

Asa Guilamo is executive director of the Western New York Sustainable Business Roundtable.



Kris Ann Bolt,
environmental health
and safety officer at
Harmac



THE BUSINESS CASE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

For many organizations, safeguarding our environment is key to their missions—and future

BY MATTHEW BIDDLE

Asa Guilamo grew up in a forest in Sweden and saw how the extraction of iron ore from nearby mines impacted the surrounding environment. From a young age, she wanted to do her part to help the environment.

“Early on, I realized individual action can only take us so far when we have an incentive structure that is incentivizing something different,” she says. “Sustainability needs to be made mainstream.”

For Guilamo, that’s where business comes in. After completing her master’s in environmental management, Guilamo worked at the intersection of public policy, sustainability, and business for the Swedish government, first as a scientific attaché for sustainable development at the Swedish embassy in Tokyo and later as a special advisor on the government’s Environmental Advisory Committee.

Now living in Buffalo, Guilamo serves as executive director of the Western New York Sustainable Business Roundtable (SBR), a nonprofit with nearly seventy member-organizations that pledge to integrate sustainability into their operations. Through SBR, company representatives network, learn best practices, and access resources to optimize their use of energy and materials and reduce waste and pollution—all to benefit the environment, their employees, and the bottom line.

“Our vision is to grow an environmentally and economically resilient community that prioritizes the well-being of both current and future generations,” Guilamo says. “My inspiration is my grandmother; she lived to 103 years old. So, for me, it’s about creating a long and better life for ourselves and for our future grandkids and great-grandkids.”

Safeguarding our environment and tackling climate change requires all of us to be part of the solution, especially the business community, whose ability to innovate, respond to trends, move markets, and scale quickly can make it a key driver of climate action.

Sometimes, particularly when government fails to act, it’s the business sector that propels progress on a large scale. After the Trump administration pulled out of the Paris Agreement, more than 1,200 investors and companies declared their continued commitment to the climate accord’s goals. In 2019, after the administration announced plans to roll back fuel efficiency standards, several automakers—including Ford, Honda, and Volkswagen—publicly backed California’s stricter emissions rules.

Locally, SBR members proactively and strategically implement sustainability in their organizations for many reasons. For some, it’s simply the right thing to do, while others are responding to demand from their customers, investors, or employees. Some are cutting costs or protecting their supply chain or brand image—and many cite all of the above and then some.

Members include the University at Buffalo, M&T Bank, Catholic Health, the Buffalo Zoo, Perry's Ice Cream, Cannon Design, and Tesla.

"[Sustainability] is a moral imperative, but there's also a clear business case, and it's getting more and more plain every day that goes by," Guilamo says.

At Rich Products, a four-billion-dollar food company and SBR member, consumer demand for healthy and socially responsible products is driving change. A 2020 New York University study showed that sustainably marketed products were responsible for more than fifty-four percent of growth in the consumer-packaged-goods sector, despite representing only sixteen percent of the market.

"At Rich's, sustainability means thinking about our social and our environmental impact, our people, and our planet," says Nira Johri, director of global diversity and sustainability. "We have to think about what's going to be best for our people over the long run, from our workforce to our diversity-and-inclusion initiatives, as well as our environmental impact—what we put out into the world and how we manage everything from the ingredients we buy to our manufacturing emissions."

Across its worldwide footprint, Rich is working to reduce its packaging waste, adding labels to help consumers recycle packaging properly, and

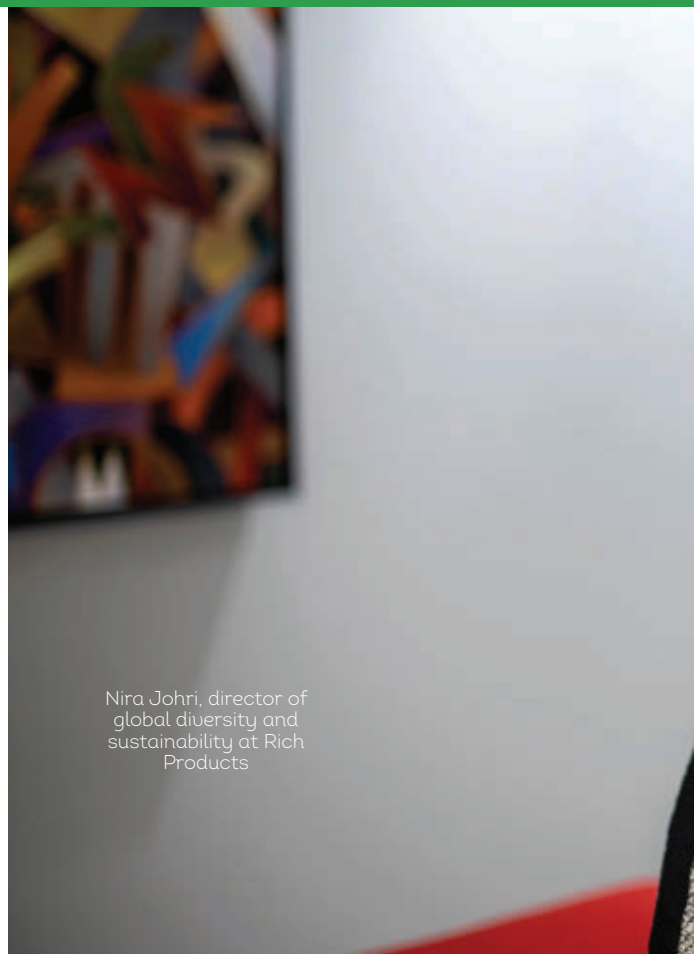
partnering with other food companies to improve the recycling system. In addition, the company has converted all of its seafood to sustainable sources, is evaluating other ingredients, and has set metrics for reducing its overall carbon footprint.

"One of the most meaningful steps we've taken on that journey is procuring renewable wind energy credits," says Johri, announcing that by next year, four Rich plants and its Buffalo headquarters will be completely powered by renewable energy. "When we looked at our long-term ambition and what we wanted to do, we realized we had to take aggressive action."

At Orchard Park-based Curbell Inc., a medical device manufacturer and distributor of performance plastics, the focus on environment comes from the top: Chairman Tom Leone, who owns one of the region's first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-certified homes, started pushing the company to assess and improve its sustainability more than fifteen years ago.

"Typically, what's good for the business is also good for the environment," says Mark Shriver, Curbell's director of safety and environmental affairs. "It started out with simple recycling and getting some return for your recyclables, and doing a relighting project to cut your costs and reduce waste. Then, the evolution of it is looking up and down the supply chain, cutting your packaging cost, cutting your shipping cost."

"More recently, it's taken on a brand perspective,"



Nira Johri, director of global diversity and sustainability at Rich Products

SHRIVER PHOTO BY ALANA ADETOLA



Mark Shriver, director of safety and environmental affairs for Curbell

Shriver continues. “[Focusing on sustainability] makes you the employer of choice. You interview a lot of young people today, and they’ll ask questions about what type of company you are because they want to work for a place that aligns with their values and morals.”

Among his duties, Shriver leads a cross-functional green team that identifies potential changes across the company and organizes initiatives for Earth Month in April.

One of Curbell’s most significant improvements is in waste management, both in working with suppliers to make changes on the front end, and in cleaning up its operations to reduce what it throws away. Locally, between recycling, repurposing, and waste-to-energy efforts, Curbell is a zero-landfill operation; across its US footprint, eighty percent of waste is diverted from landfill.

Now, Shriver says, the company is strategic planning for the future and considering targets related to carbon neutral and zero waste. “Our programs are maturing, and we continue to evolve. So do our metrics: currently, we track solid waste, waste diverted from landfills, repurposed materials, energy and water consumption and reduction, and outreach,” says Shriver, who also co-founded SBR. “Once you start reporting this stuff and the dollars and cents in management review meetings, people now look for those things that just make sense.”

Over at Harmac Medical Products, a medical device manufacturer based on the East Side, the focus on sustainability goes beyond the environment to include community development, safe housing, gender equality, and other targets outlined in the United Nations’ Sustainable



Development Goals.

In 2008, the company launched the Bailey Green Initiative with government, business, and nonprofit partners to make a positive difference in the Bailey-Genesee neighborhood around its headquarters. Since then, Habitat for Humanity has constructed several homes nearby, community gardens have taken root, and Harmac hosts regular community days.

“Twenty-five percent of our employees live in the ZIP code where our facility is located, and access to safe, affordable housing was a huge issue,” says Kris Ann Bolt, environmental health and safety officer at Harmac and board president of SBR. “We also wanted to show off our facility and our community when customers came in from these Fortune 500 companies that are in bigger cities.”

Inside its Buffalo facility, which employs roughly four hundred people, Harmac has also worked to reduce its waste, including hazardous waste from the production of needles. In one project, Harmac’s engineering and manufacturing teams discovered they were discarding thousands of foam sheets every week after only using them once to transport molded parts from one room to another. Instead, they initiated a process to reuse them—easier said than done, thanks to Food and Drug Administration and International Organization for Standardization standards—and after just five months saved \$30,000 off the budget and 60,000 foam sheets from landfill.

“Generally, if you’re cutting waste out of your processes, you’re saving money and helping the environment,” Bolt says. “But then you also have the intrinsic value of really empowering your employees and showing them you care about where they live and making it better.”