

Leaders Council Podcast Episode

Becoming a Sustainable Business with Astrid Wynne, Techbuyer

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My name is Scott Challinor and you are listening to the Leaders Council podcast, for the people who run the country and the people who keep the country running. As regular listeners of this programme will know, part of our mission here at the Leaders Council is to bring you a variety of distinct perspectives on leadership. And to this end, we're joined on today's show by Astrid Wynne, Sustainability Lead at Techbuyer and a global specialist in the provision of sustainable IT solutions. Astrid is also a chartered environmentalist and full member of IEMA. Astrid, a very warm welcome to yourself today. And by all means, thank you for joining us on the show. It's a pleasure having you with us.

00:42

Thanks for inviting me. Real pleasure.

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Of course, we were joined on the show a little bit earlier on by your colleague, Kevin Towers. And you're, of course, another member of the Techbuyer senior leadership team. The agenda we'll be covering today is around becoming a sustainable business and the practical steps that business leaders can implement today to make their businesses more sustainable. So first and foremost, just talking about sustainability and the increased interest around it within the business world, what do you think are some of the real driving forces behind that green drive?

01:20

Well, I think there's a growing awareness that we're in a bit of a pickle, in terms of environmental change, COP26. Within the UK, at the back end of last year, we're seeing an increasing number of businesses, making net zero claims and trying to figure out how to reduce their carbon footprint. There's a better awareness now that reducing the carbon footprint is not just about buying your way out of it, but you actually have to change the way that you operate to reduce

those carbon emissions in your own business, and then the supply chain. So, I think there's more knowledge, more understanding, more public will to do something. I think the pandemic had a part in that because people were more connected with their environment, more interested in the countryside and where we live. It gave us a bit of a break, I think, to think about that. That was one of the few Silver Linings that came out of that situation. The change in public perception has fed into the way that businesses are looking at sustainability.

There are other drivers as well, for example, growing trends towards green finance, and investors caring about where they spend their money, because the people who are investing in the funds care about where they're spending their money. So, you hear a lot about sustainability nowadays. A lot of the net zero conversation come from the finance sector. These are large mainstream businesses that are saying that sustainability makes a difference. There's also a growing awareness that there are other benefits of having a sound sustainability strategy as well. The Harvard Business Review has released information on how that relates to the attraction and retention of talent, for example, particularly young talent.

Alongside that, you're having legislation and company reporting mechanisms aligning with a sustainability message. For example, we've got the streamline energy and carbon reporting in the UK, for surprisingly small businesses comparatively. Then there's the energy savings opportunities scheme, which is also a surprisingly small company. For large businesses, you've got things like carbon reporting, where you're reporting not just on your impact, but also the risk of climate change and how you're going to adapt. And so, I guess that's my take on the macro issues that are driving this increased interest in sustainability. Because of course, everybody has to seed the large companies, so it's driving this top down change to the way that we're doing business, as well as potentially a bottom up change in the way we do business by people's personal attitudes towards that.

04:59

Yeah, so would you say that to become a sustainable business, fundamentally, these are the things that you should really be looking at?

05:09

I think it depends. My view on sustainability is it's like everything else, you have to analyse what you actually do and look at risks and opportunities that relate to that. I think carbon is a conversation that you can't escape from. You have to have some kind of carbon plan or some kind of carbon strategy. Beyond that, there's an awful lot that businesses can do, and potentially should do, and there are huge benefits of doing that. But you've got to take it on a case-by-case basis. You've got to look at the type of business that you're operating and what makes sense for you. So, it's like any other strategic approach.

05:50

Yeah, exactly. And so, when it comes to approaching these issues, how would you say that businesses and organisations can go about dealing with these things that they need to be thinking about in order to make themselves more sustainable?

06:05

Well, I think they can begin by having honest conversations and looking at what's within their control. So, in our business, for example, we have an offer, which is an environmental benefit, in a lot of respects, because of the materials contained in the equipment that we process. The fact that these materials are running out within decades, and they're in hard-to-reach places. For example, let's talk about cobalt mining that goes into electronics, and a lot of other critical raw materials as well. So, for us, our core business, if we increase that, and do it in the right way, is that the potential net environmental benefit, as long as we manage it correctly, we try and minimise our carbon that is used in that chain.

But then we also have to look at the other impacts that we have outside of what we do in our facility. So, for us, we'd be looking at what we pay for what's within our financial control to influence. So, it will be things like careers, can, we have better career options for taking the equipment out. And then we'd be looking at ways that we can improve things in a positive way. And then not minimising negative impact but creating positive change. And for that, we take what's there already, so we take the connections within our own team. And we look at charities that we can support or initiatives that we can support or advocacy issues that we can support to increase the benefit of what the business brings. We found the UN Global Goals for sustainable development very, very useful for that. Because it's a really bright, positive framework that enables you to analyse what you're already doing and then add an element of ambition. To that end, we looked at our core business, which was taking a product, reducing waste, basically, by reusing that product, and we put a target in against that. We ended up doubling what we were expecting to do over the five years to create that reach. We are also aware that our core products save money for healthcare bodies around the world, so we put a target in against that to increase the amount of savings that we were able to produce. We also put targets in around that work that we do with schools and education bodies, to try and recognise what was being done already and then build on that, so that the company has a direction in which to head. But if you're going to do things outside of your day-to-day job or do something on top of your day-to-day job, you do it in these areas, because then it becomes a company mission, which enables us to channel our resources and make a bigger impact in that direction.

There are two ways of looking at it. First of all, you have to look at the risks to your business; what the negative impacts are in terms of carbon, noise pollution, extensive potential environmental pollution, and then look at the opportunities to reduce those impacts. Alongside that, look at something that enables confidence building within the organisation so that you increase your positive impact. For us, the framework that we use is the ISO 14,001, which is an environmental management system. We think very carefully about the targets that we want to put in so that they're relevant to our business. We use carbon foot printing to try and analyse the impact that we're having in terms of carbon and reduce that. And then we use the global goals and internal programme that enables us to have more people involved in sustainability and

therefore make a bigger positive impact. Are you familiar with the UN Sustainable Development Goals?

11:12

I don't know them off the top of my head, but yeah, that is something I'm familiar with. Absolutely. Right.

11:17

Yeah. So, there are 17 of them in total. The advice is that nobody can make an impact on every single one of those 17 goals, so you select the ones that are most relevant to the type of business you are, your customers and your stakeholders. Then you also assess how much of an impact you can make on those goals. So, for us, we picked good health and wellbeing because we have quite a good team at Techbuyer that promote this, for example our team have carried out Yorkshire's Total Warrior challenge. They do challenges and activities in aid of health and wellbeing charities, whether that's Mind or a children's cancer charity, or a local hospice, as a result, Good Health and Wellbeing was one of the goals that we decided to support. Another one was Quality Education, because we deal a lot with supporting schools and because it ties into the work that we do internally on developing research and working with research bodies. And the last one was Responsible Consumption and Production; this obviously relates to the type of business that we are, but it also enabled us to expand the work that we were doing outside of our core product.

Packaging would be a big area of impact for us because we ship products globally. Focusing on the goal of responsible consumption and production gave us a direction to be heading in, in that respect, so that we could increase the amount of recycled content that we'll be using in our packaging, and also find ways of reusing packaging and have a packaging return system. These are probably initiatives that we would have done anyway but having a framework like that, and a goal like that reported inside the company and outside the company, is a great way of communicating what we're doing and why it's important. And so, the UN Sustainable Development Goals are a great tool to use to do that, to keep everybody on track and heading in the same direction so that you feel like you're making progress.

13:52

Yeah, exactly. And it just shows what is realistic, isn't it because you mentioned the 17 goals, and it's pretty far-fetched to suggest that you're going to be able to go out there and implement all of them and become a completely 100% sustainable business because it is very, very difficult to act completely self-sufficiently in that sense and grow in a sustainable way. So, you've got to pick out what's relevant to you, and what you can make the biggest impact with and obviously in Techbuyer's case, that sort of understanding of your corporate carbon footprint. But also, it's about thinking differently about the technology that you use as well. And a lot of that is looking

at things like the right to repair and that sort of thing. So, what kind of steps have you been taking on sort of that side of things, Astrid?

14:45

We've trained to advocate change. One of the of the problems, I think, with companies when it comes to sustainability is that there's a lack of confidence in how to begin, or how to create effective change, especially with small and medium sized companies. I think you can feel defeated quite quickly. And when you think of sustainability as trying to change the world for the better, that's a pretty daunting task. Celebrating the positive things that we did enabled us to realise that we did have a say, on fairly large issues, even though we were comparatively small. For example, the right to repair is a grass roots movement that has been flowering, in EU and UK legislation, and even in the US where 34, of 52, states in the US have a right to repair legislation as a result of what have traditionally been considered consumer issues. So, in America, they talk a lot about tractors, because a lot of Americans feel connected with farming on an emotional level. They talk about the ability to repair tractors as they are not blocked by software updates, you don't have these huge pieces of machinery that effectively dead because the software provider has not been able to give the update to the person who's bought the tractor.

It also applies to other things as well like fridge freezers, washing machines, computers, laptops, etc. It's in response to a situation in which people have felt that they're buying products, but these products are closed boxes that you don't have the right or the ability to tinker with or repair. You might buy a washing machine and can't find a washing machine repair person because the band's broken or the mechanisms are not working and therefore have to buy a whole new machine. And it's about trying to give people the ability to take back control of their items and not waste this huge amount of equipment that is effectively going to landfill all over the world.

At the moment, I think we're on 53 million tonnes of waste, globally produced every single year and that's projected to grow by up to 50 million to reach over 100 million tonnes a year by 2050, according to some reports, unless we change the way that we deal with these pieces of equipment. The right to repair movement is about recognising that and saying, "what does right to repair mean?" Well, it doesn't just mean that we have the legal right to repair the equipment. We also are supported by the people who made the equipment to repair that equipment, but we also need design guides, we need spare parts production, we need advice on the tools to use, and we also need to make sure that when we repair the item, that it still works because the software associated with it is updated and installed correctly. That's what a lot of the legislation is about at government level.

What companies like ourselves are saying is that that works doubly so in the business world. People see consumer waste in a very clear way because it comes through their kitchen. But that is potentially dwarfed by the amount that businesses are wasting because they don't have the knowledge or expertise or confidence to have that equipment repaired or upgraded or refurbished. Or they could also sell the equipment to a service provider who will repair it in house and then sell to another user, not just within an organisation but within a country or within a society. We made a business on refurbishing equipment by supplying component level upgrades so that people can carry out product life extension within their own business. And

we've done that very successfully over the past 50 years to the extent that we've grown from two people to over 250. In terms of financial growth, I'm sure Kevin gave you a more detailed breakdown of this, but it has been significant, up to 20% year on year, this shows that refurbished and product lifespan extension are viable options. There's not just the scope for businesses to have those repairs done, but also for the country to develop that sector, create jobs and create economic growth. But a company of our size is usually not confident enough to say publicly, not confident enough to provide evidence to government inquiries, not confident enough to advocate for change in the industry press. And I guess, I'm telling you this because we recognise that what we did was beneficial; we realised we could make an impact and that gave us confidence to speak on these issues on a much larger platform.

21:36

Yeah, it certainly is. And it's having ripples in the industry as well, because we're seeing legislation, as we talked about creeping in to regulate the climate risk of businesses. Obviously, at the moment, it's focusing more on the bigger firms rather than the smaller guys. So, at the moment we're seeing that scope, one, two and three legislation that's now starting to be integrated into really large businesses, and they're having to report on their climate risk. They are having to look at their performance when it comes to sustainability. So, is that something that we could see filtering into the UK?

22:14

I think that the UK is potentially ahead of the US with respect to climate risk. I mean, the UK was the first country to adopt the Task Force on climate related disclosures, which happened recently. In North America, the US Securities and Exchange Commission are the people who hold the company's company reports with respect to investment. And so, yes, I think it's something that we're going to see increasingly in the UK. And although it's the large companies that are going to have to record some of this in the first instance, it will have a knock-on effect on the smaller companies, because one of the things that they'll have to do when they report is report on scope three emissions. So maybe I should just give a quick outline of what scope one, two and three are. So, scope one emissions are greenhouse gases that we directly put into the atmosphere by burning things, by running our cars, for example. So that's a direct emission into the atmosphere. Scope two covers indirect emissions that are caused by electricity generation. There are national averages of what the greenhouse gas mix will be in an energy supply for the UK versus the US and potentially different geographical regions within country. And then scope three covers pretty much everything else.

So, part of scope three will be business travel, another part of scope 3 will be services, for example, courier providers, and another part of it will be the energy that it took to produce the items that we have in business. So that could be servers for example; there is approximately a tonne of embodied carbon in each server. It could be a laptop, to compare, it takes about two kilos of embodied carbon to produce, manufacture and transport a laptop for first use and that's the embodied carbon in the item. But scope three also covers downstream emissions. So, for a software provider, it could be the services that they provide, which make them money, which their consumers use and have massive energy effects in the network. For example, when I

download something, I don't just download it onto my computer, there's an energy cost at the data centre and the cost of the networking from the data centre to my device. There's also an argument that the software providers should be responsible for these scope three emissions, because they're making money out of it.

These are some of the things that are covered by scope three that you're responsible for; you have to look at what you have to report on, what you spend money on, or potentially what you make money from. Now, it's about upstream and downstream supply chain, which means that if you are part of the upstream or downstream supply chain, for a large company, they are likely to ask you for your carbon stickers so they can add them into their calculations, and then make their report. So those smaller companies might not have to report now on scope 1, 2 and 3, but they may be asked by their customers to report on that as well. I think that part of the rationale of asking people to report on scope three is because it's a way of pushing that accountability down through the supply chain and we're going to see this happening increasingly going forward.

26:43

Yeah, absolutely. And, obviously, with all of that in mind there will be a lot of businesses out there that are buying into this circular economy idea and want to go on the journey of making their businesses more green and more sustainable. So obviously, to put together an effective plan to make that happen, I suppose one of the big things that you've got to be able to do when you're thinking about where you can cut your emissions down is really look at that embedded carbon, let's call it, which filters down through the system. So, it's like when you are transporting supplies into the business? And those are the kinds of things that you might not necessarily think about straightaway, aren't they?

27:22

Yeah, and also circular economy is a great way of measuring other impacts, not just carbon, it's a great way of reducing waste. For example, because of what we're trying to get to with a circular economy, a change away from thinking of things as incoming product is necessary and needs to be changed to just thinking about material supply. So, the definition is a system that's regenerative by design. And what that means in practice is that you should look at ways of using your waste as a feed for another product, whether that's in house, or whether with another company. And the good thing about circular economy is that when you start thinking about things in that way, you get to all sorts of fun and creative solutions. So, you start reading about circular economy, you find out that coffee houses are keeping their used coffee grains to fertilise soil, which then feeds cows, which then they milk and then they put back into the coffee shop. This trail of partnerships with other organisations ensures that not only your waste is part of a closed loop, but your by-products are also part of a closed loop and that they don't just get dumped and not used as resource. And so, when we're talking about circular economy for technology, a lot of what we're looking at is extending the product life of technology in order to

avoid the mining of energy and materials in the supply chain, because it's damaging, and also at end of life.

Electronics are not easily recyclable. In fact, with current technologies, you can't recover 100% of the materials that are in our devices. If you send a laptop to be recycled, traditional technology will just crush and melt the laptop down and recover the materials at that melting point. There are higher value recyclers, which will harvest the valuable components for resale, and then shred and melt the rest. And there are newer technologies on the horizon, which mean, you can recover a wider range of materials. So, you can use bio leaching, for example, to recover rare materials, like cobalt and titanium, and there's paralysis as well, which is a kind of melting without burning technique that enables you to recover a wider range of metal. At the moment, when you send electronics to recycling, the rarer more precious materials in the device are burnt away by the traditional recyclable process. So, the effectiveness of recycling is not there yet for your technology; you have to extend that product life as long as you can. And that you can do that in all sorts of ways. So, you can reuse equipment between departments, for example, if a high-powered machine is no longer fit for purpose, because it's been taken over by the next latest greatest piece of machinery for your research department who's crunching numbers on genomes, that doesn't mean that that piece of technology can't be used by somebody who is just recording files, for example. It's about reusing the equipment within your own organisation and cascading the equipment down the use cases. So, you start off with the really, really high-powered equipment in the high-powered departments, then you cascade the asse down through the business.

When you're doing that, you might encounter problems, for example, software updates, which means that you have to reconfigure your hardware, then you'd need to understand that, and then you would need to have the expertise to upgrade the relevant components and parts that can make the new piece of software run on that older machine. In reality, a lot of companies don't have the expertise in house to do that. They will potentially be looking at service providers to have the knowledge and expertise to do that for them, or they may just sell them their old machines and buy some new machines that have been upgraded.

Circular economy would also be at end of life of products, seeking out the highest value of materials recovery for your redundant assets. If that makes sense. If you've got something that's perfectly usable, just for not your organisation, then donate it to somebody who can process that for charities use. That would be your first level. The other thing is, look for recyclers or secondary market providers who will harvest the components that are reusable out of the equipment before recycling. So that way you recovering as much value as you can from that asset. There are also other higher value systems that you could put in place. For example, if companies are still providing mobile phones, for business use, think about just providing a SIM card. Some people use their home mobile machine, and then they just swap the SIM card in and out, reducing your use of new equipment.

34:18

Yeah, absolutely. So, when it comes to making a plan to decide how you can buy into the circular economy and how you can increase your impact in a positive way, there are lots of things to consider such as the product life extension models, we've talked about measuring your carbon input not just directly but also indirectly. Obviously, we refer to the UN Global climate

goals and sustainability goals that you can look at to also give you a little bit of direction, but also, you know, where you maybe don't have the expertise you can look outside the business to certain service providers, and you can also look to organisations such as IEMA of which you are a member as well. That organisation is active in providing sustainability training at the moment, isn't it, which could benefit businesses out there that are looking to really make that change?

35:13

That's right. The organisation itself runs membership from the full affiliate level, which is when you just started on your sustainability journey, right through to full membership and a decision maker level for the organisation itself. That's an entire training programme. Techbuyer is a corporate member of IEMA. Because we're a corporate member, and there is a chartered environmentalist on the team, it means that we're qualified to give accredited training courses on sustainability, which we will be doing for our internal staff, and also, eventually our customers and partners. In the wider sector, it's a good solution to have an accredited course because it will give you a background and a way of framing your thinking when it comes to sustainability and a way of viewing what you do through a sustainable lens, if you like. One of the things that it will start by doing is laying out some of the things to be aware of, for the workforce and managers, or board members in the way that they approach their jobs. So, for the workforce, it will be an awareness of what the risks and opportunities are for the business and for their area of operation, which pieces of legislation they need to be aware of, when they are carrying out their job, what mechanisms are in place to control pollution, for example, or environmental damage and what systems you can put in place to manage your environmental risk, as well as what sustainability means in general, and what it would mean for your company. So, IEMA training is a really good way of outlining that and then taking your work force through that whole process so that they come out the other end with a greater awareness of how what they do influences the environment and the company's impact on the environment. So that's something that we'll be we're looking at for our internal teams. We've already got 10 affiliate members signed up to start their journey and we have our first batch of training beginning in three weeks' time for our internal team. But we'd encourage all companies to look at this so that they're aware of the issues and that when they start putting together a sustainability strategy, it's one based on broader issues. This ensures that when they put this in place, and they start communicating with other people, with stakeholders, with government, with other organisations, that they're covering the whole range of issues that they need to be dealing with.

38:29

Absolutely, right. And obviously, Techbuyer is a fantastic model to follow in its own right. Not only have you talked about how the business has essentially been built on sustainability and the circular economy, and we talked about all the work that you've been doing as well. And that's not gone unnoticed, because in the last couple of years, you've been recognised with two quite huge accolades; Circular Economy Organisation of the Year by IEMA two years ago, and also Sustainable Organisation of the Year at the UK IT industry awards just last year as well. So, I

think it's fair to say that Techbuyer is making incredible strides in sustainability, and I suppose that's going to be the case and long into the future as well.

39:13

They're fantastic things to have awards. It's great to be recognised by people outside the company and by impressive organisations as well, it's an amazing confidence builder. Thank you to everybody at the company that puts in the workday in day out to make things better for us and I would hand on heart say that we won these things because a lot of people in the company spend an awful lot of time thinking about how we can make things better. Back to sustainability, I'd say that as a group of people, we are encouraged to make things better in a lot of areas. But people take time out of their weekends, go to climate action festivals, people put together tech fossil pits to demonstrate to kids what obsolescence means. People put together thoughts and ideas, word searches, crosswords for magazines that go out to all people, contact art galleries, who are wanting to do exhibitions about waste. People have also commissioned an electronic waste bike created by a local artist to raise awareness. About a year before the Mount Rushford happened in the press and carted that round all the tourist spots in North Yorkshire as part of a publicity campaign to support the bike race that was coming through, the UCI bike race, which is a big deal in the cycling world. So a lot of our company members are creative and committed, they go way above and beyond what they have to do in order to make things work, to advocate, to educate, to change, to celebrate. And it's just really lovely that all these assets are recognised by people outside the company. Because, yeah, I just, it makes you really proud to work.

41:50

It is exactly, it's a huge source of pride. I suppose it's now the real hope that the confidence that that gives you, supported by everybody working within the business can act as real trailblazers and an example to others as well to join the journey and get on that sustainability trail. Because, as we talked about right at the beginning, with the COVID situation and all of the talk around COP26, there's a lot of momentum now in trying to deal with the climate emergency, there's a lot more urgency about it and we need all the help we can get to get on that trail, don't we? And really head to where we need to be.

42:28

Yeah, I agree. And also, we'll work together to get there. I mean, that's another thing that I'm particularly proud of, when working for Techbuyer because as a company, we're quite happy about working with other people, and getting other people involved and partnering with other organisations to think differently and celebrate positive actions and drive the conversation. That partnership element and confidence to go out there and meet new people and have these discussions is something that's infectious; it creates a virtuous circle. I think the more that we do that, the more we get out there and we try and help and improve our little corner of the world, it

draws people who are interested in that way of doing business and in that way of working to the company. So, when I first joined the company, when 93 people who work there, there are more than 250 now, and I think that a lot of the people that we have recruited have really got on board with the idea of going out there and being creative and enthusiastic about positive change and that's quite an achievement. It also means that the people who work with us, including research bodies, are also like minded in that respect. So, it allows you to amplify your actions, I guess, by having an attitude that attracts partners who have similar aspirations.

44:31

Absolutely right. It is interesting that you talk about that creative thinking and that innovative streak because that's certainly something that we're going to be talking about in the next instalment of this Techbuyer podcast series where we'll be joined by Rich Kenny, the managing director at Techbuyer's sister company Interact and also Research and Sustainability Director within Techbuyer. So, certainly looking forward to speaking with him about that. And also, to anybody sort of who's listened in today and is feeling passionate about the issues that myself and Astrid have discussed, a good port of call is to look further at Techbuyer and its work and maybe look for some way to help your business start to trailblaze in this area. Techbuyer.com is a good port of call to start with. And for now, Astrid, of course, it's been absolutely amazing and incredibly enlightening experience welcoming you on to the podcast today to discuss these issues because it is an urgent situation, it is incredibly important and hopefully to those who are listening in if even one person feels like they're ready to join the journey. Hopefully, there's something good to come out of this. Thank you for your time and agreeing to do this. It's been a real pleasure having you with us.

45:43

Okay, thank you very, very much for having me.

45:46

And to all of the listeners tuning in as well, I do hope that you thoroughly enjoyed the interview with myself and Astrid Wynne from Techbuyer today. And just a reminder as well that if you feel that your business has its own sustainability or any story to share with the Leaders Council, then you too can apply to be on the programme via [leaders council.co.uk/apply](https://www.leaderscouncil.co.uk/apply) to share that story with us. For now, you have been listening to the leader's council podcast with your host Scott Challinor today. Everybody, please do take care and goodbye.