Sustainability in the Workplace

An analysis of the attitudes and behaviours of Australians to sustainability in the workplace and the home.

Based on the survey findings of 1,043 Australian workers in May 2011.
June 2011

Introduction

Sustainability, eco-friendly, green workplaces, corporate social responsibility, triple bottom line, environmentally responsible...

We’ve all heard the terms and debated the meanings – but do we really understand what our employees want from their organisation when it comes to sustainable practices?

Sustainability at Work believes that understanding current attitudes and behaviours towards sustainability in both the workplace and at home can provide insights and a platform for organisations to promote positive sustainable behaviour.

This report highlights the thinking of more than 1,000 Australian workers: what they want from their organisations, what they believe they contribute and what they think are the barriers to being sustainable.

Our survey has found that, overwhelmingly, Australians believe that change needs to come from the top. Senior managers need to implement processes and systems that help staff with more sustainable practices at work. Communication and education were key factors in enabling positive behaviour.

More than 75 per cent of Australians surveyed also believed their workplace productivity was being undermined by the workplace itself – with them perceiving that their workspace was contributing to headaches, fatigue and eyestrain, and generally having an adverse effect on their health.

Generational differences were also highlighted within the survey results, with our Baby Boomers believing that they were more sustainable in the workplace and at home than our Generation Ys.

This report reveals many fascinating findings into employees’ perceptions of sustainability in the workplace, as well as insights to help lead positive behavioural change within your organisation.

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Sustainability in the workplace

Our Australian Workers

- 1,043 Australians surveyed in total.
- 63% are female.
- 65% live in capital cities.
- 72% work full-time.
- 48% work for large organisations (over 200+ employees).
- 48% have been with the current company for five or more years while 25% started two or less years ago.
- 42% work in an open plan work space while 37% are in offices.
- 16% are Generation Y, 39% Generation X and 44% Baby Boomers.

The survey was conducted online through Truth Serum Research. A sample size of n=1043 provides a reliability level of 99% on the results, with a potential margin for error of +/-4.08% based on the total population of actively employed people in Australia which is approximately 11,450,000.

Chart 1: Occupation

Sustainability Insight
Only 11.8% of organisations had a sustainability induction program – 50% of people did not know if there was one.
Sustainability in the workplace

Sustainability Insight
65.5% said they travelled to work in a car by themselves.

Chart 2: Type of Workspace

- Open plan low partitions: 22%
- Open plan no partitions: 20%
- Cubicle with partitions: 19%
- Shared office: 18%
- Private office: 10%
- Home office: 10%
- Other: 1%

nb: aligned with ABS categories

Sustainable behaviours at work versus at home

- 77.1% of Australians believed that their environmental performance at home was good or very good. However, this fell to 57.5% believing that their performance at work was good or very good.
- Almost 70% (67.9%) of all respondents felt that it was somewhat or very important that their organisation behave in a sustainable way, with less than 10% saying it was of no importance at all.
- 48.1% believed that their organisations environmental performance was good or very good.
- Only 43% felt that sustainability was important and their organisation was currently positively meeting their environmental expectations.
- More than 50% felt that their organisation could do more.

While Australians place considerable importance on corporate sustainability, they don’t feel their own organisations are rising to the sustainability challenge.
Sustainability in the workplace

Chart 3: How important is it that your organisation behaves in a sustainable way?

Chart 4: Comparison of individual and corporate environmental performance at home and work

These results point to a real opportunity for organisations to leverage employee behaviour at home and inject it into the organisational culture. In doing so, they will close the gap between expectation and actual behaviour in the workplace.
Sustainability in the workplace

Chart 5: Performance at home vs at work vs perception of organisation’s performance

Those that rated their commitment to sustainability at home as being very good or good believed they out-performed their organisation in the sustainability stakes. These ‘green champions’ exist in every organisation and should be empowered by their organisations to lead positive behaviour outcomes.

What are Australians good at and not so good at when it comes to workplace sustainability?

Top actions that Australians claim to ‘always’ do in the workplace:

1. Turning off the lights at night – 71%.
2. Turning computer and monitor off at night – 67%.
3. Recycling paper – 64%.
4. Recycling as much as possible – 60%.
5. Rugging up when cold – 58%.

Areas for improvement in the workplace:

1. Only 18% claim they always turn the monitor off when leaving the desk for a period of time.
2. Only 19% take public transport.
3. Only 23% specify environmental products.
4. Only 24% recycle food products.
5. Only 25% leave lights off during the day.

More than half (53%) of all respondents felt that they could do more to reduce waste.
How do Australian workers behave at home and what sustainable activities do they do when they are left to their own devices?

Those behaviours they claim to ALWAYS do at home include:

- Turning the lights off when leaving a room – 72.5%.
- Recycling as much as they can – 72.1%.
- Using eco-friendly light bulbs – 59%.
- Donating to second-hand shops – 54.2%.
- Rugging up when cold – 48.9%.

Those behaviours that they rated highest as NEVER doing are:

- Installing/using solar power – 66.9%.
- Using worm farms or composting – 55.9%.
- Installing and using a water tank – 51.5%.
- Using environmentally friendly paints – 28.5%.
- Growing our own fruit and vegetables – 27.9%.

The family structure also impacts on the sustainable behaviour in the home. Those single and married empty-nesters rated themselves as more sustainable than all other family types.

Those who lived at home with parents (74%) and family with children (73%) were the poorest performers.

Chart 6: Environmental performance at home by household structure

Females rated themselves slightly better than males at behaving sustainably at home.
Communication and Education

The survey asked about sustainability reporting, sustainability policy and sustainable induction programs. More than a third (27%) of respondents said their company had a sustainability policy, while only 12% said their company had a sustainable induction program and sustainability reporting. Part-time workers were the least informed of employees.

In addition, 28% of respondents felt that their organisation did not give them the correct information to act more sustainably.

Table 1: Knowledge of sustainability programs by full-time and part-time employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does your company have a sustainability policy?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does your company have a sustainability induction program?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does your company complete an annual sustainability report?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many organisations have environmental policies and programs in place, with these fully operational and part of the corporate DNA. However some organisations either fail to communicate their programs or have not yet made a commitment to deliver them.

Encouraging positive behaviour through leadership, communication and education will lead to a positively engaged and more sustainable workplace.
Motivations and Barriers

Some surprising motivations and barriers have been uncovered in the survey findings. It is clear that simplified processes and systems, together with a strong commitment from management and simple communication, will help to break down the barriers currently preventing positive behaviour.

The survey found that motivation is not a predictor of actual behaviour with only 32% of those who are motivated to implement sustainable practices at work rating themselves as either good or very good in the workplace.

However, sustainable behaviour at home leads to sustainable behaviour at work with more than half of those who behave sustainably at home also indicating a commitment to sustainable behaviour at work.

Table 2: Reveals the difference between motivation and behaviour at home as an indicator of their positive behaviour at work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation to implement sustainable practices by rating at work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL = 32.1%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highly motivated to implement changes by positive performance at work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivated to implement changes by positive performance at work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance at home by rating at work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL = 51.8%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Very good rating at home by positive performance at work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good rating at home by positive performance at work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finding and leveraging your ‘green champions’ (those who exhibit sustainable behaviours in their daily life) in the workplace will help to drive your sustainability programs within your organisation.

Key barriers include:

- 21% of Australian workers indicated that the biggest barrier was no facilities for recycling or reusing materials.
- 21% also said that there was a lack of ‘how to’ information.
- 15% said they were not encouraged to be more sustainable at work.
- 15% said they were too busy.
Sustainability in the workplace

Chart 7: Barriers to behaving sustainably while at work

“Although I am a senior manager if I so much as mention our environmental impact at meetings I am howled down as a leftie lunatic by my peers.”

“At work we do not have any choices or input – most people would support more action.”

“Behaving sustainably at work is extremely difficult when we cannot control our own office. We are not permitted to open doors to let in light or fresh air because it stuffs up the air conditioning.”

Many people in the survey claimed to have few barriers and this is very positive. The comments confirm that many people are motivated to leave the world in a better place and believe in climate change.

One comment encapsulated the general responses of many and should provide organisational leaders with a clear direction:

“Overall I think people want a balance of convenience and doing the ‘right thing’. Getting people to be more sustainable will need to become a thing of convenience if it’s going to start to shift people from their normal and comfortable behaviours.”
Management commitment and simplified systems are top of the list for improving behaviour.

- 54% would like to see simplified, user-friendly systems introduced.
- 53% would like more commitment from management towards sustainability.
- 48% would like more visuals signs and reminders.
- 47% would like rewards for ‘doing the right thing’.
- 46% would like more sustainably-conscious colleagues.
- 45% would like acknowledgement or positive feedback from managers and colleagues.
- 42% would like to see sustainability incorporated into the induction program.
- 40% would like company-wide sustainability events and activities.
- 39% would like more education on their building’s green features.
- 37% would like sustainability incorporated into all employee KPIs.

Health and Workplace Performance

Given most Australians spend around 40 hours per week in the working environment, it is important to understand their perceptions of their current workplace.

While 37% of respondents liked coming to work, 45% of respondents did not feel energised at the end of the day.

Chart 8: Attitudes towards workspace

**Sustainability Insight**

64% of people said they never fly for work, with 3% flying at least once a month.
An overwhelming 75% of respondents felt their workspace induced headaches; fatigue; sore and dry eyes and throat in the last three months.

Of the 779 respondents who indicated that they had experienced adverse health effects, they reported suffering the following at work in the last three months.

1. Headaches – 455 instances
2. Fatigue – 448 instances
3. Eyes – strained, sore or dry – 370 instances
4. Muscular pain (mainly from computers/chairs) – 290 instances
5. Dry mouth/throat – 253 instances

Health and well-being of staff plays an important role in workplace productivity. When it comes to health, perception is often indistinguishable from reality. Put simply, if people feel sick, their performance and workplace morale suffers.

Many employees do not take sick leave while suffering from minor ailments such as headaches, fatigue and other symptoms, which can nevertheless have a significant impact on a company’s productivity.

Organisations will need to address actual health and well-being of staff through improved building performance, but may also need to investigate staff perceptions of health and wellbeing, which can adversely affect health and staff morale. Office noise, lack of privacy, lack of consistency and comfortable office temperatures were issues also encountered by our respondents in the last three months.

On a positive note, the level of natural and artificial light, minimal disturbances from outside noise, and overall personal control of air flow and lighting are all positive features of today’s workspaces.

Table 3: Top 10 problems encountered with workspace in last three months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>No. of people encountering issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable and consistent temperature</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office noise</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal control of air temperature</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smells and odours</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stale air</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humidity</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal control of air flow</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside noise</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glare from windows</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those least likely to encounter problems with the workspace are those in an enclosed or shared office, while the worst performing spaces were open plan offices with no partitions, followed by cubicles with partitions and then open plan offices with low partitions.
Generational Gaps

Baby Boomers

In terms of generational attitudes to sustainability, Baby Boomers rated themselves as the number one performer at work in 9 of the 11 categories – including recycling as much as they can, turning lights off at night and during the day and specifying environmentally-friendly products.

Baby Boomers also felt their workspace had a positive impact on their health but thought that they could do more about reducing waste.

Chart 9: Results of which generation ‘always’ undertakes these sustainable behaviours in the workplace

Generation Y was the worst environmentally-rated performer in all but two of the categories – and they did not once rate highest for any of the positive behaviours.
Generation X

Generation X was the most indecisive of all groups and felt their workspace had a negative impact on their health. They were also least happy coming into their office space and felt disempowered to make decisions on sustainability issues. Given they now make up more than 40% of the workforce and large percentage of management positions, this is a surprising and somewhat concerning result.

On a positive note, Generation X takes first place for being the most likely to use their own coffee cup and public transport.

Generation Y

Generation Y felt more productive in their work environment and the group who most like coming into their work space every day.

They also rated their work space as more sustainable than any other age group. They did, however, feel they could do significantly more to reduce their waste.

Table 4: How the generations view their workspace and the impacts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gen Y</th>
<th>Gen X</th>
<th>Baby Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive impact on health</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel energised</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel productive</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like coming to office</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My org. gives info to be sustainable</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We can do more to reduce waste</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think my office is very sustainable</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5: When you are at work, you ALWAYS do the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Gen Y</th>
<th>Gen X</th>
<th>Baby Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recycle as much as possible</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recycle food waste</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recycle paper</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turn lights off in day</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turn lights off at night</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer/monitor off at night</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor off if away from desk</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rug up when cold</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specify environmental products</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use own coffee cup</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take public transport</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results for Generation Y are particularly surprising, given the educational focus both at home and school on recycling, water shortages and climate change.

**Conclusion**

Understanding is the first step to any behavioural change. This report provides insights into employees’ perceptions of the day-to-day sustainability within their own organisations. It also reveals some of the barriers to improving workplace sustainability and opportunities for positive behavioural change.

Whether your company is just starting its sustainability journey or is further down the road, this report can provide extra guidance to help you benchmark your employees’ sustainability perceptions and performance.

It is only a matter of time before workplace sustainability is considered ‘business as usual’. Employees are already demanding that their organisations take the lead. This report clearly demonstrates that employees are willing to embrace workplace sustainability – now it’s time for organisations to take a top-down approach to deliver systems, communication and policies that integrate sustainability into their organisational cultures.
About Sustainability at Work

Sustainability at Work was born in August 2010 out of the desire to bring ‘people’ back into the centre of the sustainability and ‘green’ building movements. After working for years within the property sector, it became clear that people are fundamental to the environmental performance of a building and central to business success. Sustainability at Work was established to make sure this is always the case.

Melissa and Tania turned their idea into reality and have been injecting ‘people passion’ into the workplaces, marketing campaigns, projects and training, ever since. And they love it.

We can help you to:

• **Benchmark** your organisation against this study and see where your team fits.
• **Establish** your sustainability goals and benchmarks.
• **Research** current staff attitudes, perceptions and behaviours towards sustainability.
• **Develop** programs to engage your staff in delivering your sustainability goals.
• **Motivate** and inspire your staff to promote positive behaviour.
• **Evaluate** outcomes and celebrate successes.
• **Communicate** and market your achievements.

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