

Introduction to Environmental Sustainability

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Today, we will be looking at environmental sustainability in work and business spaces. You might think that this has nothing to do with you or that it is better handled by other people. Think again; individuals can play a role in persuading big corporations to make real changes.

By the end of this track, you will be able to define and explain what environmental sustainability is. You will be able to identify some of the major sustainability dilemmas for businesses, including reliance on fossil fuels, supply chains, and the switch to renewable energy. You will also feel empowered to become a conscientious consumer.

Let's start with the basics. What is environmental sustainability?

Sustainability has a broad definition. In simple terms, it relates to the lifespan of the object. Take coal, for example. Coal is not a renewable material, so it is not sustainable in the long term.

Of course, when we talk about sustainability, we often think of the environment. Environmental sustainability is a concept that asks: can we maintain the environment around us? How long can the natural resources that we depend on last? Do they have an expiration date? In an ideal world, all the materials and energy sources that we use to support our lifestyles would be sustainable.

The United Nations Environment Management Group takes this concept one step further. By referring to this idea as [Environmental and Social Sustainability \(ESS\)](#), the United Nations highlights the connection between environmental sustainability and human actions.

Everyone has a responsibility to protect the environment. Politicians and broadcasters are quick to mention the environment, but they don't explain the major roadblocks that face people who are in business and commercial spaces trying to tackle environmental issues in the private sector.

So, what kind of issues do companies deal with around environmental sustainability?

The main focus of environmental sustainability is natural resources. Non-renewable resources are those that are finite, meaning there is only a certain amount available. Carbon-based fossil fuels are the most talked-about finite resources.

Fossil fuels are made from decomposing animals and plants. The Earth's crust is made up of layers and layers of fossil fuels, which have compacted over millions of years. When we add heat and pressure to fossil fuels, we create everyday energy sources like gas and oil.

Longevity is not the only problem with finite fossil fuels. Burning fossil fuels releases toxic emissions that speed up climate change. These air-borne pollutants can also have a negative impact on human health.

The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee found that [78% of the UK's energy comes from fossil fuels](#). More specifically, oil, gas, and coal. This is a considerable decrease from [96.5% in 1970](#), but there is still a long way to go.

To create an environmentally sustainable future, we need to stop using finite resources. Of course, there are many more ways that the UK can improve its environmental sustainability. Recycling, water use, and one-use white goods are just as important as fossil fuels. For now, we'll focus on fossil fuels.

So, why doesn't the UK government ban fossil fuels?

The UK is still far too reliant on fossil fuels to ban them entirely. There is also a lack of cohesion among the groups that want to ban fossil fuels. In his journal article *The logic of fossil fuel bans*, Fergus Green notes that ['support is typically shallow; relatively few people prioritise such policies, let alone take to the streets to demand them.'](#) He also states that these challenges mean that 'environmental activists have shifted their focus in recent years to target fossil fuel projects and companies directly.'

Is it right to pin the blame for the UK's lack of environmental sustainability on companies? The statistics don't lie. In 2020, [the energy, manufacturing, and transport sectors joined households as the biggest users of energy from fossil fuels](#).

It is no secret that companies have far more buying power than householders. Big businesses that use tonnes of fossil fuels every week can have a real impact on environmental sustainability.

A solution to this problem is renewable energy. Bioenergy, solar, wind, and hydroelectricity are renewable energy sources. Renewable energy is anything that is an infinite source of energy. Wind will never be in short supply, which means that UK businesses can use as much of it as they need.

With the solution so clear to see, why are so many business owners still funding fossil fuels? Renewables are generally more expensive than fossil fuels for a number of reasons, one being the lack of infrastructure. The UK started burning fossil fuels in the 1880s, so the infrastructure and processes are very well established.

The good news is that British energy giants are leading the way towards a more sustainable future. You might have heard of the Big Six, a collection of six of the most popular and reputable energy companies in the UK. British Gas, EDF Energy, EON, Npower, Scottish Power, and SSE all offer renewable energy options to their commercial customers. As renewable energy infrastructure becomes more established, we will see more business owners making the switch.

Let's move on from fossil fuels and look at supply chains.

In order to become more sustainable, businesses need to create long-term structures and processes. This is particularly important when we consider supply chains, something that almost every product-based business depends on.

A supply chain can be visualised as a chain link. Each link relies on the other for sourcing, transport, and manufacturing. These chains link together to form a journey, with sourcing at the beginning and the business at the end. Vendors, warehouses, retailers, transportation companies, and distribution centres all use supply chains.

Supply chains can be good or bad. Transparent supply chains are created when businesses know where and how their goods are produced. They can provide details and data about each stage of their supply chain, which is sometimes necessary under UK law.

For example, a supermarket chain might have a transparent supply chain for mangos. In this case, it would be able to say that its mangos are grown in Mexico and transported to England. It could also tell us that the pickers in Mexico receive a fair wage relative to their location and that they are not victims of human trafficking. It could prove that the drivers who transport the mangos have all the correct documents.

This is a good example of a transparent supply chain, but it is not necessarily environmentally friendly. To make this supply chain eco-friendly, the supermarket could start by sourcing its mangos from a closer location. This would eliminate thousands of miles of truck travel and could even cancel out a few aeroplane rides. In this case, the supermarket has expended far fewer fossil fuels in its supply chain, making it more environmentally sustainable.

Unfortunately, most supply chains are not environmentally sustainable or even transparent. Y. Yusuf and others, in their article in the International Journal of Production Economics, note that ['One of the key issues that loom large is the huge expenditure needed for innovation and for changes to operational structures and processes. It is generally agreed that greening the supply chain requires a sizable investment.'](#) Without public pressure, business owners are unlikely to undercut their profits to establish sustainable, transparent supply chains.

If there is one thing to think about today, it is this: big businesses only make changes when they feel the pressure of public opinion. Consumers have far more power than they realise, especially when it comes to driving environmental change. As Green said, support for environmental causes is 'typically shallow', meaning that large companies can side-step real sustainability issues. To support environmental sustainability in the commercial sphere, be a conscientious consumer. That could mean being careful about which companies you give your money to and only supporting businesses that are committed to environmental sustainability.

Go one step further and make your feelings known. Your opinion is the most powerful tool that you have, so start conversations and inquire about the environmental impacts of big businesses. Think about your workplace's processes through the lens of environmental sustainability.

That's all for today. Have a productive week!