



Managing Your Sustainability

Life Cycle Assessment

Bernie Thomas:

So life cycle assessment is an environmental management technique that can be used to quantify the environmental impact or consequence of the...of a product or service and the way it is delivered in the economy. And fundamentally there can be two types of life cycle assessment. You might want to quantify the environmental impact of a product and examine where in the life cycle the principle impact comes from. Where are the hot spots, if you like, in terms of the environmental impact? Secondly you may have an interest in comparing the product that you are currently delivering with an improved version - you know, a more efficiently produced version or a completely radically different approach, you know. So, for example, a newspaper might just be delivered by a web page from now on rather than a physical paper. So life cycle assessment can look at improving products within the sort of existing production constraints or can look at radical alternatives for the delivery of products or services.

Life cycle assessment techniques have been used by large manufacturers for the last forty or fifty years. In fact, the large manufacturers have been instrumental in developing the life cycle standard and in using the life cycle assessment for the development of their products

I would argue that life cycle assessment is a very effective means of systematically and structurally identifying what the impacts and risks associated with the delivery of your product and service are on the environment. What the social risks are; what the risks perhaps to your brand or your product brand are and in that case it is a very useful technique for identifying those risks and mitigating those impacts.

I take the view, perhaps as an optimist, that it gets used in all decisions in some shape or form. Perhaps not quantitatively – a great big detailed study to examine objectively the difference between X and Y – but is considered within the decision making process. What are the impacts of my product? What are the resources that are likely to be consumed by my product? It gets used by government in practically all the big policy decisions – environmental policy decisions at present. The European Commission are encouraging life cycle thinking and life cycle approaches to understanding the most important environmental policy type decisions.

I guess we've done work to challenge perhaps policy initiatives that have little environmental basis for how they have arisen. For example, we examined a product in which the government wanted to ban a certain substance from being used within the manufacture of that product because it had an impact over here. But we showed that by reducing or eliminating in this case, that chemical being used in its manufacture, it had a greater impact in the life cycle over here and as a consequence the legislation the concept of eliminating this material was actually thrown out because it was shown to – that action would be shown to have a greater environmental consequence further down the life cycle.