SUSTAINABLEIT
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ESG Pioneer Rackspace Becomes Advocate for IT Sustainability
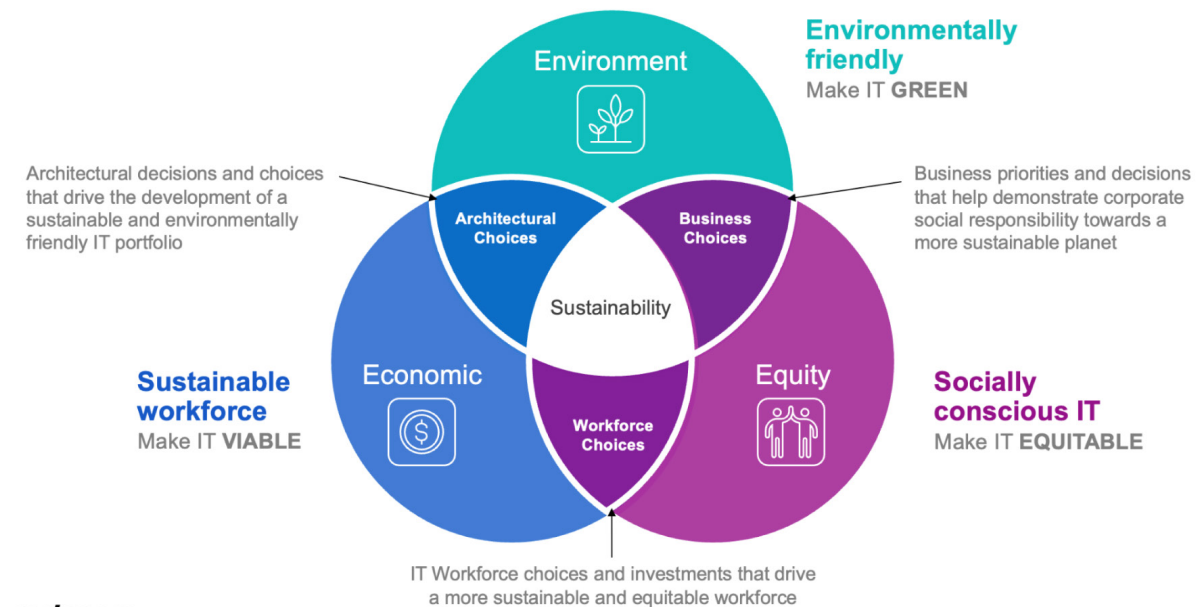
By Brian Carlson

Back in 2007 it wasn't popular or trendy to be sustainable. In fact, it was probably the last thing on the mind of many technology companies as they struggled to grow in their prospective markets.

But that did not stop Rackspace Technology, Inc. from establishing their headquarters in an abandoned mall in an economically challenged area of Windcrest, Texas. Anyone who has grown up in the USA knows a town with an abandoned mall that has fallen on hard times. Abandoned or blighted buildings can have a broad and wide-ranging effect on the community at large.

Rackspace converted this abandoned mall into 1,000,000 square feet of office and data center space, and as a LEED gold-certified building it represents their early commitment to the environment and to making the community a better place for everyone. They've continued that commitment by recently announcing a move of their headquarters to a more energy efficient building. The move will also allow them to further reduce their carbon footprint by moving closer to where a bulk of their employees live thereby reducing commutes.

The fact is environmental, social, and governance (ESG) ideals were baked into the culture of Rackspace from its inception, and they are not jumping on the sustainable IT bandwagon like so many others, with ESG being core to Rackspace's business model and values.

What is Sustainable IT?

Environmentally friendly
Make IT **GREEN**

Environment

Business priorities and decisions that help demonstrate corporate social responsibility towards a more sustainable planet

Architectural decisions and choices that drive the development of a sustainable and environmentally friendly IT portfolio

Architectural Choices

Business Choices

Sustainability

Sustainable workforce
Make IT **VIABLE**

Economic

Workforce Choices

Equity

Socially conscious IT
Make IT **EQUITABLE**

IT Workforce choices and investments that drive a more sustainable and equitable workforce

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Srini Koushik, EVP & CTO Rackspace, Board of Directors SustainableIT.org believes that enterprises need to make sustainability a top business priority, and that means embracing a full view of what it means to be sustainable.

"The way we've always talked about sustainability is the broader comprehensive view of sustainability. You want to do the right thing for the environment. Every one of our companies has to own that," Mr. Koushik said. "But the broader view of sustainability says it's not just about the environment. It's about economic sustainability. And it's about doing it in an equitable way that benefits everyone."

The non-profit SustainableIT.org is on the leading edge of advancing sustainability through technology leadership. Its mission is to define sustainable transformation programs, author best practices and frameworks, set standards and certifications, provide education and training, and raise awareness for environmental and societal programs that make our organizations and the world sustainable for generations to come.
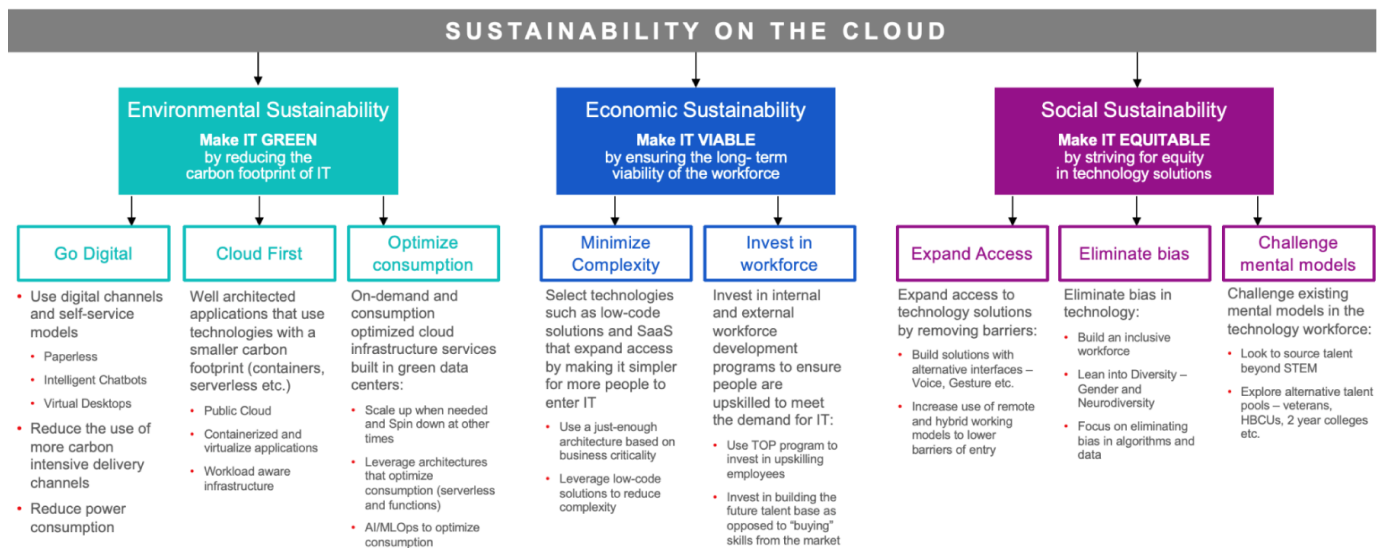
IT Needs to Step Up for Sustainability

On the front lines for the battle for comprehensive sustainability is technology and IT leadership. One of the top reasons Mr. Koushik says it must be like this is because IT leaders have insights into how money is being spent that other executives simply cannot see.

"As an IT leader you have a very good view into how you consume resources. IT needs to be a conscious consumer," he said. "Technology leaders need to take that leadership role in sustainability and make those recommendations to the business leaders."

And it's not just about making sure IT is green, but about the IT department taking a holistic view on all three dimensions of sustainability - environmental, economic and social equity. And according to Mr. Koushik, embracing comprehensive sustainable best practices and standards is good for business.

A holistic view of Sustainability

SUSTAINABILITY ON THE CLOUD		
Environmental Sustainability **Make IT GREEN** by reducing the carbon footprint of IT	**Economic Sustainability** **Make IT VIABLE** by ensuring the long- term viability of the workforce	**Social Sustainability** **Make IT EQUITABLE** by striving for equity in technology solutions

Go Digital	Cloud First	Optimize consumption	Minimize Complexity	Invest in workforce	Expand Access	Eliminate bias	Challenge mental models

• Use digital channels and self-service models
  • Paperless
  • Intelligent Chatbots
  • Virtual Desktops
• Reduce the use of more carbon intensive delivery channels
• Reduce power consumption
	Well architected applications that use technologies with a smaller carbon footprint (containers, serverless etc.)
	  • Public Cloud
	  • Containerized and virtualize applications
	  • Workload aware infrastructure
		On-demand and consumption optimized cloud infrastructure services built in green data centers:
		  • Scale up when needed and Spin down at other times
		  • Leverage architectures that optimize consumption (serverless and functions)
		  • AI/MLOps to optimize consumption
			Select technologies such as low-code solutions and SaaS that expand access by making it simpler for more people to enter IT
			  • Use a just-enough architecture based on business criticality
			  • Leverage low-code solutions to reduce complexity
				Invest in internal and external workforce development programs to ensure people are upskilled to meet the demand for IT:
				  • Use TOP program to invest in upskilling employees
				  • Invest in building the future talent base as opposed to "buying" skills from the market
					Expand access to technology solutions by removing barriers:
					  • Build solutions with alternative interfaces – Voice, Gesture etc.
					  • Increase use of remote and hybrid working models to lower barriers of entry
						Eliminate bias in technology:
						  • Build an inclusive workforce
						  • Lean into Diversity – Gender and Neurodiversity
						  • Focus on eliminating bias in algorithms and data
							Challenge existing mental models in the technology workforce:
							  • Look to source talent beyond STEM
							  • Explore alternative talent pools – veterans, HBCUs, 2 year colleges etc.

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technology.

"Most business partners tend to listen to their IT leaders. The leaders of this space need to step up and find out it's a win-win situation," he said. "A focus on sustainability is good for the business. It is not a competing priority."

In order to accomplish this, technology leaders need to put their egos in the backseat and stop focusing on the latest shiny-object emerging technology solution, and redirect their attention to inclusion and getting the right skills in-house so they can meet evolving business plans and customer demands.

"Many tech leaders chase the latest and greatest technology. Some of the architectures, like microservices, are not simple and not easy to understand. So, by picking those hard-to-understand technologies you are by default becoming exclusionary," Koushik said. "You are excluding 90% of the IT population that can help you if you picked a technology that was easier to understand. A lot of times you are picking technology to satisfy the ego of the individual rather than whether it can be built."

An Abundance Problem

According to Mr. Koushik, by being exclusionist and picking technologies that limit your ability to hire and train technology staff, you paint yourself into a corner.

"The war for talent is real, but I think some IT leaders make that more complicated than it needs to be. Because if everyone is trying to hire for that same skill and we are not producing enough of those skills, it's ALWAYS going to be a scarce market."

IT leadership is creating its own conundrum Koushik said. By bringing in hip technology to satiate their egos, they limit their ability to bring in or upskill qualified staff.

"The way to solve this issue is to convert the skill scarcity problem into an abundance problem. We have to look at a broader workforce to get things done, we need to be more inclusionary, and reach out to non-standard pools," he said. "And when you look at this non-STEM workforce, you need to give them a way to ease into technology. Low-code and no-code give these workers a good way into technology. This way you are expanding opportunities for a broader segment of the population."

Mr. Koushik and Rackspace put their money where their mouth is. Internal training and upskilling programs are what is giving them a pipeline of fresh technology talent.

"In Rackspace we invest a good amount for our peoples training and retraining. In the last 90 days we ran programs where we certified 560 people in AWS," he said. "We run a program called TOP (Technical Onboarding Program), where we take Rackers from other areas and put them through these intense programs while working with our partners to mitigate costs on the exams. Everybody steps up to contribute."

And unlike many technology leaders who think if they train someone they will jump ship for greener pastures, that is a good thing according to Mr. Koushik, who believes upskilling people is critical for socially equitable sustainability.

"This is a battle we want to fight from a position of abundance not scarcity. We don't want to fall into the trap that if we train someone, we are concerned they will get hired away by a competitor for more money," he said. "We value our Rackers, so if someone leaves for a different opportunity, we welcome them back with an open door. We believe in the system that creates more of this talent."

The reality is it is not just technology that makes an organization sustainably successful, it's the people.

"If you want to build a sustainable technology organization, you have to be willing to invest in your people as much as your technology," Mr. Koushik said.

ESG, Data and No-Code Low-Code

Rackspace's Koushik explains that an ESG lens can be applied to all areas of a technology business, with data being a common use case that needs sustainable best practices.

"For all use cases you can apply the ESG lens to, data is included. Because data is cheap you can create a million copies of it. Most people just store everything," he said. "Being judicious and conscious about what data you store, how much of it you store, how you store it are all on the environmental side that you can do."

And beyond the green side of managing data sprawl, by focusing on the entire data supply chain, Koushik says organizations can include economic sustainability as well as social equity into their data management plans.

"Thinking about the supply chain of data helps you put together an economically sustainable model," he said. "Clearly with data the equitable piece shines big. Embedded biases from data have to be removed from it. That is how we need to move forward."

We are All in it Together

Rackspace has stepped up to embrace ESG principles and provide leadership for sustainability in many ways. Following their 2020 IPO, Rackspace Technology committed to achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2045. Their progress and plans towards their ESG goals are detailed in their corporate ESG report.

They have invested in smart building automation systems to reduce energy consumption by managing light, heat, and cooling zones based on operational demand. Since 2008 they have prepared a greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions inventory (Scope 1, 2, partial 3) for all operations worldwide.

They have also found other creative ways to minimize waste like composting coffee grounds, refurbishing retired IT equipment for aftermarket use, and collecting HVAC condensate for landscaping. Mr. Koushik says looking at equipment refresh cycles is low-hanging fruit for improving sustainable practices.

"One of the key things IT leaders can do in this space is looking at refresh cycles. Even if it's a monitor, you need to think about the total cost of ownership of it if your refresh cycle is every 4 years," he said. "If you can get the monitor back into a supply chain where it gets recycled for parts, it may be a shorter refresh cycle that in the end consumes less energy."

Rackspace is going beyond holding itself accountable for sustainability, they also work with their suppliers and partners to encourage and pick up best practices from ESG-advanced companies.

"Sustainability is a journey. Some of our partners are more advanced in ESG than us. By working with them, we get the halo effect," he said. "For the smaller suppliers, we are asking for more details on their sustainability efforts. We want to understand what they are doing through the three lenses of ESG. You want that information so we can get to the next stage of making smart decisions regarding our suppliers."

In the end, Mr. Koushik feels that to be successful in comprehensive sustainability efforts, everyone in an organization needs to buy in and participate to ensure progress. The challenges are big, but the rewards can be just as significant.

"When it comes to sustainability it's not an either or, it's an and. It's got to be all of us in it together. We got here collectively, and we are going to have to come out of it collectively."

About SustainableIT.org

Vision

Advancing global sustainability through technology leadership.

Mission

For too long, sustainability has been someone else's problem to solve. As technology leaders, we drive digital transformation programs that unlock the art of the possible. Together, we can define sustainable transformation programs, author best practices and frameworks, set standards and certifications for governance, provide education and training, and raise awareness for environmental and societal programs that make our organizations and the world sustainable for generations to come.

It's time technology leaders take a stand for sustainability, as one.

Mandates

Best Practices, Research and Standards

Identify sustainable digital transformation programs by industry. Research and define best practices, frameworks, and standards for all three pillars of sustainability (environmental, societal, and governance) for IT departments and organizations.

Global Awareness and Recognition

Promote sustainable digital transformation programs and advances in sustainability. Raise awareness through local, regional, and global awards, as well as through social media, publications, and public relations.

Community, Education and Training

Build local and regional communities for technology leaders to advance sustainability. Develop education and training programs for IT leadership and professionals for all three pillars of sustainability.

Transparency and Accountability

Set standards for metrics and reporting to enable transparency and accountability. Create certification programs for individuals and organizations with rights to use our sustainability emblem.

About SustainableIT.org

SustainableIT.org is a Delaware 501(c)(6) nonprofit, non-stock legal entity led by technology executives who will advance global sustainability through technology leadership. Our mission is to define sustainable transformation programs, author best practices and frameworks, set standards and certifications, provide education and training, and raise awareness for environmental and societal programs that make our organizations and the world sustainable for generations to come.

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