



A career with a conscience

Today's job seekers are increasingly searching for an employer with high ethical standards, including a good record on environmental protection, as well as labour rights in the developing world. This focus on ethical issues is causing a change of attitude across the business community, says **VIRGINIA MATTHEWS**

According to the history books, it was the 1960s that, more than any other modern decade, helped shape our romantic notions of youthful idealism.

Yet while the peace-and-love, hippy protesters of 40 years ago instinctively spurned what many saw as the evils of world capitalism, it is their equally demanding children and grandchildren who, thanks to the internet, are probably far better informed about how the global marketplace actually works.

Their passionate commitment to a wide range of ethical issues – from the iniquity of cheap labour to the ecological devastation caused by mass tourism – is forcing the pace of change inside some of the country's most conservative organisations.

Little wonder then that a recent NUS survey found that more than three-quarters of today's graduates said they would not work for a firm with a poor ethical record and over half believed that it was still possible to be selective about a potential employer's ethical record even when the economy was under pressure.

Ethically demanding

Although student fees and increased job competition have inevitably led to more studying and less protesting at our universities and colleges, today's school leaver or undergraduate is by no means ethically-blinkered, says Philippa Foster Black, director of the Institute of Business Ethics.

She believes that far from seeing Third World debt or environmental devastation as being less important than getting a foothold in a well-paid job, job-seekers are ever more ethically demanding. "Many young people expect firms to be both transparent and accountable in terms of their contribution to society.

"A pharmaceutical or food firm that appears to be ethically compromised will not make many undergraduate wish lists, however famous or profitable it appears to be," she adds.

For recruiters who desperately need the services of bright graduates or dynamic school-leavers, the problem of cleaning up a tarnished environmental reputation or dispelling rumours about exploitation of Third World producers is a desperately important one.

"There are clear signs that many,

many school-leavers and graduates now pay close attention to a firm's corporate and social responsibility (CSR) policies – details of which are posted on most websites – before they even compile a list of the firms they wish to apply to. Many companies considered less than up to scratch are discarded at this stage," believes Philippa Foster Black.

Intriguingly, today's ethically-aware recruit is often just as concerned with how an employer behaves on the other side of the world – in India or Africa – as with their record in Ipswich or Andover. "The details of how you are treating your coffee producers or textile weavers in the Third World are in many cases quite easy to access on the web," comments ethical trade consultant Peter Richard, "and if you are guilty of exploiting them in villages thousands of miles away, it may be difficult to hide that from outsiders."

Priority list

Philippa Foster Black believes that what she calls "this heightened awareness of the ethical dimensions of running a company" tends to concentrate on a handful of core issues. Human rights comes in at the top of the priority list –



including fair pay and conditions for domestic and overseas workers – followed by animal rights, supply chain issues and fair trade with UK and international partners.

Tobacco industry

She believes that many young people are instinctively sceptical of the tobacco industry – because of the dangerous nature of the product it promotes – and suggests that there is a strong feeling that tobacco firms are unable to behave ethically under any circumstances, despite their many attempts to flag up squeaky-clean CSR policies.

She finds similar distrust of the mining, oil and gas industries, whose environmental, and in some cases, human rights policies have long been under scrutiny.

At a time when recruiters' most valuable asset – their potential staff – are on the lookout for unethical trading practices though, isn't there a danger that many of the avowed CSR policies boasted about on the web are mere window dressing? No, says Philippa Foster Black.

Ethical identities

"Companies are spending huge amounts of money on getting their ethical identities in shape and in the current climate, few of them can

afford to be discovered merely playing at ethics or 'spinning' the ethical card. Today's top graduate is simply too smart to be hoodwinked."

And she adds that the widespread debate over how firms treat their suppliers or partners is having an effect too amongst current workforces.

Responsible corporate citizen

To Peter Richard, the ethical revolution that has, he says, "swept through Western Europe in the past 20 years" has brought in its wake important changes to how most firms do business.

"In the past, ethical trading used to be fairly humdrum and even parochial," he says, "perhaps limited to delivering a firm's taxes on time, sponsoring a local primary school or re-using wasted printer paper."

"Today though, being ethical means far more than switching off lights or banning experiments on animals. Broadly, it encompasses everything to do with being a responsible corporate citizen, whether it's who you recruit here in the UK, how much you pay people on the other side of the world or even how far you go to ensure that the food you make is not contributing to rising levels of obesity."

The fight for more ethical business

practices though doesn't begin and end with a career in the charitable sector or a post in a well-respected fair trading organisation such as Cafédirect.

According to Jayne Rowley, head of publishing at Prospects.ac.uk, the search for a more meaningful role at work affects very many of us.

"There are those of course who will only ever consider a job at Oxfam or Shelter, but for most workers, being more ethical means being more aware of the practices of any organisation we happen to work for – whether it specialises in low-cost housing or in banking."

Jayne Rowley notes that after years floundering in the doldrums, the once-derided public sector is back in favour among graduates. She thinks she knows the reason why.

"Whether you opt for local government, environmental health or teaching, a career in the public sector puts you in direct contact with the people you serve and can feel a whole lot different from a private firm, where more profits for your directors and shareholders may be the only real purpose to what you do."

Given the more ethical persuasion of today's young people, she believes that the public sector's people-before-profits-manta could at last be coming back into fashion.