

6 sustainability terms to kick-start a new impact job in 2015

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Dear Shannon is a career advice column for sustainability professionals and wanna-be professionals. If you have a question for Shannon, send it to shannon@walkoflifeconsulting.com.

Dear Shannon,

I've been away from my role in CSR for the last two years after an extended maternity leave. I took the opportunity to switch off completely and avoided all work-related news, research and social media. It was great at the time but now I'm returning to work and want to get my sustainability vocabulary back up to speed. Things move so fast in this sector and I'm too worn out keeping up with a toddler to do the research — can you help me cheat?

— Susan in Washington, D.C.

Dear Susan,

A refresher course in sustainability lingo is a great way to kick-start your re-entry into the workplace. Whether you're returning to work after an extended break or trying to launch a career change into sustainability, it's important to be able to demonstrate an understanding of current trends, their origins, controversies and applications by speaking the right language. So to help you cheat your way to a cutting-edge sustainability vocabulary, here are six revamped and refreshed key concepts, words and phrases that'll be on the industry's lips in 2015.

1. Circular economy

You've surely heard of cradle-to-grave thinking. The concept of the circular economy takes this to a new level with cradle-to-cradle thinking. As the Ellen MacArthur Foundation succinctly puts it, "it's an economy that's regenerative by design." In other words, a system that turns waste streams into resources that can be mined for value.

As a sustainability professional, this means designing, engineering, financing, project managing and communicating a whole new way of thinking about trash. As Nick Liddell pointed out [on the Huffington Post](#), "Imagine knowing the gold in your wedding ring used to be someone's tooth. Our concept of old and new will need to evolve." It's our job to make that happen.

If you're hoping to advance your sustainability career in 2015, you also can apply the principles of the circular economy to your career history. All those jobs and volunteering stints you thought were a waste of time? It's time to extract some value. Think clearly about how you can repackage unsexy roles for a hot new job — in terms of achievements, challenges and learning curves — and sell them back to prospective employers for maximum career impact.

2. Sustainable development

In 2014 the debate on sustainable development was brought face to face with the real world and all its complex, messy, interconnected challenges through the forthcoming [Sustainable Development Goals](#) — the direct descendants of the Millennium Development Goals. Crucially for our purposes, the SDGs offer a functional modern definition of the old, tired and somewhat confused concept of sustainable development by breaking it down into its working parts.

These include familiar goals of reducing poverty and hunger, improving maternal health, increasing access to education and addressing gender equality. But this time they also cover ambitious new ground with targets for domestic and global inequality, affordable energy, safer cities, sustainable consumption and production, peaceful communities and climate change. The latter undoubtedly will link up with the 2015 Paris climate talks.

Compared to their predecessors, the SDGs take a far more holistic sweep of 21st-century challenges and their solutions, offering a new framework for sustainable development that will be crucial to the work of practitioners in the sustainability, international development, environment, business, CSR and impact sectors.

So make sure you're up to speed. Note that they're not entirely without controversy — criticisms have emerged around the lack of focus on rural sustainability and land rights, and a deeper debate is likely to emerge in 2015 as we move into the implementation phase.

3. Systems thinking

Systems thinking has its intellectual roots in the field of system dynamics. It was developed as a new way of testing ideas about social systems by focusing on the whole rather than individual parts. Its core premise is that, like the web of life, everything is connected and the study of those connections and interactions can offer new and different conclusions. If you consider yourself to be a holistic thinker who integrates multiple stakeholders, multiple ideas, multiple impact areas into one core initiative, you may in fact be a systems thinker.

It's frequently touted as a useful tool for framing and responding to modern challenges at the global and business levels. Sustainability-for-business experts such as [Alan AtKisson](#) (founder of the [ISIS Sustainability Compass Methodology](#)) and [Jo Confino](#) (editorial director at the Guardian's Sustainable Business pages) are big fans, and sustainability management models such as [The Natural Step](#) acknowledge its importance.

It's a hot term with big potential, but it's complicated, too. Thankfully, in 2014 systems thinking got a communications makeover. This video from [BEE Environmental Communications](#) did for systems thinking what Annie Leonard's "Story of Stuff" did for the circular economy — and all through the medium of love.

As we move towards the Paris climate talks in December and the launch of the SDGs in 2015, systems thinking is sure to be on everyone's agenda, so think about how you can develop or use your own skills as a systems thinker to impress at an interview or secure a promotion in your current role.

4. Resilience

No longer the sole domain of therapists, the notion of resilience has grown as a key concept in business, sociology and ecology. It has major implications for sustainable development. In 2014 the term took on a new face thanks to an initiative called [100 Resilient Cities](#), pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation. By taking a systems-thinking perspective on urban challenges, 100RC frames resilience as the solution to shocks such as earthquakes, fires and floods, and stresses such as high unemployment, inadequate public transport, endemic violence or chronic food/water shortages.

At the city scale, 100RC says resilience can be viewed in four dimensions: health and well-being, economy and society, leadership and strategy and infrastructure and environment. As urban sustainability comes under focus through the aforementioned SDGs, city resilience is likely to become a major piece in the puzzle.

Being resilient in the workplace also can help you overcome challenges as a practitioner. It's an important trait or characteristic for jobseekers to demonstrate in CVs and at interviews. Oftentimes, the biggest hurdle in achieving measurable impact is the length of time it takes to come to fruition given the diverse stakeholders that have to get on board and the necessity of embedding sustainability concepts or initiatives across an entire business. Change management, which is what most sustainability initiatives are at their core, requires personal resilience as well as social and environmental.

5. Creating shared value

The term creating shared value (CSV) was coined in 2005 by Nestlé employee Niels Christiansen, who used it to crystallize the company's core corporate principle of creating long-term value for all stakeholders, and was later expanded and [popularized by Michael Porter](#).

In recent years, the term faced [growing controversy](#) in the media, where it was accused of stepping away from the integrity of its original meaning and succumbing to ravages of greenwashing. Critics claimed that the CSV agenda had failed in its aim to drive the kind of fundamental changes that

would stop business winning out over nature. Instead, it had been applied too often to individual projects that offered easy win-win solutions that benefited the business while making it look good.

In 2014, the idea's original architect responded to this by setting out [his vision for creating shared value within a company](#). In it, Christiansen asked, "What would it take to redirect the popular understanding of CSV back to a basic business principle, applicable to all the company's activities and employees?"

His answer focuses on practical action for CSR and sustainability practitioners trying to realize systemic change in business through embedding value throughout the chain, and in doing so offers a new and valuable perspective on the term that can help you respond to the "How would you approach your first 100 days in this job?" question at your next interview.

6. Disruptive innovation

Most of my career-coaching clients claim to be amazing "problem solvers" or "solutions orientated." However, the ones getting on the A list with recruiters are the ones who have something tangible they can share that is truly innovative, proven in an [accomplishment statement](#).

In our digital age, the concept of disruptive innovation is often linked to technological innovation — usually those businesses you come across and wonder, "Why didn't I think of that?" such as Uber, Airbnb or Zipcar. You may ask how they thought they could compete or get by with that new business model.

Well, these entrepreneurs started out wearing their systems-thinking hats and combining this with a circular economy perspective to commercialize a business concept that, at its heart, is all about sustainability and positive environmental and social impact.

So there you have it, a glossary of key sustainability terms and phrases to set you up for the new year or a new impact job. I hope they inspire you to dig deeper into current trends and give you the confidence to speak up in the office or at an interview.

To keep up with the trends, sign up with some news feeds (such as GreenBiz, CSRWire and Triple Pundit) or follow a few select thought leaders (I love [@volansjohn](#), [@ellenmacarthur](#), [@jonathonporritt](#), [@makower](#)) that will keep you informed without overwhelming you.