

# Manager Sustainability Job Interview Questions And Answers



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# Manager Sustainability Interview Questions And Answers Guide.

## Question - 1:

Explain whose support did you need but did not get?

### Ans:

This sounds a bit like a whistleblowing question, but that's OK, occasionally. I think the CEO should know who is blocking the process. If sustainability is important to you as CEO, and reporting is a key part of that, you need to have set your expectations clear. If your people are blocking progress, you might want to consider how this should affect their performance review, bonus or career development prospects. As a minimum, you might want to talk to them to find out what prevented them from being collaborative.

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## Question - 2:

Explain what help do you need from me in the next reporting cycle?

### Ans:

Asking the question doesn't commit you to providing all the help requested, but it does give you an idea of the state of mind of your SRM. The SRM should be pleased to receive help and support from the CEO and I can think of hundreds of ways the CEO could support the reporting process. An SRM who responds "nothing, really" to this question is probably not doing the best possible job.

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## Question - 3:

Explain what were your disappointments in producing your last Sustainability Report?

### Ans:

Maybe there weren't any. Maybe the report turned out exactly as your SRM envisioned. Maybe not. Understanding how your SRM measured up to her own expectations may tell you a little about the organizational issues your SRM faces in driving sustainability processes. These are the issues where a helping hand from the CEO might just be what is needed.

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## Question - 4:

Tell me what aspect of our last Sustainability Report are you most proud of?

### Ans:

A positive and open ended question for a gentle introduction to the subject. The SRM should be able to talk with enthusiasm about the sustainability report and in response to this question is free to select the things that personally gave her the most satisfaction. Whether these things are the same as those which are important to you, the CEO, or to the business, will give you an idea as to how well your SRM is aligned with the business and with your aspirations. The response may also enlighten you about things you may not have realized were such a big deal as you read the Sustainability Report.

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## Question - 5:

Tell me why should we continue to produce a Sustainability Report?

### Ans:

This is a fundamental question that every company should ask itself before re-embarking on the process another year around. The answer may not be the exactly the same each year and its worth taking a few minutes to articulate specific hopes for this cycle of the reporting process. NB: The response, "because we reported last year" is not really quite good enough.

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## Question - 6:

Tell me what are your objectives for the next report and how will you measure success?

### Ans:



Following on from the existential "why are we doing this" question, the obvious next thing to ask is "how will we know if we have done it well". As a minimum, you should expect to hear quantitative targets such as adherence to budget and on-time publication, but equally, qualitative targets about the process of reporting should not be overlooked. Does your SRM intend to get feedback on the process of developing the report? Did your SRM run an effective Reporting Steering Team in which people have had the opportunity to influence? If your report is the single-handed work of your SRM and a consultant, you can bet there's something essential missing.

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### Question - 7:

Tell me was the sustainability report produced in line with budget? If not, what was different?

#### Ans:

Sustainability reports have a talent for coming in over budget. The SRM is a business manager and must know how to manage budgets. This question is more about understanding if your SRM has it covered than understanding the gory details of what was spent where.

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### Question - 8:

Tell us how much of our sustainability reporting budget was spent on external consultants?

#### Ans:

Of course, I am biased, being a sustainability reporting consultant:) but it is always worth having some external help when writing your Sustainability Report. However, you should know how much it is consuming of your total reporting budget.

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### Question - 9:

Tell me what's new?

#### Ans:

Many many moons ago, I attended a Leadership Program which included a strategy session run by the inspiring Aslam Malik. One of the things he talked about as a feature of great leadership, which has always stuck in my mind, was the fact that a leader is always asking questions and eager to listen to the answer. Just as a simple question such as: How are you? can be a real floodgate opener, so can the question: What's new? be an opportunity to learn lots about what's top-of-mind in your business and also about the person you are asking. Anyone who answers the question What's new? with the answer: Nothing much has obviously checked out of life for a while, because in life, work and in sustainability reporting, there is always something new.

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### Question - 10:

Tell me who will be working on this project?

#### Ans:

Fit is important at the organizational level, but also at the interpersonal level. Make sure that you have met the people who will be working on the project. The most important person will be the account manager (or the project manager) - the person who will be your primary point of contact on day-to-day matters. But it's also helpful to jump on a video conference (seeing them in person makes a huge difference here!) with the entire project team.

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### Question - 11:

Tell me fancy some ice cream?

#### Ans:

How can you have a conversation about Sustainability Reporting without ice cream?

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### Question - 12:

Tell me which alternative energy projects are you most excited about?

#### Ans:

Solar. It sounds very obvious, and yet the sun is everywhere around us and is there for the taking. Frankly, the solar industry has been on a very sharp learning curve, so I have expectations that that learning curve will continue and that it will, over time, be able to contribute a much higher percentage of energy.

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### Question - 13:

Tell us what insights have you gained from the last Sustainability Report that will be helpful in producing the next report?

#### Ans:

Every report is a learning process. How does your SRM learn from experience? How does your SRM value continuous improvement? This question will enlighten you.

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### Question - 14:

Tell me who were your greatest allies in the company in producing the Sustainability Report?

#### Ans:

Yes, here is the list of people to give fat bonuses to at the end of the year:)

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### Question - 15:

Explain how does your job benefit the environment?

#### Ans:

My job is very involved in energy topics. I'm not doing physical work to make a building more efficient, but I bring ideas to energy management, share information, and find ways for people to get involved with our conservation programs. I helped coordinate forums between energy staff and students to hold conversations with students wanting to get involved.

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### Question - 16:

Tell me are there any common misconceptions about this type of work?

#### Ans:

Some people think sustainability is not definable, that it is vague. We are working to define and measure sustainability. Our efforts to show what works (and what doesn't) will hopefully help the public be more informed.

Another misconception is sustainability always costs more and is not practical or that you aren't being fiscally responsible. Reducing energy use and waste can be big costs savers and are first steps to create more sustainable operations. Terminology is important. For many people, when they hear "green," they may assume you have a radical political agenda. Not everyone does. Some people in this field are simply practical problem solvers. Another challenge is misinformation and "green-washing." I hope the university can play a role to help the public wade through information.

There's also controversy of the words "green" and "sustainability" and applying them to things that have happened for years. Regulatory jobs are now called green jobs. Other people think sustainability is a "flash in the pan" and wonder whether it will be around long-term. Making decisions that take into account future generations and life cycle concepts isn't simple, but I think there will always be people working on these issues to get the job done whether or not they are "popular."

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### Question - 17:

Explain what specific objectives were established for the Sustainability Report and how were they met?

#### Ans:

There are many different types of possible objectives for Sustainability Reports. These may relate to the collaborative process of developing the report, the cost, the adherence to an agreed timetable without a last minute rush, the amount of time invested, the quality of the output (which may be the report content, design or presentation) or objectives might also refer to the range of feedback received after publication of the report. Of course, we are assuming that your SRM did actually establish objectives. If not, that begs another question.

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### Question - 18:

Explain how many new recruits read our Sustainability Report and did this influence them in accepting a job with our company?

#### Ans:

Everyone likes to quote figures about how potential new recruits (including the zillions of Green MBA and Net Impact grads that join the job market each year) seek socially responsible employers. But once and for all it might make sense to check whether those who joined your company were actually influenced to do so by your sustainability performance.

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### Question - 19:

Why this company and why this job?

#### Ans:

The interviewers want to feel special. Things to talk about could include the training scheme structure, opportunities to take on early responsibility, support for taking professional qualifications or the company's policy on sustainability and social responsibility. You probably shouldn't say that the salary is one of your biggest motivations for applying, even if that is in fact the case.

The best way to prepare for these types of question is, of course, to read up about the company and the wider industry. But you should also consider where you fit in; how will this particular training scheme help you develop as a leader?

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### Question - 20:

Tell me what do you enjoy most about your job?

#### Ans:

I like being in this role of coordinator and being part of setting a direction for the university to be more sustainable. Sometimes, it's still an information overload, but it's a great asset to be able to learn and have access to the work and research of faculty experts at the university. I like being in the middle of these changes and the focus the university researchers are bringing to critical issues of our world.

I enjoy working with the operations team - we have a sustainability steering committee - and their expertise in running our university. It's great to help make stronger connections between these very busy people and fill the communications gap between departments. When I started, the energy engineers were doing great work but they were trying to fill energy job openings and didn't have time to develop a market campaign about what they are doing. There were many people involved in getting the "It All Adds Up" energy conservation campaign underway. There is now more cohesion amongst student groups working on these issues. The energy campaign helped make unique connections and focus efforts.

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### Question - 21:

Now start with a bit of self-reflection and analysis?

#### Ans:

If you were completely honest with yourself, would you be best suited for a more technical role (e.g., supply chain auditor), a less technical role (e.g., communications) or a managerial position (e.g., self reflection corporate responsibility director or vice president)? Use your self-analysis to filter -- or at least



prioritize -- the jobs in your search.

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### Question - 22:

Tell me how do you measure the success of your sustainability consulting engagements?

#### Ans:

In our experience, this is an often-overlooked issue. Most proposals will specify deliverables - a report, a carbon footprint, etc. But few will take the next step and clearly outline how they (and the client) should judge the success of the consulting engagement itself. It can be extremely helpful to make sure you're on the same page here. For example:

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### Question - 23:

Tell me what skills or personal qualities are good for this job?

#### Ans:

People and strong communication skills, along with the technical skills and knowledge are helpful for working in this field. My engineering background helps me understand some complex technical issues. I have an understanding of business practices and organizational management, and use those skill sets by bringing people together into ideas and engage them in actions. I rely on many people, and collaboration is important. It helps to be pro-active and willing to circumvent many barriers. Everyone I need to work or talk with is busy, so sometimes I have to get in peoples' faces - politely! Being able to listen is important. I hear many opinions about what the university needs to do or not do, and how quickly. In this type job, you have to be a self-motivator. I'm pretty introverted personally, so sometimes it's a push for me to be in front of people all day. I try to connect the dots between groups. Other times I bring people together and just get out of the way. The size of the university creates huge challenges. Culture change at a place like the university can move very slowly, so I need to be patient!

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### Question - 24:

Explain what obstacles do you see in reaching full and effective implementation of most engagements?

#### Ans:

This question gets at two important things. First, a good consultant will be able to quickly and clearly identify common obstacles that they will come up against. If they don't have a good answer, you should take that as a big red flag.

Second, a consultant's response to this question will give you a heads up about what kind of interpersonal, time management, scope of work, and other problems they may encounter. Every consulting approach has its weakness, but you should go into it with open eyes.

What you're looking for in a good fit is a) a consultant who thinks proactively about the challenges that will inevitably occur and b) a consultant who will work together with you throughout the engagement to quickly surface and resolve obstacles that stand in your way.

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### Question - 25:

Tell me how many Managers have used the report in discussions/presentations/meetings with external stakeholders?

#### Ans:

Your Managers are your sustainability ambassadors and the Sustainability Report is a key tool in their arsenal, whatever their role in the company. If they are not using your Sustainability Report, your SRM is not engaging them effectively. Your SRM should have her finger on the pulse of how your Sustainability Report is being used in the organization.

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### Question - 26:

Tell me what is your advice to someone interested in this field?

#### Ans:

Give yourself more future options by sticking out the tougher math and science classes. Find out which classes you need to get into the field you think is interesting. It can be a challenge to pick up classes later if you don't have a good foundation. Volunteer in your community or check out student internships. Getting involved in student groups that work on sustainability is a good start too. For instance, on campus we have a student group Engineers without Borders. They work on global projects and look for people (other than engineers) to be part of the team. The Solar Decathlon team included students from across disciplines, from design, architecture, and engineering. The Active Energy Club conducts energy audits. MPIRG is politically involved. You can learn good skills in student groups like these. Students show a lot of interest in these topics. On campus, we had students at forums talking about energy and wanting to be involved. Conversation at these forums revolved around what students could do. Now they are involved in re-commissioning buildings by measuring energy use, and putting up "Turn off the lights" reminders on switches. You can put those things on your resume.

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### Question - 27:

Explain what sort of tools, machines, or equipment do you use regularly?

#### Ans:

I mostly use a computer, e-mail, telephone, presentation software and equipment, and e-meeting technologies. I do some driving when I visit the other campuses, but we're trying to be more "green" by less travel. Social networking is on the list of tools to use more as we move forward.

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### Question - 28:

Tell me what makes you think that your sustainability consulting firm is the right fit for us?

#### Ans:

Listen carefully to this answer. Nine times out of 10, the answer you hear will be all about the consultancy - about their technical credentials and about their past



experience. What you should be looking for, however, is an answer that speaks directly about YOUR organization.

Do they demonstrate an understanding of the challenges you're facing? Have they asked probing questions to get at the heart of your needs, or rushed to present a proposal that reflects "their way" of doing things? Can they reflect back to you the real reasons that you're looking to hire a sustainability consultancy?

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### Question - 29:

Tell me was the Sustainability Report prepared in accordance with an action plan and clear timetable and to what extent did performance align with these plans?

#### Ans:

The reporting process is no less important than the product of the process. Quality process usually means quality report. Also, the reporting process can often be an example of how other cross-functional projects are managed in the organization. Any reporter who begins without an action plan, timetable and allocation of roles and responsibilities (usually a Steering Team for the report is preferable) is heading for a last-minute scramble, headaches and much conflict before the report is finally published. As CEO, you should be interested in embedding good process in your business, as well as delivering a good report.

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### Question - 30:

Explain how did you get started working in this field as Manager Sustainability?

#### Ans:

I have only been in this job for a few years, but I worked in the environmental field for 17 years in the manufacturing industry. In those jobs, I focused on regulations or integrating environmental health and safety aspects into business decision processes. My technical background is helpful in the operations portion of the job since I understand the structure and systems behind operations that can help make the university run more smoothly.

A couple years ago, I wanted to refresh my environmental knowledge and was interested in learning more about current issues like climate change. I looked into classes at the university and found this newly-formed position. It was a fortunate accident. To take this new job meant a pay cut. One thing important to understand about "green jobs" is if you're trying to get into a new field, taking a pay cut might be a choice you have to make. I decided to take this job because it was unique and not one that would open up very often. I liked the challenge of a new role. I was also motivated by the opportunity to help integrate life cycle into learning opportunities.

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### Question - 31:

Explain how many work-hours of our company employees were invested in the production of our last report?

#### Ans:

The report budget often does not include the woman/man/hours of company employees engaged in the reporting process. It includes consulting, design, PR, marketing, printing and all other associated and easily quantifiable costs. However, doesn't employee time also cost money? As a consultant, I log all my hours and can tell you exactly how much time (and therefore money) I have spent on anything from a major client project right down to this blog post or volunteering work. Knowing the time and cost of your reporting process is half the way to managing it more efficiently.

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### Question - 32:

Tell us what is your role in your organisation?

#### Ans:

I'm the Director of Brand Sustainability for adidas, which means I focus on our brand sustainability strategy, new innovations, and business models we're going to implement across our business units and our global creations centers.

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### Question - 33:

Tell me what kind of status updates should I expect to receive from you?

#### Ans:

Lots of sustainability consulting occurs remotely - in fact, you may find that only 10-20% of billable project hours are spent onsite at your facilities. That means you need to get comfortable with working in a non-face-to-face relationship with your consultant team.

So before you commit, find out how often they expect to be in contact, what forms of communication are preferred, and how they deal with regular status updates. There is no right answer here, but the key is to discuss the options and find a mutually agreeable working relationship.

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### Question - 34:

Tell me what did we choose not to report on and why not?

#### Ans:

Almost all reports are trade-offs. Legal, marketing, finance, HR team members almost always have something they prefer not to disclose for different reasons. In many cases, these "Secrets" may not be critical to the report's integrity but in some cases, they might be quite telling about the organization's challenges. As CEO, you would probably want to know what your people are fearful about disclosing and why.

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### Question - 35:

Tell me what is a typical day like at your job?

#### Ans:

My typical hours are between 8:30 a.m. and 6 p.m., sometimes earlier or later depending on events and meetings that day. My hours vary depending on the time of year, because in the summer there are fewer student activities. I meet with student groups in the evenings or work on student events or community events during the weekend. As long as I am accessible by phone and Internet, I can get many parts of my job done. There's some flexibility to work from home if I need to. During a



normal day, I meet with a variety of people - from large committee meetings that I staff to informal student meetings. I also speak to classes and other groups. Since I am fairly new to the job, I spend a lot of time learning about everything going on at the University. I often read and e-mail in the evening. I also learn new technical information. For example, trying to learn about B3 energy standards compared to LEED. I benchmark schools and their policies in transportation, dining services, purchasing, etc.

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### Question - 36:

Explain what are the big barriers or frustrations you face to achieving change?

#### Ans:

I'm not going to give you the 'normal' answer you may hear as to which barriers we face when trying to achieve change - I'm going to go with my pet peeve, which is the lack of readily available, and high quality life cycle analysis data. Life cycle analysis data enables you to find out where your biggest impacts are, i.e. how much water you use, how much electricity you use - unfortunately our industry is not quite at the big data age yet. There's a lot of info you can get - but it takes a long time and it's difficult to find.

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### Question - 37:

Why this industry?

#### Ans:

What is it about the work environment that appeals to you? Perhaps you're applying to be a retail manager because you particularly like the idea of working in a store. Or maybe you're applying to be a construction site manager and you've always been an outdoors type. It will be particularly impressive if you can talk about the challenges and developments facing the industry.

If you're applying for role in transport you could talk about rising fuel costs, for retail you could talk about the role of online shopping and for construction you could talk about sustainability, for example. That would show that you've got business sense and are commercially aware, a crucial skill for a manager.

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### Question - 38:

Tell me when should we have another little chat?

#### Ans:

Be prepared for a non committal response

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### Question - 39:

Tell me how many of our employees have read the report and how many have provided feedback?

#### Ans:

Aha. This is a great question. If your Sustainability Report is not reaching your employees (supported by a proactive process of dialogue) then you are probably not gaining all the potential benefits of reporting. How can employees reflect the company's Sustainability Performance to external stakeholders if they are not familiar with the report? Your SRM should be in close collaboration with the HR function to ensure that the internal organizational processes include engagement with the Sustainability Report.

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### Question - 40:

Explain what changes in this field do you expect to see in the future?

#### Ans:

What won't be changing? It's very dynamic. Minnesota is at a different place than other states. It's more active on many sustainability-related issues. Jobs could shift to other parts of the country that are just starting to think about sustainability. I think we'll see shifts in jobs based on research and political support. Minnesota will play an important role in our energy future.

Other institutions are working on sustainability too. Hospitals are involved and working on this through their credo of "health care without harm." Businesses have been focused on environmental issues for years. For several years, there has been a shift towards sustainability and the triple-bottom line. Interdisciplinary research and education help bring more holistic approaches. On campus, student interest drives a lot of changes. The Internet is linking students to global ideas and solutions. It's a shift that people of my generation don't always fully appreciate. As these students enter the workforce and become consumers, they will be looking for responsible companies that are being innovative in their solutions. With Minnesota resources, our workforce has an opportunity to prepare for future jobs.

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### Question - 41:

Tell me what sort of training or education do you have?

#### Ans:

I have a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering. I received my master's degree in environmental engineering from the University of Minnesota. One of the reasons I was a good candidate for the job was my regulatory and environmental health and safety experience in operations and product development. My past jobs required systems thinking. I worked with teams that were cross-functional. Interdisciplinary thinking is a large part of problem solving in sustainability - looking at issues from numerous perspectives for solutions to complex problems. Training has been on the job for me, primarily through webinars and attending workshops and conferences. There are more courses available to people interested in sustainability jobs today than when I was in school. The University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus has a minor in sustainability open to all majors and the College of Continuing Education is developing a professional certificate. There are sustainability programs in architecture, agriculture, and business. The Association for the Advancement in Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) has resources for people interested in campus sustainability.

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