

Managing community relationships, reputation and sustaining competitive advantage: The case of mining towns

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Abstract

An important issue currently facing the mining industry in Australia is the management and cost to the industry and other stakeholders of entry into and exit from towns and their communities. These costs can be environmental, social, economic, political or reputational. The ability of companies to engage the trust of communities, governments and investors is critical, and corporate reputation plays a significant role in this. For the industry to secure a long-term and sustainable future, it must have the technical, business and reputation assets to proceed in a cost-effective, environmentally acceptable and socially supportive way. The paper introduces the concepts of sustainability both at the corporate level and the regional town and community level. For the companies, there are important impacts on costs and efficiencies, an organisations 'license to operate', shareholder value and the trade off between dealing with environmental and social issues through prevention or retrofit and corrective measures. However, for the mining industry, possibly the most important aspect of this study is the ability of companies to get access to new sites at competitive cost. For mining companies sustainability has moved from mineral and environmental resources, to a greater emphasis on economic sustainability and community capacity building.

Introduction

The minerals industry contributed \$55.8 billion to Australia's export earnings in 2001, making it the nations largest export earner. However, according to surveys of public opinion and community relations the industry has a poor, although recently improving, reputation (Cheney, Lovel & Solomon, 2002; Prager, 1997; Reputex, 2003); poor reputation costs the industry millions of dollars and holds up projects of commercial and national importance. In one recent case, a company in regional Victoria incurred extensive costs in a frustrated bid to gain access to a new site due to a lack of adequate community support. Hence, the industry is confronted with the difficult challenge of meeting market needs and society expectations and is "distrusted by many of the people it deals with day to day." and "failing to convince some of its constituents and stakeholders that it has a 'social licence to operate' " (MMSD, 2002, p. xiv).

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Industry based organisations, including the Minerals Council of Australia and the Australian Centre for Mining Environmental Research, have taken up the challenge of developing best practice in the economic, environmental and social aspects of mineral industry development (Minerals Council of Australia, 2004). The goal of many industry initiatives is to re-establish trust so as to facilitate cost effective access to resources (Minerals Council of Australia, 2002). Significant progress with environmental performance (Milne, Owen, & Tilt, 2000) is now being supported by a range of initiatives to promote host community development (Sinclair Knight Merz, 2001) and this is underpinned by Social Impact Assessments (Joyce & McFarlane, 2001), an increasingly used tool in mine planning. This shift in focus has been reinforced, or perhaps initiated, by an acknowledgement that local communities are increasingly influential in regulating access by mining companies to local resource deposits. As a consequence companies are now forming relationships with communities in part to facilitate access and to maintain operations in a cost effective way (Cheney et al., 2002). The cost to both companies and communities of poor relationships can be high. Hence, the sustainability of mining operations requires a balance between community acceptance, resource assets and long term planning.

This paper reports on an ongoing research program to evaluate the impact a mining company's reputation(s), with its various stakeholder groups, has on a company's ability to sustain competitive advantage. Integral to this study is to develop an understanding of the relationship(s) between stakeholders, including the varied host communities, i.e. communities hosting mining operations, and the mining companies. The paper discusses the issues of mining company and regional town sustainability, where sustainability includes environmental, social and economic factors and analyses the community activities being undertaken by companies in an attempt to address these issues and improve their corporate reputations.

Reputation and corporate citizenship

Should businesses act in the broad interests of stakeholders? The conventional neo - classical economics view (Freidman, 1970; Henderson, 2001) is that profitability is the guide for companies and that social development is the role of government. However an increasing number of partnerships between businesses, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) or community groups have provided new perspectives (Warhurst 2003). Other studies (Porter & Kramer, 2002), suggest corporate philanthropy is 'unfocused and piecemeal' but that strategic philanthropy, properly conceived, can give companies a significant competitive advantage.

Warhurst (2003) describes the new situation as corporate citizenship and this reflects a shift from a paradigm of 'doing no harm' to one of adopting a role for 'positive good' (p. 1). This is neither a corporate social responsibility nor a shareholder wealth model; it is a reflection of enlightened self-interest and a growing alignment of organisations with their broad range of stakeholders. Companies are not only being obliged by law to control risks but are doing so strategically to encompass areas of ethical, social and political risk that might affect future business strategy and liabilities as well as shareholder value. These issues are critical in the mining industry in Australia.

Sustainable development in its broadest sense is identified by the mining industry as an important focus (MMSD, 2002). Sustainable development has a number of meanings. Sustainability is defined by the Brundtland report (Brundtland, 1987, p.41) as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Corporate sustainability is defined as "aligning of an organisation's

products and services with stakeholder expectations, thereby adding economic, environmental and social value.” (Cottrell & Rankin, 2000, p.1). For mining companies, sustainability raises a number of issues (Warhurst, 2003), there are important impacts on cost and efficiencies, an organisations licence to operate, shareholder value, and the trade-off between dealing with environmental impacts and social issues through prevention or retrofit and corrective measures. Access to new sites at competitive cost is critical for mining companies, and hence, for these companies sustainability has moved from having a primary focus on mineral and environmental resources, to a wider focus on economic and community sustainability (Eggert, 2001).

This study assesses reputation within the local community as a critical competitive issue for mining companies. Reputation is defined as ”a collective representation of a firm’s past actions and results that describes the firm’s ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders.” (Fombrun, 1999, p.10). However in this study we propose that ’reputation’ matters differently in different contexts:

1. reputation with various stakeholders may be driven by a range of strategies; capital markets, labour markets and regulatory markets are dependent and interdependent
2. the history of a company and its previous reputation will have a major impact on the present
3. the location, demography and history of a host town may influence how important the management of different aspects of sustainability will be. For example the variation between a ‘fly in fly out’ site when the mine is not the main employer in a town compared to a town where the company and town are complementary to each other.

In essence, as technology and information make mining more predictable; the physical and human assets of mining companies are less likely to be the critical resource in a Resource Based View model of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). The proposition is that in mining today, reputation as it facilitates day-to-day operations, regulatory zeal and access to new mine sites will become the rare, inimitable and valuable resource for mining companies. Corporate reputation creates cost advantage and leads to improved financial performance and corporate sustainability.

A number of further tentative propositions are suggested:

- Reputation is driven by both the social, environmental and economic outcomes of corporate activity, and the quality and structure of the relationships that exist between a company and its stakeholders (Svendsen, Boutlier, Abbott, & Wheeler, 2002).
- Corporate citizenship as well as competition and adherence to regulation may promote innovation in processes and community outcomes, through the pressures on cost structures and the interactions with stakeholders (Porter, 1998).
- Reputation with host communities is an absolute and relative phenomenon, facilitating better working and investment relationships, but in competitive markets (for capital, planning permission, and skilled labour) it is how the firm is relatively perceived in the industry, that is critical and *ceteris paribus* will influence corporate performance (Roberts & Dowling, 2002; Eggert, 2001).
- Reputation is complex to develop and difficult to imitate and replicate, and except in the case of major ‘shocks’, it may display considerable stability over time (Barney, 2001).
- Building social capital and reputation may experience stages of both increasing and diminishing (\$) returns (Svendsen et al., 2002).

- There may be distortions in community outcomes through the processes and constituencies of engagement (Cheney et al., 2002).
- The management of exit has a major impact on reputation and hence significantly influences the opportunities and costs of entry to new mining sites (Warhurst, 2003; Cochilco Chilean Copper Commission, 2002).

Mining towns and sustainability

We argue that the context in which mining operations are being undertaken will determine the relative importance of different aspects of sustainability for the mining company and the host community. A mining community has been defined (Veiga, Scoble & McAllister, 2002) as one where the population is significantly affected by a nearby mining operation. This definition is useful as it does not imply that the community is necessarily associated with the mining operation through direct employment but may be impacted through environmental, social, economic or other impacts of the mine's operation.

Mining has had a direct impact on the development of communities since the discovery of gold in Victoria and New South Wales in the 1850's (Hogan & Berry, 2000), particularly with respect to the location and pace of regional economic development (Richmond & Sharma, 1983). Thus towns such as Ballarat, Bendigo, Broken Hill, Kalgoorlie and Charters Towers developed as a direct result of mining during the 1800's. In the last century towns such as Mount Isa, Mount Tom Price and Roxby Downs developed as a direct result of mining.

The modern development, particularly in the metalliferous mining industry, towards the use of fly in fly out operations (FIFO) has changed the dynamics of modern mining. Hence the development of new mining specific towns is unlikely. The use of FIFO is a reflection of technological and social changes within the industry. In particular the labour requirements of the industry have reduced due to technological change which requires lower numbers of more highly trained personnel. FIFO however is rarely applied in coal mining operations (Hogan & Berry, 2000).

Prior to the use of FIFO, three traditional options existed for settlement of workers (Hogan & Berry, 2000; Veiga et al., 2002), these being;

- New single company mining towns such as Roxby Downs and Rosebery
- New central, multi-company, mining towns such as Mount Tom Price
- Expansion of existing settlements such as Kalgoorlie, Ballarat, Bendigo, Charters Towers and Stawell.

In the case of FIFO the expansion of existing settlements will occur distant to the mining operation. For example Perth is utilised as a base for many FIFO operations located in Western Australia, Townsville in Queensland and many other towns and cities around Australia. FIFO creates multiple mining communities, the FIFO base(s) and the host community for operations, each impacted by the entry and exit of mining operations. New issues are starting to emerge regarding the possible impacts of the move by companies to FIFO operations on regional economic development (Hogan & Berry, 2000) and in the future the nature of proposed mining operations, regarding the settlement of workers, may be one of the determining factors in gaining access to new sites.

With relation to the mining industry, Veiga et al. (2002) describe numerous case studies worldwide describing the success or lack of success of mining communities particularly post

mine closure. Community relations and reputation management are important issues throughout the life of a mine but particularly at closure (Elliot, 2003). Post closure issues increasingly focus on jobs, business opportunities and community capacity to sustain itself after operations have ceased (Eggert, 2001). A sustainable mining community (Veiga et al., 2002) can be defined as one that realises a net benefit from a mining operation from the start of mining, through life of mine and beyond mine closure. In practical terms this means that the mining operation must adhere to the three fundamental pre-requisites for a sustainable society, these being:

- ecological sustainability
- economic vitality
- social equity.

The challenge is to ensure that these three pre-requisites are achieved. To do this mining companies must ensure:

- Environmental impacts must not pose any unacceptable risks to the associated communities
- Communications between the mining company and the communities must be transparent and effective, and
- Mine development is perceived to bring a net benefit to the community.

Mining communities range from being heavily dependent on a single mining operation, i.e. the single company town, to well established and diverse economic communities where the mining operation is one of many industries contributing to the sustainability of the community. Despite this variation between mining communities, it is important to recognise that community ‘wellbeing’, in all cases, is inextricably linked with the associated mining company operations within that community, irrespective of the type of mining community. Importantly the mining companies need to recognise this diversity of host communities and their needs, to ensure that the initiatives undertaken are appropriate and effective for both the community and the company.

It is proposed to develop a criteria for classifying mining communities within the context of changing community expectations i.e. the move from an environment focus to a more broad economic, environmental and social focus. The criteria will take into account the nature of the community and the mining operation in addition to the economic dependency of the community upon mining operations. Classification may enable us to identify the relevant sustainability issues for the various types of communities. We believe that for certain types of community the focus may be mainly on the environmental impacts of mining operations, for example a diverse well established town. Whereas, for other types of communities the main focus may be the social and economic impacts, for example a highly mining dependent remote town.

Initial classification of the host communities at the point of entry of a new mining operation may include:

- New single **company mining towns**
- New central (**multi-company**) **mining towns**
- **Existing town** with a **diverse** economic base
- **Existing town** in **transition** from mining dependence to broader economic base
- **Existing town** currently **mining dependent**
- **FIFO** site and **associated community**
- **FIFO** base, **distant city or town** from mining operation.

We propose to further refine these categories with regard to the possible regional locations of each, for example capital cities, other metropolitan, coastal, inland and remote. Table 1 provides details of the distribution of mining industry employees by region type in Australia and highlights the relative importance of mining employment in certain types of region, for example mining industry employment accounted, in 1996, for over 13% of the employment in ‘remote’ areas and that over 53% of Australian mining employment was in the ‘remote’ or ‘inland’ areas.

Table 1: Employment, by region and mining industry 1996

	Mining*	Total*	% of Region Employment	% of Mining Employment
Remote	29,599	223,553	13.24	33.42
Inland	17,803	971,708	1.83	20.10
Coastal	9,855	785,966	1.25	11.13
Other Metropolitan	10,152	642,536	1.58	11.46
Capital Cities	21,165	5,003,279	.42	23.90
Australia (Total)	88,574	7,627,042	1.16	100.00

*Source: Country Australia, ABARE Research Report 01.1 (Garnaut, 2001)

In addition further categorisation based on a given community’s propensity for economic diversification, during and after the life of a mining operation, may also be indicated for a number of the proposed categories.

Corporate community involvement of mining companies

We argue that an important component of a company’s overall reputation is the relationships and reputation it has with its host communities, which are clearly influenced by the company’s approach to corporate citizenship. Corporate Community Involvement (CCI), a subset of corporate citizenship, focuses on the firm’s social impact and is of particular importance to host communities (Cronin & Zappalà, 2002). The type and nature of CCI activities currently being reported through company web sites, company annual reports and/or corporate sustainability/health, safety, environment and community reports, for a several large mining companies in Australia, have been reviewed and categorised in Table 2.

The CCI activities of the mining companies considered (top 17 companies¹ by revenue (Business Review Weekly, 2004) operating in Australia excluding oil and gas operators) are highly varied, however they can be grouped according to the nature of the activity into three broad categories, i.e. community engagement, community contributions/development and community partnerships.

Table 2: Examples of CCI Activities

Community Engagement	Community Contributions/Development	Partnerships
Open days / Site visits	Donations	Research partnerships
Community newsletters	Sponsorships	Partnerships with NGO’s
Community meetings	In-kind donations	
Near neighbour initiatives	Employee participation	
Community relations officers / committees		

CCI activities can also be differentiated by the company’s motives and desired benefit mix between business and community for a given activity, as follows: charitable gifts, community investment, and commercial initiatives in the community (London Benchmarking Group). Activities may be included in more than one category and/or may result from a combination of motives.

A recent survey of CCI in Australia’s top companies (Zappalà & Cronin, 2003) identified common themes in the literature that signal the depth and breadth of commitment by companies to CCI. They grouped these under three key areas, strategic vision and approach, employee involvement and financial support and indicators were identified for each of these key areas as follows:

Strategic vision and approach

- Publicly available statements on CCI policies and practices
- Rationale for implementing CCI
- Formal measurement and evaluation of CCI
- Degree of communication/consultation with stakeholders
- Integration with business strategy/corporate business plan.

Staff and employee involvement

- Employee volunteer programs
- Matching employee charitable donations
- Providing payroll deduction facility for charitable gifts.

Corporate financial support

- Financial investment
- In-kind support
- Partnerships.

Table 3 summarises the preliminary findings for the 17 mining companies sampled with regard to the depth and breadth of their reported CCI activities (Company sources).

Table 3: Reported CCI Activities

	Yes	No
Individual Sustainability/HSEC Report	13	4
Designated Web Page(s) Sustainability/Community/Social	14	3
	Available/ Reported	Not Available/ reported
Strategic Vision and Approach		
Publicly available statements on CCI policy and practices	16	1
Measurement and evaluation of CCI	10	7
Communication and consultation with stakeholders	17	0
Integration with business strategy/corporate business plan	10	7
Staff/Employee Involvement		
Employee volunteer programs	6	11
Matching employee charitable donations	3	14
Providing payroll deduction facility for charitable gifts	2	15
Corporate Financial Support		

Financial investment	17	0
Partnerships	15	2

The majority of the sample companies produced an individual sustainability or a health, safety, environment and community report for the latest reporting period 2003/4 with only 4 of the companies continuing to report on community activities only within their company annual report. In addition the majority of sample companies have include a social/communities section on their company web pages. Increasingly companies are realising the importance of communicating company activities to the relevant stakeholder groups, and in particular to host communities. The level and detail of the reporting of CCI activities varied across the sample however a number of general observations can be made:

- All the sample companies are providing corporate financial support to host communities
- All companies detailed communication and consultation activities with stakeholders
- The majority of the sample companies are reporting community partnerships, consistent with the findings of Centre for Corporate Public Affairs and Business Council of Australia (2000 (p. 81)) "Mining companies are leading the way in forming partnerships"
- There are indications that more companies are moving towards integration with business strategy and many are stating explicitly
- Only a small number detail their staff and employee community involvement programs, and
- Most companies are currently reporting some level of measurement and evaluation and a small number are reporting formal evaluation programs.

In summary, the reported CCI activities of this sample of the large mining companies, although varied, appear to have a focus on corporate and community sustainability and are not just traditional philanthropic activities.

The next stage of the research is to identify the extent, if any, to which the large companies are tailoring their activities to their individual communities. By utilising the proposed mining community categories, we will analyse the relationship between a company's CCI activities and the type of community in which they are operating. This will provide further evidence of the rationale mining companies have for undertaking CCI activities, and provide further insight into the relationships between companies and their communities. The sample of companies will also be expanded to determine if the activities of these large companies are representative of the industry more generally. In addition, this research will facilitate the development of a measurement tool for mining company reputation.

Reputation measurement

Many Australian companies are starting to evaluate the relationship between reputation and community involvement including some mining companies, eg Alcoa, are looking at reputation for disaggregated stakeholder groups (Centre for Corporate Public Affairs & Business Council of Australia, 2000). Measuring reputation over time for disaggregated stakeholder groups is an expensive exercise, and the cost may be a key factor in determining if this is undertaken. However as the case of BHP and the Ok Tedi mine demonstrated (Hanson & Stuart, 2001), corporate reputations need to be actively managed taking account of all external stakeholders views and expectations. In the case of mining companies, the role played by CCI in determining reputation may be more pronounced than in industries This is

due to the nature of the environmental and community impacts of mining, the changing expectations of society and the overall reputation of the industry.

Brammer and Pavelin (2004) provide evidence to suggest the existence of variation between sectors, and hence industries, in their study of the link between reputation and social performance. They found the general tendency was for sectors to exhibit above average reputations and below average social performance, or below average reputations and above average social performance. However they found that in the resources sector “firms exhibited relatively strong social performance despite enjoying relatively good reputations” (p.710). Brammer and Pavelin conclude “that, for the purposes of reputation building, there is a need to tailor Corporate Social Responsibility activities in light of both a firm’s size and the nature of its principle business activity.” (p.712). This study highlights the strategic importance for mining companies of correctly identifying the appropriate scope and extent of its CCI activities.

In recent years the interest in corporate reputation and social responsibility has increased. With this renewed interest has come a proliferation of public reputation and corporate social responsibility indices/measures, and a number of socially responsible investment funds. Examples of these include: the Reputex® Social Responsibility Rating, the Reputation Quotient, Fortune – America’s Most Admired Companies, the Corporate Responsibility Index – UK and Australia, the Delahaye Index, the FTSE4Good Indices and the Dow Jones Sustainability Indices.

The literature on the measurement of reputation and the analysis of the relationship between corporate reputation and financial performance are reviewed in Berens and van Riel (2004) and de la Fuente Sabate and de Quevedo Puente (2003) respectively. Recurring themes regarding the measurement of corporate reputation include:

- concern regarding the constant use of the Fortune Most Admired Companies data with little or no regard for its deficiencies and limitations (Fryxell & Wang, 1994; Wartick, 2002)
- the lack of theory development and definition (Berens & van Riel, 2004; Wartick, 2002)
- the challenges to measuring reputation (Gardberg, 2002; Cravens, 2003).

The majority of reputation measures and studies have been multi sectoral, although these have included mining companies none of them have been designed specifically for the mining sector. As a consequence no account has been taken of the unique characteristics of the mining sector and its host communities. Hence “the studies carried out so far are not very representative of the main sustainability issues facing the mining sector” (Greig-Gran, 2002, p.41). The development of a reputation measure specifically for the mining industry, addressing the relevant sustainability issues for both mining companies and host communities, will facilitate further study of the relationship between reputation and performance in the mining industry and the relationships between mining companies and their communities.

Conclusion

This paper has set out the proposed framework for ongoing research into the reputation of mining companies, identifying the importance of host communities. It is anticipated that the development of a method of classification for host communities will lead to improved

understanding of the drivers of reputation in the various types of host communities, as classified, and will enable development of our conceptual model of reputation.

Diverse challenges exist for both the mining industry and communities to achieving their goal of sustainability. Further understanding of the reputation of mining companies in particular within their host communities is of vital importance for both communities and mining companies. From the mining company perspective the ability to link sustainable development to financial success is seen as a key obstacle to embedding sustainability within mining organisations (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2001). From a community perspective enhanced understanding by the mining companies of the community sustainability issues and their impacts, especially with regard to competitiveness will provide the impetus for mining companies to improve practices within communities.

¹ The sample companies include: BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto, Xstrata Queensland, WMC Resources, Alcoa World Alumina Australia, Mitsubishi Development, Xstrata Coal Investments Australia, Placer Dome Asia Pacific, Anglo Coal, Coal and Allied, Newmont Australia, Iluka Resources, Newcrest Mining, Harmony Gold Australia, Centennial Coal, Zinifex and Barrick Gold of Australia.

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