

# Transcript of 'Building a Career in Sustainability'

## Season 3, Episode 24, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

**Paul:** Hello, and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

**Jan:** And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

How do clothing brands collaborate to ensure the environmental credibility of their supply chains?

Plus, how do we end up in the careers we end up in and then pivot into careers in sustainability.

[Theme music]

**Paul:** What did you want to be when you were 18, Jan?

**Jan:** [softly] When I was 18.

**Paul:** I know it's a long time ago, but take your time...

**Jan:** [laughs] ...steady. Uh, I wanted to be an accountant.

**Paul:** So you've been as boring [Jan laughs] when you were 18 as you are now? Is that what you're telling me?

**Jan:** Well, no, it was quite hard to know what to do and uh, and my parents were a bit conservative, so they thought accounting was a proper job and I could do it, so I went off and did it.

Of course, you know, what you end up with later on is something quite different.

**Paul:** Did you want to be an accountant or were you pushed into accountancy?

**Jan:** I think it was an escape route.

**Paul:** An escape route. [Jan laughs] An escape from the farm.

**Jan:** [laughing] Yes, indeed. It was a bit.

**Paul:** Yeah, because I, I gather you never wanted to be a farmer.

**Jan:** Uh, no. Well, given, given my advanced years, which you keep on mentioning, um, and because I was a girl at that time where I grew up, the idea that I might be a farmer would've been like, it was not conceivable.

So, so, and my mother advised me not to be a farmer's wife 'cause she was so, um, [laughing] I think they were the, that was, the option for farming is to be someone's wife, which, you know, is not that appealing.

**Paul:** When did sustainability come into your mindset of something you

**Paul:** wanted to do?

**Jan:** Uh, in the mid-eighties. Um, yeah.

**Paul:** Okay.

**Jan:** Yeah, so once I was at university and a bit beyond it, and, and then I found I could do it by pivoting on the accounting skills towards sustainability accounting. So I kept what I knew, but pivoted.

What about you? What did you want to be when you were 18?

**Paul:** I wanted to be a journalist.

**Jan:** Hey, and there you are. [laughs]

**Paul:** I, I became one and then stopped being one. Yes. [laughs]

**Jan:** Ah, you're still using your journalist skills though. So you've, again, kept your core, but pivoted into a different area.

**Paul:** Yeah, I suppose, yeah, to a certain extent. Yeah, yeah. It's, it's a lot different doing this than it used to be, uh, tapping out reams of copy on football matches, cricket matches, rugby matches, et cetera. Working until midnight to get the paper ready for the next morning, things like that.

**Jan:** Yeah. Why, why are we, why are we having this conversation?

[Everyone laughs]

**Paul:** You had a wistful look in your eyes then. [Jan laughs] You, you were suddenly remembering back in the days...

**Jan:** ...back in the days...

**Paul:** ...when you suddenly decided, well, we're gonna be talking to someone today who came here to Lancaster, who then has had a career journey that's been through sustainability and has led him to a company that controls whether or not you have a job.

**Jan:** Um, I don't think they do, but I do feel accountable to them, and... [laughs]

**Paul:** ...I've read your contract. It definitely says in there, if Jan upsets anyone from Pentland Brands she will be gone.

**Jan:** Well, here's an opportunity then. [laughs]

**Paul:** I, I've tried this once before when you failed to upset someone from Pentland Brands and it didn't work, so we brought someone else back in, just in case.

**Jan:** Wow. We have indeed.

**Paul:** Yeah. So we're gonna be talking with someone who is the Positive Business Director at Pentland Brands, someone who studied both for Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree here at Lancaster.

They started just after I left...

**Jan:** ...ah, yeah...

**Paul:** ...I think they knew I'd gone and thought it's safe now, we can go...

[Jan laughs]

**Paul:** ...and that's it.

**Jan:** It's, it's quite nice, 'cause we've had previous guests, um, Richard, who overlapped with...

**Paul:** ...mm-hmm...

**Jan:** ...with Paul, so...

**Paul:** ...yeah, yeah. So our guest's worked as a sustainability manager for companies such as AO, Burberry, Asda, now at Pentland Brands.

So yes, welcome, Richard Mason. Welcome back to Lancaster.

**Richard:** Thank you for having me.

**Paul:** Let me ask you, what did you want to be when you were 18?

**Richard:** [joking] Gosh, apart from definitely not wanting to be an accountant, um...

**Jan:** [mock hurt] ...oooh...

**Richard:** ...it was probably very similar actually. I think, I think it was an escape route. That's what I was looking for. But, um, I grew up in a rural town, Whitby on the North Yorkshire coast, so it was very much, how do I get out of Whitby, I think.

But, um, I went down the route of what was I good at? Or probably, what did I find easy at school probably was the, uh, the thing. Until I got to university, I don't think I really started to figure out what was important to me. I think I always had a bit of a, um, leaning towards social justice and, and what have you. But yeah, until I came to university, I don't think I really found that thing that stirred me.

**Paul:** I, I should have said before by the way, I definitely didn't want to be an accountant when I was 18, and I, I know this for a fact because that's what my dad wanted me to be.

**Jan:** Aaah.

**Paul:** My dad knew I was very good with numbers. Um, so I, I did my Maths A Level level with my eyes shut, essentially, it was very straightforward, so my dad thought, yeah, accounting, that's where you can go. I just hated Maths. Wanted nothing to do with it. I did it so I'd got a good qualification, A level in Maths, but beyond that, never wanted to do it. No one wanted to be an accountant when they were 18, Jan.

**Jan:** I feel like, I feel like [laughs] I'm being ganged up on. Um, I probably didn't know what an accountant was when I was 18 either, the truth be known as well... [laughs]

**Paul:** ...did get out the A to Z of what you could be, and after abacus salesman and aardvark keeper was accountant, and that was it?

**Jan:** Yeah, something like that. Well, as I say, it was, it was a route out, like, uh, many of us are looking for when we come from small rural places. Yeah.

**Paul:** Yeah. So as we say, Richard, you did come to Lancaster when you were 18. So, yeah, tell us a little bit about your journey from leaving here to where you are now at Pentland Brands as their Positive Business Director.

**Richard:** Yeah, I mean I, so my, my undergrad was Biology and my Master's was in, I guess it doesn't exist here anymore, but it was Environment, Philosophy and Public Policy. So I guess it was the early days of sustainability.

Um, so I can tell a really neat story about how when you look back, it was all planned and I went down this pathway. That is absolutely not what happened. I came to university, I loved it here and had a short term strategy of how do I stay in Lancaster as long as possible, not as successful as yours, it seems.

But, um, I did the Master's 'cause I wasn't sure what I wanted to do and I wanted to stay, and I knew I didn't wanna work in a laboratory, but I knew that the human side and what the implications of biology were, were of interest.

So that was kind of the driver then, and it was quite a big risk for me. Um. I didn't have huge financial backing. Um, you know, staying for another year without that guarantee of a job, it was, it was quite stressful actually, when I think back.

But I left university and it was a couple of years afterwards that I actually applied for a graduate scheme at the Co-op. And I remember my mum, bless her, saying, have you ever heard of CSR in companies? And I was like, well, not really, I know a little bit about it, it's kind of linked to what my degree was.

Um, and I googled it and found the Co-op grad scheme and I applied for it and I got into the Co-op grad scheme. So it was just a series of, like, sliding door lucky moments. I've got stories I could tell you about the interview process. And the numbers of people applying for these things, it, it is luck. And you hear people that you know will go through hundreds of interviews.

I got lucky and I landed in an organisation that I loved, and I loved the idea that it was a general graduate scheme. So I wasn't going into work in sustainability. I was going to work for what I perceived to be an ethical organisation, had a different cooperative structure, and I got to try different roles within that business. And it was there that I found what sustainability was in a business, and I did my first placement with them and I've never looked back.

And I couldn't actually, it's probably similar to accounting. Once you've done it, I couldn't imagine doing anything else. It's one of those roles where you touch every part of the business, you get to work and influence all different departments. Um, and you're still linked to this kind of world outside the business, which is always important to me.

And it's interesting, right? I, I, it never really appealed to me being the person that prices up the beans in a supermarket, but I like being able to do a job that relates to the, the outside world.

**Paul:** Richard talks there as if becoming an accountant when you did it and you can't get out is because you want to be there. I view it more as you're trapped, and once you become an accountant, there's no way out, there's no escape.

**Jan:** [laughs] Although, um, I'm gonna try to defend accounting. I'm crossing my arms and feeling defensive as I'm doing it. [Paul laughs]

It's that, it's kind of, it's kind of like what, what you speak about with regard to sustainability because, um, if, if you're doing good accounting, then you're trying to figure out what projects to be undertaken, how to support a planning process. You know, product costing would be part of that, figuring out, you know, production schedules, all of that sort of thing.

And then there's an external facing role as well, as how do you communicate with significant people outside of your organisation, both financial and non-financial stakeholders, about what's going on.

So, so accounting, um, you know, parts of it are boring, absolutely, like parts of every job's boring. But it, as a technology of control and connection and communication, it can be quite good fun, if you can find that outside thing...

**Richard:** ...mmm...

**Jan:** ...so for me, the outside thing was also sustainability. So how can I use this tool to enhance social justice, environmental sustainability, et cetera.

**Richard:** I think that's true of a lot of degrees. I'm trying to think back, when the comments I made about biology, it's, I think sometimes when you start a degree, you don't know what that application of it is.

And you know, obviously sustainability is intertwined with accounting, particularly around a lot of the reporting requirements now. So I think, yeah, when I came, I think I general, I liked the environment, I probably liked the ecology side of biology more than the microbiology. But yeah, it comes later in that you find your passion within that subject.

**Jan:** Yeah. And in that sort of, that happenstance and, and luck, what, what have you found, um, most interesting about your career as it has evolved and the various places you've worked at?

What, what is sort of maybe the key thing you've found from them, um, before moving on to the next job and bought with you as part of your package of things that comes with you in a, in a job?

**Richard:** Yeah. It's interesting 'cause I think if I look at my role now, I'd say it's about how I support the team and get the team under me and other departments to, you are almost like a catalyst for change, whereas when you start out, you are the one doing the project or you, so you, I guess your drivers potentially change, but I think I knew quite early on that I was more interested in the bigger picture stuff and helping the scale of it than I was, the kind of ego side of delivering a project and feeling good about that.

And I think there's definitely a differentiation there in sustainability. Some people, and there's nothing wrong with it, really enjoy that gratification of, I've delivered this project that's done something great. Whereas I think I get more enjoyment of seeing other people realise that.

And, and, and so yeah, I think when I started out I was, you know, doing small scale projects. Um, you get to meet and work with so many different people and different leaders. And I think I was incredibly lucky to work with some amazing, I'd say humans, not business leaders, just good people, that gave me the confidence to just be myself.

Um, I got shown examples of how to lead in a, I could say a human way. Um, and embrace kind of my quirks, I guess. You know, I am slightly scatty and, but you know, all these are actual benefits. I think when I first started out it was like, I must be a project manager and I must get all these core skills, and then you realise actually that isn't what I bring to a team or a business.

So I think I was lucky enough to have some good leaders that led by example. Had some tough times as well, you know, where I got stuck with a leader I didn't like or when I first left university and had to take a sales job to just make ends meet. And it was a pretty horrific experience, but I learned to kind of just take the learnings from that. Probably what I don't want to be, and take it into my world.

But yeah, I mean, it's, it is just everywhere and I feel like I've always been a bit of a yes person. So when an opportunity's come, I've just said yes. I remember being sat in the office at the Co-op and someone walked in and said, oh, we've been asked if anyone wants to go and work for the International Cooperative Alliance in Geneva.

And in that split second, I thought, that sounds good, could get to go skiing. And uh, I put my hand up and they were like, well, yeah, if you're interested. Two weeks before I went, it got changed to Brussels, so put an end to the skiing, uh, plans, [Jan laughs] but...

**Paul:** ...not quite as Alpine in uh, Brussels, really, is it...?

**Richard:** ...no, but I mean, it's a culture based on chips, beer and chocolate. [Jan laughs] So it's, it's not bad, but, um, but yeah, I, I, things like that.

I mean, I've got, I've got to work on the Tour de France. Um, again, it was just a chance. I was looking for a new opportunity and the Tour de France came to Yorkshire and they needed a project manager, and my boss at the time said., would you fancy applying for it? It was a bit outta my comfort zone, but I thought, why not? I'm kind of stagnating a bit.

And then when I came back from that, there was a promotion ready and it, I think it's just, like I say, sliding doors moments. You can obviously look back and think it worked out really swimmingly, but there were times when I was thinking, oh my gosh, where's the next step? But I think it's just saying yes and not afraid to fail or take the wrong step.

**Paul:** How have you seen sustainability grow and evolve within what you do for all the companies you've worked for over these past 15, 20 years? And also how these companies are thinking about sustainability?

**Richard:** Gosh, yeah. I mean, it, it has changed completely. I think I was lucky because the Co-op were very early adopters of thorough reporting. Um, so my first experience was incredibly well evidenced report driven sustainability. Do I didn't really, I guess, cut my teeth in that kind of greenwashy, late 90s, 2000s, uh, lots of companies will have gone through. But it's transitioned so much, and I think even in the last five years, I mean, it's unrecognisable.

I think your, the regulation, particularly around green claims, it's kind of...

**Jan:** ...mm-hmm...

**Richard:** ...forced businesses that were all about the narrative, and we spent years and years trying to find ways of linking sustainability progress to business outcomes, normally linked to marketing, um, or branding.

You then suddenly got thrust into this world of, there's all this regulation on reporting, so actually suddenly you have to do this backwards looking

reporting and forget all the innovation and the storytelling and double down on that.

And then just at the same time, you have the regulation around green claims, which makes everyone kind of kneejerk into, oh my gosh, can we even say this anymore? How do we say it? Oh, it's a lot harder to say it.

So it's been this really uncertain time over the last five years, and I'm not sure anyone's really worked out exactly where they fit with that. And certainly coming into Pentland over the last year. We've been, we've been trying to set a new kind of, I guess, vision and pathway that balances that.

Um, and I see a lot of businesses, unfortunately, kneejerk either too far into reporting and forgetting how you actually drive innovation and link this to, to the business. Or forgetting your consumer. I mean, I, I listened to one of your podcasts, actually, with a comms expert, and I should have listened more carefully, but it was really interesting 'cause it is that I think a lot of us have fallen into the trap of talking about jargon and reporting and evidence-based, when actually the majority of people you want to influence who aren't yet, you know, factoring sustainability into buying decisions are not gonna be turned on by that. So you have to balance that.

How do you engage an audience that isn't yet ready for it with talking CSRD reports and other things like that?

**Jan:** And because, um, Pentland brands have brands that, um, if you like, are sold across the world. So you've got consumers in, in all sorts of countries. And given the sort of the pullback, certainly at the formal level from, um, the United States in this whole area, do you observe any of that in, in, when you're trying to sell Speedo swimming costumes?

I mean, does that feel different in different places or does that not really come into that equation?

**Richard:** No, I mean there absolutely is both from a consumer, the person buying the product, but also our retail partners. Um, you do see it, there tends to be a bit of a lag. So a lot of it's theoretical because of the way that it takes, you know, up to 18 months from design to selling a product. There's this, this bit of a lag in between.

So people are kind of, and we've had it particularly with the US, kind of the theory of what, what now happens to the consumer based on a political, um, change. But you absolutely do see it.

I mean, insights-wise, I've seen it where we had a really interesting case with Endura, our mountain biking brand, which I thought was fascinating, but it was around repair. And a few of our brands have got very, uh, you know, I think Berghaus has had its repair service, free repair service since the 1960s. It's quite embedded in the way that we do business.

And we were looking at how do we communicate that in the US, and it was incredible. So in the UK, if you offer patches and free repair service, it's seen as a sign of quality, and the product's more durable because you're investing in it. You're not hiding from it.

In the US the customer insight suggested completely the opposite, that actually sending out patches and repair kits suggests that it's not good quality. And so, there's definitely differences from a consumer level. But the biggest difference for us is our retail partners, 'cause a lot of our product is sold through a retailer as opposed to our own channels, that some of them will be, I guess, more influenced by local consumer behaviour or potentially political behaviour.

And we, we, we see it with, you know, peers that in the US you know, who will be working with the US government suddenly having to pivot away from things that just seem business as usual. And you'd be horrified if, if a brand like Pentland Brands was to pivot away from, say, reporting on climate. But some of our peers and competitors are actually having to do that to keep government contracts.

So it's a very strange world at the moment.

**Jan:** And in that pivot, um, uh, you know, maybe not for yourselves, but for your folks in the, the same business area, are they still doing the work and they're just not talking about it? 'Cause that's what, that's, you know, that's my supposition. That if you were serious about it in the first place, and if it confers risk and competitive advantage or access to capital or whatever, you carry on doing it, but you just don't wear it on, on your sleeve so much.

**Richard:** Yeah, it's, it's really interesting this 'cause I, I think, speaking to you, I'd say yes, I think that is true, but general conversation I have, it's a bit of a

bug bear of mine, this. 'Cause there has been a lot of regulation around green claims and what you can and can't say. And I keep hearing this term greenhushing, and from a lot of sustainability professionals as well, and I just don't buy it.

You're not allowed to lie anymore. [Jan laughs] And what you do, you have to evidence, there's a very big difference here...

**Jan:** ...yeah...

**Richard:** ...so yes, people are talking less, but they're talking less about the things that they were, whether it was meaning to mislead or not, they were. So I think, I think it's just a sharpening of what you can and can't say.

And I think I've seen it at Pentland where, where you have to understand exactly where your, where you can differentiate, and what your actual product and brand stand for, and fix to that. Uh, as opposed to having this generalist, we're great for the planet, sustainability. It doesn't wash anymore and I think consumers switched off from that a long time ago.

So there is a lot of great work and tough work that goes on in any business that goes, you don't get a pat on the back for it. But I do think from a marketing perspective, I don't buy the greenhushing too much.

**Paul:** Would a company such as Pentland get asked by, say, American partners not to make so much of a big deal about the green credentials because they're in America and they want to keep that quiet at the minute?

Or would it be a case that they just accept you're doing what you're doing, and we're doing what we're doing?

**Richard:** Yeah, we, we haven't seen that. I mean it, we're probably unique in that a lot of our partners in the US um, are cooperatives. Um, they are well-established organisations.

Like, perhaps some of the big retailers are maybe being forced to not communicate, to your point, Jan, around certain elements of this. But it's so complex. Even in the US you have a small group of states that are actually really progressive, so you couldn't pivot and we wouldn't want to pivot. Um, and you have a consumer base there that many do care. So sometimes I think the political rhetoric doesn't actually flow through.

Um, so where you do hear examples of companies watering down certain policies, it's either them not talking about it as much, or they didn't have a business case in the first place. So yeah, I, I don't think we do see that.

And I think, if anything, I've seen the opposite, where they're looking for us to kind of double down and lead on it. But that might be swayed by who our retail partners tend to be and the kind of sector we're in, I guess.

**Jan:** Yeah, and I'm, I'd like to sort of focus a bit more on this sector you're in because, uh, I guess people will see something with a, a Berghaus brand or Endura, whatever, and I assume that they realise that you are not manufacturing that, but it's your brand.

So, what kind of challenges does that introduce if you're not manufacturing your own things but it's going out with your, your brand name on it?

**Richard:** Yeah. I mean, it's one of the, it's fascinating. Because I don't think many people do know or think about how their clothes are manufactured. I remember having a conversation, having come back from some factories in Vietnam, and someone was asking me about the, the process, and I don't think people realise how much is handmade.

I think a lot of people just assume it's robots and it's all, but you know, if you have a sweater, it's, it will have been stitched by someone on a machine. And, uh, so I, I think there is that, that kind of, um, perhaps misconception.

I think from our end, you're absolutely right. There's a, there's a double piece of this. So most of the relationships we have with our supply chain are not direct in the sense that we will contract the work with factories, and this is how most big brands work, whether you're the, the brand that you're wearing right now, Patagonia, [Jan laughs] or whether it's Nike or whoever.

But it, it's really interesting because it, it doesn't change necessarily what you're focused on, but you're doing it at arm's length, which can make it more difficult, and especially with bigger challenges around carbon reduction, et cetera. You are having to work with partners as opposed to having the capability of just enacting it yourself.

So, it's much more partner driven as the sustain, and we see adding value to sourcing teams through this as well, because we're having to do more around the, um, ethical credentials of factories, the environmental credentials of

them. We're having to collaborate more with them as partners. But that adds value to the sourcing team and the relationships they have.

Um, and it aids if, if you've got long-term relationships with suppliers, which we're lucky enough to have in a lot of cases, it aids those, those advancements. So, it's much more collaborative than if it was your own business and you could make a top-down decision. You have to have a rationale for your partners, essentially.

But it's equally, in a world of reporting regulation and deeper due diligence, all brands are being, are being forced to have that traceability and understanding of their supply chain.

So I think long gone are the days where a brand could, you know, put a logo on the top and not understand their supply chain. You, you can't do that. We do still have the same traceability as you would if you were manufacturing, but, but yeah, it's very complex.

**Paul:** What's your personal role within all of this then, Richard? We've had conversations on this podcast before about what a sustainability manager is, and what sustainability teams are and various things like that, but you're called a Positive Business Director, so you don't have that title of sustainability manager or director, but, so what is it that you do?

**Richard:** Yeah, so it's sustainability I guess in its broadest sense. So I oversee a team that's responsible, so we have a direct responsibility for the, um, ethical auditing of factories and the ethical side of the supply chain.

I think the rest of the function is set up, or we've recently reset this as, as more of an enabler. So we are not a team that work should be siloed in. And I think going back to your earlier question, this is something that's evolved over time.

It used to be a very siloed function. So if somebody said, we want to do something on a new sustainable fabric, it would get dumped in the sustainability team and off you go with a project.

The way it works now is we are an enabler. So if we were to do that same thing, we'd go and make sure that it was embedded in the materials and the sourcing team where it will happen, and it will happen at scale.

So we look after reporting to our retailers on their requirements. We look after external reporting. We liaise with marketing and brand teams, set the strategy centrally for Pentland brands. But it is such a wide-ranging [pause] role, and I

guess you, you were gonna claim accounting was as well there, but it, it is like that [Jan laughs] I literally touch every part of the business and what I try to do is not control it...

**Jan:** ...mm-hmm...

**Richard:** ...and actually support and enable other people to drive this rather than, so it's almost being that catalyst in the business, as opposed to what it used to be, which was what can you personally go away and deliver?

So it's a very broad title, I guess, but also a broad remit for the team.

**Paul:** I think when you talk about a team, I don't know if you realise how lucky you are, but certainly when we've had these discussions before, there is *a* sustainability director, *a* sustainability manager. Their team is themselves and whatever's inside their head, and it seems really positive for Pentland brands to have a team for you to work with and then to be able to go and work within other teams and not still have that.

I, I know you're saying it used to be the case that everything just got lumped on the sustainability person if it was a sustainability thing. I wonder if maybe your company doesn't, but some companies out there still do.

**Richard:** Definitely. Yeah, I mean, without question. I mean, if you, if you're a smaller business and the structure only allows a small team or one person, I mean, it's, that is so difficult.

And I think you just even need to be more, even more focused on what is material to your organisation. Like, where can you really make a difference? Where do you have to make a difference? Um, you can't have any mission creep in that instance, but I don't envy people who have to take that. You gotta be the reporting person and this person driving innovation.

**Richard:** Um. [pause] Yeah, I mean, I think I see it in some companies. I think the scale of things have meant you've had to adopt and evolve. I think where you still see it a little bit is companies that have been in the midst of the EU regulation over the last few years have accidentally become a reporting function. And then an extension of the accounting team.

Um, and I think you're starting to see now as some things are changing, that they're sort of evolving and trying to get back to where they were before. But I think that's where I see the silo most now, is they fall into the trap of it's so overwhelming what we need to report that we're only gonna do that.

**Paul:** We almost started talking about omnibuses again. [Jan laughs] It, it felt that, that, that you talked to regulation, EU, et cetera. And I was just remembering back a couple of weeks to our conversations with Andreas about omnibuses.

I'm not going as far back as taxonomies, [Jan laughs] but that I'm sure they fit in as well. It's...

**Jan:** ...yeah...

**Paul:** ...all, uh, yeah.

**Jan:** And it, and it's, I guess, maybe understandable that people would be drawn in and focus on that, but then a missed opportunity because it's, it's about an external reporting function, not adding value to the, the, the company.

So hopefully these things maybe go in cycles and we might cycle back to the reporting being the outcome, not the input. Um, yeah. It's hard because it's, it's regulated in, in many instances, so people feel very drawn into that.

**Richard:** Yeah, and I, I think Pentland Brands, because of its unique ownership, I think is in the right cycle of that reporting, that we weren't impacted. But I have seen other businesses that have had to, you know, probably quite awkwardly reassert themselves with an executive board. That you've taken down the reporting's everything for the next 18 months, it's critical, to suddenly, oh, it's moved or it's not same, or we're not in scope. And that, that's difficult for a sustainability team, and I think for a board as well, to understand.

But I, I completely agree. I don't actually disagree with any of the EU regulation. I think it drives the right things. I think it's the stability of it. I think it's very hard if it keeps moving, that's the problem...

**Jan:** ...yeah, mmm, yes. And, but of, of course, these are all political programmes. So they end up, where they end up.

So in terms of your, you know, Positive Business Director and positive things, what, what kind of initiatives do you think are particularly impactful for a brand company of, of a type of that, um, Pentland Brands are. What, what, what are the big-ticket items that would really make a difference, or do make a difference?

**Richard:** Gosh, it's a difficult one. Um, we, the way that we've set our new sustainability framework up is almost like two tracks. So you've got your foundational topics, which are your climate change, your responsible sourcing, your product design materials, packaging. These non-negotiable things you don't get a pat on the back for, but I would argue are the big-ticket items that actually make a difference to, you know, the environment or humans in the supply chain. And I think that's, that's the big motivation.

Because Pentland Brands owns multiple brands, we have to have a framework that works also at an individual brand level. So we've tried to differentiate or, or, or identify the differentiators at a brand level, and create a framework that they can tell in their own brand language.

So the um, Play It Forward framework is designed specifically to say those foundations are uniform across all the brands, we have to do this. And that's my team's major job is focusing on them. But then at a brand level, you can talk about the right to play, which is very much focussed on how do you address, um, issues around the lack of inclusivity in sport and physical exercise.

And I know you've had guests on talking about this before. How do we get people more active? Now, for all of our brands that is relevant, and you don't, you know, it's directly linked to what we sell and our products. So it's the obvious place to go.

Um, but we also have the Kit to Play, um, and the Space to Play. And this is us trying to get the brands to think about where they can manoeuvre this. Now, for Berghaus, how they communicate that will be completely different to Speedo.

They won't talk about the 'play' language I'm talking about there, that's the Pentland Brands framework. They will put that into their own language. And each of them, depending on how mature they are as a brand, depending on their consumer base, will have a different way of, way of approaching that.

So it's, it is a complex challenge and not one I'd had before coming to Pentland Brands, as to how do you give the structure centrally, but enough freedom for those brands to, to differentiate?

So the stuff consumers will probably see will be the brand level interpretation of that. So you'll probably start to see more things around inclusivity in sport and access to physical exercise. But the bits you don't see are where I would

probably say those big-ticket, wow moments come. And it normally comes from collaboration because they are hidden...

**Jan:** ...mm-hmm...

**Richard:** ...so we talked about supply chain complexity before. Most of these things we cannot change on our own. And a lot of the time we'll be in factories with other brands.

So it's, I think that's where the really interesting stuff happens, where we come together with other brands to kind of take on some of these things.

**Paul:** Are there areas you feel that you still need to be thinking more about?

I mean, you talked about climate change, responsible sourcing, which I guess is touching on issues such as modern slavery there, um, the materials that are coming in.

But what about issues such as maybe, say, nature and biodiversity? Do you feel that companies like yours are working enough in those areas?

**Richard:** I think it's one of those areas that for a lot of companies has been either linked, so either linked loosely to climate change in the past or been slightly put to the side because of, again, around, if you look at TCFD and, and what, what's happened in that climate space, it's much more mature. And I think with biodiversity and nature, it's only just starting to kind of be realised what that means.

So I think it's slightly difficult to make it tangible at first. Um, as it was with climate 10 years ago. And I think, I think for most brands at best, it is a, trying to get their head around it, some loosely linked, I, I don't see many great examples of it yet, but it's certainly happening.

And again, the regulation is driving that, which is great. And it's making you understand actually how is biodiversity material to a business like Pentland Brands. You can't avoid those conversations anymore, which is great.

So I think for us it's definitely, that's a really good example of something that we will need to do more on. Definitely. Um, and we'll need to formalise what that means. So we're probably doing lots of things already that you would put in a biodiversity report, but it's not formalised and managed in the same way climate risk is yet.

Um, so yeah, there, there's always areas like this, and I think one of the hardest things about being a sustainability professional is you're, you can never do enough. Like there's so many things I would love to do more of and love to focus on. And you, unfortunately, as the leader, have to decide what's most important right now.

And I think, you know, it's really difficult. And I think it's kind of, it's also linked to that existential threat piece outside that you're inherently interested in and, and it's, it can be quite a heavy topic place to work. I think it's very hard to just put your blinkers on and get on with your day job. You're constantly exposed to the wider ongoings of the business and then also this thing going on outside.

So, it's a challenge, but...

**Jan:** ...and I think that thing that's going on on the outside, currently, I, it feels very heavy to me and I'm finding it quite hard to keep on doing my own job with sort of thinking, oh, well, you know, the podcast is good, we're doing various good sort of things, but is, is that enough given the size of that thing over there?

And so, yeah, sometimes you have to sort of pack that up in order to keep on doing things. But if you never check whether or not you're doing enough for the big thing, then you sort of end up conning yourself as well.

So it's a really, yeah, I'm currently in the unhappy space in there, [laughs] but I shall find a happy space. Well, maybe I won't, I don't know, but you know what I mean. It's actually, it's pretty hard work.

**Richard:** Yeah, I've, I got two young children. I was talking to them about the size of space the other day and it was like, it was blowing my own mind doing it. [Jan laughs]

But it's like, I think sometimes you just have to remind yourself, you know, you're in a very lucky position to influence people...

**Jan:** ...yeah...

**Richard:** ...so working in a, as an academic or in, in the sports brands that I do, you can make a difference. But you are also a very small part of that. And I think sometimes reminding yourself of that context can put you in a more positive place to make a difference.

But yeah, it's, it's really hard and I feel the responsibility when you lead a team as well to, you know, make sure that the team below me don't feel overwhelmed with that.

You know, sometimes you, in any business, you will hit roadblocks and you just have to go back and find another way. How else can you sell it in? What can you do differently...?

**Jan:** ...yeah...

**Richard:** ...but it, you do have to sit with, yeah, not moving as fast as you'd like. [Jan laughs]

**Jan:** ...or not, yeah. But also it's also like, uh, I think one of the potential problems and, and certainly in my kind of, uh, position and field, is to think you are the white knight and you're gonna solve it all. 'Cause you never are. So actually not being too mad in your ambition in a way that's egomania...

**Richard:** ...yeah...

**Jan:** ...like egomaniacal. Is that a word? Egomaniacal?

**Paul:** [pronounces the word differently] Egomaniacal is a word... [Jan laughs]

**Jan:** ...Let's have that then...

**Paul:** ...I, I'll, I'll pronounce it properly and you can just say your, whatever you were saying...

**Jan:** ...yes. Words are not, I find quite hard.

So I suppose that's quite a good time to sort of say about, because you're talking about with your brands, you have to be well in, in partnership with your supply chain. But are there other problems that can only be solved by working as a whole industry or working with everyone else in the place where you are?

So there's sort of two sort of frames there, isn't there?

**Richard:** Yeah, I think the industry thing, absolutely. I think with, particularly with apparel and textiles, the supply chain is so shared. Like I don't, again, think consumers quite realise how much of it is shared. So you, you're not gonna find many factories where you're the only brand operating in there. So straightaway there's that. You can't do something without anyone else, particularly if you're the smaller brand there. You're gonna have to, to go along.

I think bigger brands can learn from small brands and jump on the back of their innovation, and bring the scale. And there's some great examples of this in the industry where you've got, you know, retailers or brands that aren't historically known for being particularly sustainable piggybacking on ones that are, and that massive change happening.

Um, and I think with things like, um, material innovation or, you see it with textiles to textiles, recycling where there's a, there's a clear intent from the regulation to drive us that way, but the infrastructure's simply not in place. So the only way you can address that is as an industry as a whole, or you find your partners within it that, that want to work on it.

Similarly with, you know, the ethical sourcing side, we, we, you find the partners that are aligned morally and want to do the right thing in these places and drive change, and you work with them and it's in a very non-competitive space most of the time.

Um, but yeah, it's, I think you're getting to the point where the easy stuff for business to change has been done, or should have been done. So now you're in the, the realms of big system change, which needs everyone around the table.

**Jan:** Yeah.

**Paul:** Coming to the close then, Richard, let's just have a look. Where do you think is next for Pentland Brands when it comes to sustainability?

**Richard:** I think the next piece that will be visible will be that brand level identity and, and really talking about specifically for each brand, how they deliver societal benefit or you know, what is it that if you buy a Mitre football, what is it that Mitre stand for? Why are we different?

And I think that differentiation and really focussed attention to that differentiator will become much clearer, while we will be putting more and more effort into those foundations behind the scene.

I think, I think you see with consumers now, I don't argue it was ever there, but I don't think many people, if anyone buys a waterproof jacket because it's sustainable. Um, they might factor it into their perception of quality, or it might be a factor after cost and how effective it is as a rain jacket. But I think now it's, it's almost like a table stake. There's a risk to not having it from a reputational perspective, but I think you've gotta find better ways of communicating to customers that, why you do this and why it's specific to your

brand. So I think, I think from a communication perspective, you'll see a significant change in the way all retailers and brands show up on this stuff.

But meanwhile, from a regulatory point of view, the the foundations are moving so quickly. So the standards, the traceability, the control you have to have on your supply chain is getting deeper and deeper and deeper, which is a positive thing.

**Jan:** So that traceability thing has come up time and time again. And we've also had other podcasts that looking at data centres, AI and those sorts of things.

But surely with, you know, big data and ways of analysing data should make traceability more straightforward. So there's a, you know, if you like an opportunity to join up that AI innovation with, with the, the needs of a brand business?

**Richard:** Oh yeah. I mean it's, I think if you have that core traceability, it's, it's almost like the unlock for so much. And I think with AI and the technology side now, if you can get that traceability of your supply chain, it opens everything up.

Um, and I mean, we, we've been using it. Um, I know I did listen to your podcast on AI and, uh, it was really interesting, but we, we've found some really positive applications of it already.

So, for example, when we audit, we ask for a third party audit of any supplier that we work for, and we, we manage them through that. So you raise what's called a corrective action plan, if you find things and you work through with the, the, the vendor to be able to correct them.

Um, in the past, this was a process that required hours of the supplier's time to upload the audit and then transfer the information in that audit onto our Pentland template. Something that, um, the department actually helped with many years ago, I think. [Jan laughs]

Um, and it would take hours of the supplier's time. It would then sit on our desk for a couple of days till someone had the time to review it. We would then have to tweak it, 'cause it was inevitably slightly wrong. You then have to go back to the supplier, to-ing and fro-ing, hours of wasted time that adds absolutely no value whatsoever. Over the last few months, we've been trialling an AI tool where the supplier uploads the audit, it's done. Like, it automatically reads the audit, puts it against our nonconformities list.

Now our role then becomes the validator of that. So we verify that that's correct still. The accuracy is off the scale more accurate from an AI than a human, uh, sadly, but it means that our team can be actually focused on working with the supplier and putting the problems, correcting the problems, as opposed to spending hours looking at audits.

So, absolutely, I mean, you see so much innovation in this space and uh, that will help us. Obviously there are other...

**Jan:** ...yeah...

**Richard:** ...things to consider, but there is definitely an immediate benefit.

**Jan:** But even since the start of the, this podcast series where we were looking at, you know, data centres and, and sustainability, and I have a general lack of understanding and a slight suspicion about AI, I've, I've been trying to deepen my understanding.

And so in those kind of applications it's super smart, and yet we're spending most of our time worrying about doctored images. Well, there's good reason to worry about doctored images and how much of, you know, LinkedIn posts are AI-generated and all that sort of thing.

So it seems to me that almost like the, the rubbishy use that's making us all cross is obscuring this really huge benefit that, that is there in the system. So it's, yeah, it's a, it's a funny situation really.

**Richard:** Yeah. I mean, I, I, I can't think of many things that have that flips, you know, the polars, uh, positives and negatives to it as, as AI. But yeah, there are some great applications and I think, like you say, if you look past the nonsense rubbish that's created by it and the impact that will have, yeah, it can, it can help us a great deal.

And I mean, we see it, we, we get asked questions about the energy side of it, which I know you covered in an earlier podcast, but even that has a, you know, there's two sides to that coin. You could argue that it could drive us towards a renewable future quicker because there's such a demand.

Or you could argue that it's gonna cause great stress on the energy system...

**Jan:** ...yeah, it might do a bit of both, of course. [laughs]

**Richard:** Yeah.

**Paul:** Well, Richard, thank you so much for joining us and thank you for not mentioning Jan's choice of attire during this entire conversation...

**Jan:** ...nothing wrong with...

**Paul:** ...as she chose to went, go off brand today... [laughs]

**Jan:** [laughing] ...Patagonia, it's still a good brand.

**Paul:** [laughing] Thank you for being with us. It's been really good fun.

**Richard:** Thank you very much.

[Theme music]

**Paul:** Yet again, Jan, I feel that you've survived an encounter with someone from Pentland Brands without losing your job.

**Jan:** Well, I, there's no reason why I should be worried, to be fair, Paul,

**Paul:** And yet every time, sweaty palms, [Jan laughs] shivering, looking very furtive.

**Jan:** Yeah, no, not at all. I, there was, um, I really enjoy the conversations I get to have with Richard, and we were really, you know, wowed when we realised he was also a Lancaster graduate, 'cause it's always nice to be connected with your graduates.

And I think, um, there are some things that he said that I found really, really interesting. Uh, firstly, green claims, because this has been a game changer in terms of making sure that organisations are saying accurate things about their products and the green claims legislation that's come in, it's really powerful 'cause it's consumer protection legislation, which always is a powerful part of a legislative framework. So that's, that's a really important part of the mix.

**Paul:** You did talk a lot about formalisation, about the fact that you are possibly doing stuff, sometimes maybe a little half-arsed, maybe. Maybe you are doing it without necessarily meaning to do it, and when things come in that formalise it and that you have to do it, whether that be external regulation that's forcing you to do things, or whether it's internal change that is formalising a process, it does have such an impact.

**Jan:** Yes, and I think that fits well with some of the, like the, our podcast of the more recent past about the, um, the request that you tell a story about it actually creating that formalisation.

**Paul:** Yes, and, yes, telling a story, but not telling a story, if you know what I...

**Jan:** [laughing] ...yes, yeah...

**Paul:** ...because that's something as well that was stressed that the, the importance of saying what is actually happening, rather than telling a nice old tale that doesn't reflect reality.

**Jan:** The other thing that leapt out at me, which I was really interested to hear about, because I suspected this was going on in business, so it's nice to hear that, at least for this one it is. That the traceability unlocks everything else.

Um, so we've certainly seen that with colleagues that we've worked with in the Seafood Business for Ocean Stewardship, is that once you have traceability you suddenly have a, an entry point to be able to think about a lot of your sustainability actions, because now you know exactly where they're happening, um, with whom, what kind of duration, et cetera.

So that, that was good to hear as well.

**Paul:** At the same time, it was interesting to hear Richard admitting that customers aren't necessarily paying the greatest deal of attention to the manufacturing provenance of any particular product.

So therefore, whilst the companies are doing all the traceability to make sure the customers aren't necessarily following up and finding out and making decisions based upon that. And there's both positives and negatives from that, I see. It's positive being the companies are doing it anyway. It, they, they're not, they're saying it doesn't matter if the customers are asking it, we need to know, as a company, we need to be there and ready and make sure we're doing the right thing. Negatives is, how does a company, uh, benefit from such things and how do customers make the right choice if they're not looking into this?

**Jan:** And I suppose this is where, when he was talking about working together comes into play. Because if everyone is, if everyone's doing the base that's required for a, for decent work for everyone in your own operations and your supply chain, and, you know, conforming to pollution controls, all of those sorts of things, then, then maybe you don't need the customer to care that everything they buy is going to be well-founded.

So I guess maybe given the years of work in sustainability, maybe we're heading in some sectors and some product sectors towards, actually it's all sound, so now it's, well, what, what's beyond sound, if you like.

**Paul:** Yeah. Maybe it becomes a matter of, you know, what country the company is from and, you know, therefore all the stuff that takes place in that...

**Jan:** ...mm-hmm...

**Paul:** ...nation in order to ensure that certain regulations are in place. You feel safe buying it, knowing that it's gonna meet a certain minimum standard that you're happy with.

But if you see another, if you see something that comes from a company in another country and you think, I know that country's got zero in the way of regulations around all of this, I don't know what, how that's been made, where the products have come from, what that company does in terms of clean energy, in terms of modern slavery, in terms of this, that and the other. Maybe I'm not going to buy from there.

**Jan:** Yeah. So I suppose we're, yeah, I think that's, if a consumer is at well informed, then they will make those choices.

**Paul:** Yeah, because that's the kind of thing that does actually make the news, not necessarily what individual companies are doing, but what regulations are in place in certain countries.

**Jan:** Yeah.

**Paul:** So what are we talking about next week, Jan?

**Jan:** John? We're talking about, uh, the situation in a country, which is a, used to be, well, is a big producer of cotton, and used to be a big producer of, um, of taking cotton from the fields into materials. Um, but which hit some big, stormy problems in around, um, state-sponsored forced labour.

**Paul:** Yes. We're going to be talking to a PhD researcher here at Lancaster, Farmon Asadov, who is gonna be telling us about Uzbekistan...

**Speaker:** ...indeed...

**Paul:** ...and the situation there with their industry, like you say, around cotton, around forced labour and various circumstances around that.

And he's got a personal story as well as his expertise and research to show us...

**Jan:** ...absolutely. It'll be a fascinating one, as every single episode is.

**Paul:** Until then, thank you very much for listening. It's goodbye from me, Paul Turner.

**Jan:** And goodbye from me, Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]