

Recruitment trends - Is resilience sustainable?

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Recruitment in the sustainable business sector has bucked the trend and remains relatively buoyant. We ask some recruitment experts why

Against the backdrop of a stagnant global economy in 2012, recruitment prospects in sustainability and corporate responsibility might be expected to be bleak. Additionally so, if you also consider that in the recent past many companies have grouped corporate responsibility within marketing and communications – always the first budgets to be cut in difficult times.

The reality, however, is far more positive and a testament to how far corporate responsibility has become an integral part of business rather than a veneer to appease stakeholders.

Georgina Stevens runs sustainability consultancy One Pumpkin, which offers a range of sustainability services, including recruitment support. She says: “I am regularly asked by people in my network to help them either get into or move up/around in the CR and sustainability world, and the last year has felt like there has never been a better time to work in the sector.”

Stevens has seen “a lot of new jobs around”, as companies expand their teams upwards and outwards, and other companies “hiring their first dedicated resources”, particularly those within the supply chains of those companies with strong sustainability initiatives.

“There has been a continuing trickle of chief sustainability officers being added to boards, with Unilever adding one this year,” she adds. “Many companies, particularly in the US, are also following suit. In the UK, 20% of FTSE 100 companies now have someone on the board or at director level responsible for sustainability or CR.”

One of the factors driving this trend is that many companies no longer view corporate responsibility as a cost, but rather a function that should yield profits. This move is associated with the increased integration of corporate responsibility into the operations of companies, which in turn has had an impact on the skills being sought.

Paul Gosling, managing director UK and Europe at sustainability recruitment consultants Allen & York, believes there has been “continuing incorporation of a wider range of social as well as environmental issues, particularly in the extractive industries”. He says sustainability professionals are increasingly coordinating and facilitating activity, pushing responsibility deeper into their organisations, particularly into procurement. Most successful programmes have been driven by “pragmatic need rather than altruistic drive”, where there is more clarity about the value the sustainability sector can bring.

The past year has seen “more defined demand for industry-related qualifications – eg engineers within engineering businesses,” says Andrew Tew, senior consultant at Acre Resources. He also notes the increased need for the sustainability function to be profitable, the increased focus on energy efficiency and the continuing integration of sustainability and health and safety.

The skills being sought in candidates bears this out, with recruiters looking for a much wider range of experience.

“As the number of different roles in the [sustainable business] sector increases, so do the skills required, but the core ones remain the same,” says Stevens. “Comprehensive business acumen and the ability to collaborate, inspire, problem solve, innovate, negotiate, and of course finish a job.”

Hard nose needed

Increasingly companies are also realising that candidates need to be resilient, because often they will be pitching against other business units for budget, resources or prominence, and often face resistance in some key areas of the business.

Tew agrees that commerciality is a key strength: "Sustainability professionals need to be able to sell the benefits of the function to the business."

Gosling adds: "The CR function is increasingly finding a voice in the day-to-day operation of organisations. The risks of not taking sustainability seriously can impact in both a financial and reputational sense."

Gosling argues that every company demands something different from its corporate responsibility or sustainability professional and therefore a breadth of skills can be an advantage; health and safety, marketing and PR, management skills can all be part of the mix, he says. The key for many corporate responsibility roles is a passion for the subject, a drive to make things happen and "very good understanding of the current issues and technologies within the sustainability arena".

In many companies, these skills are employed across the organisation, while in other organisations, corporate responsibility is focused more within a dedicated department – although this is likely to change.

"More than ever, the role of the sustainability professional is in the facilitation and co-ordination of projects rather than as the sole delivery function," says Gosling. "The trend is very much towards the incorporation of sustainability into the activities of all parts of an organisation and is no longer the sole preserve of the corporate responsibility team."

Stevens agrees, saying: "The most effective place for an understanding of the opportunity sustainability presents remains at board level, but the skills to deliver on that know-how are essential across every business unit." However, her personal experience is that the trend still remains for most companies to build a dedicated department, "albeit with the increasing realisation that these teams need to be mobilised across the business effectively to make change."

"For people working in the sector this is placing an increasing importance on their non-technical skill set," says Gosling. This includes the ability to influence decision makers, manage projects and maximise the commercial value of their day-to-day work. The trend is for companies to absorb sustainable practice into each business unit, so that such practice becomes part of the fabric of the company.

The purpose of the sustainability team, says Tew, is to effect that change as it reaches into all facets of the company and, ultimately, integrate its practices into the day-to-day working of all employees. "Where the actual function sits varies massively from company to company, but it tends to be a central corporate function sitting with health and safety or operations."

In the know

The past year has seen a shift in the way companies recruit. Stevens notes that one of the more interesting trends in sustainability recruitment has been the increase in personal referrals. "This is the result of an increasingly networked sustainability community, which looks set to continue," she explains. Of course, saving on expensive recruitment fees will also help to drive this, she says, as well as the ability to get a variety of views of the candidate from a range of sources, rather than just from their carefully prepped referees.

Gosling believes that it is becoming increasingly difficult for more junior candidates to break into the sector, due to limited opportunities for individuals to immediately start their career directly in sustainability. "The route in is increasingly through the existing teams rather than to move straight into the CR or sustainability team," he says.

The consensus is that the trends of 2012 will continue into 2013. There will also be additional impetus in the UK from new carbon legislation. From April, the mandatory carbon reporting for

FTSE-listed companies will have a significant impact.

The fact that energy prices are high means that everyone is more focused on efficiency. Gosling agrees. "2013 will see a continuation of this process, with carbon reporting coming into force and the continuing upward pressure on prices."

He also predicts that changes in how big energy users source their power will boost the utilisation of micro-generation. "We see this being an accelerating trend in 2013, with very significant developments and sophistication in energy systems and decentralised energy generation."

It might also be a good time to be in human resources. Stevens believes that the companies that are committed to embedding sustainability at the heart of their businesses will be building sustainability into all of their job descriptions and individual targets. "So what the industry needs now is innovative HR experts who can help drive this change."

Links:

[1] <http://www.ethicalcorp.com/users/claire-manuel>