

# A Brief History of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

For decades, companies have been using [corporate social responsibility](#) (CSR) to give back to society while [bolstering brand reputation](#). This management concept as we know it today is mainly a product of the twentieth century, taking shape in the early 1950s.

However, the history of corporate social responsibility is one that actually spans over two centuries.

## The 1800s and the Birth of Responsible Organizations

While there has been a recent spike in the popularity of CSR, evidence of businesses' concern for society can be traced back to practices originating from the Industrial Revolution. In the mid-to-late 1800s, there was growing concern about worker wellbeing and productivity among industrialists.

Growing criticisms of the emerging factory system, working conditions, and the employment of women and children were being brought to light, especially in the United States. The consensus among reformers was that current employment practices were contributing to social problems, including poverty and labor unrest. However, industrial betterment and welfare movements at the time were viewed as a combination of humanitarianism and business acumen.

Also making an appearance in the late 1800s was the rise of philanthropy. Industrialist Andrew Carnegie, who made most of his fortune in the steel industry, was known for donating large portions of his wealth to causes related to education and scientific research.

Following in the footsteps of Carnegie, oil industry business magnate John D. Rockefeller also donated more than half a billion dollars to religious, educational, and scientific causes.

## The Catalyst for Modern Corporate Social Responsibility

Although responsible companies had already existed for more than a century before, the term Corporate Social Responsibility was officially coined in 1953 by American economist Howard Bowen in his publication *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*. As such, Bowen is often referred to as the father of CSR.

However, it wasn't until the 1970s that CSR truly began to take flight in the United States. In 1971, the concept of the 'social contract' between businesses and society was introduced by the Committee for Economic Development. This contract brought forward the idea that companies function and exist because of public consent and, therefore, there is an obligation to contribute to the needs of society.

By the 1980s, early CSR continued to evolve as more organizations began incorporating social interests in their business practices while becoming more responsive to stakeholders.

## **Universal Acceptance of Corporate Social Responsibility**

The 1990s marked the beginning of widespread approval of CSR. In 1991, University of Pittsburgh professor Donna J. Wood published *Corporate Social Performance Revisited*, which expanded and improved on early CSR models by providing a framework for assessing the impacts and outcomes of CSR programs.

In the same year, business management author and professor at the University of Georgia Archie B. Carroll published his article *The Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility*. In his paper, Carroll expanded on areas he believed were crucial when implementing CSR in an organization.

By the early 2000s, CSR had become an essential strategy for many organizations, with [multi-million dollar companies](#), such as Wells Fargo, Coca-Cola, Walt Disney, and Pfizer incorporating this concept into their businesses processes.