

Net Positive: Humanscale's Commitment To Sustainability

An Interview with Jane Abernethy, LEED AP, Chief Sustainability Officer at Humanscale

E&I sat down with Jane Abernethy, LEED AP, Chief Sustainability Officer at [Humanscale](#) to discuss the [company's commitment to sustainability](#) in both their manufacturing processes and internal practices, and how other organizations can build their own robust sustainability program.

Tell us a little about Humanscale's commitment to sustainability. What is the focus of your program?

At Humanscale, we believe that less bad is not good enough, so we aim to make the world better off as we operate. Most companies have goals to reduce their negative impact, which is necessary, of course. But this will never get us to a better world. It still leaves companies doing harm, just less of it. We see reducing our negative impact as a starting point and then we aim to go beyond that to actually having an overall net positive impact. We want to leave the world better off because of our activities.

How did you get started on a sustainability program?

First you need to understand your impact. Depending on your specific activities, you may have significant impacts in different areas such as water, energy, climate, waste going to landfill, toxic materials, impeding on wildlife, or social impacts like diversity, child labor, or forced labor. Understand where you're at and how you're doing. How much waste do you make? How much water are you using? Measuring your impact in different categories gives you a sense of how you're operating. A deep evaluation combined with reviewing the priorities of your stakeholders will give you a good sense of what to focus on first.

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Jane Abernethy, LEED AP
Chief Sustainability Officer
Humanscale

After that, you'll want to manage inefficiencies, which can help across different departments. When done right, this can lead to financial savings and have a lasting impact. There is an abundance in the world, and part of the reason why we don't feel it is because we're so inefficient with how we use our resources. There's almost always room for becoming more efficient, and that's low-hanging fruit that can help get people behind sustainability initiatives. It's not the whole sustainability program, but it's a good starting point.

It's important to start with projects that have a reasonable chance of success, and then build on those successes. It's also important to have buy-in from all the different groups who will be involved, to understand how they will be impacted, and make sure it's not going to make their lives difficult. This is just as important to understand as the financial implications.





Our Quality Team audits our suppliers anyway, so we work with them on our sustainability priorities and, while they're onsite, they can look for things that might be an issue for sustainability.

Another thing we've done is incorporate it into our design process. New product design can be eighteen months from first idea to launch. You don't want to come in at the end and say, "Oh, you did it all wrong! Start again!" So, we get involved from the first rotation all the way through to the end. We try to be proactive and feed into the existing mechanisms and systems that are in place, but of course, once in a while we have to hold people accountable.

Have you experienced any misconceptions or challenges regarding sustainability? How have you responded?

Yes, definitely. When I find people have misconceptions, I try and understand why they think that way and where it's coming from, then have the conversation from there.

But there's a difference between having an honest misconception and not being passionate about sustainability. There may be a person who's been doing their role for years and they're not looking for someone to tell them how to do it differently. There's a little bit of resistance, but it's not insurmountable.

What are some of the sustainability trends you're seeing?

Sustainability is always evolving. A couple decades ago it meant the three R's – reduce, reuse, recycle – and then it meant the ozone layer. Most recently, I'm seeing healthy materials and the concern around chemicals of concern being used in mass production, which are not well regulated by the EPA. With buildings becoming better sealed and more energy efficient, everything that's indoors stays there. That means we're more effected by the products we put inside.

What are your future plans and how will you continue to grow the program?

We aim to be net positive. The big impact categories for us are use of resources, healthy materials, wildlife preservation, social impact, climate, water, and energy. We have metrics around these, but what is the scope we should look at when doing our calculations? Do we calculate the activities of the logistics companies shipping our goods? Do we calculate the activities of our suppliers? There's a world of difference depending on these factors.

At what point is the world better off because we're here? That, to me, is the ultimate goal. So, that means you calculate how much damage you're doing – your footprint – and how much positive impact you're having – your handprint. Then, you put these together and figure out if you're in the positive or not. It's kind of like banking. Yes, you're going to have withdrawals, but you're also going to have deposits.

“...at the end of the day, you always want to do more good than harm.”

Jane Abernethy, LEED AP
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Read the full interview at: www.eandi.org/supplier-spotlight-humanscale