

ASSESSING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF YOUR SUPPLY BASE – PART 2 IN-PERSON ASSESSMENT

June 2024

Sustainable Procurement

Jonathan O'Brien, CEO of [Positive Purchasing](#), author, and global procurement thought leader, outlines his effective approach to assessing the current levels of sustainability within your supply base, then prioritizing where and how to focus your resources to make the greatest and most cost effective positive impact.

Having looked at using remote assessments in Part 1, Jonathan now examines how to get up close and personal in Part 2. He fully explains all aspects of supply base assessment in his definitive work on this fast-evolving subject, [Sustainable Procurement](#).

REMEMBER THE “GAP”?

In Part 1 we talked about the gap between where we are and where we want to be in our plan to deliver greater sustainability within our own business, and as far as possible along our supply chain. We also explored how to use remote assessment methods to identify and evaluate this gap.

We looked at using tools like SSTP, PESTLE and Hot Spot Analysis to create a Hit List of those suppliers representing the best opportunity to realize some early wins and deliver maximum sustainability impact for our available budget.

(If you are not familiar with this approach or want to see what you may have missed, take 10 minutes to read Part 1 then nip back here and read on - just click [here](#)).

For those initiatives with the potential to deliver the greatest positive sustainability impact and where remote methods are either unavailable or have proven less effective, we need to get boots-on-the-ground and make an in-person assessment.

PREPARATION IS KEY

As the costs and time commitment for in-person assessments are much greater, it is important to ensure we make the best use of the time spent on the ground.

The background research to identify a particular supplier for inclusion in your Hit List should have indicated the type of sustainability initiative required.

Determine what additional information you need to be able to finalize your project plan and, where appropriate, how you are going to measure the results and how you can establish a baseline reading.

THIRD PARTY INFORMATION SOURCES

Other than the target supplier team, there may be external sources too who can either provide an informed opinion of a range of aspects before you make your site visit, or help verify supplier claims post visit.

These may include:

- Industry bodies
- Any agents that work for your organization
- Friendly and informed customers in the same country or region as the supplier
- Competitive suppliers from the same location

These resources can be a good source of information or provide an informed second opinion.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

The better you plan your trip, the more effective the result will be. Your initial research will have indicated what you need to discover or verify, so you will have a detailed list.

Try and use as many credible independent data sources as you can for either a richer background picture, or to verify what you learn from your supplier. This will not only give you deeper data but will also demonstrate to your hosts that you are well informed and mean business.

Ensure that your supplier has a clear understanding of the purpose of your visit, specifically what information you need and how you need to verify it. Dialogue beforehand can gain information that can be verified whilst you are on location. Ideally if you get answers to all your questions before you go, all you need to do is confirm it is all true!

PRE-TRIP COMMUNICATION

Good, clear pre-trip communication can ensure the most effective use of your time in country and the best quality of data acquired. To facilitate this, try to get the following in place before travelling:

1. Your list of information required/questions that need answering or aspects that need to be verified.
2. Locations you want to view and the information you need at each.
3. Any third parties you need to meet, e.g. upstream suppliers, union or workforce representatives or key members of the supplier team.
4. The required evidence of processes or practices that cannot be viewed.
5. Evidence of compliance with international sustainability standards or personnel practices or protocols.
6. Any other aspects that need to be evidenced or proven.

Ensure you plan and pre-arrange a wash-up meeting with your host(s) before you leave to provide them with any appropriate feedback.

THE “A B C” APPROACH

Many suppliers are totally trustworthy, honest, and will be completely transparent in their dealings with you. However, there may be those with a vested interest to deceive or at least muddy the waters regarding the information you require.

In my book, [Sustainable Procurement](#), I have included a section entitled “We have Been Expecting You Mr Bond!” Now, I am not suggesting your supplier lives in a secret underground lair where they incessantly stroke a fluffy white, diamond collared cat. What I am saying is that you may need to be part detective and just a little bit of a spy to get the information you need.

In my early days as a buyer conducting site visits, I got some good advice from a colleague with many years of site visits under their belt. “Remember A B C” they told me. **A**ssume nothing. **B**elieve Nothing. **C**onfirm everything.” I pass this on to you in the same spirit!

AND DON'T FORGET THE “D”

We have already looked at how to set up your visit by sharing a list of what you need to understand, see and verify. Ideally, your supplier host(s) will have designed and shared an itinerary that facilitates this. If there are aspects that are not covered, or you need to see and understand additional areas or processes that arise from earlier discoveries, make sure you communicate this early and ensure arrangements are made to give you what you need.

In fact, I'll add a “D” into the mix – be politely but firmly *Demanding*.

BEFORE YOU DEPART

I previously mentioned a pre departure wash-up meeting where you can share learnings and any concerns. This gives your hosts an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings or misconceptions and to share any remedial plans they may have. It also provides an opportunity to have a last shot at acquiring any outstanding information.

Make sure you leave your hosts with a clear understanding of what happens next; what you will do, if you require anything further from them, and by when it is required. Promptly confirm this in writing on your return.

POST-TRIP ANALYSIS

Hopefully you will have gathered and verified all the data you need during your trip. I always collated and reviewed this as soon as I could on my return while it was fresh in my mind. If there is anything you still need to discover, or if analysis of what you have learned has given rise to additional questions, formulate a way to get this information and act on it without delay.

Once you have finalized your analysis, send a summary confirmation to your supplier together with a request for any further information that you need.

Once the assessment is concluded, we can evaluate the gap between the supplier’s current situation and what is needed to drive progress towards our sustainability target. A project plan can then be formulated and a dialogue commenced with the supplier.

This insight article is adapted from [Sustainable Procurement: A Practical Guide to Corporate Social Responsibility in the Supply Chain](#) by Jonathan O'Brien © 2023 and reproduced by permission of Kogan Page Ltd.

[Jonathan O'Brien](#), CEO of [Positive Purchasing](#), is a leading expert on procurement and sustainability and works with global blue-chip organizations to help transform their purchasing capability.

THE PROCUREMENT SHOW

If you enjoyed this insight, why not check out an episode of my podcast? Procurement professionals discuss the big issues facing our industry - from AI to driving Social Value and getting better results when negotiating in a landscape of ever-increasing prices. So grab a brew and listen [here](#).