

Defining and developing the corporate sustainability professional – *the practitioners' view.*

Global Association of Corporate Sustainability Officers (GACSO)

Introduction

The role of a corporate sustainability officer is emerging as a new and important role within corporations and one that has a subtle but important difference from the more established corporate social responsibility focus. The role, however, remains unclear. What is the precise contribution this role can make? What is the portfolio of skills required to succeed and what is required to make this is a rewarding and successful career? Who better to make a contribution to the answers than those who have worked in this profession?

Eighteen individuals working for UK and international companies answered these questions, all having worked in this role for all or a large proportion of their career. Together they bring 175 man-years to this profession. They have contributed to the creation of the Global Association of Corporate Sustainability Officers (GACSO), a small but growing group of individuals committed to help nurture rewards and effective careers in corporate sustainability.

The purpose of this paper is to present these answers and also describe the rationale and future operations of GACSO. It our intention that this paper will be updated each year by practitioners who have been exposed to the profession's changes and improvements and through their inputs, will become a contributor and supporter of the content of this paper.

The contributors were:

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What do we mean by corporate sustainability?

This group proposed the following definition:

Corporate Sustainability is the discipline by which companies align decision-making about the allocation of capital, product development, brand and sourcing with the principles of sustainable development, in a resource-constrained world.

The emergence of corporate sustainability came about because of the understanding that businesses, as well as governments and NGOs, need to adapt their operations to meet the global environmental and social challenges that we are facing with increasing urgency. Businesses that engage in sustainable development strategies are thinking about the long term and how global realities will affect the need for, or relevance of, their product or service.

The current state of play in the industry

There is a great deal of diversity in the role of a corporate sustainability professional and in the background and skills of the people who fulfil that role. This is illustrated by the findings of an informal survey of GACSO members: some have broad corporate experience, others are sustainability specialists and several have backgrounds in the NGO sector.

Within the role, responsibilities vary greatly. Some sustainability professionals have no budget at all, while others are managing a substantial budget. Some are Board Directors; others have three reporting layers between themselves and the Board. Salaries vary greatly too but are roughly commensurate with experience: someone with up to five years experience is likely to be earning below £50,000 whereas a professional with 10-20 years experience can command a salary in excess of six figures.

GACSO members report that opportunities for professional development are limited. Most don't have any relevant professional qualifications, although there is a growing appetite for structured CPD as the sustainability role becomes more complex and multi-faceted. Most people rely on informal networks of personal contacts when they need advice on the development of their career. Opportunities for career progression are also seen to be limited: most people expect to move to another organisation as the next step in their career, suggesting that opportunities for progression within organisations are hard to identify or poorly defined.

The need for codification

There is currently little consensus about what the sustainability role involves and what makes a good corporate sustainability professional. The lack of a clearly defined skill set prevents effective recruitment and frustrates the development of compelling career paths in this field.

The aim of codification is to help sustainability professionals demonstrate and enhance their skills and develop their careers and to help HR departments, board directors, recruitment professionals and business schools understand what kind of person they need.

Our view of the key skill sets for sustainability professionals is set out in the next section. This represents the 'gold standard' towards which a competent sustainability professional would be working, although it is unlikely that any one individual would be able to demonstrate all these attributes. It is intended as a framework to help individuals assess and develop their own skills and to assist with structuring a larger team.

In the future GACSO intends to help its members develop their skills against this framework, through exposure to real life career paths, access to established professionals, mentoring opportunities and accredited professional courses.

Key Skill Sets for Sustainable Development Professionals

Experience or current role

- Generally on an Operating Board or part of Senior Leadership Team
- Track record of achievement across several functions and markets core to the organisation
- Experience of a variety of financial responsibilities including direct P&L exposure
- Experience of leading a major change project within the organisation
- Has an "alternative" or "non-traditional" approach to business – comfortable with challenging the status quo or ways things are done.

Competency

Description or indicators

Expert knowledge

Has a profound command of the overall sustainability agenda, particularly the Big 5 issues of poverty, consumption, carbon, wellbeing and reforming economics, tracking their evolution and the interplay between them.

Able to analyse and interpret how the Big 5 and lesser issues could, and will, influence the core business and product offer of their company. Keeps fully informed about latest developments in sustainability thinking.

Leading people

Promotes excellence in sustainability thinking and works to raise the bar with key players and the organisation.

Creates a compelling vision that generates excitement and commitment and fosters innovation.

Demonstrates creative ways to build and sustain a positive climate for engaging on sustainability matters.

Shapes efforts of self and others towards common purpose of delivering sustainability strategy and programme.

Acts to reinforce sustainability vision and ensure people, processes and practices are aligned accordingly.

Articulate and creative communicator internally as well as externally to achieve recognition of organisation's thinking, vision and achievements.

Results Orientation

Creates environment in which current thinking, processes and methods of working can be challenged

Can focus energy and intellect of self and others on an issue or underperforming part of organisation.

Identifies and overcomes barriers to major change in thinking and processes within the organisation.

Develops stretching proposals but with workable plans to take the organisation out of Business as Usual into transformation territory.

Demonstrates entrepreneurial flair with drive, passion and energy to succeed.

Acting Independently

Demonstrates self-belief and resilience to enable existing thinking and processes to be challenged before being asked to.

Prepares self and own team for challenges ahead based on own vision.

Will take action to reposition self and other key roles to deliver transformational thinking as part of wider process of creating change in strategy or approach.

Able to hold firm to belief or decision that is right for the organisation even in face of potential personal cost.

Demonstrates high level of resilience in the face of challenges and setbacks.

Competency	Description or indicators
<p>Impact and Influence</p>	<p>Demonstrates extremely strong ability to persuade, convince and influence others. Evidence of using differing approaches to win support, gain co-operation or overcome objections and barriers.</p> <p>Skilled at networking and using alignment strategies to secure support ahead of decision points and securing ownership and “buy in”.</p> <p>Uses in depth understanding of others to develop engagement methods in change - politically savvy!</p> <p>Acts to shape and steward other functions within the organisation rather than implementing projects in isolation.</p>
<p>Teamwork and Collaboration</p>	<p>Effective within “virtual” teams with high levels of ambiguity.</p> <p>Demonstrates support for efforts of matrix teams working across organisational boundaries to deliver new thinking and sustainability programmes.</p> <p>Identifies and involves the best talent in the organisation to achieve specific objectives - seen as the best virtual team to be in by others.</p> <p>Challenges silo mentality within the organisation.</p> <p>Builds teams within the organisation to drive change and operationalise sustainability outside of sustainability function.</p>
<p>Focused Thinking</p>	<p>Understands business areas/functions from an alternative sustainability perspective and provide a commercial angle to integrate sustainable thinking/acting.</p> <p>Conducts “breakthrough” thinking so bringing a totally new perspective to sustainability issues that are of significance to the organisation.</p> <p>Builds new models to explain situations, issues or to resolve complex problems.</p> <p>Creative about opportunities to align product or services with future sustainability challenges and can articulate these to others.</p> <p>Able to think through impact of critical forces shaping the organisation, its external environment and current sustainability challenges and be prepared to develop radical proposals.</p> <p>Understands complexity of decision making within own organisation and able to use these or alternative methods to achieve a viable and commercial end goal.</p>

Competency

Description or indicators

Information Seeking

Has a strong external focus, building and maintaining good knowledge of political/ economic/environmental/social/legislative forces and trends in operating sectors and geographies.

Seeks out and clarifies complex and conflicting data to provide self and others with better understanding of sustainability challenge in language organisation recognises.

Identifies commercial risks and opportunities in the sustainability agenda and communicates these commercially within the organisation.

Actively networks internally for strategic information and externally for latest thinking and data on sustainability matters.

Seeks out and brings to business breakthrough thinking and technologies to reshape the organisation.

Looks to work collaboratively with like-minded organisations and policy makers to shape industry wide initiatives.

Organisation Awareness

Understands and makes best use of power and political relationships within the organisation identifying key alliances and rivalries!

Understands and recognises reasons for long term organisational issues (past practices, culture, changing values, myths)

Comfortable not being restrained by organisational politics, recognising influencers and choosing how to act accordingly.

Understands current strategic direction and able to harness this and blend it with sustainability thinking to improve organisation's performance

Demonstrates in depth knowledge of organisation's operating environment but also able to capitalise on strategies and change from other sectors.

Commercial Awareness

Demonstrates in-depth understanding of the commercial impact of the overall sustainability agenda.

Acute awareness of the financial and commercial impacts, both long and short term, of the organisation's evolving sustainability strategy.

Developing People

Creating conditions and programme for the next generation of sustainability thinkers and leaders to be developed within the organisation.

Enabling an "edge" to future sustainability leaders is honed by providing external challenges and experiences.

Looking to the Future: the role of GACSO

The world of Corporate Sustainability is a crowded space, and yet none of the existing organisations have as their primary focus the development of the profession itself and the empowerment of professionals. This is the role that GACSO aims to fill.

What GACSO is -

The Global Association of Corporate Sustainability Officers was established in late 2009 with the aim of enhancing the effectiveness, influence and careers of corporate sustainability professionals.

Who we are -

Started by a small group of sustainability professionals, GACSO was created for the profession, by the profession. It represents companies with a combined turnover of £160 billion with offices across the world. GACSO members include both established senior professionals and the professionals of tomorrow.

Why GACSO?

We have come together because we believe there is an urgent need for -

- A clear definition of corporate sustainability, to act as a clarion call for businesses and professionals looking beyond CSR to the wider challenges of a sustainable future.
- Better information for board level management about the role that sustainability professionals can play in creating business value in the short and long term.

- Definition and codification of the skills (technical, managerial, attitudinal) that a sustainability professional needs. This codification should then be used as the foundation for tools to support effective recruitment, training and career progression.
- Improved structure and coherence within the industry, in order to achieve greater professional recognition for corporate sustainability officers.

We will do this by -

- Providing members (and the wider profession) with a clear consensus description of the role and its impact on the wider business.
- Codifying the knowledge and skills required to work at the highest levels in corporations, purposefully aligning their interests with those of sustainable development. This paper represents our current view and will be revised as we extend the conversation to a wider audience.
- Tracking key trends in corporate sustainability careers and providing members with access to career pathway data and mentoring opportunities.
- Providing industry leaders with a 'safe space' in which to discuss the development of the profession and a mechanism to support the next generation of sustainability professionals.

GACSO is 'work in progress' and we need your active support to develop the best possible offering for members.

What we need -

Members: GACSO is actively recruiting for members to help build the capacity of the organisation to act in support of the corporate sustainability profession. Annual membership fees are currently £360.

Intellectual input: We need help in refining the definitions and skills sets for sustainability professionals, and further input into future iterations of this paper.

Organisational support: We are looking for back office support for GACSO to provide the services needed for our members.

A platform: GACSO needs a higher profile to appeal to a wider group of sustainability professionals. We are looking for opportunities to speak at events to engage with the profession.

Links to Human Resources professionals: We recognise the importance of working with the HR function of companies to help build a common language around corporate sustainability in the definition of roles, recruitment, remuneration, career-pathing and progression.

International links: GACSO is based in the UK but aspires to support corporate sustainability professionals around the world. We would like to hear from organisations in other countries that might want to work with us.

Funding: GACSO is a registered charity and we are looking to raise funds to cover the costs of running the organisation