Bridging the Sustainability Gap with Employees in The Apparel and Footwear Industry: A Pilot at Reebok International

Boston-based sustainability consulting group Quanits conducted the first science-based metrics study on the fashion industry and found that apparel and footwear companies are responsible for 8% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions (Chrobot, et. al, 2018). While 8% might not sound like a jarring number, it is important to note that this negative climate impact from a singular industry is equivalent to that of the entire European Union (Chrobot, et. al, 2018). Furthermore, these metrics do not even consider the massive issues with energy and resource use in the use-phase, and the waste that occurs at the products end of life. If apparel and footwear brands continue to operate as they do today, they are set to increase their negative impact by nearly 50% in the next decade (Chrobot, et. al, 2018).

The success of fashion brands largely rests with their consumers, who are increasingly demanding responsible business practices from the companies they buy from. Moreover, consumers are starting to vote with their dollars. In a recent consumer survey, it was found that 50% of respondents were more likely to purchase clothing from brands committed to sustainability while almost 30% of respondents would not purchase clothing from a company not committed to sustainability (NOSTO, 2019).

Sustainability is no longer a “nice to have,” and is quickly becoming a business imperative. In order to appeal to and win over consumers in the sustainability space, it is critical that internal employees are aligned and engaged first. This paper explores alternative approaches to integrating sustainability into corporate culture, specifically in the apparel and footwear industry, using Reebok International as a test pilot. This investigation found that clarity, convenience, prioritization, and know-how were the primary barriers to making more sustainable choices. The importance and process of a how to define a genuine brand stance on sustainability is explored first. Secondly, the success and practice of unconventional collaboration, grassroots employee groups and individualized employee growth opportunities were explored as a means to overcome the existing barriers in a corporate setting to help drive positive change forward.
References
