

Article for Guardian Sustainable Business

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Reaching for the moon

One of my earliest memories is of the moon landing in 1969. Then, and indeed now, you could make a case for it as representing one of the most impressive feats of collective human endeavour. Putting a man on the moon within a decade was a goal, set by President John F Kennedy, in 1961. When that goal was announced, no-one knew how it was going to be achieved. It was a huge, visible target, literally hanging in the sky.

Today, mankind faces a target of even greater complexity, which dwarfs the moon landing in its scale and significance. By 2050, there will be nine billion people living on earth. That's nearly 30 per cent more people in the next 37 years – to feed and water, to clothe, to live together with, what we hope will be, a high degree of life satisfaction. At the same time, we know that we would need three planets' worth of resources for the whole world's population to live the lifestyle that those (above the poverty line) in the UK currently enjoy. Our new moon landing is this: how do we provide high quality lifestyles for the future world population of nine billion, using the resources available to us? It's almost too big a challenge to process, let alone solve. How can we ask businesses to help to deliver this future? Where do we even ask them to start? That is what we mean by sustainability... it's not about sacrificing quality of life, it's about changing how we supply quality lives.

It took a huge and multi-skilled team of 170,000 people nine years to land two men on the moon, each focussing on a key aspect of the project. Within that large group, a team of 300 people made the moon boots. Without the moon boots, there would be no moon landing. I use this analogy to characterise the role that we, at Business in the Community, are asking businesses to play: to identify what is their equivalent of the moon boot – what is the significant, unique contribution their products and services can make to the overall goal of nine billion quality lifestyles by 2050?

We have 37 years to unlock talent, think about new ways of working, test new business models and deliver these solutions. There's a lot of room for making existing supply chains more efficient, but we will get much further towards our goal by completely redesigning the product or delivering the service in a different way.

We need to move more quickly. Businesses always ask us: what is the business case for the change you're asking us to make? There is an obvious business case for certain actions – more energy-efficient lighting saves money, for example. There is a less demonstrable business case for other asks, such as changing your business model to encourage people to buy less. B&Q have set up Street Club which



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encourages people to share things like lawnmowers and drills with their neighbours, rather than each person purchasing one of their own.

Consideration of the short-term business case involves focussing on short-term results, which leads to incremental change. This has value, but it won't take us where we need to be. For businesses to drive real, long-term, transformational change, they need to move beyond looking at the business case; they need to look at their business models.

We need courageous business leaders to think about sustainability, challenge conventional business models and deliver new ways of doing things. This process must begin at the highest level in every business – in the boardroom. At Business in the Community, we are in the early stages of working with our member companies on developing a new agenda for the boardroom – identifying key points for discussion at senior level which will help to embed consideration of sustainability deeply into an organisation.

Board members have a crucial part to play in examining and addressing sustainability challenges for their business in a changing world. They should regularly discuss issues such as the opportunities and risks posed to their business by global mega-trends including rapid population growth, increasing resource constraints and shifts in consumer values. They should also be discussing the legacy of the business – what should be the business's contribution to society, beyond financial returns for shareholders? Finding the right balance between decisions that serve the short-term needs of the business, with those addressing much longer-term needs is key. And the customer should also be considered – board members should identify the specific asks they have of their customers to help their company to deliver more sustainable products or services.

There are great examples of companies who are testing new and potentially more sustainable business models. Marks & Spencer is aiming to change the business model for the clothing retail sector through its 'shwopping' programme, encouraging customers to donate old clothes to Oxfam using in-store boxes before they buy new clothes and cutting down on clothing that goes to landfill. This initiative began in the boardroom where board members wanted to do more than solely deliver short term financial results. Instead they wanted to think and test new approaches to their business to address the global trends affecting their business that stretch from now to 2050.

However, transformational change doesn't end in the boardroom, or even the single company – it should extend up and down supply chains and right into the customer's sitting room. Businesses cannot deliver a sustainable future by themselves, any more than governments can. They need citizens to play their role as well – and sometimes that might mean them recognising that their current behaviour and lifestyles can be changed to create a better life for themselves and help increase the chances for others to enjoy a better life. .

Through our 'Be the Start' campaign, every day during the month of May a different company or organisation will communicate what they are doing to make it easier for UK citizens to, through the products or services they offer, make a positive contribution to sustainability. 'Be the Start' is all about encouraging people to discover the individual action they can take to create a sustainable future for everyone. The responsibility is with the individual and the action they take is individual; there is no single version of a sustainable lifestyle, but collectively the impact can be huge.

This [Responsible Business Week](#) (15th-19th April), we at Business in the Community will engage with our 850 member companies, aiming to create a different narrative for corporate sustainability and sustainable development. We want to create a unique collaboration extending across companies and citizens, with each organisation testing new business models shaped by both short-term economics and customers' trends, but also by long-term environmental and social trends. We are asking for bolder, longer term thinking in boardrooms, more courageous tests of new business models and, when they prove successful, the delivery of that business model across that company's entire reach – from their boardroom, across the business, up and down the supply chain and finally to all the consumers their products or services touch.

And that will be their moon boot. So what's your company's? And how can we start to deliver it?