

# HR'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

On October 31<sup>st</sup> 2023, over 90 CRF members gathered in-person to explore HR's role in sustainability. Chaired by CRF Research Director, Gillian Pillans, the event explored key aspects of sustainability, the ways that HR can contribute to sustainable business, and how HR practitioners can increase the role they play in this area. The event also included practical lessons and experiences shared by four case study organisations. These Post Meeting Notes summarise the discussion.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **HR's contribution to sustainability has evolved significantly since the last time CRF researched this topic in 2019.** HR's role has particularly grown in the areas of leadership and applying HR related skills to the supply chain, though there is still an opportunity to embed sustainability further in HR practices.
2. **The area of sustainable business which requires the biggest focus is net zero and the environment, yet HR's main contribution is currently in the areas of diversity and wellbeing.**
3. **The scale of the sustainability challenge the world is facing means that organisations should move beyond just minimising negative impacts or setting net zero targets,** and instead adopt a *just and regenerative* approach based on reconfiguring overall systems.
4. **Therefore, for organisations to fully embrace sustainability, a systems-level change is required.** The deepest lever for systems change is our mindsets, narratives and beliefs which HR can shift through their influence and practices.
5. **The role that leaders play in sustainability is changing.** Leaders are increasingly expected to have a sophisticated understanding of global issues, place creating a positive impact at the core of value creation and lead change across their sector.
6. **Leadership and tone from the top is essential.** However, organisations should not forget about the potentially thousands of individual employees who can advocate for change and take actions that, taken all together, impact on culture.
7. **HR should work to embed sustainability in everyone's roles and ensure that sustainability is part of everyone's job,** creating mechanisms that encourage employee participation in sustainability.
8. **Sustainability can be a key part of EVP and talent attraction** (particularly amongst younger generations). To help in this area, organisations can demonstrate sustainable practices in their social media channels (only if authentic and they show real impact) and include clear impact statements on every job posting.
9. **HR should commit to upskilling their workforce in sustainability skills,** both building awareness for all and developing specialist expertise.
10. **Through performance and reward systems, employees can see how their daily work contributes to the overall sustainability objectives of the organisation.**

## HR'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

### INTRODUCTION TO SUSTAINABILITY



**DR. SALLY UREN** oversees Forum for the Future's mission to accelerate transformation to a just and regenerative future. She recently contributed to Forum's Business Transformation Compass – a guide to just and regenerative business, and co-authored Driving Co-Benefits for Climate and Health – private sector guidance for developing integrated climate and health strategies. Sally is a regular speaker at conferences, has articles published in a variety of media outlets and is an independent advisor on Advisory Boards for M&S, Kimberly Clark and Burberry.

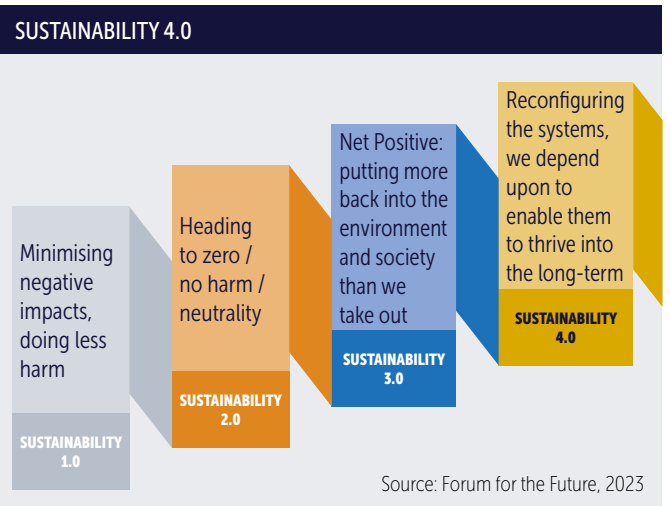
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Dr. Sally Uren outlined three macro trends that are shaping the business context of sustainability:

- 1. Climate change.** September 2023 was the hottest month on record and levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are unprecedented. However, different futures are possible if we rapidly decarbonise every aspect of our lives.
- 2. Biodiversity loss.** Biodiversity matters as the health of our economy and society depends on healthy natural ecosystems. Therefore, regeneration (restoring ecosystems so we can restore biodiversity) is important, reflected by the adoption of the first global agreement on biodiversity (The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework) in 2022.
- 3. Inequality.** The Covid-19 pandemic reversed progress on many global equality indicators. International agreements will be critical to address the carbon dioxide and biodiversity challenges, though these are dependent on functioning societies and democracies – which are being eroded by inequality. There are many actions that employers can take to start to address these inequality issues, such as implementing the Living Wage.

These three trends mean that organisations now need to aim for Sustainability 4.0:



Sustainability 4.0 is based on a 'just and regenerative approach', which:

- Recognises planetary boundaries
- Creates and distributes value in new ways
- Understand that humans are a fundamental part of nature
- Respects everyone's university rights and potential to thrive
- Is underpinned by systems change.

Systems change is particularly important to achieving Sustainability 4.0 as the world is a set of interconnected systems. Dr. Uren emphasised that the economic system is not 'broken', but functioning exactly as it was founded to do – to maximise short term profit for shareholders. Therefore, we need broaden the goals of our economy to deliver benefits for people and for planet. This is at the heart of a 'just and regenerative approach' to sustainability (for further detail refer to the [Sustainability Implications for HR](#) section).



# HR'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?



## CRF RESEARCH SUMMARY HR'S CONTRIBUTION TO SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS



**DR. NIGEL GUENOLE** is an expert in measurement and analytics. He has worked to enhance the quality of psychological measurement in industry and to promote analytical approaches to HRM. His work has appeared in *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, *European CEO Magazine*, and *European Business Review*. He co-authored *The Power of People: Learn how Successful Organizations Use Workforce Analytics to Improve Business Performance*, and recently co-edited a special issue of the *Human Resource Management Journal* on HR Analytics.

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Dr. Nigel Guenole presented key findings from CRF's recent research report [HR's Contribution to Business Sustainability](#), based on interviews with over 30 practitioners and a survey of over 100 member organisations. This research defined sustainability as 'meeting today's needs without compromising future generations ability to do the same,' though also noted the variation in practitioner definitions, based on industry, geography, HR maturity and sense of purpose.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Sustainability matters and should be built in to organisational strategy, rather than a bolt on.
- HR's role is growing – particularly in the areas of leadership and ESG contribution (such as applying HR related skills to the supply chain).
- The core areas where HR can contribute are:
  - Ensuring ethical leadership is in place.
  - Conducting advocacy and positioning to ensure sustainability remains a priority.
  - Ensuring the culture and mindset of the organisation focus on sustainability.
  - Equipping the organisation with skills, through both talent acquisition and development to ensure staff have the relevant skills.
- The biggest area of focus for sustainability is net zero and the environment, yet HR is currently contributing to sustainability in the areas of diversity and wellbeing.
- To be effective, HR will need to collaborate with other business areas.

The following findings also emerged from the CRF member survey, implying that HR can still go further in contributing to sustainable business:

- There is considerable opportunity for greater action – only 14% of firms reported being recognised leaders in sustainability (though very few organisations report that they are only focused on compliance).
- HR is increasingly taking the lead in sustainability – the CRF survey showed a moderate involvement of HR in sustainability strategy and nearly 10% of CHROs are also Sustainability Officers.
- There is an opportunity to embed sustainability in HR practices more broadly than is currently the case – only 38% said that sustainability goals are strongly or fully incorporated into the people strategy.

CRF research also focused on the contribution of the following HR specialisms to sustainable business:

### + LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE

- Nearly 2/3 firms report embedding sustainability in culture as a goal.
- Organisations should create mechanisms that encourage employee participation in sustainability. Keystone processes (such as embedding sustainability goals in everyone's performance agreement) can be an effective way of doing this.

### + TALENT ACQUISITION

- Sustainability can be a key part of the EVP and talent attraction, particularly amongst younger workers (though only if claims match reality!).
- Few organisations currently ask candidates about their sustainability skills or values during hiring.

### + LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- 78% agreed that they were committed to upskilling their workforce in sustainability skills.
- Learning should be divided into building awareness for all and specialist expertise.
- Learning about sustainability should be problem focused and practical, though not necessarily a linear pathway.
- Organisations are increasingly collaborating with external providers.

### + PERFORMANCE AND REWARD

- 31% agreed that 'the full range of available compensation is used to encourage sustainability'.
- Sustainability goals were more common for leaders than the wider employee population.
- Performance and reward are a useful way for employee to see how their daily work contributes to the overall objectives of the organisation.

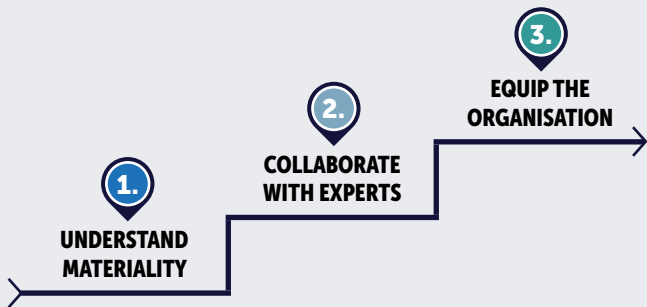
## HR'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

### A SYSTEMATIC WAY FORWARD FOR SUSTAINABILITY

The following three step model is a useful tool to help organisations 'get started' or 'speed up' their approach to sustainability:

1. **Understand your materiality** – the impact you have on your stakeholders. Who are they are? What do they expect?
2. **Collaborate with the experts** – who is your Chief Sustainability Officer? What do they need from you?
3. **Equip the organisation** – once you know what your CSO requires, you can equip the organisation to support this.

### A SYSTEMATIC WAY FORWARD FOR SUSTAINABILITY



**Q** How important is it to engage and harness the power of the wider employee base?

**A** *Setting the tone at the top which then flows down the organisation is important. However, usually there are very few people at the top of an organisation and possibly thousands of individuals who can all take small actions that together have an impact on culture. There is a lot we can be doing on the micro level.*

### BUSINESS APPROACHES TO SUSTAINABILITY

CRF has created a 2x2 model to help organisations understand where they currently are in their sustainability journey and where they might want to be.

#### CRF MODEL OF BUSINESS APPROACHES TO SUSTAINABILITY

|                   |               |  |  |
|-------------------|---------------|--|--|
|                   |               | <b>PROCESSES</b>   |  |
|                   |               | <b>DEVELOPING</b>  | <b>MATURE</b>  |
| <b>FOCUS AREA</b> | <b>BROAD</b>  | <p style="text-align: center;"><b>RISING CHALLENGER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide interpretation of stakeholders and awareness of their needs</li> <li>• Sustainability activity extends beyond the boundary of the firm</li> <li>• Still discovering best practices</li> </ul>  | <p style="text-align: center;"><b>TRAILBLAZER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advanced stakeholder awareness via multi-stakeholder sensing and materiality research</li> <li>• Prepared to innovate across the ESG spectrum to better serve needs to stakeholders</li> <li>• Global leaders in business sustainability</li> </ul> |
|                   | <b>NARROW</b> | <p style="text-align: center;"><b>MINIMALIST</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primarily focused on meeting basic requirements of E, S or G, as relevant to the business</li> <li>• Focuses internally on firm rather than other stakeholders</li> <li>• Internal processes are ad hoc, firm operates in reactive manner</li> </ul> | <p style="text-align: center;"><b>SPECIALIST</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrow focus but advanced processes for tracking impacts</li> <li>• Prepared to innovate within a prescribed area or at least match competition</li> <li>• Niche leaders in intra-firm sustainability</li> </ul>                                     |

## HR'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

### SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS FOR HR: ACHIEVING SYSTEMS CHANGE



**DR. SALLY UREN**  
Chief Executive at Forum for the Future

in LINKEDIN

SLIDES

The deepest lever for systems change is our mindsets, narratives and beliefs. With this in mind, international sustainability non-profit Forum for the Future has created a Compass for Just and Regenerative Business. Through understanding the below four mindsets, practitioners can better identify what stage their organisation is currently at, and how to shift this through HR's influence and practices.

#### 4 SUSTAINABILITY MINDSETS FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE



Source: Forum for the Future, 2021

#### RISK MITIGATION MINDSET

Requires the least effort and investment and guards against short-term reputational risk. However, it overlooks opportunities to build long-term value, leaves businesses vulnerable to disruptions and unattractive to investors, and can make it harder to recruit and retain staff.

- Focuses on the minimum needed to be legally compliant.
- Resists investments in ESG topics that don't deliver a short-term pay.
- Reduces pollution, poverty, deprivation, human rights abuses or risk exposure.
- Waits for customer demand before taking action.

#### ZERO HARM MINDSET

Further reduces exposure to risk, makes businesses better able to attract investment from increasingly ESG-focused investors, gives greater credibility to sustainability claims and may help create customer preference. However, it is likely to miss opportunities for creating a positive impact. Many organisations fall into this category.

- Recognises the need to invest in reducing negative impacts.
- Focuses on metrics, though certain areas (e.g. aspects of the social agenda) are very difficult to measure.
- Aims for zero emission, not to contribute to biodiversity loss, use water within ecological limits and to end rights violations and offer opportunities equally for all.

#### THE 'DO GOOD' MINDSET

Goes beyond risk avoidance to drive innovation that can build long-term value and new market opportunities, allows the business to be positioned positively with consumers and benefit from diverse leadership. However, may not necessarily tackle the root causes, meaning that critical systems that the business relies on may still fail.

- Actively creates positive change through redressing past social inequalities and restoring damaged or unhealthy systems.
- Invests in nature-based solutions, watershed replenishment or ecosystem restoration.
- Creates opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups.
- Design interventions in a way that addresses power imbalances.

#### THE 'JUST AND REGENERATIVE' MINDSET

Restores depleted ecosystems and weakened communities to provide a viable basis for continued human wellbeing and prosperity. Also embraces complexity in a way that makes finding solutions to root causes more likely and unlocks exciting new sources of value for businesses. However, if not carefully managed, the pace and scale of transformation needed could make the business vulnerable to retaliatory actions from the current system.

- Seeks to change system goals to support regeneration and justice (e.g. through advocacy, customer engagement etc.).
- Solves interconnected human and planetary health issues so that living systems can thrive together.
- Creates norms and structures focused on continually making systems fairer.
- Builds capacity to directly address the roots of structural inequality and nurture human rights.
- Just and regenerative business is already here (e.g. in certain agricultural businesses), though requires scaling.



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### APPLYING A JUST AND REGENERATIVE MINDSET IN PRACTICE

Dr. Uren outlined five required organisational shifts to apply a just and regenerative mindset:

1. **Aim for a just transition, rather than just getting to net zero.**
  - E.g. shutting down a coal-fired power station will not be just or regenerative without a strategy to also create new jobs.
  - This will require taking a disruptive, innovative approach and HR will need to support people to feel comfortable with an innovation gap (i.e. the gap between what is currently possible and what is required by the sustainability challenge).
2. **Consider the potential that you aren't seeing, rather than just reducing risk.**
  - Shifting mindsets will be critical to achieving this.
3. **Aim to achieve Net Zero as soon as possible, rather than by 2050.**
  - This includes seeing the opportunities in linked challenges, such as encouraging active travel to work to both improve employee health and help decarbonise.
4. **Understand the tacit knowledge of local communicators and the people who are most affected, rather than just relying on external experts.**
  - Building the capacity to rapidly sense and respond is essential to this.
5. **Consider how to codesign solutions with employee and communities, rather than prescribing what employees and communities need.**

HR can play a critical role in supporting the organisation through the above transformations, particularly in the following areas:

- Talent attraction and retention (particularly for the younger workforce)
- Learning and skills development (especially systems change skills)
- Performance and reward
- Staff engagement to motivate and inspire.

In addition, an HR function with a just and regenerative mindset will focus on the following:

- Supporting authentic purpose-driven leadership.
- Giving leaders and employees the space to invest in developing their own skills, learning and sense of purpose.
- Equipping designated change agents to be champions for supportive and inclusive culture (whilst Board signoff is important, it is also important to have people throughout the business who are engaged in sustainability).

- Advocating for broader mandatory reporting requirements in relation to diversity and inclusion to drive wider system change.
- Advocating for policies that close skills gaps in society.
- Investing in creating conditions where every person can contribute and feel safe in doing so.

**Dr. Uren finished by emphasising that, through starting to really consider what 'just and regenerative' means for their practice and organisations, HR professionals can shape the future they want.**

**Q How important is the role of leadership in this process?**

**A** *Leadership is essential. All of the really successful approaches I've seen to embedding sustainability, have involved Board buy in. This does not necessarily need to be the CEO, but usually is, due to the time, commitment and money required.*

## HR'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

### CASE STUDY CREATING A HAPPIER FUTURE STRATEGY AT VIMTO



**CHRISTINE SHILLINGTON**  
Group People and Sustainability Director,  
Nichols plc

[in LINKEDIN](#) [SLIDES](#)

**Vimto** is a small business with a diversified business model and three distinct routes to market: UK packaged (50%), out of home (27%) and international (23%). Their strategic framework is based on five growth pillars, one of which is to create a 'happier future.'

The Happier Future strategy has three key pillars:

1. **Everyone matters**, starting with employee wellbeing but also supporting local communities.
2. **Products we're proud of**, offering consumers healthier choices and staying ahead of any legislation.
3. **Owning our climate impact**, through reducing direct emissions, decarbonising supply chains and responsible water usage.

Vimto have created their 2025 Commitments to achieve the above, focusing on short term objectives to encourage quicker action. This includes improving the future for over 100 young people in their local communities, and striving to reach 100% sustainably sourced rPET in their packaged UK products by 2025.

Their Happier Future strategy has been embedded into employee's day to day work. For example, everyone has a happier future objective in their annual goals and it is also baked into processes such as recognition or onboarding. There is also alignment at the highest level of the organisation; the strategy has been aligned with the Board since 2020. Other features of Vimto's Happier Future Strategy included:

- Adopted a multi stakeholder approach (e.g. investors, suppliers, sellers, customers etc.) when making decisions.
- Cultivated a good relationship with employees, with people sharing personal stories on their internal network.
- Considered what's realistic for their size and industry when setting and implementing the strategy.
- Supported the 'everyone matters' pillar through community outreach projects, such as Camp Vimto – a residential youth camp with a focus on topics such as wellbeing and leadership.

#### + CHALLENGES

- External: political and legislative landscape, impact of inflation.
- Internal: the need to make tradeoffs between commercial and sustainability outcomes, which are currently seen as separate (though this will likely change over time), busyness creating challenges around prioritisation and wellbeing.

#### + INSIGHTS

- Get alignment across the organisation and make sure it feeds in everywhere.
- Remain authentic – be transparent rather than try to convince consumers that you are.
- Learn and course correct as you go (being transparent about when you do this and why).
- Communicate both internally and externally.
- Hard wire certain things into your business (e.g. embed in project management or policies).

## HR'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?



### CASE STUDY

#### BUPA'S ECO-DISRUPTIVE PROGRAMME



**JANE BENNETT**

Global Capability Delivery Consultant,  
Bupa



**MAR SORO**

Group Head of Sustainability Advocacy,  
Bupa



**Bupa** is an international healthcare company with over 80,000 employees worldwide. With no shareholders, Bupa reinvests their profits into providing more and better healthcare. The organisation also recently refreshed their purpose to *'Helping people living longer, healthier, happier lives and making a better world'*, reflecting the broader role they expect to play as a business.

The climate crisis is also a health crisis; climate action is core to Bupa's purpose and business. Therefore, Bupa officially launched their sustainability strategy in November 2022, which is focused on the intersection of climate change, healthcare and the health of the planet, and has three pillars:

- 1 **Mission zero** – aiming to become a net zero business by 2040 across their operations and value chain. This will focus on driving down absolute emissions, rather than offsetting.
- 2 **Mission accelerate** – innovating and using their influence, research and advocacy to transform the whole healthcare sector. (This includes the eco-Disruptive programme, outlined below).
- 3 **Mission regenerate** – contributing to conserving, restoring and regenerating natural ecosystems.

The above ambitious strategy will only be achieved through radical collaboration (e.g. with the wider private and healthcare sectors, suppliers and policy makers), and through making sustainability a key part of every employee's role (an area where HR can take the lead).



#### ECO-DISRUPTIVE

eco-Disruptive is Bupa's unique talent and leadership offering. It brings together Bupa participants in a talent development programme to address the biggest challenges Bupa faces. This global programme started in 2021 and currently has 18 squads working to find startups that can help Bupa overcome their challenges:

- The process provides an opportunity to learn at many different levels, beginning with really understanding the challenges that Bupa faces.
- Squads then develop a MVP for bringing the startup to Bupa and scaling up.
- The winning startup receives £200,000 and is brought into Bupa to be scaled up.
- Overall, the programme also encourages employees to engage with Bupa's sustainability strategy.



#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Sustainability is one of the most powerful engagement tools when it is core to the business.
- To be successful, everyone needs to have sustainability as part of their job.
- When both talent development and sustainability ambitions are at the heart of the design, it's a truly transformative experience.



## HR'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

### SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP IMPLICATIONS AND CAPABILITIES



**MATT GITSHAM** is Professor of Business and Sustainability at Hult International Business School and Hult EF Corporate Education and Director of the Hult Sustainability Impact Lab, one of Hult's flagship research impact labs. Matt has led numerous research projects on business and sustainable development for over two decades, focusing on leadership and leading change. He has worked closely with networks including the UN Global Compact, the Ethical Trading Initiative and Business in the Community, and companies Unilever, IBM, HSBC, GSK, De Beers, Cemex and Pearson. Matt's research has featured in *The Economist*, *The FT* and the *Harvard Business Review*.

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Professor Gitsham's research has involved extensive conversations with Chief Executives in organisations recognised in leading in sustainability, summarised below.

Business Leadership and sustainability is evolving. Leaders now need to:

1. **Lead change within the organisation** through storytelling, the ways in which they articulate their purpose and goals and the targets that they hold people accountable to. All of these help to unlock wider employees' confidence to play a leadership role in sustainability.

2. **Lead change across the value chain, industry sector, and wider society** through creating demand and engaging with competitors, rather than just responding to changes and the wider eco system.

Business leaders require a new leadership mindset, involving:

- An increasing requirement to lead and collaborate in the sustainability space.
- The view that creating a positive impact is as a core part of value creation.
- The need to have a sophisticated, nuanced understanding of global issues.
- Multi-fiduciary obligations, rather than shareholder primacy.

### DESIGNING LEADERSHIP PROGRAMMES

Professor Gitsham's research has investigated what factors have influenced leaders to embrace the sustainability agenda. Influential factors often included a combination of recent experiences and earlier formative life events (e.g. personal experience of social or commercial problems, participating in networks that bring them together with other senior leaders). These influences are useful to consider and replicate when designing leadership development programmes.

Other aspects of successful leadership development programmes included:

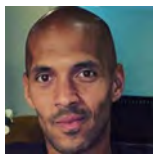
- Project-based business challenges around sustainability. These helped people to make the connection between sustainability and business impact, and build skills.
- Expert opinions or briefings on the challenges.
- The opportunity to share personal experiences.
- Post-programme support.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS IN HR

As well as identifying senior leaders, it is also important to identify active change maker roles with the following attributes: passion, technical knowledge, a thorough understanding of the organisation's business context, and skills for understanding and leading change in corporate culture. HR also needs to play a key role in shifting organisational culture.

## HR'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

### CASE STUDY INTEGRATING SUSTAINABILITY AT CHEP BRAMBLES



**JAMES MCGAHAN**  
Director, Talent Acquisition Europe and Digital,  
Brambles

in LINKEDIN

SLIDES

**CHEP Brambles** are a pioneer of the sharing economy and one of the world's most sustainable logistics businesses. With their business model based on share and reuse models, sustainability is grounded into everything they do. Sustainability also matters in the job market. For example, 80% of Gen Z job seekers want opportunities that better align with their interests and values.

CHEP Bramble's EVP has six pillars, three of which are directly related to sustainability (*emphasied in **bold** below*):

1. **Join the Future of the Circular Economy**
2. Benefit from Our Size – Grow with Us
3. **Do Work That Matters**
4. Find Inspiration Everywhere
5. Be Empowered to Progress
6. **Be Socially Responsible and Sustainable**

Their digital EVP is a key part of how CHEP Brambles attracts talent. This includes through static and video branding and social media (with content that involves the real experiences of employees resonating best with the target market).

Focusing on their digital EVP has increased CHEP Bramble's competitive advantage. For example, 70% of digital new starters in FY23 mentioned that their reason for joining was linked to CHEP Bramble's sustainability agenda and impact on society or planet.

#### MAIN TAKEAWAY

Job candidates are looking for companies that track impact through clear and transparent ESG reporting, and who make actionable sustainability impact at every level of the company. Organisations should:

- Demonstrate sustainable practices by proactively using social media channels (need to be authentic and show real impact).
- Communicate a pledge to sustainability through a clear impact statement on every job posting.
- Focus on simple things such as impactful training or zero waste initiatives.
- Engage current employees in sustainable practice discussions to create your own ambassadors.

## HR'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

### & CASE STUDY SUSTAINABILITY IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES AT EY



**SARAH SMITH**  
Talent Director, Global Sustainability,  
EY

in LINKEDIN

Sustainability at **EY** focuses on two areas: delivering sustainability advisory services, as well as engaging their 400,000-strong global workforce in EY as a sustainable business. In this session, Sarah Smith, Talent Director, Global Sustainability at EY, responded to questions about EY's approach to sustainability.

**Q How do you characterise your sustainability outcomes?**

**A** We are measured on EVP, as the employer brand needs to reflect the strategic importance of sustainability. We also need to make sure that individuals have the right skills and know what roles they need to play.

**Q How do you approach workforce planning?**

**A** EY has been doing work in the climate change and sustainability space for 20 years, which used to be a very niche market and a small part of our business. Strategic Workforce Planning also used to be simple, though now is more complex as we need sustainability professionals across all areas of our business. To help with this we attended workshops with leaders to think about what capabilities we need and then look at how to enhance or evolve our capabilities. Sustainability encompasses many areas, and this has forced business leaders to think about what areas we prioritise. We are not short of people who want to get involved – our focus is instead making sure they have the capabilities they need.

**Q What skills are particularly important?**

**A** We have a three-step process for everybody in our organisation who works with clients: 1. Listen – what are they saying? What are their challenges? 2. Engage – you don't have to be an expert in the topic to do this. 3. Connect – find the right person in the organisation and introduce them to the client, which requires trust in the ability of your colleagues.

**Q How are you tangibly building a mindset shift?**

**A** We are conducting learning programmes and webinars. You can't just rely on one-way communication or a colleague reading an email – instead you need to have dialogue and work horizontally.

**Q How are you implementing your learning and development approaches?**

**A** Whilst the way we deliver learning and our leadership programmes has not changed, we have invested in sustainability and brought it to the front. Sustainability is for everyone – we don't gatekeep who can be sustainability experts. For example, all employees can earn badges which can be displayed on their LinkedIn profiles. We have also created a masters programme in partnership with Hult EF, which is free and available to everyone.




**Q What barriers have you experienced?**

**A** As with any company that is fee earning or revenue generating, some of the barriers are inherent to our structure and these in turn impact on behaviour. For example, the P&L drives behaviour and people don't want to feel penalised if P&L drops based on their sustainability-focused actions.






## HR'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

### crf UPCOMING EVENTS

-  IN-PERSON & ONLINE  
[Evidence-Based HR: A New Paradigm](#)
-  25<sup>th</sup> January, In-Person, London
-  7<sup>th</sup> February, 14.00 GMT, Online

Register →

-  IN-PERSON & ONLINE  
[A Systems Thinking Approach to Organisational Change](#)
-  19-20<sup>th</sup> February, In-Person, Home Counties
-  20<sup>th</sup> February, 14.00 GMT, Online

Register →

### crflearning

#### OPEN PROGRAMME:

#### [Impact Through People Analytics](#)

5-6 December with a follow-on date February 2024

HR is under increasing pressure to demonstrate business impact. Taking an analytical approach and using evidence, rather than relying on 'gut instinct' alone, is a significant opportunity for HR to make an impact on business performance. This programme aims to take a commercial, HR-centric view of data and analytics, assisting HR practitioners in how to leverage data to deliver tangible business impact.

### FURTHER READING

CRF. (2019). *Responsible Business: How Can HR Drive the Agenda?* <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/responsible-business-how-can-hr-drive-the-agenda>

CRF. (2023). *HR's Contribution to Sustainable Business.* <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/research-hrs-contribution-to-sustainable-business>

Forum for the Future (2021). *A Compass for Just and Regenerative Business*



Should you have been unable to attend either of the CRF Partner Masterclasses on the morning of the event and would like to access the materials, please contact [Mette Stern](#), CRF Partner Engagement Manager:

- 1 **Culture vs Data – How HR Can Unlock the Sustainability Agenda through People Engagement and Leadership Mindset** by [Achieve Breakthrough](#)
- 2 **HR's New Purpose: Saving The World** by [Mercer](#)