

On the Right Track

ROB ATKINSON, *lead designer, project manager and sustainability consultant at IA INTERIOR ARCHITECTS*, discusses the big step companies can take to hit their sustainability goals.



During the past couple of years as awareness of the climate emergency has grown, an array of countries, several states in the US and major corporations have started to respond by setting targets to control their CO₂ emissions in line with the latest climate science and the Paris Agreement.

And more operational changes are coming, with over 2000 global companies now undertaking commitments to programs like the Science Based Target Initiative (SBTi), a global body that focuses on large companies and SME's (small and medium sized enterprises), tailoring carbon reduction strategies that encompass everything from real estate to transportation. SBTi's goal is to halve emissions before 2030 and achieve net-zero before 2050, thereby limiting global warming to 1.5°C, a crucial threshold for the future of the planet and its inhabitants.

While larger companies with a presence across multiple countries are leading the charge, organisations of any size can play their part in pivoting towards a low carbon model. With the UK government having already signed up for a zero-carbon economy by 2050, companies that take the first steps in adjusting their business strategies will build both brand and investor confidence.

Likewise, an understanding of how to design and build sustainably is no longer just an optional enhancement for architecture firms offering design services to clients — it is key to providing a competitive advantage. As a global architecture practice, IA Interior Architects recognizes

our industry's responsibility to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions and wants to be one of the first to undertake its own SBTi commitments.

To support sustainability, we are learning how to change some of our practices as well as advise our clients how to do the same. Though the expertise of our Ecos Studio team, comprised of IA Interior Architects and Brightworks Sustainability, we are on a path to accomplish this through a series of measures across our studios which includes working with SBTi.

How does that work? The first stage is for a company to register online, signing a standard commitment letter. Once signed a company has a maximum of 24 months to develop medium and long-term sustainability targets aligned with specific science-based criteria.

Once targets are established, SBTi offers assistance for understanding target requirements and how an organization can best apply them. In addition, SBTi monitors the organization's progress annually, providing expertise and tools to validate the information gathered over time. IA is currently in this phase which means examining current factors like our facilities' energy and waste policies, the commuter patterns of staff, and business travel.

However, we are also setting ambitions for projected initiatives and professional practices yet to be developed, like green leasing agreements for future offices, best practice guidelines to improve circularity, and construction waste management, as well as making sure our specifications prioritize low carbon materials and our supplier agreements meet enhanced sustainability criteria. Indirect emissions and renewable energy targets

are included in our approach. Since the timeframe is five to 10 years, it is important that we not be too constrained by what is currently possible.

Our next step is to submit IA's targets for validation, which involves a process relevant for architecture. Because we will be setting goals for IA with future fulfilment dates, this action is both challenging and exciting. To ensure companies remain on track, the SBTi validation process also considers near-term steps along the path and provides mitigation strategies for operational difficulties that come with business growth.

Most large corporations use their communications platforms to inform stakeholders once SBTi approves their targets. For IA, which is currently working towards that step and employee owned, it will be about communicating the implications to staff and clients and putting measures into practice through changes in technology, software or policy.

Then the hard work will really begin as we monitor the movement towards our targets and disclose emissions savings annually. The idea is to reveal this progress not only through annual reporting, sustainability reports, and across our website, but also through CDP, a not-for-profit charity that runs the global disclosure system for investors, companies, cities, states, and regions. By accessing that network, we can track and benchmark our progress against peer architecture firms, learn how to improve our progress, and identify risks and opportunities that can inform our industry.

For designers whose awareness of sustainability has transformed their approach to our profession, the stakes have never been higher or more exciting.

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