

Green is in, but is it perennial?

 By [Peter Townshend](#)

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The greening revolution is a fad, and the term "greening" is a fatuous one. These are probably not words that you would expect from a "greenie". However, the truth is that "going green" has come to mean very little in the corporate world where the term "return on investment" will always be king.

Despite this, the green movement is going for gold and there are numerous studies that show the growth of the green sector, including a recent study by McGraw-Hill, that states that green building is, "rapidly taking hold in South Africa, with its share of firms that are highly dedicated to green building growing at a faster rate than in any other part of the world."

The study shows that the average green share of building project activity in South Africa in 2012 was 31%, with the majority of growth in the sector as a result of it "being the right thing to do".

Yet, is it "the right thing to do"? The answer is both yes and no. There is no doubt that a well-executed greening plan has real benefit. However, if this is not integrated into a more meaningful sustainability plan, the real reduction of impact is minimal at best.

Concentrating on sustainability

A large number of companies realise this and are concentrating significantly on "sustainability", a far more encompassing term that can result in real change and makes the greening efforts inherent within it meaningful and impactful.

Perhaps semantics, or pedantry here, are out of place. I would say not. The more we call for real, sustainable change, the better. Changing to energy saving light bulbs should not be seen as a greening initiative for which companies should receive credit, but should be seen as a basic obligation, a duty, a minimum. Not something you do to "go green". Similarly, recycling should be seen as a moral obligation, not something for which a pat on the back is deserved.

So, where does that leave companies who truly want to make a difference in ensuring they minimise their impact on the environment (and too often forgotten) the people within it? Waiting for legislation is clearly not the right thing to do, as we all wait in anticipation for the effects of 2015's carbon tax, the consequences of which have already been felt with ArcelorMittal's shares dropping by 6% in February this year following the announcement of the tax in Pravin Gordon's budget speech.

To truly "go green" in 2013, a company needs a comprehensive sustainability plan that critically accesses the organisation's impacts and contains detailed implementations that aim to reduce these. It needs to look beyond investor

relations, stock value, and customer opinion. It also needs to look beyond "greening" and deeply investigate the company's social impact, which often is an extrapolation of its environmental impact - you seldom come across a company with an excellent and meaningful corporate social responsibility record and a poor environmental stance. Society and the environment can no longer be separated.

Having said all this, we need to start somewhere and for companies who are now, commendably, if not a little slowly, looking at their sustainability, "greening" is good place to start and "green" initiatives can be quickly implemented that also show a return on investment.

Power and heat generation

A quarter of all global greenhouse gas emissions come from power and heat generation. While transport accounts for 14% of greenhouse gas emissions. So these are two key areas where companies like starting their greening initiatives, followed by water and waste management, and rightly so.

Yet there are so many other avenues to explore. Greenhouse gas emissions, of which carbon is seen as the devil of emissions, despite the perhaps more pressing concern and danger of methane - the real Mephistopheles of emissions, is only one aspect, though an important one, of becoming sustainable.

Few companies, however, look at their corporate real estate beyond energy consumption and water and waste management. And when they do, they only look at direct solutions: light bulbs, daylight harvesting, alternative energy, etc.

Companies need to look at how they can reduce their impact far more holistically, and an excellent place to start is with their staff. Offices, are after all, merely structures that unite a workforce and provide staff with facilities to enable them to work productively. Productive staff are clearly better for a company's carbon footprint than unproductive staff - yet few companies make this link and concentrate on reducing emissions by changing their buildings as apposed to changing the mindset of their staff and the way they work.

Changing the way we work can have a meaningful impact on a company's environmental impact. Underutilised workstations, for example, are a potential source of energy savings. Because many office buildings are only 40-50% occupied, this creates the opportunity to reduce the number of workstations provided. By reducing the number of workstations, you are reducing the space you occupy, the cost of maintaining this space in both financial and resource terms and you optimise your workflow. This can all be successfully achieved by adding flexible time schedules and shift management options; taking advantage of satellite office locations; eliminating unused workspaces; creating more integrated and multifunctional workspaces; and instituting a company bus service to allow for more off-site work.

It is by adopting initiatives such as these that will ensure sustainability and promote a mindset that goes beyond compliance and simply greening.

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