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The UK jobs market has been a tough place to navigate over the past few years, and environmental careers have not escaped lightly in the downturn. But there are strong signs we are turning a corner, and optimism is growing.

In this supplement we review the current state of the environmental careers market and look ahead to the coming year.

We talk to recruiters about the resurrection of traditional environmental roles as the construction industry revives and trade bodies tell us how individuals are becoming more mobile in the marketplace (p4).

We also give advice to those looking to switch to the private sector in an era of public sector cuts (p6) and take a close look at two key environmental areas: waste (p7) and sustainability (p10).

Isabella Kaminski, senior writer, the ENDS Report

This report has been produced in association with IEMA

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Environmental careers market bounces back

Optimism has returned to the environmental careers market. Traditional and emerging areas have both seen growth, finds Isabella Kaminski

Whether already actively hunting for a new environmental job or just considering a leap into the unknown, the message from specialist recruitment firms is overwhelmingly positive: the careers market is picking up again.

ENDS spoke to a number of environmental recruitment firms, which still have an important role in the green careers market. All said the market had improved noticeably over the past year.

The figures back this up. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills’s latest report on the UK’s low-carbon goods and environmental services sector shows it has risen continually over the past five years to reach £128.1bn in 2011/12 (ENDS Report 464, p37). And this shift is finally starting to be felt more widely.

The latest labour market report by the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) shows the number of permanent placements rising at the strongest rate since March 2010. Tom Hadley, the REC’s director of policy and professional services, says demand has definitely returned. “Before this was true of engineering and technology but now demand is spread across the whole market.”

The Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment’s (IEMA) latest survey of 2,120 practitioners shows unemployment among its own members is down by one percentage point to 1.4% in 2014 and suggests individuals are becoming more mobile.

Traditional roles

Recruitment firms have seen a particular increase in traditional environmental roles, such as brownfield land regeneration and environmental impact assessment (EIA), in the year. Adam Whitney, director of Evergreen, says: “A lot of it has to do with energy activity, for example wind farms and energy-from-waste plants. That’s been fairly steady throughout the recession. It’s now moving into oil and gas and infrastructure, where there’s a demand for senior positions.”

Whitney has also seen a surge in contaminated land jobs, such as remediation and site investigation, in the past six months. He says these had more or less disappeared during the financial crisis and links their return to the resurrection of the construction industry. Indeed, contaminated land overtook water and waste management as the principal service area for the leading 22 consultancies worldwide (ENDS Report 469, p17).

But water and waste remain significant areas. The Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM) has noticed a significant increase in water and environment vacancies from large consultancies, water and wastewater companies and local councils. It attributes this to a combination of recent flooding, the implementation of lead local flood authorities under the Flood and Water Management Act and the upcoming water asset management plan spending cycle.

Paul Gosling, UK and Europe managing director for Allen & York, notes that drought management and flood risk are particularly buoyant areas at present. “They always have been to an extent, but the recent situation has brought wider management issues to the fore. The jobs tend to be around flood risk management, particularly new developments or development projects. Sustainable drainage systems, for example, are being incorporated into new plans and developments” (see p6).

CK Science, which specialises in scientific careers such as renewables and chemicals, has seen a similar pattern. Operations director Liam O’Connell says: ”For a long time we haven’t had vacancies coming through for more senior roles but we are starting to now, which is good. People are becoming a bit more mobile in the market.”

But the upturn does not necessarily mean all these jobs are easy to fill, with the continuing gap in appropriate STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) skills and qualifications (ENDS Report 451, p36). Research commissioned by Scottish Renewables suggests half of Scottish renewable energy companies are looking to hire staff this year, but it is unclear whether there will be enough people to fulfil demand.

Hadley says: “For many of these roles it’s very hard to find the right candidates with the right skills, particularly in construction and engineering where there’s a specific skillset needed. Projects such as HS2, nuclear new build and fracking will be supplying jobs. The demand is starting to be created now but the short-term fix isn’t there.”

Gosling notes a particular problem with the engineering elements of land management. “There has been a skills shortage in this area for a while, but it has been papered over because companies weren’t recruiting. Now that they are looking to build and grow again, the skills shortage is coming to the fore. All roles relating to house-building skills are in short supply, particularly geotechnical engineering.”

It is also a big issue in newer technologies such as biogas and energy from waste (see p7).

Recruitment firm Acre has noted an increasing demand for supply chain and procurement specialists with knowledge of environment and ethical issues (ENDS Report 462, p39). Andrew Tew, senior consultant at Acre, says this is for “reasons of competitiveness as well as compliance. But there is a dearth of suitably qualified individuals: recruiting at a senior consultant level is difficult.”

Energy auditors

It is also a problem in energy. Cartland believes there will be increasing demand for energy auditors, which are already in demand. “Many companies are unprepared for the upcoming Energy Savings Opportunity Scheme (ENDS Report 463, p34) which will prompt mandatory audits for larger companies.”

Gosling notes that companies start focusing on energy management when they grow. “The best prospects are for energy managers with a specific area of expertise, business information knowledge or a building services background.”

Experienced senior energy managers may be like gold dust, but finding people at a mid-stage in their careers is a problem across the board. Part of the problem is attributable to the recession, when many consultancies cut back on their environmental graduate programmes and some people left the industry altogether.

Gosling says: “Some of the most difficult people to find are those with two to five years’ experience. There is a demand for people at this level, who have some project management skills but haven’t developed their career to the level where they can justify a much higher salary. But there haven’t been opportunities for people to start their career in the past five years, or they have moved away from it out of necessity, so there is a gap.”

Whitney agrees: “It’s not so easy to find people, especially with at least five years of experience. It’s a very niche market and they want someone with a consultancy.
background.” He says EIA skills, for example, are fairly generic and transferable, but companies often want someone with experience working on a particular kind of project. “People tend to sectorise. They’re looking for someone with industry contacts as well as technical skills, and who has a name in the sector.”

As a short-term fix, some companies are looking to bring people in from overseas. But this could become more difficult. CK Science’s O’Connell warns of an emerging scarcity at a lower level in scientific jobs. He puts this down to visa changes as there were a lot of overseas people in: “There aren’t enough UK graduates to fill those posts.”

At the same time, CK Science has seen a dramatic rise in UK consultancies working overseas. “There is work for people who are prepared to work in from overseas. But this could become more difficult. CK Science’s O’Connell warns of an emerging scarcity at a lower level in scientific jobs. He puts this down to visa changes as there were a lot of overseas people in: “There aren’t enough UK graduates to fill those posts.”

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Flexible working
Indeed, there appears to be a shift towards companies using more ‘flexible’ staff. These are not just temps or agency hires; they are also using skilled staff as contractors and interim managers.

“We have seen a five-fold increase in our contract and interim business,” says Acre’s Cartland. “These are marketplaces where that’s normal – for example in finance or IT – but the environmental and sustainability marketplace has been slow on the uptake. There is more caution in relation to hiring permanent staff since the recession and contractors offer companies the ability to expand and contract their workforce more readily.”

Hadley says this is not a new phenomenon and is partly the result of the recession. But he says the contract market is continuing to grow despite the improvement in the market and believes it is a longer term trend. “If you do want to take on somebody permanently it’s not easy and it can take a long time to fill that post. That speed of recruitment is one of the plusses for employers.”

It can also fit project-based work better. Interim management, for example, is increasingly being brought in to managed a specific campaign or project. It is popular as an alternative to traditional consultancy because it is cheaper and can provide staff with ultra-niche skills.

“There’s always going to be a need for flexible staff because of the nature of some of the work,” says Hadley. “Employers are quite keen to take on a person as permanent but it’s difficult.”

Alongside this there is a trend toward self-employment. IEMA’s 2014 practi-
Making the private sector jump

Leaving the public sector for a private company can be a challenge, but it is not impossible to make the leap and the benefits can be huge.

With the private jobs market looking increasingly healthy, many public sector workers will be weighing up their careers options.

Although ongoing public sector budget cuts and recent news about the environmental regulators slashing their jobs are clearly causing some jitters (ENDS Report 466, p11), there are reasons to be optimistic.

Hundreds of people have already answered calls for voluntary redundancies at the Environment Agency, Natural Resources Wales and Natural England (endsreport.com/43059).

But while some will be forced by circumstance to make the leap to the private sector, there are many other reasons why someone might want to move: to escape excessive bureaucracy, higher pay for similar work, even greater job security.

Tom Hadley, director of policy and professional services for the Recruitment and Employment Confederation, says many people are leaving the public sector voluntarily (see figure, p7). “The work culture is changing quite a lot and the ways of working are evolving, for example working from home and hot-desking, which doesn’t suit some people. There’s been a definite shift.”

Traditionally, the leap from the private to the public sector has been a difficult one to make. Adam Whitney, director of recruitment firm Evergreen, says that although experts in particular areas may packages are typical of individuals who have a niche skillset combined with a strong commercial mindset, for example, finance, innovation or business start-up experience. They are valuable if they can affect the bottom line.

Cartland notes that people in senior corporate positions need a broad skillset. “Ten years ago the chief financial officer didn’t need to know much about environmental issues. But these days they’re likely to be well versed, particularly on issues such as water stress in the developing world or issues affecting the cost of energy in the UK (see p70).”

“There has been an increase in people in those roles being recruited from non-sustainability backgrounds. Technical specialists tend to put themselves into too small a pigeonhole to be valuable to the business more widely. They need to look at it in a very holistic sense and show how sustainability can benefit the business. You don’t get that by simply focusing on environmental permitting.”

This trend is only likely to increase. The ongoing revision of the environmental management standard ISO 14001 is likely to put more emphasis on corporate supply chains and give senior management specific environmental responsibilities (endsreport.com/4144).

Indeed, IEMA’s practitioner survey shows that environmental management is now the most cited primary work area, overtaking health and safety management to capture 20.6% of members.

Overall, the picture is a positive one and should hearten jobseekers and those already advanced in their environmental careers. “A lot of consultancies had a good end to last year. There’s a general sense of optimism,” says Tew.
put off if somebody worked in the public sector but the candidate would have to prove some commercial nous.

Whitney says those who have managed it tend to have a more commercial role or had worked in the private sector before. He says it is important to have an understanding of what the commercial sector is like, with a sense of business development and how that role contributes to it.

Gosling says: “You can look at the generic set of skills you have and see where it is best suited: are they technically focused or strategic outward-facing ones? Also, not all roles within consultancies demand extreme business development skills.”

Some sectors are more receptive than others. Claire Poole, education and training manager for the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (CIWM), says there is a fair amount of movement between regulators and private companies in the waste industry, particularly for those with a few years’ experience as opposed to a whole career (see the next article).

Liam O’Connell, operations director of CK Science, says that in his company’s scientific field a lot of the work that environmental professionals do in the public sector tends to be fairly similar to private work. “What they need to get used to is a faster and more demanding pace of work. Work is done now; not later, and they have to be right first time – people who can deliver as a whole project not just part of it. Once they can adjust to that mentality they’re as good as anyone else.”

He notes that in the scientific field moving from government laboratories to the private sector is more difficult than pure research. “Companies will recognise particular skills and expertise in a relevant field but need to test people to see that they can adapt. So to get in people often have to take a salary cut and prove themselves over the first six months. Once people get their heads around the fact that they don’t have huge resources, tighter budgets and deadlines they’re OK.”

Hadley’s advice is to research what the market being targeted is like, what the key skills are and what the individual company and its culture are like. “Interviews at private companies can be very different, and even these are changing; for example, they are often competency based.

“We are seeing more of a role for specialised recruiters to provide that extra level of guidance on jobs and your CV. Some use their relationships with clients to say ‘this person doesn’t have the typical background but we think they would be good for the job.’”

Paul Seeley, director of Eden Recruitment, believes going through a traditional recruitment agency is not necessarily the best way to go about it.

“From an agency point of view, when we send a CV to a client it has to represent what the client wants. We have from time to time sent someone from the public sector to that kind of role with a client that really trusts us. But the best thing is to have a personal connection, to build up your own network.”

Gosling notes that public budget cuts are ironically opening up opportunities to support regulators’ work. “That’s creating an opportunity for consultancies to provide their technical and strategic services. Flood risk modelling, for example, is very much led by private sector development.”

It may well be worth making the jump, and it can be possible to get help from a membership organisation. James Thorne, IEMA’s head of membership services delivery says that, while there are specific issues with private or public sector roles, there are transferable skills in sustainability.

“IEMA’s role is to support people to show that they have these skills. We have networks to enable member to exchange information with each other. The most powerful support you can get is understanding how other people have already achieved it. If you’re transitioning, the best course of action is finding someone else who has done it and seeing how.”

Resourceful futures in the waste sector

A career in the fast-moving waste industry could be a good bet for specialists willing to keep on learning

The waste sector has changed nearly beyond recognition over the past decade, from a largely ‘hump it and dump it’ mentality to a highly technical and professionalised industry.

Alongside this change it has explicitly tried to position itself as the place to be for those in search of skilled, long-term employment.

There is certainly an increasing awareness of resource scarcity at the political level and large companies are realising the importance of minimising waste both for cost and reputational reasons. But the public image of the waste industry has been slow to catch up and permeate wider society.

Claire Poole, education and training manager for the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (CIWM), says: “We get a lot of enquiries from people coming in from other areas or doing different degrees thinking about moving into waste, but they don’t always understand the complexity or variety of work available.”

She notes that few people come into the industry having done a specialised waste degree. “It tends to be people who have done an environmental science degree but a module in waste. It turns out to not be as boring as they thought it would be and then they start to think about the waste industry as a career, either entering the industry as a graduate or doing a masters in it.”

Poole says: “When most people think of the waste industry they think of recycling. But there are many other roles, such as monitoring emissions, compliance, permitting, regulation, procurement, research. That surprises people.

“I don’t think a lot of people realise just how technical a lot of the facilities can be or how important the education side is. Years ago it was low technology – now it’s as intricate as it comes.”

Designing out waste

As well as more obvious jobs, there are increasing roles for designers at large manufacturing firms to minimise the amount of waste being produced in making and disposing of products from the start; local councils are hiring marketing professionals to run campaigns on the importance of recycling; and brokering and financial experts are sought after to negotiate feedstock contracts, gate fees and product sales.

In November 2012, the Associate Parliamentary Sustainable Resource Group (APSRG) published a report on skills in the waste management sector. It estimated the waste industry’s infrastructure building programme would create...
A more recent report by EU Skills says there will be a greater need for the traditional waste sector to collaborate with other parts of the supply chain. This will require high-level project management, planning, negotiation and coordination skills.

“An understanding of international contracts and markets becomes more important, foreign language skills may be an asset. In particular, specialist skills and understanding relating to the complex area of defining ‘end of waste’ will be increasingly required, which are currently restricted to a number of larger firms and contractors in the sector,” says the study.

But this depends on whether investment in waste infrastructure comes through at the pace and scale needed. Sita recently warned that a 17.8 million tonne capacity gap will open up by 2015 due to a lack of treatment infrastructure, although this is likely to narrow afterwards (endsreport.com/43060).

The government is trying to boost investor confidence by making the planning process for new waste plants easier (endsreport.com/39429 and ENDS Report 468, p22).

“It’s still a growth sector so there are opportunities,” says Poole. “It’s also a changing and evolving industry – there are always different and new skills and technologies that require different types of people. For example, companies are taking much more ownership of their own waste. We are focusing now on training people from within manufacturing, such as facilities managers.”

Although the industry may not be as tight-knit as it used to be, it has the reputation of being fairly supportive to incomers, whether those at the start of their careers or job changers.

Sarah Jane Widdowson, principal consultant on resource efficiency and waste management for Ricardo-AEA, chairs CIWM’s London and Southern counties members network. The network organises a variety of different events, such as site visits and workshops, and helps people meet and network with other waste professionals.

“It’s a real mix. There’s quite a lot of people who are first and second jobbers, but we have already had people coming into the industry from completely different careers,” says Widdowson. “The industry is very good at recognising transferable skills. You could be a specialist in any other industry and then come into it.”

Simon Catford, Viridor’s sustainability and regulatory director, says: “The biggest recent change is that we don’t consider ourselves as the waste industry any more. We are moving away from that fairly traditional waste disposal role and becoming more of a resource and energy efficiency market.”

This has led to big changes in who and how waste management companies, local authorities and consultancies recruit.

Energy from waste

The most significant recent change is the boom in energy from waste (EfW), particularly incineration and anaerobic digestion (ENDS Report 453, p30). Most large waste management firms are already heavily involved in or eyeing up the possibility of EFW, which means planning, permitting, building, running and monitoring new plants.

Kevan Sproul, director of human resources for Sita, says an EfW plant generates work for three to five times as many people as an equivalent-sized landfill site. “But they are different sorts of jobs – often more technical ones. We are looking for people experienced in production and process techniques.”

This is good news for jobseekers with the right skills. They have a good chance of a job, can easily transferable skills for their niche skills and, given the long-term nature of many municipal waste contracts, have potentially great job security.

But all the large waste companies that ENDS spoke to said finding people to fill these new technical posts is proving difficult. They are being forced to build more time into projects to hire appropriate staff and train them up before new sites become operational.

Waste firms are taking two approaches to this: training up internal staff and actively recruiting from other industries, such as power, for staff experienced in continuous process technologies.

“All those facilities need to be staffed and operated by very skilled and experienced people,” says Catford. “But the pool from which we are fishing is quite small and there are quite a few fishing rods hanging in.”

Some of these skills are transferable, while others are specific to one type of technology. “At operator level, in particular, there’s quite a bit of training to be done,” says Catford.

Sproul says that even the more traditional collection services are changing. “It is becoming more important to manage current and new waste streams well and to make processes more efficient.” To achieve this, Sita is recruiting from logistics and distribution industries such as pallet and parcel firms.
Catford says this outward-looking approach benefits the waste industry. “It will only get better by comparing ourselves to best practice and to benchmark ourselves against higher standards.” For example, the waste industry had a poor worker safety record, but has learned from industries such as construction that have hugely improved their performance.

The APSRG report said: “An injection of fresh blood into the sector is to be welcomed, not least because importing these skills from more mature sectors can rapidly raise the general level of competence, professionalism and safety-awareness within our own.”

But Sproul notes it is important that current employees do not feel left out or disenfranchised by these major changes, particularly those who have been working at a company for many years. This can be particularly difficult for more manual jobs. Many landfill sites, for example, are reaching the end of their lives.

The EU Skills report notes that, although increased automation may lead to a decline in some roles, reliance on low-grade manual skills is likely to give way to investment in sophisticated measuring, monitoring, diversion and integration telemetry systems. Even manual jobs are likely to get more skilled, with a need among processors for increased training in the grading of recyclables and contamination avoidance.

The report is only at the start of this process, but is looking at what other nearby options there are for existing employees and upskilling or reskilling them as appropriate.

**In-house training**

Many waste companies are looking at innovative ways of getting the skills they need, and the trend appears to be towards in-house training.

Jane Pateman, Biffa’s HR director, says: “About three years ago we took a step back from that and asked what skillsets we need now and what we will need in the future.”

Mike Hardy, group head of organisational development at Biffa, said most of the company’s training is now done internally. “We wanted to go further than other providers and create a sense of pride in the industry itself. It helps with employee engagement and we think it’s a great retention tool.”

The company has even developed its own set of qualifications. Many of these, such as certificates of technical competence, have been certified externally.

An important part of this is an extensive internal management training programme. Biffa had identified a particular gap in senior management skills and started by bringing in people from different backgrounds, such as general managers from logistics companies. This was quite successful, but the company realised it needed a more sustainable approach.

The APSRG report noted that requirements for managers and supervisors have changed, “with greater emphasis on customer management, product quality, budgetary control and financial modelling. The move to industrial-type waste facilities has meant that the nature of the risks faced by sector workers has changed significantly.”

Hardy says: “When I first came into the waste industry there wasn’t a great deal of focus on the core skills from a first line manager through to middle and senior management. We introduced a three-tier management development programme. We wanted to make it as generic as possible, as well as including industry knowledge, so we could use people almost anywhere within the company.”

Catford says training your own people “is one way of dealing with skills shortages”. Most large waste firms run foundation degree programmes and hire significant numbers of apprenticeships, as well as provide graduate training.

A more fundamental way of increasing interest in the industry is to improve its public image. Poole admits there is still some stigma attached to waste. “You still need people on the picking line and there are still people needed to collect the bins – although even that’s getting more complex and has more responsibility.”

The APSRG said the waste industry must “assert itself in the environmental agenda” to attract highly skilled workers.

Poole says there is a need to make the industry more attractive at an earlier stage when people are choosing first degrees.

Sproul agrees: “As a business we need to get closer to the educational world to deliver processing engineers. We are now competing with energy companies and production facilities for people, so we have to get in early to those types of individuals.”

Viridor is trying to improve the image of waste as an attractive industry to get into, for example by using social media to market jobs.

More flexible working patterns will also help widen the appeal to a wider group of people. In professional and vocational roles, for example, there is a trend towards more flexible patterns, such as home working and flexi-time, which has helped increase the number of women in a traditionally male-dominated area.

Sita is trying to make roles more attractive to women by reviewing its job titles to make them seem less overtly ‘masculine’.

**Salaries**

The increasing professionalisation of the waste industry is starting to be reflected in salaries and the growing number of people becoming chartered environmentalists.

Widdowson says the fast-changing nature of the industry means existing staff need to keep up with regulatory and technical changes, and membership of a professional body such as CIWM can be helpful.

“The job market is getting tougher and you need to be able to distinguish yourself. At Ricardo-AEA we like to see people who are members of an institution when we’re recruiting. Access to these institutions can really help you to stay on top of what’s happening. It also provides you with a network which can be handy.”

When ENDS spoke to Catford two years ago he spoke of a “ticking time-bomb” in the waste industry when it came to skills (ENDS Report 451, p26). Now, he says he feels “slightly more optimistic about sourcing people. It’s still tricky and we haven’t got everybody we would need yet. But the industry has got better.”

Hardy agrees: “It’s a very exciting time to be in the waste industry and I’m finding it quite progressive in its thinking.”
The corporate sustainability profession is growing. Not only are more people working in the sector but the level of experience brought to the job is also increasing.

One event highlighting the rise in importance of the sustainability role is the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment's (IEMA) acquisition on 1 April of the Global Association of Corporate Sustainability Officers, which included 41 members from leading global companies. This specialist association adds to IEMAs existing body of 15,000 environment and sustainability professionals (ENDS Report 470, p47).

"Organisations are finally switching on to the intrinsic value of environment and sustainability professionals", says IEMA chief executive Tim Balcon.

A further testament to the sector’s rapid growth is the increase in respondents to this year’s corporate responsibility and sustainability (CRS) salary survey, run by consultancies Acre and Carnstone, and communications agency Flag.1 The survey, published on 8 April, had 1,200 respondents, representing a 42% increase compared with 847 last year.

"Doomsayers in 2008 confidently predicted the demise of the corporate responsibility and sustainability professions in the face of harsh economic realities. This survey confirms that the profession is actually in rude health," says Peter Hughes, head of corporate responsibility at education consultancy Pearson.

At the top of the sector, the position of director or head of sustainability is the pinnacle of a corporate sustainability professional’s career. According to the survey, in-house CRS directors have at least 15 years’ experience and usually the position will not have been their first CRS role.

However, these professionals typically do not have a first degree in a CRS subject. “The sector is highly qualified, but typically not in CRS-related subjects. In part, that is not too surprising for what is a relatively new profession,” Hughes says.

Indeed, sustainability managers continue to come from a range of work and educational backgrounds, moving up from operational or general management roles (ENDS Report 462, p44). Few are specialists in environmental management.

According to a survey by IEMA, only 30% of professionals reported the environment or earth sciences formed the topic of their first academic qualification.2 Just over 40% of respondents considered themselves ‘career changers’, starting in non-environmental roles (see box, right).

“There is a new breed of sustainability practitioner. They have a blend, an integration of the sustainability knowledge and commercial skills,” says Bridget Jackson, head of corporate sustainability at consultants PwC.

Describing today’s leading sustainability executives, she says: “I think it’s a mind-set rather than a skillset.” Sustainability professionals must be able to interpret and apply the technical information to the different parts of a company.

**Candidate quality**

Jackson says she is always impressed by the ever-increasing quality of candidates. “It’s almost an expectation now that people will have two sets of skills that they’re combining,” she says.

“One of them is a sustainability skill set, which has either come from their work experience or from academic training and the other is the need to have commercial skills for the job you’re hiring them for,” she explains.

“They’re becoming more of the facilitator and coordinator as opposed to the doer,” adds Geoff Lane, partner at PwC, sustainability and climate change.

According to the salary survey, the ability to engage with stakeholders is the most important competence for the profession. “CR and sustainability is nothing without the ability to understand and engage with stakeholders,” says Paul Burke, senior partner at Carnstone.

A mixed bag of skills is therefore needed to engage the different players within a business, from stakeholders to suppliers. “A key requirement is a passion for sustainability, an appreciation of the drivers, barriers and levers that such a role can face, and an ability to collaborate with others and a willingness to learn,” says Kené Umeasiegbu, head of climate change and sustainable sourcing at Tesco.

Richard Gillies, group sustainability director at DIY chain, Kingfisher, adds leadership skills and resilience to the list. This is because sustainability executives are “leading the change” he says. “Managing the status quo is difficult enough, driving change is an order of magnitude different again.

“By its very nature they will be working at the front of the change curve, it won’t be business as usual, it never is in this space.”

Gillies says it is his job to help create “the capacity, capability and skills across the organisation”. Engaging and supporting a company’s different divisions to help them operate more sustainably is a key aspect of the role. Building motivation and engagement across a company to realise the potential that exists within its people, he says.

Umeasiegbu agrees: “The best way, indeed the only way, to consistently deliver sustainability is to embed the commitments into the core business. This means sustainability teams must work hand in hand with various departments in the company.”

Umeasiegbu believes the mix of subject matter expertise and familiarity with company structures, culture and ways of working allows sustainability to be embedded into the core business rather than being a simple add-on or PR stunt.

“Success in delivering a long-term sustainability agenda therefore depends as much on effective collaboration as on a solid technical understanding of the issues,” Umeasiegbu says.

Beyond just designing a sustainability initiative, however, professionals must be able to evaluate the results of any given initiative.

To do so, Jackson emphasises that these professionals need both qualitative and analytical skills so as to “not only be able to deliver the programmes but measure the outcomes”.

However, a big gap remains between the leaders and the laggards, she says. In companies on the tail end of sustainability leadership, corporate sustainability professionals need to be highly determined. This is because they still feel it takes a lot
to get heard and to embed sustainability within their company, says Jackson. Questions remain about how to link sustainability into core business decision-making. “There’s still what I call re-wiring or re-plumbing work to be done,” Lane says. “It’s not glamorous work but it is hard work to help organisations finally get sustainability well and truly into the core business process.”

The type of professional hired depends on the size of a company and level of significance that sustainability is perceived to have, he explains.

“There’s still a challenge with resources because I still think the role is seen in many organisations as a cost and not an investment,” he says. This feeds down into the budget given to sustainability departments compared with others.

But, there is some hope. More than 62% of corporations worldwide are expected to increase spending on environmental management initiatives in 2014 according to a study by analyst firm, Verdantix.3

According to the report, published on 12 February, particular spending hotspots will be in environmental health and safety software, environmental reporting, auditing and compliance. Sustainability has also emerged as a key theme for the coming year. In Europe, water, waste and product sustainability top investment lists.

But with only about a third of corporations across Europe, the Middle East and Africa expected to increase spending in 2014 there is still room for improvement.

According to a report by the German sustainable investment ratings agency, Oekom Research, published on 13 March, sustainability is stalling (endsreport.com/43270). The proportion of companies with poor sustainability performance stands at 53% for 2013.

What is more, the report claims only 39% of international companies surveyed have taken the initial steps towards sustainability management and the relevant issues are still not systematically and comprehensively integrated into their management systems.

So there is still a lot of work to be done to get the basics in place and to “get companies to a point where they are managing the whole agenda of sustainability in a systematic way let alone in a proactive way”, Lane says.

Towards integration

While there may be a long way for the strugglers to catch up with the leading companies, it is agreed that in future, corporate sustainability roles should be integrated into the business.

An integrated approach is needed, in part, to respond to wider societal changes. Umeasiegbu predicts that in the next five years the sustainability agenda will continue to evolve in line with the rise in new consumer markets around the world.

This will drive increased supply chain competition. “Businesses will need to be more attentive to these issues,” he says. He continues: “Effective sustainability agendas will need to focus more on addressing these strategic questions than on disparate projects. Competing in this new reality will require greater partnerships, with strategic suppliers, sourcing communities, across industries and with civil society groups.

“Sustainability roles will therefore require capabilities around nurturing partnerships and collaborating with business colleagues to develop business plans that respond to a changing world.”

Lane believes part of this evolution means sustainability professionals will have to “let go of the agenda”. This means putting the impetus on individual departments to implement their own sustainability initiatives with less guidance from the top sustainability team.

“I think deep down [leading sustainability teams] know that the next generation or the next direction of this is to let go of the agenda and let it be owned across the business,” he says, “because that’s really the only way to get it embedded, which is the holy grail thing to do.”

The risk in this of course is that by letting other people run the agenda they may not do it in a way that you think is right, he added.

Of course, Gillies notes, “we can’t go from where we are today right to the end-game in one fell swoop. It has to be a series of incremental changes that build learning and accelerate change”.

He added that for full integration, resources and leadership need to be invested into the transition process. “Ultimately, once a business has been through that transition and the programme becomes part of everyday life you may not need these same roles in the future.”

Richard Gillies, group sustainability director, Kingfisher

After almost 30 years at Marks & Spencer, Richard Gillies joined Kingfisher as group sustainability director in October 2013. The former M&S Plan A director is now responsible for corporate and government affairs at Kingfisher and leads the company’s Net Positive eco plan.

“My role is to be able to invest time in understanding the transition of the organisation and help the different parts of the business be able to begin the journey because we’ve got to take some fairly big concepts down to some really practical actions.”

The 45-year-old began as a retailer for M&S and moved up the ranks through roles in store management, construction and procurement. He became director of Plan A in 2008.

It was during these varied roles that Gillies began looking strategically at what was going to impact the business. As design and construction director at M&S his engineering and energy responsibilities gave him the opportunity to influence the estate and drive sustainability.

“My background isn’t in environmental science or health and safety, it’s more on core business and from core business I’m looking ahead and able to identify the sustainability issues and the way they impact on core business,” he said.

Despite ‘sustainability’ being in his job title, Gillies prefers not to use the word. “Words like ‘sustainability’ and ‘green’ tend to pigeonhole organisations, people and trains of thought into an old paradigm of what sustainability used to be,” he said.

“For me, I’m very clear of the business case of adapting to all the changes we see impacting our business,” he said, whether that be resource scarcity or the internet.

The biggest challenge is simplifying the agenda and distilling it into “manageable, digestible, communicable bite-sized pieces of information that the organisation can then respond to,” he said. “Because shouting man-made climate change at a retailer is not particularly helpful.”
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