

Voices of Sustainability: Season 1, Episode #8

Phillip Schlies

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Intro

Hello and welcome, I'm Phillip Schlies and you are listening to the Voices of Sustainability Podcast. Join us as we delve into the various strategies and challenges faced by the government, businesses, and non-profits, all striving to balance economic growth with environmental and social responsibility.

This season from the University of South Carolina, our reporters are all business majors at the Darla Moore School of Business with a concentration in sustainability. They'll be talking with various organizations to highlight how they're working to improve the world we live in and conserve our natural resources.

To explore the topic of sustainability, the episodes will explore how each person being interviewed defines sustainability, how the success of sustainability initiatives are measured in their organization, the motivations to be sustainable, and how to have a positive impact in your career. The conversations also provide insights into topics such as, circular economy and recycling, innovation and technology in sustainability, as well as regulation and policy that are influencing this space.

On today's episode, our reporter Pat Sandhass will be speaking with Kait Sagan, the Sustainability Specialist at the GEL Group, Inc. The group is made up of companies specializing in analytical services, environmental consulting and monitoring, civil engineering, structural engineering, surveying, and geophysical services. Join us as we delve into Kait's journey and explore how the GEL Group is leading the charge in environmental, laboratory, and engineering sectors. Let's get into it.

Script

Pat Sandhass

So just to get started, can you tell me a bit about the series of events that led you to choose your career path and maybe how your education prepared you for the challenges and opportunities in the sustainability field?

Kait Sagan

Yeah. So I'm very recently out of college. And so, how I sort of decided to go the business route into sustainability... At first I was very much like that was not on my radar. I was thinking I was either going to go the government or the NGO side of things. I had internships on the NGO side and just reading the news on the government side. I just sort of got frustrated with the speed at which things could happen and then I was able to land an internship here at the GEL Group which I could talk more about later. But in that, I was really able to dive deep into what sustainability meant from a business perspective and also the amount of opportunity there is in the business world to make change. There's a lot more resources, things can happen faster. So I just got really excited by that opportunity and wanted to sort of dive more into that with my career. And so, sort of my educational background, I have a degree in public health and environmental science. It's sort of like a mashed together degree, which I love. But, I think what really helped me prepare for this, especially because sustainability is a really broad topic, right?

Pat Sandhass

Yeah, with it being so broad, I did want to ask you: What does sustainability mean to you personally? If you could define it in your own words.

Kait Sagan

Yeah, I love this question. I actually had a really great conversation the other week about defining sustainability and I think one of the people I was talking to put it really well. It's very operational. So I like how you ask, what does it mean to you, because I really think that's important when defining sustainability, it's very operational what you're doing. For me, I'd say, and sort of links in with my company, the GEL Group, we have a sustainability policy with a new definition. We've defined what sustainability means for us and I really enjoy it. It's sort of intentional stewardship and innovation to ensure long term wellness for our people, our company, our community, and our environment. So, I really like that because I think including the word intentional on it is really important. I don't know... I've been sort of spiraling this morning. I don't know if you've seen this article about how the UN just released a report that we're in code red or something for climate because 2023 was a record year of heating and ice melts. So I really think being intentional about addressing these issues that we're facing and the intense repercussions on human Wellness that we're gonna experience from that is really important.

Pat Sandhass

That's definitely concerning. I hadn't seen that article, but I might want to read it now.

Kait Sagan

Yeah. I had to grab a cup of tea this morning and just sort of sit on that a little bit and see where my sphere of influence was and sort of go from there.

Pat Sandhass

I imagine you definitely do have to stay really up to date with all those trends. A little more into the industry side of it, I guess, what are some of the industry trends you've observed in your job so far and how have they influenced your approach to driving your sustainability initiatives?

Kait Sagan

Yeah. So again, I've only been here 8 months, but I do try to sort of stay on top of things and sort of trends overall. And what I've seen, and probably what you've seen, is how the business world is sort of... I think the world at large is sort of catching on to why sustainability is important. Both from the environmental and the social side of things. So I think especially in our work... So the GEL Group, we're a pretty diverse company. So one part of the company is our laboratory and in that we have analytical chemistry and also radiochemistry services. The second part of our company is GEL Engineering, which is really broad. So we have civil engineering, structural engineering, environmental engineering, and wetlands and waterways permitting. We have air permitting and compliance, industrial hygiene, and then also survey work as our third part. So we're really broad, and I think everyone honestly has a part to play in sustainability, but I think our biggest focus right now is focusing on the lab. And labs are intrinsically super consumers because, like, I don't know if you've been in a lab before but there's methods you have to do. You have to follow these steps because you need to do it right. We're providing this service for you and we have to be in compliance and we have to give you our best work and in doing so. And honestly the most important thing is making sure our people are safe. So our fume hoods are cycling air in our labs all the time and that consumes a lot of energy. We have a lot of waste just for safety, again, and for the wellness of our work. So really coming up with ways of: How can we make this more sustainable?. Are there strategies we can do to make the work we're doing more efficient in these consumptive areas?

Pat Sandhass

I guess the next question I had kind of pertains to all of the subsidiaries of the GEL Group and that's: How do you guys remain at the forefront of sustainability practices across all of the subsidiaries, if some of them can tend to consume more energy than the others?

Kait Sagan

Yeah. So that's a really good question. I think what we're trying to do here is really have something that's both top up, top down, and bottom up. What's really great is we really have fantastic leadership that really believes in the mission of sustainability. Like actually, we have a sustainability policy now and while I was constructing that, looking at our core purpose and our values... our core purpose is basically a definition of sustainability, which I thought was fantastic. So I think it's there from the top, but really trying to break it down for people like you and me who are like, working every day. And I think that's something that's really special about here is we're an environmental service company, and the folks here are really passionate about sustainability. We did a survey and like over 75% of people thought helping the environment was really important. So that's really awesome. I have a sustainability lunch and learn coming up on Monday where we just talk about our progress in 2023 and where we're going moving forward. And I think there's, like, 60 people signed up, which is great. I was really happy about that. So

really, having those individual conversations with people and saying, OK, so this is what sustainability is. Trying to break that down, how can I help you make this process more efficient or is there a strategy you think you can implement to decrease your paper use? I don't know, in the designs you're making, can we incorporate natural environments. There's just so many opportunities and I think it's really exciting to people.

Pat Sandhass

Lots of cross collaboration. I see. Very good. Is that your job? To organize that little lunch and learn event?

Kait Sagan

Yeah!

Pat Sandhass

That's Awesome!

Kait Sagan

It is! I love it! I think sustainability... sometimes it's really not an approachable thing because people are like: what is sustainability? I hear it all the time. But I think when you break it down and sort of show people, like this is what we're consuming, this is how much water we use every year. They're like: whoa, that's crazy. What can I do to decrease this, decrease my impact?

Pat Sandhass

That actually brings me to another question of mine. Other than events like that, how do you encourage this innovation and then collaboration across all the sectors of the business to address their unique challenges?

Kait Sagan

Yeah. So we have four different impact teams which are covering four of our different priority areas. We have a team for energy efficiency emissions reduction, we have a team for water consumption, we have a team for waste and recycling, and we have a team for employee wellness and community, and these teams are really cool because we're bringing... And this started like a month ago, two months ago, like really this is really like we're starting it now, which is super exciting, but there's people in these teams who are from across our different companies who are coming together for ideas about how we can make this a better and more sustainable place to work. What's really fantastic is we've done so much in the past towards sustainability, we just haven't ever put the label of sustainability on it. So it's sort of looking at that and saying, OK, this is what we're doing, this is what we've done, but how can we improve this even more under the umbrella of sustainability?

Pat Sandhass

Was there a specific moment where the company sort of took a more sustainability focused direction? I guess since you said that all of the work you guys do is pretty much sustainability

focused anyway, but you put a real label on it at some point. Was there a specific moment when that happened?

Kait Sagan

I think we've been a very environmental service oriented company and just learning more about our community impact projects, like that's been... From the beginning, we've been doing things like that. But I think now the, sort of, bringing it under the umbrella of sustainability has probably happened in the past two years. I guess with my internship. And this sort of goes back to your question earlier that I don't think I answered super well, but talking about like what is bringing us into this sort of world of sustainability, and I think it's, there's multiple parts. One, I think the world and businesses are starting to catch on to that, there is environmental change. And here's this concept of sustainability, which allows us to address this as well as making our workplace better for the people who work here. So I think there's that component, but also I think it's really a competitive advantage under that framework because people are acknowledging that this is more and more of an issue. They're really looking for businesses to work with that are focused on that side of things as well. And also just from an internal standpoint. There's so much opportunity when it comes to sustainability. From the environmental side of decreasing our consumption, saving money. There's that business argument. But also like the social side of things I think is really important and just encouraging because a lot of younger people coming into the workforce now are really looking for a company that, sort of, coincides with their values and is someplace they want to spend 40 hours a week at. And I think sustainability and being a company, being aware of its impact is a really good selling point and something that can bring people in and make people want to stay at a company. There's a lot of reasons, but I feel like those are a couple.

Pat Sandhass

I just had another question that was a little more personal to you, and that's: maybe some insights into the challenges you've encountered trying to drive some of these sustainability initiatives. Has anything happened that has been just a little tricky to get going?

Kait Sagan

Yeah, that is a great question. My job is really fun because I'm basically starting this sustainability program, or helping start this sustainability program from scratch. So, number one, it's super exciting and I love it. Number two, there's a lot happening all at once, and there's a lot of things I need to learn about our company and also about sustainability. And so, I think organization and relationship building have been like the two biggest challenges for me, but also that I love. Well organization I love a little less just because I'm not an organized person, well I try my best. I could be better and I'm learning but its ok. But relationship building is really fun because, I described our company, it's really broad, but being able to talk to these different people, to sort of bring people together towards a sustainability policy, a sustainability program, like having this in our heads is really exciting, but definitely a challenge because relationships are something you work for, right? But on the organization part, as a sustainability specialist, there's so much happening in sustainability like there's the monitoring, there's the reporting,

there's creating the policy, there's building relationships, there's like actually implementing the strategies to help us be more sustainable. So there's a lot of stuff happening right now and all the time, which honestly for me is great because I love that, but definitely keeping everything organized is something that I've been growing towards.

Pat Sandhass

Yeah, well, this sounds like a huge role for, especially for someone right out of school, which is awesome. So I'm glad you get to do all that.

Kait Sagan

Yeah. And that's like a super important point. Like, don't get me wrong, I get impostor syndrome all the time, but also like these are conversations that I've had with folks, especially around our age and who are younger. Because they're like, there is a thing like we're not as experienced as other people who have been in the business world for a longer time and know what's going on. So there's that learning curve, but also I think younger folks have a passion for really enacting change towards sustainability because we see these things that are happening. We're recognizing how it's impacting our lives and how it's going to continue impacting our lives and our, if we have children, our children's lives. So, I think we're really important voices to have at the table, and I'm super grateful for my company and my leadership for believing in me and allowing me the freedom to do this kind of work. I think there is a space for young people, but I think it's very intimidating sometimes. So you just sort of have to, at least for me, I like talk myself into being confident. I just think there's a really important space for younger folks here that I'm happy that people take seriously.

Pat Sandhass

I guess sort of speaking about the future, and how it's important to have young voices and so in terms of the future of sustainability what emerging trends or technologies do you see playing a role in shaping the future of sustainability? Both, I guess, within the industry and globally.

Kait Sagan

I'm not as much into the technology side, although there's a bunch there. But I think trends for sustainability...I think the biggest one that sort of involves me is reporting. I don't know if you've read sustainability reports, they're very long, and different companies report on different things sometimes, and it's a bit confusing. So I think standardization and reporting is probably coming on. Which I think would be really helpful in talking about sustainability. And I think the climate disclosures rule by the SEC will help, but I also think there's a standardization in Europe that would really help.

Pat Sandhass

Part of our class work recently, was to take a look at some of that reporting, to find a company that does it. So I looked at Salesforce and they had, It was like colorful, and it looked nice, but I doubt that's what all of them look like.

Kait Sagan

So now the concept of like green washing or good washing. Like, really big issue, right? So I think to avoid that and to avoid lawsuits, I've been reading how companies are sort of "green hushing" and like, not really talking about what they're doing anymore, just to sort of protect themselves legally. And I think this is a, even though there's still doing the work towards sustainability, and I think this is a really interesting trend and something I sort of wish wasn't happening, but I understand. Because I think what's really important about sustainability, and I think it's like the sustainability goal number 17 from the UN, is like partnerships for sustainability. And I think this is like a super vital part of building sustainability at any company is sort of building relationships across sectors and brainstorming about, and sharing ideas on how we can be better. So, while I understand businesses are sort of hushing more, I sort of wish there was this greater aspect of transparency that allowed people to build and grow off each other. That's my wish. I don't know if that's realistic.

Pat Sandhass

I think that's noble.

Kait Sagan

Very noble, but realistic, I don't know. But that's what I'd love to see. Transparency. And I think it helps people know that it's not like a weird thing to try to be sustainable.

Pat Sandhass

I haven't heard green hushing before. That's an interesting term. Actually I had another question here about, sort of, maybe more specific to the GEL Group, but what are some areas of focus that you think are becoming increasingly important within your organization that they plan to address in the coming years?

Kait Sagan

Yeah. So we have outlined five different priority areas on which to act for sustainability. So the first one is waste and recycling. Under that topic, first and foremost like we have to be in compliance, we have to be safe like we're in a lab like that's really important. Compliance comes first. But also there are a lot of avenues where we could be better, especially when it comes to recycling and doing our part. So our impact team for that is really looking towards like those waste streams and seeing how can we make recycling more accessible to people throughout the building throughout the campus? And then also like one of our projects that we're going to be tiptoeing into, I'm really excited about is composting. So we'll see how that goes. Our second priority area is emissions reduction. So can we sort of see the feasibility of incorporating hybrid or electric vehicles into our company vehicles? That's something we're looking into, but also like from an energy consumption perspective, what can we do to decrease this? I think that's super, super important. Let's see... Water consumption. We consume a lot of water. So can we standardize practices? Can we encourage people to turn the sink off when they're cleaning? Things like that are our third priority area. Then we have employee wellness and community. So really, how can we encourage and make wellness accessible to the people who work here even

more so than it already is? And also we have food trucks that come like three times a week which is fantastic. But what else can we do to sort of build this culture of, or not build this culture but grow this culture of coming together more often because we are sort of separated in the buildings like the lab's over here, engineering's over here, there's another lab over here, like solutions is all the way outside over here. So how can we bring these people together? And then the last one is corporate responsibility. So that's just making sure like we're part of a safety matrix that is thinking about well, including sustainability as part of their reporting measures to get a certain grade. So me, gathering that data to answer those questions. And also I'd like to put together a sustainability report.

Pat Sandhass

Great!

Kait Sagan

And that was a lot. But yeah, there's like a lot going on.

Pat Sandhass

I guess moving away from all that, sort of into advice for aspiring sustainability professionals. What skills or experiences do you believe are crucial for success in this industry?

Kait Sagan

Good question. I will say, speaking as someone who was recently hired into a sustainability position, and I think going through like sort of sustainability education, we talked about the report, it's really broad and it requires that systems level thinking. Which I think is essential for learning about sustainability. But with that comes, sometimes you don't have a specific skill. So I would really, really, really recommend that young folks like us sort of focus on a skill. Like, can we do greenhouse gas accounting? Can we do a life cycle analysis? Finances, like accounting. I think what's often overlooked is you can bring a sustainability mindset to different types of jobs. Like although there are a lot of sustainability jobs popping up, there's a lot of people going for them. And sometimes it's really hard to get a job. So I think really making sure you have a skill is really important. Like, that you can say: I can do a life cycle analysis.

Pat Sandhass

I've definitely noticed that it's something I need to work on more. But, definitely something I'll tell my kids one day is you should know how to do this specific function of whatever. I can't say that everyone's gonna go into business, but you know more specific, like there's a lot of jobs looking for: OK, we want you to know power BI or some other software that's important for the function of the job. And be like: I don't know it, but I looked it up and I think I can be good at it. It's tricky.

Kait Sagan

Yeah, so also... Umm, what else do I want to say? I don't know. I think that's my biggest thing is that there are a lot of sustainability jobs out there, but I think there's so many people who are

now learning or like taking tracks in sustainability or majoring in sustainability. But like you can also have an impact if it's not a sustainability like in the job title job.

Pat Sandhass

And then I guess just... I sort of just asked you this...

Kait Sagan

Ask me again!

Pat Sandhass

But yeah, If there's any more just general advice for young professionals... This is my final question. I figured I'd organize them a little closely, but I sort of just asked you so sorry about that.

Kait Sagan

No, that's alright.

Pat Sandhass

But just some, if you have any, general advice for young professionals looking to make a positive impact in sustainable practices within their organization, would you mind sharing some of that?

Kait Sagan

Yeah. I think relationship building is a really key tool and skill to develop. And I think this goes for everybody, but like especially, I don't know, for myself as a young person, being able to, like make genuine relationships with people where you truly want to know like what they're doing, how they are, like who they are as a person because I think, like once you know someone and they know you and they know you're genuine and you really want to make positive change in your life, in the company, in the world, like I think they can sort of latch onto that and be inspired to do things with their position. And like are more willing to work with you to sort of have sustainable outcomes. So, I think relationship building is a super important skill, but also genuine, like genuine relationship building. It's not just like networking. I hate that word because it seems so, like cold and distant. But there's so many cool people out there that have so many great ideas and that can, like, help push forward more sustainable practices. And then also having the confidence of like... It's ok to ask people to talk, but also like be respectful. But sort of balancing that like, have confidence in yourself. Know what you're bringing to the table. Ask questions. You know something, like be confident in that, but also you don't know everything, so be humble. But also be like questioning, like I don't know, ask questions. You'll learn more.

Pat Sandhass

I'd have to agree with you on the networking sentiment just because I feel like that's been made to seem so important, which it is, but it does sort of feel like you're getting good at using people to get where you want to go. That's how it feels. So I like how you put it as relationship building

because it seems more genuine there. Well Kait, that's all the questions I have for you. So, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

Kait Sagan

Thank you!

Outro

Thanks for tuning in. I hope you've enjoyed getting to know Kait and learning more about the GEL Group. From waste reduction to community engagement, they're commitment to sustainability spans across all of their diverse operations. However, that's all the time we have today. Tune in next episode to hear our guest from Mark Anthony Brewing discuss the challenges and responsibilities of being sustainable in the alcohol industry. Thank you for listening and we will see you next time.

Tag

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