Collaboration for Impact
What is collaboration?

“In the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.” – Charles Darwin

Collaboration is not a new concept in the world of corporate responsibility and sustainable development. It is the cornerstone of effective transformation and meaningful partnerships, some of which have existed for many years. And yet, collaboration has become a buzz word in the realms of social impact. But what makes a programme or initiative truly collaborative? While many types of collaboration exist and collaborative programmes take form in different shapes and sizes, all have a focus on shared vision, combined action and impact.

Too often in corporate responsibility we talk about partnership, which only describes a static state, a kind of relationship. In this way, reference to partnership alone is reminiscent of traditional corporate philanthropy where one party commits resources (usually the company giving cash) and the other party (the charity) delivers. Collaboration goes beyond this as it embodies a way of working together in partnership. It is about joint action, working with others to achieve a shared aim. This is why we believe that those engaged in truly collaborative initiatives are the ones achieving the biggest impact.

This briefing explores the different types of collaboration, how collaboration can help to achieve impact and what makes a successful collaboration.

Why are companies collaborating – why is it important at the moment?

It is evident that many of today’s and tomorrow’s biggest societal (social, environmental and economic) challenges cannot be tackled in a piecemeal fashion or in isolation – they cross politics, industries and geographies. The opportunity to bring about change by addressing these issues collaboratively is underscored by a growing recognition of the role of business in this respect and an increasing desire to generate greater impact.

In recent years, we have seen a trend to be more strategic, better aligned with core business function and to have a sharper focus on particular societal issues to drive change. As they aspire to make a bigger impact, companies have gained a heightened awareness of the importance of using their resources more effectively. This shift – mobilising resources to be more impactful – has gone hand-in-hand with the recognition that achieving greater impact necessitates working with others, be this the third, public or private sector.

Landscape – who is collaborating?

Corporate Citizenship undertook a survey of corporate responsibility and sustainability practitioners around the globe to take a snapshot of the current environment of collaboration for social impact. Our findings are presented here.

Survey demographics

The majority of collaborations are with:

- 87% Not-for-profits
- 64% Government bodies
- 51% Same-sector corporates
- 41% Cross-sector corporates
- 23% of respondents are collaborating across all four categories
- 57% of those are collaborating with 8+ organisations
- 35% UK
- 7% Australia
- 13% Asia
- 27% North America
- 13% Europe
- 5% Other
- 68% of practitioners who responded to our survey believe they are engaged in collaborative projects

The recent launch of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) further highlighted the need to collaborate. Unlike their predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs were developed in consultation with business. As a result, the ambitious goals are being used by business to focus on specific issues and identify opportunities to bring multiple stakeholders together to achieve lasting impact.

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Types of collaboration

1. The Conductor

A single company collaborating with a number of not-for-profit partners to solve a specific challenge. These types of collaboration will often be focused on one specific issue and working to tackle this issue across a number of geographies, utilising different local not-for-profits to achieve this.

Kellogg Company – Breakfast for Better Days

Kellogg Company, an American multinational food manufacturing company, has one flagship programme, Breakfast for Better Days. Their aspiration is to be the leading corporate advocate for breakfast. In 2013, they set a goal to provide 1 billion servings of cereal and snacks – more than half of which are breakfast – to people in need around the world by the end of 2016. Kellogg work with a range of not-for-profits to provide grants and training, as well as free food, bowls and other equipment. They carefully select different not-for-profit partners in different regions and countries to ensure they have the greatest impact at a local level. Working closely with different partners across the world has enabled them to exceed their goal (reaching 1.9 billion) and they aim to take the initiative even further with new commitments for 2025.

2. The Alliance

A company or group of companies that have come together to tackle a specific industry issue. This can often result in the development of a focused initiative that the companies subscribe to deliver, or the development of tools, indices or standards that companies within the industry commit to.

Legal Sector – The Collaborative Plan for Pro Bono

Launched in 2014, the collaborative plan for pro bono in the UK (the Plan) was developed to improve pro bono service delivery and more effectively promote access to justice. It is the legal sector’s initiative to help address low-income individuals’ unmet legal needs. Participatory firms commit to providing pro bono services to marginalised people whose access to justice is hindered.

By collaborating, the firms tackle a range of social issue areas, drawing on their varying expertise, sharing resources and creating task forces to focus on specific areas of law such as immigration and on certain demographics such as homelessness. In order to ensure pro bono services are effectively delivered the firms are together developing the systems and infrastructure required, complementing rather than replacing the work of others such as existing legal aid services.

Since its inception, this profession-led collaboration has grown quickly. Having begun with 20 law firms, it has nearly doubled in size to 38 participant firms, which undertook 283,859 hours of pro bono work in 2015/16 with an average of 23 hours’ pro bono per year per lawyer. Demonstrating its importance and the commitment level, 94% of the firms counted this time towards billing targets and 97% counted it towards bonus hours.

3. The Assortment

Several companies across industries working together to solve a particular societal issue, applying their resources, skills and expertise as relevant. These collaborations are often cross-sectoral, involving not-for-profits and/or government bodies.

Singtel – Australian Business and Community Network (ABCN)

Singtel, Asia’s leading communications group, serving over 600 million mobile customers around the world, places collaboration at the heart of achieving social impact.

Singtel has acted as a catalyst for collaboration on several occasions. The company has initiated or been involved in numerous small projects, which have grown both in the number and type of partners as well as size of contribution. An example of this is the Australian Business and Community Network (ABCN) programme. It was founded in 2005 by Singtel Optus and six other Australian companies to address the challenges of social integration and inclusion for youth from vulnerable backgrounds. Forming the ABCN further connected member companies with a network of public schools across Australia through the mentoring programme.

The initial student mentoring programmes proved successful, enabling the ABCN to increase the number and types of programmes delivered, and corporate partners. Today, over 30 companies across a variety of industries contribute to over 13 mentoring programmes. Since 2005, they have provided over 33,000 corporate volunteers and helped over 100,000 students. What started as an idea to address a social issue through a small collaborative pilot project has successfully grown into an opportunity for companies to have a greater positive impact in the community.
Customer focus

This model is focused on involving the customer or client in the collaboration. Often these collaborations are embedded into greater business aims (marketing, service delivery etc.) and will go beyond a pure corporate responsibility programme. Again, this model may also have the support of not-for-profits or government bodies in the delivery of the collaborative programme.

4. The Engager

A company that engages and collaborates with its clients or customers to find solutions to sustainability issues. These types of collaboration may come about through specific corporate responsibility initiatives or through a commercial relationship.

IHS Markit

IHS Markit combines information, analytics and expertise to provide solutions for business, financial institutions and government. Having earned global recognition for its own company-wide sustainability efforts, IHS Markit is also a leader in helping other public and private enterprises address an array of economic, environmental and social issues through paid engagements and pro bono projects.

IHS Markit recently started working with its customers to use the UN’s SDGs as a strategic framework. For example, Shell commissioned IHS Markit experts to look at complex energy–economy–climate challenges in the Philippines. Colleagues from three different divisions of IHS Markit collaborated to develop state-of-the-art analytics. The first study of its kind in the Philippines, this project showed how an energy modelling suite, an economic impact assessment model and a bespoke health impact assessment model could be used together to outline options for achieving SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy. As a result, IHS Markit was able to answer critical issues relating to the Philippines’ energy future and devise a plausible roadmap that has been discussed at the highest levels of government.

Holistic focus

This model is the most mature and focusses on the issue first. It will involve careful selection of organisations (e.g. other companies, government, not-for-profits, academia etc.) that are best suited to solve the specific issue. It will draw on expertise across a range of sectors and types of organisation. Any organisation involved will be so because they can bring a specific skill set or resource that will directly impact the success of the collaboration.

5. The Selector

A company that selects and collaborates with parties with varying but specific expertise across a range of fields to address a societal issue. This collaboration is the most mature model and involves taking a holistic approach to solve an issue.

IBM – Childhood Education

American multinational technology company IBM and Sesame Workshop, the non-profit education organisation that produces the television programme Sesame Street, embarked on a three year partnership to advance childhood education. Each party is applying its specialist skills and expertise to create change: Sesame Workshop, having the in depth knowledge and insight into early childhood and IBM using its Watson’s cognitive computing technology to develop new educational platforms and products. Shaping the future of childhood education, they will create products that can adapt to the learning and aptitude levels of individual pre-schoolers.

What makes this partnership unique is the additional expertise IBM and Sesame Workshop are bringing to the table. To start, they are gathering leading teachers, academics, researchers, technologists, gamers, performers and media executives to brainstorm ways in which cognitive computing can best help pre-schoolers to learn. In developing the new products, they will also gather feedback from this diverse group as prototypes are tested and refined.

Together, with the input of experts across a range of fields, Sesame Workshop and IBM aim to impact the lives of millions of children through education, transforming the way in which they learn and how teachers teach.
The key to successful collaboration

“Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.” – Henry Ford

Collaboration is easier said than done. Here are some key points to bear in mind when embarking on a collaborative initiative.

1. Partners
   Be sure to pick the right partners! It sounds obvious, but it is important to get it right from the beginning.

2. Questions
   With your partner, answer these four big questions before you embark on a collaborative programme:
   1. What are you trying to solve?
   2. What resources do you bring?
   3. Who do you need to work with?
   4. How will you measure the impact?

3. Similarities
   Recognise your cultural similarities and differences. This will allow you to work together effectively to achieve the greatest impact.

4. Agendas
   Understand each other’s needs and agendas from the outset. Don’t make assumptions about abilities, desires or aims. If all parties understand the ambition and value each one can bring, incongruences and gaps can be identified and addressed early on.

5. Shared goals
   Make sure your collaboration is focused on a shared outcome. Make it all about what you are trying to achieve together and focus on a common goal.

6. Pace
   Go at the pace of the party that wants to go slowest. Going faster than they want will leave them behind and lead to discontent and unbalanced input.

7. SDGs
   Use the SDGs to drive collaboration. They are a common language that brings organisations together.

8. Third party
   Consider using a third party to manage the programme. Having an external party to lead operations and act as an objective voice can build confidence and will allow equal input across all members of the collaboration.

9. Catalyst
   Don’t be afraid to take the role of catalyst and be the test case. Taking on the funding and prototyping is the most difficult part but is sometimes necessary to get large scale collaboration off the ground.

10. Ownership
    If possible, encourage ownership of collaborative projects across the business. The project will be more successful if it is driven by the team it is most relevant to.
Corporate Citizenship is a global management consulting firm specializing in sustainability and corporate responsibility. The team uses expert insight and a simplified approach to sustainability to deliver growth and long-term value for business and society. With teams in London, Melbourne, New York, San Francisco, Santiago and Singapore, we work with clients on both a local and global level to achieve their commitments to responsible business behaviors and sustainable practices. We advise on a number of areas including strategy, community, engagement, environment, supply chain, socio-economic impacts, reporting and assurance – helping clients to make the smart choices that will enable them to survive and thrive in an increasingly challenging business environment.

To find out more:
To hear more insights from businesses and a not-for-profit about collaborative projects you can listen to our collaboration for impact interview series on our website at http://corporate-citizenship.com/our-insights/collaboration-for-impact-leader-interview-series/.

About the authors

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