

# Sustainability in the Workplace

Source [Pablo Páster](#)

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While the business world is abuzz with talk of green and sustainable business practices, it's important to remember that workplace sustainability goes far beyond switching out light bulbs and turning down the thermostat. Sustainability has both internal and external drivers and spans environmental and social dimensions. Below are a few key points to take into consideration:

## **Internal Environmental Sustainability: Learning to Walk the Talk**

Before declaring itself "sustainable," an organization should evaluate and address its own impact. Under the motto "what gets measured gets managed," an inventory of environmental impact should be undertaken. This can be as simple as compiling utility bills from the past calendar year. Natural gas and liquid fuel combustion results in direct, on-site emissions of greenhouse gases while electricity use contributes carbon to the atmosphere at some out-of-sight power plant. Tracking monthly utility bills provides a good baseline from which to gauge energy efficiency efforts and can develop into an obsession.

Once you have established a baseline you can begin to reduce your impact. The most cost-effective initiative is to change wasteful habits. Encourage people to turn off unneeded lights, turn computers off at night, and dress appropriately for the season (not a sterile air conditioned 72°F all year long). Next, improve efficiency by switching to fluorescent lighting or even by installing skylights. Set printers to print double-sided on default and disable computer screen savers in favor of "hibernate" mode.

Most importantly, involve employees. Remember that most innovation comes from the individual, so tap into the ideas of people to reduce energy use, waste, and increase workplace satisfaction.

## **Internal Social Sustainability: Going Beyond Good HR Practices**

Imagine a pleasant workplace with daylighting, good air quality and access to views of the outside world. Imagine an office space set up to foster collaboration. These types of office conditions can have an amazing impact on morale and productivity -- this is called human capital.

Architects specializing in sustainable design will point out that energy costs represent a much smaller percentage of annual expenses than the costs associated with human capital, yet there is much more attention directed at energy efficiency. The benefits of investments in human capital are seemingly endless. Absenteeism rates drop, retention rates increase, it becomes much easier to attract (and retain) top talent, and productivity increases as well. Examples of companies that have benefited from such efforts include ING, Wal-Mart, and Lockheed.

## **External Environmental Sustainability: Doing Well by Doing Good**

Protecting the natural resources that our economy and society depend on, while limiting the costs externalized to society are the hallmarks of a sustainable company. Radical resource-use and process efficiency improvements can save money and lessen your company footprint on an already stretched environment. In order to be truly sustainable we need to ensure that natural resources are extracted at a rate no faster than the rate at which they are replenished.

The relationship between business and the environment is often a one-way relationship built around extraction of value. Markets ensure the efficient allocation of resources, while government regulation prevents un-equitable exploitation of the environment. But companies that are merely driven by compliance rarely display meaningful innovation in resource efficiency and are often playing catch-up to the latest in pending legislation (like the RoHS

and WEEE laws in the European Union). Progressive companies, on the other hand, strive to continuously improve best practices, and therefore, are in compliance with many laws before they even come up for debate, saving them money and gray hairs.

### **External Social Sustainability: Being a Good Global Neighbor**

Businesses depend on their communities to provide a workforce, and an investment in that community is an investment in the foundation of an organization. A healthy community with access to public transportation and fresh food will lead to a workforce that is less prone to illness and is less impacted by volatility in fuel prices. Beyond promoting education, clean water, and public transportation being a good neighbor is also about what your company doesn't do.

A sustainable company only advocates legislation that is genuinely good for society, and not just when it is economically advantageous, and ideally stays out of partisan politics altogether. A good neighbor also manages noise, dust, and emissions levels as to not impact the health or wellbeing of the community and always makes decisions with the whole picture in mind. Seventh Generation and Timberland are good examples of thriving companies who have taken environmental sustainability seriously.

The planet would do fine without us, but we are highly dependent on it. It is essential that we use the tools at our disposal (business, markets, and innovation) to restore a balance on our planet so that we can continue to prosper and thrive. Rather than seeing the challenges ahead as threats, the most admirable companies, like Clif Bar and Patagonia, have taken the lead by seeing them as opportunities.

These opportunities are economic, but also social and environmental. We have only one chance to get it right, but if we succeed we will ensure that future generation can enjoy a high standard of living, practice meaningful and dignified professions, and have access to the clean and abundant natural resources that we take for granted.

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