

Sustainability in the Workplace



Introduction

On December 12 2017, Summertown Interiors, a corporate member of EmiratesGBC, delivered a Technical Workshop which discussed a holistic approach of meeting sustainability in the workplace. The workshop was facilitated by Marcos Bish and Sarah Flowerday who elaborated that sustainability does not have to necessarily involve added costs and can be incorporated in business operations so that benefits can be achieved on an environmental, economic and corporate level.

Drivers of Sustainability

There are many global drivers such as United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the international commitments of COP21 and the Paris Agreements to limit global temperature increase to 2°C. Additionally, the UAE has also aligned with these goals of tackling climate change issues and has developed its own national strategies such as the UAE Vision 2021 and UAE 2030 Green Agenda. While this is being done on a global or national level, it is the responsibility of all businesses to help address these issues to reach a sustainable future.

Benefits of Sustainability

Apart from the social responsibility aspect, there are also other reasons for incorporating sustainability practices in a business. In terms of environmental benefits, there is a direct impact of reducing resource (energy, water, materials) consumption and reducing carbon emissions; from an economic perspective, there are the direct benefits of resource savings but also an indirect benefit of increasing profitability through increased productivity of employees. Lastly, on a corporate level, there is the added benefit of promoting value and reputation to the company's name which increases employee attraction and retention, and feeds into increasing profitability through higher market awareness and recognition.

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The question then arises of how to actively attain these benefits without comprising current business practices and simultaneously achieve buy-in from the respective stakeholders. The key to this is by identifying the key sustainable indicators that are most relevant to the business and sanctioning actions to address those indicators. An example of this is using Dubai Chamber of Commerce CSR Label as a framework and measuring against the 4 pillars shown in *Figure 1*. Environmental stewardship is only one pillar of sustainability and thus, while significant, companies should broaden their scope to look beyond this and consider focusing on affecting the local community and marketplace as well. Additionally, it also vital to adopt and practice sustainability practices within the workplace as well so that management and employees are aligned with the company's sustainability vision.



Figure 1 Dubai Chamber of Commerce CSR Label

Sustainability in action

Embedding sustainability practices as part of ongoing operation ensures that all relevant stakeholders are involved in the process. An example of this is seen through Summertown's operations, whereby they not only have reduction targets for their resource consumption, but they also aim to support their clients to become sustainable. For instance, even when LEED or other sustainability certification is not requested by the client, they apply the same underlying environmental principles, thereby providing added value for their clients. This also has the added benefit of increasing their value amongst their client base and the overall market, which is highlighted in their [sustainability report](#).

Additionally, they involve their entire workforce into their health, wellness and wellbeing program and offer several daily, monthly and annual initiatives that supports in ensuring employee happiness, which results in increased employee productivity, attraction and retention. The employees feel a sense of commitment and are aligned with the company's sustainability actions.

Continuous improvement

While it is important to implement sustainable practices, it is also integral to continuously monitor and measure these practices so that it can be improved, making sustainability an ongoing process. Environmental performance can be evaluated using existing frameworks such as the LEED Existing Buildings: Operations & Maintenance (LEED EBOM) which encompasses ongoing energy, resource and water efficiency, sustainable purchasing, indoor environment quality, and enhancing employee productivity and wellbeing. The ongoing measurements can be monitored and tracked against previous baseline readings to check for areas of improvements.

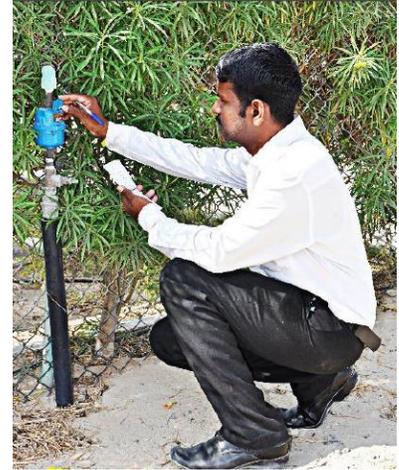


Figure 2 Measurement and verification can drive environmental performance

A further step that can be undertaken is to set up targets such as a percentage reduction in energy, water and waste, to act as drivers for improvement. Targets can be set up to adhere to business commitments, such as being fully powered by renewable energy as is the case for Google; national level commitments such as the UAE's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC); or even global level commitments such as the Paris Agreements. An important factor when setting up these targets is to closely examine what is applicable for the respective company and stakeholders in terms of their size, economics and feasibility.

Measurement is not only limited to environmental performance and can also be extended, in the form of surveys and questionnaires, to rate employees' happiness, comfort and satisfaction levels in the company. This has the added benefit to the company of evaluating the key areas of improvement for future planning.

Future workplace – What are the next steps?

An increasing number of statistics show that improving the Indoor Environmental Quality (IEQ) conditions results in improved performance of the building occupants. The principle behind this lies in looking beyond just green building principles and addressing the IEQ factors that have been shown to be associated in influencing human behaviors related to health and wellbeing. A recent framework for advancing health and well-being in buildings developed by The International WELL Building Institute, is one certification tool that is expected to be adopted more widely by developers and companies

globally. The WELL Building Standard provides a pathway for companies to tackle these features across seven concepts which include: Air, Water, Nourishment, Light, Fitness, Comfort and Mind.

Conclusion

Through the UAE Vision 2021 and Green Agenda 2030, the UAE has set out clear objectives for a future sustainable economy. Sustainable business practice should be part of every business, big or small and therefore being aligned with global as well as UAE sustainability goals makes environmental, corporate and economic sense as discussed earlier. Sustainability should be an on-going process and should be holistic to include all stakeholders; from employees to clients. Embedding this practice can deliver the needs of the clients as well as minimize environmental impact, deliver cost savings, and maximize employees' sense of wellbeing and happiness.