Why this study?

The support of business and industry in Australia and throughout the world is critical to realising the goals of sustainability. Accordingly they have been a focal point for a large number of programs and initiatives aimed at improving their overall social, economic and environmental performance.

Yet recent studies indicate that business and industry engagement with sustainability in Australia, although on the increase, still has a long way to go - especially in comparison with companies overseas. This is despite a vast array of resources, covering topics such as Triple Bottom Line (TBL) reporting and environmental efficiency, that are designed to assist business and industry to shift towards more sustainable practice.

It is generally considered that in order to realise lasting change, sustainability needs to be integrated into the core values of individual industries and companies. What is not clear is how this can practically be achieved and how sustainability toolkits and other resources can assist with this process.

What was the aim?

The objective of this project was to review sustainability toolkits and other products to determine what resources already exist for companies wishing to engage with sustainability concepts and to identify the lessons learnt in order to inform the development of future resources.

The study also investigated the specific needs and drivers for companies engaging with sustainability. Given the current focus on TBL reporting, this led to a recommendation that the next stage determine how the preparation of TBL reports and other sustainability initiatives can actively contribute to the development of deep and lasting sustainability cultures within organisations.

The resources examined during this study are discussed below and 38 from Australia are examined in more detail in a table available at www.deh.gov.au/education. It is hoped that this table will provide a useful guide for companies looking for information and also for those developing new resources in the future.

How was it carried out?

The research study reviewed and classified 38 Australian resources designed to engage industry on various aspects of sustainability. These were primarily identified from the further information sections of sustainability guides and by using internet sustainability portals such as Sustainable Development Online and Greenbiz.

The resources were analysed according to audience, content, format and delivery – which translates as the 'who' & 'why', the 'what' and the 'how'.

Key corporate sustainability literature was then reviewed to expose further considerations under the four headings with a view to identifying options for potential ways forward. This was complemented with a review of existing international sustainability resources in order to identify best practice.

Key findings from the research helped identify industry needs. A recommendation for the next phase of this project was then developed in conjunction with the NEEC Industry Working Group.

What were the outcomes of the study?

Existing Australian resources

The 38 Australian resources reviewed in detail were funded by the Australian Government, state governments, industry associations, individual companies and universities, and were often a result of collaborative efforts between organisations, including non-government organisations. Most of the resources are available free of charge and all can be used by the target audience themselves. The use of all resources is voluntary.

> The resources were categorised as guides (information, steps in process), databases (data management, report generation), standards (voluntary codes, covenants) or surveys (data input, verification), with the majority falling into the first group.

There are many differing interpretations of sustainability amongst the resources reviewed. Many of the resources focus on corporate sustainability in general and ten address TBL reporting in particular. In terms of specific topics, cleaner production/eco-efficiency is the content type covered by the greatest number of resources, followed by eco-design.

Best practice and areas for improvement

The Australian resources reviewed predominately focus on short-term outcomes such as cost reduction through increased energy efficiency, waste reduction and avoidance of non-compliance. Long-term outcomes, such as meeting the expectations of stakeholders and investors, are apparent with some resources, yet none clearly focus on the strategic integration of sustainability into corporate management and operations.

Few of the resources target specific job functions (such as Human Resources) within a company which means that the information can often be quite general. Similarly there tends to be a 'one size fits all' mentality with a number of resources aimed at business as a whole and not taking into account industry-specific issues and practices. However, there are a number of resources aimed at small-medium sized enterprises. Some resources target key multipliers (such as senior managers or trainers) who are more likely to engage with others and thus maximise the reach and impact of the resource. One resource also actively encourages users to exert positive external influence outside of their companies.

Environmental issues are the sole focus of 40% of the resources reviewed, with less consideration of other aspects of sustainability, such as the social context. For some this is an effective approach to take as otherwise the concept of sustainability gets too broad and intangible, but for others it conflicts with the holistic nature of sustainability which requires that all issues be balanced against each other.

The content of some Australian (and international) resources duplicates, overlaps and even conflicts with the content of other resources, which can add to the sustainability information overload for companies. The sustainability agenda is changing fast, and while some resources have been regularly updated since being launched, others are up to five years out of date. Two of the 38 resources have been formally evaluated and the results made public so that others can learn from them.

Few resources encourage companies to focus on the future, define a vision of where they want to be and explore alternatives for getting there - an approach which would frame sustainability as an opportunity instead of a risk that needs to be minimised.

The resources are generally good at describing the 'what' and to a certain extent the 'how'. However, the approach is usually prescriptive, with the majority based on requirements rather than questions. This does not really assist companies to think for themselves or to learn how to manage change towards sustainability.

Change comes about through action, yet few resources genuinely empower people to act. Instead they tend to provide a one-way dissemination of information from 'experts' to companies, which can increase awareness and knowledge, but does not necessarily lead to long-lasting organisational change. This is seen as educating *about* sustainability rather than educating *for* sustainability.

> There is no single definition of education *for* sustainability. However, there is general consensus about its guiding principles, which include collaboration and empowerment. Education *for* sustainability seeks to build capacity, develop ownership and motivate change towards sustainability. Critical reflective thinking is a key component as it encourages organisations to reflect on the underlying assumptions behind existing structures, systems and processes.

Some of the electronic sustainability resources are large and take several minutes to download depending on connection speed. Several resources have overcome this successfully by also making the material available as web pages. Few of the hard copy versions of these resources have been sustainably produced, although there are some exceptions where recycled paper is used. Some of the proprietary resources are quite complex, which underscores the importance of end-user involvement and testing at all stages of development.

Drivers and challenges for engagement with sustainability

There is general agreement that change for sustainability requires leadership from within an organisation, but there is disagreement as to whether the catalyst should be senior management or individual employees. However, the research indicates that a top-down approach is prevalent.

Externally, institutional investors are identified as powerful agents for change for companies requiring funding, although on a private individual level there is confusion about ethical investment terminology and options. Business-to-business pressure is also identified as a key influence on change. Procurement policies and purchasing power can, therefore, exert significant influence to make suppliers implement more sustainable practices.

Given the pay-back times associated with some sustainability initiatives, companies with a short-term outlook are less likely to adopt them than organisations with longer-term strategic objectives. It would seem that public and private funding bodies can be beaten by such impediments too as there is limited evidence that many are 'walking the talk' by themselves using the resources they produce.

Use of the sustainability resources is voluntary and most 'sell' themselves to their audience with the following benefits:

- Cost savings
  (from increased efficiency, compliance)
- Time savings
  (from targeted information, reduced jargon)
- Stakeholder recognition
  (from awards, accreditation)

Where to from here?

This study provides a number of valuable insights into existing sustainability resources in Australia and overseas, including areas of best practice and barriers to business and industry engagement.

Many of these resources focus on outputs, such as the production of TBL reports, which can sometimes distract companies from the harder challenges associated with the organisational change needed to embrace sustainability. Stage two of this project will assist a small number of companies to improve the integration of sustainability within their organisations using TBL reporting as a driver and will document and share the learnings with other companies.

Citation:
Tilbury, D. and Adams, K. (2005) 'Industry Sustainability Toolkit Project - A Review of Sustainability Resources for Industry' Report prepared by the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES), Macquarie University and Arup Sustainability for the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage.

The publication can be downloaded from the ARIES website at http://www.aries.mq.edu.au/news.htm

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