

Sustainable brands are more successful

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BIOGRAPHY

WORKING EXPERIENCE

- Executive Director of Business Leaders Forum and Senior Program Manager at Pontis Foundation (July 2015 – present)
- Program Manager at Pontis Foundation (January 2008 – June 2015)

EDUCATION

- Faculty of Philosophy, University of Constantine the Philosopher, Nitra – Master in European Studies and English Language and Literature (1999 – 2005)

The message we hear from companies is clear – we have to consider sustainability issues in our day-to-day business decisions. It is no longer a question of why or if, but how. How can we get it right? How can we address the correct issues? How will our environmental and social performance goals contribute to our business goals? Is there a connection between our economic success and creating a positive impact on society? These are all valid questions, and there is not one universal answer. But one thing is clear – customers want sustainable products and ethical and responsible companies are more successful.

The global headlines are alarming. "The climate is 1 degree warmer compared to 1850 – we are halfway through the safe warming of the atmosphere." "Another product for children contains harmful chemicals" "Corruption hinders economic growth". The consequences of only considering profit when doing business are clear to see. If we want to leave our planet for future generations in a livable condition, we must change our ways now. Lowering our negative impact on society and the environment must be the first step. But companies that want to be successful in the future can also embrace another approach – making profit and also making a positive change to our lives and the environment. Imagine buildings that are not only passive (consuming almost zero energy), but active – they clean water, produce energy and have a positive impact on people living in them. Not every product or service can be like this, but all companies can rethink their way of doing business.

Take for example Unilever, once a "normal" company with standard business goals and mainly responsible to its shareholders. Under the leadership of a sustainability "icon", Paul Polman, they have changed their focus to "Sustainable Living Products" and now these products contribute to Unilever's growth by 50% and their sales are growing at twice the rate of conventional products. A recent Nielsen study shows that 51% of Europeans (and 66% of people globally) are willing to pay more for products and services from sustainable companies. Overall, sustainable and more ethical companies are more successful on the market, and on stock exchanges, have more loyal employees, a better reputation and more engaged customers.

But what about Slovakia? The most troubling issues for the general public in Slovakia are fairness and honesty in business, followed by topics related to employees – health and safety, work-life balance, career possibilities and appropriate working conditions. These are issues we try to address with our activities. What in 2004 was just an idea of 11 companies, has now grown into an association of companies that are committed to sustainability principles. Ten years ago, we established an association for responsible businesses – the Business Leaders Forum (BLF). It now has 34 members, which employ over 84,000 employees. All its member companies are committed to reconsidering their role in the world and in Slovakia. Our members understand that being responsible companies means that you are not here only to make money, but also to have a positive impact on society,

the community, environment and employees and to help solve the most prominent issues society is facing – climate change, youth unemployment, the inclusion of minorities and achieving economic, social and environmental progress in a sustainable and responsible way.

At the BLF, we want to help companies to improve their performance in all areas of corporate responsibility. We have covered several topics in the HR field, such as active ageing (Slovakia will, in the near future, have one of the highest percentages of older people in Europe, creating huge pressures on the social system), work-life balance and engagement of employees. In the environmental area, we work with facility managers and operational managers on alternative mobility at companies, e-mobility and its business case and adaptation to climate change. We also focus on the position of a company on the market with regards to its suppliers, customers, and transparency via reporting on its performance. We also support transparency across Slovakia through the Fund for Transparent Slovakia.

The approach to business globally and in Slovakia is shifting. More and more people and businesses consider sustainability issues when making a purchase decision. Those companies that are not able to adapt to this change will face severe economic problems in the near future.