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Do Corporations Have an Obligation to Pay Attention to Social Justice?

In the modern world, social justice, equality, and human rights are gradually becoming central points on which most developed societies focus. The sphere of global business is not an exception. Usually in the past, a division of organizations that are for-profits focused on earning money and non-profits engaged in socially valuable practices has lost its relevance. Thus, today, a company that neglects the demands of the zeitgeist for the sake of earning more profit is not likely to be successful. Although corporations cannot undergo legal coercion to implement social justice in their policies, they have a moral obligation to do it due to ethical significance and, simultaneously, are recommended to focus on this aspect because of the pragmatic benefits it will bring them.

The activities of most modern companies are, to one extent or another, influence the processes that are not directly related to their operational functions. Therefore, they cannot avoid but decide on whether they should or should not pay attention to the issues related to social justice. Meanwhile, there are several ways in which they can do it. First, corporations can focus

on social justice by implementing its principles in their policies and guidelines to benefit society in the broadest scope of dimensions. This type of activity is usually referred to as the implementation of corporate social responsibility. Second, companies can take a clear and unambiguous position on high-profile social issues and deliver it to an audience through campaigns and advertising. Both of these policies have their supporters and opponents who believe that companies should either implement them or refrain from doing it.

Undoubtedly, ensuring that a company's policies benefit society and help in solving relevant social issues is ethically justified. It corresponds to the widely known principle of Kant's categorical imperative in all of its formulations. Meanwhile, in addition to apparent moral validity, the implementation of corporate social responsibility as an element of an organization's policy has numerous tangible benefits to it. First and foremost, modern society expects companies to actively participate in solving social issues (Tobin par. 14). Their reputation among customers and potential employees directly depends on whether they focus merely on profits or contribute to socially valuable struggles. According to recent studies, "91 % [of customers] believes companies must go beyond the minimum standards required by law to operate responsibly" (Tobin par. 16). Similarly, socially responsible companies tend to be much more attractive to young jobseekers. Modern laborers find pride in their employers' social responsibility and perceive it as an indicator that they will find better treatment in such organizations (Tobin par. 21). Therefore, there are both ethical and pragmatic reasons due to which companies should implement corporate social responsibility in their policies.

The second way in which the companies can implement social justice in their activities is by articulating their positions on relevant social issues and conveying them to broad audiences through public statements or campaigns. The ethical reason for such actions is the level of influence that business entities have in the modern world. Today, companies and brands are perceived as public figures that have positions regarding the issues and voices to proclaim them publicly (Blaeser par. 3). Their influence and resources provide them with the capability to make a difference and initiate positive changes. Therefore, the necessity for them to pay attention to social justice is primarily caused by ethical reasons. Some companies have already managed to contribute to solving socially relevant issues. For instance, the 2017 “Mom On” campaign initiated by the US company Yoplait focused on the acceptance of public breastfeeding. It has reportedly raised awareness of the stigmatization that this practice usually faces and increased its public acceptance (Blaeser par. 11). This fact, along with other real-life examples, demonstrates that companies are capable of influencing socially relevant issues positively. Therefore, the idea that they have a moral obligation to contribute to the spreading of social justice is not devoid of logic.

The notion of companies’ ethical commitment to pay attention to social justice in their operational activities and corporate policies is not a subject of general agreement. The central argument that opponents of corporate social responsibility rely on is the statement that companies should focus on their primary purpose: making a profit. They claim that all types of socially relevant issues belong to the competence of the state, embodied in central and local

authorities. Corporations already contribute to the good of society by paying taxes which governments later use for public benefits. Public bodies and their departments involved in this sphere are competent in it so that they can use the funds more appropriately than business entities (McKenzie par. 4). A second argument against companies implementing social justice in their policies is the high probability of them using it solely for self-advertising. Social activists often claim that large corporations, “are hijacking movements for the sake of selling products” (Blaeser par. 4). They are following popular trends to promote themselves but do not contribute to solving the issues they discuss.

Although both these counter-arguments have the right to exist, they are not universally applicable. First, the sums with which corporations operate with can be more significant than those public authorities can use for specific socially relevant purposes. Also, focusing on social justice does not eradicate companies’ obligation to pay taxes. So, both spheres are not mutually exclusive. Finally, organizations can manifest their social responsibility in collaboration with the government, which refutes the argument about them lacking the competence to solve relevant issues. As for the second counter-argument, it can be true in many instances. However, in the age of social media, it is difficult to mislead people with false achievements (Tobin par. 25). Companies are judged not only by their public image but also based on the real deeds that either confirm or disprove their adherence to particular ideas. Therefore, arguments against the implementation of social justice into companies’ policies and public positions are significantly less convincing than those advocating it.

To conclude, today, paying attention to social justice is both rational and ethically compulsory for corporations. From a pragmatic point of view, if business entities refuse to implement it in their corporate policies, they will suffer significant reputational losses, as both clients and potential employees tend to trust socially responsible companies more than those focusing merely on profits. Moreover, currently, brands and corporations can bring positive changes in problematic spheres due to their influence and resources. They are capable of changing the world and making it better. In these circumstances, refusing to do so would be questionable from an ethical point of view. Consequently, companies are morally obliged to pay attention to social justice in their corporate policies.

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