

*Bertelsmann Stiftung,
Voices of Economic Transformation (Hrsg.)*

Update Wirtschaft für Gesellschaft

32 Vordenker:innen aus der Praxis geben
Anregungen für besseres Wirtschaften

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Abstract

Business and society are inextricably linked. That is why it is essential for economic, social and political issues to be considered holistically. People increasingly expect companies to take a stance on social challenges. Yet a company's social responsibility is not limited to adopting a certain position while waiting for policy makers and civil society to shape a response.

When it comes to socio-ecological transformation, major challenges exist that business and society must address. Companies can and should develop ideas, drive change and show how better, more sustainable ways of doing business can benefit society.

This book looks at business practices that support society and its needs. It brings together ideas, examples and calls to action that are based first and foremost on practical experiences gained in real business contexts.

How it all started ...

The idea for this book first developed through the interactions of various individuals in private and professional networks and from the desire to hear what motivated, progressively minded young people from the business world have to say. Established for this book project, the initiative Voices of Economic Transformation is a self-organized group that wants to work together to make a difference beyond predefined structures.

... and who has joined forces

In this book, a wide variety of voices from the business world, including operational practice, address the reader directly. The authors are primarily young executives such as directors, department heads and senior managers from major corporations, mid-sized enterprises and the tech and start-up scene. They are young – in terms of years and especially in terms of their thinking. They are mostly female and diverse and, above all, they have one thing in common: They are looking beyond what is happening in their own organization and they want to bring about fundamental change.

Thematic background

Donations, charitable contributions and the establishment of nonprofit corporate foundations are one traditional pillar of companies' civic engagement. These activities undertaken by "corporate citizens" have been pooled in theory and practice under the broader rubric of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Some stakeholders have criticized the approach to CSR taken in Germany until now, saying companies and their communications departments have treated it more as an obligation or reporting requirement, instead of viewing it as worthy of C-level attention or even as part of strategic corporate management.

Yet perceptions of CSR are now subject to a new dynamic – for the following reasons:

- ⊙ The magnitude and urgency of global challenges can no longer be ignored: the escalating global population, accompanied by the permanent increase in resource consumption and the rising demand for public goods against the background of planetary boundaries; an ever-widening gap between the privileged and the less fortunate; populism; political authoritarianism; and the weakening of international organizations. All of those factors compound the problems stemming from climate change, while exacerbating inequality and magnifying the threats to liberal democracies and their social orders. These challenges are so urgent that they demand a comprehensive and collective response. The major issues of the 21st century require answers from all societal sectors: politics, business and civil society – and this expressly includes companies.
- ⊙ The socio-ecological transformation of business and society is now on the policy agenda and has been endorsed by the public. The Paris Agreement, which aims to limit global warming to well below two degrees, has been enshrined in German law by the 2021 Climate Protection Act. The European Union wants to become the first carbon-neutral continent, thanks to the Green Deal. It also wants to deploy the EU taxonomy for sustainable activities, among other measures, to influence the economy – and thus every single company.

Many corporate leaders have recognized that their organization's business activities do not take place independently of these socio-political developments. Therefore, reflecting on the role companies play in society and developing entrepreneurial answers to the challenges of our time are not merely an operational "nice to have," they are an integral part of long-term, intelligent and responsible corporate management. If economic growth is to be combined with social and ecological benefits, and if business activities are to focus on individual well-being, social cohesion and preserving natural resources, then companies face the task of fundamentally rethinking their business models and their license to operate.

Thinking together to think ahead

This collective volume examines the various aspects of doing business in a way that is socially responsible. The individual contributions advance new ideas, formulate calls to action and provide a basis for discussing the changes needed in and for business organizations.

The contributions are highly diverse, including stylistically. Some adopt a personal tone, others are more analytical; some make an impassioned appeal, others focus on providing insights. What they all have in common is that they do not merely describe problems, but also develop potential solutions. They do not stop at an examination of the status quo, but always look to the future as well. And they always address in concrete terms how business can be done responsibly in the context of sustainable social development.

Ideas and exchange are needed to identify the necessary social and economic changes. This book is meant to stimulate both – not only through its contents, but also through its form.

Sharing and expanding knowledge

To assist readers in developing their own insights, the book leaves ample space for jotting down thoughts as they occur. Along with the text, the book's design and illustrations are meant to stimulate new, inspiring ideas.

The book is divided into six sections, which group the 29 contributions written by 32 authors according to the following topics:

- ⊙ Corporate social responsibility
- ⊙ Funds and financing for a more just society
- ⊙ Opportunities and challenges of digital transformation
- ⊙ The business world's contributions to environmental and climate protection
- ⊙ Equality, diversity and understanding in companies
- ⊙ The role of business in society, and new organizational structures

We hope to reach people both inside and outside business enterprises who are interested in economic policy issues – people in politics, civil society, trade associations and the media, as well as members of the public. We want to address all of those who would like to see interdisciplinary solutions developed that enable conscientious companies to do business more responsibly in a sustainable society.

Knowledge multiplies when it is shared. New ideas are generated when input from others is added to the process, and robust debates benefit when opinions are heard and discussed.

The contributions in this book are covered by a Creative Commons license. That allows us and the book's readers to share them with others, disseminate them via social media and quote them in blogs, among other possibilities. As a result, the book is available not only in printed form, but also online as a digital publication.

However you read and use this book, we hope it will inspire new ideas and insights while increasing your desire for networking and change.