

Professional Development for Local Government Sustainability Directors

The path for individual professional development in the urban sustainability field isn't clear. In 2011, a group of USDN members created a robust, and still relevant, toolkit.

In 2011, a group of Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) members explored what professional development looks like for local government sustainability directors. The result is (1) a toolkit that explores how to move towards institutionalizing sustainability in local governing structures, (2) a self-assessment tool, and (3) a sample job description for sustainability directors. Now, as we enter 2016, 76% of USDN's founding members have left their jobs as sustainability directors. Second and third generation sustainability directors are now building change in their communities, and the lessons learned in the 2011 USDN Professional Development Toolkit are increasingly important. This article explores the toolkit resources and gives interested supporters a glimpse into what it takes to create change from the inside out.

The full document can be downloaded from the [Innovation Products](#) database at USDN.org. The Professional Development Toolkit can be found [here](#). The zip file includes:

- Evolution of a Sustainability Office Checklist
- A Self-Assessment Tool
- Sample Sustainability Director Job Description

Evolution of a Sustainability Office Checklist

This checklist is a framework to help sustainability directors make sense of the evolution and continuum of institutionalizing sustainability. Four functions of a sustainability office and four phases of evolution frame this tool. Activities range from elected officials' creation of sustainability functions and positions and obtaining funding for that work to developing community support and cultivating public expectations that sustainability initiatives will be sustained and expanded.

The Four Functions of a Sustainability Office

1. *Planning Government's Sustainability Initiatives*: Develop vision, definition, cases, goals for sustainability, and the role of local government. Develop initiatives, plans, and budgets – within departments and across governments. Establish performance metrics, scoreboards, and progress reporting processes. Study other cities' sustainability efforts. Coordinate sustainability planning and goals across departments.
2. *Developing a Government Culture of Sustainability*: Engage employees in thinking and caring about sustainability and trying new behaviors. Conduct internal communications and education to promote a culture of sustainability. Embed sustainability goals and initiatives in employees' position descriptions and performance evaluations.

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The Four Functions of a Sustainability Office (cont'd)

3. *Developing Community Support and Action*: Communicate with public and media about the sustainability vision and initial initiatives. Develop website(s) with resources for sustainability actions. Partner with civic organizations to undertake community visioning processes and community-based sustainability education. Engage stakeholders and constituencies in developing plans and partnering with government on external initiatives. Engage leaders of communities in coordinating and collaborating. Develop a community-wide sustainability scoreboard. Support public outreach/education to increase community awareness of benefits.
4. *Building Government's Structures for Sustainability*: Create sustainability functions with staff and short-term funding. Build connections with outside expertise and peers in other cities. Fundraise to support budget and staffing for sustainability initiative development. Create technical advisory groups. Create incentives (rewards, sanctions) for departments and agencies to achieve goals. Adopt a performance scoreboard for publicizing and monitoring. Create a government-wide sustainability knowledge creation and innovation function. Use "horizontal coordination" among departments to achieve shared goals.

Sustainability Director Self-Assessment Tool

The self-assessment tool is a spreadsheet that builds on a time management framework originally developed by Dr. Steven Covey, author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. This tool focuses on the professional development opportunities that will have the most impact for sustainability directors as they define and evolve their role in City Hall. For each skill and knowledge area, the tool requires three inputs: 1) existing ability; 2) the importance of that skill or knowledge area to the position; and 3) the level of urgency for professional development in that skill or knowledge area. Based on those three factors, the tool generates a menu of recommended professional development delivery models for each competency. Self-assessors can further prioritize by filtering results based on the three inputs: ability, importance, and urgency.

Sample Sustainability Director Job Description

This job description was developed from a 2011 survey of 82 USDN members. It is not a model job description because there is a high level of local variation in responsibilities and competencies. Instead, it is a standard template that offers composite descriptions. The document includes details on the following areas:

- Variations on job title
- Job definition
- Reporting structure
- Examples of work
- Education requirements
- Experience requirements
- Knowledge and abilities requirements
- Salary range