

Why Every HR Professional Needs To Be Aware Of The Changes The Sustainability Agenda Will Bring - And Planting A Tree Isn't The Answer

As the dust settles on COP26, which rather predictably failed to fulfil hopes and promises, the obvious questions for HR professionals are: what next, and how can we contribute?

Pandemics excepted, COPs normally take place every year. COP26 was important – not because Scotland was hosting it, but because it is five COPs on from Paris, where it was agreed to limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees. Glasgow should have been the Action Plan; the “How”.

There are still widely varying views on sustainability and what, if anything, individuals and businesses can do. Some people believe the issue is not as bad as it's painted; many ask what is the point if China and Russia refuse to play ball; others want to do something, but don't know what; many are simply confused.

I'm not surprised – it is confusing. There are so many different terminologies: carbon neutral, carbon removal, carbon offset, net zero, to name but a few. They all mean different things but instead of explaining them, mostly what we hear about in the press is of businesses planting trees.

So, Let's Clear That One Up. Planting Trees Is Not The Answer.

Obviously, it's not a bad thing to plant more trees, but we produce far too much carbon for trees to be the solution. I won't bore you with the maths, but to offset the carbon from UK households alone (ignoring businesses entirely), we would have to completely forest an area larger than Wales – and that's assuming Wales had no trees already.

Across the planet, there is physically not enough viable space to plant the number of trees required to offset the carbon we produce.

On what then, should the HR sector focus? As the people who will be the conduit between board-level policy and the implementation of the sustainability agenda in the office or on the shop floor, it is important that HR professionals are up to speed with the issues.

It is increasingly clear that people are becoming more selective about their career choices, and conscious of what companies stand for and what their values are. In attracting staff, HR will have to be able to demonstrate that sustainability is something your company or organisation is invested in. Without that, people will take their talent elsewhere.

It is increasingly clear that people are becoming more selective about their career choices, and conscious of what companies stand for and what their values are

Disseminating information about the company's commitments, and the rate of travel to its goals, will help drive change in attitudes – and clear communication is of the essence in getting messages across not only to staff, but also to customers and the supply chain.

It must also be recognised that there will inevitably be resistance to change. Young people in general will be more receptive to new sustainability policies and practices, but people who have been doing the same thing

the same way for most of their career may need some persuading. This is where HR's talents come in.

And to be convincing, it pays to be au fait with the arguments, some of which are detailed below.

The key term is Net Zero. Offsetting carbon cannot solve the problem alone. The only solution is REDUCTION. The principle of Net Zero is to reduce carbon output first, aiming for at least a 90% reduction – then offsetting can be used for the last 10%. Businesses which boast about planting trees now are just indulging in PR spin, which should rightly be denounced as “greenwashing”. Clued-up staff will know this and call it out, so as HR professionals, keep your company honest.

It is also reasonable to ask why businesses should care. And, if the fact that sustainability is vital for the planet is not reason enough, here is another incentive: how about staying in business?

I am not being melodramatic. This is fact. The UK has already signed up to Net Zero by 2050 and, legally, every business must achieve the same.

That probably still feels like a long way off, so how about 2023 instead? While COP26 may not have fulfilled all aspirations, a very significant announcement was made by Westminster at the start of the conference, stating that all large businesses and public organisations must have a plan for Net Zero by 2023.

You may not be a large business nor public body. But you probably do business with them – or, if not, you are likely to be a supplier to someone else who does – and true measurement runs end to end, including the full supply chain up and downstream.

Therefore, if you want to stay part of the supply chain, you must have a plan yourself. And, most companies need to start planning a year before the deadline date – so if you haven't got this in hand by the end of next year, your business probably won't survive very long.

To make it real, Tesco already announced this step in October. If a business does not

have a plan, and is not measuring and showing improvement, then it will no longer be accepted as a Tesco supplier from next year.

The next question then, is what can and should we do. The first step in effecting change is to measure and understand the problem. This means you need to calculate your carbon output, and there are three scopes of measurement:

Scope 1.

The actual carbon a business burns, such as gas usage for premises and vehicle fuel.

Scope 2.

Indirect carbon such as electricity usage, although if you use 100% renewable electricity this counts as zero.

Scope 3.

Everything else upstream and downstream such as business travel or transportation of goods. Every item has a carbon value from its production. This means EVERYTHING.

If every single business measured everything, then suddenly it would become a lot easier. Expect regulation in the not-too-distant future which demands that every single item lists its carbon rating – just as we

have the traffic light system on food today.

Once you know how big your carbon footprint is, and what is driving it, you can take action to reduce it. Set a target with a plan to achieve it. Make it stretching but realistic. As sustainability becomes ever more prevalent, consumers, businesses and staff will only want to engage with those taking action, so don't leave this too late.

Keep tracking and keep taking actions to reduce. Once you get down to the last 10%, then, certainly, go and plant some trees.

Here are four quick wins:

1. Switch to 100% renewable electricity. You immediately score zero on scope 2.
2. If sales staff are still travelling to press the flesh, encourage them to embrace teleconferencing technologies. The emission savings are remarkable.
3. As your fleet of vehicles comes up for renewal, consider switching to electric.
4. Consider business travel – do you really need to take that flight? Implement an HR policy which makes remote connections the default and travel the exception.

In summary, don't wait around – start your plan now. Don't worry about what China is doing – focus on what you can do.

Do it for the planet. Do it for your children. Do it for your business and staff. If you don't embrace Net Zero, you will have no business left in less time than it takes a sapling to grow.



NEIL BRADBROOK

Managing Director of Ahead Business Consulting.

Neil Bradbrook is an expert in adaptive business strategy and managing change, whose career includes senior roles at General Electric, RBS, and Santander. He formed Ahead Business Consulting in 2019. It helps leaders plan, implement, and engage their customers and staff to drive greater success. Prior to this, he led a 160-strong team, transformation, and digital innovation consultancy, growing it from £11m to £23m.

For further information, contact Neil Bradbrook, Managing Director, Ahead Business Consulting, Armont House, Falkirk FK1 5SL. T: 0333 444 4123. M: 07971 954573. W: www.aheadbusinessconsulting.co.uk.



Where we care about each other

Lara aged 5, Chunyi aged 11, Thami aged 5 & Alfie aged 7

BSB Primary School has the warm, cosy atmosphere of a small school, yet benefits from the resources of a large school.



Visit us Britishschool.be