

BOOK REVIEW

‘Sustainable Logistics and Supply Chain Management’

Authors: David B. Grant, Alexander Trautrim, Chee Yew Wong (2013)
London, Kogan Page ISBN 978 0 7494 6866 8

The sub-title of this book is: ‘Principles and Practices for Sustainable Operations and Management’. I like long titles and sub-titles which tell you what is inside, rather than mystery titles invented by advertising agencies. Sustainability is a world-wide problem to counter a world-wide threat, the greatest threat ever to confront we frail humans and our wounded Earth. Appropriately, the authors are an international bunch of renowned supply chain experts (although all based in England at the time of writing).

They set the scene by listing the forces which have developed the expertise of SCM: globalisation, relationships outsourcing, technology, and lean v agile. These all contribute to increased standards of living in many countries, but have been detrimental to the natural environment: depletion of our natural resources, increase of waste and, of course, highly damaging emission of carbon dioxide gas into the ozone layer. Our economies are unsustainable. We need to act to limit the damage, by improvements along the length of our supply chains: supplies and production, and the inefficient movement and storage of goods.

The authors focus on three issues: reverse logistics, CO₂ emissions, and the greening of supply chains. Reverse logistics must stop the wasteful one-way flow of goods, through return networks, and recycling of products. To reduce emissions of CO₂ we must improve our use of transport and storage, which both use energy which itself produces CO₂ (the estimate is that transport uses 6% of the total CO₂ produced by humans).

For the greening of logistical activities and supply chains, the authors cite the World Economic Forum of 2009 which laid collective responsibility on three groups: logistics and transport service providers; shippers and buyers; governments and non-government policy makers. The Forum provided specific recommendations for these three groups, described in the book.

The three book authors design a sustainable framework diagram – a very useful model - which has four inner linked factors (Product Development, Downstream Customers, Internal Operations, and Upstream suppliers), and four outer quadrants (competitive environment, market environment, internal environment, and regulatory environment) within whose demands the sustainable practices must operate.

I find that diagrams such as these are so helpful. My brain loves the condensed simplicity, which increases my understanding of the underlying complexity. Indeed the design of the whole book is very user-helpful, with tables, boxed examples from successful firms, graphs, lists, matrices, bar-charts, pie-charts, flow-charts, and what they intriguingly call a 'radar chart' (new to me). At the end of every chapter is a useful summary, and a first reading would benefit by simply reading these for a rich foretaste of the detailed contents.

This is definitely not an academic book (although written by brilliant academics, with 14 pages of references, and a five-page index) but it now finds a place in my supply-chain classes. It is really a handbook, a do-it-yourself guide for supply chain managers, clearly explained, and not avoiding the problems of implementation. As the authors remind us, the actions needed are not cost-free

The book has chapters on transport, warehousing, production, procurement, and reverse logistics, with a penultimate chapter on risk, corporate social responsibility and ethics. Surprisingly, the final chapter is corporate strategy, whereas it is the convention to put this first, but it now becomes obvious that a firm cannot decide its strategy until it knows the available range of sustainability tactics.

If you want a book to read like a romantic novel, turn aside. This is heavy going because the multitude of things which need to be done, if we and our planet home hope to survive to 2050, are tough challenges. Not nearly as tough as if we let our extinction happen. I hope that we are not too late.

The Stock Exchange of Thailand directors must have read this book. If not, they should, because they have just launched a training programme for 31 Thai firms on sustainability as the key to successful business.

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