Unleashing Human Potential Through Green Initiatives

By Joe Carroll, CMF, SPHR

IST Management Services

It was the publication of Rachel Carson’s book, Silent Spring, in 1962, that helped usher in a reawakening of the green movement and a renewed focus on protecting the environment. Going green focuses on clean air, clear water, protecting the spotted owl and a myriad of other environmental concerns. Sustainability may include green initiatives, but delves a little deeper into the social and economic impact of our decisions to go green. For example, drinking fluoride-free water may be considered a green initiative, but if the manufacturer left a huge carbon footprint in delivering the water to our shores, it would not be considered sustainable.

The gold standard in any green initiative or sustainability is to ensure a positive, long-term impact on both the species and the planet. If we achieve this standard in the office environment, it can help unleash an avalanche of human potential. Let’s assume the following caveats concerning sustainability as it relates to work:

1. It is an effort to tap into today’s resources and technology without compromising the needs of future generations.

2. It creates a flexible work environment that is more tuned-in to the human psyche.

3. It strives to create an environment that is fun, fair, meaningful, and creates a positive impact both in the office and at home.

4. It maximizes the human potential by aligning talent with the needs of the company.

Use Technology and Save Trees

There is no doubt that using technology to reduce the use of paper and save thousands of trees is a green initiative that will last for generations. The problem is that the world has been talking about the so-called “paperless society” for the last fifty years. It is estimated that it takes about
a half a tree to make 10 reams of paper. Nearly 4 billion trees are cut down throughout the world expressly for the paper industry. Trees are important and we need to keep more of them around. Among other things, they clean the air, provide oxygen and cool the streets in our towns and cities.

What can an office do to reduce its use of paper? They can either buy software or create software to eliminate the need for paper. For example, most companies have a hiring process in place. It typically includes completing an employment application and perhaps twenty or thirty additional forms for new hires to land safely on the payroll. Why not invest in an applicant tracking system or a human resources information system? Today’s workforce is totally computer literate and automating the human resources functions is something that companies can do today in a heartbeat. Besides saving trees, your company will eliminate file cabinets, off-site storage expense, reduce expenses, and missing forms and files will become a thing of the past. In addition, there are some document management software programs specifically designed to manage and automate a law firm’s legal documents including collaboration, document searching, versioning, comparison and audit history. The proper use of technology can provide companies with a differentiator while eliminating the anti-green costs of managing a paper system.

**Create Flexible Work Environments**

In addition to technology, flexible work environments can go a long way in improving our green initiatives and can have a powerful, positive effect on the human psyche. If we go back about 150,000 years ago, humans were hunting in the fields and scavenging for food to survive. Our natural habitat did not have the constraints of four walls and a desk. It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that people starting leaving the farms and seeking office employment. We were, therefore, accustomed to working in an exciting, adventurous, open, strenuous and dangerous environment. Contrast that to our work environment today that is often in a brick building, artificially lit, cooled and heated. We are confined to a cubicle with occasional breaks for the bathroom, lunch or coffee.

If we want to take sustainability seriously, we need to be a little more flexible in our work environment. The options are numerous and include things like flextime and remotely working from home. Less use of the car will help to eliminate the carbon footprint due to oil and gas usage. It will also have a positive impact on the paycheck and less trips to the gas station.

Some may view these types of arrangements as having an adverse impact or productivity. Let’s face it, if we have a laptop, phone and internet connection, we can work from anyway. Depending on your function, some people will always need to be in the office. However, there is tremendous room for accommodation and flexibility on this front.
Establish a Fun Culture

In addition to flexibility in our work environments, it is also important to establish a culture of fun in the office. Employees need to laugh and have fun. We are one of the few species on the planet that have the innate ability to laugh. In some offices fun and laughter may be an indication that people are just goofing around and not getting the job done. However, there is ample evidence to support that fun on the job increases productivity and job performance. We are already accustomed to time off and relaxing through paid vacations. We understand the value of this benefit. Why not extend it in some way to the office environment? Throwing parties, contests, and other group events allow employees to laugh, relax and have fun. Most of us will spend about 100,000 hours in work-related activities. We need to start creating those corporate sandboxes and start playing in it.

Finally, aligning talent with the needs of the company is probably the biggest contribution we can make to sustainability because it impacts the lifetime of a human being. Winning organizations have figured out how to align talents, skills and interests with the jobs and responsibilities that exist in their companies. Too often companies rely on their training programs to bridge the gap between employee skills and the needs of the company. While training can have a very positive impact on the company’s performance, it cannot be viewed as a panacea. There is rarely post-training follow-up and we often assume that the employees are eagerly using their new-minted skills. The problem is not necessarily training, but a misalignment of talents and job requirements. It is a mistake to box people into jobs that do not tap into their talents and skills.

Sustainability initiatives come in many shapes, forms and colors. Going green in the office is not just about recycling, energy efficiency and reducing the carbon footprint. As we strive for quality of air and water, we should also strive for the quality of life in the office. As Alexis Carrel once said, “The quality of life is more important than life itself.”

About the Author

Joe Carroll is Vice-President, Human Resources for IST Management Services headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia. IST is a privately-held, facilities management, technology and e-Discovery company. Joe is a certified career coach, speaker and author of How To Get a Great Job in 90 Days or Less. Joe can be reach at 404-582-8859 or Joe @istmanagement.com; www.istmanagement.com.