

Don't just save energy, manage it: incorporate work-life policies into holistic sustainability plans

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Guest Columnist

March 19, 2009

You can't speak of business today without speaking of the economy. You can't speak of the economy without speaking of green jobs, and you can hardly speak of green jobs without asking just what precisely they are — and what does their newfound popularity mean for your organization?

We can all surmise part of the definition. "Green" was long ago championed as the simple, umbrella term for the complex topics of sustainability, energy efficiency and environmental stewardship. Green jobs are broadly seen as those that work to improve the environment. The Obama-Biden administration has ordained "green collar" workers with the task of building infrastructure for an economy powered by renewable energy. A recent report issued by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and partners explains that green jobs span both the public and private sector in an array of industries, ranging from high-tech engineering, to marketing, to traditional blue collar areas such as plumbing or electrical wiring.

In addition to benefiting the environment, the other consistent ingredient in green collar work is its impact on the job holder. President Obama and a recent taskforce he appointed to address how green jobs will affect the middle class concluded that green jobs pay up to 20 percent more than other jobs, are more likely to be union and are largely domestic (and immune to outsourcing).

Phillip Angelides of Apollo Alliance, a coalition of business, labor, environmental and community leaders for clean energy, reported to TIME that "a green job is one that pays decent wages and benefits and can support a family. It has to be part of a real career path, with upward mobility." Only then does he add that "it needs to reduce waste and pollution and benefit the environment." UNEP agrees, "people's livelihoods, rights and sense of dignity are bound up tightly with their jobs...jobs need to provide equal hope for the environment and the job holder."

This is not a new concept. Organizational sustainability is founded upon the idea that a single bottom line does not calculate the true cost of doing business. A triple bottom line, including the economic, societal, and environmental costs is more accurate for long-term planning. Seeing this relationship will be important as more companies seek to "green" their practices.

The incentives to do so are mounting: both consumers and employees expect companies to prioritize the environment. A recent survey of consumer attitudes reports that 80 percent of consumers feel companies should still support social causes in a recession, and 68 percent say they'd remain loyal to brands that did. MonsterTRAK, a global career and recruitment service, reports 80 percent of young professionals want jobs that positively impact the environment, and 92 percent prefer environmentally friendly companies. Organizations are listening. According to a recent Panel Intelligence report, 80 percent of North American corporate executives plan to increase sustainability initiatives spending in 2009, despite the economic downturn.

As many companies begin shoring up their production processes in order to reduce overhead and appeal to customers, they may start with tangible items, such as recycling, switching light bulbs to compact fluorescents, or turning down thermostats. These are important steps, but they are the tip of the "sustainability" iceberg.

Companies who have made concerted efforts to fully integrate sustainability into their workplace culture understand that work-life fit is paramount to their success. Patagonia, the corporate paragon of organizational sustainability (which also sells \$290 million annually) has always seen the business case for satisfied employees. Knowing that parents work more effectively and efficiently with the security of child care, Patagonia subsidizes it. Knowing that a refreshed and invigorated employee works more creatively, Patagonia offers flexible scheduling to accommodate its staff's active and adventurous lifestyle. The result is an engaged, satisfied and loyal staff and a queue of qualified resumes ready to join ranks.

A 2008 Atlanta-based study puts some numbers to the mutual business and environmental benefits of telework. Employees who participated in the study reported saving on average 91 minutes each day by telecommuting, and 57 percent spent that time performing work-related duties. Sixty-eight percent of employees felt they were more productive working at home, and 93 percent of managers reported increased or equal productivity. Fifty-nine percent of teleworkers said they are less likely to look for another job as long as they may continue the practice. The community benefits from telework as well. The CleanAirCampaign that issued the study reports that through alternative commuting, Georgia saves 1.2 million miles of vehicle travel and prevents 600 tons of pollution daily.

Experts agree that the nature of work is changing, and that in addition to conserving energy, successful organizations will manage creative energy. By merging these goals and integrating work-life policies into a holistic sustainability plan, you may have found the crux to a prosperous, thriving organization that is built to last.

Jess Miller is the project coordinator at the Institute for Workplace Innovation. She actually likes the color green because it is pretty, not just because it is the right thing to do.

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