

Environment Analyst Business Summit 2022

Roundtable headline takeaways and notes, 22 June 2022

About

A popular feature of the annual [Environment Analyst Business Summit](#) series, roundtable discussions allow attendees to discuss topics of interest in an informal atmosphere, sharing their insights and experiences. They are moderated by guest experts in their respective fields. Here, we present the key takeaways and discussion outcomes from each of this year's sessions, which were held in-person for the first time since the pandemic.

A. Managing organisational challenges and the impact of the post-Covid 'new normal' on business structures and practices.

Moderator: Philippa Ross, Director of Planning and Environmental Consenting, Atkins

- Covid allowed an evaluation of the impact of remote working on internal and external relationships.
- Working at home allows people to be more productive. It also provides the flexibility for a good work life balance.
- On the flip side, people miss out on social interaction. It's hard to sustain the sense of connection, sharing ideas, feeling that you are in a team and part of a company culture.
- It was agreed that new employees and staff in early careers need those things to help them develop, so remote working has a particular impact on those groups.
- Some of Atkins' graduate employees and others in exit interviews said that they had lacked face-to-face interaction, to the detriment of career development.
- What's the answer? The attendees agreed that they didn't know, yet. "It feels like we're all going through an experiment," said one.
- Surprisingly, they noted, since pandemic rules were relaxed, only a few companies have mandated a certain amount of time to be physically on site. Many are leaving it flexible.
- Flexibility is important, but some roundtable participants try to make sure that staff are in on certain days, to help create a team atmosphere.
- Some felt that staff should be mandated to go in all the time. This is clearly a divisive issue, with a broad spectrum of views, and evoking strong feelings.
- Different approaches work for different kinds of work. One company has "heads up, heads down, heads together" sessions, which attendees thought was a good idea.
- The office is merely a tool not an end in itself, said some. There should be a reason to come in. If there isn't, working flexibly and working at home definitely have benefits.

- The table also talked about mental health – how the pandemic had highlighted that issue and loneliness. Coming back to the office had been important in addressing that – making people feel connected again, part of a team: good things.
- In conclusion, it's complex. The consensus among the group was that no-one has the right answer, but they agreed that hybrid working has been a good thing and were interested in seeing how things looked three years' time.

B. Natural capital accounting: Leveraging environmental impacts and benefits and Nature Based Solutions (NbS) in business cases.

Moderator: Justine Saunders, Senior Manager, Capitals Coalition

- Ascertaining the extent of knowledge: some people were just learning about nature-based accounting. Others had already gone into great detail. Responses were diverse.
- It was acknowledged that there is a plethora of available tools and this brings about a need for consistency. The tools are needed to help consultants communicate value to stakeholders, such as investors.
- There is a new [EU LIFE-funded] project called 'Transparent,' which is designed to address this by developing standardised natural capital accounting and valuation principles for business in line with the European Green Deal.
- There's a need for tools to be outcome-focused and to consider longer term timelines. It's also important that tools communicate risks.
- Attendees agreed on the need to consider the synergies from co-benefits [of using different tools] and to illustrate opportunities and trade-offs in a transparent way.
- Anticipating a move from ESG to an integrated capitals approach, the group noted the need to understand human, social and natural capital, which use very different vocabularies, and explain them in a way that accountants and decision-makers can understand, sometimes in different languages.
- Digitalisation of our products will allow us to delve down into the data. But when aggregating data, don't focus just on value: make sure to keep the bigger picture.

C. Addressing the skills challenge and improving diversity and inclusion in the E & S consultancy sector.

Moderator: Marc Davies, Managing Director, Environment, Tetra Tech Europe

- There's a clear need for collaboration across the sector to overcome the skills challenge. Positive experiences along these lines have been shared from the Netherlands, where that approach is producing some results.
- From an institutional perspective, the fragmentation of representation of the skills ("in this room") across different organisations and institutions is a weakness, noted the table. "Unlike civil engineers or planners we don't have a single overarching representative body, which makes it difficult for us to act cohesively." There was some discussion of the potential benefits of working together to try and solve this.

- There is a strong need to promote the industry as a great place for a career, from a diversity and inclusivity perspective. To attract recruitment of the right people you have to reach out to the right schools. There was strong recognition at the session that diversity brings innovation and profit.
- The pandemic has left some negative impacts. While it led to some good working practices, it also led to isolation, with some individuals feeling more engaged with their clients' cultures than that of their own organisation.
- However, the participants recognised the importance of flexible working, especially for working parents, and the ability to adapt to their personal needs.
- Organisations will need to promote flexible working to retain talent and to foster good mental health, especially for individuals working at home, following through on their welfare.
- Positive hiring is important and this includes engaging with employee representative groups, providing forums and opportunities for shared experience. Learning doesn't only come down from board level.
- This might only be a short-term problem. "Because of the 'Greta Thunberg effect', everyone wants to be an environment consultant. We'll have lots more in five years," said one participant.

D. How to embed sustainability and net zero principles into an organisation, secure the support of senior leaders, manage impact on company culture and align organisational purpose and values with ESG metrics.

Moderator: Jo Jeffreys, Principal Social Value Consultant, Office of Global Climate Response and ESG, Jacobs.

- We're all at different points on the ESG strategy journey. Also there are different drivers we are responding to, whether regulatory or financial or clients demanding or asking questions.
- The involvement of senior leadership is important in securing top-level buy in to net zero and sustainability. The challenge is to maintain their engagement and support, not just at the beginning but all the way through.
- One participant said their firm had observed big gaps between client teams delivering ESG strategy and their employees delivering projects. This raises the question: whose role is it to bridge this gap?
- Time is required to prepare, educate and engage people. Another key question: whose time should this be – the consultant's or the client's?
- Some critics say that you can't measure ESG. Can we measure it, or not, asked a participant. These questions provoked further debate, with no clear conclusion but one person commenting that we need visionary leaders to inspire a drive towards a purpose-driven culture.
- Rewarding and incentivising a systemised ESG approach within organisations is key. Even with good leaders, the challenge is how to inspire, educate, reward and recognise employees who don't think their job is to do ESG or, who, in fact, are already doing it, participants agreed.

E. Most large infrastructure projects are being delivered through collaborative relationships. What lessons are being learnt and how can they be leveraged to deliver optimum value and innovation?

Moderator: Max Campbell, Regional Segment Manager, Civil, EMEA, Seequent

- The roundtable considered the kinds of collaborative structures that have been used for different parties, whether they are providing benefits and whether collaboration is on the increase.
- Key highlights of the discussion included acknowledgement that there's been an increase in mega projects, like HS2 in the UK. This has led to more confidence in using joint ventures (JVs) and more trust between consultants.
- This confidence will facilitate "more cooperation down the road". The table acknowledged presentations at the Summit of "some really great examples of cooperation and best practice, such as joint interviewing, within JVs".
- There are challenges between tier one and tier two consultants. Sometimes small firms can "feel assaulted" or "pigeonholed into particular aspects of projects" and steered in directions they may not like.
- Larger players don't always necessarily have ESG expertise, which opens the door and leads to opportunities for small players.
- Data has not always been collected and used in the way that it might ideally be. So there is a big opportunity to collect data more effectively.

H. Developing resilient cities: integrating adaptation and mitigation measures into sustainable urban development, to deliver climate objectives.

Moderator: Christine Wissink, Technical Director of Climate Resilience and Adaptation, Wood

- The first point of discussion was about aligning definitions and knowledge. "It's clear that we need an improved, common, industry understanding of climate resilience. It's not just flooding and it's not just ghg resilience," said one participant.
- Forecasting and planning ahead for change was a key issue. In terms of working with clients, upskilling, and building capacity, it's important, said another participant, that we understand what the future climate is going to look like and what its impacts will be on society, the economy and infrastructure.
- There is a need to know more about scenario planning, how combined or consecutive events will exacerbate impacts, and how secondary or transmission dynamics impact not just immediate sites or projects but surrounding areas and supply chains.
- Cities were identified as having a unique ability to cope with and be resilient to climate change.
- Challenges include inadequate funding for climate adaptation and resilience compared with for net zero and mitigation.
- Natural solutions were identified as being important to address climate resilience.
- One comment emphasised the key to addressing climate risk as "the nexus between the economy, people and technological solutions". They can't be looked at in isolation.

- Our technical services and abilities as experts need to be broader than just our specific silos and our specific areas. The sector needs to look at interdisciplinary solutions to drive climate resilience across society, economy and the built environment.

I. Achieving an innovative, sustainable approach to supply chains and procurement.

Moderator: Torsten Glaeser, Director, CEPROSO – Circular Economy Procurement Solutions

- The first topic was the role of ESG in supply chains, or the movement of goods or materials across the globe, and it was agreed that it was increasingly significant.
- The second topic was the impact of ESG on procurement tendering and supplier management.
- The missing things in supply chains are missing data, missing coding for labour and material and missing price predictability. Expectations from the client are often not clear to consultants.
- ESG awareness is now common among companies at board level. So questions like security of supply, social investment and educating SMEs are coming to us now.
- There are some good examples out there, especially in public procurement and for bigger companies who take the issue of supply chains seriously.

Credits

We extend our thanks to the external moderators who led these roundtables, contributing to the success of this year's Environment Analyst Business Summit. Thanks as well to EA staff members who contributed to the event, to reporter Will Hatchett (who curated this report), to Amanda Rafferty (who helped plan the session as part of the wider summit programme), and to all participants at this year's roundtable meetings.