



Q&A



TIM MOHIN

CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY EVANGELIST PART 1

INTERVIEW BY ERICA ROWELL
Photo courtesy of Tim Mohin

*The first of a two-part series.
Part 2 will appear in the Fall 2012
Dukenvironment.*

Tim Mohin MEM'84, director of corporate responsibility for Advanced Micro Devices (AMD), thinks business and the environment can be harmonious pursuits. His decades-long-and-counting career is a case in point.

Before AMD, he spent 10 years in government shoring up air-quality protections, then he led sustainability

Tim Mohin, director of corporate responsibility at Advanced Micro Devices (Austin, Texas area), is author of *Changing Business From the Inside Out: A Treehugger's Guide to Working in Corporations*, available this summer from Berrett-Koehler and Greenleaf Publishing. He received his master of environmental management degree in environmental toxicology from Duke in 1984 and will return to Durham in April as the keynote speaker at the Nicholas School's graduation recognition ceremony.

→ alumni//CAREER MATTERS

WORKING FROM WITHIN CORPORATIONS TO EFFECT SOCIETAL BENEFITS

While many see "corporate responsibility" as an oxymoron, this is a fast growing, impactful career path. Society expects more from corporations and, as these expectations increase, there is a growing need for people to work for social and environmental causes from inside companies.

By effectively working within a company you can influence decisions that have massive societal benefits across the globe. And there has never been a better time to work on these changes. The race to be the greenest, most responsible company on the planet is in full bloom

efforts at Intel and Apple. Along the way, the corporate sustainability arena expanded its scope to the broader field of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

His forthcoming book, *Changing Business From the Inside Out: A Treehugger's Guide to Working in Corporations* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers and Greenleaf Press, due out August 2012), is a highly readable compendium of lessons learned and detailed steps about how to run today's corporate responsibility (CR) office.

Dukenvironment sat down and talked with him about his book and his career.

Q&A

DUKENVIRONMENT:

Before we dive into the book, where did you go after graduating from Duke?

MOHIN:

My first job was with the Environmental Protection Agency. The interesting part of that was, during the Reagan administration there had been a real slowdown in regulatory activity and the focus was on the Air Quality Office. There was a shakeup within the agency and President Reagan brought in Bill Ruckelshaus for his second term as EPA administrator, and Ruckelshaus immediately was called before Congress and grilled on why hadn't there been more air regulations—he promised there would be 20 new air toxics regulations by year's end.

Putting that in context, there had been

(e.g., last year, more than 5,500 companies around the world issued sustainability reports, up from about 800 10 years ago) and appears to have substantial staying power. Companies of all types are looking for people to help improve their environmental, social and ethical performance. By learning the skills and strategies of working for good within a company, you can create large, immediate and lasting change.

Instead of empty rhetoric, this point of view is the essence of my own career choices. I have done more for people and the planet working within corpora-

seven in the entire history of the Clean Air Act. And so they needed help—and fast. Duke publishes a resume book, my name was in it and had "Eco Tox" in the title. I got a call from EPA.

At EPA I got to work on the Clean Air Act amendments which were signed into law in 1990, and that gave me a lot of legislative experience, which led to the job in the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee where I worked on several different pieces of environmental legislation.

Q&A

DUKENVIRONMENT:

How did you move into the private sector?

MOHIN:

When the Senate majority flipped in the 1994 elections I started to search for a new role. Eventually, I was asked to stay on at the Senate, but by then I had found a great job at Intel.

Intel fit me like a glove because they really care about environmental protection; they just wanted to do it faster than the government allowed. It was an agenda I felt very comfortable representing.

tions than I could have expected to achieve had I stayed in the government (I worked at the Environmental Protection Agency and in the U.S. Senate for the first 10 years of my career). While government regulators and non-profit activists are important drivers for social and environmental protections, they must work from the outside to cajole corporate behavior. The threat of enforcement or activism as tools for change pales in comparison to the sweeping implications of—for example—leveraging a multinational corporation's buying power to improve environmental condi-

Q&A

DUKENVIRONMENT:

Faster than the government allowed or required?

MOHIN:

Required. Basically it came down to this: Intel was more than capable of meeting or exceeding environmental standards—what they couldn't stand was delay. Permitting, reviews and administrative red tape, when you're building semiconductors in a highly competitive environment, just wasn't working for them.

Q&A

DUKENVIRONMENT:

Okay, now on to your book. It reads like a handbook, full of good advice for the CSR professional and beyond. What was the impetus for writing it?

MOHIN:

You have to learn before you teach. And maybe this will sound a little sour grapes-like but there are a lot of sustainability and CSR books out there, and I'd say the vast majority are from people who haven't actually worked in CSR. So the reality is different from what's being published.

Being a board member of Net Impact, I know there's a legion of young people who want to work in something bigger than themselves. But the reality of being an environmentalist inside a big company can be a steep learning curve.

tions across a global supply chain.

To a certain extent, being a corporate treehugger is a line-walking exercise. Corporations are indeed focused on profit, and being an activist within a company is very different than being an activist for a non-profit organization. But as transparency and awareness increase, the expectations for corporate behavior are changing. These macro-level changes are opening up new jobs across a broad spectrum of industries that can be rewarding on many levels.

Especially if they're reading some of these more academic sustainability treatises, they might come away thinking, well, this is easy, and not get a full picture of what it's really like. So the idea behind the book is, as you said, to be a handbook or a manual, with step-by-step instructions for practicing CR.

Q&A

DUKENVIRONMENT:

Your book draws on a wealth of experience, but if you had to cite several key themes, what would they be?

MOHIN:

Two things: capabilities and content. I talk about how to build the essential capabilities for corporate responsibility. What's interesting is that these skills also have value for other careers. The second is content—the book lays out what you

actually do in a step-by-step way. It starts with setting the strategy then gets into the programs and processes. One I would highlight, because it's growing fast, is supplier responsibility. There are actually two chapters on that.

From my career in Apple it became very clear to me that, as business continues to outsource and globalize, the responsibility for labor, human rights, environmental health, safety, is falling to companies. And so it is the people in corporate responsibility jobs who must ensure that labor, health, safety and environmental expectations are met.

The exciting thing is that this change happens faster [in the corporate sphere than in government], and I think it's more effective because it's truly global. In government, there's legislation, regulation, litigation and finally you get to some sort of action—but the only

leverage is through enforcement which some companies may not view as a threat, and even then, it's only within a certain jurisdiction. With companies it's global and covers a broad range of issues—including environmental, health, safety, ethics, labor and human rights. Also things happen more quickly because suppliers will typically do what it takes to keep the business. Business can be far more effective as a motivator; as I say in the book, it comes down to “our dollars, our values.” In my experience working within a corporation, nothing moves people faster than economic reality.

Erica Rowell is managing editor of Dean Chameides' blog, TheGreenGrok.com. She is based in New York City.

