

A Business Case to Embrace Sustainability

By Israa Thiab and Clyde Hull

Sustainable business practices are often seen as a luxury that only rich countries can afford. And these days, some of the biggest economies, including the United States, are backtracking on those commitments.

But what if businesses had an incentive to adopt practices that help the environment because it made sense for the bottom line?

We are researchers of business and sustainability who ran projects in both Jordan and the United States to see how entrepreneurs could adopt environmentally friendly practices in their day-to-day operations. In essence, we tried to embed in their business model the principle known as “circularity”: Products and materials should stay in use as long as possible through repair, reuse, remanufacturing, and recovery rather than just being thrown away.

We found that these ideas worked best when they served what business founders were already trying to do, rather than when presented as a separate cause. And entrepreneurs responded best

when sustainability was framed as an opportunity rather than an obligation and was connected to what they already cared about.

We argue that the adoption of such practices, more generally, shouldn’t require businesses, whether established or just starting up, to choose between profit and sustainability. Often, the two point in the same direction. When startup founders build products that last longer, recover more value from materials, and reduce dependence on fragile supply chains, they often create a more robust business. Environmental benefits follow naturally.

Frustration, then progress, in Jordan

We spent two years inside an entrepreneurship program in Jordan, from 2021 to 2023, trying to help founders build successful businesses around circularity. What we learned surprised us.

Our first cohort looked promising on paper, consisting of eighteen recruited participants with formal knowledge of business and sustainability. We then assigned them to specific waste sectors, such as polyester waste, divided among four teams. Our training relied on lectures and presentations



more than practical application. The results were disappointing. Only one of the four teams survived the incubation phase and went on to work in a business.

We also saw that many participants became frustrated. Some were assigned projects they didn’t

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2026

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Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration, Rhode Island District Office
Contact: Brian Hopkins, 401-528-4575, brian.hopkins@sba.gov
Fee: Free; registration required

This free workshop, presented by the Rhode Island District Office, is designed to help entrepreneurs understand the various SBA programs and services available to help them as they start, expand, grow, and recover their businesses. This overview presentation covers: Introduction to the SBA; SBA Resource Partner Network—Business Training and One-on-One Counseling; Selling to the Federal Government—SBA Contracting Certification Programs; Access to Capital—Loan and Surety Bond Programs; International Trade Assistance; Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Assistance Loans. Register online for the free workshop webinar at <https://www.sba.gov/event/80673>

Federal Contracting for Small Businesses Webinar
Tuesday, August 11, 2026, 11:00 am–12:30 pm CDT Online
Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration
Contact: Irene Gonzalez, 208-334-1673, irene.gonzalez@sba.gov
Fee: Free; registration required

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Tuesday, August 18, 2026, 1:00 pm–3:00 pm CDT Online
Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration
Contact: Patrice Dozier, patrice.dozier@sba.gov
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