

## Reconsidering the ‘Symmetry’ Between Institutionalization and Professionalization: The Case of Corporate Social Responsibility Managers

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**ABSTRACT** The assumption of a mutually supportive, ‘symmetric’ relationship between institutionalization and professionalization is central to the institutionalist perspective on professional work. Our inductive qualitative study of corporate social responsibility (CSR) managers in multinational corporations (MNCs) prompts to rethink the validity of this assumption. We show that as the institutionalization of CSR advances and consolidates, CSR managers are pushed to the organizational periphery. This indicates that the relationship between professionalization and institutionalization can be ‘asymmetric’ under certain conditions. To advance the study of this asymmetry, we develop a conceptual framework and a set of corresponding propositions that explain why some groups are able to advance their professionalization projects, while others cannot. Our study makes three main contributions to the literature: First, we explicate under which conditions the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization is more likely asymmetric than symmetric. Second, our explanation of the shifting organizational positions of different professional groups allows for further delineating occupational from organizational professionals. Third, we contribute to the CSR literature by examining the dynamic yet ambiguous role of CSR managers as driving forces behind the implementation of CSR.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility (CSR), CSR managers, institutionalization, organizational professionals, professionalization

## INTRODUCTION

*‘Our mission is fulfilled if we are no longer needed’ (Informant).*

*‘My job will become obsolete. Because, if done rightly, this would mean that CSR is part of the company’s DNA’ (Informant).*

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The institutionalist perspective on professional work in organizational contexts continues to attract attention in the literature (Muzio et al., 2013; Suddaby and Viale, 2011). Professionals are institutional agents who have central roles in creating, testing, conveying, and applying institutions (Scott, 2008). Much of the extant research treats professionalization and institutionalization not only as concomitant but also as inseparable concepts in which changes in professional jurisdictions (Abbott, 1988) and changes in organizational and institutional fields (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) occur simultaneously (e.g., Daudigeos, 2013; DiMaggio, 1991; Empson et al., 2013; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008; Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2013).

According to Suddaby and Viale (2011), professionals are key drivers of institutional change, because they form new alliances and strategic relationships with institutions which can assist them in their professionalization projects. For example, DiMaggio (1991) showed that museum curators reconfigure the structures and practices of their employing organization to their advantage. Empson et al. (2013) found that lawyers build new corporate structures that they then populate, or they create transnational governance regimes to establish a global market for their expertise (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008).

However, professional groups are just one side of ‘the causal connections’ between projects of institutionalization and professionalization (Suddaby and Viale, 2011, p. 424). Institutionalization allows professionals to occupy central positions in the organizational and institutional contexts they inhabit, and this in turn promotes professionalization. Thus, professionalization projects depend on institutionalization projects; for instance, the professionalization of museum curators was driven by the institutionalization of the national museum (DiMaggio, 1991). Likewise, the establishment of corporatized international law firms allowed lawyers to expand their sphere of action and influence (Empson et al., 2013), enabling the legal profession to open up an international market for its expertise (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008). This helps professionals ‘exchange resources and commitments with other institutional actors [...] in order to establish and maintain positions of hegemony and power’ (Suddaby and Viale, 2011, p. 426). These examples show that the assumption of a mutually supportive relationship between professionalization and institutionalization is central to the institutionalist perspective on professional work. Projects of professionalization and institutionalization are ‘inextricably linked’ (Suddaby and Viale, 2011, p. 424), because of ‘reciprocal dynamics between processes of institutionalization and processes of professionalization’. On these grounds, the two theoretical constructs are generally described as having a ‘symmetric’ relationship, which we define as cases where institutionalization and professionalization follow a reciprocal and mutually supportive trajectory.

Our inductive study prompts us to challenge this assumption. As the two quotes from our informants shown above suggest, the data from 85 interviews with organizational professionals – more precisely corporate social responsibility (CSR) managers working in multinational corporations (MNCs) revealed what we describe as an ‘asymmetric’ relationship between professionalization and institutionalization: the two focal constructs neither evolve reciprocally nor have a mutually supportive dynamic. We found that, although CSR itself became institutionalized within and beyond the focal organizations (Bondy et al., 2012; Matten and Moon, 2008), some CSR managers were not able to advance their professionalization projects, but were marginalized to the organizational

periphery. In our study, centre and periphery denote the poles of a spectrum of professionalization, as defined by Abbott (1988).

We have consolidated our findings into a conceptual framework that answers two interrelated research questions: First, under which conditions can the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization be asymmetric; and second, how can institutionalization projects be maintained despite marginalization of the concomitant profession? Studying these questions is important both from a theoretical as well as practical point of view. Theoretically, it seems that the commonly held assumption in the literature about the institutionalization-professionalization relationship needs to be problematized, in particular in light of recently emerged forms of organizational professionalism that depart from traditional forms of occupational professionalism. Practically, our findings suggest that CSR managers have an important, yet ambiguous and dynamic role to play in the CSR implementation process, as having more CSR managers work in an organization does not necessarily mean a more advanced level of CSR.

We address these questions by showing that a professional group that *externalizes* control of the application of its knowledge base is more likely to become marginalized than a professional group that *maintains* control of the application of its knowledge base, as is commonly assumed in the literature (Von Nordenflycht, 2010; for an overview, see Muzio et al., 2013). We also find that the early phases of institutionalization are characterized by symmetry and the later phases by asymmetry, because 'trigger functions' of the CSR professionals become less important over time. Moreover, we find that CSR managers may be able to counteract their marginalization by expanding the scope of their professional knowledge base. Finally, our evidence shows that although CSR managers gradually lose influence, the institution of CSR is maintained via the 'compensation effect'; that is, the declining influence of the CSR professional group is compensated by the increasing influence of other professional groups on CSR, such as procurement managers or accountants. As a result, CSR can consolidate as a key component of the organization's strategy and core business, even as its initial proponents slide to the periphery of their organization.

Our work responds to recent calls to investigate the influence of institutionalization on specific professional groups (Lawrence et al., 2012) and offers three main contributions: First, we challenge a key assumption in the literature on institutional theory and professional work and suggest that symmetry or asymmetry between institutionalization and professionalization are dependent on several factors that we explicate in this study. Second, our findings help to explain why some professional groups can sustain their influence as the practice with which they are associated institutionalizes, while others cannot. This is an important issue on which the extant literature has had little to say. These insights also advance recent research that has attempted to distinguish occupational from more recent forms of organizational professionals (Evetts, 2006; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Third, we contribute to the CSR literature by examining the role of CSR managers, who have been described as the driving force for institutionalizing CSR within firms (e.g., Chandler, 2014; Strand, 2014). Our work complements previous research on the organizational implementation of CSR (e.g., Acquier et al., 2011; Bondy et al., 2012; Wickert et al., 2016) by providing empirical support for the

argument that the declining importance of the CSR manager may indicate that CSR itself has been successfully embedded in the firm (Strand, 2014).

We proceed by problematizing the central assumptions of the institutionalist perspective on professional work. We then outline our research context and method and present the results of our study. On this basis, we develop a conceptual framework and a set of propositions on the institutionalization–professionalization relationship. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for the literature, the limitations of our study, some practical implications, and avenues for further research.

## AN INSTITUTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE ON PROFESSIONAL WORK

At the heart of the institutionalist perspective on professional work lies the reciprocal relationship between professionalization and institutionalization. Suddaby and Viale (2011, p. 423) argued that professionalization and institutionalization are concomitant because ‘professional projects carry with them projects of institutionalization’ (see also Muzio et al., 2013) and ‘occur simultaneously’ (Suddaby and Viale, 2011, p. 426).

On the one hand, professionalization supports institutionalization because ‘professions function as institutional agents – as definers, interpreters, and applicers of institutional elements. Professionals are not the only, but [...] the most influential, contemporary crafters of institutions’ (Scott, 2008, p. 223). For instance, professionals can affect institutionalization by creating or opening up new spaces for their expertise and thus restructuring the respective institution. DiMaggio (1991) showed how museum curators reconfigured the structures and practices of their employing organization to their advantage and, by redefining its logic, turned the national museum into an institution. Similar examples can be found in studies of health and safety management. For instance, Daudigeos (2013) shows how professionals build legitimacy and exert unobtrusive influence to secure their organizational positions. Professionals rely on internal and external networking, adaptive framing of issues to more effectively address different audiences, and using organizational market power to promote practices externally. Studies of large corporatized international law firms (Empson et al., 2013) and IT-based management consulting firms (Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2013) have shown that professionals help create new corporate structures and then populate them with new actors to pursue professionalization. In addition, professionals set boundaries and influence the rules that govern contiguous fields so that they can advance their professionalization projects (Muzio et al., 2013). For instance, professionals who launch professional service firms actively reset institutional frameworks and thereby open up a market for their expertise (e.g., Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008).

On the other hand, institutionalization promotes professionalization because ‘professional projects [...] are also projects of institutionalization’ (Suddaby and Viale, 2011, p. 426). This means that there are institutional effects on professions as they are embedded in specific organizational and institutional fields. Going back to the previous examples, the institutionalization of the national museum, which had been driven by museum curators, positively affected their professionalization (DiMaggio, 1991). Health and safety managers (Daudigeos, 2013) depended on the institutional context to drive their professionalization project; that is, the market power of the focal firms and rising

institutional pressures to improve health and safety in other firms. Lawyers were able to expand their sphere of action and secure their status, legitimacy, and reputation via the institutionalization of newly formed corporate structures, such as international law firms (Empson et al., 2013), IT-based management consultancies (Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2013), and transnational governance regimes that globalized the demand for lawyers' expertise (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008). To conclude, as institutionalization progresses, professionals are enabled to move to or consolidate positions at the centre of an institution (see Abbott, 1988).

The examples presented above indicate that a central assumption in the literature is that the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization is reciprocal and mutually supportive or, as we termed it, 'symmetric'. However, our findings reveal this assumption to be problematic because it is rooted in more traditional and historical forms of 'occupational professionalism' (Evetts, 2006), which involve occupational control of the work, among other things. For instance, in response to the introduction of knowledge management systems, potentially challenging medical doctors' autonomy in hospitals, this group of occupational professionals may apply distinct strategies to ensure their jurisdiction over knowledge and independent working. To main control over their knowledge base, doctors engage in processes of 'co-optation' of responsibility and learning processes, 'adaptation' of existing collegial systems to foster local learning as well as managerial interventions, and 'circumvention' by emphasizing the advantages of their own system (Waring and Currie, 2009). This profile of occupational professionals, as well as the related strategies applied by them to defend their autonomy and jurisdictional boundaries, may however no longer apply to contemporary 'organizational professionalism' which controls its professional knowledge by other means (Evetts, 2006; Noordegraaf, 2015; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). In light of this, a fresh look at the assumed symmetry between institutionalization and professionalization is needed.

### **Professionals in the Organizational Context**

In contrast to occupational professionals, organizational professionals such as CSR managers, and the more established group of HR managers are relatively 'weak' (Caldwell, 2003). This weakness may be related to the way in which organizational professionals control knowledge and expertise (Evetts, 2006; Noordegraaf, 2015; Von Nordenflycht, 2010), which makes it difficult for them 'to realize the degree of indetermination, monopolization and control of their knowledge base enjoyed by the liberal/independent professions' (Reed, 1996, p. 584).

There are various reasons for this difference. Organizational professionals apply 'professional principles to the solution of problems' (Scott, 2008, p. 228), have a "craft-like" knowledge base' (Reed, 1996, p. 584), and are obliged to apply their knowledge to solve organizational problems (Daudigeos, 2013). Currie et al. (2012) note that these professionals benefit from the tacit knowledge about organizational context that they have gained through experience and socialization with other organizational members. Furthermore, access to cultural capital that organizational professionals possess due to their situatedness in acquainted organizational contexts facilitates to construct opportunities for change (Lockett et al., 2014).

However, the status of many organizational professionals is somewhat ambiguous, because they are permanent members of the established system of norms, beliefs, and routines of the organization to which they belong, but are simultaneously supposed to challenge this order (Daudigeos, 2013). For example, the role of HR managers is inherently ambiguous (Caldwell, 2003): they are peripheral to decision-making processes and must always justify their professional knowledge base and their relevance to business operations (Legge, 1978; Tyson and Fell, 1986). However, these ambiguities also allow HR managers to reinvent and reinterpret their role so they can maintain their power and professional status in a permanently changing working world (Caldwell, 2003; Legge, 1978).

The focal agents of this study, CSR managers – sometimes also referred to as ‘sustainability’ or ‘ethics’ officers – are responsible for promoting socially and environmentally sound business practices (Chandler, 2014; Strand, 2013). In the next section, we explain why CSR managers represent an emerging type of organizational professional and how they contribute to the institutionalization of CSR within and beyond their organizational contexts, through their day-to-day work activities.

## THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF CSR

We broadly define CSR as the systematic integration of social, environmental, and ethical concerns into business conduct, often in cooperation with stakeholders (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Wickert et al., 2016). From an institutional theory perspective, companies integrate socially responsible actions into their business in response to societal demands and in order to maintain their license to operate (Campbell, 2007; Matten and Moon, 2008). Here, the role of CSR managers is focal, because they are responsible for managing the compatibility of their organization’s operations with these demands and for developing and promoting CSR policies internally (Strand, 2014). In that respect, CSR is particularly pertinent to the question of how institutionalization and professionalization interrelate. CSR has now become institutionalized in industrialized economies (Bondy et al., 2012; Matten and Moon, 2008) and CSR professionals are well established within MNCs (Chandler, 2014; Strand, 2014). At the same time, ‘CSR is in permanent contest, complex and has open rules of application [...] and represents a highly dynamic phenomenon’ (Matten and Moon, 2008, p. 405), making it a particularly interesting case for studying the relationship between professionalization and institutionalization.

### CSR as a Dynamic Institution within MNCs

MNCs have been under pressure to take on social and environmental responsibilities (Campbell, 2007) that include ‘environmental protection, [...] philanthropy, employee rights and job satisfaction, workplace diversity, community engagement, and consumer safety’ (Bromley and Meyer, 2014, p. 7). As a consequence, MNCs are highly involved in CSR and many have implemented new organizational structures and practices along the value chain and in various domains, including strategy, human resources, finance and accounting, marketing, sales, procurement, manufacturing, and logistics (Bondy



Table 1. Six phases of CSR institutionalization in MNCs (based on Bondy et al., 2012)

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Distinct patterns of practices</i>
Phase 1 – <i>Research</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying the possible form and understanding of CSR in the business.</li> <li>• Identifying current activities that can be described as CSR and assessing the organization’s relative performance on CSR-related issues.</li> </ul>
Phase 2 – <i>Develop a Strategy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drafting a CSR strategy (purpose and commitments).</li> <li>• Defining the details and formalizing the strategy.</li> </ul>
Phase 3 – <i>Develop a Management System</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining the scope, structure, and key relationships to stakeholders.</li> <li>• Specifying commitments.</li> </ul>
Phase 4 – <i>Roll-out new Practice(s)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rolling out CSR within and outside the organization; getting feedback.</li> <li>• Creating local systems and commitments.</li> </ul>
Phase 5 – <i>Embed the Institution; Administration and Review</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reporting on performance and getting feedback.</li> <li>• Analysing the feedback; responding to stakeholders and communicating achievements.</li> </ul>
Phase 6 – <i>Continuous Improvement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revising the strategy, improving performance, incorporating feedback into next cycle.</li> </ul>

et al., 2012; Graaf and Herkstroter, 2007; Wickert et al., 2016). For instance, Bondy et al. (2012, p. 281) characterize ‘CSR as an institution’ because it manifests as patterns of social action on different levels, such as environmental monitoring and reporting within firms, and multi-stakeholder initiatives, such as the Global Compact (Boxenbaum, 2006). Mena and Suddaby (2016) analysed the institutionalization of fair labour norms in global supply chains and argue that CSR represents a case of institutional change in which new practices that promote factory workers’ rights are created and subsequently maintained by various actors, including MNCs. On the basis of these arguments, Bondy et al. (2012) developed a comprehensive six-phase framework for the CSR institutionalization process within MNCs which describes the new practices that are introduced in each phase (Bondy et al., 2012). Table 1 summarizes this framework, which we draw on to measure CSR institutionalization in the MNCs we studied.

### CSR Managers as Organizational Professionals

We chose to explore our main research question in the context of CSR because it allows us to acknowledge ‘the roles of corporations, which had previously been largely absent from the relevant literature [...], as key sites and vehicles for professionalization projects’ (Muzio et al., 2011, p. 458). Further, CSR offers new insights into the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization and the potential asymmetry between them in the context of a highly topical issue.

More generally, the growing tendency of MNCs to appoint CSR managers (Chandler, 2014) enables us to study professionalization ‘in action’ through a currently evolving type of organizational professional. The evolution of the ‘trained professional’ is

typical of the institutionalization of a profession (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 347). In CSR, trained professionals have emerged from universities offering tailored education programs and have been appointed as CSR managers in MNCs. Bondy et al. (2012) and Strand (2013) suggest that CSR managers now possess traits that are generally viewed as characteristic of a profession.

The creation of a professional association is also an important milestone in the process of professionalization (Lounsbury, 2002). In the last two decades, CSR managers have begun to organize themselves collectively by setting up globally oriented professional associations. These associations organize events and conferences, offer certified training, and have developed their own codes of ethics. Some of the larger international associations are the International Society of Sustainability Professionals (ISSP) and the Corporate Responsibility Officer Association (CROA). The latter aims to be 'the professional society for the corporate responsibility community' with the mission 'to promote the practice and profession of corporate responsibility in service of good business' ([www.croassociation.org](http://www.croassociation.org)).

The increasing professionalization of CSR managers is also apparent in the rise of conferences for specialized practitioners and in the increasing popularity of courses that train participants on implementing CSR standards (e.g., ISO 26000). The emergence of executive education and academic courses in CSR and the growing body of professional literature are further signs of increasing professionalization (Moon and Orlitzky, 2010). These developments have been shaping and reproducing the professional identity of CSR managers and laying down the specialist knowledge base that they share, enabling them to band together as a professional group (Evetts, 2006; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). This trend is also apparent in the emergence of studies that describe the job profile, functions, organizational position, and responsibilities of CSR managers (e.g., Izraeli and Barnir, 1998; Strand, 2013) and the traits, skills, and expertise that employers commonly expect of them (e.g., Hoffmann et al., 2008). CSR managers are described as 'social issue sellers' (Wickert and de Bakker, 2016) who build relationships with other functional managers within their organizational contexts in order to create momentum for CSR-related change initiatives. As specialists for these issues, CSR managers mediate 'between top management, the company's external environment, and middle managers from the operating divisions' (Acquier et al., 2011, p. 233).

Our review of the literature shows that CSR, and the role of CSR managers as an emerging type of organizational professional in MNCs, offers an empirically rich context for studying institutionalization and professionalization. However, the literature does not explain why the gradual institutionalization of CSR in MNCs does not necessarily reinforce the function of CSR managers and, counterintuitively, may even lead to their marginalization. For example, the corporate social responsiveness literature, which emerged in the 1970s, considered how external pressures translate into internal strategies and procedures that make organizations more or less responsive to social issues (e.g., Ackerman, 1973, 1975; Ackerman and Bauer, 1976; for a recent overview see Acquier et al., 2011). Interestingly, and in line with our empirical observations, Ackerman and Bauer (1976) propose that full institutionalization of CSR might require CSR managers 'to agree to relinquish their position as driver and take a more back-seat role



supporting division-level action' (Acquier et al., 2011, p. 233). Our study helps to provide a theoretical answer to this empirical observation.

## METHODS

Our empirical data comes from Germany and Switzerland. Both countries are characterized by strong societal pressure on companies to implement CSR. In both countries many MNCs have established a diverse portfolio of CSR-related organizational practices and can thus – on average – be considered particularly advanced in CSR implementation (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Hiss, 2009). Thus, both Swiss and German MNCs offer a data-rich empirical context that at the same time allows comparisons with other industrialized economies, such as the USA, or the UK. The increasing standardization of CSR helps such comparisons: many companies tend to adopt global CSR frameworks, such as the guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative, or the principles of the United Nations Global Compact (Waddock, 2008).

We pursued a qualitative research approach to examine inductively the relationship between professionalization and institutionalization. In line with the principles of an iterative approach to qualitative research – in particular, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) – we used the 'constant comparative method' by constantly moving back and forth between theory and data (Suddaby, 2006, p. 636). The shift in our research focus, which will become evident when we present our data collection strategy, is reflected in the iterative refinement of our theoretical insights.

### Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

To capture the evolution of the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization over time, we collected our qualitative data in three stages between November 2012 and September 2014 (22 months) in the form of 85 semi-structured interviews. Of the 85 interviews, which were conducted either face-to-face or on the telephone, 67 were with CSR managers and 18 were with other informants from the fields of corporate communications and corporate development, whose functions were closely related to that of a CSR manager. We used a theoretical sampling approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that involved data gathering 'driven by concepts derived from the evolving theory' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 201).

We started by searching for companies listed on the German stock index (DAX, MDAX) and the Swiss Market Index (SMI). This allowed us to collect a broad cross-industry sample of representative MNCs in each national context, including manufacturing, banking and financial services, software, automotive, construction, chemicals, and utilities. Each MNC had at least 5000 employees and operations in multiple countries. Following that step, we screened company websites, where the contact details of CSR spokespersons are commonly published. Because the CSR domain includes various job titles and functions, we used the following keywords to categorize our sample of informants: 'corporate social responsibility', 'corporate responsibility', 'corporate sustainability', 'social responsibility', and 'ethics' (Strand, 2013). This approach enabled us to compile a list of nearly 125 potential candidates that fitted our sampling criteria.

Table 2. Overview of the interviews and informants

	<i>CSR Managers</i>	<i>Other Informants</i>	<i>Total</i>
Stage 1	6	2	8
Stage 2	40	13	53
Stage 3	21	3	24
<b>Stages 1–3</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>85</b>

Based on publicly available information, we classified the MNCs in our sample into categories that reflected different levels of CSR institutionalization on the basis of Bondy et al.'s (2012) six-phase framework that we described earlier (see Table 1). In order to compare how changes in the status and role of CSR managers may relate to different levels of CSR institutionalization, we consulted informants from companies that had published their first CSR report in different years. The publication of the first CSR report marks the 'reporting' phase. This practice is characteristic of the early fifth phase and thus represents a relatively advanced degree of CSR institutionalization (see Table 1). Such reports are particularly useful because they contain details about, e.g., certificates or information about membership in various CSR initiatives, which are indicative of CSR institutionalization (Graffin and Ward, 2010). Our sample included companies that had achieved an advanced, intermediate, or low degree of CSR institutionalization to allow better comparison across cases.

Table 2 provides details on the 58 informants we selected and on how many interviews we conducted in which phase. In line with the findings of other studies (e.g., Morf et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2014), the interviewed CSR managers had significant cross-functional experience in their organization because they had previously held other positions within the same firm. Like Taylor et al. (2014), we too found that over one third of the CSR managers we interviewed had no budgetary responsibility and oversaw teams of one to three employees. Approximately 10 percent of our interview partners reported directly to the CEO, chairman, and/or the board of directors. The degree of access to top management is higher than in previous studies. For example, Taylor et al. (2014) found that less than 5 percent had direct access to the highest organizational level. However, most of the interviewed CSR managers reported to executives below the top management.

*First stage.* Data collection took place between November 2012 and January 2013. We arranged eight face-to-face interviews with CSR managers, each of whom represented a different industry and MNC. These interviews lasted between 40 and 120 minutes, were tape-recorded, and fully transcribed. We opted for open and largely unstructured interviews, as our main objective was to examine how CSR-related practices and procedures were implemented and how CSR managers dealt with obstacles in the course of implementation. We asked questions such as 'Can you describe the organizational implementation of CSR practices?', 'Who is involved internally in the implementation of CSR?' and 'What obstacles and difficulties do you encounter when you seek to put into effect the implementation of CSR internally?' These exploratory interviews provided primary data on which we gradually built our knowledge of the field. On the basis of these first

insights, we formulated new open-ended questions for our interviewees that explicitly addressed the institutionalization of CSR and updated our interview manual for the second stage.

*Second stage.* We arranged 53 interviews, which we conducted either face-to-face or on the telephone. The interviewees were either heads of the CSR department or had a management function that explicitly related to CSR. The interviews took place between March and September 2013 and lasted between 35 and 105 minutes; again, we recorded and fully transcribed them. During this stage, the focus of our research gradually moved to the relationship between professionalization and institutionalization. We asked the interviewees to reflect openly on their internal role and how this had developed and to give us their outlook on the prospects of their profession (see the interview manual for Stage 2 in the Appendix). Most of the informants repeatedly pointed out that their initially central position in the organization was becoming more peripheral. These initial findings led us to adjust our research focus.

*Third stage.* To corroborate the findings gathered in the previous stages and to find support for the insights we derived in the second stage, we contacted about half of the respondents to conduct follow-up interviews approximately one year after the initial interview. During this lapse of time, various changes that had been prefigured in the previous interviews materialized. In this stage, we selected the interviewees according to whether any of their previous statements indicated that their role had been changing and their influence might be shrinking. On the basis of a new interview manual (see the interview manual for Stage 3 in the Appendix), we conducted 24 follow-up interviews between June and August 2014. We asked the informants to describe the developments that had taken place in the meantime, to specify – with evidence – how CSR had been implemented in their organization, and to explain how this had affected their organizational position.

To capture empirically the organizational position of each CSR manager as it is reflected in the data we collected in the second and third stages and to classify it as rather central or rather peripheral, we followed Chandler's suggestion and examined the 'access to valuable resources' that CSR managers had (Chandler, 2014, p. 1728). These include tangible resources, such as staff (Lounsbury, 2001) and the budget they were allocated (Covalesski and Dirsmith, 1983), and intangible resources, such as 'influential others' (Sparrowe and Liden, 1997). More specifically, access to the top management is critical for CSR managers, because the implementation of CSR requires political competencies and persuasiveness (Daudigeos and Valiorgue, 2011).

We asked our interviewees to provide evidence of how their overall influence in their organization had developed since the first interview and to what extent they felt that CSR-related structures and practices had become accepted in the meantime. To measure changes in the interviewees influence, we enquired about their position in the corporate hierarchy, about the number of staff they supervised, and about the degree to which they were involved in functional processes and participated in high-level meetings. Asking our interviewees to present 'facts & figures' was critical, because interviewees may adopt rhetorical strategies that allows them to present themselves in a favourable light, concealing that their formerly central position is becoming or has become peripheral (Jacobsson, 2000).

In the second and third stages, we included additional secondary data. More specifically, we analysed publicly available material either published by or about the selected companies to get a better picture of the level of CSR institutionalization that they appeared to have reached. Most of this material came from the company websites, press releases, annual reports, reports on CSR or sustainability, and organization charts. We also screened web-based forums in which CSR managers discussed issues related to their work to gather further evidence for the trends that we had identified in our primary data. In one public forum (XING, the German counterpart of LinkedIn), for example, CSR managers discussed the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization directly, under the topic title ‘CSR managers – CSR experts are losing their importance’. Similarly, at a relevant event we attended in Switzerland in 2014, many CSR managers repeatedly expressed concerns about the future of their influence within their organizations once CSR had been successfully implemented.

## Data Analysis

To analyse our data, we applied the ‘Gioia Methodology’, which comprises three different levels of abstraction and is tailored to inductive inquiry (Gioia et al., 2013). As tables (3–7) show, we began by openly coding, grouping and classifying the individual descriptions of the relationship between professionalization and institutionalization that our informants gave us as ‘interview samples’ to perform a first-order analysis. Our next step was to perform a second-order analysis by comparing these categories and examining the patterns that emerged. This analysis provided the basis on which we developed our theoretical propositions and conceptual framework. We assigned ‘sample activity codes’ to the descriptions of the relationship between professionalization and institutionalization and classified them accordingly. These codes represented ‘a slightly higher level of abstraction – higher than the data itself’ (Martin and Turner, 1986, p. 147).

During the second phase of interviews, we identified several abstract categories into which we classified our data on the relationship between the organizational position of CSR professionals and the institutionalization of CSR. Gradually factoring in more data, which we gathered during the third stage of our research, allowed us to develop more robust theoretical concepts and discern and clarify this relationship at the highest level of analysis until the emergent theoretical framework crystallized.

We also used the literature to facilitate the comparison of emergent categories by iterating between theory and data, a procedure common in qualitative research. While the theoretical constructs we devised supported the research process, they did not determine our interpretation of the empirical data. To measure the degree of CSR institutionalization, we looked for specific patterns of practices that played a role in this process in the selected MNCs, based on the six-phase framework we described above (Bondy et al., 2012). These patterns helped us derive keywords that guided the analysis of the interview data and identify the specific phase that the institutionalization process had reached at various points (see Table 1). We also compared the secondary data with the interview statements to triangulate and validate our theoretical constructs (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Table 3. Are CSR managers working towards obsolescence?

<i>Interview Sample</i>	<i>Sample Activity Code</i>	<i>Theoretical Category</i>
‘What do I wish? That my job would become obsolete. Because, if done rightly, this would mean that CSR is part of the company’s DNA’. (50–2)	Full institutionalization makes CSR manager obsolete.	Asymmetric relationship: Institutionalization harms professionalization.
‘Our mission is fulfilled if we are no longer needed. This is the case once the organization addresses and engages with these issues of its own accord and external pushing becomes obsolete’. (57–3)	Completion of the mission to fully institutionalize CSR renders the CSR function obsolete.	
‘Ideally, CSR managers become unnecessary. This is what we want and therefore we try to confer CSR upon the business units. [...] We have not achieved that yet; so, I believe that we still need the function of the CSR manager, because CSR is still a fragile plant and therefore it needs to be further nurtured and supported’. (56–3)	The CSR function is necessary to the company only so long as CSR has not become fully institutionalized.	
‘Well, if you see it that way, then the end goal – and this is not a joke – the end goal, then, is that the function [of the CSR manager] ceases to exist once sustainability becomes fully implemented in a company’. (57–3)	Complete CSR implementation leads to the elimination of the CSR department.	
‘That is our key objective: to mainstream CSR and sustainability in the DNA of the company’. (38–2)	Make CSR taken-for-granted within the company.	

To measure the degree of professionalization that our interviewees had reached, we noted how the relative budget each MNC allocated to the CSR department had changed between interviews (Covaleski and Dirsmith, 1983), as well as changes in the number of staff in the CSR department in each MNC (Chandler, 2014) and changes in the degree of access each interviewee had to people at the highest corporate level (Sparrowe and Liden, 1997). This data served as indicators of the organizational position that the CSR professionals in our sample occupied.

The criteria for characterizing a CSR manager’s position as ‘central’ were close ties between the CSR department and the top management team or board of directors, increases in the involvement of staff whose role related to CSR in strategic decision-making processes, and a relatively high budget for the realization of CSR projects and initiatives. In contrast, decreases in the number of staff working in the CSR department and in the department’s budget, an increase in the operational rather than strategic tasks

Table 4. Externalizing knowledge to other business functions

<i>Interview Sample</i>	<i>Sample Activity Code</i>	<i>Theoretical Category</i>
'The [CSR] team has not changed, but more and more we draw on resources from other departments [...]. For instance, in the case of communication management, we increasingly use colleagues from the communication department. Also, in the case of our "ecology month", the environmental and social risk department or people from the internal environmental management are strongly involved. This is the approach'. (57–3).	Execution of CSR-related tasks is systematically handed over to other business units.	Externalizing knowledge to other business functions induces shift to periphery.
'[As a CSR manager], you give away the control of certain things. For instance, the HR department now organizes the "bike to work" program. Although I was the one who started auditing the energy consumption of the company's buildings, this job is now done by the real estate department. Another example is purchasing, where I don't do much anymore. Only from time to time I talk to the purchasing manager'. (47–3)	Hand over responsibility for CSR activities to other departments.	
'CSR managers are indeed losing influence. But they just get another function. It is less about running a certain project from A to Z. The line managers now organize that and are responsible for implementation. For instance, in product development, sustainability is important from the outset, and if the product manager has assimilated [it into the department's tasks], then we don't need the CSR manager anymore'. (63–3)	Despite negative effect on CSR managers' position, the primary objective remains to externalize CSR-related knowledge to other departments.	
'My job is to tell the different departments where their opportunities lie in terms of sustainability. And then, it's up to [these] departments to find a solution'. (11–2)	Teach other business units how to take responsibility for CSR issues.	
'We have to demonstrate that sustainability is not created by the sustainability department, but that every department needs to tackle it! The fewer people I have here, the clearer it is that everyone else needs to take care of sustainability'. (11–2)	Reduction of staff in the CSR department implies that CSR responsibilities are delegated to other departments.	
'Once sustainability issues have been integrated into incentive schemes and other objective functions, people successively consider [them] a daily routine'. (8–2)	When CSR becomes fully institutionalized, other departments handle CSR independently.	



Table 5. How the phase of institutionalization affects CSR managers’ organizational positions

<i>Interview Sample</i>	<i>Sample Activity Code</i>	<i>Theoretical Category</i>
‘Of course, there are many employees, directors, and managers who can identify with CSR and who try to implement [CSR] practices in their departments. But, basically, the CSR department is where it all begins’. (43–2)	Dynamic evolution of the CSR manager; the ‘trigger function’ in the beginning is critical.	Initial symmetry is replaced by asymmetry.
‘So far as the successful integration of CSR into the business is concerned, our influence [as CSR managers] decreases if [CSR] comes closer to the business. But our role also changed parallel to the life cycle of the topic. And I’d say, [...] that we [CSR managers], just became sparring partners on another level. Not less important, just different. But related to the business, respectively if it goes closer to the business, our influence decreases’. (58–3)	Dynamic evolution of the CSR manager’s organizational role in the course of CSR institutionalization.	
‘CSR management does not vanish completely, but it certainly loses its significance. For instance, in the case of quality management, they initially had a huge department in order to get it going. For CSR this is also important – that there are more human resources in the initial phase’. (58–3)	Initially CSR managers need more resources, while in more advanced stages, the department is downsized.	
‘They [other CSR managers] often say that [...] if a company has already done a lot [in terms of CSR], they shrink the CSR departments’. (58–3)	The greater a company’s progress in implementing CSR, the more it reduces the CSR manager’s function.	
‘In the beginning, a CSR department is highly relevant because these ‘ambassadors’ need to have their information. You need to activate [the ‘ambassadors’]. You need to provide [...] an information and meeting platform. [...] To keep to the goal of making the CSR department obsolete, we first need a strong CSR department. The bigger the community of ‘ambassadors’ gets, the less important the CSR department becomes, because	Compensation as a strategy to put CSR into practice: the influence of ‘CSR ambassadors’ is inversely proportional to that of CSR managers.	

Table 5. *Continued*

<i>Interview Sample</i>	<i>Sample Activity Code</i>	<i>Theoretical Category</i>
[CSR] becomes self-sustained. It becomes a self-selling item'. (57–3)		
'The key point is that sustainability becomes part of the company's DNA. Other companies with a huge CSR department are simply in an early stage, they still need to do missionary work on CSR'. (2–2)	The initial trigger function requires a bigger department; as the institutionalization of CSR advances, this function becomes smaller.	

CSR staff had to deal with (e.g., compiling data for and crafting the yearly sustainability report), less involvement of CSR staff in strategic meetings, and more involvement in mere consulting were all signs of marginalization. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of our inductive reasoning process and shows how we moved from our empirical raw data to more abstract theoretical categories (aggregate dimensions) that reflect the factors influencing the institutionalization-professionalization relationship which we will subsequently develop.

**FINDINGS**

Our data enabled us to identify a number of conditions under which the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization becomes asymmetric. This finding challenges the prevalent assumption in the literature that this relationship is largely symmetric. To facilitate comparisons between interview statements, we used anonymized interview identifiers to code direct quotes (for example, 55–3 indicates that a quote comes from interview number 55, taken in the third stage of our research).

**Are CSR Managers Working toward Obsolescence?**

In some cases, we found that as CSR became increasingly institutionalized in an organization, the relative position of the respective CSR manager shifted from the organizational centre to the periphery. To investigate this shift, we asked our interviewees what their ultimate objective was. The following response is typical of the answers we were given: 'The ultimate aim is to get rid of [the] sustainability function by ensuring it's all embedded in business processes, thinking, and performance' (55–3). Echoing that statement, another respondent hinted at her prospects: 'My job will become obsolete. Because, if done rightly, this would mean that CSR is part of the company's DNA' (50–2).

When the second informant (50–3) was interviewed again over a year later, she was asked to describe to what extent that aim had been realized in the meantime. This informant replied that in the areas of human resources, diversity management, and procurement, for example, she no longer participated in meetings and had retreated from

Table 6. Expanding the scope of CSR

<i>Interview Sample</i>	<i>Sample Activity Code</i>	<i>Theoretical Category</i>
'While we retreat from daily business in many areas, [...] there's still a need for someone who identifies new issues relevant to CSR, who has the up-and-coming issues on the radar'. (45–2)	Influence can be regained if new CSR issues are put on the corporate radar.	Counteracting marginalization by expanding the scope of CSR.
'We therefore do not become less important because in certain new issue areas we are still the only ones who trigger that, and there are also not yet specialist departments which can take over our work. And in cases where other departments have taken over [certain subject areas], we still have the know-how and the exchange with NGOs that help us identify new issues [...]. But we can generate new ideas and point out new potential risks'. (57–3)	CSR managers can claim the role of the main expert in new issue areas.	
'The human rights landscape is continuously changing. New legislation on human rights comes out. Either governmental national action plans to operationalize the UN Guiding Principle or things like conflict minerals, which is a human rights related order. All that needs specialists to interpret how that can be integrated into the business. So, yes, in the best of all possible worlds it would be wonderful to have human rights driven solely by the business, but you need some CSR specialists to understand the changing landscape and also to train others'. (51–2)	New topics require CSR specialists to interpret and guide its implementation in business operations.	
'The CSR department has increased its acceptance and importance. This is because there are new CSR-related opportunities emerging'. (47–2)	The CSR department's acceptance and importance relates to emerging new issues.	
'Our role is more about ascertaining whether the stated objectives have been attained, adjusting these objectives, and looking out for trends. But this is a dynamic	CSR managers screen environment for new trends that become relevant to the organization.	

Table 6. *Continued*

<i>Interview Sample</i>	<i>Sample Activity Code</i>	<i>Theoretical Category</i>
process characterized by ups and downs. It's probable that there'll come a phase when we are more engaged in operating activities. Then, we will withdraw again from the business because [CSR] is a moving target'. (47–3)		

daily business activities pertaining to these areas. This suggests that, although her input had led these departments to incorporate CSR issues into their agendas and activities, they no longer needed to draw on a CSR manager's expertise to the same extent and, consequently, her influence in these functional processes had decreased. This example illustrates why as the institutionalization of CSR progresses, the CSR manager's position may become peripheral: once 'CSR is part of the company's DNA' (50–2), CSR managers become obsolete.

Several other informants revealed this kind of asymmetric relationship between the organizational position of CSR managers and specific levels of CSR institutionalization while talking about their access to resources (see Table 3). Data from a transportation company for instance shows that CSR institutionalization is evident in the increasingly closer cooperation between the CSR department and the company's business units – such as the establishment of a company-wide working group for environmental controlling. While the creation of this working group is typical of a pattern we observe in the fourth phase of institutionalization, i.e., the creation of local systems and commitments to roll out CSR, the CSR manager of this company now reports to the line management instead of the top management, which indicates that this position has become more peripheral.

In sum, the data provides evidence that as the institutionalization of CSR in a particular organizational context advances, the role and participation of the CSR managers in this process may shrink and their position may shift from the centre to the periphery of the organization. Having less access to tangible and intangible resources is a strong indicator of these parallel changes. In the next sections, we refine this initial insight into the potential asymmetry between professionalization and institutionalization.

**Externalizing Knowledge to Other Business Functions**

The CSR managers we interviewed consistently emphasized that a key task of their job was to 'explain' to organizational members in other departments, such as HR, accounting, and procurement, which CSR practices were relevant to their functions and how these should be handled. The CSR managers' ultimate aim was to pass sufficient CSR-related knowledge to other managers so that they could handle relevant issues independently. For example, in one company, responsibility for CSR 'that had been with the

Table 7. Maintaining the institution by strengthening other professionals

<i>Interview Sample</i>	<i>Sample Activity Code</i>	<i>Theoretical Category</i>
‘And this is the reason why we then get rid of [CSR managers] and instead have more people who make sure that all the different [departments] are working [in line with CSR]’. (57–3)	Getting rid of CSR managers while strengthening other professions.	The CSR institution is maintained because other professional groups ‘take it over’.
‘We managed it so that the environmental data [report] now has to be signed by the Chief Financial Officer’. (56–3)	Environmental accounting has been taken over by the CFO.	
‘We have successfully transferred CSR-related knowledge to the procurement function; CSR is now part of their job. [...] What procurement people, say, for instance, is that they don’t do CSR on top of what they are doing already, but that it’s just a normal part of procurement’. (37–3)	Other (professional) groups take over CSR and replace the CSR manager.	
‘One day companies will say, no, we don’t need a CSR department because we actually got health and safety people working in the business, for the business, with the business. We’ve got our environmental specialists attached to this and that unit’. (55–3)	The need for CSR managers diminishes when CSR is taken over by other professional groups.	
‘Why do they need someone like me, if there are specialists for environmental sustainability, who know every law and detail? I have an idea about most things, but I don’t know most of the details’. (33–2)	Once CSR has been institutionalized, other professionals take care of environmental issues and replace the CSR manager.	
‘I don’t have to tell them anything about new sustainability standards, like ISO 26000. They can do that themselves. What I do is, consolidate information and gather data’. (37–2)	Functional units manage CSR on their own, while the CSR manager only has an advisory and controlling role.	

CSR manager was passed to the procurement department, where these CSR issues are now handled’ (48–3).

Likewise, another informant described how the CSR department she had been head of had been shut down with the justification that most of the jobs, such as environmental controlling, ‘can be more efficiently done when combined with the respective functional units’ (24–3). Another CSR manager explained how the institutionalization of CSR impacted the professionalization project of CSR managers in general:

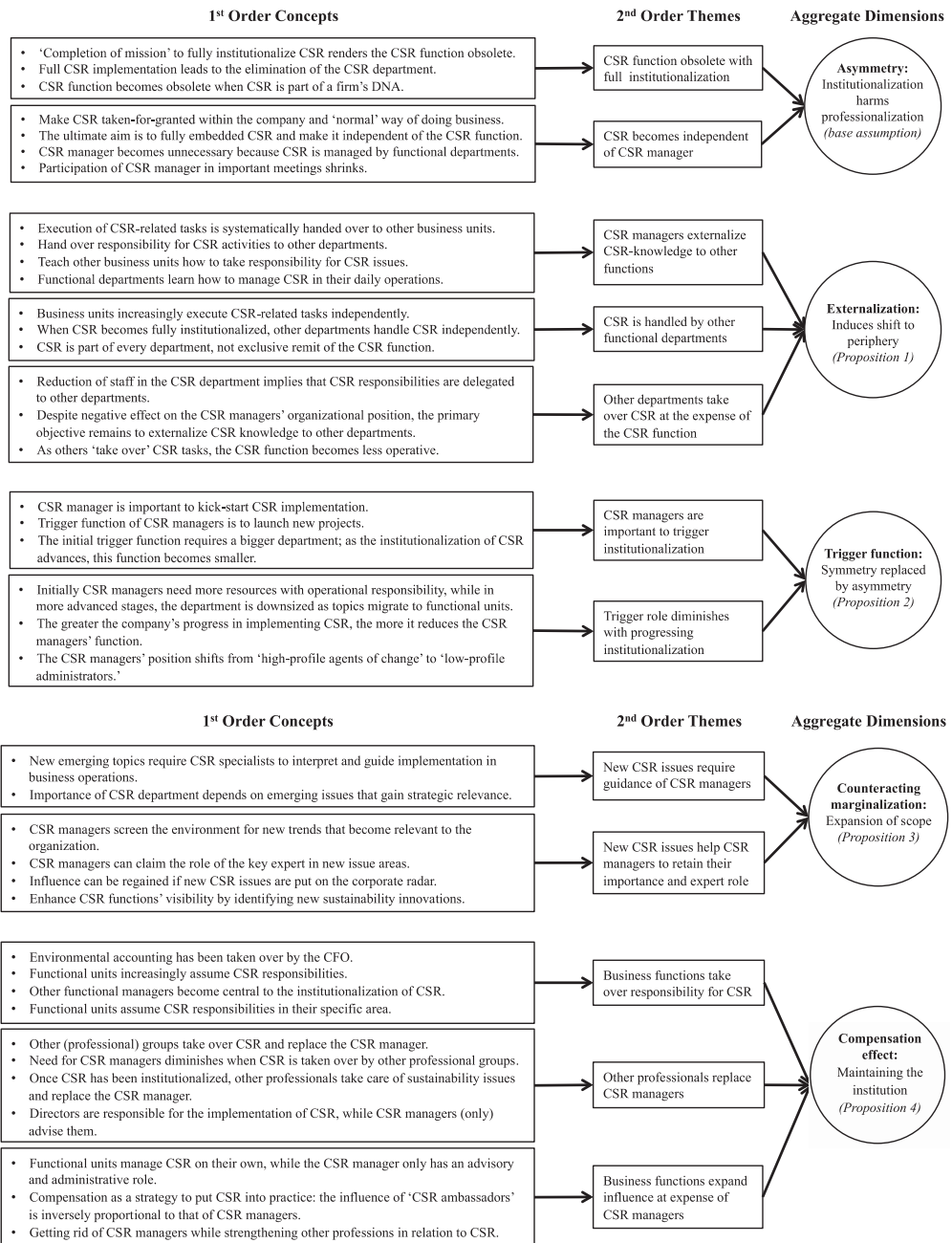


Figure 1. Data structure

The tendency is that the CSR function will become less operative, because CSR should be taken over by the business units where it becomes increasingly self-supporting. People [in these business units] integrate CSR into their daily decisions that relate to clients or business partners. Therefore, our function [as CSR managers] becomes less operative, and we only have an advisory function. (56–3)



A possible explanation for the CSR managers' shift towards the organizational periphery in the course of CSR institutionalization is that these professionals handle the control of their professional knowledge base – i.e., what CSR means and how it should be practised – to other job functions. The aim of CSR managers is that other functional managers (e.g., in procurement or HR) increasingly execute CSR-related tasks independently. To that end, they transfer specific CSR knowledge to other professional groups, which can then manage CSR-related tasks as part of their own expanding organizational function. As a consequence, the process through which the institutionalization of CSR practices progresses may render CSR managers less important and affect their relative organizational positions.

While the CSR managers we interviewed seemed to move steadily towards the periphery as the institutionalization of CSR advanced, mainly due to what we describe as the 'externalization' of CSR-related knowledge to other professional groups (see Table 4), another possible reason for this asymmetry emerged from our data, which we discuss next.

### **How the Phase of Institutionalization affects CSR Managers' Organizational Positions**

A second factor that potentially determines whether the institutionalization–professionalization relationship is symmetric or asymmetric is the phase of the institutionalization process. At the beginning of the CSR institutionalization project, most of our informants seemed to be able to secure a central organizational position. As the institutionalization progressed beyond the early phases, however (see Table 1), they were pushed to the periphery. The following excerpt illustrates this process:

First of all, [we] need someone who triggers [the process of CSR institutionalization]. But once it has become understood and is part of decision-making in the business strategy, etc., and if this is implemented, then the [CSR] department does not need to exist anymore. (45–2)

One year after the first interview, the same informant confirmed his previous account:

Yes, the ownership of many topics migrated to the functional units [...]. The usual path is that topics are identified together with us and then operationalized, but then they are handled independently by the functional units. A few years ago, this was different; [then] we used to have more operational responsibility in the CSR department. This has happened with procurement, HR, and diversity management for instance. (45–3)

The trend this informant describes was evident in several other cases too, where several companies at early phases of CSR institutionalization reported expanding CSR departments, while others at later phases reporting decreasing staff at their CSR departments. For example, a construction company in our sample increased its CSR budget and staff

continuously until 2014. After 2014, in the midst of the transition from the fourth to the fifth phase of CSR institutionalization (see Table 1), the CSR function was reduced in terms of budget and staff. Thus, once CSR had become highly institutionalized in that organization, for instance by evidence of comprehensive reporting systems that reached through various divisions and sub-units, the influence of its CSR managers became peripheral. In the case of a utilities provider, the budget of the CSR function increased in 2012, but then started to shrink steadily until our last observation in 2015. At the same time, CSR staff was downsized from 9 to 6 employees. Although the CSR management ended up with less access to tangible resources, the level of CSR institutionalization remained high as the firm moved from the fifth to the sixth phase, as the increasing involvement of the firm's CSR managers in auditing reveals (see Table 1).

Overall, this suggests that at the beginning of the institutionalization process, the organizational position of CSR managers is more central because these managers function as the key drivers of CSR and are the main carriers of relevant knowledge. Their position remains central until a 'tipping point', at which the other organizational members have understood CSR practices, fully absorbed the relevant knowledge, and accepted these practices as a legitimate component of managerial strategies (for a similar argument, see Green, 2004). It seems like a natural consequence of this process that after this point the CSR manager's role is no longer as essential and gradually becomes more peripheral as CSR becomes taken for granted. Downsizing the CSR department, excluding CSR managers from important meetings on strategy, etc., are all signs of this kind of marginalization. At that stage, the need for CSR managers to further externalize knowledge to other organizational groups is reduced because these groups already possess sufficient amounts of relevant knowledge (see Table 5).

This trend may have to do with the fact that the expertise of CSR managers is viewed as generalist with a focus on CSR (Hoffmann et al., 2008). Possessing broad strategic and cross-functional expertise is important in the initial phase of CSR institutionalization, because initiating organizational change demands a holistic perspective. However, aligning organizational practices and processes with CSR objectives demands narrower, more technical expertise. Thus, as the institutionalization and implementation of CSR in the different business units increases, the importance of the generalist expertise of CSR managers decreases. Functional managers in MNCs have such expertise and consequently take over the ownership of CSR (see quote 56–3 above). Although slipping towards obsolescence seems unavoidable for CSR managers, according to these data, we found that not all of our informants were silently accepting their marginalization; on the contrary, some actively worked against it.

### **Expanding the Scope of CSR: How CSR Managers Counteract Their Marginalization**

Although our data largely indicates that CSR managers steadily lose their centrality, in a few cases we also found that the capacity of CSR managers to identify new issues that they can add to their professional knowledge base has an important moderating effect on the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization that we described.

The historical development of CSR provides various instances of new issues that emerge every so often as the concept of CSR becomes reconfigured: for example, while toward the end of the twentieth century CSR was largely viewed as a mix of philanthropy and community involvement, in the current business environment popular approaches to CSR commonly reflect a strong focus on an organization's core business operations and extend to accepting responsibility for social and environmental harm throughout the organization's global supply chains (Wickert et al., 2016). In the last decade for instance, issues such as climate change, human rights and labour rights became very relevant to most MNCs (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). Identifying new issues that 'make them important experts again' is a strategy some of the interviewed CSR managers have used to counteract their marginalization (see Table 6). As one informant explained, 'If I want to be visible in this [CSR] area, then I have to think about what the innovations, what the new issues are with regard to sustainability' (8–3). This means that those CSR managers who put new CSR-related issues on the agenda and expand their professional knowledge base with unique expert knowledge about issues of strategic importance for their organization can reclaim or sustain a position closer to the centre of their organization.

In the case of a consumer products and retail company in our sample, the CSR budget and staff remained stable and the CSR management still reported to the CEO by the end of our data collection. The fact that the CSR department maintained a stable access to resources is surprising against the background of company-wide budget cuts. Although two employees of the CSR department migrated to the marketing department in 2014, our informant reported that he was able to secure two new CSR manager positions who had responsibility for issues that were new to the company and thus expanded the scope of CSR: 'detox' (i.e., avoiding hazardous chemicals in textiles) and data privacy. Identifying these new fields and successfully asserting their strategic relevance thus allowed the CSR department to remain at the organizational centre.

Two other companies in our sample reflected this pattern (5 and 45). One, a software company, was able to increase its budget and even install a 'Chief Sustainability Officer' who had very close access to the board of directors. This was accompanied by the introduction of new topics, such as electrifying 20 per cent of the company's car fleet. A similar pattern emerged at an engineering and electronics company: in 2014, the CSR management increased its budget by 10 per cent compared to 2013. Before the increase, the CSR managers had prioritized new issues, including diversity management, CO<sub>2</sub> reduction, and supply chain responsibility. These new issues had to be strategized in a more general manner before technical aspects became important. The CSR management is fully in charge of these new issues. Interestingly, these two companies were at different stages in the institutionalization process, which suggests that the identification and inclusion of new issues on the agenda can take place at any stage.

### **Maintaining the Institution by Strengthening Other Professionals**

As we emphasized earlier, the symmetric relationship between professionalization and institutionalization seems to hold until a point after which the profession starts losing its relevance, while the institutionalization project continues. Our data enable us to refine

this process of divergence. While the institutionalization of CSR pushes CSR managers to the organizational periphery, that same process pushes towards the centre of the organization other groups to which the CSR-related knowledge has been externalized and enables them to gain control over the further institutionalization of CSR. The ‘asymmetry’ we described springs from this mechanism. The rise of groups that have ‘inherited’ the control of the institutionalization process can be observed, for example, in the case of accounting professionals, who increasingly occupy important roles in relation to environmental reporting.

This finding suggests that while professionals are important drivers as well as carriers of institutionalization, different professional groups can take over this role when the relevant knowledge has been externalized to them. In one case in our sample, for instance, the CSR department was downsized by half and its tasks were transferred to other business units:

However, these tasks [have not been] taken over by a junior CSR manager; instead, they have been integrated in the business unit. These 50 per cent are now taken over by people working in the business units. (58–3)

At the same time, other departments increasingly handled the management of CSR:

This means that operations now gather data on key performance indicators, HR is now responsible for the awareness-raising campaigns for employees, and in the investment business, the responsibility now rests with the financial analysts. This is for sure something that has changed dramatically in recent years. (58–3)

The increasing centrality of other professionals with regard to CSR and the simultaneously increasing peripherality of CSR managers reflects what we described as a ‘compensation effect’: the decrease in one professional group’s influence is compensated by the rise of another professional group’s influence.

The informants generally emphasized that the cross-functional nature of the CSR institutionalization project made it necessary to involve other professionals and organizational groups in order to promote or maintain the institutionalization of CSR (see Table 7). The following comment illustrates this trend:

There is a general trend to downsize [the CSR manager position], [...] but the topic of CSR per se is not suffering at all. On the contrary, there is an impressive number of initiatives and groups that are pushing [CSR] forward and are specializing in certain topics. CSR is diversifying; for instance, building managers have their own platform as well as investment specialists or people in the procurement or logistics. CSR is gaining substance because it is becoming broader and better implemented in the business units. (58–3)

In summary, the compensation effect supports the observation that as the institutionalization of CSR progresses, the professional group that initially triggered this process may be displaced to the organizational periphery while other professional groups

advance to the organizational centre. This shift results from the transfer of relevant knowledge from the ‘initiators’ of CSR to other groups, which increasingly participate in related decision-making processes and thus gradually replace the CSR managers.

Overall, we identified several activities which show that the institutionalization–professionalization relationship is much more dynamic and less symmetric than previously thought. In the next section we will consolidate these findings into a conceptual framework from which we will derive our propositions.

## **A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND PROFESSIONALIZATION**

The conceptual framework we propose consists of four propositions and provides a new perspective on the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization. Our data challenge the common assumption that institutionalization and professionalization are mutually supportive and that their relationship is thus symmetric. The data show that institutionalization and professionalization do not necessarily follow the same reciprocal trajectory and reveal the key factors that determine when this relationship may become asymmetric. In the following, we explain these factors theoretically and build corresponding propositions that frame the institutionalization–professionalization relationship.

### **Externalizing Control Versus Maintaining Control over the Professional Knowledge Base**

Professionals who drive the institutionalization of a particular concept, standard, or set of practices can be divided into two categories: those who *maintain* and those who *externalize* control over their knowledge base. Several scholars argue that it is the ‘strong control over the application of their knowledge base via a range of institutions, such as training and licensing’ (Von Nordenflycht, 2010, p. 156) that distinguishes professional and occupational groups (see also Starbuck, 1992). However, this distinction has been questioned, particularly with regard to recent forms of organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2006; Noordegraaf, 2015). The extant literature widely assumes that maintaining control over expert knowledge helps a group occupy a central organizational position and that the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization is therefore symmetric (e.g., Empson et al., 2013; Suddaby and Viale, 2011). For example, Faulconbridge and Muzio (2008) showed that the legal profession actively designs organizational strategies and structures in globalizing law firms. At the same time, the institutionalization of such frameworks helps lawyers retain ‘control over the planning and execution of their work’ (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008, p. 19) in law firms.

However, not all professional groups may be able to maintain such control (Noordegraaf, 2015). We found that some of our interviewees actively promoted the externalization of their knowledge base to other professional groups in order to promote CSR. Another complication is that different professional groups have different degrees of control over their knowledge base, as Von Nordenflycht (2010) argued in his study of professional service firms. Recently, scholars have begun to question the concomitant

autonomy of different professional groups, in particular those operating in organizational contexts. For instance, Noordegraaf (2015) suggests different forms of ‘managed’ and ‘organizing professionalism’ that are characterized by increasing degrees of collaboration and knowledge exchange between professional and occupational groups. As is the case for CSR managers, ‘professionals are still experts, but they are able to link their expertise to [...] other professionals and their expertise, [...] other actors in organizational settings, including managers and staff’ (Noordegraaf, 2015, p. 15).

Anteby et al. (2016, p. 37) offer another explanation for why CSR managers might be motivated to externalize the control of their knowledge base to other groups, even though this can be to their disadvantage. They characterize such professionals as ‘sociological citizens’ who ‘see their work and themselves as links in a complex web of interactions and processes rather than as a cabin of limited interests and demarcated responsibilities’. Similarly, Evetts (2006, p. 136) indicates that ‘public interest and professional self-interest are not necessarily at opposite ends of a continuum and that the pursuit of self-interests may be compatible with advancing the public interest’. These arguments are in line with studies proposing that, even though CSR managers may pursue self-interest (e.g., to advance their careers), they are also driven by an idealistic stance (Currie et al., 2016) and strong ‘prosocial motivation’ (Grant and Berry, 2011), which is particularly high for this group of professionals (e.g., Hemingway and MacLagan, 2004; Strand, 2013; Wickert and de Bakker, 2016).

The notion of externalizing control over a professional knowledge base helps explain why the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization can be asymmetric. We summarize this idea in the following proposition:

*Proposition 1:* The greater the extent to which an organizational professional group externalizes control over its knowledge base to other professional groups, the more likely the former group will become marginalized to the periphery of an organization.

### **From ‘Trigger’ to ‘Administrator’: How Progressing Institutionalization Undermines Professionalization**

Our data showed that externalization of expert knowledge was not the only reason that CSR managers were displaced to the organizational periphery: we found that the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization becomes asymmetric only in the later (advanced) phases of institutionalization (see Table 1). At the beginning of the institutionalization process, the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization in the MNCs in our sample was symmetric, because the ‘trigger function’ of CSR managers was vital to the introduction of CSR and they were regarded as important carriers of new and relevant knowledge. However, once other groups (e.g., procurement or manufacturing managers) had absorbed sufficient CSR-related knowledge from the CSR managers, they no longer needed their expertise to maintain the institution and carry out CSR-related activities. This gradually weakened the role of the CSR managers as agents of change, pushing them to the organizational periphery. In



the Swiss and German MNCs we studied, we repeatedly observed the emergence of this asymmetric relationship between the organizational position of CSR professionals and the institutionalization of CSR.

These empirical observations and the asymmetry between institutionalization and professionalization can be theoretically explained by drawing on the work of Green (2004), who studied discursive justifications in the course of institutionalizing new practices. Green (2004, p. 656) argued that justifications for a practice increase at the beginning of a diffusion process, then decrease ‘without a corresponding decrease in diffusion’, which ‘indicates a process through which the taken-for-grantedness [...] emerges.’ In other words, CSR managers may lose their centrality because the more CSR becomes a taken-for-granted component of organizational life, ‘the less the justification needs to be repeated or sustained [by them] in order to maintain the practice’ (Green, 2004, p. 656). Based on these considerations we develop our second proposition.

*Proposition 2:* The early phases of an institutionalization project are characterized by central roles of organizational professionals because they fulfil important ‘trigger’ functions, while the advanced phases are characterized by peripheral roles leading to marginalization because other professional groups have absorbed relevant knowledge.

### **Counteracting Marginalization: Expanding the Scope of the Knowledge Base**

Some of the CSR managers we interviewed fought actively against marginalization. A key activity was to identify new issues that could be incorporated into the CSR agenda of their organization and thereby become part of the institution of CSR. The CSR managers identified emerging salient CSR issues and used their ‘contingent and localized knowledge’ (Reed, 1996, p. 585) to expand their knowledge base and once more become important carriers of knowledge that was new and relevant to the organization. This finding corresponds to work of Currie et al. (2012, p. 958), who show how medical specialist doctors delegate routine tasks to others, while maintaining control over activities that preserve their central organizational positions through a ‘creative act’. Relevant for CSR managers is Anteby et al.’s (2016, p. 33) suggestion that ‘instead of viewing jurisdiction as a fixed pie, with one occupation gaining at another’s expense [...] the pie can expand through collaborative action’.

The emergence of new issues that ‘expand the pie’ can be explained theoretically by drawing on the concept of ‘institutional waves’ (Chandler, 2014). These field-level organizational forces are ‘characterized by peaks and troughs of varying intensity that are driven by societal attention to critical events that occur across industries and fields’ where ‘societal pressure on firms to act ethically is ever-present, but, rather than a static constant, it ebbs and flows over time’ (Chandler, 2014, p. 3). In the CSR context, this mirrors the shift in understanding the roles and responsibilities of business firms in society from paying attention to “how the money is spent” (philanthropy without costly

adjustments in core business operations)’ towards a greater emphasis on “‘how the money is made” (integration of CSR principles in strategy and core operations)’ (Wickert et al., 2016, p. 21). Usually, it is CSR managers who identify such trends and emerging issues that are not yet on the corporate radar but will likely bring added societal pressure on the firm; recently, for example, modern forms of slavery, income inequality or tax evasion. As ‘mature’ issues, such as recycling, waste management, or energy-efficiency, are assimilated into an organization’s day-to-day business, CSR managers who identify emerging, strategically relevant issues and take ownership of the new knowledge can counteract their otherwise inevitable marginalization. From these observations we derive our third proposition.

*Proposition 3:* The more an organizational professional group is able to incorporate new issues into its knowledge base and into the institution to which it is professionally linked, the more this group will be able to counteract its marginalization.

### **The ‘Compensation Effect’: Strengthening other Professional Groups to Maintain the Institution**

We have seen that the aim of strengthening the CSR institution leads CSR managers to externalize their expert knowledge in order to ‘populate’ CSR ‘with people, their work activities, social interactions, and meaning-making processes’ (Hallett, 2010, p. 53). As other groups take over the project of institutionalizing CSR, the declining influence of CSR managers is ‘compensated’ by the rising influence of their successors, who may be accountants, procurement managers, and other functional officers. We saw this process in action in our sample: while the CSR managers who pioneered the institutionalization of CSR were often marginalized, the process of institutionalization continued or materialized in later phases (see Table 1). Reed (1996) supports this view arguing that as organizational professions formalize and standardize their operations, they tend to lose their influence in the area that they have opened up to others.

Theoretically, our findings connect to the work of Anteby et al. (2016) who studied the interaction between different occupational and professional groups. The authors provide the example of ‘many of the tasks nurses perform today were previously performed by physicians, resulting from physicians relinquishing certain tasks to nurses or from nurses making claims to physicians’ tasks’ (Anteby et al., 2016, p. 23). This shows that professional groups negotiate and change jurisdictional boundaries around the content of their work, which may have an effect on the prestige, influence, and remuneration of each group. However, as our data shows, CSR managers do not compete with other groups for control of tasks, but share their expertise and coordinate them to advance the original institutionalization project. What Anteby et al. (2016) describe as the ‘brokerage perspective’ on professional work implies that professional groups bridge boundaries, instead of erecting them. They do not ‘concern themselves only with their own occupational group’s advancement, [but] they connect people and tasks to benefit the entire network, and in the process they often help implement change and reform, coproduce innovative products and services, or get their and other’s work done’ (Anteby

et al., 2016, p. 36). The dynamics around brokering control over a professional knowledge base then influence the social position of the groups involved, which is summarized in our last proposition.

*Proposition 4:* As an organizational professional group externalizes the control of its institution-specific knowledge base to other professional groups that take over the maintenance of this institution, the former's position becomes more peripheral while the latter's position becomes more central.

## DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Our study contributes to the institutionalist perspective on professional work. We problematize the common assumption that the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization is symmetric (e.g., Daudigeos, 2013; Empson et al., 2013; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008; Suddaby and Viale, 2011) and argue that it can become asymmetric the more the organizational professionals who drive the institutionalization process externalize control over their knowledge base. In the context of CSR, our findings indicate that externalizing expert knowledge triggers a shift in the relative position of CSR managers from the centre to the periphery of the organization. Although we found that some CSR managers counteract this marginalization, on the whole, the more they succeed in institutionalizing CSR, the more they 'saw off the branches they are sitting on', so to speak. This finding reflects the idea that organizational professionals are 'weaker' than more traditional occupational professionals, as previous research suggests (Caldwell, 2003; Reed, 1996). It also theoretically supports previous observations that as the institutionalization of CSR advances, the importance of the CSR manager diminishes (Acquier et al., 2011; Strand, 2014).

We expand these literatures by uncovering and theoretically explaining the mechanisms that might lead to this outcome. Drawing on a sample of CSR managers in MNCs, we found that professionals who externalize their expert CSR knowledge are unable 'to realize the degree of indetermination, monopolization and control of their knowledge base enjoyed by the liberal/independent professions' (Reed, 1996, p. 584). This finding helps explain why the relationship between professionalization and institutionalization can be asymmetric, as we observed, and why some professional groups are able to secure central positions when the corresponding institution flourishes, while others fail to do so. For CSR managers on the periphery, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain their organizational standing, secure access to key positions, and maintain their professional authority more generally (Abbott, 1988).

Our data indicate that although CSR managers do not become completely obsolete once CSR has been fully institutionalized, they tend to be reduced to more peripheral roles as administrators of CSR-related routines (e.g., to compile the annual sustainability report), while other professional groups take over the daily tasks of strategizing and executing CSR. This observation has important practical implications for MNCs that are striving to implement CSR and deciding how to position the CSR manager in their organizational context. Our study suggests that in the early stages of CSR

implementation, business firms are well advised to provide CSR managers with ample resources, which should however be reallocated to other functional units later on. Future research should track this process and examine the effectiveness of such decisions, for instance by looking at the relationship between CSR managers' access to resources and level of CSR institutionalization. At the same time, scholars studying the implementation of CSR might reconsider their measurement strategies of what constitutes successful CSR implementation if such claims would be based on the size and budget of the CSR department as indicators of success. Our findings also warrant a closer look at the question whether a large CSR department could be a sign of a low degree of CSR institutionalization or probably even a form of 'cheap' impression management to avoid demands for more extensive and costly further implementation efforts (Wickert et al., 2016).

As we found, the centrality of CSR managers is closely tied to the degree of control they have over their expert knowledge. CSR managers lose centrality when they externalize their knowledge to other professional groups and as CSR practices become widely understood and accepted within the organization. This finding is echoed in studies of other groups of organizational professionals, such as HR managers (Caldwell, 2003; Legge, 1978; Tyson and Fell, 1986). However, organizational professionals can actively counter marginalization by expanding their firm-specific and local knowledge (Reed, 1996). This strategy allows CSR managers to maintain 'the haziness surrounding [their] mission and focus-points, and [...] to reel in and embrace emerging issues that had originated from within the organization' (Acquier et al., 2011, p. 238). It is critical for CSR managers to perpetuate their role ambiguity, because CSR is a highly dynamic phenomenon (Matten and Moon, 2008) characterized by 'ebbs and flows over time' (Chandler, 2014, p. 3). This similarly applies to HR managers who, in order to maintain credibility and status, have constantly been reinventing and reinterpreting their organizational roles (Caldwell, 2003). HR managers have often shown themselves willing 'to adopt different roles and rhetorics to suit the contingencies of the times and to exploit possible bases of power' (Legge, 1995, p. 53). Recent work (Battilana, 2011; Lockett et al., 2014) supports the importance of looking at role ambiguity by showing how individual actors' social position both within an organizational field and within an organizational hierarchy influences to what extent they are able to employ social and cultural capital to advance particular change projects.

Further research should thus examine how organizational professionals can leverage their social positions to expand their professional knowledge base and counter potential marginalization and by doing so also address the relatively neglected aspect of de-professionalization (Abbott and Meerabeau, 1998). At the same time, it would be interesting to explore seemingly less obvious cases: For instance what happens if CSR managers that become aware of their marginalization start to encumber the further institutionalization of CSR and keep the organization at some intermediate level to maintain their high influence? Scholars could investigate whether some CSR managers may even actively resist the further implementation by stopping to externalize knowledge about CSR, and what potential tactics CSR managers may use to maintain their centrality.

Future studies should also examine how the nature of the institution that forms the core of a professional group's knowledge base influences the extent to which these professionals can monopolize their expertise. In this regard, it would be worthwhile

exploring how either maintaining or externalizing control of knowledge shapes the process of institutionalization of a practice over a longer period of time. These processes, and the propositions we derived, should also be empirically examined among different professional groups. Collecting data from different groups may provide a basis for triangulation, which would increase the robustness of our conceptual framework.

## CONCLUSION

Our study challenges a central assumption about the relationship between institutionalization and professionalization and prompts a rethink of the idea that these two constructs reciprocally reinforce each other. We have shown that institutionalization may indeed prevent professionals from occupying and maintaining central positions in organizations, and can even lead to their marginalization. Our general prediction is that the institutionalization–professionalization relationship is more likely to be asymmetric when the professionals involved envision an ideal state in which ‘their job is done’. The CSR managers who strive to create socially and environmentally responsible organizations are a case in point.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview manual: Stage 2

Opening question: ‘Please explain how the implementation of CSR takes place in the company and describe your role in this process’.

#### Main questions

1. ‘Please describe the major challenges that a CSR professional commonly faces’.
  - a. ‘Please describe the core competencies a CSR professional needs to possess’.
2. ‘Please explain which actors are involved in the implementation of CSR. Which goals do they pursue and what are their incentives and motives?’.
3. ‘Please describe the biggest conflicts and barriers you faced. Which aspects complicate interaction and collaboration with other actors?’.
4. ‘How do you convince other managers of the importance of implementing CSR?’.
5. ‘If you think back, what were the major events and decisions (or milestones) in relation to your company’s stance to CSR? How did this impact the implementation of CSR?’.

6. 'Please describe the most important tasks that you/the CSR department is involved in'.
7. 'In what way does putting CSR into practice differ from implementing other strategies or management concepts?'.
8. 'Do you meet with other CSR professionals? Please describe how you interact with them'.

Concluding question: 'How do you see the future of CSR managers?'.

### **Interview manual: Stage 3**

Opening question: 'Please tell us about the most important changes that took place in the last year with regard to CSR and your particular role'.

- a. 'Do you think CSR has become more or less relevant to your company?'.

#### Main questions

1. 'Who is responsible for implementing CSR in your organization? Did you observe any changes, compared to how things were?'.
- a. 'Please elaborate on your role as a CSR manager'.
2. 'Please describe what has changed in your job and your responsibilities'.
3. 'Do you have different tasks today compared to a year ago?'.
- b. 'Does the function of the CSR professional change over time?'.

Concluding question: 'Do you observe similar developments in other companies?'.

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