



# TRAINING A GREEN WORKFORCE

By Jenni Jarventaus



## WORKPLACE LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE PROFESSIONALS ARE HELPING EMPLOYEES LEAP ONTO THE GREEN BANDWAGON.

What a decade ago was merely an environmentalist's daydream is now slowly becoming reality: Thinking green is becoming mainstream. Thanks in part to the public awareness campaign by former Vice President Al Gore and to the manifest signs of changing weather patterns, the need to protect the planet's natural resources is on the agendas of governments and businesses alike.

The current green movement's agenda is calling for tougher action and developing practical ways, such as carbon-neutral products and services, to initiate change. Many corporations are extending their green policies beyond operations to influence suppliers and consumers.

In the absence of strict government mandates regulating emissions and other hazards, many organizations have begun their own training and educational campaigns to reduce damage to the environment.

Skeptics may dismiss the corporate green wave as mere "green washing,"

but signs indicate that the phenomenon will bring about real changes. During the last three years, green businesses have been growing at a rate of 5 percent annually, according to Green Economy, a Boston-based workforce development firm.

In the United States, there are now 1,000 office buildings that have been certified "green," and the list grows by 100 a week. The number of "green-collar jobs," such as installing solar panels, weatherizing buildings, and farming organic products, is growing. Environmental consulting firms are competing fiercely for engineers, information technology professionals, and environmental scientists.

Organizations are finding that sustainable practices not only enhance their reputations, but can act as new, lucrative business opportunities. As General Electric CEO Jeffrey Immelt has put it, "Green is green."

Whatever their motivation, an increasing number of corporations are not only implementing more



environmentally sound business practices, but also are developing training programs to get their employees on the environmental bandwagon.

### **Making the business case**

Until recently, sustainable development initiatives, common in Western Europe and many other parts of the world, were often dismissed as hopelessly quixotic ventures in corporate America. For years, environmental proponents discussed the frustration of trying to “make the business case,” notes Meredith Armstrong Whiting, senior research fellow at the Conference Board and co-author of a recent study, “Managing for a Carbon-Concerned Future.”

“The good news is that the business case is now much easier to make,” Whiting says. “For instance, energy costs used to be strictly operational; they never made it into the overall budget. Now, more and more companies are looking at energy costs as potential cost-saving opportunities.”

CEOs are paying attention to sustainability because they realize that there are limitations to the amount of raw materials available, and because financial institutions are questioning them about their contingency plans in face of climate change, according to Carol Singer Neuvelt, executive director of NAEM, a Washington, D.C.-based not-for-profit consortium of environmental, health, and safety managers.

Through her work with NAEM, formerly known as the National Association for Environmental Management, Neuvelt witnessed a dramatic increase in the amount of communication and training activities that focus on organizations’ environmental goals. Corporations are now aware that they are not only responsible for what comes out of their factories, but that the activities of all employees contribute to the organizations’ environmental footprints.

“We see a lot of programs that are based on sharing rides, working from home, recycling, community activism, and the like,” Neuvelt says. “There is a concept now that employees are vested stakeholders in the organization, and they are concerned about having a progressive company that cares for its environmental stewardship.”

A survey conducted in March by Adecco USA attests to the phenomenon. Out of more than 2,400 U.S. workers surveyed, 52 percent thought their company should do more to be environmentally friendly while only 22 percent thought their company already does enough or too much. Thirty-three percent of those surveyed considered an employer’s eco-friendliness to be an important distinction when looking for work.

### **Riding the green wave**

Driven by strict environmental regulations, Western and Northern European companies have so far been a few

steps ahead of their global peers in both developing green products and involving their employees in environmental programs.

DHL Express Europe, which has operations in 28 countries, has run a six-step environmental program across Europe with local officials and environmental managers since 2002. In December 2006, the company launched a carbon-neutral product line called GoGreen. The GoGreen shipments are carried out as normal, but after delivery, their environmental impact—the car transport, sorting, long-distance flights, and distribution—is calculated with a software program that takes into account all emissions released during the shipments. The customer can then offset the emissions with a fee that will help fund internal and external carbon reduction projects such as alternative fuel vehicles, solar cells, and reforestation projects.

To market GoGreen, the company has designed various training programs, including web-based training, for its salespeople. The training starts with facts about global warming, why it is a concern for the company, and what programs the company has in place to fight it. It also distributes information on carbon neutrality and the Kyoto protocol, the international treaty on climate change.

“We think it’s extremely important to show that we have done our

homework,” says Jens Bruno, environmental manager at DHL Express Europe. “The salesforce needs to be able to bring the message to the customers and present it in a proper way by knowing the arguments.”

The company also has a general environmental training program for all its employees. Key personnel are selected for more extensive training at the GoGreen Academy—a four-day training regimen that includes numerous assignments on sustainable business practices. It will be expanded to countries outside Europe.

### Changing the culture

Many organizations are finding the greening process to be arduous and slow. Surprisingly, even in environmental organizations whose mission revolves around sustainability, training employees to work in greener ways can be challenging.

“When I started, I thought this was going to be easy,” says Elizabeth Baer, an organizational sustainability specialist at Conservation International, an environmental not-for-profit based in Arlington, Virginia.

“We start with the benefit of an educated workforce that has the mindset that the environment is important. But people here, as in any other organization, have been doing things the same way for 30 or 40 years. It’s an issue of breaking a habit and changing a business culture,” says Baer, who

## E-Learning as Green Learning

Some forms of training are more environmentally friendly than others, and some e-learning providers are using this technology as a marketing tool to entice enviro-savvy clients. Arguably, e-learning is more environmentally sound than traditional training methods. While it takes electricity to run computers, e-learning doesn’t involve sending people to an off-site classroom by emissions-spewing planes or cars. It also creates less paper waste and doesn’t require heating and running separate facilities.

In April, e-learning provider SkillSoft launched a campaign in Europe that marketed e-learning as a green training alternative to 9,000 organizations. The company has yet to launch a similar campaign in the United States but has begun marketing efforts.

“It seems that a trend has caught up with our product,” says Julie Ogilvie, senior director of corporate marketing at SkillSoft. “As opposed to us driving it there, the demand is coming from the market, especially from certain geographical areas and companies that tend to be more sophisticated about their public image.”

Ogilvie views the green training initiative as another way for the training function to emphasize its position as a strategic business partner. “One of the things we’ve heard in the last few years from our clients is that training is looking to become more closely aligned with business strategy. It turns out that this is a perfect fit: Trainers get to contribute to the good of the world and also to the company’s public face,” she says.



manages all of the organization's internal sustainability initiatives, including employee training.

Environmental education is often scattered among different departments. Baer's position is a case in point. Initially, a quarter of her time was managed by HR, while the rest was managed by the conservation and business section. Recently, her position was moved into the organizational development and training department.

"Over a couple of years we've come to the conclusion that this work is very closely tied to training and learning," Baer says. "We made the change because we wanted to make sure that the messages about greening were going to be worked into everything—that when leadership talks about sustainability, it isn't just in the financial sense but is included in sustainable business practices and human resources."

### Stepping up in America

Changing the business culture can pose a formidable challenge, but some very prominent companies are nevertheless abandoning their use-and-throw-away policies in exchange for more sustainable practices. Not long ago, the simple thought of retail goliath Wal-Mart and its 6,600 big box stores was enough to make environmentalists shudder. The tide turned a few years ago, when the world's largest corporation embarked on what has since been titled the biggest corporate greening in history by

committing to using renewable energy, reducing greenhouse gas emissions at its stores and distribution centers, and investing \$500 million in environmental improvements each year.

Wal-Mart's green initiative also affects its 1.8 million employees. The company recently launched a voluntary program called personal sustainability projects, associate-driven efforts through which Wal-Mart and Sam's Club staff develop individual goals to incorporate sustainability into their lives, according to Andy Ruben, Wal-Mart's vice president of corporate strategy and sustainability. The projects, which will roll out this year to the company's 1.3 million U.S. employees and will eventually expand to its international stores, include recycling, developing healthier diets, using eco-friendly products, and cleaning up parks and recreation areas.

Some of the company's best green ideas come from associates, Ruben says. "For example, a cashier suggested using the large cardboard compactors that were already in stores to incorporate loose plastic, which created the 'sandwich bales' that we recycle today." The machines have already saved the company more than \$28 million. Another associate from Burlington, North Carolina, recommended removing all light bulbs from the vending machines in store lounges as a way to reduce energy consumption—a simple action that will save the company \$1.2 million each year.

Such measures illustrate why so many corporations are now training their employees to go green: It not only motivates employees and improves the company's image—it also can improve the bottom line.

Home Depot recently kicked off a green captain program, an initiative through which the company's "green leaders" help other associates become environmentally aware. The company also organizes a "Scream If You're Green" contest to encourage associates to live environmentally sustainable lives.

Caterpillar, which has implemented rigorous greening measures in the last few years, is developing an e-learning environmental module. Caterpillar University's strategic learning manager Frederick Goh, who represents the learning and development function in the corporate sustainability strategy team, says that employee learning is identified as one of three critical success factors in ensuring implementation of the company's sustainability strategy.

"I think it is an excellent opportunity to promote learning and development's contribution to the sustainability strategy," Goh says.

### Raising awareness from the start

For companies that market themselves as environmentally friendly, training employees on green issues starts during the interview stage. At Aveda, one of the first cosmetics companies to endorse the Coalition for Environmentally

Responsible Economies (CERES) business principles, candidates are required to learn about the company's environmental mission and how it permeates the company's business strategy.

"People have to evaluate for themselves whether their values will fit the company's values. And quite honestly, they don't always fit," says Mary Tkach, executive director of earth and community care at Aveda.

During the onboarding stage, new hires learn about the company's history, culture, and environmental and community programs. The company is currently launching a new training program that Tkach calls "sustainability 101," which will be introduced to all employees in the near future.

"We've recognized that people don't really have a basic understanding of earth systems and sustainability issues. I think this will get everybody into the same ballpark so they can make better decisions in their jobs."

At Toyota Motor Sales USA, new hires complete an orientation that includes presentations on the company's environmental ethics, goals, and programs. "It's a question of how you bring new hires into the fold and get them infused with a lot of the intangible issues that pervade the company. For us, it's a matter of just living it," says Mark Yamauchi, facilities operations manager at Toyota Motor Sales USA's headquarters in Torrance, California.

The employees at Toyota are involved in waste reduction, recycling, and energy conservation efforts. The company's Think Green! program includes volunteer advocates who educate co-workers on sustainable practices.

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"One of the interesting findings is that the champions come up with all these great ideas about things such as using less water and turning off lights," Yamauchi says. "Other programs are coming down the line but right now we're just trying to keep them focused on waste reduction and recycling. We're trying to make sure that we're taking one step at a time."

As the creator of the popular hybrid car Prius, Toyota has invested heavily

in greening construction and renovation projects. The Torrance complex has one of the largest commercial solar panel systems in North America. The site also conserves 11 million gallons of drinking water annually and produces no landfill waste. The 5,000 employees at the complex are educated about waste reduction and recycling, and the company also helps them recycle household waste. According to Yamauchi, the company is considering a method to disseminate information to employees on not just global warming issues but also on actions they can take outside of the office.

"There's a lot of confusion because what the associates may be doing at home may be different from how we do things here at the office. We're trying to do our part to help get rid of some of that confusion and raise their awareness in their home lives as well," Yamauchi says.

#### **Implementing incremental steps**

While learning initiatives in most companies still focus on incremental changes, such as increasing recycling, reducing waste, and conserving energy, those activities will contribute to strategic change, according to NAEM's Neuvelt.

"The issue is to move from an incremental approach to one that understands the entire footprint of the organization," she says. "It means taking a look at the programs

# Ten Tips for Eco-Friendly Training



**Avoid travel.** Traveling is the biggest polluter related to workplace learning. When possible, organize in-house training, using local trainers. Use e-learning and video conferencing to train geographically dispersed participants.



**Meet close.** Choose a location that's close to as many attendees and trainers as possible, and choose a venue and hotel that are accessible by public transportation or shuttle services.



**Use paperless technology.** Use new media and electronic technology to cut down your paper use. Scan and post online as much of the training material as possible. Communicate with attendees using email or by posting messages on a designated website. Offer electronic registration and confirmation.



**Encourage use of public transportation.** If there are no bus or train connections to the training venue, help attendees organize car sharing.

**Lighten your stay.** Choose a hotel that offers a linen and towel reuse program and bulk dispensers for shampoos and soaps.



**Avoid excessive printing.** Have all printed materials published on recycled paper and print on both sides of the paper, using vegetable-based inks. Recycle and reuse paper and office supplies.



**Practice the three Rs.** Ask your hotel and meeting venue to provide reduction, reuse, and recycling services for paper, metal, plastic, and glass.

**Eat green.** Ask your food and beverage provider to include vegetarian meals, using local, seasonal produce. Ask the vendor to use bulk dispensers for sugar, salt, pepper, cream, and other condiments. Request reusable serving utensils, napkins, and tablecloths.

**Save energy.** Turn off lights, monitors, and air conditioning when the training space is not in use.

*If you cannot avoid traveling to an off-site training location, use these tips, provided by the EPA, to make the sessions more environmentally friendly.*

**Save energy.** Coordinate with the meeting hosts to ensure that lights and air conditioning will be turned off when rooms are not in use.

we have in place and translating what we do from a process perspective into individual behaviors that work to minimize waste, reduce water use, and change the way we work.”

Whiting, of the Conference Board, draws an analogy between the current organizational greening efforts and the safety movement of a decade ago.

“The safety movement started with intense training for employees that

led to a zero tolerance of accidents. There have been enormous strides made in that regard,” she says, predicting that the same kind of philosophy will work on the energy efficiency and recycling movement. “In fact, we already see signs of it happening,” she says. **T+D**

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