Flagship Programs: Focusing Corporate Social Investment for Impact

By Esther Toth, Senior Consultant, and Nick Jackson, Senior Researcher, Corporate Citizenship

Corporate social investment has evolved over the last two decades from ad hoc donations to more strategic approaches. Today, measuring the returns for society as well as the business is widely accepted as global best practice. In parallel with these developments, a new trend is emerging: companies are using flagship programs (also known as signature programs) to spearhead their corporate social investment activities. Flagship programs provide companies with a way to differentiate their brand, cut through the noise and achieve meaningful impact that is aligned with their core business. This Giving Thoughts article assesses the typical structure of flagship programs and presents examples of companies that have effectively developed them.

Explaining Flagship Social Investment Programs

Flagship programs target resources and unite activities under a single global focus. Local offices may adapt the core theme, and ad hoc small initiatives may continue on the sidelines, but the strategic intent is one of relentless focus on making an impact in a chosen issue area that relates to the company’s business assets, operations and core capabilities.

Flagship initiatives are designed to be a true standard-bearer that provides the focal point for the business’s social investments. For example, when asked what the company does in society, the CEO of a company with a flagship program can respond succinctly—typically in a few powerful words—and articulate a story of ambition and impact.

This Giving Thoughts is based on Esther Toth and Nick Jackson, Flagship Programmes: Focusing Corporate Social Investment for Impact, Corporate Citizenship, 2015. (Reprinted with permission.)
Implementing a successful program

Based on a global survey of corporate community investment practitioners, as well as detailed interviews with some of the world’s leading flagship program managers, Corporate Citizenship has mapped out the five critical success factors to help companies looking to design and implement a successful flagship program: Purpose, Space, Resources, Impact, and Story.

Interviews and survey responses highlight how no single part of the model can exist in isolation. Considered across three stages, they represent a powerful force that can drive the successful design and implementation of the flagship program:

• Stage One includes “purpose” and is about setting the objectives of the program, providing the backbone from which the rest of the program can stem.

• Stage Two includes “space,” “resources,” and “impact” and represents the mechanics of getting a flagship program right: honing in on the specific issue area that the organization is going to tackle; allocating the necessary resources and fostering the right partnerships for implementation; and setting the impact measurement framework that will help track and demonstrate results.

• Stage Three includes “story” and is about telling the story of the flagship program to key audiences that matter to the business.

In the model, purpose feeds into space, resources and impact; and all of these four components are critical to telling a story. The binding together of all parts of the model is what can make flagship programs compelling and impactful.

The research has found that flagship programs don’t stand still. The most successful programs are in a process of continually adapting to changing circumstances and the lessons learnt from activities on the ground and feedback from stakeholders. That means that some elements of the program may evolve over time. While there needs to be some level of consistency, a flagship program doesn’t mean a stagnant program. Indeed, the dynamism of flagship programs is what makes them so resilient.

Challenges of developing flagship programs

There can be barriers to creating a strategic alignment between a company’s social investment portfolio and its core business objectives. Typically, many companies have programs that have been developed organically by enthusiastic individuals. While sometimes successful, they are less likely to be strategically aligned. These programs are often the brainchild of powerful individuals within an organization and so may be politically difficult to change. Another factor is the complex and devolved structure of large companies, particularly those that have diverse operating businesses or have grown by acquisition and taken on another organization’s legacy community programs. These barriers are no doubt a challenge to overcome, but the benefit of a purpose-driven, company-wide and highly impactful flagship program is worth it.
Practitioner Views on Flagship Programs

This section draws on the findings of a detailed survey of corporate community investment practitioners around the world.

The current state of flagship programs

Most companies today exhibit an assortment of social investment activities in the community. In the survey, 59 percent of respondents described their current approach as a mix of larger initiatives accompanied by a relatively small number of local programs.

A focused approach to social investment—where resources are prioritized towards a single global theme—is not yet mainstream. Just 12 percent of respondents said they currently had predominantly larger programs with a specific issue focus that is consistent on a regional or global level.

The future of flagship programs

There are clear signs that change is afoot. The shift towards a more focused approach with a flagship program is evident. Of those who reported not currently having a flagship program, 70 percent said that they expected their organization to embrace a more focused approach over the next two years.

This indicates that the appetite for a more focused approach to social investment is clearly present. However, whether or not all these organizations will successfully evolve their strategies towards the flagship model will depend on how successfully they overcome some of the barriers explored in this report.

![Chart 1](image1.png)

**Chart 1**

**CURRENT APPROACH**

N=103

How would you describe your company's current portfolio of social investment activities?

- A mix of larger initiatives accompanied by a relatively small number of local programs: 59%
- Predominantly smaller programs reacting to local needs and requests from the community: 26%
- Predominantly larger, flagship programs with a specific issue focus that is consistent on a regional or global level: 12%
- Other: 3%

![Chart 2](image2.png)

**Chart 2**

**FUTURE APPROACH**

N=27

Do you think your company will adopt a flagship community program in the next two years?

- YES: 70%
- NO: 30%

*Source: Corporate Citizenship, 2015*
Locally driven initiatives
The survey also uncovered evidence of another trend: localization. Just over a quarter of all respondents indicated that a growing plurality of issues and causes was the likely future for them. This shows that for some organizations, a portfolio of smaller and diverse initiatives is still considered the best way to demonstrate the company’s commitment to the local community.

The two trends of more focused social investment and localization are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A global flagship program can provide the framework that local operations can adapt to suit their own needs. The commitment to local communities can go hand-in-hand with a global flagship program as long as priorities are defined at the outset and an appropriate ratio is applied when investing resources into the flagship as well as the locally driven programs.

The benefits of a flagship community program
While respondents had a range of views on what their future social investment portfolio might look like, there was a ringing endorsement for the benefits associated with having flagship programs.

Over 90 percent of all respondents considered flagship programs an effective way to maximize the social and business return on investment, while 85 percent thought flagship programs allowed a company to own a space, differentiating its brand in the community.

The majority of respondents also supported the idea that flagship programs are the best way to demonstrate the company’s social purpose (i.e., the reason for the company’s existence beyond creating economic value), ensure charitable donations and employee volunteering go hand in hand, and consolidate and focus community activities.

The fact that these benefits appear to be well understood goes some way towards explaining why so many companies seem to be indicating that a flagship approach is going to grow in popularity.

Chart 3
THE BENEFITS OF A FLAGSHIP PROGRAM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A flagship community program is an effective way to maximize the social and business return on investment</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A flagship community program enables a company to “own” a space and differentiate its brand in the community</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A flagship community program must ensure that charitable cash donations and employee engagement/volunteer goes hand-in-hand</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A flagship community program is the best way to communicate and demonstrate the social purpose of a business</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporates should consolidate their community and social investment spending by focusing their efforts through flagship programs</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Corporate Citizenship, 2015
Purpose

Getting the purpose of the flagship program right at the start of its development is crucial to the program’s long-term success. Not being clear on the objectives will lead to an ill-targeted, ineffective and ultimately underwhelming initiative.

While the introduction of a flagship community program does not necessarily require re-inventing the wheel and it can certainly build on past successes, a clear articulation of the flagship program’s purpose and ambition acts as a springboard to success.

Having a clearly defined purpose for the flagship program can help rationalize activities that are not strategically aligned to the business. This consolidation happens when a company adopts a focused approach to social investment that is driven by a clear purpose that unites initiatives and ensures that they are all moving in the same direction. It can also help in making difficult decisions, such as when to scale back investment in an area that does not contribute to the strategic purpose of the organization.

Defining your purpose

The following considerations are most essential in helping an organization to define its purpose:

• **Ambition** What role do you want your flagship program to help you play in society? What is the intended scope and scale of your flagship community program? Do you want to be seen as an innovative leader on an issue, or would it be better for your business to follow a tried and tested path? Do you want to scale up an existing successful initiative or are you prepared to start from scratch?

• **Audience** Who are the target audiences for your flagship community program? Who do you want to care about its impact and success? Is it aimed at creating greater brand affinity, helping improve relationships with key stakeholders and ultimately contributing to business success? Or is it about rallying your employees and/or customers around a cause and boosting their engagement?

• **Beneficiaries** Which group is it that you primarily want to target with the flagship program? How does the beneficiary group align with your key audiences? Of particular importance is to consider the relevance of that beneficiary group to your core business: if this isn’t immediately obvious, then the beneficiary group you’ve chosen may not be the right one.

• **Business goals** What is it that the business can expect to gain from the program? How does the flagship program’s purpose align with corporate priorities (e.g., market expansion, product/service innovation, consumer insight)? Will it attract greater publicity and win the most prestigious awards? Can it fit into training and development opportunities? Will it help grow the organization or reduce costs? Will it make you an employer of choice?

Defining a clear purpose for your flagship approach is not a linear process. Snap judgments need to be put aside. It is imperative to get this first part right in order to build a strong foundation for your program. Testing your answers internally and externally to make sure you’re hitting the right areas is crucial.

Examples of purpose

Case study companies reinforced the fundamental need for a clearly defined purpose in order for a global flagship program to be a success. All interviewed companies were able to articulate the purpose of their existing flagship programs:

1. **Amway**: to fight malnutrition among children under five with a special focus on micronutrient deficiencies.
2. **Kellogg Company**: to support global hunger relief with an emphasis on providing breakfast meals and snacks for children most in need.
3. **Microsoft**: to close the opportunity-gap for 300 million young people worldwide through technology.
4. **Rolls-Royce**: to reach 6 million people through STEM education initiatives.
Space

The second characteristic of a successful flagship program is about determining the right space for the initiative. This is the specific niche that the organization intends to occupy within a wider societal, environmental or economic issue area.

There are a number of steps to consider when identifying a niche issue to pursue through a flagship program:

- **Follow materiality** A growing number of companies conduct materiality assessments to identify and prioritize the most pertinent social, economic and environmental issues for the company to address, based on their relevance to the business and to its stakeholders. Such an assessment can be a valuable precursor for determining the space for the flagship community program to pinpoint the business’s key social impacts.

- **Look for strategic initiatives** Real differentiation comes not only from pinpointing the relevant issue, but also finding a segment or a niche within that issue where the company’s contributions can go the furthest.

- **Listen to stakeholders** Although it is possible to come up with a flagship program in isolation, it is certainly not advisable. Companies can sharpen the flagship program’s focus and pivot the strategy based on feedback from consumers, employees, advisors and nonprofits.

- **Make an impact or solve a problem** There are two categories of social issues defining the space for a flagship social investment program: those to do with social impact or what business does to society; and those to do with social problems or what business can do for society. Of course the choice is not always as clear cut, but this dichotomy is a good reminder that the space for a flagship program can address either a social impact or a social problem, and in fact could aim to tackle issues in both categories.

Defining where the organization stands in the corporate social investment terrain will inevitably take time. Effective flagship program development is never about jumping on the latest trend. It is about connecting the brand with an issue that relates to the business that can ultimately leverage change in the long run.

**CASE STUDY**

**Finding a unique positioning in a crowded space**

**Kellogg Company**

Kellogg is a multinational food manufacturing company with key products in the ready-to-eat cereal and convenience food categories. The company is headquartered in the United States, but has manufacturing facilities in 18 and consumers in 180 countries. Over the past few years Kellogg has gone through a process of realigning its corporate philanthropic activities and defining a global flagship initiative.

The challenge was two-fold: On one hand Kellogg wanted to honor the company’s genuine philanthropic heritage, which started with its founder and has always made sure that the business invested in the communities where its employees lived and worked; on the other hand it was clear that spreading resources too thinly across a number of different themes and issues would not meet the expectations of today’s consumers who are looking to companies to support impactful societal programs.

**Gravitating towards hunger relief** The team at Kellogg reviewed a variety of issues and existing successes, and looked for synergies between corporate objectives and consumer interests. As a food company, hunger relief was a cause that Kellogg quickly gravitated towards, and it was corroborated by consumer research. However, the team wanted to find opportunities for the company to emerge as a leader and decided to look deeper for a unique positioning for Kellogg.

As a result of this process, the company found a key point of differentiation: specifically, that most organizations have previously segmented hunger relief as an issue and related interventions primarily by age group and demographics. Kellogg, however, was one of the first organizations to focus on meal occasions with programs such as “Give a Child a Breakfast,” running in the UK since 1998. From this insight the new flagship program was born with the aim to ensure that children and families have access to breakfast.

The “Breakfast for Better Days” flagship initiative was launched in early 2013 with a commitment to provide 1 billion servings of cereal and snacks by the end of 2016. Kellogg was able to build on existing initiatives to create a global platform centered around global hunger relief with an emphasis on breakfasts. It is clear that Kellogg alone cannot eradicate global hunger, but a key learning for the company was that it can certainly lead and champion a specific segment of it.
Resources

The greatest challenge, but also the greatest opportunity, facing social investment professionals is how to achieve maximum impact while being efficient with resources. This research shows that companies are able to increase the social and business returns on their investments by rethinking the ways in which their businesses contribute resources. There are six considerations:

1 **Internal financial and nonfinancial resources** Cash funding, employee time and in-kind contributions are usually considered the primary resource commitments to a flagship community program. The most impactful programs are able to successfully combine at least two or even all three types of contributions.

2 **Efficiency in management expenditures** Economies of scale exist in social investment, just like any other area of business. These efficiencies often arise later in the implementation phase and sometimes only after several years of hard work. Cash funding from social investment departments is best invested at the beginning of a flagship project to incubate promising programs, and at the very end of each key stage to measure results and find areas for improvement. While upfront costs can be high, smart organizations are able to find ways to test and pilot components of their flagship program before committing serious resources. Delivery and implementation of flagship programs can be led or supported by a business division or externally by a relevant partner.

3 **Leveraged contributions** One effective test of a flagship program is the extent to which it is able to attract financial and nonfinancial resources from other parties. Employee fundraising or cause-related marketing initiatives can be a good first port of call for mobilizing resources. The key question here is: how do you go beyond that? Successful flagship programs leverage external resources, and are able to enlist support from suppliers, partners and/or customers.

4 **Scalable partnerships** Flagship community programs are often anchored in successful partnerships. Some of the case study companies in this research work with key global nonprofit partners to deliver their flagship programs on the ground, such as Amway’s partnership with CARE. Other companies such as Kellogg adopt a regional or country-by-country approach to selecting the most appropriate delivery partner with the right distribution network and local capacity. Partnerships can bring credibility and external recognition to a project, especially if the partnering organizations are able to co-develop and co-brand the flagship program. Involving key organizations early in the design process can ensure that expertise and experience of on-the-ground implementation or thought leadership can be leveraged. Flagship programs are not “me too” projects, nor about re-inventing the wheel. Organizations should commit their resources where they generate the most impact and aim to find and work with partners that can amplify their impact.

5 **Integration with the business** Leadership in the corporate responsibility and sustainability field is clearly moving toward a greater integration of programs with mainstream business processes. Organizations that are able to integrate their flagship programs with core business functions reap the rewards of doing so. This can include reaching new markets, gaining valuable consumer insights or reducing the cost base for manufacturing and distribution. This level of integration makes the flagship program more sustainable in the long term because the returns can be invested back into the program to expand its scale and remit. Understanding how the organization’s growth, geographical expansion or product strategy will evolve over time and feeding these key insights back into the flagship program development process will not only make it more robust, but also enhance the value realized by the business.

6 **Backwards budgeting** An intriguing and perhaps counter-intuitive recommendation is to forget about the budget altogether once the niche is identified, and try to answer the critical question: what would it take to do this right? Budgets, legacy programs and other commitments often pose serious constraints and limitations on flagship program development. Therefore, this piece of advice might sound unexpected, but it can be an innovative and liberating approach to planning resources and contributions.

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**CASE STUDY**

**Laser focusing on unique competencies and complementary resources**

**Amway**

Amway, a Michigan-based direct-selling business, is the largest manufacturer and distributor of vitamins and dietary supplements globally. In 2014, the company launched its worldwide effort, the NUTRILITE™ Power of 5 campaign, leveraging its core competencies to fight childhood malnutrition.

The initiative originated in the early 2000s when Amway became aware of chronic child malnutrition in the communities surrounding one of its organic farms in Brazil. Amway began partnering with local schools to add a nutritional mix to the food of the school’s cafeteria. The positive results prompted Amway to seek similar results on a much larger scale.

Around the same time, Amway started to develop a new product, NUTRILITE™ LITTLE BITS™. The 1g sachet, when mixed into the daily diet of a malnourished child, provides the essential 15 vitamins and minerals to help brain development and body growth in the critical first five years of life. Amway piloted the product in Mexico in 2009: a clinical study, in conjunction with a local NGO and the National Institute of Medicine and Nutrition in Mexico,
found a 93 percent reduction in anemia and 40 percent reduction in stunting among the beneficiary children.  

When launching the Power of 5 campaign, Amway pulled together all its existing activities to combat child malnutrition and committed to expand the program to 17 countries by 2016. The company has mobilized its own and its partners’ resources for maximum impact:

• **Collaborating with the business** The Power of 5 flagship program uses Amway’s expertise to extend the reach of its product to segments of society that haven’t previously been directly touched by the business. This work has fostered great collaboration between the CSR team and Nutrilite, Amway’s Nutrition division, the largest product brand of the business.

• **Partnering with civil society** The core skills of Amway lie in product development and manufacturing. Amway realizes that the most effective solution to addressing childhood malnutrition is to work with partners, such as CARE, GAIN and Glasswing, that have existing nutrition programs. The company is aware that the long-term positive impact of the program doesn’t just rely on the product itself: micronutrient supplementation complements nutrition and hygiene education for families, food provision, and regular and consistent assessment of the children.

• **Fundraising and matching donations** Amway leverages internal and external contributions through the product and campaign websites. The company sponsors a number of different walks and runs around the world to raise awareness of malnutrition. Amway has asked people to raise their hands to fight this issue: 200,000 handprints were collected from all over the world with Amway contributing an additional dollar to CARE for every handprint.

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**Impact**

Leading companies are increasingly focusing on the areas in which they can have the greatest impact. And corporate social investment professionals are increasingly asked to demonstrate and justify their programs in terms of the impacts they have—both on beneficiaries and the business itself.

Rigorous impact data can help to assess the effectiveness of a program, as well as tell a more convincing and robust story. Impact measures are not always easy to put in place, but essential for an effective flagship program.

By understanding results and impacts, companies can begin to demonstrate the value they create on a local, national and international level. The collection of the appropriate metrics acts as a rich source of data to assess the program and create a narrative that will tell the story of the organization and brand.

There are three key reasons why a company needs to put effort into collecting the right data:

1. Conveying impacts— not just inputs and outputs— is what will gain the company the rightful recognition it deserves for the good work its social investment programs achieve.

2. Benchmarking impact will position the organization as a leader on an issue, which will not only attract the right type of publicity, but will also help to grow the movement of interested organizations.

3. Robust data and understanding of the program’s impact will allow for better management of the flagship program and inform decision making.

**A fit-for-purpose impact measurement framework**

To achieve clear results, organizations need to be forward looking and specific about the type of data that is sought from the very beginning and to decide on the measurement framework they want to apply to their program before it is even launched. This will help companies design a program that is realistic and measurable. Crucial to this is agreeing key success measures and indicators, both internally for the program as a whole, and with individual implementation partners.
CASE STUDY
The enabling power of setting a big hairy audacious goal

Rolls-Royce

Rolls-Royce is a Power Systems company providing power for aircraft, ships and land applications. Its vision is to provide “better power for a changing world.” As part of its work to deliver on this vision, Rolls-Royce launched its flagship community investment program in May 2014 under the goal of reaching six million people in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) by 2020.

By inspiring people to follow careers in STEM, the company not only helps secure its future talent base, but also that of its suppliers and customers, helping create the necessary environment to secure the future viability of the firm. While the program is applicable globally, challenges are addressed on a local level. In the UK and North America there is a shortage of STEM talent. In Singapore and Germany, the competition for STEM talent is fierce. In India, it’s about providing access to STEM opportunities. In Brazil, it’s about meeting and raising the aspirations around STEM.

The program is driven forward by over 1,000 STEM ambassadors within the company and Rolls-Royce’s 55,000 employees are at the forefront of its delivery. Assessing the impact of a broad range of STEM activities globally is clearly a significant challenge for the business. With this in mind, Rolls-Royce has stripped back its data collection to focus on the fundamental components of its programs.

The primary focus of Rolls-Royce’s impact measurement is on the depth of reach it achieves with its STEM programs. It has categorized its reach into four tiers:

- **Tier 1 Connect**: exposure to Rolls-Royce in a STEM context
- **Tier 2 Engage**: engagement through Rolls-Royce’s people or resources
- **Tier 3 Learn**: participation in a one-off learning activity
- **Tier 4 Sustain**: engagement in a sustained learning activity.

This means that the company has a clear view on how many people it is reaching and the extent to which it is creating a lasting change. In addition to the tiers of reach that Rolls-Royce uses, it also collects data using the LBG standard measurement framework on the number, role, age, and diversity of its beneficiaries. This means that, along with evidence from its partners, Rolls-Royce is able to analyze a rich patchwork of data through which it can demonstrate its impact on different groups. This is particularly pertinent in the engineering sector where the issue of age, gender and ethnic diversity is particularly acute.

**Story**

Without a story that is successfully articulated, flagship programs may not reach their full potential. Without a clear narrative, a company may fail to enlist partners and build a strong movement behind the cause. Employees, customers, beneficiaries, partners and key opinion formers are all potential audiences. Leading companies are able to engage their key audiences in a meaningful way, rallying the troops behind their flagship cause.

**Underdeveloped storytelling**

It’s important to get the right story across to the right people for the flagship program to maximize its impact—both for the business and potentially also for the beneficiaries. This is arguably one of the greatest challenges of flagship community investment programs.

One major hurdle to effective storytelling is siloed corporate structures. In some cases, corporate community investment professionals do not have extensive public affairs and marketing experience. This means that the communications element of a social investment program is often an add-on rather than an integral part of planning process.

The problem of communications can often be traced back to the lack of a clearly defined strategy. Furthermore, if the strategy, and therefore the overall program, diverges from what stakeholders expect, then a clear message will be very challenging to get across. Would you be more interested in a foods company talking about financial inclusion or hunger? This is particularly so with audiences that are more savvy about the target issue and corporate practices.

If you get your strategy right—by linking your program to your company’s unique purpose, competencies and audiences—you are much more likely to find other departments getting involved in the program. This could see the marketing team using it to create content, or the HR team using it as a vehicle for employee engagement. Getting this element of the story right means that the flagship program can grow organically to be owned and championed by the whole business, rather than being entirely reliant on the core team.

**Making your storytelling compelling**

Storytelling has to convey impact in meaningful ways. The focus should be on what has been achieved, not just what activities have been undertaken. At the same time, organizations need to be wary of the seduction of numbers alone: it’s often the human aspect that captures the imagination and makes something memorable.
People remember how a story made them feel more than the facts contained within the story.

A compelling story is about those who benefit, those who carry out the project, and those who make the decisions. These are considerations for the inception as well as future development of flagship programs. Attention has to be fought for and earned.

Digital and social media

There are clear examples of digital and social media being used to enhance a program, but success is not guaranteed. Organizations need to take a step back and think about what they are trying to achieve.

An appropriate digital presence should serve three discrete objectives, all of which are related to amplification:

1. **Target your key messages** Make sure the messages hit home to the right people and audiences.
2. **Amplify your reach** Digital and social channels increase the number of people your messages can reach, as well as giving the messages a truly global scope.
3. **Amplify your impact** Social media can foster advocacy and action around your cause. It is particularly well suited where opinions, sharing and support are inherent to all main platforms.

CASE STUDY

Closing the opportunity gap

**Microsoft Asia Pacific**

Technology is at the core of Microsoft’s business as well as its citizenship strategy. Microsoft launched its YouthSpark initiative in 2012, which is a company-wide, global approach to create opportunities for 300 million young people by 2015.

At the launch of the initiative, a concerted effort was made to address an issue that is aligned with Microsoft’s business and with the issues that stakeholders would like Microsoft to be involved in. In developing its new flagship initiative, Microsoft consulted with government, nonprofit, and business leaders globally to understand the challenges young people face in building their lives and contributing to their communities.a

This work highlighted the need to go beyond addressing the “digital divide” and to take a more holistic approach to address the “opportunity divide”—the gap between those who have the skills, access, and opportunities to be successful and those who do not. This directly links Microsoft’s core competencies in the digital economy to alleviate a pressing global issue.

In the Asia Pacific region, the launch of the YouthSpark initiative and its overarching global goal helped to galvanize existing programs and kick off a few new ones. The refocused strategy created a clearer sense of Microsoft’s target audience and the initiative’s issue focus, which is about connecting young people with opportunities for employment, education and entrepreneurship.

For example, Microsoft is working together with the ASEAN Foundation to train young entrepreneurs and start-ups in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam. As part of the program, a specific Information and Communication Technology (ICT) curriculum has been developed and train-the-trainer sessions have also been rolled out.b

YouthSpark combines philanthropic contributions to nonprofit organizations with Microsoft products and services and makes this package easily accessible through Microsoft’s YouthSpark Hub. The YouthSpark Hub functions as the initiative’s dedicated online hub. This website pulls together a number of YouthSpark programs in an interactive way, allowing young people to search and sign up to those that are the most interesting to them.

Beyond its online presence, Microsoft holds YouthSpark Live events to help young people identify the skills they need to reach their goals, how technology can support their ambition, and sign up to programs that will help them get there.

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Conclusion

Many companies are giving changing global social issues more thought, and as a result they are focusing their responses and developing strategies that create measurable value for both the business and society.

For social investments, this shift has compelled companies to target their resources rigorously and align interventions with their core competencies. As a result, companies are increasingly using flagship programs to spearhead their corporate social investment activities. This is because flagship programs are an effective way to leverage resources and partnerships to differentiate a company’s brand, cut through the noise, and achieve meaningful impact.

Flagship social investment programs are likely to grow in importance over the coming years. This can bring a wealth of positive impacts, but it also presents risks if a rush to streamline initiatives means that strategy is an afterthought.

There are five critical success factors designed to help companies develop and implement an effective and impactful flagship social investment program that achieves long-term success:

1. **Purpose** Taking the step back to engage internally and externally to properly define the purpose, objectives and audiences for the flagship program.
2. **Space** Focusing on the specific niche space within a relevant societal issue that leverages the company’s core competencies and distinguishes the program from others.
3. **Resources** Dedicating the necessary resources, and fostering the right partnerships internally and externally.
4. **Impact** Setting an impact measurement framework to evaluate and manage the flagship program to better demonstrate the difference that it makes.
5. **Story** Telling the story of the flagship program to key audiences to help gain public recognition and show leadership on a specific issue and to mobilize a genuine movement for change.

Ultimately, the litmus test for success must be whether or not a flagship program is aligned with business drivers, responds to a clear societal need and is designed to be resilient.

About the Authors

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**Nick Jackson**’s role at Corporate Citizenship encompasses corporate social investment, research, strategy, stakeholder engagement, reporting and assurance. He works with a range of clients to help them design, implement, measure and communicate their corporate responsibility activities. Nick has worked with clients such as, Amec Foster Wheeler, BAE Systems, Royal Mail Group and Unilever. Nick is also an account manager for a number of LBG members, helping them in their application of the leading global impact measurement standard for corporate social investment. Prior to joining Corporate Citizenship, Nick worked for UK Trade & Investment delivering events around the UK Government’s G8 Presidency.

About Corporate Citizenship

**Corporate Citizenship** is a global business consultancy specializing in sustainability and corporate responsibility. The team uses expert insight and a simplified approach to sustainability to deliver growth and long-term value for business and society. With teams in London, New York, San Francisco, Santiago and Singapore, Corporate Citizenship works with clients on both a local and global level. The organization helps clients to make the smart choices that will enable them to survive and thrive in an increasingly challenging business environment. Corporate Citizenship advises a global client list on a number of areas: strategy, community, environment, supply chain, socio-economic impacts, reporting and assurance.

Research Methodology

The information in this article is based on interviews with corporate community investment professionals from nine companies. Corporate Citizenship is grateful to the following organizations for their participation: Amway, BD (Becton, Dickinson and Company), Colbún, Collahuasi, Kellogg Company, M&S (Marks & Spencer), Microsoft Asia, Rolls-Royce and Unilever Singapore.

In addition, 103 practitioners participated in an anonymous global survey. More than 86 percent of respondents were either directly responsible for overseeing corporate community investment programs, or were corporate responsibility or sustainability professionals working within major companies.
About Giving Thoughts

Giving Thoughts is a public forum in which The Conference Board engages experts from the disciplines of corporate philanthropy, impact investment, and social innovation in an open dialogue about issues of concern to member companies. Subscribe for free to the Giving Thoughts report and blog at www.conference-board.org/givingthoughts.

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About the Series Director

Matteo Tonello is managing director of corporate leadership at The Conference Board in New York. In his role, Tonello advises members of The Conference Board on issues of corporate governance, shareholder activism, corporate sustainability, and philanthropy. He regularly participates as a speaker and moderator in educational programs on governance best practices and conducts analyses and research in collaboration with leading corporations, institutional investors, and professional firms. He is the author of several publications, including The Corporate Governance Handbook: Legal Standards and Board Practices, Sustainability in the Boardroom, Institutional Investment, and the annual US Directors’ Compensation and Board Practices report. Recently, he served as the co-chair of The Conference Board Expert Committee on Shareholder Activism and the Technical Advisory Board to The Conference Board Task Force on Executive Compensation. He is a member of the Network for Sustainable Financial Markets and the Advisory Council to the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB). Prior to joining The Conference Board, he practiced corporate law at Davis Polk & Wardwell. Tonello is a graduate of Harvard Law School and the University of Bologna.

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