

THE LEVERAGE OF A SMALL DESIGNER GROUP: DESIGNWORKS

A \$15 MILLION WHOLLY OWNED SUBSIDIARY of BMW Group, Designworks USA provides design and engineering services both to BMW Group and to external clients. Located just outside Los Angeles, CA, its 80 employees focus on designing vehicles and a wide array of consumer products.

Prompted by the BMW Group, Designworks USA began developing a sustainability management system (SMS) in 1999, recognising that designers are uniquely positioned to influence the environmental, social and economic impacts of products. Working with the BMW Group's corporate staff and with WSP Environmental, a London-based consultancy, Designworks USA developed an SMS framework that incorporates the 'triple bottom line' sustainability concept developed by UK consultant John Elkington. A sustainability policy was developed that includes commitments to continuous improvement of environmental, economic, social and ethical performance. It also dedicates the firm to encouraging its suppliers, contractors and clients to implement similar practices. Each department developed comprehensive lists of the environmental, social and economic aspects and impacts associated with its activities and then created action plans to address the high-priority issues. Action plans included objectives, targets and deadlines. The SMS is monitored through a system of periodic internal audits and external certifications.

Many features of the Designworks USA SMS support the principles of the Global Compact. By requiring each department to identify and prioritise its environmental aspects and impacts and to develop objectives and targets for prioritised aspects, this process represents the 'precautionary approach to environmental challenges' advocated by the Global Compact. In addition, the firm's efforts to minimise its on-site environmental impacts and to work with clients and suppliers to reduce their environmental impacts support the Compact's call to 'promote greater environmental responsibility'. The efforts of the purchasing and operations departments of Designworks USA to reduce the company's environmental impacts have led them to request contractors and suppliers to recommend environmentally superior technologies, which serves to 'encourage the development and diffusion of environmentally friendly technologies', a Global Compact principle.

Beyond these environmental issues, Designworks USA is addressing some of the Global Compact's human rights and labour principles. For example, it is reviewing its promotion, hiring and performance practices to facilitate gender and racial equity, which serves to 'eliminate discrimination in respect of employment and occupation'. In addition, it has initiated efforts to better understand its suppliers' practices in relation to child and forced labour. In

analysing its potential social aspects, the purchasing department considered its suppliers' possible use of child and forced labour to be a significant aspect. As such, the department developed a questionnaire to screen existing and potential suppliers. This questionnaire included issues on child and forced labour as well as other social and environmental criteria. The firm's top 100 suppliers have already been sent and responded to the questionnaire, and all other existing and new suppliers are in the process of responding.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Designworks USA website: www.designworksusa.com

See also:

M.W. Toffel, N. Hill and K.A. McElhaney, 'Developing a Management Systems Approach to Sustainability at BMW Group', *Corporate Environmental Strategy: International Journal of Corporate Sustainability* 10.2 (2003): 29-39

M.W. Toffel, N. Hill and K.A. McElhaney, 'BMW Group's Sustainability Management System: Preliminary Results, Ongoing Challenges and the UN Global Compact', *Corporate Environmental Strategy: International Journal of Corporate Sustainability* 10.3 (2003): 51-61