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Small is beautiful

The stationery and workplace supplies sector needs to stop pursuing unsustainable growth and shift to a genuinely sustainable business model

Success is normally determined by sales and profit, but such accounting only measures transactional value and not whether an enterprise provides any purposeful benefit to nature or people. A 'green' business should create value and respect for the environment and society as its primary function.

However, most companies take the view that profit and economic growth can still be the prime motivation as long as the environmental and social impacts are reduced, thus creating a 'sustainable' business.

From a green perspective, this approach is fundamentally flawed as it pursues a reductionist solution to a systemic problem. The difficulty with seeking technical resolutions is the consequence of technological changes on the overall ecosystem are unknown, which is why 'greens' work towards a holistic solution to the damage caused by economic production.

Over the past 30 years, business sustainability has resulted in an acceleration of environmental damage as the steps taken to ameliorate the destruction have been outweighed by increasing harmful industrial activity. This is not to say that recycling and reducing waste and energy consumption practices should not be undertaken, rather they will have little impact on the climate and ecosystem crisis if the current commercial system continues to expand.

CARBON NEUTRALITY AND NET ZERO

The global awareness of climate change has generated international demands to stop releasing carbon into the atmosphere. But most companies can't eliminate all their carbon emissions, so the net zero concept was created.

The idea was the remaining 20% or less of carbon produced by business activities after taking all sustainability measures would be offset by carbon capture through planting trees or using technology. However, many firms cannot – or will not – lower emissions through sustainable practices and intend to offset most of them.

Sadly, the net zero policies of big business and governments are fantasies. There simply isn't the space on the planet to plant enough trees to offset emissions. The trillions of tonnes of carbon that need to be removed from the atmosphere would require technology that currently does not exist. If it did, it would consume more energy to set up and run than the current fossil fuel system, which has taken decades to create.

The easiest way to capture carbon is to restore forests, coral reefs, peat bogs, etc, but these are precisely the ecosystems that are being destroyed by the increase in economic activity. The one-trick pony of carbon emission counting does nothing to address ecological loss, which is by far the most serious problem we face.

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MANAGING A GREEN BUSINESS

A sustainable company must keep its economic activity to a minimum while delivering its goals. This is very different from the standard business model where enterprises seek to become larger to enjoy greater profits through scale and market domination. It is also contrary to a sustainable business model, where profit and growth are

required, along with environmental management, in order to avoid poverty and deliver wealth.

At The Green Stationery Company, we have limited turnover by not engaging in selling activities such as extensive advertising, employing salespeople or offering low price deals. In our industry, this is at odds with normal practice, and we are not regarded as successful since our aim is to break even rather than maximise profits.

We have always been a small microbusiness, with less than £500,000 in sales and employing no more than four people. This model has ecological benefits and is also more efficient relative to standard organisations – it avoids economic waste and we try not to engage in activities that do not directly add to the environmental and social value of the products our customers want.

Companies must run on the 'small is beautiful' principle

In many companies, non-value activities like brand advertising, packaging and transportation networks can be a huge part of the cost of a product. They are also damaging to the environment. Most suppliers in the UK stationery industry offer the same goods, distributed through three main wholesalers.

Conversely, The Green Stationery Company is one of the few dealers with a unique range of sustainable office supplies. It is our USP. The strategy is to make us easy to find by customers wanting eco-friendly items rather than trying to sell to those with no interest.

For these reasons and because we are not engaged in a low-price battle for the supply of homogeneous products, The Green Stationery Company is able to achieve high margins compared to many others in the sector. A high-margin, low-volume venture like ours can offer better wages and shorter working hours than the standard dealer.

Our model has been helped by environmental aims that reduce costs. These include packing for orders that consist of reclaimed boxes and void materials from local businesses and

electronic ordering facilities for drop-shipping from suppliers to minimise the movement of goods. We were early adopters of internet marketing – the first webstore went live in 1997 – to avoid the production of physical literature and all the waste it entails.

OPERATING WITH GREEN MICROBUSINESSES

To make the financial system sustainable, it must shrink – at least 30%. A 'small is beautiful' national economy would mainly consist of microbusinesses and be less engaged with global trade. How is this possible?

Over half the economy is already composed of micro and SME businesses. UK economic policy, however, is skewed to supporting just 8,000 large enterprises which enjoy monopolistic profits, low rates of taxation and access to political power to further their interests. It is these companies that are primarily engaged in the international exploitation of natural resources and degradation of ecosystems on a scale which is causing the climate crisis.

To achieve huge turnovers, these organisations inevitably engage in economic waste as they must create an endless artificial demand for the goods they manufacture inefficiently, without any competition.

Instead, producing less stuff with little use value and more things that genuinely enhance people's lives is needed. Such an economy would be built around repairing and re-purposing things to reduce resource consumption. It would employ more people to deliver individually crafted, durable, quality products supplied by low-impact microbusinesses.

Companies must run on the 'small is beautiful' principle. Only then will the human economy tread lightly on the planet.

