



The Value Proposition of a Sustainable Degree

By Ted Mero

Brigitte Bavousett is the first-ever student to graduate with a degree in sustainability. The event was even the subject of a newspaper article that appeared when the pioneering student received her master's degree from Arizona State University in December 2008.

Surely in a world moving toward a more sustainable future, the first accredited graduate in the field could take the professional realm by storm, picking and choosing from the endless suitors knocking down her door.

First up, dinner with the CEO of an oil company who read the article and praised the recent grad for her accomplishment. "I asked him, 'Are you hiring a sustainability director?'" Bavousett recalls. "Oh no," he said. "We tagged our environmental compliance guy to do that."

The CEO's response is hardly uncommon, as Bavousett and those who've followed in her footsteps have discovered. And as sustainability programs continue to develop and expand throughout the country's colleges and universities, those who enter the field must build a knowledge-base and skill set that is not only practical, but marketable, as they look to overcome the instinct of business to tackle its sustainability goals and challenges with in-house employees.

Finding the Right Fit

Elizabeth Heid is a matchmaker. The Chief Executive Officer of Green Jobs Outsourcing Brokers, Heid serves the greater Denver area in uniting companies and potential job candidates in the expanding green economy.

Heid says it is a little too early in the game to deduct the value of a sustainability degree; the limited number of degree-holders in the field provides too small a sample size to assess any real trends. She does agree, however, that the more a graduate knows about sustainability, the better off he or she will be in finding a match.

"From a general perspective, I would say it's very helpful for people to have knowledge of the industry, to understand the terminology, and to understand the difference between the different types of energy efficiency," Heid notes. "As we move forward, having a (sustainability) degree will be looked upon very favorably. I'm just not sure that is right now."

One of the reasons businesses aren't gravitating toward greater sustainability efforts is the fact that the concept is typically viewed in environmental terms, as part of the highly publicized green movement. Everyone would love to help the environment, but how does it help the bottom line?

Bavousett, who studied psychology and theatre as an undergrad, was not sure what to expect when she entered ASU's sustainability graduate program; she, like so many others, just knew she wanted to make a positive impact on the environment in some way.

"In my first class we were flat out told, 'If you're a tree hugger, you might as well leave the room because you're not going to be able to work in sustainability,'" Bavousett says. "That floored me. I learned you have to understand the economic and societal implications of every decision that's made."

By the time she completed the program, Bavousett had a more well-rounded understanding of the subject, realizing that a multidiscipline approach was not only critical to attacking sustainability problems, but in landing work. Her skill set led her to a part-time position as a carbon offset program manager for U-Haul, where she is helping with research and development of a 15-year carbon sequestration project. The rest of her time is dedicated to various freelance assignments, typically picking up gigs as a sustainability consultant for businesses ranging from food producers to construction companies. One recent job was at S-Bar Foods Co., a leading manufacturer in processed meats, performing sustainabil-

Global Institute of Sustainability/Arizona State University



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ity walkthroughs at their Oklahoma plants and helping them develop and implement a plan of action for a more sustainable business.

Bavousett says one of her biggest keys to finding steady work is keeping an open mind when searching the market for potential employers. "Just be open to any job assignment, no matter how bizarre," Bavousett advises. "The construction company I worked with seemed so unsustainable, but it ended up being an amazing experience to work with them. Just go to the interview, even if you want to say no. You never know what may happen."

For many employers, like the CEO of the oil company, it is simply easier to assign staff members to do the sustainability work, particularly for small-to medium-sized companies, which are not large enough to support a sustainability manager on the payroll.

"Smaller businesses are looking to have everyone in the company learn and understand sustainability," Heid says. "The larger companies are the ones that need a (sustainability expert) because the experts need to train everyone else in the organization."

Bavousett could not blame the CEO for staying in-house, and says she sees the positives and negatives to both sides.

"The advantage (of hiring within) is that you have a guy who knows that company, and you can send

them off to conferences to learn about sustainability, and learn through trial and error," she says. "But they don't have that background with the whole multidiscipline approach to the problem."

Expanding the Bottom Line

That multidiscipline approach is critical to breaking the traditional business mindset of companies that concern themselves solely with profit margins, as the bottom line expands to include environmental and social impact. (See Figure 1.)

Businesses that figured this out 15 or 20 years ago have a head start on adapting to a new world order. The green movement may be a sexy marketing campaign, which has seen businesses across the board hop on the bandwagon to promote their green products or practices, but the motivation is often driven by the dollar signs.

InterfaceFLOR, an innovative carpet tile company that started in the 1970s and pledges to eliminate any negative environmental impact by 2020, has long been embedded in a culture of sustainability. The company believes the way its product is made is just as important as its design and style.

George Bandy Jr. was hired as the company's manager for sustainable strategy after a similar role at the University of Texas-Houston. He worked in the sustainability field before the topic was mainstream and knows that change comes slowly, especially with businesses long-entrenched in the status quo.

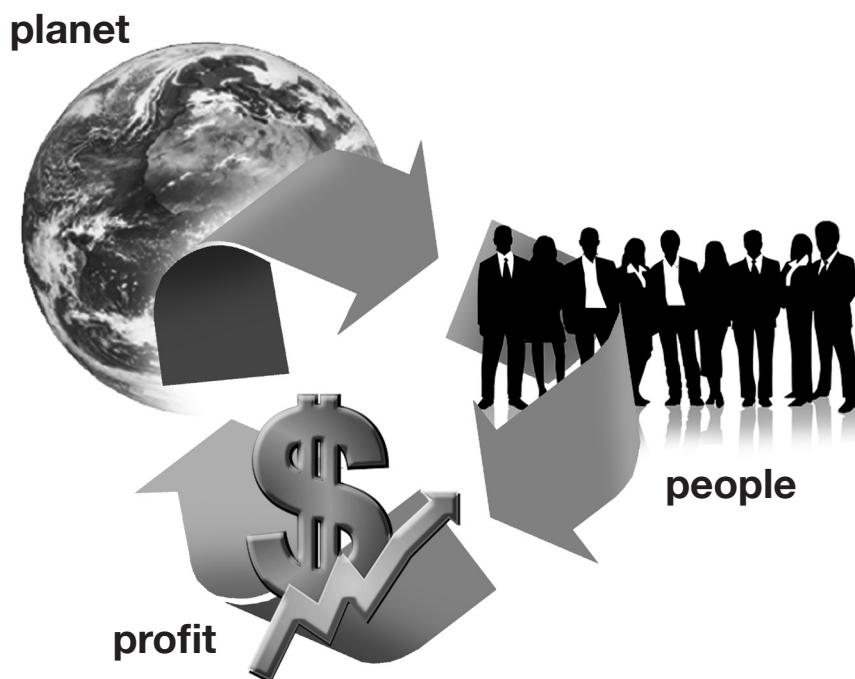


Figure 1: The Triple Bottom Line

"The next generation of high school graduates knows more about sustainability than a lot of professionals," says Bandy, now Interface's vice president. "That scares me. But it also excites me because I know that the wave is coming." That tide comes with a new generation of customers who are no longer simply looking for affordable, quality products, but ones that are made with a conscience.

"It's not that other companies or educational institutions have shamed companies (into changing)," Bandy explains. "Customers are demanding it. It's not good enough for us to just have the best carpet tile anymore. Now customers are asking the second question: What are you doing socially? Environmentally? Does your product emit greenhouse gases? Can it be recycled back into itself?"

Those businesses with a strategy to satisfactorily answer those questions are the ones that will prosper moving forward.

Entrepreneurs Steering the Ship

Those organizations without a sustainability plan may do well to start looking at the campus in Tempe, AZ. Bavousset's degree from Arizona State was just the beginning for the school's Global Institute of Sustainability, where a widening crop of students have graduated since, armed with a mindset to find practical solutions for economic, environmental, and social challenges.

The program is more action than theory, with students immersed in projects that prepare them for the professional world and also gear them toward addressing sustainability concerns in the here and now. The school's entrepreneurship program was created to address problems both local and global, and many of the students who've followed in the footsteps of Bavousset entered the program to create business models rooted in sustainability.

Mark Sholin, for instance, is the cofounder and general manager of Pragmatic Energy and also the creator of the BioHydrogenator (BHR), a product he says could revolutionize how food and beverage manufacturers manage their wastewater. The BHR is still awaiting patent, but Sholin's business is making headway after winning \$10,000 in funding from ASU's Edson Student Entrepreneurship Initiative. But that's just the beginning for Sholin and his team, who are working their way through business marketing competitions and building relationships with potential business partners along the way.

"We've got about a dozen different companies enthusiastic about the idea and giving us different feedback about what they'd like to see happen," says Sholin, a first-year Ph.D. student. "That \$10,000 is a great start, but we need more

money to build our next generation of prototypes, optimize them accordingly, and scale them up. Ultimately we need to treat 100,000 gallons of water per day."

For Sholin to convince prospective customers and funders to support his cause he must be able to communicate with individuals from a wide array of disciplines and illustrate how ideas can translate into opportunity. "It's really important to have a clear deployment strategy in sight," Sholin says. "A road map from the lab to the real world, so people can see some kind of benefit from it."

While Sholin's academic background is based in engineering, many of ASU's Edson finalists reside in the School of Sustainability, painting a picture of where the future of sustainability experts may be headed.

"We don't need more people with opinions; we need action, we need results," says Mats Lederhausen, the former global head of strategy at McDonald's and founder of BeCause, a company whose mission is "building businesses with a purpose bigger than their products."

"We need more entrepreneurs, more people that can start successful business models and actually do this stuff. ... I'm looking desperately for solutions and it's really challenging."

Lederhausen created BeCause in large part because he was tired of talk. He spent 15 years of his career frustrated with how capitalism had taken a turn from starting with an idea and doing something worthwhile for society—to turning a quick profit. "I think it's morally wrong, but also, it just doesn't work; it's shortsighted."

From Wall Street to Ghana

Thirty credits shy of graduating with his finance degree, David Metoyer was lining up a summer internship at Merrill Lynch, where his friend worked as a fund manager, but his concerns about the position grew as the market dwindled. Metoyer called his friend to ensure they still had a spot for him upon graduation. "He said, 'Yeah, David, we'll be able to plug you in.'"

In the summer of 2009, as the market continued to struggle, Metoyer called his friend again. "Actually, David, I'm packing up my office right now," his friend told him.

With his future as an investment banker in question after nearly four years of schooling, Metoyer needed to know why. Oil was \$140 per barrel, Americans could not afford to pay their mortgages, and the market was crumbling. Metoyer connected the dots

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and determined it all stemmed back to patterns of behavior that were entirely unsustainable.

Metoyer decided there was a greater need for sustainability coordinators than another stockbroker on Wall Street and delayed his graduation to pursue a degree in sustainability, with a focus on international development, through ASU's GlobalResolve program.

Two years later, Metoyer is now in Ghana working on one of three business models. This business involves a product called the Twig Light, which transfers leftover charcoal from cooking into a source of light and electricity. Metoyer was asked by fellow ASU entrepreneurs to join the project thanks to his finance background and assigned to develop a business plan on how to market the product.

"In business in the United States over the last few decades, we've been able to develop and implement technology, but we don't necessarily understand the outside effects of what we're doing," Metoyer

explains. "Countries are looking at the U.S. as an example, but our resources are dwindling. If the rest of the world tries to develop like the U.S., it's not going to happen, and we're going to have a major shortage crisis on our hands."

That's why the Twig Light project, which aims to manufacture and sell its product in Ghana, is so critical, Metoyer says. It will reduce the developing world's reliance on American aid and help them become more self-sustainable as a result.

For Metoyer, this is a far cry from the ways of Wall Street and the career he once pursued, and it is a reminder that the mindset of American business must make significant changes in order to flourish in the future.

So where do the graduates of sustainability fit in?

Says Metoyer: "American business over the last fifty years asked, How do we develop the system? Not, How do we maximize efficiency when the system is in place? Now that's our job in this generation."