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Safe and sustainable

How does EHS fit in with the 'green' movement?

KEY POINTS

- Corporate sustainability strives to balance social, environmental and economic interests.
- Concerns exist about public relations or marketing experts leading sustainability instead of trained EHS professionals.
- Sustainability may help safety by increasing employee buy-in to the EHS program and causing employers to look at worker safety and health issues as part of their overall sustainability effort.

By Ashley Johnson, associate editor

Six years ago, recycling was the extent of sustainability at Valley Cabinet Inc.

“We didn’t even know what a footprint was. Then about five years ago, we started going to seminars and learning a little bit about what sustainability meant,” said Jim Killingbeck, director of safety for the De Pere, WI-based custom cabinet maker. “Now it’s part of what we do.”

Killingbeck estimated that 10 percent of customers want “green” information about the cabinets: Does the wood come from a sustainable forest? Are the stains and finishes formaldehyde-free? Does the wood meet certain environmental codes?

His role in answering such questions reflects the expansion of environmental health and safety to include sustainability.

Corporate sustainability strives to balance social, environmental and economic interests. Business leaders have latched on to the concept amid growing consumer and governmental demands for eco-friendly products and processes.

Some safety professionals say being involved with sustainability can benefit EHS and their personal careers, although questions remain about how to integrate the disciplines.

“On the safety side, I think the big question is, ‘Where really does safety fit in this, and is this a big driver for improved safety performance?’ And that’s a tough one because I don’t know,” said John Ficklin, recently retired corporate director of health and safety for Medtronic Inc., a medical technology company in Minneapolis. “The way I look at it is sustainability is another lever we can use to promote better safety performance.”

Competitive advantage

Definitions of sustainability vary. Tim Mohin, director of corporate responsibility for Advanced Micro Devices, a technology company headquartered in Sunnyvale, CA, said his favorite one is “people, planet, process.”

Consultant James Strock, founding secretary of the California Environmental Protection Agency, suggested that while there is no single definition, “corporate sustainability is about serving more and more stakeholders at a deeper and deeper level.”

Perhaps the most-cited definition comes from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (also known as the Brundtland Commission). In a report issued in 1987, the commission defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Strock said that historically, negative externalities such as pollution and poor worker safety were not reflected in market value. “But today in the transparent world we are moving into, I would argue that is coming to a close and it’s ceasing to be an option,” he said. “The big-picture change, in my view, is that ethical enterprise and individual conduct and goals are becoming a competitive advantage.”

Companies tout their sustainability efforts in annual reports to the public. Conversely, alleged violations of worker safety or environmental regulations can make headlines nationwide and harm a company’s reputation.

Further reading:

[Read the report from the Brundtland Commission](#)

[Download the UN Global Compact-Accenture CEO study](#)



Commonalities and differences

A study released last year by the UN Global Compact and consulting firm Accenture demonstrated the emphasis executives place on sustainability. Of the 766 CEOs surveyed, 93 percent said sustainability was critical to their companies' future success. Most CEOs also said sustainability should be fully integrated into business strategy and operations.

Even if the goals are similar, organizational approaches to sustainability differ. "What often gets lost in the public discourse about sustainability is that the very term 'sustainability' means different things to different companies," said Carol Singer Neuvelt, executive director of Washington-based NAEM, formerly known as the National Association for Environmental Management. "Each company defines sustainability in terms of its industry and its business objectives, which in turn informs how it integrates this big idea with the EHS function."

Neuvelt said a survey of NAEM members found that EHS managers were responsible or involved with the majority of a company's sustainability initiatives, including greenhouse gas management, product stewardship, waste reduction and sustainability reporting.

"And thanks to the important role that employees play, sustainability is prompting companies to take a fresh look at issues related to employee health, safety and welfare," she added.

The obvious common thread between EHS and sustainability is the environment. Additionally, working conditions and employee treatment may factor into public perceptions of a company.

Money represents a key difference between EHS and sustainability. Strock pointed out that EHS typically is seen as an expense and defensive in nature because it developed in response to government and public pressure for better worker safety and health.

"Sustainability differs in that it includes that but it's broader; it's not solely defensive by any means," he said. "It's finding new profit opportunities, ideally."

Creating value

Mohin, who previously worked at the Environmental Protection Agency and for the U.S. Senate before moving into corporate environmental roles and then sustainability, pointed to his own career as proof that sustainability presents opportunities for learning and advancement.

Noting that sustainability wraps into many issues, especially a company's brand and reputation, Mohin said, "It really does have more attention from leaders of companies, and I think, therefore, can be a boon to a career."

For Aaron Lilach, senior safety and training manager for Muskego, WI-based R.A.S. Delivery Services, sustainability offers another way to contribute to the bottom line given that many organizations already have reduced injury rates and associated costs.

"Sustainability, in my opinion, is one of those tools that fits right in with all of those other tools a safety professional has to create value, whether that's reducing risks or doing some of those green improvements," Lilach said.

Killingbeck agreed. "If we don't have a way to show that we can help manage the bottom line, safety isn't going to grow. And sustainability is one of those things that can really make a big difference," he said. He thinks that in the future, safety professionals in various industries will be helping their companies figure out how to reuse or recycle leftover materials.

However, that responsibility does not appeal to everyone. Killingbeck cited a recent conversation with EHS colleagues at an association meeting. "The idea of adding that to some of these people's jobs was not something that they outwardly welcomed," he said. "They basically felt that to be the company's garbage man was not the direction in life they wanted to go."

'Superficial efforts'?

Another concern for some EHS professionals is the relationship between sustainability and public relations and marketing. Companies would not hire a CFO without financial experience, "yet sometimes basically you get folks that are more skilled in public relations and communications heading corporate sustainability efforts and, to me, that doesn't seem quite right," said Richard MacLean, director of Richard MacLean & Associates LLC, a management consulting firm in Flagstaff, AZ.

While stressing that sustainability itself is not the problem, MacLean said putting people without appropriate experience in charge of sustainability compromises the integrity of the effort.

"I think [EHS professionals] see how a lot of the sustainability issues have transformed themselves into more public relations strategies and superficial efforts rather than attacking some of the core issues that might affect the company in the long term," he added.

MacLean insisted sustainability leaders need strong backgrounds in science, engineering and regulations on which to base their decisions. It would be a "real shame" if EHS and sustainability were completely divided within an organization, he said.

Strock also supports unifying EHS within sustainability. Otherwise, organizations may miss out on opportunities to update processes, mitigate liabilities, earn public trust and make profits.

For effective sustainability leadership, an individual needs communication skills in addition to technical knowledge, according to Killingbeck. He gave the following scenario: Say your company has the chance to buy a raw material at a lower price but that material is not certified. If you go ahead with the purchase, you need procedures in place to ensure the uncertified product does not mix with the certified product to guarantee customers will receive the right type.

"You've got to be able to communicate and make the lines on both sides of those gray areas very, very small so that the understanding of what direction you want to go isn't blurred," he said.

'It's a way of doing business'

At Medtronic, being a good corporate citizen and providing for employee safety are part of the corporate mission. Ficklin said sustainability will be a key focus for the next fiscal year as the company seeks to define its efforts and develop key performance indicators.

For the past two years, a formal sustainability award has been bestowed upon 12 sites; this award includes key safety criteria. Additionally, Medtronic's citizenship report, available to the public, looks at environmental stewardship and injury rates.

At manufacturing sites, Medtronic does not treat sustainability as a program. "We don't separate it out and say this is going to be our safety/sustainability effort for 2011," he said. "What we work on is this philosophy of ensuring that our people go home at the end of the day at least as healthy as they were when they walked in in the morning. How do you do that? There are probably a thousand different ways that concept is pursued. Some of it is engineering, some of it is education, some of it is the politics of engaging management support. And so it's not a single program. It's a way of doing business."

As to whether sustainability boosts workplace safety, the answer seems to be yes, but in ways that cannot easily be quantified.

Neuvelt said many organizations address labor rights, worker safety and employee engagement as part of sustainability. "This is not surprising," she said, "since one of the most immediate benefits of sustainability for a company is retaining and attracting employees."

At Valley Cabinet, Killingbeck noticed that employees who participated in sustainability initiatives such as recycling became more invested in the entire EHS program. "It drew them in," he said, "so now they're more likely to follow everything rather than just one part of a safety program because now they're involved; it's their program."