

The Evolving Role of the Chief Sustainability Officer in India

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Indian companies have always recognised their responsibilities to communities and have acted on them well before CSR was mandated by law. However, environmental issues have tended to be seen from a compliance perspective. This perhaps explains why when Indian companies became aware of the idea of triple bottom-line or sustainability – in the early 2000s, I reckon – the Environment, Health and Safety (EHS) function began to morph into a sustainability function.

To begin with, the role of the Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO) - or equivalent - in India was about legal environmental compliance. Importantly however, and unlike the CSR function, it was relating to core business and remained “within the fence” but did not usually cover the supply chain. Many sustainability professionals of today come from the EHS space.

The next stage in the evolution was perhaps the advent of Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). Many Indian companies had been members of the UN Global Compact and reported regularly, anchored by the CSR team. But when Indian companies began to embrace the idea of GRI reporting, this responsibility fell into the hands of the sustainability/EHS team as much of the contents of the report pertained to operations, which the CSR people were unaware of. Thus, coordination of sustainability reporting became an additional role of the CSO.

As Indian companies began to realise that sustainability issues are a source of both risks and opportunities to their current businesses, the CSO's role came closer to what it is now in many companies – that of a strategic thinker, a provider frameworks and guidance to the CEO on building a sustainability vision for the company and embedding this thinking into core business. This also means that the role of the CSO includes ensuring that all functions in a company integrate triple bottom-line thinking.

As companies move from looking to future-proofing their current businesses to determining what their future businesses should be based on, amongst others, sustainability trends, the role of the CSO will get even more strategic. The business strategist and the CSO will, ultimately, blend into one.