Building more sustainable businesses in a post-Covid world

By Robin Fisher   10 Jul 2020

Over recent months the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that as humans we are all connected. There are also parallels with the climate emergency we are facing: both require a global response, long-term thinking, and businesses to play their part.

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Lower levels of air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions due to reduced travel and commuting may be of little comfort in the midst of a global health crisis, however, it is important to recognise the potential of what can happen when we do work together. For too long many companies have ignored the environmental impact of their actions and dismissed sustainability as optional. As businesses we talk a lot about the importance of stakeholders – including employees, partners, communities – but there is no greater stakeholder than the planet.

At this point in time, talks have somewhat shifted from when will we open to how can we open. As businesses across different industries move into this phase, there is a unique window of opportunity for firms to act to inspire and unite people for a cause, while rebuilding existing policies and processes with sustainability in mind.

Reopening safely

As we look to the second phase of this crisis – recovery and reopening – return-to-work readiness will be crucial. While the initial phase required a rapid shutdown, and the ability to make decisions quickly, this second phase will need to be more structured, strategic and gradual. As government guidance develops and changes, businesses will need to adapt accordingly, and technology will continue to play a key role in keeping people connected, supporting leadership decisions, and helping organisations adapt to change.

All kinds of businesses have already had to shift, scale and adapt their products to work in new ways, and the technology sector has a responsibility to support. Never have things like data availability and the ability for teams to collaborate on a problem in real-time been more important. Shift management and compliance to new health and safety regulations compound the imperative to digitally transform in the face of this pandemic. There's an ongoing need for tools to help communicate with agility.

Technologies to put sustainably at the heart

On top of this, there is a real need for more sustainable work practises and a rare opportunity to implement them as businesses rebuild in a post-Covid world. Integrating technology into sustainability processes can help businesses maintain visibility over their own impact and offer the highest levels of accountability to employees, customers and stakeholders.

For example, understanding carbon emissions from energy usage and company travel can be daunting for businesses, not to mention time-consuming. By combining data-driven insights and carbon accounting technologies into a dedicated platform for sustainability, organisations can efficiently quantify their carbon footprint and create an environment where they can begin to understand their own impact.

Utilising data is critical in the journey to corporate sustainability. By mining and publishing data-driven insights businesses can prove their commitment to carbon-conscious and sustainable practises to both internal and external onlookers such as regulatory agencies, as well as using them to take action. Data visualisation is a very useful way to evaluate corporate environmental impact, track energy patterns and emission trends, and importantly help to make the sustainability business case to executives. Once an organisation understands its own impact on the environment, decision makers can begin to create roadmaps and programmes with the environment at the heart.

Other sustainability initiatives to consider

It is not enough for any company to only think about its own footprint, only through catalysing global systemic change can we hope to reach a 1.5 °C future. To deliver unprecedented, timely environmental action, we need to achieve new levels of collaboration among businesses, NGOs, governments and other institutions on a global scale.

Collaborative initiatives have been rising over the last few years and are now more important than ever. Some examples of these include, 1 Trillion Trees – pioneered by the World Economic Forum and key invested partners – seeks to connect, empower, and mobilise a global reforestation community of millions, unleashing their potential to act at an unprecedented scale and speed to ensure the conservation and restoration of one trillion trees within this decade.

Additionally, one of the most powerful tools businesses have to drive change is voice. This could mean committing publicly to the Paris Agreement of aligning to a 1.5 °C pathway, writing open letters to government backing recovery plans to build a more inclusive, stronger and more resilient economy or joining influential climate advocacy events such as LEAD on

Climate 2020. The May event brought more than 300 companies together digitally and helped unite them to look at their systems and agree to build back better after Covid-19.

The environment should be a key stakeholder for every organisation. Business can be a great platform for change and encourage employees, citizens and future generations in taking action to help make a more sustainable climate. Businesses need to prepare for their future under the context of the new normal. Ultimately, what this means is figuring out how to not just replace what was there before but to take time to use innovative technologies to build a better future that respects the environment and the future of the planet.

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