

INTERVIEW WITH CAILLAN MITCHELL

HOW TO START YOUR SUSTAINABILITY JOURNEY



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BENEFITS OF BEING GREEN

ZGSC: *Good Morning Caillan and thank you for taking time to give us this interview. Can you tell us a bit about your background, your current role and how you came to specialise in sustainable business practices and development?*

CM: Thank you for having me and for considering me to answer your questions. My background is broadly in the areas of biology, ecology, and environmental management, which comes from my studies in Geography where I specialised in the mentioned areas. During my studies in Scotland, I travelled and worked in environmental research and conservation in places such as the Seychelles, Malaysia, and the Maldives. Now what brought me to Zambia is a long story, but the draw of the incredible terrestrial ecosystems that exist in this country was irresistible, when the opportunity to assume the role of Head of Sustainability for Mupapa Wood Ltd, I couldn't say no.

My role in the company is primarily to identify areas in the company where sustainable practice can be implemented and areas for the company to improve its processes to be more sustainable, and then to bring those changes into practice. However, implementing changes is often the hardest part of the job, and bringing ideas of sustainability and environmental management can be difficult in areas where there is often a lot of resistance to changes in areas that aren't clearly understood by all. Moreover, I look to the future of the company, thinking long-term about what ways the business must develop or adapt to achieve a long-lasting and profitable business in

a changing market.

Overall, I have a passion for the environment and that has become a core part of my business practice. I genuinely believe, and have witnessed, the incredible benefits that sustainability has brought. Not only to businesses, but to local communities, and the environment. It seems obvious that in an environment where no-one is left behind and the natural world is not exploited, then we can continue to all benefit and ensure a future for us all and for generations to come.

ZGSC: *I would like to ask some questions to try and highlight the benefits of implementing sustainable business practices in the manufacturing industry in Zambia. As a manufacturer what are the key benefits of implementing sustainable practices in your supply chain?*

CM: Sustainability is hugely important in any business no matter what that business does. The idea of sustainability is simply thinking long-term and more broadly about your business. We now understand the implications of environmental damage, the very global and local issues of climate change that face us today. If we continue business-as-usual and don't consider the long-term impacts of what we do, then eventually the entire system falls apart and if there is no environment then there are no people.

As a manufacturer of hardwood products, it is vital for us to ensure a sustainable management of resources through sustainable management. By implementing sustainable forest man-

agement, it ensures we have a continued supply and access to the resources we need. Moreover, this all benefits the environment, by reforesting areas or general replanting to replace stock taken, the environment is continually protected. The reason for this is that we put value into this that is beyond the immediate period and considers a time in 60 – 100 years when these trees grow tall that they will have value. Sustainable practice for us also means using our resource fully to reduce any waste, so this brings innovation to find ways to implement what would normally be waste material into a product that is then profitable.

You will find that if you bring sustainable practices, both the environment and your business will prosper. Not all benefits will be immediate, but the long-term benefits will be vital.

ZGSC: What are some common misconceptions businesses have about sustainability?

CM: I know the term “Sustainability” is thrown around a lot in this day-and-age. Often in ways that people don’t understand just to make a business comply or seem desirable to clients, this is known as “green washing.” This leads to many people getting misconceptions about what sustainability is meant to be, its not a single act of planting a tree to make your business sustainable just to tick a box. Sustainability is the long-term commitment to ensuring your business gives back, in a way that relates to your business. An example is a company doing a one-day of tree planting, which is great and super important, but that doesn’t make that business sustainable. A way to make it sustainable would be if that company began to implement alternative power solutions in their office, reducing their carbon emissions through actions that are related to what they do as a business.

So, the biggest misconception is how to properly implement sustainable business practices into your business. It is not a matter of ticking the box and calling your business sustainable but committing to making changes that are related to your business.

ZGSC: In what ways does sustainability enhance your brand reputation and potentially increase growth?

CM: This is an effective way to look at sustainability as a business! For one, there is a huge global interest in sustainable products and businesses, and that global market shift is an enormous opportunity to make innovations in your business, especially here in Africa. The world is looking to innovative ways that normal business can be done sustainably, such as clean power alternatives, alternative ways to make products with sustainable practices or materials. As a company in Africa, if you take steps to make a certified sustainable product, then this draws a lot of attention to you and your product from big investors.

Additionally, that certificate of sustainability can make your brand or product unique, making you stand out from the crowd of other businesses. Sustainability in your business can be seen as both a selfless act of giving back and be-



ing green, but there is always an element of the selfish argument for sustainability. People are increasingly environmentally conscious, especially from the global West, and so having that certification of sustainability gives your brand that trust these clients are looking for.

ZGSC: Does adopting sustainable practices improve employee morale, engagement, and productivity?

CM: Absolutely it can! This is something people don’t think about a lot, but sustainability isn’t just for the environment, it can apply to any aspect of life and business. Imagine the difference between working somewhere that has no natural landscape, no trees or grass. It has been proven that if you work in an office and all you can see is concrete, then your productivity is lower than someone who can see natural landscapes. Nature makes us happy and improves our motivation, now if you implement that into your business workplace then you and your employees will see an improvement in moral.

Engagement can be actioned through corporate social responsibility activities such as tree planting activities, opportunities to get away from the workplace and contribute to a sustainable project. Sustainable practices can also be seen as investing in your workforce, by providing proper working conditions, fair working wages, skills development, and care of responsibility to employees. This form of social sustainability can bring many benefits to your business, which then go further into the local community.

ZGSC: Can businesses in Zambia mitigate risks associated with climate change and regulatory changes by adopting sustainable strategies?

CM: Zambia itself has in its hands the power

to change the local climate, the enormous forest areas, and freshwater resources that Zambia has is unique. But it is those same resources that are so freely abused and exploited for quick profit, which then leads to where we found ourselves this year. A drought that causes crops to fail, long hours of loadshedding, and then the pressures that puts on the people, communities, and businesses.

By implementing sustainable practices and promoting for robust regulatory changes, Zambian businesses themselves can make the difference in helping the local climate. Strategies that protect and manage resources in a sustainable way will ensure that no exploitation occurs, while still adding value to resources rather than restricting them.

However, Zambia already has some of the best and most robust regulations on environmental management, yet in many areas they are not actioned. It is down to the businesses to action that change, for their future, and the future of Zambia. If we want to get away from the risks of climate change, then we need to all start thinking long-term about our actions and business practices.

ZGSC: What are the competitive advantages of offering Eco-friendly products or services in industries that are evolving toward sustainability?

CM: As I alluded to earlier, there is a lot of interest in sustainable products in Africa, this often makes your company attractive as sustainable products are still developing here. The market and clientele for sustainable and Eco-friendly products is growing, and a lot of the time people are willing to spend more if a product is sustainably sourced or manufactured. If you can then get international interest in your product then your market for sustainable products opens rapidly.



ZGSC: *How can sustainable supply chain management reduce disruptions and ensure long-term partnerships with suppliers?*

CM: A good question, I wouldn't say that adopting sustainable practices will solve all issues of supply chain management, but it can give you some resilience to climatic changes. For instance, in Mupapa Wood we are beginning to source our timber from a FSC certified forest management area, this assures that the timber is sustainably sourced and ethically worked. Compared to normal timber suppliers, this source of timber is managed in a way that means it is unlikely to run-out, meaning a long-term partnership with a trusted company and continued business for the mutual parties.

Other businesses such as agricultural products, if the supplier uses sustainable agroforestry farming, then their crops will be more resilient to droughts and other climatic changes.

ZGSC: *How does integrating sustainability into a company's strategy help attract investors who prioritize Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria?*

CM: I believe that as you integrate sustainable processes and policies into your business, you become a vector for other businesses ESG criteria. If a company has a mandate to only pur-

chase goods and services from businesses who comply with sustainable practices or criteria, then reaching those criteria opens new markets for your business. Here in Zambia there are still unfortunately few businesses meeting those criteria, so a lot of business is lost to international companies, especially in South Africa. So as a Zambian business you may be able to offer then only local sustainable option for businesses, giving you an extremely competitive advantage and good reason to invest in sustainability.

ZGSC: *Can you highlight some of the support Mupapa Wood has had to encourage your business to implement sustainable projects or practices?*

CM: Truthfully, there has been a mixture of support. Often little support from the Zambian sector, although there are some interested parties that agree with developing sustainable practices. However, most of the support and encouragement has come from external investors or institutions such as the EU, UN, USAID, and European companies. Mainly because they have an interest in Zambia, but to partner in any way you must have sustainable practices or certifications because of their countries policies.

Zambian associations are always excited when we approach them with sustainable practices, but there has unfortunately been little sup-

port to the business to facilitate or develop this, so you are often on your own.

Mupapa Wood has support from the Finnish institutions and government with their interest in wooden products, this is the driving forces to look at a sustainable certification under the Forest Stewardship Council. This has also led us to helping to establish the first national standard of FSC in Zambia and meeting many likeminded businesses and institutions and a close relationship with the forestry department of Zambia.

ZGSC: *What role does sustainability play in innovation? Can it lead to the development of new products and services? How can businesses use this to add revenue to their existing model?*

CM: As I mentioned before, sustainability forces you as a business to look at everything it does and evaluate it. Through this evaluation it is often possible to identify areas where waste materials can be utilised. For Mupapa Wood, our sawdust can be made into so many different use cases, from chicken farming to turning it into an organic biochar or briquettes! All of this from something that is often just thrown away as waste. This process is both sustainable and great for bringing new income sources to your business.

Moreover, current climate change pressures are forcing innovation in sustainable practices, under pressure we adapt and become better. Finding ways to do something that no one has ever thought of before, and there is an infinite number of possibilities for companies to adapt and change what they do with sustainable practices.

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

ZGSC: *Now for our readers I would like to focus on a practical approach to sustainable business implementation that any Zambian business can follow. For example, how would you assess a company's current environmental impact?*

CM: This can be quite simple to identify areas where the company impacts the environment. Firstly, you should assess what the company uses and produces. For example, what does the company take? in the case of Mupapa Wood we purchase local timber that comes from certain forest areas, we use power either from a generator or ZESCO. We use glues and sanding sealers. And what does the process produce, I don't just mean your final product, but everything that can come from your normal day-to-day business operations and you will see that everything has some kind of environmental impact.

From that point you can research what you can do to mitigate, replace, or reduce to offset the environmental impact.

And then if you keep doing that process repeatedly, broadening your scope every time, then you will eventually have a comprehensive list of what impacts your business has on the

environment, so you can look at sustainable processes or off-setting. Additionally, if you have the money, you can also reach out to consultants who would happily help you also!

ZGSC: What are the first steps a company should take when beginning their sustainability journey?

CM: If you are a small company, then you can start small. As I mentioned just identifying areas where you have an impact and do what you can. Step-by-step you will slowly move to a more sustainable business. There are many steps where simple low-cost options will make small improvements, moving to using less paper in your workplace if you have the capacity to move more digital. Or, purchasing paper that is FSC certified, there will be a label on anything that is FSC certified so you can make more sustainable purchases of items. Essentially, taking the time to review your business and making a business plan of commitment to sustainability, whether you start small or big. You may identify areas where you can save money or make innovations to create a new product from waste material.

ZGSC: How can businesses engage and educate their employees to foster a culture of sustainability?

CM: When it comes to the process of implementing sustainable processes, and this is where you will often find difficulties. It is important to take a moment and explain to employees. Tell them why the business is making the change, take the time to explain the difference it will make in normal processes and the impact it will have on the environment. You can even engage NGOs and charities for materials or educational talks in your business.

This isn't just to help implement sustainable practice into your business but cascades a knowledge and understanding of environmental sustainability to your employees who could then take that understanding to their lives outside of work. You never know what difference it might make.

ZGSC: How can small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) implement sustainable practices without a large budget? How would you balance short-term costs with long-term benefits in this transition?

CM: As an SME Mupapa Wood has also been through this problem. There are so many things you may want to do but don't have the budget to achieve. But that is a good thing, it means you have the ambitions to commit to changes in your business in the interests of sustainability.

If you are faced with this, then identify what you can do with what you have, you don't have to over stretch yourself. No matter what that is, it is still a sign of your intentions, and you should report on this. Take the time to write down everything you do, and the larger goals that you wish to achieve when you have the budget for it. This report can then be taken to institutions and agencies that are looking to fund SMEs in achieving sustainable practices, they will see that even with



a small budget you have still managed to do "X" amount of change but will see the commitment that gives them confidence in potentially giving funding. Even minor changes in a business, multiplied by thousands of businesses, makes a substantial difference, and can be a voice for change.

ZGSC: What role would technology, innovation, and data play in your approach to sustainability?

CM: At Mupapa Wood we are implementing technology to better monitor and evaluate our processes. Technology can help bring more comprehensive data that allows you to make more informed decisions, such as showing where operational losses are causing more material to be used than normal. Which with wood has a greater impact on the environment as you are using more trees than is needed to make the product.

This data gives you a way to monitor and report on operational efficiencies, which can be used to show how sustainable your company is. Additionally, with innovative technologies and it is becoming easier to track your carbon emissions and environmental impact, so you can make business models and projects to off-set or reduce that impact.

ZGSC: Could you provide an example of how Mupapa successfully transitioned to sustainable practices and how it impacted your business?

CM: The transition to sustainable practices is a continuous process, but one step we are making is in waste management. Identifying what waste materials, we have such as off-cuts and sawdust, we stopped seeing them as waste and started finding a way to re-introduce them into the production line or finding new uses for them. Especially in the wood industry, the less waste you have means the less environmental impact you have. A high waste percentage from low operational efficiencies means you will be consuming more than needed, increasing your expenditure, and lowering your profits.

Mupapa Wood only works with licensed and trusted wood suppliers that have proper permits from the forestry department. This increases the trust in processes of procurement, and only gives business to legal suppliers. However, Mupapa Wood is looking to move to truly certified sustain-



able timber of which there is only one supplier at the moment in Zambia, we have begun this process and getting even our workshop certified to this standard, to bring one of the only truly sustainable Zambian wooded products to the market and to export.

ZGSC: Where can businesses research sustainability initiatives that could benefit them?

CM: It may depend on your business but a simple place to start is the internet, it can give you some ideas of what other businesses are doing and how you may be able to do something similar in your business. Additionally, if you aren't familiar with how exactly environmental changes affect the climate then there are plenty of online classes, videos, and workshops that you can join to increase your understanding.

If you are a large business, then you can also look to Zambian SMEs as many small businesses are producing innovative ways of making products and processes that are seriously impressive and unique in their environmental approaches. These businesses might be interested in partnering, the social aspect of sustainability is key as we raise each other up then everyone will start to benefit.