

A social conscience, and skills in demand

Social entrepreneurs now care more about causes than cash. But they are also developing abilities that employers will covet, experts tell RANDY RAY

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Unlike many other bright and energetic business school graduates, Susanna Kislenco's current career goals do not include a six-figure salary, a pricey automobile or a corner office in a lofty downtown office tower.

Since completing the international bachelor of business administration program at York University's Schulich School of Business in 2004, Ms. Kislenco has worked full-time at a non-profit organization. There, she earns about a third of what many classmates are raking in at large, for-profit corporations.

Like a growing number of college and university graduates, she is forgoing the high pay and perks of the corporate world to work at a not-for-profit business, where the priority is helping people in need rather than earning big bucks.

Ms. Kislenco and other graduates who have taken this route are known as "social entrepreneurs."

They're motivated by the belief their skills are best used to help overcome a wide range of critical social problems, from poverty and physical abuse of women to hunger and lack of birth control use.

Many of them are trained in professional schools, such as business and law, but choose to apply what they learn to social ends rather than profit-oriented ones.

Such grads are now doing their part for causes they can relate to. But they are also putting their stamps on companies that are increasingly demonstrating their own increased social consciousness and, just as importantly -- whether they realize it or not -- developing skills that will make them strong candidates to one day become company leaders, experts say.

Social consciousness is certainly a rising priority for career choices.

A March survey by GlobeScan Inc. found that a whopping 93 per cent of Canadian employees believe corporate social responsibility should be as important to companies as profits and shareholder value.

And 91 per cent of the 1,506 employees surveyed said their drive to work for an employer would be strongly affected by their feeling that the company was showing such responsibility.

Some social entrepreneurs, like Ms. Kislenco, work in the trenches.

"I can look at myself in the mirror and see that I made a difference; I can see that I'm really helping people, and that what I do every day is not making a bar of soap or building a car but actually changing peoples' lives," says Ms. Kislenco, 24, who works as client relations and marketing co-ordinator at the Toronto office of World Education Services, which evaluates foreign credentials for people educated outside of Canada.

Others, like Rahul Raj of Toronto, have launched not-for-profit companies, in his case, to provide food to the less fortunate.

"It is more important that I help people," says Mr. Raj, 29, a 1997 business graduate from Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont.

In 1993, while still in school, he founded Meal Exchange, a national, campus-based charity that operates on 45 Canadian college and university campuses to provide food to registered charitable organizations. He remains a volunteer member of its board of directors.

Socially conscious grads like Ms. Kislenco and Mr. Raj display strong senses of ethics and problem-solving skills, as well as an ability to build bridges between various sectors and organizations -- and no aversion to small paycheques and long hours on the job, says Gary McPherson, executive director of the Canadian Centre for Social Entrepreneurship at the University of Alberta School of Business in Edmonton.

Ms. Kislenko knows all about dismal earnings and lengthy workdays. Had she followed most of her graduating class into a corporate job, she'd be earning as much as \$100,000 a year. At WES, she earns about \$35,000.

That job combined with a non-profit travel magazine she recently launched, eats up 60 hours a week.

At Engineers Without Borders, most staff work for about \$32,000 a year, says Parker Mitchell, co-founder of the charitable organization that sends engineers around the world to work on projects in underdeveloped countries.

"Our employees probably put in 55 to 60 hour weeks and work one to two weekends a month. It is not a job, it is your life, your passion."

Still, it's a passion that builds solid job skills and can open doors to all kinds of career possibilities, say those in the field of social entrepreneurship.

Mr. Mitchell says business graduates who start out in careers related to social causes learn a variety of useful entrepreneurial skills, including how to start a business, how to stay organized and how to manage people.

"You learn lots of things about running a business, . . . you get the opportunity to make lots of decisions," he says.

"They have the freedom to set their own direction, the chance to identify and define the problems and issues they want to address and the opportunity to develop innovative and creative solutions to social issues," adds Sherrill Johnson, who, as a researcher in 2003, wrote a study for the Canadian Centre for Social Entrepreneurship that demonstrated the growth in social entrepreneurship. Later in life, their skills will be valuable to for-profit companies that manage to lure social entrepreneurs onto their payrolls, she says.

"Social entrepreneurs will bring passion, enthusiasm, curiosity, creativity and well-developed problem-solving skills to any organization they join," Ms. Johnson says.

Mr. Mitchell says many social entrepreneurs who join for-profit companies make excellent bosses because they develop a knack for motivating their staff with enticements other than money.

"In a social-venture organization, you lose a key motivator in the private sector -- salary -- so you must do more to make sure your employees and volunteers are placed in meaningful roles and that they feel like they are contributing."

Social entrepreneurs who join companies can also help them develop a sense of social responsibility too often lacking in many large companies, says Tyler Wry, a 27-year-old University of Alberta masters in sociology graduate who is helping the Centre for Social Entrepreneurship develop a support network for social entrepreneurs.

"Big business is paying increased attention to issues of ethics and social responsibility.

"Individuals with a social-entrepreneurship background typically believe deeply in these issues and could contribute to an ethical and responsible work force," says Mr. Wry, who, in 2001, founded Bikes for Boys in Edmonton, a non-profit project that helps children find, fix and learn to ride bicycles.

"And working in social entrepreneurship requires flexibility, comfort with uncertainty and ambiguity, using creativity to overcome unique challenges, and working cooperatively. All of these are highly desired traits in corporate employees," he adds.

Mr. Raj is a case in point.

He now works for In-Sync Corp., a Toronto-based marketing company where he is developing a "social change practice" that works with clients to promote social projects, such as increased condom use in Africa.

"I could have taken a more traditional corporate job, where I would have been focused entirely on improving the bottom line, which is not necessarily for me. I have found my dream job. It allows me to leverage my

marketing talents to improve the firm's bottom line while improving the social livelihood of those in need," he says.

Since joining In-Sync Corp. in December, 2004, he has impressed managers and fellow staffers with his creative and strategic abilities in marketing and also raised the social conscience of the company, says Alison Findlay, a partner and director of the Toronto-based firm's consumer division.

"The company has done a bit of philanthropic work over the last 10 years . . . but Rahul's passion has taken an organization that dabbled somewhat in this area to a new level and created a lot of excitement" by helping to uncover unmet social needs that In-Sync can help clients fulfill, Ms. Findlay says.

"Since Rahul arrived, both he and our company have an opportunity to be in a for-profit setting where we have the opportunity to create tremendous impact in the world of philanthropy."

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