

Interview series.

Leaders making a difference, 2025



Sara Peña Astorquia

Sustainability Director, Zelestra, Spain

For Sara Peña Astorquia, sustainability represents a way of understanding life and how the world should work. Now as Sustainability Director at Zelestra, an energy company on a mission to make decarbonisation a reality, Sara explains how empathy, communication, and international outlook have combined to ensure sustainability programmes make a lasting impact.

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How did your home life influence your career path, and how has your passion for sustainability shaped your career choices, including your current role as Sustainability Director?

From a very early age, my father often said that if something was worth doing, it was worth doing right. I've taken that approach throughout my career, as it represents the very essence of how sustainability can make a lasting impact. I think my desire to travel and see the world began when, from the age of 8, I helped at home preparing packing lists for export operations around the world. I would often imagine what each destination would be like.

After graduating in law and economics in Spain, I fulfilled my dream to travel when I began to work for the Spanish Ministry of Economy and was posted to Brazil. However, it was when I began taking on roles in the private and third sectors that I really saw the potential for the transformative power of innovation in achieving sustainable development goals across different sectors involving the environment, energy, and agriculture.

In many ways, my international outlook has helped me to consistently engage and build connections with people throughout my working life and greatly influenced my career choices. I have also taken these experiences to inform and enhance the position I have today as Sustainability Director at Zelestra. Being responsible for integrating sustainability into our business strategy, my work represents a strong link with the meaningful purpose of the company, which is making decarbonisation a reality for our partners.



Leaders who communicate a clear vision for sustainability can really inspire, achieve buy-in and align the entire organisation towards a common objective.



Alongside your career in sustainability, you also trained as an Ontological coach. What does this involve, and how has this helped to understand how company culture, leadership and communication can make a difference when developing a business-wide sustainability programme?

In addition to developing a deep understanding of sustainability issues, one of the most important sustainability skill sets is the ability to coordinate and act as a catalyst. It's a skill that helps to get the best out of everyone and drives programmes forward to become a reality. My Ontological coaching skills have helped with this as it involves working with culture and communication, which are very connected with sustainability success. Good company culture, strong leadership and communication excellence are pivotal in driving a sustainable strategy.

However, strong leadership has to set the tone. It ensures that corporate governance supports long-term environmental and social goals over short-term gains. It's something Zelestra is deeply aware of, and the company has recently launched a leadership programme designed specifically to empower the extended senior leadership team with all the resources, strategies, and tools needed to lead with confidence and clarity. Leaders who communicate a clear vision for sustainability can really inspire, achieve buy-in and align the entire organisation towards a common objective.

Paying attention to how sustainability is communicated is also essential. While we are more aware of sustainability terminology, there's still a significant gap in how much everyone understands. In particular, teams understand sustainability in different ways, especially where legislation is involved. We need to translate sustainability concepts so that more people can understand and see the bigger picture. This could be done by using simple language as well as more frequent exposure to sustainability issues. We want our people to see a solid link between their role and sustainability on a daily basis. Sustainability is embedded in our culture, a part of our value proposition, so we all can be cultural ambassadors.



As a leader in sustainability, what's your recipe for ensuring strategies and goals achieve long term success?

Sustainability cannot exist in a vacuum. It requires the seamless integration of company functions that strike a balance between all environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors. Long term success is not possible without equally addressing each of these dimensions as they are all crucial for building a resilient and sustainable business. For example, at Zelestra, we uphold a zero-tolerance policy for health and safety. We aim to prioritise the wellbeing of our employees and stakeholders in every aspect of our operations. Operational risk management is critical as it helps to identify and mitigate social and environmental impacts, risks and opportunities that allow the business to adapt to industry volatility. A focus on efficiency through operational excellence optimises the use of resources and reduces waste. Everything is linked.

Together, these functions enhance reliability, minimise cost and strengthen the company's ability to navigate sustainability and ensure long-term success. It's about joining all the dots to ensure continuous improvements are made.



Zelestra has embraced a new customer-centric approach that uses technology and innovation to tailor energy solutions to specific needs. How are you using this approach to support your role?

It's clear that if we are to help our partners to meet their decarbonisation goals, we need to tap into a range of renewable energy solutions, tailoring them to each of our clients' specific needs for a sustainable future. So, whether it's solar, wind, batteries, hydrogen, or a combination, we can only deliver these solutions through the smart use of technology and innovation. For example, grid innovation is helping to enhance energy distribution and reduce energy waste by optimising energy demand management. Artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) enable real-time monitoring and predictive maintenance of assets, which also helps minimise energy loss.

This ability to harness technology and apply innovation can play a crucial role in enabling us to accurately track, report and optimise our own sustainability efforts. In particular, digitalisation is helping us comply with a fast-moving regulatory landscape and provide transparent, verifiable information about all sustainability and environmental claims. This will only increase, so technology and innovation are more vital than ever in this role.



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Having an international outlook, where do you currently see the main challenges in our ability to move to a low-carbon and more sustainable future?

It's clear we are running out of time to reach net zero goals, but it's also essential to recognise the progress we are making with new technology and ideas. However, there is a big challenge with global public awareness of sustainability issues. We need a more internationally coordinated approach that helps to dispel any myths that make us resistant to change and highlights how our actions can help not just ourselves but different communities and countries.

Another main challenge is the high cost of transitioning to a low-carbon future, especially for some sectors and industries. Much of our infrastructure still needs to be upgraded, and there are gaps in the affordability, availability and scalability of certain technologies. There's also the backdrop of a very complex regulatory landscape. Navigating different policies across regions and countries can be a challenge. A sustainable future requires global collaboration if we are to make meaningful progress.



As a sustainability leader, what critical drivers do you rely on for embedding sustainability across the business?

The main driver is the leadership commitment. There has to be robust and visible commitment from the top. It's essential to prioritise sustainability initiatives to inspire the entire organisation. A clear sustainability vision and measurable social and environmental goals are also necessary as they guide and drive decisions. Building the right foundations helps to promote employee engagement and foster a culture of sustainability across the organisation that aligns with different stakeholders, including customers, clients, suppliers and communities. It involves a cultural transformation that enhances collective efforts to manage impacts and deliver broader sustainability goals.

To get to the next level, we need to harness technology and apply a strong digitalisation and data management strategy. It's a mindset of continuous learning that allows the organisation to adapt to new challenges, technologies and best practices in sustainability.



Protect. Transform. Sustain.



Finally, what sustainability initiative are you most proud of and why?

I am particularly proud of the social impact strategy I helped design at Zelestra, enabling it to become a reality across all the countries where we operate and truly make a difference in the areas where we work. It's about using what we call the three E's - energy, education and environment - to help create a better, carbon-free future.

One program that is very dear to my heart is Zelestra Futures, which aims to equip the next generation with the necessary skills for a world that is net zero. This has given us the opportunity to link students and technical schools with the renewable energy industry, fusing their learning with real-world, cutting-edge applications. Seeing our staff members offer their time as mentors and share their knowledge and soft skills has also been fulfilling.

It has been a pleasure to see this program flourish in countries like Spain, Chile, and Peru, and I am eager to see it spread to other areas. I've learned from this experience how crucial it is to maintain adaptability and an open mind so that each location may modify the program to fit its own reality. It has been difficult yet rewarding to strike a balance between precise instructions and flexibility. Seeing how a goal with a purpose can motivate and inspire teams to perform at their highest level is really satisfying.

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