

# Assessing the assessors

Sustainability consultants can help you learn the lay of the land as you try to save the planet

By Corey Van't Haaff

**M**ake no mistake: the field of sustainability is big business, but who exactly is throwing a hat into the ring? The line between green and green-washing isn't always obvious, and education might be the only clear answer. The question is, Who do you turn to in order to get that education?

The problem might be pretty simple to some: we are using too much energy and creating too many greenhouse gases (GHGs). But the means to deal with the problem aren't always as easy. The low-hanging fruit – the easy fixes – will help the environment a bit, but in the long term, you need to develop a strategy to accomplish greater goals.

You can do it for humanitarian reasons, to be socially responsible, and that may be enough for some, but not for everybody. From a business perspective, the debate also has to centre around a reduction in costs. Together, cost-savings, social responsibility and environmental protection are a three-pronged approach that will work.

"The issue is not about saving the planet. It's about saving yourself and creating a sustainable world where people flourish," according to Erich Schwartz, president of Greenomics, a consultancy company focused on the business of sustainability. "In order for that to happen, business needs to flourish. I've travelled the world. There are shanty towns with squalid con-

ditions that are actually sustainable. Their environmental footprint is very, very small. Are they flourishing and achieving their potential? Absolutely not. Sustainability is creating an environment where individuals and businesses flourish."

You'll probably need help getting from point A to point B on the journey to sustainability and there are a broad range of consultants available for every need. A lot will do GHG assessments. You need to understand how much GHG you create, how much you want to (or must) reduce it by and how to accomplish that.

Beyond that, Schwartz says, businesses need a strategist-type of consultant who can help determine where the company needs to be and what behavioural change needs to be created to deal with the social pressures, look at the opportunities and mitigate risks to maximize value for the shareholders.

"Quite often, people don't know what to do. There's a lot of confusion about what is sustainability. Ask two people; get five definitions," he said. "The consultant should be immersed in the field of sustainability and know the issues, who is doing what and which regulations are coming."

Often, in-house staff members are too busy doing their own jobs to become experts.

"Embracing sustainability isn't someone saying swap out light bulbs. Paper, electricity, water, getting to work – they are



very, very complex issues," said Schwartz.

"Hiring or changing someone's title to the environmental manager is like the kiss of death. It's dismissed by other people in the company – the green guy," said Schwartz, adding that consultants need to get buy-in from the executive team, which delivers the company-wide message "sustainability is important to us." The consultant implements the structure, implements the change and helps the company move forward, faster.

Consultants have to pass the sniff-test,

says Schwartz. If you get a bad vibe, find someone you think you can work with. There has to be a focus on sustainability, of course, but he or she also needs to understand how to run a business.

"If someone comes across as a save-the-planet type, it should give you some concern as they may save the planet at the expense of your company," said Schwartz.

Some questions to consider when looking for a consultant are:

- What is their experience? Have they prepared a business case before?

- How do they contribute to a company's goals? Do they provide recommendations for short-, intermediate- and long-term benefit?

- How do they plan to transfer knowledge? It isn't enough to write a policies and procedures manual to support a project. People have to understand it or the report will get buried on a shelf.

"If you go down the sustainability route, it's important to understand the commitment. If you don't understand it, you won't be in business in 15 years." ■



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