

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/rob-commentary/companies-should-tap-into-social-procurements-endless-opportunities/article35310257/>

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

MITCHELL COHEN

Companies should tap into social procurement's endless opportunities

MITCHELL COHEN



Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Wednesday, Jun. 14, 2017 4:35PM EDT

Last updated Wednesday, Jun. 14, 2017 4:35PM EDT

Mitchell Cohen is President of the Daniels Corporation. Daniels, in partnership with Toronto Community Housing and local social service agencies, implemented social procurement strategies over the past 11 years within the Regent Park Revitalization.

It's time for the private sector to climb aboard the "social procurement" train.

Investing in local economies has long been a business imperative for not-for-profit organizations from coast to coast. These organizations understand how their purchasing power can be leveraged to build social capital and create positive social outcomes in their home communities.

In recent years, for-profit businesses have begun implementing "giving back" strategies that go deeper than simply writing cheques to worthy causes. In fact, engagement philanthropy is becoming an important tool for corporations intent on attracting and keeping the absolute best and the brightest.

The fact is, the best and the brightest are looking for more than a paycheque. They don't want their employer to just talk the talk on giving back. Rather, they want opportunities to walk the walk. In short, they want to contribute their energy and creativity to companies with a soul who mean it when they say they care about the local community.

Social procurement is a powerful tool to demonstrate how much a company cares. It's also incredibly easy to put into practice, and starts with a simple premise and promise.

The premise is that companies spend money in every community in which they have a footprint. The promise is to hire and train as many team members as possible locally, and spend money with intentionality, with a lens sharply focused on making a positive impact on local residents and the local economy.

There are endless opportunities to leverage corporate expenditures for local benefit. For example, all corporations, large and small, purchase art for the workplace, and virtually no one knows where it

comes from. A simple social procurement decision is to source local artists and artisans, buy their art, and identify each artist and their work with a small plaque. A hugely important second step is to celebrate the artists' work in news releases and corporate newsletters. The benefits are enormous to the artists and their families, and career sustainability becomes a real possibility. One phone call to a local craft guild or arts collective would get that ball rolling.

The same philosophy can be applied to the production of corporate videos and photography. Find and hire non-profit agencies that are teaching young people the technical skills that will lead to postsecondary education or career paths in film and television. Putting cameras in the hands of young people is enormously empowering and there are non-profit groups doing just that across the country. Engaging those groups will create a ripple effect that will be felt for generations.

Another big-bang social procurement opportunity is catering, whether for lunch meetings, corporate retreats, year-end parties, or celebrating the closing of a successful IPO.

Catering collectives and "social enterprise" catering companies are springing up across the country with a business model based on hiring and training locally. In so doing, they are creating much more than a single bottom line. These microbusinesses, often driven by new Canadians, are not only delivering new tastes from around the world, but also career path opportunities within the ever-expanding service industry.

Some bicycle courier companies hire and train people with mental-health challenges, and some printing companies hire and train homeless youth. Quilting and sewing collectives create and sell gifts for every possible occasion. Each one of these present an opportunity to engage locally, to truly make a difference.

All that's needed is the desire to find the opportunities, to pick up the phone and invest time and money in social procurement. It won't be long before the most progressive companies designate specific team members to develop and implement social procurement strategies, establishing partnerships and working hand-in-hand with local non-profit agencies to build community capital.

Non-profits have been doing it for decades. Municipalities are adopting social procurement policies and implementing community benefit agreements to maximize local economic and social benefits.

It's time for the corporate sector to jump in with gusto. The money is going to be spent anyway. Let's spend it wisely.