

The sustainability movement faces extinction

– what could save it?

By Wayne Visser

We all want to change the world, but where to begin? A good start would be getting as far away from sustainability as possible. If you are already in its clutches, don't despair: it's not too late to turn around, walk away and never look back. Forget you ever heard the s word and take a vow of silence never to speak it again. Once you've done that, you might consider joining a tech company (infotech, biotech, cleantech – it doesn't matter which; they will all be indistinguishable soon). I'm betting that would be a good way to kickstart your world-changing mission.

I say this after 20 years as a professional in sustainability (capital S if you're a devotee), which I've discovered to be many things, but certainly not an effective strategy for change – at least, not yet. The reason is fairly simple: the essential idea of sustainability – that we must endure, perpetuate, hold on to the past and drag it into the future – is about as exciting as watching lettuce wilt under the midday sun. As Michael Braungart, co-author of *Cradle to Cradle*, likes to say: "sustainability is boring".

I imagine your expressions of shock and horror, but it's true. Sustainability has won many battles – for best-new-jargon-inventor, for most-likely-to-make-you-feel-good – but has lost the war for the hearts and minds of the people. It has pinned its colours to the mast of scarcity and survival, when most of the world is far more interested in prosperity and thriving. I'd go so far as to say that the sustainability movement has failed to understand what it means to be human.

Let me explain. As human beings, our lives are all about change – about growth and development. At best, life is about making things better. Even as a civilisation, we're all about evolution, although we prefer to call it progress. Now, as it happens, sustainability wonks believe that they are all about Progress with a capital P. Unfortunately, the rest of the world remains unconvinced.

Sustainability is like a geeky, pimply teenager who has come to our party, turned off the music and told us that we would really be much happier if we stopped having so much darn fun! The key to having a good time, declares our party-pooper, is to practice a lot more self-restraint. All those on board the austerity train, say "Hell, yeah!" ... What, no one?

Make no mistake; if we are to survive (let alone thrive), the world is going to have to change – dramatically, radically and irreversibly. The question is: how will it happen? In this "unlocking change" series for the *Guardian*, I'll be digging into the nature of change and what role we play in making it happen – in our societies, our organisations and as individuals. And when change does turn our lives upside-down (as it will), how can we become more resilient?

To begin, let me plant a seminal idea, which is that change is all about connection. In other words, connectivity is the underlying catalyst for change.

We are living proof of this. The first neurons in our brains, called predecessors, are in place 31 days after fertilisation. In the early stages of a foetus's brain development, 250,000 neurons are added every minute, and, by the time a baby is born, there are about 100bn neurons, which remain roughly constant through life. Learning only happens when synapses are formed: they connect the neurons to each other. At birth, the number of synapses per neuron is about 2,500; by age two or three, it has risen to 15,000 and some neurons later develop up to 50,000 connections each.

Hence, the dramatic changes in the early years of a child's life – all those remarkable feats of learning and development – are due to increasing connectivity, or, as scientists like to call it, complexity. And we see this same pattern at work in society. The first computer, Charles Babbage's analytical machine of 1837, would have had the equivalent of 675 bytes of memory. By comparison,

according to Cisco, between 1984 and 2012, the internet generated 1.2 zettabytes of data – that's 1.2 with 20 zeros after it.

The point is that scaling the number of networked relationships is at the heart of almost all change, including biological and social evolution. My contention is that, if we wish to save the sustainability movement from an ironic fate of extinction, we will have to get much smarter about change: better at riding the waves of science and technology, better at becoming intelligently connected, and better at designing change efforts that align with evolutionary dynamics.

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