

MAKING THE PITCH: SELLING SUSTAINABILITY FROM *INSIDE* CORPORATE AMERICA

2012 Report of Sustainability Leaders
Executive Summary

■ ■ BY VOX Global
■ Weinreb Group Sustainability Recruiting
Net Impact, Berkeley ■ ■ ■

 **WeinrebGroup**
Sustainability Recruiting

 **VOX**
Global

Introduction

“Sustainability,” little more than a buzzword in the corridors of corporate America a decade ago, is today a business concept that has been embraced by many companies in principle and, increasingly, in practice.

Yet, while more and more companies are integrating corporate sustainability strategies and programs into their daily business operations, “sustainability,” like a Rorschach inkblot, is prone to multiple interpretations. Is it a corporate citizenship initiative? A compliance function intended to appease stakeholders who might create friction? A competitive advantage to leverage with customers? A strategy to attract and retain talent?

Indeed, despite the growing visibility of sustainability within corporations, leaders charged with integrating this emergent function must often operate in unique ways compared to other well-established C-suite positions. Sustainability leaders are expected to implement strategies and programs in workplace environments where there is often no clear or uniform definition of sustainability. Further, compared to their colleagues in the C-suite, chief sustainability officers are often expected to generate results within a context of limited management authority, nominal staffing, and razor-thin budgets.

The task of making the corporate sustainability trend itself sustainable is no easy one.

For this reason, and in an effort to understand the skills, drivers and partnership-cultivation strategies necessary for executive success, VOX Global, Weinreb Group Sustainability Recruiting, and Net Impact, Berkeley conducted a national survey of sustainability leaders.

Thirty-two respondents, drawn primarily but not exclusively from Fortune 100 companies with publicly visible sustainability programs, agreed to participate in an online survey administered by a team from Net Impact, Berkeley. Respondents included sustainability professionals representing public and private companies across a wide array of industries. The respondents had levels of seniority ranging from Chief Sustainability Officers reporting directly to the CEO to sustainability managers more than two levels below. In all cases, respondents were responsible for integrating sustainability, with tasks varying from strategic planning to day-to-day implementation.

Additional depth and context to the survey responses was gleaned in follow-up, in-depth phone interviews (IDIs) with sustainability officers and managers at **McDonald’s, Novelis, AT&T, DuPont, EMC, Hilton Worldwide and Nixon Peabody LLP**. These follow-up IDIs were led by VOX Global and Weinreb Group Sustainability Recruiting.

While the 32 respondents and the organizations from which they hailed were diverse—from economic impact to workforce size to degree of visibility to social and environmental impact—the research showed that they adopted similar strategies for success.

Those lessons, many of which run counter to conventional wisdom, are shared below.

Key Findings

The survey identified three potential drivers of sustainability leaders’ success and asked respondents to evaluate the importance of each one:

Interpersonal skill—rather than subject matter expertise—is *the* most important attribute a sustainability leader must have to be successful.

- Interpersonal skills
- Ability to quantify the value of an initiative
- Subject matter expertise

The results were revealing:

Prior to taking the job, the majority (78 percent) said they had assumed that subject matter expertise would be the most important predictor of success. Once on the job, however, all respondents (100 percent) said interpersonal skills proved to be most critical (as seen in Figure 1).

Subject mastery is crucial, but sustainability leaders said they had to first sell the concept of sustainability—and sell themselves—before focusing on the content. To secure buy-in, sustainability leaders, like other senior positions, also had to balance subject matter expertise with business acumen. The ability to communicate the business case for sustainability in a language that resonates up, down and across an organization, was viewed as crucial to achieving the ultimate objectives.

Perception of Success Factors

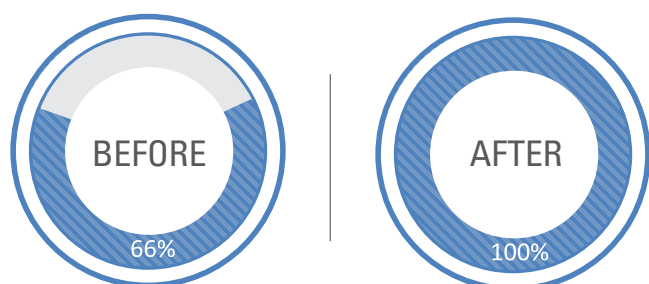
Percentage of Respondents Indicating Highest Importance



SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTISE



QUANTIFYING VALUE



INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Figure 1

Percentages may not add up to 100% as respondents were asked to select all responses that apply.

Sustainability leaders must learn to speak the language of business—and *avoid the jargon of sustainability.*

“IF YOU’RE talking to a business or operations person, and you talk about productivity improvement, their eyes brighten up. They get excited. [If] you talk to them about making that same facility more sustainable, they might not get it. But what they are realizing more and more is that the two are really the same thing.”

Linda Fisher
Chief Sustainability Officer,
DuPont

In order to be successful, sustainability leaders must collaborate with colleagues across multiple business units—colleagues over whom these leaders may have no direct management oversight. Respondents said interpersonal and communication skills are the key to penetrating corporate silos and building strong internal networks.

Influence comes only to those who collaborate.

“I THINK of myself and my team as chameleons. Being able to think and communicate in the same fashion as a business unit we’re working with is, for me, the most important skill set needed to be successful.”

Beth Adcock Shiroishi
VP of Sustainability
and Philanthropy, AT&T

Key Internal Influences

Percentage of Respondents



Figure 2

Percentages may not add up to 100% as respondents were asked to select all responses that apply.

As **(Figure 2)** indicates, senior executive sponsorship is vital, with 78 percent of respondents saying support from top management was a key contributor to their success. But more than eight in 10 respondents (81 percent) identified their colleagues across the company as primary drivers of success.

This finding underscores the crucial importance of cultivating and honing soft skills. Sustainability leaders and their direct reports must be inexhaustibly social within their organizations and consciously egalitarian in their dealings with co-workers at every level.

Successful corporate sustainability leaders recognize that traditional business pressure—for customers and competitors—is the key driver of adoption inside companies.

Sustainability leaders must function as a bridge between a company and its external stakeholders. They must constantly monitor and prioritize the social and environmental issues that can impact a company's ability to operate successfully.

Conventional wisdom suggests that non-governmental organization (NGO) pressure, regulatory policies and sustainability rankings and indices are key external factors that drive the interest in sustainability inside a company. However, the survey results indicate that customer pressures, industry trends and competitive issues were significantly more influential.

“TRYING TO get people to think about sustainability, understand it, and then align our business strategy takes a lot of dialogue, discussion, and influencing skills. You can be very bright and smart on sustainability and the science, but if you can't convince people why it makes good business sense, your initiative will go nowhere. You can have all of the quantifiable data that exists, but you must be able to frame the initiative in the language the business leaders understand.”

John Gardner,
Chief Sustainability Officer,
Novelis

Key External Influences

Percentage of Respondents

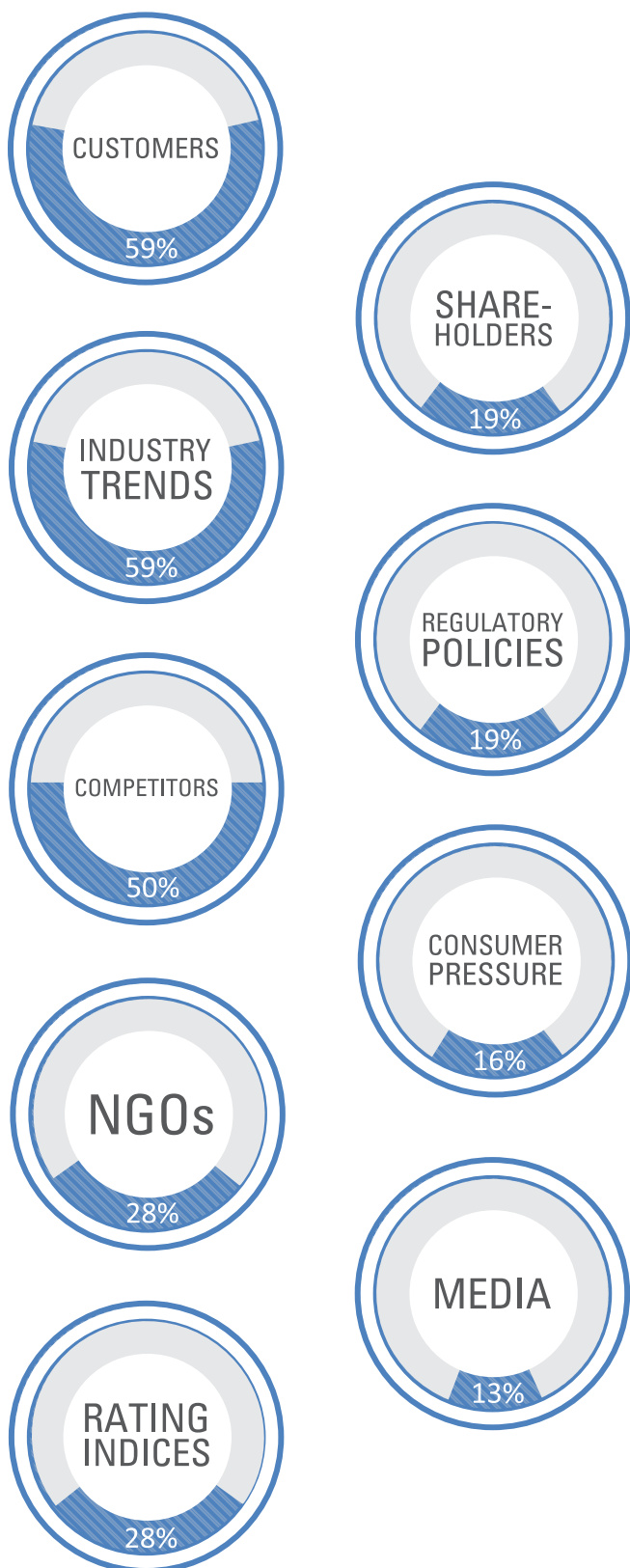


Figure 3

Percentages may not add up to 100% as respondents were asked to select all responses that apply.

The findings in (Figure 3) indicate that as sustainability programs and practices are adopted with increased frequency across industries and supply chains, the ability to satisfy customers and outpace competitors are more important motivators for adoption. In fact, vendors upstream in supply chains are recognizing that a robust commitment to sustainability may not only create competitive advantages, but may actually ensure continued viability. While purchasers in supply chains (i.e., large corporations) still select business partners based on traditional vendor-selection criteria such as price, availability and quality, sustainability metrics are increasingly being factored into the decision-making process as well.

A SIGNIFICANT part of my role is translating those social and environmental issues that intersect with our business in ways senior management can understand. Showing how they can either provide a competitive edge or respond to a customer demand is critical for success.”

Kathrin Winkler
Vice President of Corporate Sustainability, EMC

Conclusion

The bottom line—or, rather, “triple bottom line”—of the findings is this: sustainability means different things to different people and different companies. To be successful, sustainability leaders must provide context for their work in the same terms as other business units and define their impact in the “lingua franca” of the business. These leaders must use communication skills to link sustainability to core business objectives. Rather than using sustainability jargon, they must use words and phrases that are consistent with a company’s culture and business strategy. They must help import, translate and embed issues from the outside world into the DNA of their companies.

The sustainability leader's role, like many senior positions, requires a balance of subject matter expertise with business acumen and the ability to communicate the business case in a language the company understands. And those leaders who most successfully create "coalitions of the willing" inside their organizations must on any given day assume many roles to be successful.

Successfully playing these roles requires a unique soft skill set that is not easily mastered. Common sense may suggest that executives need to be skillful at becoming change agents, networking internally, building coalitions and seeing around corners. The extent to which sustainability leaders and their companies place a priority on honing these skills is not known. And the stakes are even higher for sustainability leaders, as they are often expected to generate ambitious results with fewer resources than their peers and rely on a group of willing volunteers across the company to achieve the expected results.

To be successful, then, sustainability leaders must first master context inside their organizations. Only after trust is earned and collaboration is underway can they expect to be successful implementing programmatic content that will deliver a return on investment—both reputational and financial—to their companies.

About VOX Global

VOX Global is a strategic communications and public affairs firm with decades of experience navigating the intersection of business, media and society. Our [Sustainability Practice Group](#) helps position sustainability leaders and their companies for long-term success. We offer a wide range of services that provide companies with both a reputational and financial return on investment.

VOX Global is currently working with the [Center for Sustainability at St. Louis University](#) to develop a unique executive training program that focuses on honing and sharpening the interpersonal skills needed for sustainability leaders to be successful.

About Weinreb Group Sustainability Recruiting

[Weinreb Group Sustainability Recruiting](#) is a niche executive search firm, specializing in corporate social responsibility and sustainability. Clients include Wal-Mart, Patagonia, Sears, Nestlé Waters and Levi Strauss & Co. Weinreb Group publishes reports regularly about the CSR profession, including [CSO Back Story](#), [How Chief Sustainability Officers Reached the C-Suite](#).

About Net Impact, Berkeley

Net Impact, Berkeley is an undergraduate chapter of Net Impact, sponsored by the Haas School of Business, which provides consulting services to organizations in order to gain real world experience as a complement to our education.