

# Strategies for good

**Chris Peat** urges L&D specialists to consider CSR as a strategic investment

**M**uch has been written about corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a crucial element of today's business strategy. Indeed, the idea of a triple bottom line, with its focus on 'people, planet and then profits', is almost ubiquitous.

As widespread as the adoption of CSR is its number of definitions. For some it is philanthropy, donating a proportion of company profits to charity. For others it is cause-related marketing, using worthwhile ventures to win brownie points for your brand.

In the majority of these cases, the companies involved are end-consumer-facing rather than providers of services to business, as are L&D specialists. They undertake CSR for stakeholder management reasons, because they need to improve their company's green or social image and reputation or because they need to ward off activist groups.

But why would companies in the B2B space do CSR?

First of all, you need to consider your organisation's initial motivations. The management theory academic Lantos suggests there are three different forms of CSR – ethical (undertaken to comply with regulatory requirements), altruistic (straightforward corporate giving) and strategic.

The latter is a scenario in which doing good is directly good for business, because initiatives are linked to an organisation's goals and strategic planning. Few companies are so open about their

motivations to 'do CSR' as to openly define them as 'strategic', yet this form is precisely what offers the biggest benefits.

Strategic CSR can bring about social and environmental improvements that, at the same time, help a company identify new markets or pilot a new venture. This is just what Axia Interactive Media has done by becoming involved in an initiative to bring e-learning to 3,000 health workers in South Africa. Nurses in Kwa Zulu Natal (KZN) often work in isolation, with very few resources, trying to support and improve health education for local people.

KZN is one of the poorest and worst affected regions of sub-Saharan Africa with HIV and AIDs, yet the region also boasts one of the best IT infrastructures in South Africa. So, working in partnership with local consulting company SISA, we have offered the department of health our e-learning platform on an at-cost basis; this has allowed it to provide its health workers with the latest treatment information on a range of health topics, including HIV/AIDs and other sexually transmitted infections, and, in doing so, trial the effectiveness of internet-based training methods.

As well as providing an educational resource, Axia hopes the system will create a sense of community for nurses in this region and play a part in reducing the considerable stress and isolation suffered by staff who often work autonomously, with little peer support, in remote, rural areas. Indeed, retention of health workers is considered a major problem and creating a virtual community could help to reduce this.

We see the relationship as a win-win situation for all the parties involved – the South Africans get the benefit of our many years of experience developing LearningZone, the Royal College of Nursing's e-learning environment, and we have the opportunity to explore the potential of a vast, untapped marketplace. Crucially, the initiative has been designed to be sustainable locally from day one. All the educational materials offered on the KZN Learning Zone are written by South African health workers and are culturally appropriate for the audience.

Our vision is to, one day, see a team of local writers and web specialists employed to maintain the system and, from our own strategic perspective, for the team to act as 'ambassadors' for computer-based learning in their own homes and communities.

Since the initiative launched last year, we have made some significant developments but there is still a long way to go to achieve our aims. But in a very short time it has proven a very exciting and worthwhile project to be involved with, on both a personal and professional level, and I would urge other companies who are as yet unsure about whether CSR has a place in their business strategy to explore all avenues with a view to reaching new horizons and with them, new audiences for their products and services. ■

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