

The Far-Reaching Impact of Embedding a Sustainable Workplace Culture for World Earth Day – Today!



Today's observance is a great opportunity to put 'sustainability' into your mission statement if it's not already there.

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Businesses are in a unique position to make a significant difference to the physical, structural and cultural environment we work in today. It's no longer just the health of our workforce you need to be conscious of – you also have a responsibility toward our environment.

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The good news? Living up to this responsibility won't stand in the way of your business priorities, only reinforce them. And that's a good message to spread this Earth Day 2019.

After all, the next generation of talent is predicted to account for over 35 percent of the global workforce by next year, but the general consensus is that they are the most difficult audience for businesses to engage. In recent research, 75 percent of HR professionals surveyed in the U.K. and United States said that they had experienced an average employee turnover rate of up to 30 percent each year.

To ensure the longer-term commitment of this young employee segment, you need to embed into your company policies the principles that they hold dear.

According to the Deloitte *Millennial Survey 2018*, protecting the environment is among the top five goals these young people believe businesses should be striving for. Establishing a sustainable workplace culture can thus not only reduce your environmental footprint, which can attract customers externally, but also support your internal talent recruitment and retention initiatives.

It's more than just "a good thing to do."

Few factors contribute more to business success than business culture, manifested in the system of values, beliefs, and behaviors that shape how we work. And here, environmental sustainability is one of the business initiatives that everyone can get behind.

Embedding sustainability holistically depends on creating a culture that employees have actively helped create, increasing their motivation to maintain the standards of your business's

culture day to day. The next generation of talent understands the importance of protecting the environment and natural resources, and this should be reflected in everything you do: your corporate mission, facilities, operations and social investments.

If you can find the common environmental principle that your employees feel most passionate about championing – e.g. reducing plastics, recycling, reducing energy usage – then the added benefit will be to unite your employees based on their shared values. A bond will be created that goes beyond their routine targets and deliverables.

For example, companies like Salesforce, Microsoft and Starbucks have worked to instill a volunteering culture by creating extensive employee volunteer programs that enable employees to find a higher purpose in their day-to-day lives and have a real impact. This can have dividends for both companies and their employees.

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HSBC is a company that has gone a step further by supporting the causes its employees are passionate about. The company offers two days of paid leave each year to enable employees to lend their support to a chosen charity.

In practice: How can your company embed a sustainable workplace culture?

The answer lies in looking closely at your internal business practices, and how your business interacts with its surroundings. Companies with a clear and well-managed approach to their environmental and social impacts are better positioned to shape their future and to benefit from it.

From a practical point of view, here are six tips to guide you on this sustainable workplace journey:

1. Understand your ecological footprint.

To reduce your impact on the environment and better support our climate, get a clear understanding of your current energy usage and waste management. Electricity, heating and air-conditioning generally account for more than three-quarters of a commercial building's energy use, of which 30 percent of the energy used is usually wasted.

To cut down your usage, consider moving to green energy contracts and find out from your building management what uses excess electricity and the impact of this, and share this information with your team members. The point is to encourage them to personally reduce usage where possible. Earth Hour 2019, which saw over 7,000 cities in more than 170 countries take part, reminded businesses about the impact they're having on our environment, especially in regards to light pollution.

2. Reflect sustainability in your mission statement:

Work with your executive team to clearly define how a sustainable workplace supports your company mission. Once you've agreed on this, commit to sustainable practices by clearly stating them in your corporate mission and reflecting them in your governance structure through specially appointed caretakers.

When a company's culture is clearly aligned with business strategy, and people are empowered to contribute, you'll find a high level of engagement. For example, at my company WeWork,

we've made a commitment to become fully carbon neutral by 2023, and we have a growing team of volunteer "sustainability champions" contributing to our goal. Another example is clothing company, Patagonia, which is famously environmentally minded; its mission statement reads:

"Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis."

3. Set goals.

Get your employee on board by engaging them through focus groups, feedback surveys and open calls for suggestions. This goal could be as simple as working with logistical partners to use environmentally friendly transport options or partnering with supply chains to leverage suppliers to change their packaging to remove non-recyclables.

Make sure that you have achievable objectives that employees can contribute to. HSBC, for example, publicly outlines its goals to increase recycling, procure electricity from renewable sources and review their performance on the company website for everyone to engage with.

4. Map and share your progress.

Gain momentum by sharing regular updates with employees to boost their engagement and drive further change. They'll want to understand the impact being made, and to see a realistic time line of the initiatives being put in place, e.g., any reduction in the number of plastic bottles that using glassware has created to date and how much CO₂ you have saved, etc.

Salesforce's U.K. team, for example, recorded more than 46,000 volunteer hours in 2017; and this key milestone was

celebrated and promoted both internally and externally to reinforce the company's four core values: trust, customer success, innovation, and equality.

5. Get more people on board.

Don't stop when your team is fully on board with your new sustainability mission. Engage stakeholders in your vision, increasing the impact you can make. For example, an eco-friendlier supply chain or a call to action in your wider communications could start a positive butterfly effect.

Since Unilever implemented its Sustainable Living Plan, the share of its agricultural suppliers that use sustainable practices has tripled. At WeWork, we have just launched Food Labs – an initiative through which we support food and agriculture startups, to address the biggest challenges in food sustainability today.

Other partnership ideas could relate to factors like sustainable stationery, coffee waste recycling, apprenticeship schemes that support eco-driven talent and endorsements for local recycling schools or education programs. In advance of Earth Day, WeWork hosted a sustainability day in London which included a panel exploring how we could maintain momentum with sustainability.

The objective was to ensure that sustainability would remain an imperative and not just a trend, and to answer questions people might have about the subject. Linking sustainability to training programs is also a way of embedding sustainability into the work culture.

6. Challenge the status quo.

To create positive change, you must challenge your current operating model at every level. Don't be afraid to reevaluate

your processes and procedures to see whether they are still relevant as you shift toward a more sustainable future. Encourage your team to share ideas on how to further improve your green performance, for example through sharing best cases from other companies.

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There is no single road map for engaging employees: The most effective solutions differ depending on the industry, company maturity or environment. What is most evident, however, is that sustainability is a team effort. By integrating these efforts into your corporate structure, their effects can be increased and prolonged, ultimately helping the organization become more competitive, profitable and innovative. And kinder to the planet in the process.

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