

Analysis: careers - Sustainability specialists gaining ground

Posted by [Claire Manuel](#) [1] on Jul 8, 2013

There are signs of a growing specialist market for senior sustainability roles

According to Forbes' latest "10 jobs that didn't exist 10 years ago" listing, sustainability experts are up there with social media managers and app developers.

Currently, corporate responsibility and business sustainability roles are often filled by internal candidates who already have an understanding of the organisation they are in and make the step sideways or upwards into a sustainability role. In a recent [survey](#) [2] by Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, more than half of respondents came to their current position from inside the company.

"Professionals in corporate responsibility most often have experience in an area related to corporate communication, followed by time spent working in education, government, and/or non-profits," says Colleen Olphert, BCCCC's director of membership and member services. The report examines salaries, job satisfaction, professional development and motivations of people working in corporate responsibility roles.

Shannon Houde, founder of Walk of Life Consulting, an international career coaching business focused solely on this sector, agrees that many companies are filling roles from within the business rather than seeking expertise from outside. "Companies figure that sustainability issues can be 'taught' but that understanding the business's products, services and key stakeholders, as well as knowing how to navigate and implement change across the politics of a company, is best done by an 'insider' who knows the landscape and players already," she says.

Consequently, those holding such posts come from myriad backgrounds. There are senior individuals in place with backgrounds in a huge range of specialist areas, from accountancy and finance, to ethics, corporate governance, environment, engineering, marketing and communications, according to Paul Gosling, managing director, UK and Europe, of recruitment specialist Allen & York.

"Often, the most important factor is not the specific qualifications individuals have but their ability to understand and assimilate a range of inter-related and complicated factors, put these into a commercial and business perspective, then communicate this both internally and externally," he says. "Therefore, while there is no such thing as a 'typical' background, knowledge of how business works is critical to understanding the levers to pull to get positive change happening."

Career path challenges

A wide variety of positions exist in corporate responsibility, but not a high number of them, Olphert says. There is no defined career path, unlike for other well-established business functions. "Survey respondents report a scarcity of roles in corporate responsibility and highlight the need to gain experience in other areas of business before moving into these positions," she explains.

Gosling believes that individuals start with a passion and relevant qualifications, but move first into a more operational role. "They then look for ways to increase their exposure to relevant issues and gradually move into a more focused role." He says that other common routes are through a consultancy business or a background in the third sector. "In a way that arguably was not the case in days gone by, working in a charity or NGO can provide a strong set of skills, which are then valued by corporate organisations," he says.

To succeed in this field in the future, a more focused approach may be necessary. Houde says that careers in this sector are becoming more niche. "The more that you can develop specific expertise in

one or two areas, such as water, human rights, supply chains, the better off you will be," she says. "The market is getting less charitable in terms of allowing career changers into it as there are now good numbers of solid candidates already working in this space. We see on average 100 applications per role."

Links:

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

[2] <http://bit.ly/1bOmuac>