

What Sustainable Means to Me: Sustainable Communities, Work Surroundings, and Environment

Chris Jacobs 23 January 2018

Summary

At Commu**nally**, we recognize that a vital component to reaching our overall goal of eradicating poverty is building vibrant communities. For this reason, we choose to be a leader in the Philadelphia region's sustainable business community. We hold a broad view of what it means to be a sustainable business that encompasses the economic needs of low-income urban and rural communities, the equitable capital requirements of social impact companies, the recognition that workers must balance effort with replenishment to avoid burnout, as well as environmental stewardship.

Sustainability is the hip thing at the moment, there is no denying it.

At the grocery store, one can find fellow shoppers walking in with their own canvas bags. Even during these cold

months, bikers cover the streets making their daily commute. Mental health days are becoming popular as the workforce (and its employers) become more conscious about the overall health of their employees. But there is still so much more we can do to create a sustainable life for everyone.

Environmentalists have done much to move sustainability forward. Creating "green" practices is a crucial topic that every business should address as our natural resources become more precious. But what about our human resources and disadvantaged communities?

When we talk about sustainability, we should be discussing the economic needs of low-income urban and rural communities, the equitable capital requirements of social impact companies, the recognition that workers must balance effort with replenishment to avoid burnout, as well as environmental stewardship.

Expanding what it means to be sustainable is especially true for locations that are struggling with high levels of poverty; how we treat our communities and workforce is a reflection of how we treat our city. Philadelphia remains the poorest of the 10 largest populated cities in our country with 37 percent of the city's children living in poverty. Philadelphia also holds the distinction of having the highest rate of deep poverty, or people living at 50 percent of the poverty line or less.

Philadelphia's level of deep poverty becomes even more concerning given that the city has now held the distinction two years running. Also, the median household income of \$41,500 was lower than the country's overall median income of nearly \$60,000. These statistics show the challenge we face to ending poverty.

As a company with a conscious corporate culture, **Communally**, the antipoverty technology company, has embraced the broader concept of what it means to be a sustainable business. Our ultimate mission is "to defeat poverty" not as some would seek "to manage poverty more neatly." To achieve this mission we deliver practical, web-based solutions for the complex problems of poverty. These solutions are designed to assist households in moving from the Crisis of poverty to being stable and having the ability to make Choices in their lives, in other words, move from Crisis to Choice.[®] We do this by combining innovative technology, public policy expertise, and community outreach to deliver uniquely successful web-based services, The Benefit Bank[®] (TBB) and MyBudgetCoach[®] (MyBC).

These services are delivered through partnering with state and/or regional partners, referred to by us as Affiliates. The Affiliates conduct outreach and recruit community-based organizations to utilize the services. Given that the organizations are located directly in communities, they reach people where they live, work, and play. There are thousands of organizations in multiple states using our

services; many who are serving diverse and disconnected populations.

When formed more than 25 years ago, **Communally**, chose to become a private-sector company because of the flexibility, discipline, and speed of response it offers. However, operating in a space that has been traditionally seen as the purview of government and the nonprofit sector, we were fighting a perception that we were only focused on profit. To demonstrate to our current and potential partners our commitment to the communities that we serve and to make clear that our priority lies with our triple bottom line of people, places, and profits, we pursued becoming a B Corp. We were certified by B Lab in 2012 and recertified in 2014 and 2016.

The B Corp certification demonstrates that **Communally** meets rigorous standards of social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency. It is a good fit with our own values and allows us as a company to bring a unique combination of skills, attitudes, and experiences to the fight to defeat poverty. This certification further provides independent verification of our commitment to do well by doing good both to communities across the country and to our own employees. The certification led to us becoming one of the first Pennsylvania-registered Benefit Corporations on January 21, 2013, after Pennsylvania became the 12th state to recognize Public Benefit Corporations. To retain this registration requires that we meet mission-related

goals.

Our experience has taught us that a vital component to ending poverty is building vibrant communities. Reframing the concept of sustainability can turn struggling areas into thriving communities. Under this expanded definition, businesses have a responsibility to create an inclusive economy for all. An inclusive economy is one that is equitable and creates an opportunity for people of all backgrounds and experiences to live with dignity, to support themselves and their families, and to help their communities thrive. When local business leaders commit to making the economy impartial to class distinction, everyone's wallet wins.

As a Public Benefit Corporation, we include in our definition of success incorporating a broader view of sustainability in how we function internally and externally. Our company culture embraces openness, transparency, and accountability and our mission and business values are rooted in the standards required for B Corp certification. Communal**ally**'s financial information is reviewed on an annual basis by an independent firm of accountants and all full-time staff have access, upon request, to that information.

We have worked consciously to build a workplace environment that ensures our internal operations align with our external goals. We pay family-sustaining wages with a full complement of benefits for all staff, offering

multiple options for the team to be refreshed from the stress of work through generous sabbatical, parental, and personal leave policies, and committing to using a diverse group of local suppliers. The result is very low staff turnover and a high return rate.

An internal focus for **Communally** is on diversity and inclusion. A year ago we took the Inclusion Challenge presented by B Lab. During the year, we promoted women into leadership and management roles to better reflect the makeup of our staff which is 56 percent female. In addition, we promote diversity through our relationships with vendors, using businesses owned by women, minorities, people in underrepresented populations, and other B Corps in the Philadelphia area. Working with like-minded, local companies is not only better for the economy but has consistently given us a more productive, better experience.

To demonstrate the impact we are having, we continuously measure the effectiveness that our services have in the communities in which they are utilized. For TBB, we can identify the number of household members that we have served and the estimated value of the public benefits and work supports that they have received. Since 2006, we have assisted over one million household members claim close to an estimated \$2.5 billion in work and income supports at local TBB sites or through self-service options. And, for every \$1 spent on TBB (including outreach) \$43 is returned to the community.

For MyBC, we can measure the overall financial capability of the members using the service; the percentage of members using a budget; the proportion of members spending less than income; the percentage of members paying late fees. An independent evaluation of the service showed a 35 percent increase in overall financial capabilities for MyBC members.

The bottom line is that business can thrive while not only focusing on profit, but also people and places. Becoming more involved in the sustainable movement provides businesses with a different lens to look at the communities around them. There are many opportunities for any type of business, great or small, to make conscious efforts to act responsibly and sustainably for its employees and communities. Starting with clear and reachable goals, much like **Communally** did, can lead to greater opportunities in the future. If we can do it, so can you.

Author Bio

Chris Jacobs is CEO of **Communally**, The Antipoverty Technology Company, and a leader in the sustainability movement. He serves as a board member of the Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia. He has lived and worked in the Philadelphia region for more than 30 years and enjoys English Premier League soccer and cycling.