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Sustainability in business is no longer just a buzzword. It's now a necessity across all industries and African businesses need to keep up. In fact, sustainability in business is crucial for Africa because the continent is plagued by poverty, food insecurity and slow economic growth – factors that will likely worsen if we don't embrace sustainable development.

But what does sustainability in business mean and why is it important?

Sustainability in Business: Beyond Environmental Protection

While many businesses tend to adopt environmentally friendly practices, sustainability in business goes beyond the environment. It's about creating long-term value by considering a business' impact on the environment, on society and the economy.

A sustainable business aims to positively impact at least one of these areas, thereby helping address some of the most pressing problems in the world.

Unfortunately, for a considerable number of businesses, sustainability is put on the backburner. This is because there's often a misconception that sustainability erodes profits. However, sustainability in business has actually been shown to be beneficial for saving costs and increasing the bottom line.

Let's have a look at the benefits of sustainability in business in detail:

1. Cost savings and more profitability

Cutting costs and increasing profitability may seem difficult for sustainability-focused businesses since sustainability is often perceived as costly, and rightly so, for the materials used to make sustainable products are usually more expensive to produce and process.

However, studies have shown that sustainable companies are also usually the most profitable. This is especially true in this age where consumers are increasingly aware of responsible production and consumption.

One survey conducted by McKinsey highlighted how, unlike their counterparts without sustainable practices, businesses with sustainable practices improved their operational efficiency and productivity and cut costs in the long term.

For example, cutting out waste, streamlining operations, improving employee welfare and conserving resources all help lower operating costs. Some governments also provide incentives and tax benefits for businesses that invest in sustainable practices.

2. Improved reputation

As the appetite for sustainable practices, products and services grows, businesses that embrace sustainability stand to improve their reputation. A good reputation will go a long way in increasing brand loyalty – an important factor for increasing profitability.

3. Compliance

Compliance has become a big part of business, particularly when it comes to environmental issues. Governments are stepping up their efforts to improve sustainability, especially in light of global initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Having a sustainable business puts you in a good position to adapt to the evolving compliance landscape while also keeping up with consumer demands and expectations.

4. A distinct business edge

Being the business that does good, rather than the one that only focuses on profitability, can give you a competitive edge in the business world.

In addition to the obvious economic gain, pursuing a good purpose in your business can also help you attract the best talent and investors. More employees are interested in purpose-driven businesses and for an increasing number of investors, sustainability is now at the top of the investment agenda.

Getting Started with Sustaining Business Sustainably

The benefits of sustainability in business are evident, but implementing sustainable practices is not always straightforward. A lot of factors come into play including the industry your business is in and the availability of resources for implementing sustainable business strategies.

Furthermore, challenges such as unengaged employees and the lack of an action plan can also make it hard to become sustainable.

The following are some ways to get started with building sustainable business practices.

1. Instead of incurring high upfront costs, adopt a sustainability model that works with the resources you have. For example, your business can procure raw materials from local businesses, use recycled materials, build a sustainable corporate social responsibility program, and spread your sustainability efforts to your customers and suppliers.

You will be able to afford more extensive changes as you continue to cut costs in the long term.

2. Encourage employees to follow simple sustainable practices. Actions as simple as recycling and opting for reusable office supplies can cultivate the right sustainability culture.
3. No matter the stage of your sustainability efforts, always have a plan and specific, measurable objectives. That way, you can see the effectiveness of your efforts and where action is required.
4. Think about cooperative action. On your own, making a meaningful change can be hard, but with other players, it can be easier. Collaborating with other purpose-driven companies working to achieve sustainable practices can have a significant impact and lead to more success.
5. Do what works for your business. Don't spend too much time looking at what other businesses are doing. Instead, focus on what makes sense for your organisation and your unique business position.

Despite how you get started, it's important never to view sustainability as a cost to the business. Sustainability is an investment and it should be viewed as such.

It's no longer business as usual

Sustainability is becoming a crucial element of business success. Consumers and investors alike are 'woke' and they are expecting businesses to be proactive in achieving sustainability. Organisations with no interest in this new norm risk losing out, so merging business and sustainability makes sense.

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