# SHIFT: A Field-Changing Collaboration of Researchers, Students, Practitioners, and Universities

## What Is SHIFT?

The Sustainability, Help, Information, Frameworks/Findings, and Tools platform (SHIFT) is a **website and community** of scholars and practitioners. **Its purpose is to make it easier for leaders at all stages of development to “hardwire” sustainability** into their organizations, communities, and investment portfolios.

SHIFT addresses a key problem for practitioners: the marketplace of sustainability information is **cluttered, fragmented, and un-moderated**, so organizations struggle to find the guidance needed to integrate sustainability into their core organizational and investment activities. As a result there is duplication of effort, and underutilization of high quality resources.

SHIFT addresses this problem by helping users **find, compare, and choose resources, and learn about what is important to them.** SHIFT does this by   
(1) Assembling resources from across the world into one, easily searchable catalogue of curated resources, organized by sustainability tasks (such as carbon footprinting, or making the business case for sustainability investments), and   
(2) Adding intelligence and editorial content you can't find anywhere else (e.g., which of the 200+ available carbon footprint calculators include food in their calculations?)

The team behind SHIFT is a **cross-sector collaboration** lead by the MIT Sloan School of Management and Valutus, and so far includes Biogen, CSRHub, MIT Sloan Management Review and MIT Press. SHIFT is initially a project at MIT, but has the ability to spin out as a separate organization if doing so will advance the mission.

We will measure the success of SHIFT by evaluating the extent to which more organizations:

* Move from interest in sustainability to serious investment and operationalization across the enterprise; and
* Do so in ways that create substantial value for business and society.

## Our Vision for SHIFT

Our pioneer group of collaborators see SHIFT as a catalyst for the transformation and acceleration of sustainability efforts around the world. How much faster could the field progress if there were far less reinventing the wheel and far more use of the best available resources? With SHIFT, we aim to find out.

We engage companies, investors, and entrepreneurs who have already made significant investments in hardwiring sustainability, as well as those at the beginning of their journey. We ask them to reflect on their experience, and identify the areas of sustainability practice that have been the most challenging.

In parallel, we engage a network of global universities, asking them to nominate their talented researchers and students, to organize and assess “best of the best” information, framework and tools on sustainability.

Bringing these two pieces together we hope to SHIFT management practice. Our **theory of change** is as follows:

* **If** we make it easier for people to discover world-class sustainability resources, **then** utilization of, and demand for, quality resources will increase—and this will catalyze the development of more high-quality tools for the field.
* **If** we apply greater rigor to the field, **then** sustainability will become more appreciated and respected in corporate and academic life, bringing more companies on board, and embedding sustainability concepts into core management practices and management education.
* **If** we provide business leaders and investors with better guidance on which tools to use, **then** those users will make better decisions than they would have otherwise, generating better business results and value.
* **If** we make it easier to evaluate groups of companies on their rate of sustainability improvement, **then** SHIFT will catalyze sustainability benchmarking and promote a corporate “race to the top.”
* **If** we make the performance and outcomes of sustainability efforts more transparent, **then** investors will use SHIFT resources to evaluate companies and allocate capital, and to make the case to their portfolio companies for investments in more sustainable products, services, and operations.
* **If** we make these results visible, **then** government agencies, regulators, and NGOs will see improvements in social and environmental performance, leading them to promote the use of SHIFT tools through certification, preferred purchasing arrangements, and other mechanisms.

## Business model

There are several possible revenue streams for SHIFT to ensure its own scalability and sustainability. Initially we are focusing on two:

* **Philanthropic support** for development of the core platform and organizational infrastructure. We have secured an initial gift from Biogen for this purpose.
* Sponsorship by companies, impact investors, universities, foundations, and others who want to address a particular practitioner problem. Instead of paying an intern or consultant to research the prior art and collect the best resources (which they often do as a first step), they pay SHIFT to do this curation work. The output is higher quality because of our economies of scale and unique expertise with exactly this type of research, and the results become a recognized contribution by the sponsor to the wider field of sustainability. Examples of **sponsored curation** to date:
  + MIT Sloan’s Sustainability Initiative heard repeated requests from students and alumni for tools to help quantify and communicate the business case for sustainability investments in companies. We sponsored curation of these tools.
  + Progressive real estate development firm Conservatorio in Panama sponsored curation of tools to support place-based sustainability, to support its own efforts and help diffuse best practices in sustainability to the wider real estate development sector.
* We are also considering paid subscription models, with a “freemium” pay wall. For example, searching for resources could be free, but custom curricula could be behind a pay wall. Our objective, however, is to make as much free as possible to help advance the field, and enable diffusion of sustainability practices to emerging markets and small/medium enterprises.

## How Universities, Researchers and Students Can Get Involved

We hope to engage the Alliance for Research on Corporate Sustainability (ARCS), the Network for Business Sustainability Centres Network (NBS), and their institutional and individual members to assist the development of SHIFT.

The primary opportunity is **allocation of researchers and students to perform curation work,** serving as “peer reviewers” of information, frameworks, findings and tools for SHIFT. Researchers and students should be up-and-coming experts in one or more specific areas of sustainability (e.g., supply chain governance, green product design) so they can help collect, review, rate, select, and categorize world-class resources for SHIFT.

If supported by their home institution, students could complete this work for academic credit either as a project supporting a course or as an independent project. For example, MIT students have done curation of resources for green product design as the final project for a 9 unit grad class. If the student work supports an area of sponsored curation, then participating researchers and students could be **provided with a stipend** for their work. Such arrangements could be worked out according to schools’ administrative procedures and pay scales.

In either case, curators are provided a practical desk research opportunity that allows them to deepen their developing competency in various domains of sustainability. We expect participation in this leading-edge research project to provide concrete skills and materials that can be used when entering the job market. As one example, a recent MIT Sloan graduate assisted with curation of resources for sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs, which significantly enhanced her consulting practice for agribusiness startups when she intimately knew the best tools to deploy.

Through this mechanism, university allies can be at the helm of a field-changing collaboration that showcases the school’s commitment to quality sustainability research and practice. If desired, participating universities will be provided the opportunity to **promote their participation** on the SHIFT website.

The second possibility is for universities to be financial **curation sponsors,** supporting the assembly of resources and curriculum for their own students and alumni, but making use of SHIFT’s curation network to help do the work.

## Next steps for involvement

If a center, initiative, or school is interested in participating in SHIFT and helping us change the trajectory of sustainability progress, please reach out to the SHIFT project team:

Jason Jay Daniel Aronson

Senior Lecturer & Director Principal

Sustainability Initiative at MIT Sloan Valutus

[jjay@mit.edu](mailto:jjay@mit.edu) daniel@danielaronson.com