

CEO Conversation on Social Responsibility

Bryce Seidl, Pacific Science Centre, United States (moderator)

Maya Halevy, Bloomfield Science Centre, Israel

Elizabeth Hoyos, Maloka, Columbia

Eric Jolly, Science Museum of Minnesota, United States

Ana Noronha, Ciência Viva, Portugal

Guenther Scholz, CEO, Siemens Canada

The panel, consisting of CEOs from science centres across the world and the CEO of Siemens Canada, discussed science centres as agents of change. It is clear now that science centres are responsible for more than just educating the public about the facts, said moderator Bryce Seidl. He asked panelists to reflect on a series of questions about the responsibilities of science centres:

- Should science centres limit themselves to narrow roles or make connections between science and the issues of the day?
- Is there a special responsibility to serve the under-served?
- Should science centres be transforming themselves so that they are more culturally appropriate?
- What does “social responsibility” mean?

Seidl noted that the science centre in Seattle serves a million on-site visitors each year and another hundred thousand through a mobile outreach program. The centre is the largest environmental educator of children in their region. He questioned whether science centres have a role to engage in areas beyond the limits of science, or whether they should be the facilitators of discussions about important issues without taking a position on them. “I believe we must contribute to building a better world and society. We can’t afford to ignore the fact that we live in societies with many complexities and that we’re in a position to help people develop critical thinking.”

Maya Halevy explained that the Bloomfield Science Centre is physically positioned in the cultural centre of Jerusalem; she described that city as three distinct communities—Christian, Jewish, and Arab—living in total isolation from one another. Usually science centres serve science culture, she said, but they can also use science culture to reach other ends. “The language of science can be a common language to have dialogues with people from different nations.”

Science centres are a safe place for difficult discussions, Halevy said. This is a particular challenge in Jerusalem, where physical safety issues are very real and barriers such as location and the secular nature of the institution are difficult to overcome.

The science centre in Portugal was created by tapping into the sense of social responsibility in the science community, Ana Noronha said. It is a hub where scientists, educators, and the public can meet. Special programs are available to help under-served groups, such as the elderly. Part of the centre's mandate is to bring forward controversial issues in a safe, neutral environment. In general, Noronha said, social responsibility is a natural fit.

Elizabeth Hoyos described Colombia as a nation of paradoxes, a place of wealth and talented people standing next to poverty and ignorance. Their science centre, Maloka, was created to be part of the solution to social challenges. By creating a network of scientists, government, private companies, and citizens, it has been possible to build the centre from a tiny project without funding twelve years ago. Maloka is committed to the philosophy that real freedom in society comes from higher learning, knowledge, and innovation.

In developing countries, vulnerable groups are the majority, Hoyos reminded participants. "It's our responsibility to think globally and work locally, to connect the developed and developing worlds through science centres, to work together to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Science centres must reinvent themselves to work in new ways ... to respect different cultures, connect different regions, and bring forward the idea that we're all facing the difficult challenges of this great world together."

Eric Jolly said education is a liberating force in human development and that science is the essential literacy of the future, necessary for both economic participation and civic engagement. Even in a wealthy country like the United States, huge gaps divide the rich and poor, and those who are less privileged need science literacy the most. "Adults, children, families ... all need to know how today's science impacts the world tomorrow."

Effective exhibits have to engage communities and get them talking about important issues within the safe spaces that science centres create, he said. "We must invest in our grandchildren, who will be messengers to a future that we will not see."

Guenther Scholz reminded delegates that science solutions do not always require deep thinking. Sometimes simple solutions are the most elegant and effective. Business and the science community need to work together to share a vision of the future. Education is the obvious starting point, but it is necessary to change the way education and training take place so that they foster understanding and natural curiosity while acknowledging cultural difference.

Social responsibility requires a holistic approach, Halevy said. Cooperation and outreach are important in order to create solutions that work. The Bloomfield Science Centre is located in the Jewish section of Jerusalem. As a result, it was never really a safe or neutral place for Palestinians. Effective outreach required fostering partnerships and sharing expertise so that a science centre could be established on the Palestinian side.

Making connections is what enables social responsibility at the science centre in Colombia, Hoyos said. Programs connect children, adults, teachers, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers to try to empower them to be part of the process of social change. By honouring and respecting different cultures, particularly those of indigenous groups, it is possible to learn while you teach, she said.

For underprivileged communities, it is necessary to go further, Noronha said. “It isn’t enough to say here it is; you are invited. You have to create networks and reach into the communities. There is a clear obligation for action. And you have to acknowledge that learning happens in both directions.”

Panelists unanimously supported the promotion of basic science. “It will always be a matter of balance,” Jolly said. “Science needs to inspire the next generation while addressing the needs of this one; that requires immediate, intermediate, and long-term thinking.”

Equally as important as science centres’ role in presenting science to the public is their unique position that also allows them to present the public to scientists, Halevy said. Promoting the importance of funding for investment in fundamental science is a good example of that dual role.

Scholz suggested broadening the definition of social responsibility to embrace the whole scientific process. “How do we create a mindset that drives action?” he asked. “There are things we can do today to ensure that we get what society needs out of the pipeline after investing billions in basic research.”

Presenting some types of science in certain environments can be “like navigating in a minefield,” Seidl observed. Whether to ignore communities of faith with widely diverging religious beliefs or to attempt to embrace them can be a difficult decision. The solution, once again, is balance, said Hoyos. “All cultures, religions, and beliefs must be respected.... Our role is to put things on the floor, to open spaces to debate, to help people have the tools they need to make informed decisions.”

“Communities are of many minds,” Jolly said. “Our responsibility is to provide good science and allow people to use it as they see fit, not as refutation or as proof. We need to break down the barriers and make science accessible.”

Scholz agreed. Technology is an enabler, he said. It can be used to break down some of the barriers, to help communities understand what is possible, what is feasible. “All we can do is try to communicate clearly about the science, to bring science to the citizens so they can make their own decisions and use their own judgement.”

One way of ensuring that science centres can reach different communities and people with different cultures and beliefs is to ensure that staff reflect that diversity, panelists agreed. Another key is ensuring that science is presented in ways that are appropriate for

the target audiences. “We need to meet the need where it’s the greatest,” Noronha said. “That means understanding what people need and giving more to those who need more.”

“Science centres need to create organizational values that are infused into everything they do,” Seidl said. “Balance is important, but it must be driven by a clearly articulated sense of core values, and those values must be intrinsic in everything—what we present, how we present it, who we hire, who we reach out to, and how we reach out.”