Social intrapreneurs, who launch large-scale community projects from inside big businesses, are being hailed as the new wave in CSR. But practical, economic and cultural obstacles stand in their path.

**Innovation's new frontier**

ib Bulloch was working as a manager in Accenture's strategy consulting practice back in 1999 when he experienced what he describes as his "crucible moment". "I came across an article in the Financial Times saying that VSO were looking for individuals with business skills to volunteer in developing countries," he recalls. "I had thought that development [work] was only for doctors, nurses and teachers, not business people like me."

Bulloch had been working for Accenture for a number of years, enjoyed the job and was on track for promotion. "But I wanted a bit of meaning in my life." He got it very quickly. Within a week, he had organised a year-long secondment to a VSO enterprise development project in Macedonia. He swapped London's high-pressure business environment for learning a new alphabet and singing Macedonian folk songs with his host family. But rather than getting the need for meaning out of his system, the experience prompted him to think about how Accenture could replicate the help he was providing on an "industrial" scale and bring consultancy services to areas of the world and types of businesses that had historically been denied them.
The result was Accenture Development Partnerships (ADP), launched in 2003 to offer high-quality business and technology consultancy to NGOs and donor organisations at an affordable price. Current projects include supporting an international, child-focused NGO to improve its financial reporting and business planning; helping another major international NGO improve its supply chain management; and helping to transfer the knowledge and best practice of another NGO's microfinance programme across several African countries.

But ADP is not about charity or philanthropy. Initially conceived as a talent recruitment and development tool—high flyers take a 50 per cent cut in their salary to do a six-month secondment, which Bulloch describes as "a mini-MBA"—it makes business sense.

"There is a demonstrable effect on our recruitment and retention, but ADP is having a positive effect on our brand and our reputation, too. We are also gaining useful first-hand experience of the emerging markets where our clients are going. We don't aim to make a profit, but all these things are helping us move towards a position of being cost-neutral."

The success of ADP is the result of Bulloch turning the traditional business model on its head, making a strong business case and winning senior sponsorship and colleagues' support.

Bulloch exemplifies what sustainable development consultancy SustainAbility has identified as a new breed of "social intrapreneurs". The corporate equivalent of social entrepreneurs—people who set up businesses specifically to benefit a social or environmental cause—they develop innovative solutions to major social and environmental problems from inside the business. As well as having a keen entrepreneurial bent and a strong social conscience, they are company "players", their networks and political savvy matched by tact, teamwork, persuasion and patience. They bring projects to life through skilful manipulation of the latest intellectual and financial capital within their organisations.

A new guide, The Social Intrapreneur: A Field Guide for Corporate Change-makers, co-produced by SustainAbility, innovation and design consultancy IDEO, insurer Allianz and the Skoll Foundation, showcases the wide range of work being done by a variety of
social intrapreneurs in multinational corporations. The common characteristic linking all of them is a passion for driving social change through business in a way that generates long-term value for both their companies and communities.

The examples include Dan Vermeer, who, until recently, worked at Coca-Cola on water sustainability and other environmental challenges; Orlando Ayala at Microsoft, who is helping to deliver relevant, accessible and affordable technology solutions to what he calls “the next five billion” people around the world; Santiago Gowland, who is driving sustainability thinking across Unilever’s brands; and Kerryn Schrank, who, until recently, headed BP’s “targetneutral” campaign to encourage drivers to reduce petrol use.

But there are brakes on the development of social intrapreneurship. For a start, social innovators (unsurprisingly, given the qualities required) are a rare breed. What’s more, they’re difficult to spot: they can be anywhere in the corporation; there’s no set route to social intrapreneurship.

By contrast, Bob Annibale, who launched Citi’s global microfinance initiative, came to social intrapreneurship via 20 years capital markets’ experience in Europe, Middle East and Africa, culminating in the role of senior treasury risk officer for Citigroup.

“I never thought of myself as a social intrapreneur and that’s not how I label what we do,” says Annibale. “It is about disruptive innovation and changing the paradigm of a defined landscape. I don’t use emotive language: I don’t talk about ‘beneficiaries’ but about serving the needs of a new client sector.”

Nick Hughes, meanwhile, who pioneered a mobile payment offering for Vodafone customers in Kenya and Afghanistan, has been interested in sustainable development since he trained as an environmental scientist. His interest was fostered at BP where he was involved in Lord Browne’s pioneering corporate emissions trading programme, and he joined the corporate affairs department at Vodafone in 2001 specifically to think about ways of using mobile products and services to effect social change.

But although the result—the M-PESA—was conceived in corporate affairs, Hughes moved it into “the factory” of the marketing department to launch it. “It needed to be in the engine room of the company, and we subsequently moved it into global business development, where it now sits as a separate business unit with its own revenue target, profit and loss account and so on,” he says.

Hughes, like Annibale and Bulloch, was very keen that the new venture should sit neither at the “philanthropic” and the corporate responsibility end of the business nor the main business activity end, but should straddle the two. This points to another potential

### Characteristics of a Social Intrapreneur

- They are integrators, problem solvers and facilitators
- They are both tactical and strategic, independent and good team players, far-sighted and practical, driven but patient
- They are politically savvy and tactful and utilise wide networks of contacts at all levels within the organisation
- They build and inspire teams across different corporate divisions
- They communicate social entrepreneurship in compelling business terms
- They successfully navigate corporate culture, strategy and processes
- They are more ambitious for social change than for personal wealth or advancement
- They are willing and able to take risks, including moving across and between organisations and sectors in order to realise their vision
- They readily adapt to new circumstances and regularly scan the horizon for new ways to solve societal challenges

Source: The Social Intrapreneur: A field guide for corporate changemakers; published by Sustainable, IDEO, the Skoll Foundation and Allianz
problem for social intrapreneurship: it is an innovative model that
many top managers struggle to come to terms with; unlike many
CSR programmes, which can be compliance-driven, it's often
regarded as "pro-active" and more authentic.

"Corporate responsibility is largely about risk management,
while social intrapreneurship is about risk taking," says Bulloch.
"ADP is a bit of a guerrilla movement within Accenture because it
was dreamt up by a group of individuals who wanted to do some-
thing different rather than being imposed from the top down."

Bulloch has contributed close to half a million dollars in gross
salary over the past six years to the venture, with others in the ADP
management team making similar financial commitments. "It's al-
most like a 'social management buyout' of part of the business," he
says.

The business case for social innovation has to be watertight,
particularly in today's difficult economic conditions. Says Hughes: "It
is too easy to go back to 'business as usual'. You need the support of top-
level champions to mitigate against that."

Former chief executive Arun Sarin was a big supporter of what
Hughes was trying to do, as was former Accenture chairman Vernon
Ellis of Bulloch's venture. "The new chief executive of our consul-
tancy business is also a big fan, and his role now is to take the wraps
off ADP and let us take it to a new level in Accenture," says Bulloch.

Yet, ironically, too much management attention in the early days
can snuff out these sorts of social innovations, and both Bulloch
and Hughes talk about the importance of "air cover" to getting their
ventures off the ground.

Bulloch explains: "Most big businesses are risk-averse and
focused on delivering quarterly results and protecting their brand. Also,
most of our policies and procedures are set up for large multi-million
dollar client deals, outsourcing arrangements and so on. So we were
flying in the face of all that is big, safe, commercial, developed and so
on. ADP needed to break policies and rules at least once a week or we
wouldn't have been doing our job right."

And Hughes got his venture off the ground by tapping into social
investment funding. "We were launching 3G at the time, so I knew it
would be difficult to get internal funding—and even if we did, it
would be difficult to meet our usual steep return-on-investment
criteria. Getting this seed funding allowed us to step outside the
business and get on with developing and piloting the concept in a very
quiet way before we brought back a firm proposition and a strong
business case."

So what's the future for social intrapreneurship? John Elkington,
founder and chief entrepreneur at Sustainability, believes companies
should try to give employees space and permission to think about social
innovations, and then mentor, coach and support the most promising intrapreneurs and initiatives. "They might need to select projects with the coldness of a venture capitalist and build a portfolio of projects with different levels of risk, accepting that some of them are bound to fail," he says.

But he is also realistic. "Intrapreneurs are mavericks and therefore represent a relatively small slice of the business population. So they will always be in the statistical background noise." And big businesses are not, he says, going to start becoming less risk-averse any time soon.

He thinks the biggest value social intrapreneurs can bring lies in their potential to link up with social entrepreneurs. He says social intrapreneurs could be a crucial gateway into major businesses interested in addressing the challenges the entrepreneurs are tackling. There seems to be a will to co-operate from both sides. Bulloch says: "Companies need to identify their own internal talent and innovators and mavericks, but they could also encourage innovation from the outside in. If we can get big organisations to move just one per cent, that could have a huge effect."

And Reed Paget, founder and managing director of social enterprise Belu Water, says: "The more enlightened people there are who recognise that the planet needs better management, the better. Some companies do things better because they are fleet of foot and responsive, while others achieve through the magnitude of the resources they have at their disposal. They can be very complementary."

Belu Water, the UK's first carbon-neutral bottled water, diverts all its profits into funding clean water projects around the world. Its corn-based bottle is biodegradable and compostable. "We are not big enough to have invested the hundreds of millions of pounds-worth of investment it needed to develop that," says Paget. "It was done by a giant corporation. There is lots of scope for social enterprises and big businesses to work together to further the same agenda."

Mark Goyder, director of business-led think tank Tomorrow's Company, believes social intrapreneurship is a potentially important player in a new landscape where the barriers between the private, public and third sectors are being broken down. "We are moving away from the old reductionist idea that there is commerce on one side and doing good on the other," he says. "Companies shouldn't be criticised for trying to make money out of being responsible. Indeed, it is the best way of making their social innovations and their own businesses sustainable. Development leads to more sustainable communities and more sustainable businesses and so on and so on. It's a virtuous circle."