Addressing societal issues increasingly requires multistakeholder collaboration. Yet, cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) are often difficult to form and maintain because of coordination problems and conflicting interests of the organizations involved. To better understand how organizations overcome these challenges, we take a micro-foundational approach. First, we conducted an in-depth case study of a consulting firm to examine the emergence of a platform for CSPs. Second, using survey data from 665 employees, we identified critical elements that contributed to the stability of the platform. Our findings reveal how a for-profit organization can play a key role in coordinating other organizations to achieve social impact. We found that the emergence and stability of the platform were based on a novel operating model that aligned senior leaders’ interests in improving employee retention, employees’ desire for meaning in their work, and employees’ willingness to make short-term financial sacrifices to participate. Our study suggests that for-profit firms can play a central role in social impact collaborations but that doing so requires alignment of internal interests through intrapreneurship. It also underlines the potential value of using a micro-foundation approach in future research into CSPs.

We thank Bocconi University and INSEAD for funding this research. We thank Filipe Santos and Arzi Adbi for their feedback on an earlier draft of the article. We acknowledge the generosity of the management and employees of our research site for the time invested in the interviews and for implementing the employee survey. Any errors remain our own.

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INTRODUCTION

The Strategic Development Goals (SDGs) can only be realized with a strong commitment to global partnership and cooperation. – United Nations Development Programme

The UN SDGs are calls to action for governments, NGOs, firms, and civil society to address issues of societal and environmental concern. Because the challenges underlying these issues are highly complex and interrelated, they cannot be resolved by any one of these actors alone (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonenshein, 2016; Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015). Accordingly, the final goal, SDG 17, encourages the formation of global partnerships as a means to achieve these goals. Yet, despite recognition that coordinated responses by multiple stakeholders will be instrumental to achieving the SDGs by the target year 2030, how such partnerships come about is currently understudied, and the role of corporate players in this process remains ambiguous. This is a gap we seek to address in this study.

Cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) between firms and social purpose organizations (SPOs) such as not-for-profits, charities, and development organizations are increasingly the subject of strategy research (Odziemkowska & McDonnell, 2019; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Echoing the UN Declaration regarding the SDGs, extant academic work suggests that neither firms nor SPOs can resolve the most pervasive social and environmental “wicked problems” or “grand challenges” without the help of other organizations (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016; Waddock, Meszoe, Waddell, & Dentoni, 2015). Accordingly, CSPs between firms and SPOs with different capabilities and resources will be instrumental in solving these (Bhanji & Oxley, 2013; Cabral, Mahoney, McGahan, & Patoski, 2019).

Yet, such partnerships are not without challenges. In particular, it is unclear how partnerships between SPOs and firms come about and how they can be maintained (Rivera-Santos & Rufin, 2010; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). Corporate involvement in CSPs can be difficult for several reasons. First, coordinating the participation of firms and SPOs in CSPs is challenging. Firms may lack the drive to initiate projects with a significant social impact, which may be due to a lack of both capabilities and legitimacy in the field (Lyneis & Sterman, 2016; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Second, firms’ lack of experience in social impact work and their instrumental approach to solving social problems contribute to the instability often associated with CSPs (Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Le Ber & Braniezel, 2010).

To date, the literature on CSPs has largely focused on macro-level issues that detract from the stability and effectiveness of CSPs (Rivera-Santos & Rufin, 2011; Rondinelli & London, 2003; Van Tulder & Keen, 2018). At the same time, research in strategy and organizations has established that macro-level challenges experienced by firms are often a function of the misaligned interests of individuals (Cyert & March, 1963; Selznick, 2011). Indeed, recent studies have begun to emphasize the importance of individual action in enabling firm-level engagement in issues of social concern (Alt & Craig, 2016; Howard-Grenville, Nelson, Earle, Haack, & Young, 2017; Soderstrom & Weber, 2019; Wickert & De Bakker, 2018). Because social engagement is often seen as incompatible with the corporate “immune system”—the incentives, structures, and processes of profit-oriented organizations (Bansal, 2003; Battilana & Dorado, 2010)—the CSP’s stability may depend on the continued involvement of individual actors within member organizations rather than merely the alignment of objectives at the macro level.

As a complement to the macro-level approach of prior work, in this study, we take a micro-foundational approach to CSPs to advance an understanding of the challenges—and potential solutions—of involving corporates in CSPs (Coleman, 1990; Felin, Foss, & Ployhart, 2015). Coleman’s (1986, 1990) model of collective social action specifies three different types of social mechanisms—situational mechanisms, action-formation mechanisms and transformational mechanisms—through which change at the macro level influences the behaviour of individual actors and generates new macro states at a later time (Hedstrom & Swedberg, 1998: 21). Using this model as a framework, we explore how the institutional environment enabled individual actors to develop internal structures and underlying processes at the individual level, which then enabled the firm to overcome the challenges of corporate involvement in a CSP. Specifically, we ask two related research questions: (1) How did individual action shape the emergence of structures to support the firm’s CSP involvement? (2) How did these individual actions aggregate to the macro level to contribute to the stability of the structure over time?

Our mixed-methods approach relies on an in-depth case study of a large management consultancy that provides advisory services to corporate clients around the globe. Our focus is thus on the internal processes of the firm in facilitating the emergence of a CSP. We collected more than 40 hours of interview

Author’s voice:
What motivated you to undertake this research project?
data from 26 informants in the firm. The qualitative data provided insights regarding the first research question with respect to the role of individual action in shaping the enabling structures for the firm to overcome the challenges of corporate involvement in CSPs. To address the second question regarding the stability of the platform, in addition to using the qualitative data, we also surveyed 665 employees in the same firm (some of whom participated in the platform and some who did not).

Through our investigation, we made three discoveries. First, in contrast to the view that SPOs should take the lead role in initiating and maintaining CSPs (Kaplan, Serafeim, & Tugendhat, 2018), we found that the for-profit firm we studied, successfully initiated and maintained an interface to facilitate CSPs between SPOs and other corporates, defined as a platform for social impact (Cennamo & Santalo, 2013; Rochet & Tirole, 2003). Second, we discovered that the platform emerged via the establishment of a novel operating model, which aligned senior leaders’ interests in improving employee retention, employees’ desire for meaning in their work, and the interest of SPOs in gaining access to a highly trained workforce. Third, we found that micro-level actions can affect macro-level outcomes even without the alignment of a majority. Specifically, the stability of the platform was maintained through support of a sizeable minority illustrating the threshold model of collective behaviour developed by Granovetter (1978).

Our study builds on prior work that takes a micro-foundational approach to studying partnerships (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Vock, van Dolen, & Kolk, 2014). It extends this work by observing not only the communication flows and involvement of employees but also the structures and value propositions that form the micro foundations of the firm’s role in its CSPs. Our case study illustrates the conditions under which the efforts of a “social intrapreneur” (Davis & White, 2015), acting without formal authority, were ultimately transformed into durable routines and structures of interaction to support the firm’s continued involvement in CSPs. Last, our study illustrates the role of platforms in the context of social value-creation—where the firm acts not as the sole provider of all services but as a convener (Gatignon & Capron, 2019; Jacobides, Cennamo, & Gawer, 2018).

A MICRO-FOUNDATIONAL APPROACH TO CSPs

CSPs are increasingly seen as a way for firms and SPOs to achieve greater societal impact (Ballesteros & Gatignon, 2019; Kourula & Laasonen, 2010). Accordingly, the literature on CSPs focuses on what makes for successful partnerships (Chatain & Plaskenko, 2019; Rivera-Santos & Rufin, 2011). One of the enduring insights to emerge from this literature is the difficulty in maintaining stable CSPs, given the partners’ potentially conflicting motives, goals, and modes of governance (Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Le Ber & Branzei, 2010). Firms struggle to be catalysts to address societal issues because these ultimately do not fit with the incentives, structures, and processes of profit-oriented organizations (Bansal, 2003; Battilana & Dorado, 2010). For firms to implement social initiatives, individuals need to overcome inbuilt organizational resistance (Howard-Grenville & Hoffman, 2003).

In the past decade, a focus on micro foundations has gained momentum, not only in the management field but also in related fields such as economics and sociology (Abell, Felin, & Foss, 2008; Gavetti, 2005). The micro-foundational approach can be defined as the quest to “unpack collective concepts to understand how individual-level factors impact organizations, how the interaction of individuals leads to emergent, collective, and organizational-level outcomes and performance, and how relations between macro variables are mediated by micro actions and interactions” (Felin et al., 2015: 576). In recent years, the micro-foundational approach has been used to advance research on corporate sustainability in general and CSPs in particular (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Vock et al., 2014). A micro-foundational approach to CSPs helps us understand how intra-organizational structures based on individual-level preferences affect firm-level involvement in a macro-level outcome: CSPs for social impact. In this article, we focus specifically on the coordination of preferences and incentives of multiple stakeholders in a corporate context to build a platform for CSPs.

METHODS

Empirical Setting

Our study setting is a management consulting firm that launched an initiative to work on social impact projects (SPOs) in the development sector. Similar to commercial projects, these projects usually lasted about three to six months, depending on the need of the client. Thus, employee participation was a key
feature of the initiative. To preserve anonymity, we refer to the initiative as “corporate social initiative” (CSI). CSI was started in 2002 by a senior manager returning from a sabbatical. Throughout this manuscript, we refer to him as a social intrapreneur (Davis & White, 2015). His intention was to build a corporate venture that integrated social impact goals with the firm’s commercial objectives. This led to the emergence of a cross-sectoral platform for social impact, where the firm played the role of the convener, facilitating sustained interaction between other firms, SPOs, and governments. Thus, we consider CSI to be a CSP. We provide evidence of this assumption in the case study findings in the following paragraph.

This article uses a mixed-methods design. We relied on an inductive case-based approach to identify the structures that emerged to support the firm’s involvement (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Eisenhardt, 1989; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). In addition to qualitative data collection, we also conducted a survey of a broad sample of employees to measure their perceptions of the CSI model and (if applicable) their actual experience taking part in CSI work. Together, the interview and the survey data provide the evidence base from which we induced our discoveries.

CASE STUDY

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Between 2011 and 2013, we completed 40 interviews with key sponsors and individual participants involving a total of 26 individuals: 20 former and current participants (as of 2013) and six key individuals involved in the implementation process. Each interview lasted about an hour and was transcribed. Our interviews were structured in two waves. In the first wave, 2011–12, we interviewed the intrapreneur, key sponsors and former participants. For the former two categories, we focused on their descriptions of the main structures and processes related to building up the CSI. For participants, we focused on their perception of those structures and processes that were particularly salient to them, their motivation for participating, and their perceptions of the experience of taking part in CSI.

Recognizing that the first wave could overemphasize the experiences of individuals who were positively affected by CSI (and thus agreeing to be interviewed), we initiated a second wave of interviews to capture more diverse views. In early 2013, we were given the names of the future CSI participants who had been selected to work on projects starting in May/June 2013 but had not yet participated. We interviewed each of them before and after their participation. In addition, we had email and telephone communications with the social intrapreneur and some of the key CSI members to verify details of the implementation process and structures, and we were given access to internal as well as public documents relating to CSI.

We begin our analysis by developing a chronological case history of the entrepreneurial process to reconstruct the decision-making processes of the key actors, which began in 2002 and continued throughout the time period in which our interviews took place. To establish an accurate case history, we triangulated information between participants and asked informants to focus on and describe specific events they took part in (Eisenhardt, 1989). The first two authors conducted all interviews, some jointly. Where interviews were conducted by one researcher, we debriefed after each interview. The first author then hand-coded all interviews, following an open-coding approach to identify structures that emerged, and order these into basic categories with only a slight level of abstraction (Locke, 2001; Wickert & De Bakker, 2018). These ultimately became our first-order constructs (Gioia et al., 2013)—labeled “supporting features” in Table 1.

Next, the first author began to establish the relationships between these categories to develop second-order categories, which are the key structural elements of the initiative, labeled “main construct” in Table 1. To ensure reliability, the second author independently developed second-order categories from the first-order constructs. Finally, as a team, we discussed our emergent findings and, in doing so, we iterated between our data and the theory on CSPs to refine our constructs. Our two main constructs from this analysis operated at the micro level—focusing on aligning values for co-investment into the platform and legitimizing this investment on an individual level. However, we found that this individual-level action was made possible by macro-level developments, legitimizing corporate involvement in issues of social concern. These individual actions aggregated to the macro level, leading to the emergence of a platform for CSPs. The macro–micro linkages arising from our data are depicted using a Coleman (1990) bathtub model, as shown in Figure 1. The model serves to integrate our discoveries and, therefore, we discuss the model as we present our findings in the following paragraph.

2 As the third coauthor was not involved in the data collection process, their role included challenging the interpretations of the interviews by the other authors, thus increasing reliability of the coding.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Interview Excerpt</th>
<th>Supporting Features</th>
<th>Main Construct</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The external proposition is that people feel they’re getting the brand quality and</td>
<td>Buy-in from SPOs</td>
<td>Coinvesting for social impact</td>
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<tr>
<td>skills behind a company like [the firm]. So at [SPO name] they might say “yes, I’m</td>
<td></td>
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<td>actually getting people who have been skilled and trained in [the firm].” (Interview)</td>
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<tr>
<td>I find that most of my clients will say “I’m so glad you’re not pro bono. We had a</td>
<td>Buy-in from SPOs</td>
<td>Coinvesting for social impact</td>
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<tr>
<td>pro bono group two years ago. We invested so much time in that effort. We got people</td>
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<td>who didn’t seem very good. They left after three weeks because there was another</td>
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<tr>
<td>engagement, and it wasted our time.” (Interview #1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>If you can do anything to retain people so that you’re reducing attrition rates and</td>
<td>Buy-in from Senior Leaders</td>
<td>Coinvesting for social impact</td>
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<td>you’re making them more loyal, in a “people’s business” like we are, that becomes a very</td>
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<td>powerful proposition. (Interview #6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>I put myself in the shoes of my management lead. CSI is not for profit. It’s not one of</td>
<td>Buy-in from senior leaders</td>
<td>Coinvesting for social impact</td>
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<tr>
<td>his core clients that he’s going to get revenues from. So he’d look at it and say,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>okay, well firstly, is [name] going to come back a better consultant? Am I going to</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>benefit from the skills that [name] is going to get from doing that particular project</td>
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<td>or experience? Is he doing a team lead? What’s the complexity? So what I obviously</td>
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<tr>
<td>just tried to do was put forward that I would come back in three months time a better</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>person, a better consultant. (Interview #12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think for me, it will hugely increase my skill set, and the learning curve will be</td>
<td>Buy-in from employees</td>
<td>Coinvesting for social impact</td>
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<td>big; as well, we’re going to be interacting with senior stakeholders across the</td>
<td></td>
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<td>three organizations, in particular [large international SPO]. So we’re going to be</td>
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<td>managing stakeholders from three different organizations, as well as getting</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We were working with such passionate people, when they talked about these issues, you</td>
<td>Buy-in from employees</td>
<td>Coinvesting for social impact</td>
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<td>really felt like you were actually doing something meaningful.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I knew that the guys who had done it in the past, they had been seen as high</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Structures for legitimacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>performance. Some of them I knew had been promoted since. (Interview #15)</td>
<td>requirement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>And in addition, you need to have a certain level of performance rating, when</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Structures for legitimacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>we’re accepted, because it is very much a leadership development program. So I knew</td>
<td>requirement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I had to be a top performing consultant before I could do CSI. (Interview)</td>
<td>Integration into</td>
<td>Structures for legitimacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>If those evaluations are not deemed credible, then that undermines people’s faith in</td>
<td>performance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>the system, and it also undermines why people go to CSI. (Interview #7)</td>
<td>Integration into</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So they send very strong messages to everyone that CSI is part of an integrated</td>
<td>performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>career proposition for someone working at [the firm]. It’s not a time out. It’s not a</td>
<td>management</td>
<td>Structures for legitimacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>leave of absence. It’s so not a vacation. It’s a [firm] project. It’s treated the same</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>way. (Interview #13)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I heard from my other peers who’d done CSI was they did gave you a lot of visibility.</td>
<td>Dissemination</td>
<td>Structures for legitimacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Interview #24)</td>
<td>routines</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I heard about the CSI program from one of the talks, and that was one of the</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>things that I knew that I wanted to be involved in. (Interview #31)</td>
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CASE STUDY FINDINGS: EMERGENCE OF A PLATFORM FOR IMPACT

From our qualitative analysis, we observed the firm’s formation of partnerships with SPOs for addressing societal issues through multistakeholder collaborations. Over time, the firm’s relationships with individual SPOs evolved into a platform, where the firm played a central role in facilitating connections between multiple partners such as SPOs and other corporate actors. In a public speech in 2011, the then CEO addressed the role of CSI as part of the firm’s strategy to develop new operating models for social impact:

*Businesses are increasingly aware of the role they can play in helping to solve basic problems in developing countries like health and nutrition, through partnerships with governments, development agencies, and NGOs. We are looking at new models to help business partners with NGOs and governments, to leverage their expertise in technology, delivery systems, supply chain, and other core business competencies.*

The initiative moved from addressing project-by-project goals to the development of capabilities as part of a platform to enable multiple partners to address complex, interrelated societal issues. CSI thus extended beyond a client relationship to involve multiple partners with a focus on jointly addressing issues of social concern. Rather than focusing on specific activities that might be useful to help development sector clients, the emphasis of CSI was to determine which partners were needed to solve a specific social problem. For example, one public company document stated:

*We help companies see the “strategic” in “social” to create business value and social impact with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as the North Star. Consider the cutting edge partnership between financial services leader [firm name] and pharmaceutical giant [firm name]. These unexpected partners are providing access to affordable health care. [CSI] connects the international development sector to technology leaders.*

As an example, CSI facilitated and managed the CSP between mobile phone operators, the ministry of health, technology vendors, and local healthcare providers in Rwanda, Tanzania, and Kenya, to roll out a disease surveillance platform. CSI also helped coordinate and integrate the activities of multiple government agencies, 19 international private sector partners, and numerous civil society stakeholders for a new public–private partnership focused on youth HIV prevention in Kenya. Again, the primary role CSI took was that of a platform, connecting the various partners, developing the partnership strategy, and defining the operating model and processes. A senior manager explained:

*We don’t just work with non-profit clients but see the increasing importance of cross-sectional linkages, the need for a more systems approach.* (Interview #8)

Two perceived macro-level changes took place in the years preceding and concurrent with the initiation of CSI. First, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability had gained greater legitimacy, and corporate actors were involved on a much larger scale than before (Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014; Flammer, 2015). Second, there was a growing perception (shared by clients of the firm) that social issues were interlinked and that they could not
be tackled in isolation. In our micro-foundations framework for CSP emergence (Coleman, 1990; Hedström & Swedberg, 1998), these macro-level changes can be understood to act as the situational mechanisms affecting individual beliefs (macro–micro link shown in Figure 1). Specifically, the social intrapreneur recognized the importance of the increasing demand from corporations to become engaged in issues of social concern. The ability of the firm to work with its clients through CSI also helped the firm win new business and retain existing commercial clients:

*Work in global development is increasingly relevant to our commercial clients . . . I think it significantly strengthens our business case. We can say ‘we’re not only looking at [SPO name] and [SPO name], but we are working with [firm name] on integrating small local firms into a new base of the pyramid distribution model.’ And these sorts of things are paving a way with our key clients.* (Interview #1)

The demand by other firms to engage in issues of social and environmental concern created the opportunity for one organization to act as a convener of resource-rich firms and SPOs and governments.

Interviewees pointed to two key internal features of the operating model that supported the emergence of the firm’s CSP platform. The first feature was as a model of co-investment for social impact in which three stakeholder groups—employees, the firm, and SPOs—agreed to make financial sacrifices necessary for the platform. The second feature was a set of routines that legitimized the participation of employees in the platform through a highly stringent selection process and a tight integration of the initiative into the core business as well as routines for the dissemination of the benefits of the platform. We now discuss these in turn.

**Co-Investing in Social Impact**

As illustrated in the micro-foundational model in Figure 1, at the micro–micro level, the social intrapreneur developed an operating model based on co-investment. A key insight from the interviews was that the successful launch and scaling of CSI relied on the intrapreneur’s customized approach to managing multiple stakeholders. His primary motivation was to use the firm’s resources to create social impact; however, he did not want the initiative to be viewed as “philanthropy” or “CSR” as this implied dependence on the generosity of senior leaders and that funding could not be relied on permanently. Instead, his goal was to establish a model that allowed the initiative to become self-sustaining. His approach involved a process of “balancing ‘what matters to me’ with ‘what matters to them’” O’Neil and Ucbasaran (2016: 133).” Specifically, the structures he put into place changed the conditions for individual action and laid the micro foundations for the firm’s involvement in CSPs.

The first structure that emerged was one based on the co-investment of stakeholders. Each party—employees and crucially the SPO clients—was required to make financial contributions in order for the platform to survive. This co-investment model is a departure from the norm of how firms usually engage with SPO partners. The idea was to build CSI like a social enterprise within the overall corporate structure. The social intrapreneur explained:

*The business model has a three-way contribution between [the firm] giving, our people giving, and our clients giving. It’s not discounted consulting. It’s co-investing in something.* (Interview #2)

It should be noted that most CSI projects involved multiple partners, as the previous examples have highlighted. However, the financial contribution to the firm was often carried by one SPO partner—usually a large foundation.

Although SPO clients would contribute to the platform, a highly unusual feature of corporate–SPO partnerships, the same was required of the two other stakeholder groups. Employees also had to accept a salary cut for the duration of their participation in CSI. In addition to reducing implementation costs, the salary cut acted as a filter, selecting those employees who valued the opportunity to engage in such work. Finally, the firm agreed to reduce its per-consultant profit margin, thus allowing CSI to be cost neutral rather than having to compete with traditional commercial projects. In the following paragraph, we describe supporting features that created the conditions for co-investment.

**Buy-in from SPOs.** Many firms in professional service industries have historically provided pro bono services to SPOs and development organizations (e.g., Burbano, Mamer, & Snyder, 2018; Carnahan, Kryscynski, & Olson, 2017). Thus, the question of interest to the intrapreneur was whether SPOs would pay for services they were used to getting free of charge. For SPOs, the value proposition centered around getting access to the best talent for a fully fledged project tailored to their needs (as opposed to short-lived ad hoc work by individuals who were not necessarily suited to the job). The social intrapreneur explained:

*If it’s pro-bono and you don’t get a very good level of service, can you really criticize something you get for free? Is it an even relationship? You have to be thankful for what you get free — no? I find that most of my clients will say I’m so*
glad you’re not pro bono. We had a pro bono group two years ago. We invested so much time in that effort. We got people who didn’t seem very good. They left after three weeks because there was another engagement, and it wasted our time. (Interview #1)

For SPOs to buy-in the model, the preference for highly trained employees to bring their capabilities to the partnership was key.

**Buy-in from senior leaders.** The most difficult aspect to overcome—getting senior leaders’ buy-in—was that even if the CSI could break even, it still would be less profitable than other opportunities in the market because SPO clients could not afford to pay the rates that the firm charged its commercial clients. Hence, the concern was that CSI would be a lower priority for the firm’s resources (such as allocating consultants to projects).

The intrapreneur recognized that although intangible benefits like a positive external reputational or brand image could provide some justification for prioritization of CSI by senior leaders, these alone would not be sufficient. To overcome this barrier, he developed a value proposition linked to talent management. He observed that employees were interested in pursuing a hybrid career where they could make a social impact as part of their commercial career with the firm and, given that opportunity, they would be more likely to remain employed at the firm. He presented CSI as a means of increasing employee engagement and improving retention and performance outcomes, which were seen as critical for professional service firms like those in management consulting. The social intrapreneur recalled:

*The original business case was around people: recruitment, retention, skills development of people. Some of these things are difficult to measure. But most weeks, I’ll get an email from people saying ‘I didn’t leave [the firm] two years ago when I would’ve because I was waiting to do CSI, and I’ve done it now, and you know what? Now I’m really engaged and I feel better about the company. There [are] lots of anecdotes and hard evidence around how these benefits, these people benefits are helping.* (Interview #2)

To strengthen the value proposition, the intrapreneur gathered and presented data from his own employee surveys, showing a significant positive correlation between an employee’s intent to participate in CSI and the employee’s performance. As a result, he won buy-in from senior leaders to pilot CSI. In return for the retention benefits, senior leaders exempted CSI from the usual financial overheads and margins imposed on the firm’s commercial projects.

**Buy-in from employees.** The fees from SPO clients and the reduced overhead for CSI projects contributed to the viability of the operating model but were not sufficient to cover the full operating costs for CSI. A large part of the cost came from the salaries of the management consultants. Therefore, the operating model also required co-investment from participating employees. The primary lever for convincing employees to participate in CSI was the possibility of having a unique, direct, and visible impact on society. The possibility of creating value for society was an important aspect of the business case for employees, and was communicated from one employee to another:

*Some of the feedback that I got to was that the experience of working with a nonprofit organization, my friends felt that they made a larger difference and the work itself was much more fulfilling.* (Interview #25)

Importantly, the intrapreneur made sure that CSI projects were more than just “feel good” assignments—they were genuine opportunities for consultants to apply and develop their consulting skills to economic development. One consultant explained:

*There is nothing that people [from the firm] can really tell anyone in development organizations and NGOs about development. We’re no experts in diseases. We’re no experts in HIV. We’re no experts in water and sanitation. [But] if it comes down to how we get the drugs and the medicines the last mile in the distribution chain, we know about that because we do it for consumer goods companies.* (Interview # 7)

The perception that their skill sets created value for others helped participants feel that they could make a meaningful contribution through CSI participation. Because CSI teams were often smaller than commercial teams, employees on CSI projects were assigned more challenging roles relative to their roles on commercial projects. Therefore, CSI participation also provided opportunities to develop valuable leadership skills, ahead of their peers. One former participant recalled:

*There are no slides, so you get to rethink how and why you work in certain ways and how you communicate and what you communicate. I think it enables people to go back into the commercial world, and it challenges a lot of the jargon and complexity that [the firm] just seems to breathe. I think I came back a much more confident person in terms of my skills or in terms of my ability to deal with senior people.* (Interview #8)

Given the intangible benefits employees gained from CSI participation, the intrapreneur believed
that many employees would agree to a short-term salary cut during their CSI participation. The idea was that the intangible benefits and social impact created a compensating wage differential (Rosen, 1986), where employees valued the nonpecuniary benefits of participation more than (or at least as much as) they valued their pay. Furthermore, the salary cut also brought employees’ pay more in line with the wages of SPO employees who were their partners during those projects. One employee who had accepted a position on a project explained:

For me, it was a sacrifice that I was willing to make. It ensures that the people who are doing it are just really passionate about the work, and are not just doing it to say that they got international work experience in Africa or India. I think it makes sense and it gets you a feeling like you’re doing non-profit work in terms of a salary cut. (Interview #31)

Thus, the first key feature of the operating model underlying the platform for CSPs was a three-way contribution model. Each key stakeholder group—SPOs, senior leaders in the firm, and employees—was required to co-invest in the platform. In turn, the social intrapreneur put in place the structures to provide each group with a set of intangible benefits: receiving a highly trained professional consultants (for SPOs), and motivating employees who would stay longer with the firm (for senior leaders) and meaningful work as well as the possibility to gain new skills that were valuable in their commercial careers (for participating employees).

Returning to Figure 1 and the micro-foundation model, the co-investment model we argue gives rise to the action-formation mechanism, enabling the involvement of various firm-internal and firm-external stakeholders to support CSI.

**Structures for Legitimacy**

A micro-foundational model must also specify the mechanism through which individual action is transformed into macro-level outcomes (Coleman, 1990; Hedstrom & Swedberg, 1998). In the interviews we conducted, informants underlined the importance of legitimizing structures to enable collective organizational support. These structures protected individuals who had participated and provided visible proof to others of participation and the associated intangible benefits participant believed to have received (e.g., meaningful work and skill development). They decreased the perceived costs and increased the perceived benefits of participation for others, lowering their thresholds for participation. Collective support emerged not because all of the firm’s members ended up sharing the same norm or belief about CSI, but rather because these legitimizing structures changed some individuals’ thresholds (Granovetter, 1978). These small changes in thresholds triggered a dynamic in which collective support for the firm’s involvement in CSPs emerged, despite only a minority of members actively participating. In this way, the legitimizing structures unleashed a transformational mechanism, transforming individual-level support into collective support, as described in the following paragraph (see Figure 1).

A crucial feature of the CSI operating model was that it did not only rely on the informal support of change agents and individuals with prosocial preferences but also was integrated with the firm’s existing organizational routines. This integration helped legitimize CSI projects as firm-sponsored assignments rather than side work. In the following paragraph, we describe supporting features that created the conditions for collective support: an employee performance eligibility requirement, an integrated performance management process, and dissemination routines.

**Employee performance requirement.** In order for CSI to receive collective support and for employees to seek participation, the initiative would need to be perceived as one reserved for high-performing employees. Accordingly, the intrapreneur imposed a minimum performance requirement. Even so, firm records indicate that there was a vast oversupply of employees interested in CSI participation. Given the scarcity of CSI projects relative to demand, even eligible consultants had no guarantee of being selected. Individuals applied to projects advertised on the firm’s intranet, and assignment to a project was based on how well the employee’s experience and skills matched the requirements of the CSI project. Thus, selection followed a competitive, transparent application process, which emphasized the fact that CSI projects faced the usual pressures and discipline of a business and were focused on creating value. The length of the project (typically a few months) and how it was managed were very similar to that of commercial projects (except for smaller teams and more frugal expense budgets). The intrapreneur explained:

I don’t want the people who can’t get roles elsewhere. I want la crème de la crème. I want the best people. And in return, [the firm] gets a retention tool for these high performers. It might even get a recruitment differentiator. I can’t take everyone. Of course not. Business is in business to make money. But I can get a quarter of people who put their hands up and say, ‘I want to do this’ and who are in our top-performing bracket.

I don’t want the also-rans. (Interview #2)

To respond to the concern that employees might treat CSI as a holiday, the selection process was used...
to exclude individuals whose motivation did not match the expectations of the CSI team.

They screen you so you’re not the person who just wants an exotic holiday because sometimes it’s anything but exotic. You know, someone who’s adaptable enough to just go and live and work in a pretty challenging environment. (Interview #10)

Integration into an existing performance management system. To provide assurance to participating employees that they would not experience negative career consequences, which would deter support for CSI in the long run, the performance evaluation of CSI was integrated into the overall performance evaluation system of the firm.3 If during a year a consultant worked on a CSI project for six months and on a commercial project for six months, the employee’s evaluation would be based on their performance on both projects, as one individual explained:

It’s not a time out. It’s not a leave of absence. It’s so not a vacation. It’s a normal project. It’s treated the same way. You have performance evaluations, you have objectives. It goes into your performance appraisal at the end of the year. [It is,] I think, a really strong operational model that drives people to dare to take up the challenge, and also at the end of the day, it supports you once you come back. (Interview #12)

Rather than being a stand-alone unit or part of the firm’s CSR division, the CSI organization was part of the firm’s strategy-consulting business, as the intrapreneur explained.

We needed to send a signal to the business that this wasn’t the side charity while the mainstream business is somewhere else. If we put it in CSR, no matter how much we try to say it’s all part and parcel of the same company, there was still a paradigm, still a mindset that it’s nice to do but the real action, the real people, the real talent is in the main business where we serve clients, we make a profit. (Interview #2).

Dissemination routines. To provide visibility and legitimacy to CSI and attract collective support, the social intrapreneur found ways through which the experience of employees, as well as the content of the work that was accomplished for SPO clients, could be disseminated. Employees who participated in CSI projects were asked to give presentations to their focal office. Often short summaries of their experiences were featured on the internal as well as external web pages of the company. These routines not only increased awareness among employees of the benefits of CSI participation but also showcased the importance of CSI work to senior leaders. One former participant recalled:

It was a great success with the client. She [my manager] said to present it internally and also to our clients. I was presenting to [the firm] worldwide, and we had 250 people connected live and more than 1,000 people who viewed it later. One of the most senior managers who leads some of the biggest clients, he is one of our top six clients in [the firm] worldwide. . . . He was attending that webcast and listening to us and thanking us for the work that we have done. I would have had to spend twenty years working at [the firm] to get that kind of exposure. (Interview #16)

In addition to former CSI employees disseminating the content of their experience, early supporters occupying senior positions in the firm began to engage in public discourse at highly visible sustainability related events (e.g., the World Economic Forum in Davos), making public statements of commitment regarding the firm’s position on social issues and specifically linking their engagement with these issues to the existence of CSI. For example, in one public speech, the former CEO stated:

At [the firm], we have looked for new models to help businesses partner with NGOs and governments to leverage their expertise in technology, delivery systems, supply chain and other core business competencies. To help accelerate this convergence, eight years ago we introduced a new group – [CSI].

Together, these three structures—employee performance requirement, integration into an existing performance management system, and dissemination routines—allowed CSI to achieve collective support. For senior leaders, the performance requirement ensured that only the most valuable employees would receive the opportunity to engage in the practice. For employees, integration into the existing performance system promised that their commercial careers would not be disrupted—allowing them to act as visible models for other organizational members. Finally, dissemination routines helped CSI gain a more widespread audience and visibility, further anchoring it in the organization.

To interpret how participation by a minority of members of the firm could still achieve collective support for the firm’s involvement in CSPs, we use Granovetter’s (1978) threshold model of collective behavior. Rather than assuming that if members of a group made the same behavioral decision, it can be inferred that they shared the same norm or belief about

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3 It is beyond the scope of this article to formally examine whether there were any (positive or negative) career consequences related to CSI participation.
the situation; Granovetter (1978) maintains that variation in norms or preferences across individuals within a group is the most important causal influence on collective outcomes. Because individuals vary in their thresholds for action such that some may adopt when no one or only a few others have, whereas other individuals will adopt only when a certain percent of others have, as long as the threshold is passed for some adopters, and if other members can observe their adoption, then a sufficient number of members will adopt for the collective outcome to occur.

In short, individuals do not need to have the same preferences for collective action to emerge. Furthermore, in some cases, a very small change in the distribution of preferences can generate a large difference in the outcome. It is this feature of his model that is most relevant for our arguments here. Even though some senior leaders might not have believed in the norm of corporate engagement in issues of social concern and a majority of employees did not have an explicit interest in getting involved in social issues as part of their careers, the involvement of a sizeable minority of each was sufficient to spur collective support of the firm’s role in CSPs.

**Summary of Findings from the Case Study**

In summary, the qualitative data provide the following insights into our first research question, how individual action shaped the emergence of firm-level structures inside a firm to support CSP involvement. We found that the firm overcame the challenges typically associated with corporate involvement in CSPs by developing a novel operating model. The model involved the following: (1) co-investment for social impact by SPOs, senior leaders, and employees, and (2) integration with the firm’s existing routines to increase the legitimacy of the CSI platform. Consequently, the continuity of the platform did not rely on the sustained efforts of the social intrapreneur but became embedded with the firm’s existing routines: the structures he put in place lowered the thresholds for participation of interested corporate employees and enabled the support by sympathetic senior leaders. The participation and support of this minority in turn brought about aggregate changes in organizational support.

**SURVEY**

Next, we turn to survey evidence to further examine the macro-level outcomes, in particular the stability of the structure over time, in line with our second research question. Recall that from the perspective of an employee, an important element of the operating model was the set of intangible benefits they expected to gain from CSI participation (e.g., personal meaning and skills acquisition). In addition, senior leaders supported the model because they expected a positive retention effect from employee participation in CSI work. For the model to retain collective support, employees’ expectations for benefits and senior leaders’ expectations for retention gains would need to be met. We now analyze more systematically (a) the overall support of the business model involving the co-investment feature, (b) whether the expected intangible benefits were indeed received by participants, and (c) whether there is an indication that participation may be associated with retention benefits.

**Survey Design**

With the assistance of the CSI team, we launched the survey in August 2013, targeted at the 6,182 employees working in the firm’s offices in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Ireland. The survey was specifically designed for the purpose of our research.4 The invitation to fill out the survey was sent from the CSI team’s official email address mentioning a collaboration with an academic institution. There were no rewards for participating. One week later, a follow-up email was sent to remind employees to fill out the survey. We received 665 completed surveys, 113 from former CSI participants and 552 from individuals who had not participated in CSI before. Summary statistics regarding the characteristics of respondents are summarized in Table 2.5

One concern highlighted by the CSI team in the implementation of our survey was the high volume of

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4 Different elements of the same survey form the empirical basis for a related manuscript (Bode & Singh, 2018).

5 We were able to verify how representative our sample was by comparing the demographic and professional characteristics of the employee population according to the firm’s HR records as well as the respondent sample. It should be noted that we cannot link survey data to HR records as neither source of data includes information that lets us identify individual employees. We found that former CSI participants were more likely to respond than nonparticipants: the response rate for the population as a whole was 11 percent (665 of 6,128 individuals), but the response rate for the subset who had participated in CSI was 30 percent (113 of 373). Furthermore, women were overrepresented in the sample: while 43 percent of the employee population are women and 53 percent of respondents were women. In addition, although 51 percent of CSI participants are women, in our sample, 56 percent of CSI respondents were women. There were no notable differences in terms of tenure or age between the overall population and the sample nor in the population of CSI participants and the CSI respondent sample. The over-representation of women in our survey suggests that any gender-related findings must be interpreted with caution.
emails directed at consultants on a daily basis, and thus the difficulty in obtaining responses to survey requests. This makes it particularly challenging to collect multi-item measures. Recent studies have suggested that single-item measures may reduce respondent refusal to participate (Bergkvist, 2015). Furthermore, Bergkvist and Rossiter (2007) argue that “theoretical tests and empirical findings would be unchanged if good single-item measures were substituted... in place of commonly used multiple-item measures (183).” This is particularly the case where items may, in any case, suffer from common method bias, thus artificially inflating the constructs’ coefficient alpha. A single-item measure can be justified if it refers to a single and clear object to be assessed (Bergkvist, 2014; Tonoyan, Strohmeyer, & Jenning, 2019). Given our questions were targeted at assessing employee opinions regarding the CSI business model and (where relevant) their CSI experience, which are unlikely to be highly complex, we used single-item measures throughout the survey. All measures pertaining to employee perceptions were captured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”).

SURVEY FINDINGS: EMPLOYEE SUPPORT AND PLATFORM STABILITY

Employee Support for the Co-Investment Feature of the Business Model

A central feature of the operating model was related to the requirement of employees to accept a salary cut. In the following paragraph, we contrast employees’ perceptions of the operating model involving a salary cut with other possible forms of co-investment. As shown in Table 3, on average, employees agreed that companies like the firm should sacrifice profits to make a positive impact on society (Q1 average: 3.35/5.00). Regarding question 2, on average, employees surveyed disagreed with the statement that all employees of the firm should financially contribute in order for the firm to provide subsidized consulting services (Q2 average: 2.25/5.00). Regarding question 3, they also disagreed with the statement that CSI participants should financially contribute (Q3 average: 2.49/5.00). However, it is worth noting that a sizeable minority of employees surveyed (48 percent and 35 percent, respectively) was neutral or in agreement with the statement that (a) employees and (b) CSI participants specifically should financially contribute. Thus, despite the relative stability of the CSP over time, we do not see evidence that this macro-level outcome can be attributed to a persistent and widely shared norm regarding the role of firms in issues of social concern nor the co-investment model. Last, on average, employees surveyed strongly disagreed with the statement that SPO partners should pay the full commercial fee for the firm’s consulting services (Q4 average: 1.85/5.00).

The survey provides more information regarding heterogeneity among employees’ perceptions. As shown in Table 3, a comparison of means shows that compared with employees who had not completed
CSI, employees who completed CSI agreed more with the statements that the firm and employees should make financial contributions. We investigate these differences in more detail using an ordered logit model (results are also robust for an OLS model). As shown in Table 4, column (1), employees who had previously taken part in CSI were more likely to believe that the firm should sacrifice profits to contribute to society. As shown in Table 4, column (2), former CSI participants were more likely to believe that the overall employee population rather than just CSI participants should make a financial contribution. The latter findings may be in line with the motivation of former participants to spread the cost related to their choice to take part in CSI across the rest of the employee population. We also find, as shown in Table 4, column (3), that individuals with previous volunteer experience were less likely to believe that only employees who took part in CSI should make a financial contribution. Thus, the most prosocial employees seemed to be cautious of a model that was overly reliant on financial sacrifices by only CSI participants.

Next, we examine heterogeneity by gender. Women are often considered to be more prosocial than men (Gilligan, 1977; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Travino, 2010). As shown in Table 4, columns (1) and (2), relative to men, women agreed more strongly that the firm should sacrifice profit and agreed more that all employees should make a sacrifice to achieve social impact. This suggests that female employees may be more willing to shoulder the financial burden of the firm’s involvement with society, even if they are not personally taking part in the initiative (nor gaining intangible benefits of participation). In terms of garnering generalized support for CSI, women appear to be particularly likely allies.6

Employee-Related Outcomes following CSI Participation

We now present analyses of survey responses regarding employee outcomes related to CSI participation for CSI participants. We complement this analysis with a comparison between CSI participants and nonparticipants when considering their loyalty to the firm, to have a meaningful comparison of whether the value proposition for senior managers—that CSI might improve retention—might be justified. Taken together, this analysis is intended to

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**TABLE 3**

Employee Perceptions—Summary Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>CSI Completed (N = 113)</th>
<th>CSI Not Completed (N = 552)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of the business model (N = 665)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q1: Companies like [the Firm] should sacrifice profits to make a positive impact on society</td>
<td>3.35 (1.05)</td>
<td>3.54 (1.11)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2: All employees of [the Firm] should financially contribute for [the Firm] to provide subsidized consulting services to NGOs</td>
<td>2.25 (1.02)</td>
<td>2.40 (1.20)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3: Only [CSI] participants should financially contribute to allow [the Firm] to provide subsidized consulting services to NGOs</td>
<td>2.49 (1.00)</td>
<td>2.67 (1.16)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4: NGOs and development organizations should pay the full commercial fee for [the Firm’s] consulting services</td>
<td>1.85 (0.77)</td>
<td>1.81 (0.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of leaving the firm (N = 665)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5: It would take a lot to get me to leave my job</td>
<td>3.13 (1.23)</td>
<td>3.44 (1.27)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of the CSI experience (N = 113)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6: Overall I was satisfied with my [CSI] experience</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4.30 (0.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7: What I did during my [CSI] assignment made a difference</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4.04 (0.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8: My work activities during my [CSI] assignment were personally meaningful to me</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4.27 (0.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9: My [CSI] assignment helped me develop new skills</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4.39 (0.76)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All survey questions use a 1–5 scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

** p < .05
* p < .01
+ p < .1 (two-tailed t-test)

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6 It should be noted that, to the best of our knowledge, most of the early supporters of the initiative including the then acting CEO as well as a former chairman and the social intrapreneur were men. Given that we do not have complete records of all formal and informal supporters of CSI, we are unable to provide support for whether the gender of the early supporters played any role in the emergence of specific features or the sustainability of the initiative.
provide evidence of the stability of the operating model by assessing whether the value proposition to employees regarding intangible benefits of CSI participation was fulfilled and whether CSI may be associated with employee loyalty to the firm.

Table 3, rows (6)–(9), shows that, on average, CSI participants were satisfied with their CSI experience (Q6 average: 4.30/5.00), that what they did during their CSI assignment made a difference (Q7 average: 4.04/5.00), and that their work activities during their CSI assignment were personally meaningful (Q8 average: 4.27/5.00). They also found that CSI assignments helped them develop new skills (Q9 average: 4.39/5.00). Thus, overall, the perception of former CSI participants surveyed 10 years after the initiation of CSI suggests that these aspects of the value proposition were consistently met.7 Given our previous finding regarding the overall higher agreement of women with the financial contributions of all employees, we also examine whether women differ from men in the perceived outcomes of their CSI experience. We find that women were overall less satisfied with their CSI experience than men but did not report lower levels of perceived meaning or skills development. We found no evidence of project-related characteristics, such as team size or project length, to be significantly associated with the overall satisfaction.8

Finally, we consider the stated loyalty of each employee group to the firm to examine whether the value proposition to senior managers that CSI may aid in the retention of employees, might hold. As shown in Table 3, row (5), the average score for the statement “it would take a lot to get me to leave my job” is 3.13/5.00 (including both former CSI participants and nonparticipants). However, employees who completed CSI more strongly agreed with the statement than employees who had not completed CSI (Q5 average: 3.44/5.00 for CSI completed v. 3.06/5.00 for CSI not completed). This pattern also emerges from our regression analysis, as shown in Table 4, column (5). Thus, former CSI participants at the time of our survey were more likely than nonparticipants to agree that it would take a lot for them to leave their job. Based on these data, we are unable to determine whether this difference existed before CSI participation or whether it was caused by CSI participation. However, this finding is consistent with the related literature that shows evidence of employee engagement in CSR being associated with retention benefits (Bode, Singh, & Rogan, 2015; Carnahan et al., 2017).

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**TABLE 4**

Employee Perceptions—Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSI completed</td>
<td>0.592** (0.215)</td>
<td>0.470* (0.217)</td>
<td>0.327 (0.220)</td>
<td>−0.186 (0.223)</td>
<td>0.949** (0.216)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.325* (0.145)</td>
<td>0.246* (0.147)</td>
<td>−0.178 (0.145)</td>
<td>−0.341* (0.152)</td>
<td>−0.242* (0.144)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.060 (0.062)</td>
<td>−0.012 (0.064)</td>
<td>−0.191** (0.063)</td>
<td>0.090 (0.067)</td>
<td>0.198** (0.063)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td>−0.075 (0.065)</td>
<td>−0.212** (0.067)</td>
<td>0.094 (0.066)</td>
<td>0.016 (0.069)</td>
<td>−0.108* (0.065)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>−0.182 (0.172)</td>
<td>−0.263 (0.173)</td>
<td>0.023 (0.171)</td>
<td>0.147 (0.177)</td>
<td>−0.078 (0.164)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous performance</td>
<td>−0.081 (0.092)</td>
<td>0.123 (0.093)</td>
<td>−0.099 (0.092)</td>
<td>−0.018 (0.095)</td>
<td>0.062 (0.090)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous volunteer</td>
<td>0.322* (0.148)</td>
<td>0.144 (0.149)</td>
<td>−0.358* (0.149)</td>
<td>−0.054 (0.156)</td>
<td>−0.103 (0.147)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country-fixed effect</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>644</td>
<td>644</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses.
** p < .01
* p < .05
+ p < .1

Difference in the number of observations is due to missing survey responses to specific questions.

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7 Relying on a simple t-test, the mean of Q7 (“made a difference”) is statistically different from that of Q6 (“overall satisfied”), Q8 (“meaningful work”), and Q9 (“skills development”). Furthermore, Q8 and Q9 also differ from one another. Overall, the mean of Q9 (“skills development”) is highest, whereas the mean of Q7 (“made a difference”) is the lowest.

8 These results are based on an ordered logit model and are available from the authors on request.
Employee willingness to sacrifice for CSI participation formed the basis of the viability of the value propositions and the sustainability of the overall model. Surprisingly, we found that, on average, both former participants and nonparticipants were slightly below neutral in their support of the model that required a salary cut from employees, suggesting that although collective support for CSI emerged, this support was not likely due to a strong norm having evolved around firm involvement in social issues nor around the appropriateness of the operating model. However, we find evidence that women are more supportive of the model than men. Yet, they are also less likely to find their CSI experience satisfactory. Thus, for the model to remain stable, careful management of the experience of women on CSI projects is likely important. We find some indication that post-participation, former CSI participants are more loyal to the firm than their counterparts, providing at least some tentative support for the value proposition to senior managers being met.

OVERVIEW OF DISCOVERIES

In summary, our study revealed three discoveries. First, our qualitative work highlighted the important role that intermediary organizations, like the consulting firm, can play in initiating and catalyzing CSPs for social impact. Thus, our first discovery is that a corporate can take the lead role in initiating and maintaining CSPs. This is important given the conventional wisdom that for-profit firms are rarely catalysts of CSPs (Kaplan et al., 2018). Specifically, we found evidence of the firm initiating and maintaining an interface to facilitate value-creation exchanges between SPOs and other corporates that can be thought of as a platform to address societal issues.

Second, we discovered that the platform emerged via the establishment of a novel operating model with two key features: the first was a co-investment approach to social impact in which three parties—employees, the firm, and SPOs—accept to make financial sacrifices. The second feature was a set of practices that legitimized the involvement of employees in the platform through highly stringent selection criteria, tight integration of the initiative into the core business, and dissemination routines. These practices reinforced the stability of the co-investing structure by transforming individual-level support into collective support.

Third, we found that micro-level actions can affect macro-level outcomes even without full alignment of a majority, illustrating the threshold model of collective behavior developed by Granovetter (1978). Our findings suggest that engaging a minority may be sufficient for lasting corporate involvement in CSPs. Although we did not observe active resistance to the implementation of the CSP, we also did not observe evidence of a broadly shared norm emerging in support of the firm taking part in socially responsible engagements. By putting in place structures that increased the perceived benefits and reduced the perceived costs for some individuals in the firm, the intrapreneur was able to reduce their thresholds for participation. These small changes in thresholds triggered a dynamic in which collective support for the firm’s involvement in CSPs emerged, despite only a minority of members actively participating.

The macro–micro–macro linkages of our discoveries can be demonstrated through a Coleman (1990) macro–micro–macro model, shown in Figure 1. In the years before and concurrent with the development of the CSI operating model, CSR had increased in legitimacy, increasing perceptions by top management that the firm could benefit from such an engagement. The macro-level changes in the institutional environment created an opportunity for the intrapreneur to develop a co-investment model that aligned values of the firm’s internal stakeholders (e.g., employees and senior leaders) with those of individuals working in and leading SPOs. This model included key features that helped legitimize the individual-level actions, such as the performance requirement. The aggregation of individual action, facilitated by the conditions created by the intrapreneur, aggregated to the macro level, and increased the stability of the firm’s platform for social impact.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Our study on the emergence of a platform for CSPs for social impact bridges and extends research in multiple areas. We contribute to a better understanding of the interaction between individual-level structures, firm-level behavior, and related outcomes for external stakeholders in several ways as explained in the following paragraph.

Toward a Micro-foundational Approach to Cross-Sector Partnerships

In recent years, there has been an increase in focus on the interorganizational processes underlying societal engagement of firms: in particular, the role of collaborations between firms and not-for-profit partners in bringing about societal change (Bhanji &
Oxley, 2013; Cabral et al., 2019). At the same time, researchers have also started to examine the intraorganizational processes unique to engagement with social issues compared with other change processes (Sonenshein, 2006; Wickert & De Bakker, 2018). We extend this work by examining not only the involvement of employees in CSPs but also the routines, structures, and value propositions that create the micro foundations of the firm’s involvement in CSPs. Our findings suggest that when considering the roles firms can play in CSPs, in addition to the previously examined external processes (Rivera-Santos & Rufin, 2011; Rondinelli & London, 2003; Van Tulder & Keen, 2018), research also needs to focus on the internal processes.

We would expect that in settings like law or accounting as well as other service firms, similar initiatives could emerge. First, firms providing services are likely more easily able to share their main asset (knowledge) than firms in industries relying primarily on hard assets, which are less portable. In addition, because of the relatively high salaries employees in such industries enjoy, they may be able than employees in lower paying jobs to contribute toward a co-investment operating model. However, our findings may have limited generalizability in other contexts. Examining firm structures enabling the emergence of CSPs not only in different firms and industries but also in institutional and socioeconomic contexts may be one important avenue for future research. Finally, although it was our objective to study the emergence of enabling structures for CSPs in a corporate context, a similar microfoundational approach could also be taken while focusing on SPOs where individual values, preferences, and motivations as well as organizational-level structures and objectives may well differ from those observed in corporations. Indeed, future work might develop theory also at the unit of the firm—SPO partnership, examining whether and how enabling structures may coevolve.

Employee Preferences and Corporate Engagement in Issues of Social Concern

In our case study, a key part of the solution depended on employees’ valuing the opportunity to participate in a firm-sponsored social initiative and the firm seeing an intangible benefit from this. Recent research has highlighted the role of corporate talent management as a justification for social engagement. In particular, CSIs can facilitate recruitment, improve employees’ identification with the firm, and retention (Bode et al., 2015; Carnahan et al., 2017; Glavas & Godwin, 2013). Implicit in this research is the notion that firms benefit from social engagement because (some) employees value the chance to take part in or be associated with that engagement, yet existing literature focuses primarily on how such preferences can be harnessed to benefit the firm. By contrast, our study provides an illustration of how the preferences of employees are aggregated to help the firm develop the capabilities and structure to initiate and sustain collaboration with not-for-profit organizations.

Platforms for Social Impact as Drivers of the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Last, our study provides relevant insights into the means by which organizations can achieve SDG 17. SDG 17 was formulated to encourage the formation of global partnerships and to coordinate responses by multiple stakeholders in service of the remaining SDGs. Our article shows how individual-level actors can use the legitimation of firm involvement in issues of social concern to catalyze internal and external stakeholders. The role of platforms in the context of social value creation—where the firm chooses to be a convener rather than the sole provider—is just the beginning to be analyzed by the management literature (Gatignon & Capron, 2019; Jacobides et al., 2018). We hope that this work will inspire further theoretical development in this important direction and that our discoveries help advance an understanding of how the important work set out by the UN sustainable development goals can feasibly be achieved.

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