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Improving learning to enhance sustainability management

Engagement with sustainability by construction organisations is typically evidenced by the presence of certified product and management system standards. Such standards, which include the widely implemented ISO 9001 for quality management and ISO 14001 for environmental management systems, as well as the construction-specific BES 6001 for responsible sourcing, are implemented to demonstrate performance of the organisation or their products against specific areas. Certification to these standards is relatively easily achieved within larger organisations where, often, dedicated sustainability staff and finances to address sustainability are readily available. However, for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) this is seldom the case, and there may be limited time and finances available to implement such standards.

In the face of customer demand for evidence of certification addressing sustainability, SMEs are often pressurised in this regard. This becomes a bigger issue when demands are placed on them to implement multiple standards, causing an even greater drain on resources. To address the struggles that SMEs typically experience, research at the Centre for Innovative and Collaborative Construction Engineering at Loughborough University has focused upon the development of a sustainability framework which looks to make certification for the SME a more cost-effective process.

This research has elucidated the link between sustainability proactivity and high levels of learning, which itself is based upon the 'absorptive capacity' of an organisation. Essentially, the framework aims to reduce consultant time by streamlining the initial stages of the consultancy process, and hence reduces fees for clients, by assessing what an organisation has in place around core sustainability issues and by identifying any additional work the organisation needs to do to comply with the requirements of a given standard. These actions are underpinned by learning activities such that requirements of standards are embedded within the organisation to deliver added value, rather than simply being implemented in a way that does little except to fulfil a 'box-ticking' culture.

The proposed framework is designed in three parts, with the third part focusing on delivering the learning to underpin sustainability implementation. The first phase adopts a risk-based approach and it is envisaged that it will ask broad questions around the nature of operations and supply chain performance. The second phase will then analyse those answers to assess which aspects are 'significant' to environmental and



James Upstill-Goddard speaking at East Midlands Chamber Sustainability Summit

social impacts based upon the organisation's context. Those that are identified here are then addressed in the final phase, where more detailed questions are asked to determine what the organisation has in place and where action is required. Actions will typically focus upon developing policies and processes as required by many of the management system and product standards but will be supported by learning material, perhaps in the form of short e-learning material that is relevant to a particular issue. The idea is therefore that, if an organisation is unsure of how to complete an action when prompted, it can consult the e-learning material relevant to that action to determine how it should go about addressing it.

Increasing the learning and knowledge is key to delivering innovations and it is hoped that this 'learning framework' can provide the foundations for a more sophisticated sustainability tool in the future, perhaps to be developed via a web-based platform.

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