



# THE ENVIRONMENTAL TECHNOLOGY AND SUSTAINABILITY SECTOR: SMART RECRUITING IN AN EVOLVING INDUSTRY

BY ERIC SLANKIS

## INDUSTRY AT A CROSSROADS

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The environmental technology and sustainability sector is certainly an intriguing one. It is, by and large, an industry that has traditionally operated on the sidelines of the business world – sometimes marginalized, often misrepresented. Today, however, we are seeing a dramatic shift in the way this industry, and organizations operating with it, are being portrayed and perceived – towards a mainstreaming of the ideology and the industry. With that change, with increased global awareness, growing public support, publicity and exposure, the environmental technology and sustainability sector is facing an exciting point in its evolution. This industry sits at a crossroads – where an historically small-scale movement and its operations are being embraced by large industry, the public, and policy-makers alike – indicating a significant opportunity for all players in the sector.

What is particularly exciting is that the breadth and reach of this sector is enormous – encompassing grassroots environmental advocacy groups, startup technology companies, progressive branches of traditional energy companies, established consulting firms, industry associations, and government bodies, just to name a few. With such a broad spectrum of organizations involved in different elements of the same process, it stands to reason that the impact of this groundswell will be immense, both in environmental and economic terms.

Though a comparison may seem counterintuitive to some, this industry is in many ways reflective of the early 1990's high-tech sector – an industry seeing an influx of funding, increased awareness of its importance, and a growing number of companies establishing themselves in a number of new niche markets. Opportunity and competition are creating an intriguing, challenging time of evolution for the business as a whole.



Part of this evolution will naturally include the recruitment of skilled employees who allow these companies, organizations, and agencies to reach their goals. Unfortunately, our clients have repeated to us time and again that the existing pool of executive talent within this sector is particularly small, and as a result, recruiting is a major challenge in ensuring a successful and sustained industry.

In order to address this challenge, individual organizations may want to step back and take a look at the way they present themselves to the public, to investors, and to prospective candidates. The industry's traditional positioning and sensibilities may need to be re-tooled to ensure that an organization is properly equipped and structured to prosper in this new environment. Doing so will allow organizations to take advantage of the longterm opportunities that present themselves.

## RECRUITMENT ISSUES

*The key is in the creation and presentation of an attractive, progressive, and professional environment.*

In analyzing the industry as it has evolved to date, and taking into account what we have seen in other similarly growing and maturing sectors, there appear to be three key areas to develop in order for the companies operating within the environmental technology and sustainability sector to fully realize their potential:

- I. *Create an attractive environment and industry – not just to those already within it, but to those outside as well.*
- II. *Create a viable, sustainable organization that is adaptive to change.*
- III. *Recruit executives with a balance of passion and skill.*

In the case of the environmental technology and sustainability sector, the existing benefit in recruiting is that there is a pool of candidates actively drawn to the sector, often for very strong personal reasons and convictions. However, to broaden the candidate pool beyond these individuals, or to reach others who have the passion but may have balked at becoming a part of the industry in the past, companies need to develop and present an attractive environment with which to entice prospective employees.

Taking a lesson from the tech sector, the creation and presentation of an attractive, progressive, and professional environment is key to ensuring that the right candidates end up in key roles, while ensuring that the fundamental organizational mandates and passions are not lost. It also ensures the ability to recruit candidates from outside the existing industry pool – a point that will become increasingly important to companies as the industry evolves.

## I. CREATE AN ATTRACTIVE ENVIRONMENT AND INDUSTRY – NOT JUST TO THOSE ALREADY WITHIN IT, BUT TO THOSE OUTSIDE AS WELL

*Because the community proper is so limited, at some point, recruitment from other industries will become a necessity.*

In speaking with today's leaders in the environmental sector, a common theme is that there are simply not enough senior-level people in the sector to satisfy demand. Because the community proper is so limited, at some point, recruitment from other industries will become a necessity. To facilitate this, some traditional boundaries (e.g. environmentalism vs. industry) will have to be crossed, and some long-standing obstacles (like perception, compensation, and structure) will have to be dealt with. Companies within the environmental industry have to re-think the way they look at themselves. The good news is that by meeting these challenges, those companies will emerge stronger and with better leaders. Some suggestions include:

- **Don't reject influences from other industries.** Again and again, we have seen hiring committees reject people because they have spent too much time under the influence of 'the other side', or lack sector-specific experience. Look instead at comparable competencies – an influx of different information and perspectives creates a stronger overall entity with a better mix of styles and personalities.

- **Recognize that strong executives need market-competitive salaries.** Passion for a cause can incline people to take less money – but don't expect them to take significantly less. In creating a more professional environmental industry, we need to take cues from outside. There is such thing as a going rate for qualified and experienced candidates.
- **Set realistic goals.** The high-tech sector has taught us an important lesson: state clearly to candidates what they can expect to achieve, and what the company itself expects to achieve. Your organization may have large-scale goals, but the day-to-day reality is often a very different picture. Misrepresentation or overly positive positioning can harm your credibility and your ability to recruit in the long-term.
- **Work to build visibility for your organization** – but as a progressive force, not an antagonistic one (unless that is your *raison d'être!*). Build a professional environment that is open and attractive to all kinds of candidates.
- **Decide how you will approach recruitment**, and work to make it objective and transparent. Look outside your circle of contacts and make opportunities available to a broader base of candidates. An open recruiting effort will encourage applicants from a wider spectrum of backgrounds, indicate an openness to candidates from outside, and possibly lead to superior candidates for the role.

## II. CREATE A VIABLE, SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATION THAT IS ADAPTIVE TO CHANGE

*Some organizations may wish to re-assess their organizational structure and subsequently build a solid foundation for future growth.*

In creating a stronger entity overall, some organizations may wish to re-assess their organizational structure and subsequently build a solid foundation for future growth. As was the case with the high-tech sector, steps need to be taken to ensure successful evolution, and to ensure that the organizations that make up the industry grow and become more robust:

- **Organizations need to become more structured and organized.** Create career paths and pursue candidates with specific skills, credentials, and accomplishments when recruiting.
- **They need to develop infrastructures that allow them to grow.** Work to recognize deficiencies in the organization, and hire people to address those needs.
- **In many cases, organizations need to develop identities that are distinct from the person at the top** – often the founding member of the company or group. Boards and leaders of environmental organizations have to take steps to

ensure viability should the CEO step down. This entails building both an infrastructure and a culture that is attractive and sustaining, and not necessarily a direct reflection of that leader.

By addressing these issues, while also creating a sound development and succession plan, companies enable themselves to consider the best available candidates, and ensure that they are recruiting from the largest possible candidate pool. By attracting star candidates, and by spending time developing a plan to retain them, the organization creates a stronger culture while also addressing some potential traditional pitfalls. Distilled into three steps:

- **Look at your leadership.** Many environmental organizations are led by, or are recognized by, a highly visible leader – to the degree that the organization often takes on his or her personality. These organizations may need to balance, leverage, and moderate that influence, and create an infrastructure that stresses growth, opportunity and professionalism in order to recruit and retain key employees. Doing so increases the viability of the company beyond the tenure of that one leader.
- **De-politicize your organization and recruiting environment.** Eliminate any stigmas that may exist, such as the boundaries between environmentalism and industry. Some of the greatest gains can be made by bringing a stronger business-sense and broader corporate background to the table. Even if passion is part of your mandate, your work environment should be one that makes everybody comfortable, whatever their views.
- **Create long-term plans.** Build for the future. When planning staffing needs and in building your corporation, look past the political environment or regulatory obstacles of the day. The importance of sustainability and environmentalism will outlast the current administration. Work to build a store of talent, and create an environment that sustains it, before this process becomes necessary.

### III. RECRUITING: BALANCING PASSION WITH SKILL

*In an interview setting, someone who is a proponent of the values of your organization can be very attractive – but the key is to determine if that person possesses the skills that your organization truly needs.*

When assessing and selecting candidates, balancing skill and passion for the role is a difficult element of the recruiting process. We have seen many situations where a candidate for a role possessed an abundance of passion, but paled on a purely skills-based assessment, and therefore was not the best candidate for that role. In an interview setting, someone who is a proponent of the values of your organization can be very

attractive – but the key is to determine if that person possesses the skills that your organization truly needs. Finding someone with a passion for your organization’s mandate and the right skills to meet your requirements will take some time, but is certainly achievable. Some suggestions:

- **Take the time to objectively understand what your organization needs** – it is more likely to be a skill-set than one more person who believes in the goal. The CEO or Executive Director can be the leader for them to follow and support, *the Visionary*, but every visionary needs a well grounded team working alongside them.
- **Understand that the pool of key resources is very limited** – particularly if you are looking for someone with an extensive background in the environmental sector itself. Be prepared to look beyond the people you know, or the people with direct experience in the environmental industry. One of the greatest truisms in executive recruiting is that taking the time to match a candidate with your specific needs is nearly always better than simply hiring the person that is readily available.
- **Don’t be blinded by passion** – look past the person who is only motivated by a desire to be a part of the sector. Look for the person for whom this position actually makes sense from a career perspective. Hire the best person – not necessarily the most passionate. At the same time...
- **Don’t overlook passion.** It also makes no sense to ignore a person who says they want to better the environment – maybe they do.
- **Keep track of the unsolicited applications you receive.** These proactive candidates are people who have specifically targeted your organization, and may better fit its culture than someone responding to a specific ad.
- **Work from the bottom-up.** Tap into a new breed of environmentally minded graduates and professionals, as they represent the next generation of business leaders and executives.

### MANAGING PASSION IN RECRUITING – YOUR INHERENT ADVANTAGE

*These personal motivations present an inherent advantage for environmental organizations looking to recruit top talent.*

Our candidates have told us, time and time again, that environmentalism and sustainability are passions. More so than virtually any other industry, people working in this field do so because of a fundamental connection to a belief or cause. They feel good about what they are doing, and in many

cases this makes them more tied to their work than employees in banking, manufacturing, or many other industry sectors.

This commitment to one's industry is, in many ways, a unique point of attraction that most other sectors do not offer. In our years of speaking with potential candidates for environmental and sustainability sector jobs, we have noted a number of key candidate motivators:

- **A commitment to doing good** – a chance to make a difference and act on personal convictions.
- **A lifestyle choice** – a chance for involvement with a growing industry that is based on values they relate to.
- **A turn away from purely-profit driven or exploitative industries** – a chance to move away from supporting large corporations with a bottom-line, shareholder return mandate.

These kinds of personal motivations present an inherent advantage for environmental organizations looking to recruit top talent. The nature of the industry, however, can also present a challenge if it creates a sense that only the most environmentally-dedicated are welcome. Some obstacles to pursuing a career in the sector often cited by candidates include:

- *The often marginalized, sometimes radical, connotations attached to environmentalism and sustainability.*
- *A perceived philosophical divide between environmentally oriented organizations and other industry sectors, leading some people to question their ability to cross from one side to the other.*
- *A perceived lack of structure in the industry as a whole, similar to technology start-ups and many not-for-profit organizations.*
- *Pay scales that often do not measure up to other industry sectors.*
- *A lack of employment opportunities overall.*

If the companies operating within the environmental sustainability industry can address some of these perception issues, while simultaneously working to create an attractive environment with an openness to external influences, then the success that was seen in the high-tech sector can be repeated here. Having said that, some of the lessons learned from the

high-tech industry should also not be ignored: don't overextend yourself, don't over-promise results, and make sure you act in a financially sustainable and responsible manner. With sound management, a commitment to progressive, sustainable structures, and with effective recruitment and selection processes, environmental and sustainable development organizations can position themselves for what looks to be a period of growth – and position themselves to capitalize longterm on the new opportunities that are appearing.

In pursuing those opportunities, however, companies in the environmental technology and sustainability sector are going to face more competition for dollars, more players vying for contracts, and growing demand for meaningful professional services and representation. Those organizations that rise to the challenge stand to benefit from a movement that is continuously gaining momentum. This is the fundamental reason that companies in this sector need to look to the future, and address the issues of growth and structure before they find themselves left behind. The industry is going to be competing for an always-limited pool of resources, and those that have taken the time to understand how to attract and win them will quickly eclipse those that haven't.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND RAY & BERNDTSON

Eric Slankis is a Principal in Ray & Berndtson's Ottawa Office. He has extensive experience in the recruitment of leaders in the environmental technology and sustainability sector, including engagements with organizations as diverse as Sustainable Technology Development Canada (SDTC), National Resources Canada (NRCan), and the Sierra Club of Canada.

With offices in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Halifax and St. John's, Ray & Berndtson is Canada's largest executive search firm. It has been an industry leader in recognizing and developing executives within emerging markets for more than 30 years.

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