

Employees: The front lines of sustainability



Written by Govi Rao

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Environmental consciousness used to be a personal characteristic; we recycled, swapped out inefficient light bulbs and carpoled when possible.

Now, make no mistake about it: sustainability is a *business* issue. The decision to be green in the office has a major impact on corporate balance sheets – and this includes everything from energy costs to the financial value of your brand name. *Seriously*. Companies who focus on image without considering the impact of environmental ignorance are literally flushing and burning money at an alarming rate.

Shareholders, investors and yes, customers, pay attention to sustainability initiatives. A company that fails to yield high marks for environmental efforts will feel it in the market, hear about it in the boardroom and see it at the deal table/cash register.



Simply put, if you aren't thinking green, you are likely headed for the red.

That's exactly why the variables associated with green are tracked by Bloomberg Business terminals and indices such as Dow Jones Sustainability, Carbon Disclosure and *Newsweek*. More than 70 percent of chief financial officers surveyed by Ernst & Young and Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Ltd. said sustainability had become a core part of their function. During the 2011 proxy season, 40 percent of shareholder resolutions directly concerned green issues ranging from what kinds of energy is used to amount of carbon emissions.

The problem is, the public "face" of your company – your valued employees – are not in the boardroom and, likely, they aren't reviewing market analytics. In fact, they often are unclear how sustainability even relates directly to them and why it's their responsibility anyway. In this economy, good people are focused on doing their jobs every day – not on sustainability. However, this is where the buck stops. Literally.

Engaged employees, regardless of the topic of engagement, fuel the change and growth in every company. You want higher sales figures? Better customer service? Faster turnaround? Keeping those ideas held up in the corner office isn't going to make things happen.

The Gallup Organization found that the level of employee engagement directly correlates with a company's financial performance. "Engaged organizations" have earning-per-share growth (EPS) 3.2 times higher than companies with lower engagement ratings.

Skeptics take note: when monopoly New York Telephone entered a competitive environment, each manager met continually with employees to review the strategic plan. Together, they hammered out how every job directly figured into accomplishing those strategic goals, premier customer service being top of mind. Based on those discussions, employees themselves kept rethinking their job descriptions. Instead of order-takers, for example, they became real-time problem solvers for customers.

By the way, New York Telephone goes by a different name these days – Verizon.

So, if sustainability is your company's mission, the task ahead is clear. The question is: how can you enroll your employees in your company's green mission when they are focused on what's going on in their offices and cubicles?

Engage them. Design a strategy, set goals and lay out the plan. As a team, and as individuals, they can be encouraged to figure out how their jobs are essential to success. They must determine how their particular job impacts or enables sustainability. Then, they can develop strategies to combat and/or foster efforts that lead toward the company's sustainability goals.

Your job as the team leader is to offer coaching, encourage peer leadership and even set up milestone rewards that deepen engagement.

Get them talking to anyone who will read or listen about your company's sustainability efforts. Partners, customers/clients, vendors and the like are all ripe to third level engagement. Online social media is a great medium for green chatter, as well. Encourage them to be "Friend-ly," "Link In" and "Tweet" your company's praises. They are already engaged in social media anyway. Give them something to talk and write about.

Consider offering your employees one particularly easy-to-use digital community tool. [MakeMeSustainable™](#) tracks and displays current energy use, previews the benefits of multiple sustainable initiatives and then allows everyone on the team to understand how the organization is doing. Those using it report it creates a pull force in engagement.

Additionally, don't forget that good old fashioned public relations can take center stage in your efforts to get employees to share your sustainability mission with the world. Beyond the corporate branding, marketing and advertising, PR is ripe for employee engagement on the sustainability front. Encourage employees to write and publish articles, volunteer to speak at important industry events and join community and national organizations where others are ready, willing and looking to hear what the competition is doing to blow them away sustainability-wise.

Of course, the bottom line to remember is that employee engagement starts with *employees*. Start with simple, obvious assignments such as turning off lights in unused offices and conference rooms, using electronic storage methods instead of wasteful printing and engaging in webinars and teleconferences instead of unnecessary, gasoline-wasting lunch meetings. Next, think green when recruiting, hiring, evaluating and rewarding your team. Make issues of sustainability and your company's related goals a part of the discussion early and often.

All signs point to green being the new black. Companies who want positive balance sheets must concentrate on how they can be a positive force for the community at-large. It's a top-down, bottom-up effort. When you incentivize your employees to factor in green with every decision and action they take, at work and beyond, your company will be reaping the benefits. Guaranteed.

GOVI RAO is president and CEO of [Noveda Technologies](#), where he leads a team of energy management and water management experts to help clients improve building performance. Prior to joining Noveda, he was the Chairman and CEO of Lighting Science Group and most recently was a partner at Pegasus Sustainable Century Merchant Bank. With more than 15 years of global experience, Govi has held positions as vice president and general manager of Philips Solid State Lighting, North America, and vice president of business creation for Philips Lighting.

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