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LEADING AN AMERICAN MANUFACTURING RENAISSANCE



**Inc.**

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## How Sustainability Works In the Real World

I run a manufacturing company that's also sustainable--and make money doing it.



Courtesy of TruckPR

Earth Day is coming, and that means that sustainability will be mentioned a lot in the next few days. Bring up "manufacturing" in that context and people are more likely to imagine belching smokestacks than our big, blue marble floating in space. But sustainable manufacturing is very much a real concept and an important part of the environmental discussion.

Manufacturing and sustainability shouldn't be mutually exclusive. In fact, the concepts depend on one another.

A common illustration of sustainability shows three interlocking discs labeled as "social," "environmental" and "economic." Sometimes, they're marked as "people," "planet" and "profit." The circles are always the same size. One is just as vital in the equation as the other. That's the philosophy we apply to our manufacturing.

### What Is Sustainable Manufacturing?

Here are three different definitions. What they all have in common is a commitment to the world and the people living in it.

The United Nations defines sustainable manufacturing as meeting "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The U.S. Department of Commerce defines it as "the creation of manufactured products that use processes that are non-polluting, conserve energy and natural resources, and are economically sound and safe for employees, communities and consumers."

The National Council for Advanced Manufacturing (NACFAM) says it is about "financial profitability, social equity and environmental integrity."

## **You Need Profits**

Let's not forget about profits. If a business isn't profitable, it can't last and it certainly is not sustainable. The ability to provide opportunity and jobs is the most direct path to social equity.

I've seen that firsthand. When I purchased Marlin Steel in 1998, employees worked physically grueling jobs in a workplace without automation, lacked health care coverage, and made minimum wage. I was the only person at the plant who owned a car. Now, employees have health insurance, retirement plans, and performance bonuses. And there's jockeying for a parking space near the factory each morning because all can afford a car.

In a city with too many unemployed steel workers, we hire workers for a steel business. That's sustainability. We also hire local vendors so we help sustain the urban neighborhood around us where household incomes average half as much as in our state as a whole. In fact, nationally, manufacturing salaries average \$74,000 a year. Manufacturing has a greater impact on social equity by nature of the skills it employs and where it typically locates than other types of employers.

We wholly use recycled steel to make industrial material-handling containers. We recycle all our excess material. And we minimize waste through a devotion to lean manufacturing. But if people only considered those practices in assessing how sustainable we are, they'd be missing the other essential parts of the equation. A focus on sustainability must be pro-world--but it also must be real world.

<http://www.inc.com/drew-greenblatt/how-sustainability-works-in-the-real-world.html>



***Drew Greenblatt** is the president of **Marlin Steel**, a U.S.-based manufacturer of wire baskets and sheet-metal fabrications. Marlin has grown 25% over the past three years and has a record of 1,422 days without a safety problem.*

<http://www.inc.com/drew-greenblatt/true-cost-of-bureaucracy.html>

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