

## Ethicality as an employer-choosing criteria

**Increased globalization provides companies with a wider spectrum of opportunities to operate in different ways. Mostly this is a positive phenomenon creating prosperity for all parties involved but this widening of opportunities includes also the widening of possibilities for exploitation of workers, environment and the society in ethically unjust ways. This makes the choice of future employer not only a pragmatical one but an ethical question as well. By choosing your future employer you also choose what kind of ethics and notions of responsibility for society you support.**

As students of such a highly-valued university in the region, future AIT graduates are usually in a position where they are able to choose their prospective employees from a number of companies. The usual criteria for students choosing a job include the content of the job offered, the salary, the carrier advancement opportunities, the stability of the position or the location of the job. Recently, at least in the Western world, a new trend has emerged among students. Researchers have found that more and more students include the ethicality of the company as one of the main criteria's of their choice.

This phenomenon can be interpreted in two different ways. Either it is a sign of a kind of ethical awakening of students to a more responsible lifestyle which includes collective responsibility for the actions of the company you are working in. On the other hand it can be a result of multi-national companies' increasing focus on short-term profits at the expense of more responsible business practices. During the last decade media and a number of NGO's have been able to uncover and highlight the unethical behaviours of many of these companies' and their suppliers' in for example environmental matters or exploitation of cheap labour in inhuman conditions in the so-called 'sweatshops'. This might have caused the reaction among students who are realizing that the ethicality of a company cannot be taken as a self-evident fact but indeed as a criterion for choosing a firm that is ethical enough to fulfil their personal standards.

At the same time the phenomenon of corporate social responsibility has spread through the multi-national companies. Ten years ago almost none of them made any explicit public commitments of being responsible. Taking a look at them now reveals that most of them have a special corporate social responsibility department and they publish annual corporate social responsibility reports of their commitments and achievements in the field. So at least on the surface a big change of attitudes has happened. It has been mainly driven by increased NGO and media activity making public aware of different unethical behaviors of the companies. A revealing example is Nike which was a target of many boycotting campaigns in the nineties as a result of accusations of horrible working conditions in its shoe factories – ie too long working hours, inadequate work safety, monitoring employees freetime activities, not respecting local labor laws. This lead Nike to make considerable efforts to guarantee that these forms of irresponsibility would never rise again. Nowadays Nike is setting an example for other shoe and clothing companies in how to guarantee the responsibility of its suppliers. As a sign of its commitment and transparency it for example publishes on its web site a full list of all its suppliers factories around the world with complete addresses so that NGOs and individuals can

"Corporate social responsibility is the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large." -[World Business Council for Sustainable](#)

themselves go in an assure that Nike's practices are meeting the standards they are publicly committed to.

Asian perspective on the issue of corporate social responsibility reveals both good and bad things. First it must be acknowledged that there has been a tradition of responsibility among many Asian companies. Perhaps following the Buddhist philosophy the companies view of themselves is not only as profit-maximizers but also as benefactors for the society. This has lead many companies contributing to the welfare of society especially by taking care of its workers also outside the working place. Prominent examples include providing health care, clean drinking water, housing or even schooling for children of the workers. This all is quite unheard of in modern western companies even though historically – until perhaps the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century – the tradition and ideology of responsibility for the welfare of the society also existed in west. The “business of business is only business” – attitude dominating US and European companies is thus actually quite a recent invention. In Asia – although it has been recently challenged by strong ideological influences arriving from west – this attitude of responsibility has gladly survived until recently. This stronger ethicality is a very positive phenomenon among some Asian companies.

At the same time, however, greater availability of desperately poor and uneducated workers not knowing their rights combined with weaker government monitoring and more widespread corruption makes greater abuses of workers and environment more available than in west. A sad fact of human condition is that if there is a possibility of exploiting other people or resources, somebody will use it. Therefore there also exists many serious problems in some Asian companies in issues of responsibility and ethicality. These include the usage of child labour, illegal use of migrant workers, intolerable and dangerous working conditions and so on.

In summary, Asian companies thus provide an even greater spectrum of companies ranging from those being very aware of their role as benefactors and contributors to the society to those exploiting the workers and environment without a second thought. A well-working market economy can be a benefactor for all groups of society only if it involves some notions of responsibility and external or internal monitoring of the companies ethical behavior. Some companies in Asia lack both and their overall effect on the society and people's welfare might accordingly be negative.

This all makes the choice of the future employer not only pragmatical but also an ethical choice. By choosing in which company you work, you also choose what kind of ethicality you are supporting. It is my personal wish that the future Alumnis of AIT would set an example for the Asian workers in taking care in choosing a company that's practices are ethically justifiable and which has a culture of responsibility towards society and all of its workers. This, according to my understanding is well in harmony with the buddhist way of thinking (not saying that it would be less in harmony with other religions or philosophies). Making the right choice the future graduates can take pride in being part of a creation of a better society for all of its members.

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