

Do Companies Really Care? Strategic Philanthropy and Imagine Canada's Caring Company Program

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ABSTRACT

First launched in 1988, Imagine Canada's Caring Company program recognizes Canadian companies that contribute at least one percent of their pre-tax profit to nonprofit organizations within their employees' communities. Broadly speaking, the program sets a standard for corporate strategic philanthropy. However, the program is vulnerable to the same tensions that underlie the broader practice of strategic philanthropy; namely, a blurring of the line between profit-seeking activity and addressing social need.

RÉSUMÉ

Lancé en 1988, le Programme des entreprises généreuses d'Imagine Canada reconnaît les entreprises canadiennes qui versent au moins un pour cent de leurs bénéfices avant impôts à des organismes sans but lucratif au sein des communautés de leurs employés. Le programme établit ainsi une norme pour la philanthropie stratégique des entreprises. Cependant, il est vulnérable aux mêmes tensions que celles qui sous-tendent une pratique plus large de la philanthropie stratégique, la tentation de ne pas tenir compte de la distinction entre quête de profits et appui aux besoins sociaux.

Keywords / Mots clés : corporate strategic philanthropy, CSR, Imagine Canada, Caring Company program / philanthropie stratégique d'entreprise, RSE, Imagine Canada, programme des entreprises généreuses

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is seen as a key attribute of well-managed companies (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, & Davídsdóttir, 2019; Carroll, 1991; Rangan, Chase, & Karim, 2015), with philanthropy, and in particular strategic philanthropy, central to CSR (Burke & Logsdon, 1996; Elkington, 2001; Porter & Kramer, 2011). This article explores the tensions present within strategic philanthropy and accordingly highlights both the capabilities and limitations of Imagine Canada's Caring Company program. We argue that, while the program may be a reasonable means to en-

courage corporate giving broadly, it does not uphold a rigorous standard by which to gauge the merits of a company's strategic philanthropy.

The article provides evidence of the tensions present within the program drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer of 2020 with corporate philanthropy managers from "Caring Companies." The findings highlight that although the Caring Company program provides some benefits for companies and the nonprofit sector, Imagine Canada limits the program's effectiveness by maintaining inconsistent standards and omitting third-party certification. Moving forward, we suggest that Imagine Canada could strengthen the program by further promoting employee giving, standardizing its requirements, and implementing a third-party audit that ensures the program's rigor.

Corporate philanthropy has progressed in remarkable ways over the past century (Ricks & Williams, 2005), evolving from CEOs simply writing checks for their favourite charities to a much more sophisticated practice. Companies are increasingly integrating philanthropy into their core business strategies (Dennis, Buchholtz, & Butts, 2009; Maas & Liket, 2011). This type of giving is better understood as *strategic* corporate philanthropy: the "Giving of corporate resources to address non-business community issues that also benefit the firm's strategic position and, ultimately, its bottom line" (Saiia, Carroll, & Buchholtz, 2013, p. 170). Crucial to corporate philanthropy's evolution, companies strive for social and economic returns that are measurable and identifiable within specific periods (Ricks & Williams, 2005). Through strategic corporate philanthropy, companies have improved their brand reputations and increased the motivation and loyalty of their employees, all while benefiting the communities where they operate (Kubičková, 2018). In today's strategic corporate philanthropy landscape, the line separating the needs of society and the needs of for-profit firms is becoming increasingly blurred (McGoey, 2012).

While strategic philanthropy can significantly benefit recipients and benefactors, there are also deep-rooted tensions within the practice. For companies, the aspiration to generate positive social outcomes can conflict with the goal of maximizing the financial returns of philanthropy (McGoey, 2012). Further, as companies refine their philanthropic practices, they increasingly give in ways that maximize the efficiency of their programs while neglecting society's actual needs (Edwards, 2008). Corporate philanthropy is also perceived as a hallmark of neoliberalism, especially as corporations become more invested in public service provision (Eikenberry, 2017). Given the evolving role of companies in society, there is a need for effective leadership within the corporate philanthropy landscape.

In Canada, Imagine Canada has emerged as a leader within the corporate philanthropy accreditation field. Imagine Canada is a national charitable organization that seeks to strengthen and support Canadian charities and nonprofits¹ (Imagine Canada, 2015). Imagine Canada provides various programs and services to ensure that the sector is well governed, well educated, well connected, and well-funded (Imagine Canada, 2015). Accordingly, Imagine Canada has been operating its Caring Company program since 1988 to promote corporate giving (Ayer, 2018). For an annual program fee, Imagine Canada designates participating companies as "Caring Companies": companies that

“contribute at least 1% of their pre-tax profit to the communities where their employees live and work” (Ayer, 2019, p. 15).

Imagine Canada contends that companies do not have to sacrifice their profits to give back to their communities; in fact, “when done right, the benefits to the business are clear” (Ayer, 2019, p. 5). Steven Ayer (2018), author of Imagine Canada’s corporate giving report, demonstrates that Caring Companies can more effectively retain top talent because of their philanthropic activities. Moreover, strategic philanthropy seems to be so valuable for Canadian companies that, as individual donations are declining, Caring Companies plan to increase their support level: “43% of companies reported plans to increase their philanthropic budgets compared to only 10% who planned to decrease” (Ayer, 2019, p. 4).

As one might expect, the program provides various social benefits that directly impact the nonprofit sector. Chief among them, charities and nonprofits receive significant funding from Caring Companies (Ayer, 2018). Imagine Canada’s 2019 survey finds that employees of Caring Companies are more likely to donate to charities and nonprofits than those who do not work for Caring Companies. Stimulating employee giving is especially important for the nonprofit sector as general donation rates among Canadians are steadily declining² (Ayer, 2019). Further, charities and nonprofits can develop strong relationships with their Caring Company partners and draw upon corporate strategies and technologies to aid their social missions. Although the program appears to present a win-win proposition, the tensions that underlie strategic philanthropy also limit the program’s effectiveness.

This article explores the conflicted practice of strategic philanthropy, and by extension, the Caring Company program. Through a review of the strategic philanthropy literature, we explore the core tensions of the practice. We find that the desire to achieve efficient corporate philanthropy limits the practice’s overall effectiveness. We demonstrate that this tension is embedded in the Caring Company program. We provide evidence from a data set of Caring Companies and semi-structured interviews with corporate philanthropy managers from Caring Companies. The findings highlight the limitations and capabilities of the program. Specifically, while the program effectively provides Canadian companies with an accessible accreditation program that legitimizes corporate philanthropy, it is limited by the inconsistency of its standards and its lack of third-party assurance. This limitation has caused and could continue to cause top companies to exit the program, jeopardizing the value of the accreditation. We conclude with recommendations to strengthen the program so that it can continue to benefit the nonprofit sector.

UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIC PHILANTHROPY

As indicated above, strategic corporate philanthropy is defined by integrating corporate giving into a company’s overall strategy (Dennis et al., 2009) (see Table 1 for definitions of strategic philanthropy). It balances community stakeholders’ needs with a company’s skills and competencies to create a mutually beneficial practice (Bruch & Walter, 2005). Interestingly, authors tend to adopt extreme positions within the strategic philanthropy literature. While some authors believe that strategic philanthropy is the solution to all of the world’s problems (Porter & Kramer, 2011), others argue that it marks the end of democracy as we know it (Edwards, 2008). We suggest that the dialectical tension between these positions reveals the need for a more balanced approach to strategic

philanthropy. Strategic philanthropy can be a valuable tool for economic and social progress, but it must be better understood and used with caution to be effective.

Table 1: Definitions of strategic philanthropy

Reference	Term	Definition
Emerson, J. (2003). The Blended Value Proposition: Integrating Social and Financial Returns. <i>California Management Review</i> , 45(4).	Strategic Philanthropy	“A wide variety of philanthropic practices, many of which build upon traditional approaches to charitable giving In general terms, what distinguishes [strategic philanthropy] is its commitment to viewing philanthropy not as an approach to charitable giving, but rather to investing in the creation of social value” (p. 49).
Saiia, D., Carroll, A., & Buchholtz, A. (2003). Philanthropy as Strategy: When Corporate Charity “Begins at Home.” <i>Business & Society</i> , 42(2).	Corporate Philanthropy	“Giving of corporate resources to address nonbusiness community issues that also benefit the firm’s strategic position and, ultimately, its bottom line” (p. 170).
Kubičková, K. (2018). Strategic Philanthropy: Literature Review. <i>Acta Oeconomica Pragensia</i> , 26(3).	Strategic Corporate Philanthropy	“This linking of [corporate] philanthropy to strategic business outcomes ... designed to create a measurable benefit in an identifiable time period” (p. 75).

First, it is essential to understand the conceptual linkages between strategic philanthropy and corporate philanthropy. Strategic philanthropy has evolved out of corporate philanthropy, as corporations have embraced a more calculated form of charitable giving. We must underline that corporations, like strategic philanthropists, are not social purpose agencies, i.e., organizations mandated by the government or a board of directors to benefit society. Companies are constantly in the process of buying, selling, or trading resources to benefit their shareholders, while charitable giving is very much an optional practice (Gan, 2006). Like a billionaire who can decide when, where, and how they give, a corporation has the right to donate its resources however it wants (Gan, 2006). Logically, with this optionality comes the question, “What’s in it for me?”

It appears that corporations have made the most of their choice to give and, in turn, embraced a form of philanthropy that is strategic (Mescon & Tilson, 1987; Kubičková, 2018). Corporations have developed narrow and calculated philanthropic focuses while engaging in measurement and evaluation tactics that promote efficiency within their giving (Dennis et al., 2009; Maas & Liket, 2011). These changes have allowed corporations to maximize their returns on community investments while ensuring that they have a significant social impact (Emerson, 2003; Epstein, 1989; Porter & Kramer, 2011). However, this form of philanthropy is a conflicted process that delicately balances the requirements of corporations with the needs of communities (Edwards, 2008). As one would imagine, this form of philanthropy has garnered its fair share of criticism.

Milton Friedman, an early critic of corporate social responsibility, claimed that the only social responsibility that corporations should have is to increase profits for their shareholders (Friedman, 1970). Hypothetically, corporate managers who spend their company’s resources on social causes would be irresponsible, as they are using their shareholders’ funds to pursue arbitrary social objectives (Friedman, 1970). However, what Friedman misunderstood within his critique was that social benefit

and financial benefit are not mutually exclusive. Importantly, it has been demonstrated that investment in charitable causes can generate significant value for shareholders. Through philanthropic activities, companies can create more value for themselves and the communities they operate within, creating a dual strategic bottom-line (Epstein, 1989). This concept can also be understood as Porter and Kramer's (2011) principle of "shared value" or Emerson's (2003) "blended value."

However, in its early days, corporate philanthropy's benefits, both internally and externally, were unclear and unquantifiable (Kubičková, 2018; Ricks & Williams, 2005). Yet, today's corporate philanthropy strives to move beyond enlightened self-interest and toward a form of giving where social outcomes and impacts can be measured and evaluated within an identifiable period (Maas & Liket, 2011). Additionally, it is suggested that effective strategic philanthropy promotes innovation (Maas & Liket, 2011). By integrating innovative business techniques, new technologies, and measurement tools into their giving, corporations can better understand if their giving will generate measurable social and financial returns (Dennis et al., 2009; Maas & Liket, 2011). While these strategies have traditionally been confined to business operations, companies can make their philanthropic ventures more efficient by integrating them (Ayer, 2019).

More broadly, the integration of business motivations, use of scale, and search for efficiency into the realm of civil society has been termed "philanthro-capitalism" (The Economist, 2006). In *Philanthro-capitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World*, Bishop and Green (2008) exemplify the potential of blended value ventures, presenting the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as the hallmark of strategic philanthropy. The foundation has significantly improved global health standards by using large-scale, metrics-driven methods developed at Microsoft (Bishop & Green, 2008; Eikenberry & Mirabella, 2018). Operating as the foundation's sole trustees, Bill Gates, Melinda French Gates, and Warren Buffet dedicate billions of dollars to their main priority areas: global health, global agriculture, and U.S. education policy (McGoey, 2012). For Bishop and Green (2008) and many others, the Gates Foundation demonstrates that the maximization of individual wealth can be parlayed into immense social value, exemplifying that private capital and social benefit interact harmoniously.

However, enthusiastic support for strategic philanthropy, such as Bishop and Green's (2008), has garnered equally vociferous opposition. With *Just Another Emperor? The Myths and Realities of Philanthrocapitalism*, Michael Edwards (2008) provides a foundational critique of both philanthro-capitalism³ and strategic philanthropy by calling attention to these practices' problematic principles. Edwards contends that the beliefs underlying philanthrocapitalism are fundamentally flawed. Philanthrocapitalism's tenets suggest that "methods drawn from business can solve social problems and are superior to the other methods in use in the public sector and in civil society" and "these methods can achieve the transformation of society, rather than increased access to socially beneficial goods and services" (Edwards, 2008, p. 32). For Edwards, philanthrocapitalism's beliefs are misplaced and dangerous. He suggests that significant social change must come from civil society, not wealthy individuals or companies. He also finds an inherent conflict embedded within corporate philanthropy and, by extension, corporate accreditation systems: "Much that goes by the name of corporate social responsibility seems more public relations than social transformation, leaving the impression that business is using CSR as a screen to avoid more serious reform" (Edwards, 2008,

p. 25). For many companies, philanthropy is a much more favourable social responsibility mechanism when compared to options like increasing employee wages or discontinuing offshore accounting (Edwards, 2008). As Edwards demonstrates, strategic philanthropy is a convergence of for-profit and nonprofit values that remains an inherently conflicted practice.

Furthermore, many suggest that the growing popularity of strategic philanthropy is a hallmark of neoliberalism: “through public–private partnerships, contracting out, co-production, or cutting back altogether, the state has increasingly looked to voluntary and nongovernmental efforts as the means for addressing all types of collective problems in society” (Eikenberry, 2017, p. 41). In recent years, Canada’s nonprofit sector has felt a shift toward a neoliberal operating environment with increased social responsibility being placed upon private entities (Evans, Richmond, & Shields, 2005). Many researchers contend that this shift presents a significant danger to Canadian civil society (Evans, Richmond, & Shields, 2005; Woolford & Curran, 2011). Increasing the amount of influence that companies have on social funding threatens the democratic values of Canadian society: “Such responsibility cannot be turned over to an unelected class of corporate chieftains (even well-intentioned ones) no matter how grateful we may be for their generosity” (Jenkins, 2011, p. 817). If there is less democratic input into the distribution of social services, then social services will not effectively mirror public needs (Jenkins, 2011).

Some authors and academics go so far as to claim that within a neoliberal governmental structure, a state-regulated nonprofit sector can never be a force of true change for historically marginalized communities (Gilmore, 2017). Studying the history of the nonprofit sector, Munshi and Willse (2017) identify that, “The cumulative effects of decades of neoliberal reform have been a massive exacerbation of the inequalities of racial capitalism and its gendered division of labour” (p. 166). Ultimately, many authors opposing strategic philanthropy take issue with the role of government in equitable public service provision (Jenkins, 2011). For these authors, there must be significant policy reforms to ensure that the need for corporate philanthropy and nonprofit work is minimized in the first place (Edwards, 2008). After all, companies and nonprofits can only do so much to uplift communities neglected by their governments.

Given the significant inconsistencies within the practice of strategic philanthropy, should we toss it aside? Not necessarily. Although strategic philanthropy is inherently conflicted, this conflict is a condition of creating shared value. Although critical of strategic philanthropy, McGoey (2012) notes that shared value is foundational to modern economics. As far back as Adam Smith, academics have claimed that self-interest naturally brings about social benefits (McGoey, 2012). Within a capitalist structure, the pursuit of private capital also generates wealth for various other associated individuals and institutions. Philanthropy naturally yields personal returns for the philanthropist: “gift exchanges are often rooted in diverse social and economic objectives, such as bolstering the reputation of community leaders or expanding territorial jurisdiction” (Mauss as quoted in McGoey, 2012, p. 193). Thus, the tensions in corporate philanthropy already exist within other forms of gift-giving and within the fundamental interaction between economic and societal structures. However, this point also reinforces the importance of ensuring a balance in corporate philanthropy. Within a given corporate and nonprofit partnership, the nonprofit can face challenges due to an uneven power dynamic dominated by the corporate partner (McGoey, 2012). Often, as previously suggested,

within a blended value relationship, the needs of the businesses seem to take precedence over the needs of society (Edwards, 2008; McGoey, 2015).

While strategic philanthropy can yield significant returns for society and business, there are limitations and threats embedded within the practice. Therefore, effective monitoring is needed to ensure that strategic philanthropy evolves in a way that continues to benefit business while also maintaining the health of the nonprofit sector and Canadian society.

IMAGINE CANADA'S CARING COMPANY PROGRAM

Imagine Canada is a national charitable organization that works to strengthen Canada's nonprofit sector. In 1988, Imagine Canada launched the Caring Company program to certify Canadian companies that donate at least one percent of their pre-tax profit to their employees' communities. Currently, the program certifies 65 companies, including some of the largest companies (measured by annual profit) in Canada. Imagine Canada suggests that the program provides tangible benefits for partnering corporations and the nonprofit sector. Findings indicate that strategic philanthropy provides companies with an opportunity to attract and retain employees, effectively cutting input costs related to employee turnover (Ayer, 2019; Seifert, Morris, & Bartkus, 2003). Ayer (2019) notes, "54% of people who worked at Caring Companies reported that their current employer's reputation for charitable work in the community influenced them 'a lot' before accepting their current job, compared to only 13% of other respondents" (Ayer, 2019, p. 14). Moreover, "66% of people who reported awareness of the program indicated they would take a pay decrease to work for a firm more involved in the community, compared to only 23% of those who did not" (Ayer, 2019, p. 14). Thus, companies gain greater control over their external staffing costs through strategic philanthropy and reduce overall expenditures. Additionally, corporate philanthropy has the potential to enrich a company's resources in the form of improved brand recognition, which may attract additional customers and increase customer loyalty (Seifert et al., 2003).

But on closer examination, the program's promise of broad social benefit appears to be muddled by its tendency to uphold corporate inclusivity over establishing higher standards. Imagine Canada's recent publication by Ayer (2019), *Profit, Purpose, and Talent: Trends and Motivations in Corporate Giving and Volunteering*, contends that the Caring Company program provides social value for the direct recipients of corporate philanthropy and Canada's nonprofit sector at large. Further, this report suggests that corporations will play a significant role in reducing Canada's looming social deficit (Ayer, 2019). Imagine Canada's Chief Economist, Brian Emmet, contends that the deficit will result in the nonprofit sector's inability to meet increasing service demands while revenue growth slows. Ultimately, by 2026, the sector could see a \$25 billion shortfall in its ability to meet service demands (Emmet, 2018).

Ayer (2019) suggests that corporations will significantly reduce Canada's social deficit for two main reasons. First, while individual donation rates are declining, corporate donation rates are increasing (Ayer, 2019). As a result, corporations will become a greater revenue source for nonprofits and charities. Second, the report suggests that workplaces will become increasingly influential in stimulating individual employee charitable giving. For example, as Canada's demographics are rapidly changing, young people today are much less likely to attend religious services, which have historically been crucial for soliciting donations and spreading charitable information (Ayer, 2019; Ipsos Reid, 2020).

Substantiating this claim, Imagine Canada's report highlights employees of companies with various donation programs are more likely to donate to charities than employees of companies without such programs (Ayer, 2019). With these points, the report articulates how workplaces could become increasingly effective sites to encourage charitable activity. However, though companies *could be* important sites for charitable activity, this does not necessarily reduce the social deficit.

Additionally, community investment within the Caring Company program can take three forms: cash and in-kind contributions, volunteerism during work hours, and management costs (Imagine Canada, n.d.). Importantly, forms of employee-giving do not count towards a Caring Company's one percent total (Imagine Canada, n.d.). Moreover, Imagine Canada claims that its standards are in accordance with the LBG International framework, as represented by LBG Canada (Imagine Canada, n.d.). However, LBG Canada includes payroll giving and other forms of employee giving as valid philanthropic outputs in its framework (LBG Canada, n.d.). While Imagine Canada broadly adopts the LBG Canada framework, it doesn't explicitly incentivize parts of the framework, such as stimulating or matching employee contributions, which could reduce the social deficit.

Currently, there is a lack of evidence linking corporate philanthropy to broad social impacts (Edwards, 2008). The lack of such evidence is compounded by the fact that the Caring Company program does not require nor measure the corporate behavior that would theoretically reduce the looming social deficit.

To better understand the tensions in the Caring Company program and, by extension, strategic philanthropy, in the next section we detail findings from eight semi-structured interviews with managers of corporate philanthropy, drawn from a subset of the largest Caring Companies.

METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

This research operates under the assumption that companies and individuals who compose them are empirical objects that can be observed and measured (Gaudet & Robert, 2018). Companies can be experienced and sensed in various ways: by stepping into a lobby, being hired, or reading an annual corporate report.

This study uses qualitative methods to explore the complex and contextually situated nature of Caring Companies. This article draws on a set of semi-structured interviews with company officials to gain deeper insight into the relationship between the Caring Company program and the strategic philanthropy initiatives at some of Canada's largest companies.

As previously indicated, Caring Companies accredited by Imagine Canada "contribute at least 1% of their pre-tax profit to the communities where their employees live and work" (Ayer, 2019, p. 15). To develop our subset of companies for interviews from the full set of Caring Companies, we ranked the Caring Companies by annual revenue or net profits⁴ to determine the amount these companies donate to nonprofits and charities (see Table 2 for more detail). From this list, we selected the 12 largest Caring Companies using their annual revenue or net profits as reported in the Report on Business (ROB) annual company listing.

Interviewees were selected from this subset of 12 Caring Companies based on their seniority in the company and knowledge of their company's philanthropic work and the Caring Company program (see Table 3 for a list of those interviewed). Of the 12 companies, eight provided participants

Table 2: Donations to nonprofits and charities

Company name	2019 total giving \$M	2018 total giving \$M	2017 total giving \$M	Main philanthropic focusses
TD Bank Group	126.00	116.00	107.00	Financial security, connected communities, vibrant planet, and better health
RBC	111.40	100.70	86.20	Youth, arts, and the environment
CIBC	58.00	60.00	45.00	Children, natural disasters, disability inclusion, breast cancer, financial literacy
Telus ¹	55.00	150.00	45.00	Healthcare, education for children and youth, the digital economy, inclusive and equitable communities, the environment, and online security
Power Corporation of Canada ²	48.30	47.70	48.00	Poverty, empowerment of women, environmental stewardship, health, education, social entrepreneurship, and arts and culture
Manulife Financial	22.70	22.60	21.90	Heart health, financial inclusion, and local initiatives
Canada Life	12.80	3.30	13.50	Mental wellbeing, physical wellbeing, financial wellbeing, and the environment
The Co-operators ³	0.52	0.55	0.58	Marginalized youth, mental health, and youth mental health

Notes: This table presents total donations (millions) made from 2017–2019 by the Caring Companies interviewed. This table also includes the company's main philanthropic focusses, but does not include employee donations or the value of employee volunteer hours unless otherwise noted. ¹Telus's figures also include contributions from employees and retirees. For example, in 2017, \$4.45 million was contributed by staff and retirees. These contributions were enabled by Telus' donation matching program, in which Telus matches donations up to \$2,500 per person. ²Power Corporation's donation total includes its subsidiaries: Power Financial, Great-West Lifeco, and IGM Financial. Notably, Canada Life is a subsidiary of Power Corporation. ³The Co-operators' donation total includes community contributions made from two funds: Co-operators Fiftieth Anniversary Community Fund, which supports registered charities exclusively; and the Co-operators Community Economic Development Fund, which supports nonprofit organizations, charities, social enterprises, and co-operatives. Notably, this donation total includes contributions to entities other than nonprofits.

for in-depth interviews in the summer of 2020. The interviewees agreed to acknowledge their participation, allowing the research to showcase the companies that were studied. However, as part of an effort to encourage open and honest responses, the quotes and opinions featured in the study findings are not attributed to specific individuals. Hour-long telephone interviews were conducted over the summer of 2020. During those interviews, participants were asked about the reasoning for particular donations and the social impact of those donations. Detailed notes were taken throughout the interviews and coded to reveal patterns and outliers in the responses.

The interviewees discussed their philanthropy programs and their relationship to the Caring Company program. The companies interviewed for this study are some of Canada's largest companies and operate at a national and international level. Additionally, these companies represent a significant amount of philanthropic activity from various fields: banking, insurance, co-operative insurance, financial services, telecommunications, and international management and holdings. These

Table 3: List of interviewees

Company	Name	Position
TELUS	Christi Cruz	Senior Manager, National Community Investment, Team Lead
The Co-operators	Greg Elliott	Senior Citizenship Advisor
Power Corporation of Canada	Paul Genest	Senior Vice President
Canada Life	Marian Jones	Senior Program Manager, Community Relations
TD Bank Group	Farah Kurji	Senior Manager and Head of Canadian Philanthropy, Global Corporate Citizenship
Manulife	Adrienne Maniezzo	Manager, Corporate Donations
CIBC	Elizabeth Morningstar Pottinger	Manager, Corporate Giving
RBC	Mike Ronchka	Senior Manager, Impact Measurement, Corporate Citizenship
CIBC	Nathalia Santana	Director, Community Relationships

Notes: The interviewees were managers at major companies featured on the *Globe and Mail's* Top 1000 Canadian Companies list. The companies featured on the list, except for The Co-operators, were ranked by their annual profit. The Co-operators was featured on the list ranked by revenue, as profit information was not available for privately traded companies. Additionally, two interviewees from CIBC chose to be interviewed together.

companies give to a vast collection of causes: youth, arts, environment, financial security, physical and mental health, cancer treatment and prevention, disability inclusion, poverty, and various other community development initiatives. Two of the companies interviewed had withdrawn from the Caring Company program in 2020, each for different reasons.

Drawing on the experiences of managers of corporate philanthropy programs within Caring Companies, this research aims to bring additional context to the philanthropic data of those companies and explore the tensions inherent in the program. Through this process, the value of the Caring Company program and the relationships between Imagine Canada and the Caring Companies were examined.

FINDINGS

The strategy spectrum

As previously stated, what makes strategic philanthropy “strategic” is the integration of business interests, innovative business techniques, and measurement tools into philanthropic practices (Maas & Liket, 2011). Using these methods, corporations can better measure their philanthropy’s social and financial returns (Maas & Liket, 2011). However, the interviewed companies demonstrated varying levels of strategy within their giving.

For some, the value of their philanthropy was solely dependent on the positive impacts they created within the communities to which they gave. For example, one manager from a major Canadian company noted that their philanthropy was not necessarily positioned to be strategic but to genuinely give back to the community in an inclusive and meaningful way. This manager indicated that their company gave to a wide variety of causes, not choosing to focus their philanthropy within a select few areas: “The needs are diverse ... and for a vibrant society, it’s many different areas that need to be strong.” Additionally, this manager highlighted that their company does not coordinate efforts to track their social or financial impacts. Further, the manager noted that because their giving is so broad and their donations are so numerous, it would be nearly impossible to track the specific impact that their philanthropy creates. Regarding their financial returns, the manager contended that the intangible and intrinsic value of their generosity benefited the company. The manager also mentioned that philanthropy yields secondary benefits for the company: a more favourable reputation, sponsorship opportunities, and the ability to attract and retain shareholders. However, the manager noted, “It’s not so much about sponsorship: it’s about giving, ultimately.”

At the other end of the strategy spectrum, a manager from a major bank stressed the importance of data collection and technology within their company’s philanthropy. This manager described that their grantees have access to an online platform of social impact measurement tools that allows the grantees to track the effectiveness of their programs based on a variety of metrics. This manager also stressed the importance of detailed performance management over surface-level impact measurement:

You can’t manage what you can’t measure. If you’re giving away millions of dollars and you don’t know how effective it’s being, then there is no way for you to ever improve the effectiveness of the program you’re supporting, and there’s no way for you to even know if it is working.

Further, this manager noted that their company is preparing a longitudinal study to measure the social impact that one of their main programs will have on a significantly sized youth population. This study is a uniquely sophisticated endeavor, especially compared with the majority of the other companies interviewed. These companies noted that their social impact measurement was primarily confined to tracking outputs rather than long-term impacts.

Another manager from a major financial services company noted that their company could measure a range of corporate benefits that arise from philanthropy. This company uses a return on investment (ROI) calculation that analyzes qualitative and quantitative indicators to determine the corporate benefits of charitable giving. Furthermore, it measures the impact that the company’s philanthropy has on the brand awareness of its employees, customers, and potential customers. Additionally, it measures the market share that the company holds within those three populations. Compared with the other companies interviewed, this corporate benefit measurement system is quite advanced, as most of the others noted that the main advantage of their philanthropy was related to intangible rather than observable branding benefits.

Similar to the spectrum of strategies noted above, there were varying levels of transparency among the managers interviewed. While many managers expressed their desire to talk openly about specific details of their philanthropy programs, many refused to elaborate on the exact numbers or per-

centages associated with their programs. Moreover, many of the managers provided the “company line” as a response to specific questions. For example, many repeatedly insisted that there was no relation between their philanthropy and their company’s marketing. In contrast, others emphasized that philanthropy was essential for their companies’ brand awareness. One manager from a major bank spoke about measuring this function of philanthropy:

There’s a couple metrics like brand sentiment and brand consideration ... we measure those specifically tied to some of our big programs because we know that that’s where we have a lot of reach and engagement in the market.

These differences in transparency may represent a stark difference in strategic orientation; however, it is more likely caused by a variance in willingness to disclose sensitive proprietary information.

Evolving philanthropic programs

Almost all of the managers interviewed noted that their giving programs were in a period of transition or that they had made significant changes to their programs in the last two years. Notably, the majority of these changes were centered around refining philanthropic activity to become more strategic. For example, a few managers noted that they intended to increasingly focus their giving within specific areas to gain a more significant “market share.” One manager from a major financial institution indicated that their company would be concentrating their giving within one broad area in the future. Accordingly, this manager noted that their company would be refining its key performance indicators to reflect its new platform. This company strives to unify its global philanthropy operations under one platform to better understand its philanthropic impact. A different manager stated, referring to the importance of philanthropic impact measurement, that “It’s nice that 10 people went to a workshop. But what we want to see is, is there a measurement of either demonstrated change or intended change?” Almost all managers noted that they were striving for more sophisticated social impact measurement systems; however, most of the companies interviewed also noted the difficulty in measuring the true impact of their donations.

Additionally, all the managers interviewed suggested that their giving programs had become more flexible during the COVID-19 pandemic. A few managers noted that the pandemic had allowed them to reflect on their company’s giving behavior and consider giving in ways that better meet emergent community needs. Specifically, a manager from a major bank described how their company had begun to donate more broadly during the pandemic. This manager explained how their company contributed to various organizations working on the front line to combat the effects of the pandemic. Many companies also allowed their donees to treat donations as unrestricted funds and cease measuring their social impact to reduce additional resource drain.

One manager from a major bank said that the pandemic has allowed them to appreciate three main benefits of investing in online services for its own charitable programs dedicated to youth career development. First, the bank’s young beneficiaries expect consistent meetings to facilitate their career growth and skill development. Moving these meetings online has allowed the bank’s programs to become more accessible as they are less expensive to attend and available to individuals regardless of location. Second, the bank’s programs can be far more cost-effective. For example, online networking opportunities allow the company to reach more young people at a lower

cost than face-to-face programs. Last, having digital programming prepared for the future will enable the bank to have more resilient philanthropic programs if another crisis period causes them to alter their operations.

The pandemic has also influenced how companies measure the corporate benefits of philanthropy. A few companies mentioned that they have more effectively captured their philanthropy's influence on their brand awareness because their philanthropy transitioned onto digital platforms. Regarding the pandemic, a manager from a major financial institution noted, "That was a really good opportunity for us to do a lot of measurement around social media traction and press traction and to really see how we could start to put metrics in place around that." Most respondents noted that the pandemic had motivated them to reflect on how they give and consider new ways to improve their philanthropy's social and financial impact.

Relationship with the Caring Company program

The managers interviewed had differing relationships with the Caring Company program. Some were directly involved with the program, as their companies were major funders of Imagine Canada. However, some managers noted that they had little contact with Imagine Canada and indicated that they were not significantly involved or informed about their company's relationship with Imagine Canada. Further, most managers interviewed noted that the value of being a Caring Company came from knowing and signaling that they were one of the top philanthropic companies. Specifically, a manager from a major bank noted that "the advantage is that we get to call ourselves a Caring Company as well as use the . . . Trustmark that we display in our annual report, so I guess the advantage is additional transparency." Most of the other managers gave similar responses, noting that the advantage of being a Caring Company is the ability to signal a high level of social responsibility to stakeholders. Additionally, a few managers pointed out that the Caring Company program allows them to access a valuable network of other corporate philanthropy professionals.

While these respondents felt optimistic about the Caring Company program, a few managers were more critical. One manager contended that the main advantage of being a Caring Company is to justify the budget of their philanthropy department internally. Further, the one percent benchmark set by Imagine Canada allows philanthropy departments to rationalise the level of funding they receive. However, this manager noted that their department began experiencing difficulty using the Caring Company program to justify their budget because the program lacked third-party assurance. This manager claimed that the program is the only major corporate responsibility accreditation program without a third-party audit. As a result, this manager felt that the program lacked legitimacy because its self-reporting measures allow companies to inflate the value of their contributions.

Moreover, this manager's company found that very few consumers even knew what the accreditation meant. Ultimately, this major Canadian company felt they were holding up a one-sided relationship; the company's association with the program was providing more legitimacy to the program than the program was to the company. Three other managers interviewed agreed that a third-party audit would increase the program's rigor. One of these managers also noted that, since the program's inception in 1988, the program had loosened the specificity of its standards to guarantee it is more accessible. Additionally, on the Caring Company FAQs webpage, in response to the question,

“Can Imagine Canada help us qualify to be a Caring Company?”, Imagine Canada answered, “If your giving or profit margin fluctuates from year to year, we can work with you to apply a multi-year average which recognizes your commitment, and qualifies your company” (Imagine Canada, n.d.). Although this generous spirit will likely attract more companies to the program, it can also dampen the overall meaningfulness of the accreditation.

Implications for the Caring Company program

A manager from a major Canadian company firmly believed that corporate philanthropy is purely a marketing function. For this interviewee, corporate philanthropy, like any other business tool, must be refined and used in a way that maximizes shareholder value. Moreover, we found that the overwhelming majority of managers interviewed are continually refining their philanthropic practices to optimize the efficiency of their programs. At the same time, companies are striving to develop more sophisticated ways of communicating the impact of their philanthropy to deepen the bond of trust they share with their communities. One manager even went so far as to ask, could there be a future in which companies no longer need nonprofits to demonstrate their social impact? Herein lies the tension at the heart of strategic philanthropy.

The Edelman Trust Barometer provides a window into the future relationship between nonprofits and companies (Edelman, 2020). The Edelman Trust Barometer is an annual global study that measures how different populations trust institutions globally and within specific countries (Edelman, 2020). For example, in 2011, there was a 22 percent difference in the degree to which the informed Canadian public trusted companies and non-government organizations (NGOs), with 50 percent of the population trusting companies and 72 percent trusting NGOs (Edelman, 2012). However, by 2020 this difference decreased to 11 percent, with 64 percent of the informed public trusting companies and 72 percent trusting NGOs (Edelman, 2020). In light of the shrinking gap between trust in companies and nonprofits, it could be argued that corporations are beginning to no longer need nonprofits and accreditation systems like the Caring Company program to improve confidence in their brand. In short, if companies are becoming as trustworthy as nonprofits, why do companies need to partner with nonprofits to bolster their social reputation?

This question is more pertinent considering a few of the interviewed managers noted that they had begun investing more in their in-house programs rather than nonprofit programs. Therefore, Imagine Canada may need to consider ways to ensure that the Caring Company program better encourages corporate giving to nonprofits. A change to the program would be critical to Imagine Canada's mission of ensuring that Canada's charities and nonprofits are well funded. Further, without explicitly motivating corporate giving to nonprofits, the Caring Company program may completely succumb to the tensions of strategic philanthropy and evolve into a program dedicated to signaling corporate benevolence rather than supporting nonprofit work.

Given that one of the primary benefits of corporate philanthropy is the positive impact it has on employees (Raub, 2017), one such way to strengthen the program may be to incentivize and coherently measure employee volunteering, employee giving, and employee matching programs. By motivating employee engagement to a greater degree, Imagine Canada could promote a more democratic form of philanthropy where corporate funds are donated to a larger base of nonprofits dictated by em-

ployees. As a result, this strategy would ease some of the tensions of corporate philanthropy by maximizing employee contributions to nonprofits and increasing the corporate benefits of employee engagement.

Additionally, as companies continue to evolve their corporate giving programs, they may begin to feel that they provide more legitimacy to the program than the program offers them. For example, a few interviewed managers noted that the program had loosened its standards over time while their companies have continued to refine their philanthropy. Further, it will become increasingly unclear if the program is promoting giving to nonprofits or simply accrediting companies that would be participating in philanthropy regardless of the program. However, by introducing stricter guidelines surrounding what counts toward a company's one percent donation total, Imagine Canada can provide more value to Caring Companies and partnering nonprofits. Next, introducing a third-party audit for the accreditation would provide Caring Companies with the opportunity to be associated with a more rigorous program and more meaningfully showcase their philanthropic efforts. As one interviewee mentioned, the Caring Company program is one of the only accreditation systems without a third-party audit. Ultimately, introducing stricter standards and a third-party audit would ease some of the tensions of corporate philanthropy by increasing the symbolic value of Imagine Canada's Trustmark for companies while holding them to a higher standard of giving to nonprofits.

Ultimately, Imagine Canada must consider the tensions that lie at the heart of strategic corporate philanthropy. Although companies provide great opportunities for the nonprofit sector, companies will always consider their needs before the needs of society (Edwards, 2008). This reality remains true, even when the needs of society and businesses overlap and interact. Accordingly, Imagine Canada must continue to find more ways to prioritize the nonprofits involved in the Caring Company program. Ultimately, to preserve the legitimacy of their program and maintain the health of the nonprofit sector, Imagine Canada must encourage more employee giving, implement stricter standards, and introduce a third-party audit.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated within the strategic corporate philanthropy literature, strategic philanthropy has the power to influence both society and business positively. However, due to the tensions embedded in strategic philanthropy, the financial needs of a company often dictate and eclipse the social objectives of its philanthropic efforts. Further, with the ever-increasing efficiency of corporate philanthropy, led by the popularization of measurement and evaluation techniques, companies can better prioritize their needs above their community partners (Edwards, 2008). Moreover, many theorists contend that strategic philanthropy is an expression of neoliberalism: a shift toward private entities taking on increased responsibility for social needs, to the detriment of democratic social service provision (Edwards, 2008; Jenkins 2011).

It seems to be the case that Imagine Canada's Caring Company program is vulnerable to the same tensions that exist within strategic philanthropy. Within the program, these tensions take the form of inclusive yet imprecise standard setting for Caring Companies that neglects the true needs of partnering organizations. In the long run, these tensions could cause significant consequences for

the program. For example, as companies continue to refine their philanthropic efforts, they may begin to outgrow the need to be accredited by a program that encourages a standard of giving beneath what they already perform. This issue also coincides with an emerging trend in strategic philanthropy: companies no longer need nonprofits to communicate their social responsibility.

Future research is needed to examine these tensions fully and provide a more comprehensive and statistically significant investigation of strategic philanthropy in Canada and its relation to the Caring Company program. Future researchers may also need to consider tactics designed to combat the unwillingness of interviewees to talk about their philanthropic programs openly. While in-person interviews might reduce obfuscation, there may also be a need for greater mandatory and voluntary disclosure in corporate philanthropic programs. Additionally, future research should investigate the effectiveness of accreditation programs that rate companies based on their social responsibility more broadly. For example, researchers could investigate how effectively accreditation programs encourage corporations to perform actions like compensating employees fairly, discontinuing off-shore accounting, and paying their fair share of taxes.

Future researchers should also develop an updated understanding of the social and corporate benefits associated with the Caring Company accreditation. This study drew on Imagine Canada's 2019 report, but a newer, third-party led inquiry would provide more relevant insights into the program's true value (Ayer, 2019). Broadly, researchers should also focus on creating a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Canadian public, companies, and nonprofits. As highlighted by the Edelman Trust Barometer, the Canadian public seems to increasingly trust companies and nonprofits to the same degree (Edelman, 2019).

Imagine Canada, an organization dedicated to the health and success of the nonprofit sector, should reinforce its program's legitimacy by further encouraging employee engagement, better specifying its program's requirements, and introducing third-party auditing. These changes would ensure greater trust in the program and the Caring Companies involved. Most importantly, these changes would be a welcomed result for both the corporate and nonprofit sectors.

NOTES

1. Registered charities and nonprofit organizations are different entities. Nonprofits are associations, clubs, or societies operated for any purpose except profit (Government of Canada, 2016). Alternatively, registered charities are organizations that must use their resources to pursue charitable activities pre-specified by the Federal Government (Government of Canada, 2016). Charities have additional reporting, spending, and registration requirements. However, charities can issue donation receipts for donor income tax purposes and are exempt from paying various taxes (Government of Canada, 2016). Regarding Imagine Canada's Caring Company program, companies may give to nonprofits or charities to reach their 1% contribution threshold.
2. "Between 1997 and 2017, the percentage of Canadians who reported a donation on their tax return decreased from 26% to 20%, with much of the decline occurring in the last decade." (Ayer, 2019, p. 3).
3. Upon performing an extensive literature review on the topic, Haydon, Jung, and Russell (2021) define philanthrocapitalism as "The integration of market motifs, motives and methods with philanthropy, especially by HNWI's [High-Net-Worth Individuals] and their institutions" (p. 371). Within this article, "philanthrocapitalism" can be considered a broad term that encompasses the specific "strategic corporate philanthropy."
4. Cases were selected using the *Globe and Mail's* Top 1000 Canadian Companies list, ranked by profit for publicly traded companies and revenue for private companies (see Appendix B for more detail).

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