

Do green MBAs get green jobs?

by Melanie Schutt - 4.4.08

The number of jobs in corporate social responsibility (CSR) has increased 37 percent in a three-and-a-half-year period, according to a report jointly released in January 2008 by Net Impact and Ellen Weinreb CSR Recruiting. Net Impact, a global organization comprised of green-minded MBA students and professionals, increased its membership by 87 percent in the same timeframe. On the surface, the disparity seems to imply steep competition for the number of “green” positions.

However, there’s a market for specialized MBA skills that goes unaccounted for in statistical studies. The Net Impact/Ellen Weinreb report measured job growth by monitoring the number of CSR postings on two CSR job sites: Business for Social Responsibility’s job page and the CSR- Chicks listserv. The 37 percent growth refers to publicly posted, full-time openings that are categorized specifically as CSR positions. Beyond the job sites, graduates from Sustainable MBA programs are finding career opportunities in both startup and corporate settings.



Berkeley grad Erin Carlson (center) and the Yahoo! for Good team

“Many of our students become entrepreneurs,” says John Stayton, director of the Green MBA Program for Dominican University of California. “Dominican has a strong network, and these entrepreneurs come back to hire new graduates from the school as their businesses grow.”

Students are also discovering career opportunities through participation in “green” organizations and activities. Deb Parsons, an MBA graduate with a focus in sustainable enterprise and entrepreneurship, was a Net Impact chapter leader at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Kenan-Flagler business school. It was through Net Impact that she found an opening at her current company, Good Capital, a San Francisco-based socially responsible investment firm. Good Capital was in its startup phase at the time, with three principals and two staff members.

Parsons also launched a Sustainable Venture Capital Investment Competition (SVCIC) while she was a student. SVCIC is now held annually with MBA candidates from a range of business schools. Parsons became acquainted with subsequent competitors, and Good Capital hired two of these participants as portfolio analyst interns.

What is a “green” job?

For green MBA graduates trying to assess the market for their skills, another challenge is the still amorphous definition of a “green” career. Formally speaking, the term usually refers to positions with responsibility for CSR, sustainability or environmental concerns and social entrepreneurship. Yet, as commitment to responsible business practices grows within organizations, traditional job titles are including more and more sustainability-linked components within their job descriptions.

“Five years ago, a ‘green’ job sat in its own separate box on an organizational chart,” says Chris Deri, executive vice president and global leader of corporate social responsibility and sustainability at public relations firm Edelman. “Now the jobs are no longer only in silos. Green issues are becoming a mainstream part of strategy and operations.”

Bryan Garcia, program director at the Center for Business and the Environment at Yale (CBEY), has noted this trend

Resources

among graduates. "There is an opportunity to become a change agent in an organization," he says. "A graduate may take a job with a title like investment banker, but they're able to apply their knowledge of environmental sustainability to business in the firm." Yale offers a three-year joint degree program that combines an MBA with a master's in forestry or environmental studies. The joint degree program is in its 26th year, and Yale added the CBEY in 2007.

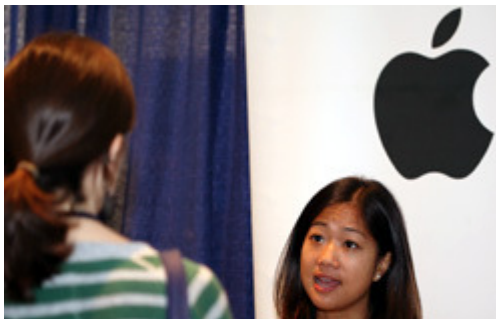
A logical question for many graduates from the growing number of specialized MBA programs is whether or not it's prudent to take a non-"green" job with the goal of eventually moving to a CSR role within the company or "greening" the job once they arrive. "Many Net Impact members seek to change their companies from within," says Liz Maw, Net Impact's executive director. Erin Carlson took a proactive approach to securing a position in CSR at Yahoo! (Nasdaq: YHOO), where she is currently Senior Manager of Yahoo! for Good, directing the company's consumer-facing "green" programs.

When Carlson met her future Yahoo! manager, she was close to graduating from University of California at Berkeley's Haas School of Business, a school she chose in part because of its strong reputation for CSR. Yahoo! was interested in hiring her but did not have available head count for a full-time position in the Yahoo! for Good area. Carlson accepted an internship instead, even though she'd graduated at that point and internships are typically reserved for students. She suggested that she create a CSR benchmark study as one of her first assignments. Her manager was able to use the completed report to make a case for an additional head count, and Carlson was hired into a permanent position. "Some people think I just fell into my dream job," she states.

Even with a less enterprising approach, graduates who begin working for firms with expanding CSR initiatives can find internal opportunities. Edelman's "CSR and Sustainability" practice has grown annually over the past 3 to 4 years at rates between 40 and 60 percent. Personnel growth is partly covered through Edelman's current employees who transfer or are promoted into the practice. Internal movement in existing organizations accounts for one of the hidden networks of "green" job opportunities.

Another indicator of a future shift in corporate jobs is the fact that CSR functions are frequently outsourced [see "Where are they now?" page 37]. Services firms that provide third-party CSR compliance support or consulting posted the highest number of job openings monitored in the Net Impact/Ellen Weinreb study. As businesses become more adept at managing environmental issues, outsourcing will become a choice rather than a need. According to Stayton, "companies bringing CSR roles in-house is a trend we'll see more and more often."

Recalibrating recruiters



Still, implementing change "requires a willingness to take a risk," Carlson says. Large firms often have multiple layers of sign-off necessary to enact new ideas. Rapidly changing external trends can outpace a corporation's ability to adapt, even when the organization is committed to improving its social and environmental performance.

MBA recruiting is one example of an established process that can cause a

Beyond Grey Pinstripes

www.beyondgreypinstripes.org

The Aspen Institute's rankings evaluate B-schools on the integration of environmental and social issues into MBA curricula

Net Impact

www.netimpact.org

Network of MBA students and professionals who share an interest in social and environmental responsibility

Social Venture Network

www.svn.org

A nonprofit network for businesses interested in social justice and sustainability

Business for Social Responsibility

www.bsr.org

Nonprofit business association with resources for companies and individuals

Echoing Green

www.echoinggreen.org

Fellowships and information for social entrepreneurs

Net Impact job fairs help link corporate recruiters and sustainable MBA grads.

potential disconnect between Green MBA graduates' career goals and employers' needs and interests. On-

campus recruiting for full-time MBAs is usually a focal point of students' final year in school.

While at UNC Chapel Hill, Parsons recalls hearing about companies that were interested in hiring Sustainable MBA graduates, but the recruiters of those same companies were reviewing candidates based on a traditional set of criteria. There's an opportunity and a need to "educate recruiters on the value of a Green MBA and ways to evaluate "green" skills," Parsons says. Corporations planning to expand CSR can improve hiring programs by generating communication and agreement between hiring managers and recruiters. Business schools with Green MBA curriculums can provide added value to students by ensuring that Career Services departments are equipped to screen employers for CSR positions and provide connections for students seeking these jobs. The interest in "green" positions has been compared to the Internet boom in the previous decade. "People are drawn to what's happening, similar to the dotcom era in the late '90s," Deri of Edelman says. "For a time, the Internet was a new and distinct phenomenon; now it's just a part of life."

Senior managers of the late '90s could feel upstaged by new graduates armed with an Internet-based education. Similarly, working professionals who already hold MBAs may soon wonder if their degree has become dated.

Going it alone

Beth Gerstein earned a traditional MBA from Stanford and worked as a corporate business development manager at Cisco (Nasdaq: CSCO) upon graduation. When she got engaged, she and her fiancée searched for a conflict-free diamond. When they couldn't locate a source, they decided to create one. The couple co-founded Brilliant Earth, a certified conflict-free diamond jewelry company that sources its diamonds from two Canadian mines, and donates 5 percent of its profits to African communities negatively impacted by traditional diamond mining and trade.

Gerstein says her MBA prepared her well to handle the issues she faces as a social entrepreneur. A number of her standard courses covered ethical and environmental topics. She says she would benefit from a course in "supply chain management to ensure environmentally and socially responsible sources. This is always a challenge, and crucial to our company."

Certificate programs are cropping up at MBA schools to help business leaders fill such gaps in their knowledge. Dominican University of California is launching its Sustainable Enterprise Certificate curriculum in two ways. Students can attend six months of courses on campus, or Dominican will arrange to provide on-site education for a company that has 10 or more managers to enroll.

The Sustainable Enterprise Certificate is primarily geared toward professionals who already have established careers and advanced degrees. "It's a chance for them to 'green' their MBA," Stayton explains.

A prevalent theme in specialized MBA students' career searches is the importance of a network. Like other career paths, connections can benefit graduates whether they choose entrepreneurship, move into an existing position or plan to initiate a new job in a large organization — all key strategies for the growing number of graduates hoping to break into the "green" job market. After her experience at Yahoo! for Good, Carlson offers this advice: "Build a network, maintain relationships and be persistent."

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