

Diffusion of responsibility

Something strange is happening to our sense of responsibility. Society seems to be experiencing a “diffusion of responsibility” – a psychological phenomenon that refers to the phenomenon that the more people witness someone being in distress, the smaller the chances are of the victim getting help. This is due to confusion about who should assume responsibility. The same thing happens in society. One moment, people are passing on responsibility to someone else, and another moment they will feel responsible for something that they’re not really responsible for. It has become unclear who is responsible for what – for citizens, companies and the government. It’s a collective confusion of responsibility. Time and again, we ask ourselves: whose responsibility is it anyway?

Relieving responsibility

On 1 July 2008, smoking was banned in cafés and restaurants. But many smokers continue to ignore the ban. More than 800 fines have been imposed since the legislation came into effect. Not upon the smokers, but upon the owners of the establishments where the smoking occurred. Aren’t the smokers responsible for their own deeds?

The latest tool added to Gmail, *Goggles*, relieves users of their responsibility for the e-mails they send. Late at night and on weekend days, this tool subjects users to math questions before their emails are sent. This is to prevent them from sending messages while they are drunk – messages they might later regret. Also, some companies have started sharing some of the responsibility that parents have for their children. For example, there are now *children’s parking garages* where you can park your kids, using a voucher-card system, at €1.10 for every 10 minutes. And recently, the first *baby hotel* in the Netherlands was launched; if you need some time to yourself, you can leave your newborn child there for a while.

Government organizations have also taken on responsibilities that may be better placed with companies or citizens. The European Parliament adopted a resolution against stereotyping in advertising. Children, it is said, should receive sexual education in primary school. Children’s healthcare clinics should encourage parents of newborns to take up library membership. And if you’ve moved in with your lover in Amsterdam, but then break up within 6 months, you can still get your old home back again, through the *trial-cohabitation regulation*.

Passing on responsibility

So there are enough signs that point towards a collective confusion of responsibility. All of these companies and government organizations are relieving consumers of certain responsibilities, while, at the same time, they are also shunning certain other responsibilities, passing them on to those same consumers. We can see this in healthcare, where family doctors are hard to reach, and where the initial-cost liability scheme encourages the insured to use fewer healthcare services. In the energy sector, where sellers are leaving the green-energy choice to their clients. And in the eternal political discussion on respect, in which the politicians say it has to start with the citizens, even though the political establishment itself is hardly taking any action.

But the best example of diffusion of responsibility, perhaps, is the credit crisis. For years, we handled money as if we weren't responsible for it. We spent money that we didn't even have. We borrowed as much as we could. Even if you had a poor credit rating, there was always some lender somewhere who was prepared to lend you more. All we wanted was more, better, more luxurious, more expensive. And we never stopped to think of the consequences. Because the bank is such a trustworthy institution, they are sure to know what is good for me. But credit vendors, in turn, placed the full responsibility with consumers. Even now, after things have come apart, citizens, companies and the government are blaming each other for what went wrong.

Assuming responsibility

The credit crunch, however, has also brought about some good things. For example, many consumers have now come to realize that, in the end, it is their own responsibility to handle their financial affairs. They no longer have blind faith in banks and governments to do this for them. But citizens are assuming responsibility for their own lives in other ways as well, and they are taking matters into their own hands. Just look at the many private institutions that are now being set up, such as healthcare organizations, where patients flock to get their *total body scan*, because they want to be masters of their own health. Or private primary schools set up by parents who are dissatisfied with the education system. An increasing number of elderly people are taking matters into their own hand and decide for themselves when they want to die. Some of them wear a badge that says, "Don't resuscitate me". Others have these words tattooed on their chests. These senior citizens want to be responsible for the timing of their own deaths, and not leave the choice to doctors or loved ones.

If you assume responsibility for yourself, you will also expect others to do the same. So it is time that companies also re-examine their responsibilities and take action accordingly. An example of a car maker that has moved in the right direction is Audi. They don't see sustainability as a marketing tool, but as their corporate responsibility. Audi not only champions sustainable engine technologies, but also sustainable factories and materials – and Audi wants to help drivers to use their cars in a more sustainable way.

Companies that are assuming responsibility are reaping the benefits. Because more and more consumers are taking this into account. It is no coincidence that there are sayings with the same message – here, too, it can be said that *if the shoe fits, wear it* and *if you want to change the world, change yourself*.