



Social Impact Heroes Helping Our Planet: How and Why Jane Abernethy & Humanscale Decided to Change Our World

By Penny Bauder

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As part of my series about “individuals and organizations making an important social impact”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Jane Abernethy.

As Humanscale’s Chief Sustainability Officer, Jane leads the company’s efforts to create a net positive impact through both its products and operations. Collaborating closely with company executives as well as designers and engineers, Jane guides the development process to help create the most sustainable products possible.

An industrial designer by trade, Jane spent over a decade working and leading design teams through the development of new products prior to her role as CSO. Her experience ranges from sporting goods to medical devices to furniture.

Jane often shares dialogue around sustainable product design and manufacturing at a variety of conferences and events globally, including Greenbuild, World Ocean Conference, and more. She recently applied her expertise as a curator for RECKONstruct, the US Pavilion at the XXII Triennale

de Milano International Exhibition: Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival. Jane’s work has also been recognized internationally, including the prestigious Red Dot award and the GB&D Women in Sustainability Leadership Award. Under her leadership, Humanscale has been recognized as the first manufacturer to achieve the complete Living Product Challenge and is a founding member of the Next Wave Initiative.

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Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit. Can you tell us a bit how you grew up?

Growing up we would go camping almost every weekend. For summer vacations, we would do longer canoe trips through northern Saskatchewan in Canada. There it was pristine enough to drink straight from the lakes and we might only find one piece of litter during an entire week as so few people had been through ahead of us. My dad loves new ideas and is always willing to question what people take for granted. My mom is dedicated, pragmatic

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and knows how to get things done. Memories were always more important than things. For Christmas we would often get an experience, instead of something that comes in a box. Family was very important, along with taking care of those around us and eating healthy meals together.

You are currently leading a social impact organization that is making a difference for our planet. Can you tell us a bit about what you and your organization are trying to change in our world today?

I lead the Sustainability department at Humanscale, the leading manufacturer of ergonomic products for work. As I was getting started, I had a lot of conversations with our stakeholders to understand what “sustainability” meant to us. Where we landed can be summed up by saying that less bad is not good enough.

We know that manufacturing can have some negative byproducts, like garbage for example. If we decide that we’re going to reduce how much garbage we send to landfill by 30%, that might sound like a good goal, but it still leaves us sending 70% of waste to landfill. That’s just not going to lead to the world we want. We need to account for 100% of our waste, and then go beyond our own activities to help others reduce their waste, until we’re leaving the world cleaner than we found it. In the case of our Smart Ocean chair, we were able to use someone else’s waste as the raw material to make our product. The Smart Ocean chair is made from almost 2lb of recycled fishing nets that would otherwise be left in the ocean where it would harm marine life.

The bigger picture is probably more exciting than any one example. If we can operate a for-profit business manufacturing goods while we have a net positive impact (leaving the world cleaner and better off than we found it), then we start to change the conversation from environment versus economics to one that shows we don’t have to choose between social or environmental progress and viable businesses in a good economy.

Can you tell us the backstory about what inspired you to originally feel passionate about this cause?

There isn’t really one ‘ah-ha’ moment to point to; it was more like a number of seeds that grew over time:

- I developed a deep connection with nature and appreciated that I got to see remote wilderness growing up.
- It seemed like common sense to me that we would preserve the natural world because this is where we get our resources from. It’s what sustains us. Not

paying attention to this seemed kind of irresponsible, like not managing your finances.

- And “sustaining” people never seemed like the end goal. If all we do is make sure people have enough to not die, that bar is too low. We should aim for a world where people can thrive, and for that we have to expand our view past environmental and start to look at social impacts.

Many of us have ideas, dreams, and passions, but never manifest it. They don’t get up and just do it. But you did. Was there an “Aha Moment” that made you decide that you were actually going to step up and do it? What was that final trigger?

There was a moment like this. It was early on, when my role was only to get our products certified to a sustainability standard. The value of creating a good marketing story around sustainability was clear, but it wasn’t clear to me how much appetite there was to actually change the way we operate. Real and meaningful change is always hard. It often takes investment. And it would take more than one person focused on it, so I would need a team. At that time, I knew my passion for sustainability was shared by our CEO & Founder, Bob King, but I didn’t know how creating a new department and influencing the direction of our company would play out.

I remember one weekend in particular where I was trying to figure out if I should push for my vision for how we could operate. After a lot of thought, I realized that if I didn’t, then I would be part of creating a marketing story about sustainability without a strong basis — aka greenwashing. And I knew I couldn’t do that. So I decided we would push for true sustainability, including some big changes. Working together with Bob, we started making changes one by one. We installed the largest solar power array that we legally could, started using captured rainwater for production, reviewed each ingredient in every product to remove any toxins, and now we’re on our way to having 25 products that leave the world better off (as certified by the Living Product Challenge). Of course, now I know that the sustainability influence is well supported by our entire organization, but at the time it wasn’t clear to me how things would play out.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your department or organization?

When I started the department, I was working out of our headquarters in NYC. After a few years, I moved back to Canada and started working remotely with my team and



the other departments in the headquarters. Before the move, I was worried that I would end up “out of sight, out of mind,” and was concerned that I wouldn’t be able to have those casual conversations in the hallway, which can sometimes be important. But in practice, I have found it gives me the space to get more work done and spend time on the larger vision and strategic plan. My team is very used to working remotely from each other now, and we’ve found a good rhythm to be effective.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson or take away you learned from that?

It’s funny. I haven’t really thought of much as “mistakes.” When I started out, I felt like I was drinking from a firehose. There was so much to learn, and there were situations or projects that would have been easier if I already knew more. That said, I always aim to do my best with what I know at the time, and I’m still learning.

None of us can be successful without some help along the way. Did you have mentors or cheerleaders who helped you to succeed? Can you tell us a story about their influence?

Certainly. To name a few, Lynda Dehn, Greg Norris, Chloe Bendistis, Michele Gerards, and Rochelle Routman have all played a role in shaping my career.

When I was first starting out, I learned a lot from Chloe Bendistis. She had a calm and friendly way to make requests but was clear and firm about the expectations. Under her guidance, I spend an incredible amount of time preparing for meetings. At the end of the meeting, everyone knew what their tasks were, when they were due, and had agreed to them (or we had found a workable compromise). Then we met regularly to make sure everyone was on track. Sustainability projects can have a lot of moving parts and detailed calculations. Some people might be really excited about the project, while others aren’t. Sometimes our projects felt like we were herding cats, but the approach Chloe taught me kept things moving forward.

Are there three things the community, society, or politicians can do to help you address the root of the problem you are trying to solve?

1. Pay attention to what actually makes our lives better. Buying stuff makes us happy for a moment, but that’s fleeting. If we’re looking to be happier, more satisfied, and even healthier, then focusing on relationships seems to work better than buying more.
2. When we purchase products, we should be smarter

consumers. We need to read labels more closely and aim for long lasting products that we love and will take care of. It can be easier on our wallet in the long run, and easier on the environment.

3. Regulations that require businesses to practice better sustainability level the playing field and change whole industries at once, which can bring economies of scale to our challenges.

How would you articulate how a business can become more profitable by being more sustainable and more environmentally conscious? Can you share a story or example?

There are two main ways.

First, the starting point for becoming more sustainable is always to become more efficient. You wouldn’t get an oversized solar power system just to leave equipment running all night when no one is using it. You start by reducing the amount of energy you use by eliminating any waste. This will almost always lead to cost savings.

Second, sustainability efforts may be interesting to clients and customers. It could be that this becomes part of the brand and shapes how the company is seen. It could also lead to customers who are more deeply engaged because they want to support a sustainable company.

What are your “3 things I wish someone told me when I first started” and why. Please share a story or example for each.

Take on very achievable goals and build on each success until you get to ambitious goals.

For example, when we started to address the waste from our factories, our ambitious goal was to reuse/recycle 90% of it. We started with some very achievable smaller projects that got the people who handle waste involved. Once some of the easier projects were done, we could show about a 35% reduction in waste to landfill and we celebrated the team’s success. This got people engaged when things were easier and it shifted people’s reactions from ‘this is confusing and hard’ to ‘we could do that much, so we might be able to figure out the next step’. I’m proud to share that for the past few months all our factories have been reusing or recycling over 90% of their waste.

Be clear and consistent of your ask, reasonable in your expectations, and tenacious in your follow up. Nothing kills motivation like being confused or when things are constantly changing.



Spend a lot of time communicating. It's easy to stay focused on achieving your goals, but I can't emphasize how important it is to communicate about them as well. This keeps people focused and motivated. That doesn't mean to put out a lot of messages, but rather take the time to make sure the right communication is reaching the right people. For example, taking the time to edit down a long email to be under 200 words will increase the number of people who will read it. It takes time to figure out which stakeholders would want which kind of communication, but that investment in time will come back to help projects run smoother and more quickly later.

If you could tell other young people one thing about why they should consider making a positive impact on our environment or society, like you, what would you tell them?

You can have a lot of influence on how our world is shaped.

Being engaged on social media can have a lot of influence on brands, so letting companies know what your priorities are can help to shape them. But don't limit your engagement to just digital platforms. Politics, from national to more local, is another platform to influence change by voting in elections, letting your representative know your values, or becoming more directly involved.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

"You don't rise to the level of your goals, you fall to the level of your systems" — James Clear

Setting goals is important to align on our direction but making them achievable involves setting up the "systems" to make sure they happen. Keeping this in mind shifts my focus off the goal itself and onto the system. It's then all about evaluating how well that system is running.

Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would like to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. :-)

Sometimes it's interesting to meet with someone who sees things differently. Anand Giridharadas recently published a book called *Winners Take All*, which describes a very different approach to creating change.