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Book review: ESG: The Insights You Need from Harvard Business Review (HBR Insights Series)

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Navigating how an organisation can effectively execute sustainability strategies is challenging, especially when leading global players' policies and reporting are in a constant flux. This is particularly evident considering the EU's Omnibus proposals and the recent anti-ESG backlash in the United States. It might even pose the question as to whether an effective sustainability and ESG strategy is even relevant, nay, too 'woke'?

Harvard Business Review's (HBR) ESG Insights, published in 2024, reminds us that sustainability and ESG is certainly not. As the report states, "Companies can't sit on the sidelines anymore because, well, there are no sidelines. In a transparent world, your silence will speak volumes." Roughly 70% to 90% of respondents in the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer said they "expect CEOs to take a public stand on issues" such as climate change, discrimination, and the wealth gap. These are choppy waters to navigate. But for your stakeholders, your consistency becomes valuable."

ESG: A marathon, not a sprint

In this ever-evolving space of ESG and sustainability, companies need to remember that doing business well is a constant ESG marathon, not a sprint – or, for some, a vanishing act. Focusing on the basics of long-term ESG amid the noise is what will keep you in the race. This is one of the many aspects I enjoyed from HBR's ESG insights.

The review is divided into three key sections: "Building an ESG strategy", "Living into ESG" and "Managing social responsibility". These sections and themes are reminders of what good, basic ESG strategies and components for businesses can look like. Chapters within these three sections are short, digestible reads referencing case studies of businesses facing common ESG challenges today. Each chapter is a short article by a different author, including writings and learnings from leading thinkers, professors and business leaders across different industries.

I also appreciated the discussions around less-discussed opportunities for businesses, such as the importance of aligning joint ventures with ESG goals and exploring how ESG partnerships with non-profits can meaningfully benefit corporates.

Two chapters that I found particularly insightful covered the need for responsible computing and IT practices, as well as the importance of robust governance structures within AI companies like OpenAI, whose fiduciary duty, as referenced in their charter, is to humanity – not boards and shareholders. The company's governance structure allowed its board to be easily overruled when attempting to oust one of the organisation's cofounders and CEO.

Additionally, themes such as responsible and safe data storage, computing ecosystems, and the benefits of having efficient function points in coding were clearly explained (an advantage for me as an IT layman) within the broader ESG themes of socially responsible data. These chapters were topical for an industry developing at an alarmingly rapid pace with new structures and challenges, but equally relevant to most companies aiming to improve efficiency through technology strategies and enhancements.

Sharing ESG knowledge is beneficial for all stakeholders

The best part of this read is that each short chapter provides a few “takeaways” for you to remember. They are concise learnings, reminders and “nuggets” of how readers can either apply these to their businesses or, in the case of more nascent developments such as AI, highlight areas of growing importance on which to focus.

Whether you're a sustainability veteran or a professional seeking to understand and apply core sustainability principles at your organisation, the insights from this HBR are relevant to modern ESG challenges and concise and practical enough to bring ESG learnings back “home”. Knowledge sharing from different organisations and leaders is beneficial for anyone tackling a daunting space such as ESG, and this HBR has achieved exactly that.

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