

Ethics Careers Guide

Although in almost every job it is very likely that ethical issues will arise at points during your career, as a student studying business ethics, you might be interested in pursuing a career specifically concerned with ethical issues. The appeal is considerable; a career in ethical business can unite the dynamic world of business with a sense of greater meaning and greater contribution to the common good. Moreover, ethical business can bring significant resources and unique problem-solving capabilities to today's most pressing social and environmental problems. Being part of this change can be uniquely rewarding. The good news is that ethical practices and ethics-oriented programmes are increasingly common in the business world. This has led to a burgeoning field of ethics-oriented careers, and a wide array of opportunities for you to pursue. The jobs are out there. The challenge is to find an ethics-oriented career that plays to your background, qualifications, and capabilities, as careers in ethical business typically do not follow a standard career path. To work in ethical business, you will need talent, qualifications (some of which you are likely pursuing right now), dogged persistence, and a bit of luck.

Combining Expertise in Ethics with Expertise in Functional Areas

There are few straightforward careers in "ethics". The key ethical issues facing a business vary greatly depending on size of a business, the sector, the industry and a number of other factors. How does ethics normatively and instrumentally matter in a given firm or industry? Each firm (and industry) is concerned with its own issues, in its own way. If you follow that line of thought, you can identify the "ethics" careers in a given firm or industry more quickly. Each firm integrates ethics and standard business functions to a lesser or greater degree, but a common trend is for ethical issues to be understood and managed through standard business functional areas. So, for example, the garment industry needs to consider ethicality in supply chains, particularly relating, for example, to issues of modern slavery and environmental impact, and there are careers in advising firms to make more ethical sourcing decisions. That intersection of business and ethical decision making is where you might target your career search. However, note that you will require competence in the underlying business to be effective in your ethical career. The advisor to the garment firm needs to not only understand ethical sourcing, certification schemes, labor codes, and civil society demands, but they must also be fully credible in matters of inbound logistics, manufacturing, and distribution. As you will see below, career seekers in ethical business generally have to develop expertise in a specific functional area in a specific industry.

Careers in Compliance Advisory

The most straightforward careers in "business ethics" have to do with compliance – either in terms of setting up an ethical regime at a firm, or in making sure a firm lives up to its commitments. Does a given company comply with legal and regulatory codes, and if not, how can they be brought up to speed? Most large firms have positions whose task it is to ask these questions effectively. People in these positions have a variety of backgrounds, but, for a variety of reasons, legal training is often preferred. Thus, if you have legal training, you might find a career in compliance to be especially interesting. Working on compliance issues, you might update the code of conduct or conflict of interest policies for your firm, update various policies to bring them in line with industry or regulatory expectations, or advise firms on their possible exposure given their non-compliance. Depending on your functional area of expertise, you might also advise on the best course of action going forward. These positions exist both in-house, as well as in consultancies or law firms, where you would work with a variety of clients.

Careers in Corporate Responsibility or Sustainability

Moving slightly away from “ethics” towards areas generally denoted as “corporate responsibility” or “sustainability”, there is a larger, broader need for business professionals who can advise firms on how best to integrate ethical concerns into their businesses. You will often see these job advertisements with titles such as “Sustainability Advisor” or “Corporate Responsibility Manager”. These advisory positions exist both in-house and through consultancies. In these advisory positions, business professionals identify challenges for firms, assess levels of risk, and work with firms to be responsive to these issues. Many firms (especially large ones) have created in-house “corporate responsibility” or “sustainability” departments, where experts work in partnership with functional areas. As mentioned above, the expertise required to work in these dedicated departments will depend on the firm in question; some firms need advice on sourcing in their value chain, while others need to lower their carbon footprints. To thrive, then, you will likely need to be able to bring this dual-perspective of sustainability/ethicality and functional expertise to the issues. Relatively few professionals thrive as dedicated, career-long, “sustainability” experts – though those individuals do exist. Many, however, move back and forth between sustainability/corporate responsibility roles and experiences working in traditional functional areas. In your job search, remember that expertise on ethical issues can be required even in cases where ethical issues are not mentioned in the job posting. Anybody advising on value chains, for example, needs to be aware of the ethical controversies in their industry. So, you may find your ethical expertise is of use in these cases, and that you might well have input on ethical issues, even if the formal job description does not mention it.

Ethics in Communications, Community Engagement, and Public Relations

There is also a large market for professionals to help firms engage society on ethical issues, drawing on your communications skills. These roles would depend on the firm and industry in question, but might range from mainstream communications or “public relations” to more specialised positions in community engagement. If you enjoy engaging the public and have some expertise on a given ethical issue, a position in the communications department of a firm working on that ethical issue might be a good fit for you. Extractive and infrastructure firms are particularly known for hiring skilled communicators with experience in host communities to help build links with those communities. If you have strong communications skills, strong foreign language skills, and perhaps even experience in regions where extractive firms are undergoing operations or exploration, then this might be a good idea to pursue. More broadly, the ability to speak to community concerns on ethical issues can be key in the broader functional areas of business development, community outreach, public affairs, and governmental relations.

Social Responsibility and Sustainability Entrepreneurship

Throughout this book there are examples of individuals who have started their own businesses which are designed, alongside making money, to try and alleviate social or environmental problems. One such example is the social entrepreneur Blake Mycoskie, founder of ‘Tom’s Shoes’. The area of social entrepreneurship has grown substantially, and due to the rise of novel business models, as well as of globalization, their form, size, and impact are rapidly evolving. Although becoming an entrepreneur and starting your own business is almost always a tough thing to do, starting a business with a social purpose allows you to implicitly deal with issues relating to ethics, social responsibility, and sustainability every day, whether that be through the business donating a portion of profits to good causes, donating products or

services, or solving social or environmental problems. As such, if successful, these businesses can have a large, positive and substantive social, environmental, and economic impact. Social entrepreneurship combines working alongside ethical issues with the practicalities and challenges of setting up and running a business, for example, relating to sales, marketing, communication, leadership, and financial management.

Beyond Business: Consider Government and the Non-Profit Sector

Ethical aspects of business are not only addressed within business. This textbook describes the important roles played by civil society groups, NGOs, trade associations, and governments. Governments in particular always need talented professionals to join their ranks, either to create regulatory policy, to ensure ethical application of government policy, or to act in specialised regulatory roles, such as antitrust regulators, securities regulators, or intellectual property regulators. Trade or industry associations are also extremely influential in determining industry standards and industry-wide feedback on governmental policy. These groups are often hiring, and can often be remarkably flat in their hierarchy, leading to unique opportunities to develop your skills and experience. Finally, civil society groups and non-governmental groups (NGOs) are terrific places to make a difference while developing your capabilities. These groups develop new ideas to challenge governmental regulators, and often work to hold firms to account – all while enabling you to develop expertise on a certain topic.

Beyond Business: Doing a PhD and careers in Academia

Finally, it would perhaps be remiss not to mention careers in academia. Opportunities for PhD places and academic jobs involving sustainability, business ethics, and corporate social responsibility have become relatively more common within business and management schools. If you enjoy research, academic reading and writing and have a particular area of interest related to business ethics, a PhD is a means by which you can become a ‘subject expert’ and develop your academic skills. Upon completing a PhD, job roles in academia, consultancy or wider roles within the private and public sector become available, which may not be open to those without a PhD. Doing a PhD typically requires a strong academic record and being willing to go back to university for anything from three to six years. Academic jobs in the area of business ethics and social responsibility allow a range of opportunities, from teaching and researching in the area of business ethics, to providing consultancy services to organizations and public bodies, as well as engagement with the public regarding issues relating to sustainability and corporate social responsibility.