

# Sustainability shouldn't be the new buzzword – it's nothing new

As we head back to the office, and some form of normality, we recently surveyed our LinkedIn connections to understand what they feel is driving growth and diversification onwards, within the ever challenging and changing operational landscape. The feedback came back loud and clear. Sustainability.

The survey results showed **60% of respondents see environment and sustainability at the forefront of the need to evolve.** Others stated it was new and emerging markets, BREXIT and the supply and cost of crude oil that was forcing diversification in the chemicals market.

Each of these factors will play a part for every chemical business in strategic marketing and business growth terms. The impact of the Covid pandemic over the last 18 months has demonstrated the strength and tenacity of companies within our industry, and more than ever, we have seen them needing to evolve and adapt.

**Geoff Mackey, Sustainability Director at BASF, tells us what "sustainability" means for his industry in terms of business growth and individual opportunities for us all.**

"Once upon a time sustainability was about was about keeping people safe at work but progression over the last 40/50 years has been very clear. Today it's about making the best use of resources, it's about valuing and respecting people – your staff, your suppliers and partners, your supply chain, manufacturing, and selling and distributing chemicals and solutions to businesses sustainably, whilst managing risk to the business. It's not just about installing some solar panels on your warehouse or planting trees to combat your carbon emissions; sustainability should be the cornerstone of any business who want to drive growth."

## What sustainability means to BASF

"It's our business plan – it drives our portfolio. At BASF sustainability is about providing quality of life for everyone", he continues.

For a business who's starting point is usually crude oil producing plastics and battery materials to catalysts and insulation and agricultural products, it feels a difficult place to be, but for BASF sustainability looks at the use of chemistry for their customers and society and looks to make the best use of the resources with that chemistry.

"We look at the value chain – starting with sustainable sourcing, safe production, build in efficiencies, the best sustainable solution and along the way you have to have the idea of valuing people. It's not just about being green aware and hitting net zero. There's no one answer. But as a strategic direction it's what's driving BASF's vision and growth and we really think we can hit net zero. Waste isn't a word we like to have in the business and in time it won't be a reality either."

BASF is going to reduce CO2 emissions by 25% by 2030 with a net zero commitment by 2050. "Most of us believe it will be sooner than that but if you start by putting a stake in the sand, both BASF and the industry will begin to move in the right direction."

It's no surprise then that the "Who we are" page on BASF's website starts with "We create chemistry for a sustainable future".

## So, what should chemical companies realise today?

"Thinking about sustainability, making sure sustainability is part of the business and sharing this with suppliers, customers, staff and investors allows organisations to shape the future of their business and their growth." Geoff continues "Those that are seeing sustainability as any sort of bolt on extra to their business offering are sadly misinformed."

"Businesses, and chemical businesses have to grasp the idea now. We can reset the UK, and COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021 was a platform to do this."

## An exciting opportunity for those working in chemicals today

The chemicals industry is facing a double transition today.

### 1. A dated perception that needs to be reviewed

The industry is still seen as people with hard hats in a manual labour industry.

Indeed, looking back to the survey, technology was shown to be a driver for diversification also. So, with technological advancements driving sustainability as we see drones delivering our parcels and AI becoming more prevalent than the hard hat, digital growth has a big part to play. For those joining the chemical industry today or reskilling and upskilling it's an exciting time to be in the sector.

"COP 26 has been a chance for the UK to state its credentials, showcase its R&D, its world leading research. It's not just about hitting net zero. It's an opportunity for businesses to drive growth through technological advancements which will drive career opportunities and business development. And, in turn, provide a sustainable future for our children."

### 2. Chemicals companies need to make investment decisions right now for the next 25 years.

"In a world where chemical demand is growing two or threefold because of the rise of the middle classes across the world, somewhere along the line we have to make sure we don't keep repeating the same mistakes – plastic for instance is a wonderful product but we treat it so badly, using it once and throwing it away."

Chemical companies need to be circular and sustainable by design to tackle climate change for the future of the market.

## The future of chemicals business - COP 26 and beyond.

### a) Strategy

"Maybe a starting point is a look at chemical companies' logistics and their distribution channels. It's got to be a start. At BASF, when your starting point is fossil fuels it's a little bit more complicated, but we are committed to net zero carbon emissions. BASF know the cost of our energy usage and the cost of our waste. COOs must make the decisions now."

There is a rise in chemicals usage across the world. Whether that be in construction, cosmetics, agriculture or automotive. Chemicals drive all of this. We have to make sure the developing world doesn't make the same mistakes as the developed world."

But what if sustainability is just used as a PR exercise?

"Ask the questions. Challenge the status quo. The role of every generation is to be better. When you're looking for your next role in chemicals, ask your future employer what their carbon footprint is or ask the HR Manager what their sustainability goals are in the working environment. Does the business have climate commitments?"

### b) Diversification driving opportunity

If the chemicals industry is to focus on sustainability and optimising the changes they can make in terms of environmental impact, this holds exciting opportunities for recruitment, as well as career opportunities for those working in it, both in terms of high investment and high R&D spend.

And, as businesses look to provide sustainable workplaces, post Covid, sustainability means flexible working opportunities too.

"At BASF business sustainability looks at the working environment. We want a sustainable workforce. We don't want burnout much like we don't want waste. It's the bigger picture," continues Geoff.

It's a wider view that many may not have considered when we think about sustainability. It's not all about "going green". The Brundtland Report of 1987 set the stage for sustainability down three avenues: economical, ecological and societal. The report defined 'sustainable development' as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Are we providing sustainable opportunities for our staff? Something to think about for all hiring chemicals companies today.

## Summary

**Many people from all over the UK are already doing their bit on climate change, from the engineers working on the offshore wind farms now powering our homes and businesses, to local initiatives encouraging children and parents to walk to school. We want to celebrate them and inspire more to join them, and we look forward to the opportunity it gives the global workforce in chemicals in 2021 and beyond.**

*This interview was conducted by eleven recruitment.*

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