Keeping industry responsible

Many companies want their research and innovation to benefit society, but how do they ensure this happens? The EU ‘Responsible Research’ project is providing a framework to allow them to benchmark their activities and work out how they can improve.

Many companies formulate plans and strategies in areas such as risk management or gender equality - it helps their businesses run successfully. But, says De Montfort University Professor Bernd Stahl, ‘this is not enough to ensure that the process and outcomes of their research and innovation are societally acceptable, desirable and sustainable.’ Stahl calls this ‘responsible research and innovation’ and it has been the focus of his EU-funded RESPONSIBLE-INDUSTRY (Responsible Research and Innovation in Business and Industry in the Domain of ICT for, Health, Demographic Change and Wellbeing) project, which has spent the last three years trying to understand how to integrate such thinking into existing business infrastructure.

The project worked intensively with industry partners, focusing on companies using
information and communication technologies for healthcare, demographic change and well-being – currently a growing sector. Such companies are designing technologies for assisted living like robots or communication aides. The team involved academic partners in seven EU countries, interviewed 30 industry experts and held 15 focus groups as well as a workshop for over 150 participants. ‘It soon became clear that our initial idea to develop an industry-wide, one-size-fits-all implementation plan would not work and we needed to develop a broader framework to allow companies to develop their own strategies,’ explains Stahl.

In developing this, the RESPONSIBLE-INDUSTRY consortium looked at the sorts of difficulties and pressures that have prevented industry from considering responsible research and innovation. ‘One much debated issue was the question of the motivation versus costs,’ says Stahl: ‘Companies want to ensure that their work is done responsibly, but this may require additional resources which need to be justified in profit-oriented organisations.’ There are also some aspects of responsible research and innovation that are counter to established commercial principles, for example the idea of being ‘open access’ can seem to interfere with intellectual property interests.

The project has created a framework that recognises the positive impacts that responsible research and innovation offers companies, including enhancing their reputation, decreasing business risks and strengthening public trust in the safety of products. Getting companies to take these messages on board means starting at the top, according to Stahl. ‘We therefore produced a document specifically aimed at the top leaders in a company, to give a quick overview of the values and benefits and including short case-studies, where these benefits had materialised in other companies.’

Part of the RESPONSIBLE-INDUSTRY project was testing the framework on four companies, two in Spain and two in Finland. The companies were asked to reflect on how useful the framework was for them. ‘It turned out that the benefit was in allowing companies to identify places where they could improve and in several cases this led to change,’ notes Stahl.

Whilst Stahl feels the project has made a good case for the benefits of responsible research and innovation, there can still be push-back from companies who are not thinking beyond immediate profit goals. ‘If this is to be adopted more broadly, there need to be industry standards or other softer incentives,’ he adds, ‘one thing that became clear is that it is not something that will happen by itself. It requires the support of publicly-funded initiatives.’

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Last update: 7 December 2017
Record number: 169593

Permalink: https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/169593-keeping-industry-responsible

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