

# Eco-officers are moving into executive suites

**At many companies, sustainability officers are placed in the upper echelons of companies, where they are highly visible. In some cases, the CEO has taken on the extra duty.**

» **By: Tiffany Hsu** » **The Los Angeles Times**  
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During his more than three decades in real estate David Pogue played many roles, but environmental expert was never one of them.

That didn't stop his company, Los Angeles real estate brokerage CB Richard Ellis, from naming him the company guru of all things eco-friendly nearly two years ago. Pogue suddenly found himself in charge of making the firm and its projects more energy efficient and environmentally conscious, an abrupt switch from his previous property-management responsibilities.

"I'm an outsider, a real estate guy trying to become an environmentalist," said Pogue, the company's national director of sustainability. "But I believe in what I do, that it's something bigger than myself."

As companies grapple with climate change, try to attract eco-conscious customers and develop alternative energy agendas while complying with regulations, a new kind of administrator is moving into the executive suite to help out.

Sustainability officers and green supervisors, some say, are successors to the diversity managers and innovation specialists of the 1990s -- with their focus equal parts corporate responsibility, public relations and profit.

"Our clients expect this," Pogue said. "A company of our size doesn't have the luxury any longer of not participating."

After attending a rigorous series of conferences and cramming in hours of reading on the so-called green industry, Pogue settled into the position. His efforts include connecting CB Richard Ellis with programs such as Energy Star from the Environmental Protection Agency and the Energy Department, and the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design building code.

Positions such as Pogue's often are placed in the upper echelons of companies, where they are highly visible and directly overseen by the chief executive. At Coca-Cola Co. and Mitsubishi Motors North America Inc., chief executives Muhtar Kent and Ryoichi Ueda, respectively, have adopted the sustainability officer title as well.

Other firms bundle in extra duties, such as dealing with the supply chain. At Levi Strauss & Co., Michael Kobori works on labor standards and general green issues as vice president for social and environmental sustainability.

"Ten years ago, the position I have didn't exist," Kobori said. "Now, we are seeing a new generation of business leaders who have grown up with sustainability. There is actually a career path in this field for someone at a corporation."

Last year, fewer than 200 positions dedicated to sustainability were spread among more than 1,200 companies, according to consulting firm Hudson Gain Corp. With a "very limited talent pool of experienced sustainability executives," many firms plucked internal candidates who were well-regarded in other fields for the role, the report said.

In higher education, about 80 positions existed last year, 82% of them full time, according to the Assn. for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. Salaries ranged from less than \$20,000 to nearly \$160,000.

Green managers are also springing up in government. President Obama signed an executive order in October requiring federal agencies to each designate a senior sustainability officer.

Some companies, eager to cash in on the eco-enthusiasm, have been accused of hiring sustainability officers who are little more than figureheads. Instead of greening the business plan and inspiring the staff, critics contend, these executives end up isolated, ineffective or overburdened.

"There's a danger in creating a chief sustainability officer, because it places all the responsibility of that issue onto one person," said Kobori of Levi Strauss. "We're successful when sustainability gets embedded in all the roles in the company."

Kobori said he works with cotton farmers, fabric mills, factories, shipping lines, retail stores and consumers. His team's efforts have raised water quality standards so that the wastewater pumped out of partner factories in China and Mexico is sometimes cleaner than the water going in, he said.

Care tags on many jeans, some of which feature blended organic cotton and recycled denim, promote energy-saving cold water for washing and clotheslines for drying.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. hopes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from its current locations by 20% by 2012 and send no waste to U.S. landfills by 2025, said Matt Kistler, the retailer's senior vice president of sustainability. At a sustainability forum last month, he discussed plans to offer locally grown produce, use certified fisheries and track the diamonds, gold and silver used in the chain's jewelry.

Among other things, Wal-Mart is using energy saving light-emitting diodes in many of its refrigerated and frozen-food cases.

After Bank of America Corp. announced a \$20-billion, 10-year commitment to sustainable operations, products and services in 2007, it took on several eco-officers. Among them: a manager certified in green building standards who works on environmental compliance for the company's 96 million square feet of space, an "electronification of paper" executive and several investment strategists focused on renewable energy.

"This is not just doing good; it presents compelling business opportunities for our clients," said Richard Cohen, managing director of environmental strategic investments at the banking giant.

As director of environmental affairs and sustainability at FedEx Corp., Mitch Jackson said he takes a "practical environmentalism" approach -- posting tangible goals and results on the company's citizenship blog.

"There used to be the perception of the environmental department being a cost center rather than as the potential for being a profit center," he said. "We haven't had that in quite some time."

Green officers come from a sprawling range of backgrounds, including engineering, research, finance, human resources, law and public relations, according to the Hudson Gain report.

Frank O'Brien-Bernini, vice president and chief sustainability officer for building-materials company Owens Corning, studied sustainable living in college and researched solar energy for his master's degree in mechanical engineering.

"It's been a career and a passion," he said. "I've been in this for a long time."

Most others, however, such as James J. Gowen at Verizon Communications Inc., are another sort of green -- as in inexperienced. But Gowen, who was already heading up supply chain operations when he was tapped in September to also serve as chief sustainability officer, said Verizon has a history of energy efficiency.

"We've been dealing with sustainability issues for a while, though maybe not calling them that," he said.

Gowen leads a team of eight employees at Verizon, while also pulling from a staff pool of hundreds for various projects.

At Ford Motor Co., Susan Cischke fights the green fight with a staff of nearly 300. The group makes Ford vehicles lighter to improve fuel efficiency, designs electric and hybrid cars and reduces the environmental effects of company factories, among other things. As group vice president of sustainability, environment and safety engineering, Cischke also deals with regulators and works closely with environmentalist and Executive Chairman William Clay Ford Jr.

"This isn't just a job on the side," she said. "It really influences everything we do. It goes beyond compliance and into long-range planning and preparing the company for a broader view."

But in a shaky economy, some sustainability officers are finding they must take "an incrementalist approach" and cherry-pick environmental investments, Pogue of CB Richard Ellis said.

"The past months have been about survivability, not about sustainability," he said. Still, Pogue said, even resistant markets will have to accommodate the demand for green products and practices, and for the people who can make that happen.

"Real estate is a conservative business, and we deal with a lot of people who believe there is no

ecological problem," he said. "But they're practical. If enough others believe it's important, then it's important."

Source: [The Los Angeles Times](#)