



Business in the

Community

Ireland

CSR

Case Study

EirGrid

Company Description

Business in the community Ireland (BITCI) is Ireland's only network for responsible business, made up of 73 of Ireland's blue chip companies; the network is committed to expanding and improving responsible and sustainable business practices. BITCI also runs the Business Working Responsibly Mark, Ireland's only accreditation for responsible business practices. It is valid for two years and is audited by the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI). It provides a benchmark and gap analysis for businesses of their current Corporate Responsibility strategy across all business operations identifying opportunities and risk and improving on areas. Many of the companies who have received the Mark, 11 so far, describe the process as a journey towards best in class corporate responsibility and very much a process that reveals the before and after of having The Mark. Intel, Transdev and Eirgrid are three of those companies who have shared their experiencing of achieving the Business Working Responsibly Mark.

Eirgrid is a commercial semi-state, dedicated to the provision of transmission and market services for the benefit of electricity consumers. They operate across the island of Ireland and are responsible for the safe supply of electricity 24/7, balancing supply and demand and operating the wholesale market. EirGrid is responsible for putting in place the grid infrastructure needed to support competition in energy, to promote economic growth, to facilitate more renewable energy and to provide essential services.

In doing this, it operates and maintains a safe, secure, reliable, economical and efficient transmission system, as well as developing key infrastructural projects that are vital for the socio-economic development of the State.

An enormous remit, given the sheer scale of the projects involved, currently including the Grid Link project, the Grid West Project, the North South Interconnector and the Grid25 strategy. To do it, the company employs 400 staff, a quarter of them in Northern Ireland.

The Process

Having a strong commitment to good corporate citizenship ensures the company is oriented to consider the matter from its stakeholders' perspective. "Our business is about delivering secure electricity and pylons are just one route by which we can do that. We are open to other solutions, whether they be smart grid or other tools," said EirGrid Director Michael Walsh.

"It's important that we do this in a positive manner, which is why we go through a considerable consultation process in the marketplace. The levels of engagement (by members of the public) increase more when it comes to specific proposals, so we are doing a lot of outreach work at present in relation to newspaper advertisement and articles."

It doesn't just speak however. Being a good corporate citizen means it must listen too. In relation to the GridLink project, EirGrid received more than 38,000 responses from members of the public.

"We've really, actively, worked to listen to and address those concerns, while at the same time recognising that we have a remit for the safe supply of electricity. Initially our aim was to gather the broad themes that emerged, and then go back and drill down into the responses we've received in more detail. When you're delivering infrastructure of this scale, it's very important that you have a very open, visible consultation process."

While it is the public that is the end user, EirGrid's customers include energy companies such as Airtricity, ESB, Bord Gais and wind farms across the country. It runs customer relations surveys every two years, to ensure it is scoring well in terms of customer satisfaction, with formal tracking systems in place to track customer metrics, which are then reported to the board on a monthly basis.

"It's all part of our commitment to continuous improvement," said Walsh. "Equally, we are constantly looking at ways to improve our procurement processes, running sustainable procurement workshops with suppliers and potential suppliers. What's more, when we have finished a tender process we go out of our way to give quality feedback to unsuccessful bidders."

It's not just because it's the right thing to do, but because there is a strong business case for doing it, he pointed out.

"Very often in tender situations awarding authorities are too cautious to say anything for fear it could lead to a dispute. We go through all our tenders very carefully to see where tenderers may have fallen down, feedback which doesn't only have a positive effect on them, but on us too. This is a very small industry we are in, and acting in this way gives us a reputation as people who are good to do business with, which is an important way for us to keep the pool of suppliers as large as possible. The larger the pool of suppliers, the easier it is for us to do business economically as possible."

Challenges

Understandably, work on its commitment to the environment has been to the fore in terms of its CSR activities.

“We have made very strong progress in terms of monitoring our footprint and achieving verifiable goals in relation to reducing emissions, waste and water. In our grid and transmission projects, we comply with the highest international standards. We are also making great strides at decarbonising our electricity supply, by integrating renewables such as wind into the supply.”

Helping to foster innovation among its suppliers has helped it on this front.

“One of the biggest factors limiting electricity is that you need your supply to be very stable. As a result of this, traditionally power system operators would only let 10 – 15% of supply come from wind, for example. However, by working with vendors we’ve helped developed a wind stability tool that will allow up to 50% of wind be used, using real time information regarding the system and its stability. We have also worked with different vendors to help develop much better wind forecasting tools, which gives the power system operators more confidence.”

“Over the past year or so we have become better known by the general public. For us, an important part of our corporate and social responsibility work is around being very conscious of the impact we have on communities. It’s important that we bed CSR into the organisation so that it is not just a bolt on. Behaving in a socially responsible manner is already one of our core values as an organisation.”

Benefits

CSR in the workplace initiatives at EirGrid include a top notch training programme for mapping resources in the organisation and upskilling people. Good employee engagement has been crucial in helping the workforce cope with recent structural changes, in particular the process of integration that taken place between operations in Northern Ireland and the Republic.

“It was a very significant change programme but having strong employee engagement and good consultation processes in place enabled that transition to take place very smoothly. What’s more, we captured a lot of feedback at the end of that process which we have learned from and which will of use to us for future reference,” he said.

CSR also of course reaches into the community, with education outreach taking centre stage at EirGrid. Its flagship programme on this front has seen it deliver an entertaining and informative life science show to Junior Cert students around the country. Introduced three years ago, up to 5,000 students have attended and the EirGrid team behind it is constantly tweaking it to ensure its longevity as an initiative.

As executive director with responsibility for CSR, Walsh has an active role in ensuring best practice in relation to EirGrid’s corporate governance. “It’s very formally instituted, with a CSR group within the company, pillar heads for each of the five CSR pillars – such as marketplace, community and

workplace – with sub committees that meet monthly and whose input is reported back up at top team level every quarter.”

With all this already in place, why bother with the Business Working Responsibly Mark? “As part of the coming year’s business plan, we have two areas we are looking to focus on, innovation and CSR,” he explained.

“For us it’s not just about having a CSR group that does good things once a month, it’s about ensuring CSR is embedded in the organisation. Given our activities, our visibility and profile, we felt it was important to challenge ourselves to be best practice in CSR terms, and the Mark was the best way to do that. And we were right. Through it that even in areas we were very good on, such as education outreach, there was fine tuning to be done. That has been of real value to us.”

While it is onerous, it adds value, he said. “We are very much a performance driven organisation, and the Mark was a great opportunity to measure our performance on this front. It forces you to take a much more serious approach to the topic in all sorts of ways. To give just one example, it

Business Working Responsibly Mark

The Business Working Responsibly Mark measures all areas of your business:

Corporate Responsibility

Sustainable Practices

Employee well-being

Supply chain management

Environmental policies

Communicating your CSR

Based on ISO 26000, The Business Working Responsibly Mark certifies your responsible and sustainable business practices. Audited by the NSAI, it not only gives third party endorsement of your practices, it crucially provides you with an inventory, a gap analysis and a roadmap for your sustainable journey.

For more Information:

Visit <http://www.bitc.ie/business-working-responsibly-mark/>

Or contact Elise McCarthy at Business in the Community Ireland on 0 1 874 7232