

Roundtable: Core Competencies for Sustainability Professionals

What Educational Background and Job Skills Do They Really Need?

Ask a sustainability coordinator what he or she did all day, and you'll get a host of answers: met with the university president, talked to the facilities folks about new initiatives, helped students organize an awareness drive. Inquire again the next day, and the response will be entirely different. Beyond "pitching in where needed," what exactly is in a sustainability professional's job description? Do skill sets required by the academic sector differ from those necessary in the corporate world?

Sustainability: The Journal of Record brought together sustainability professionals from both spheres to discuss what prospective hires need to be able to do, why they really should get paid to dream big, and whether their educational pedigree should include an M.B.A., a Ph.D. in environmental science, or just good people skills. Excerpts from the conversation follow.

Job Responsibilities

Dave Newport: What do you feel are the sustainability professional's primary job duties?

Cindy Pollock Shea: The primary job duty is to catalyze the development and implementation of more sustainable policies, practices, and curricula throughout the university.



Dave Newport

Dave Newport: What does that mean in terms of what you do after you get to work in the morning?

Cindy Pollock Shea: To foster sustainability across the campus, I am involved in functional areas like high-performance buildings; energy, water, and materials efficiency; purchasing; transportation; curriculum development. I work with a broad range of partners across the campus in a collaborative way to brainstorm and vision about how well the university can function now and in the future.

Judy Walton: I would use the exact word that Cindy did: catalyzing. Catalyzing change on campus is probably one of the most significant job duties of the coordinators—and to coordinate activities that relate to sustainability and really trying to shift the campus in a more sustainable direction, which often involves more than just tweaks and minor changes, but involves a very systemic overhaul of the campus operations and curriculum and administration.

Marsha Willard: We at the International Society of Sustainability Professionals probably take a broader view than we've talked about so far. When we think about sustainability professionals, we're not sure that it is a job, but probably encompasses several different career tracks or specialties. It might include a generalist within an organization whose job it is to spearhead the implementation of sustainable business practices. But we also might be talking about consultants who assist both colleges and private industry and government. We're talking about government workers who do this not only within their organizations but in their communities. We're talking about community developers. And then we're also talking about specialists within the field who might specialize in energy or transportation or facilities and buildings.

Terry Link: There are two kinds of primary duties of a sustainability coordinator. One is to keep the attention on the whole. Everybody, at least on campuses, is involved in the parts. A sustainability coordinator has to keep the focus on the whole. The second function overall is the connecting of the networks and building the networks so that the whole is actually talked about from a variety of perspectives at the same time by a wide range of people.

R. Warren Flint: Sustainability practice is a collaborative activity that assesses plans, implements them, and coordinates and monitors and evaluates options and services required to meet an individual or group's or community's socioeconomic as well as environmental well-being needs using a whole host of different kinds of tools and methodologies to achieve appropriate outcomes.

Participants

Moderator

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Rick Woodward: From a corporate perspective, it really seems to me that it breaks down into two different components. Mostly I work in facility maintenance issues with facility maintenance product manufacturers and customers.

But there are two different perspectives. One is the strategic perspective, the decision about a company adopting sustainability objectives and the ability to deliver on those as a strategic part of their go-to-market plan, and then the second is the tactical implementation of those objectives, which is much more the 'get your hands dirty' stuff.

In my role, the critical issue is my ability to help the leadership team develop a strategic plan, communicate a shared vision, and help define what sustainability means throughout the organization and identify the opportunity both for the organization and the stakeholder, and then ensure that there are plans in place or mechanisms in place to create value up and down the supply chain, whether it's vendor-facing activities, customer-facing activities, or internal operations.

Scope of Sustainability

Marsha Willard: Most of the people in our organization would assume that when we use the term "sustainability," we are talking about social, economic, and environmental issues. Certainly in private industry and in government, those are all three critical considerations.

Dave Newport: Comment on this specific notion of labor practices as it relates to campus personnel, and whether or not in the course of your professional activities you've had occasion to weigh in on this issue.

Cindy Pollock Shea: There is a role for the sustainability function within an institution to get involved in the economic, the environmental, and the social. What that means in terms of the quality of the professional life and remuneration for that life on the part of campus employees is varied. It relates to the wages, it relates to the working conditions, it relates to the food and transportation modes that are available for people while they're present at that workplace. Even if you're talking about the economic and social, I don't think it's singularly related to what the wage is. I think it's a broader quality of work life range of opportunities available to people to do meaningful work in a healthful way that advances overall sustainability objectives.

Dave Newport: It sounds to me as if that description—this much broader notion of social sustainability, as you've described it—would transcend the organizational type and be applicable within a private-sector organization, local government, or campus equally.

Judy Walton: We've been giving a lot of thought to this lately at AASHE with the development of a sustainability assessment system called STARS—Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System. We've covered all three dimensions of sustainability—the social and the economic and the environmental. It's surprising that many people weren't aware that sustainability covered all those dimensions, including social justice issues.

Sustainability professionals may define their jobs differently, but many strongly agree that unless all the components are considered, then you're simply doing environmentalism, for example, or one aspect of sustainability.

Marsha Willard: If we look at sustainability coordinators, no matter which industry they're serving in, it is pretty important that they bear in mind the full complement of issues that define sustainability, and that does include social aspects, which take into account employee issues, customer issues, community member issues, and all critical stakeholders. There are some benefits to doing so in terms of policing your stakeholders and attracting and retaining the best employees.

Evolution of the Job

Dave Newport: I sense you're correct, that we are focusing on sustainability coordinators. There's all manner of sustainability coordinators at all manner of levels within an organization.

Marsha Willard: In the International Society of Sustainability Professionals, we have members that represent all business sectors and come into the field from a real variety of directions. We certainly have a number of people who would call themselves sustainability coordinators or directors and work in-house. We also have people who are consultants both in the general arena around sustainability and also specifically around particular technological assistance programs, like energy management and facilities management and building.

We have people that are working in government. We have people that are working in and with communities, because now there are whole communities that are adopting sustainable practices, and any number of other fringe relationships that we've got. I know of at least one Realtor who's specializing in marketing and selling green property, and so is that a sustainability professional? We've invited people like that into our fold. I think we're finding that the profession as we're defining it is very broad and multifaceted.

Dave Newport: Years ago when we started talking about this, as it relates to organizations, the sustainability person was singular. We all said then that, over time, it needed to morph into being part of everyone



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in the organization's job descriptions. It would appear that what you're saying, Marsha, is that that's happening, is that no longer is there just, as there is an HR department, a sustainability department, that the sustainability functions are now integrated across the value chain and the supply chain and so forth and have become much more integrative with ongoing operations.

Marsha Willard: I agree with that as the appropriate trending, that that's where we want to be, that it becomes part of everybody's job. I'm starting to see it a little bit as we work with members and other organizations that become members, but I wouldn't say that we're there yet. There are still people in organizations who carry titles of sustainability coordinator, but if they're doing their job well, they're probably involving facilities managers and human resource managers and purchasing managers and all of that and teaching them about how sustainability integrates with the work that they do, so that eventually most of the sustainability coordinators I talk to talk in terms of working themselves out of a job in the near future.

Designated Professionals

Dave Newport: Judy, is it your observation that sustainability is becoming more embedded across the professions and occupations in higher education, or is it a standalone one-man band?

Judy Walton: We may be trending there, and it's ideally where we want to go, but we're just beginning to see that. We're seeing a very strong interest in developing job descriptions with sustainability in them. What we see are a lot of people doing it voluntarily as part of their job, sustainability champions across campuses, but it's not in their job description. So there's definitely an interest in embedding more of that in job descriptions.

Dave Newport: Cindy, I know you're very effective at your job, and therefore you have converted many people at the University of North Carolina to sustainability. You're no longer a one-man band. Is that true?

Cindy Pollock Shea: That is true. I think that there will be a continued and ongoing role for a point person focused on sustainability. But obviously, that individual cannot implement all of the various aspects of sustainability within any restrictive institution. The role of the designated sustainability professionals are to provide the leadership and the vision to other members of the organization, obviously developed in consultation and collaboration with those others, and then to plan on how to accomplish that vision. There needs to be a broad look at how an entity is functioning and how all the different pieces can play a role in advancing sustainability.

Some of the other areas that the sustainability function needs to perform is to educate members of the campus community, not necessarily in the traditional sense of education, not always sitting in a classroom developing a curriculum, but a lot of what I focus on with professional development over the years, enabling our professionals, whether it's in facilities planning or energy management or food procurement or purchasing, whatever it is, to understand sustainability goals and objectives and how those can be incorporated into a particular field.

Having great oral and written communication skills are essential. You need to be able to make the business case, so you need those quantitative and financial analysis skills. You need to be able to persuade people. It's really important to be familiar with a wide, wide range of subject areas—not an in-depth expert, necessarily, but knowledgeable about the vocabulary and the issues that are important to people working in particular subject areas.

Then you need to be able to directly supervise the staff that you may have and to market the successes of the program so people are aware of the accomplishments achieved to date.

Dave Newport: Terry, what can you add to that answer? I know you've got special skills and you've seen this industry evolve for quite some time. Where is the trend going on your campus?

Terry Link: I don't mean this in any disrespect, but I don't think any of us know what the heck we're doing. That's a good, honest first place to begin, because what we need is a transformation, not a tinkering around the edges, but a total transformation of how we organize ourselves to accomplish what it is we want to accomplish in the world.

When we can create the environments that nurture the space for many others to come together, then we're moving in a direction that we have to go in. Otherwise ... I think we end up defending turf spots as opposed to opening up the creative possibilities that are out there.

My campus is probably somewhat similar to other campuses. There are large pieces of sustainability being addressed by many more people on my campus, but there are still very few, just a couple of people, myself and a couple others, who are trying to always bring the other pieces into conversation at the same time. That's still the real challenge, to think about the reverberation of the choices upstream and downstream in time and space across generations and geographies to make sure to minimize the possibility that we're going to do some damage that we really wouldn't want to create by the choices that we make.

Cindy Pollock Shea: One of the ways that many of us now are starting to view success is that there are



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R. Warren Flint

sustainability initiatives starting up spontaneously in many areas of our institution that we haven't had to directly nurture and light the fire for, because, as Terry said, we're frequently the ones bringing the multiple silos together. But when those different components of the silos start working together themselves without our intervention, that is a manifestation that sustainability is really taking hold.

Dave Newport: It's good news and bad news. I love seeing volunteers, ad hoc groups sort of coming. On the other hand, it sometimes becomes a coordination issue because we start getting in each other's space, and we've had issues along those lines.

Rick Woodward: I've had several conversations about this recently, because so many organizations have identified an opportunity for marketplace differentiation and a wide range of other opportunities to embark upon a sustainability program. Interestingly, the differentiation seems to be whether or not they've identified a leadership role within their industry as a part of their objective is one of the big drivers about whether or not they believe they need a dedicated professional at an executive level within their organization or whether or not they can rely on consultants and people with particular sets of technical skills that relate to their industry.

So we compare and contrast how this role would work. A really good model is employee development. Within most corporate organizations, managers have a responsibility for employee development, developing the new leaders in the organization and developing those leadership skills, while it's not necessarily part of their main functional specialty, that they're coaching and identifying opportunities for them to integrate new skills. Sustainability awareness and incorporating sustainability decision modeling into their process is very similar to that.

At some point, the sustainability folks are facilitators. As the information changes about what our sustainability-preferred options are for materials or transportation, organizations will always need someone to play that role and to be kind of the gut check on does this really constitute sustainability or is this a greenwashing activity?

R. Warren Flint: From an academic perspective, it is great when the different players begin to work together, especially if they do come from completely different silos, and I wouldn't say as much as the problem may be getting in the way with one another as it is in my experience is that the administration is not on board. The people who make the final decisions and who set the strategy and so forth are really not on board, so it's just a continual frustration.

I'd like to put out a caution. And I think this applies not only to communities, the grassroots arena, but

also to employees in the workplace, whether it be an academic setting or whether it be a corporate setting. I think much of the sincere concern that people show today for the future and our children's children and those kinds of things is certainly a factor that motivates people to use the word "sustainable." But they look at it as an adjective, and I get concerned about that. And then, on top of that, I often experience a situation, especially in communities where somebody will make reference to environmental sustainability. And in my thinking, sustainability does not have an adjective associated with it. Sustainability is directional. I surprise people often when I'll say, honestly, that of the three components—environment, society, and economy—if there is now not social equity in existence within people within a community, even within a corporation, that leads to conflict, and that conflict is over natural resources in some fashion, one way or another.

To me, the foundational component of sustainability is probably the equity issue of whether everybody has equal access to something, and that something usually is natural resources or some other aspect of the environment. The conflicts that can arise from that are really what drives sustainability, and yet you rarely hear people either in the academic setting or even in the community setting coming forth and saying, 'We're concerned about our neighbors and whether they have the equal opportunities that we do,' and that kind of thing. Until those discussions enter into the arena, we're still going to be falling a little bit short, and honestly, I'm at this point not quite sure how to stimulate that.

Core Competencies

Dave Newport: If you had to design a sustainability coordinator or a sustainability manager for your organization or for an organization you're familiar with, what might that person's background look like in terms of their academic training, and what would they be good at? What would they need to bring to the table as essential skills in order to, first, from their background, understand the work, and secondly, to implement that work?

Terry Link: They need a good liberal arts background, interest in and an introduction to a lot of different disciplines and ways of looking at the world. They could have a degree in just about anything—philosophy, art, engineering, business, social science.

They have to be incredibly good communicators. They have to be the kind of person that exudes trust because they're building relationships all the time, so they have to have a personality that nurtures that. They have to be inquisitive. It would be helpful if they were fun and able to see connections in some way



and to be able to voice those in an articulate way to the other players, and to be able to throw out good, provocative questions to help people think through the complexities that are staring them in the face.

Judy Walton: This discussion was on the campus sustainability coordinators' listserv recently, and it generated quite a bit of discussion that mentioned that most often, the skills mentioned in job ads for sustainability coordinators emphasize the technical skills needed, and most of the people who wrote in said, "That's not what I needed for the job."

It's interesting that many people's background is a liberal arts background, not necessarily a technical background for the job. Probably the ideal background is one that's broadly liberal-arts based. The skills needed for the job are communications, social marketing, and being a change agent and encouraging others to do the same, building alliances and spreading awareness, and catalyzing programs. Those are not necessarily the technical skills that some people envision as primary in a sustainability professional's job.

Marsha Willard: I'd also add organizational development or organizational change theory because sustainability is really an organizational change initiative. That means being savvy about how business systems work and how people interplay with the organizational psychology piece of that.

In addition, if the coordinator's job is just that, to coordinate and manage this effort, then a good sustainability coordinator must have some savvy around management systems—about how to use metrics and reporting and communication and tracking to be the overseer of all of that.

Lastly, you need to be a good systems thinker, because sustainability is a complex systemic issue and understanding how it plays out into all aspects of an organization takes a particular systems perspective.

Dave Newport: How is this different in the business world?

Rick Woodward: It can vary somewhat depending upon whether you need to demonstrate quantifiable value creation in the short term. Currently, the folks that have functional responsibility in these companies haven't yet evolved a decision modeling that incorporates sustainability, so the ability to articulate the value created within the supply chain, and particularly for that organization, is critical.

One last skill set needed in a for-profit enterprise is strategic thinking.

Credibility within the boardroom is somewhat dependent upon some business credentials. In most

cases we're finding that the people who have these, at least at an executive level position, tend to have advanced business degrees, M.B.A.s in particular.

R. Warren Flint: Most important is systems thinking. In terms of preparation background, they can come from any disciplinary study, as far as I'm concerned. Some things that come to mind, though, is an integrated environmental science background, being able to understand, for example, what the scientific method is, not how to practice it, but at least understand what it is, because so much of solutions to sustainability are based upon science and technology in one degree or another.

Beyond that, critical thinking is a key with people wanting to do well and make major contributions in this field, and their ability to improvise and adapt and innovate, and even dream up still more visionary yet real ideas about how to transform global societies and, at the same time, revitalize ecosystems in trouble. It's a pretty big order.

I have this little adage: understanding the connections, which is systems thinking, and considering the choices we make so that we don't have unintended consequences. Somebody who thinks and who has an ethic and a philosophy along those lines could fall into a sustainability professional category.

Cindy Pollock Shea: Professional background can be from any discipline, but I think it needs to be interdisciplinary so that people have been exposed to the economic and environmental and social context, and, ideally, have a variety of perspectives that may come from living in different places or looking at comparative policy analysis.

Some of the important individual attributes are being able to connect the dots, to introduce people from one area to people in another, to identify training programs that might be helpful, to identify programs that exist out in the community that they can link people to. They're a broker of ideas and of networks.

One of the reasons I love working in sustainability is that I think people working in the field need to have a propensity to share information. Future orientation is important. A lot of people see the world the way it is. As we talk about seeing the future and being change agents and thinking out of the box and dreaming, one of the things that sustainability professionals bring to the table is identifying what isn't and could or should be.

Behavior Modification

Dave Newport: When I've been asked these questions historically, my answer to this is, I don't run a recycling program. I don't run an energy conserva-



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tion program. I don't run an alternative transportation program, I don't run an environmental science program, I don't run an environmental justice program. I run a behavioral change program, and that there's some product of all the competencies in the programs we do are measured by the behaviors we change either in our leadership or in our constituency or in the broader community.

Is the aggregate of core competencies you all have mentioned really focused on creating behavioral change? Is that the outcome that sustainability professionals, be they singular coordinators or more broadly defined, should measure our effectiveness by?

Marsha Willard: Especially in an organizational setting, one of your biggest levers is to change the systems and the practices and the infrastructure to achieve results, whether people's attitudes have changed or not. Ultimately, I'm about behavior change.

Rick Woodward: Pathways are different. If I meet with the CEO of one of my vendor partners and I can articulate a vision for his organization based around sustainability and their ability to help me meet my downstream partner sustainability, then I've got behavior change, and I've used a dollar bill to do it.

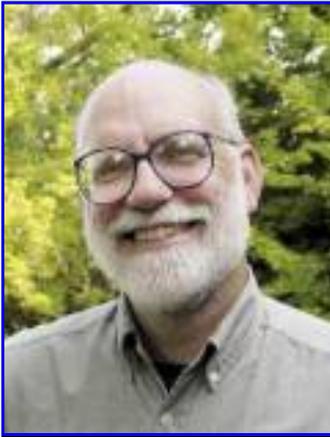
Terry Link: We're talking about transformation of systems, transformations of the way we are in a social setting, not simply as individuals. The transformative part is part and parcel with the behavior change.

R. Warren Flint: My belief is that you don't legislate or mandate sustainability. It has to come from the bottom up, because we're all involved. And that comes down to behavioral changes on the parts of all peoples.

The big question right now is how do we do that? Do we do it from a scientific perspective? Do we do it from strictly a communication and cajoling kind of perspective? I think that's one of the big mysteries that's so important to solve here, is how do we reach the common person, even with the science? It's incumbent upon scientists to be able to make sure their message is receivable by the individual and the public arena.

Judy Walton: At AASHE, we talk a lot about changing the mindset, and that sustainability is a lens through which you see the world, which leads, of course, to behavior change. So chicken and egg, whether it's changing minds, leading to behavior. Sometimes changing behavior leads to a change in mindset. Both of those can lead to a change in systems and how we design the way we live.

Cindy Pollock Shea: Behavioral change is crucial. People need to become aware of what sustainability is and understand it and why it's important, and then either internalize it as an individual or institutionalize it as an organization, and once that happens, then you see behavior change related to decisions and investments and action and research and educational paths that people take.



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