

CSR Quest: Crane & Matten interview Wayne Visser

Wayne Visser, interviewed by Andrew Crane & Dirk Matten

Reposted from the Crane & Matten blog:

In January, our sometime collaborator and co-editor of the A-Z of CSR, Wayne Visser set off on a 12 month, 22 country 'CSR quest' to talk and learn about how companies can help tackle the world's most pressing social and environmental problems. Crane & Matten talked to him about what he hopes to achieve and what's in his luggage.

C&M: So, what is the CSR quest and why are you doing it?

WV: In my mind it's a bit like the Holy Grail. Is CSR (corporate social responsibility) something that we should be chasing after, and what actually is a company's social responsibility? My experience so far is that it means completely different things in different countries. So I want to explore this variety and then capture and share some of the innovative CSR practices that are going on out there.

But why pack up all your stuff and go on the road for a year? Couldn't you have just sent some emails?

You can only do so much with email and internet forums. Unless you meet and engage face-to-face, you don't really capture the learning. Also, companies are just not achieving the transformative change that we need to solve the world's problems. This is my attempt to help turn the tide.

But is flying all over the world the most responsible way of promoting social responsibility?

There's merit to that criticism. I'm trying to make the trip neutral through carbon offsets. But I wouldn't be doing the trip if I didn't think the benefits outweighed the costs - and that includes the environmental costs. I'm hoping it has a multiplying effect. If you look at the impact Al Gore had on climate change awareness, it wouldn't have happened if he'd just stayed home.

How much difference do you expect to see in terms of how companies practice CSR in different countries?

I'm learning about the various cultures and how cultural context affects CSR - in terms of religion, history, etc. And I'm particularly targeting developing countries, where the need

for CSR is greatest. Often it's where the need is greatest that the real innovation happens. So I'm looking out for some of those kinds of differences too.

Do you think you'll be anywhere long enough to see any real differences?

I'm under no illusions that it's anything other than a snapshot. It's my personal wandering adventure, so it will inevitably be ad hoc. But just by interacting on the ground and meeting people face to face you do get a good sense of what's going on.

You've just been to Turkey and Kenya - was there anything that struck you in those countries?

In Kenya, what was really exciting was M-Pesa, which is an initiative that has now empowered a whole country (where 80% of people don't even have a bank account) to access financial services through mobile phones. That's an example of where need can drive innovation. Turkey was still surprisingly immature with respect to CSR. But it has got hold of the corporate governance agenda and is promoting itself as a bit of a hub for corporate governance in the region, especially in the Middle East.

How are you going to go about sharing all the things that you pick up along the way?

I'm conducting workshops for various host institutions (universities, CSR associations and the like) and sharing what I've found. I'm also posting blogs and short videos of interviews that I conduct in each country. And I'm keeping a diary, so a CSR Quest book is a possibility some time in the future.

What if no one tunes in?

It will probably grow in momentum as it goes on. I have existing networks and outlets through Facebook, Twitter, Ning, so you never know what the impact of these things will be. Besides, I would do it even if only 1 person was listening; it's a personal journey as much as anything.

You're putting everything on the internet for free and you're giving free talks - so how exactly are you financing the trip?

With difficulty! It's all self-funded. I'm organizing more substantial workshops for some of the host institutions, and those are paid-for. But it's very uncertain. I've got the tickets booked but it's not all set-up - I'm relying on the power of the web and the networks to keep it going. So all offers to help are welcome!

You're one month in now - how are you liking being on the road?

I gave up my flat, so I'm essentially homeless now, living out of a suitcase. It's a mixture of tiring and unsettling, and invigorating and stimulating. As soon as I'm interacting with

people on the ground it's extremely rewarding. It's already been worthwhile, so even if the rest of the tour would falter, I'd still feel it had been a success.

How big is that suitcase?

Just one quite large suitcase and the bag for the computer and the camera. So two bags. It's not quite hand luggage but it's not much.

Is there anything that you're sorry that you had to leave behind?

Not yet. But I may regret going light on the clothes. I've just got one suit and 3 shirts. And I'm having to do a lot of underwear washing in the shower!

Crane and Matten are currently based in Amsterdam and Toronto respectively. Any plans on dropping in on us?

I hope so. I plan to finish the tour with a North American leg, but I'm not planning on coming to Amsterdam at the moment. If after 10 or 12 months I get an invitation and I'm up for more, who knows? By then, though, I may well need to put my feet in concrete for a while.

More information

You can follow Wayne's CSR Quest on the CSR International blog at www.csrinternational.org or <http://csrinternational.blogspot.com/> or contact him directly on wayne@csrinternational.org

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