



Business principles and principled businesses

Working at the intersection between business and society, **Professor Harry Van Buren** wants to see greater emphasis on fairness and responsibility

Firstly, what led to your interest in the area of social issues in management?

I chose this area after graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary, believing that it would allow me to pursue questions of social justice while making business more socially beneficial. Business is also intrinsically interesting to me; the stories we tell about it are both compelling and important for understanding how it can create a truly just world.

You are currently the Jack and Donna Rust Professor of Business Ethics at the University of New Mexico's Anderson School of Management, and have held a number of other positions in academia. What have been some of the highlights of your various posts?

I have been fortunate to teach a wide range of students, including those in their first semester and executive MBAs. I have also been able to work with excellent colleagues and have found tremendous support for my research – even when it has been critical of business.

What are the potential implications of this research for policy or the business world? What makes it particularly important in the present economic climate?

I hope that policy makers and business managers use my research to reduce unfair treatment of employees and create opportunities for employees and communities to thrive. Questions of economic inequality are receiving an ever-increasing amount of attention. Many people are sceptical that capitalism and business work for them. My focus on fairness addresses the present economic climate, seeking to understand how business can be fairer and better for society.

Why are the ethics of contemporary employment practices of particular interest to you?

One reason that this is of interest to me is that I grew up as the child of a union steward, and employment ethics was a constant topic of conversation in our family.

Could you elaborate on the multidisciplinary nature of your investigations? Are there any key collaborators you would specifically like to mention?

My research increasingly crosses disciplinary boundaries, including work in history, philosophy and theology. I have worked extensively with a number of co-authors, including Michelle Greenwood (Monash University) and Shawn Berman (University of New Mexico).

When teaching, how important do you find the use of case studies and simulations in engaging the students of today/tomorrow?

The great thing about teaching in the area of business ethics and corporate social responsibility is that every class is – or should be – a class that uses current events as 'living cases'! I often construct case studies using very contemporary events, believing these to be more relevant to students than historical case studies.

You are the Editor for a new book series, *Research and Practice in Business and Society*, to be published by Emerald Books. What are your editorial aims for this?

My goal for the series is to find books that explore topics related to the complex and ever-changing intersections between business and society while being of interest to both academics and managers. Titles should appeal to three audiences: academic researchers, students and practicing managers. A key rationale for the series is that there is a need for an ongoing conversation between the world of business and society scholarship and that of management practice. Ideally, titles published in the series will be at home in university bookstores, libraries and course syllabi, and also on the bookshelves of managers and academics.

In particular, there is a growing need for managers to have access to cutting-edge research in the field that is written in a sophisticated but approachable way. Currently, book proposals are being solicited in the following areas: ethics and compliance, accounting and corporate responsibility, business and human rights, ethics and human resource management, governance and corporate responsibility, and spirituality and business.

Conducting business the right way

Research is being carried out in the Anderson School of Management at the **University of New Mexico** that aims to help make business – and society – fairer



THERE HAS NEVER been a time when the relationship between business and ethics has not been a lively and relevant area of study and discussion, but in recent years it has received more attention than ever. There is a pressing need for well-informed and reflective research, crossing disciplinary boundaries and encompassing the interests and concerns of everyone involved, including both scholars and practitioners. Professor Harry Van Buren from the Anderson School of Management at the University of New Mexico is a researcher in this field who is especially keen to make connections between the business world and society, with an emphasis on exploring and promoting fairness in relationships between businesses and their stakeholders.

Van Buren works with the express intention of attracting an inclusive readership, academic and non-academic, and has published work on a wide range of subjects in the area of business ethics, including book chapters and journal articles. In 2011-2012, he was part of the State of New Mexico legislative taskforce on family-friendly workplace policies. Currently chair-elect for the Social Issues in Management Division of the Academy of Management, Van Buren has a large number of active research areas.

EMPLOYEES AND ETHICS

Some of Van Buren's early research looked at areas such as fairness in the employment relationship, and the legal and ethical implications of businesses downsizing their workforces. More recently, he has been considering the role of human resources departments and, in particular, how changing priorities may have ethical implications for the employer-employee relationship.

Van Buren and his co-authors have observed a trend away from 'human resource management' (HRM) towards 'strategic human resource management', with business strategy increasingly taking priority over employee welfare among human resources professionals. There are

a number of drivers behind this, including the changing political landscape. The effects comprise an erosion of the traditional HRM stewardship of the employer-employee relationship and a loss of focus on employees, whose interests are now (somewhat unrealistically) often seen as being identical to those of the business.

For Van Buren such issues are central to ethical business practices. "Employees are the stakeholder group without which organizations can't exist, he says. It is in a business's best interests to focus on its employees' welfare, and yet many employees are mistreated and do not receive fair remuneration." Van Buren's work is partly motivated by his desire to make employment more equitable –and, ultimately, society fairer as a result.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITIES

In keeping with the business ethics theme of his earlier research, Van Buren's current project seeks to understand whether corporations have human rights obligations and, if so, how far these obligations extend. Indeed, what can businesses reasonably be expected to do in practice? Working with Nicole Janz of the University of Cambridge,

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Theory building and normatively-orientated research are important for Van Buren's work. He employs various empirical research techniques, such as network analysis and survey instruments.

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UK, and Michelle Westermann-Behaylo of the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, he sees the two key issues as being how specific human rights become business responsibilities and how businesses should practise due diligence to avoid contributing to violations. Specifically, he is looking at global supply chains: "We are seeking to develop due diligence processes for ensuring that supply chains are free from human trafficking".

RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES

With a strong theological background – Van Buren received his Master of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1995 – it is hardly surprising that he has maintained a passionate interest in the relationship between business ethics and religious ethics. Van Buren's work is inclusive, combining different religious perspectives and balancing these with more secular concerns. A recent example of an inter-faith project is his article, co-authored with Jawad Syed of the University of Huddersfield, UK, concerning how managers working in Muslim-majority countries can maintain their obligation to ensure gender equity while respecting the local culture. Van Buren is currently looking at the contributions faith traditions might make to debates about employment practices and the obligations businesses have to their stakeholders.

ACCOUNTING FOR STAKEHOLDERS

Venturing into other areas, Van Buren is also investigating a relatively unexplored aspect of accounting: stakeholder theory. "The quantification of organizational activities that occurs through accounting has focused primarily on the interests of one group: capital providers such as shareholders, equity owners, and bondholders," he says. Conversely, the use of accounting to help other stakeholders manage their risks has received little attention and, according to Van Buren, currently lacks sufficient theoretical grounding and data. Van Buren and his collaborators are working to make up this deficit.

OTHER DIRECTIONS AND THE FUTURE

Van Buren's research interests are thematically consistent but nonetheless varied and, it might be argued, even eclectic. His recent work has covered a large number of topics, including: conflicts of interest in the proxy voting system; leadership and corporate responsibility; religious institution shareholder activism (i.e. encouraging greater corporate social responsibility in the companies they hold shares in); voluntary corporate responsibility in the

ONE AND MANY, HARD AND SOFT

In his work, Van Buren discusses two contrasting HRM perspectives: the unitarist and the pluralist. The unitarist model assumes (broadly speaking) that the interests of an organization and its employees are identical. By contrast, the pluralist model suggests that there are also potential conflicts of interest. Related to these ideas are those of 'soft' and 'hard' employee management. The soft view emphasizes creativity, proactivity and development, while the hard view is more functional, largely seeing employees as passive resources to be deployed in pursuit of strategic goals. In his research, Van Buren notes that there can be a disparity between the rhetoric employed by organizations and the actual approach taken.

chemical industry; bullying; organizational compassion; and gender in management.

Future research for Van Buren will build on his work in employment ethics, with an accent on examining the socio-economic consequences of contemporary employment practices, for example those relating to inequality. He is also keen to add to his existing accounting/stakeholder work, while in the religious field he intends to explore how religion acts as a macro social force that affects business.

Regarding the wider field, Van Buren forecasts that business ethics is set to take in a number of topics: "There will be a focus on defining community and the contributions that businesses make to sustainable communities; addressing business' role in ameliorating income inequality; and understanding the role that culture and religion play in defining locally acceptable business behaviour". It is as clear from this, as it is from his work, that he regards his discipline as a positive force for good, and sees it offering concrete future benefits.

BUSINESS ETHICS

RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Accounting and stakeholder theory
- Business and human rights
- Religious ethics and business ethics
- Ethical implications of contemporary employment practices

KEY COLLABORATORS

Dr Shawn Berman, University of New Mexico, United States

Dr R Edward Freeman, University of Virginia, United States

Dr Michelle Greenwood, Monash University, Australia

Dr Michelle Westermann-Behaylo, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

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