

How Product Stewardship Impacts EHSQ Performance

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Once upon a time, few people gave any thought to the fate of what happened to light bulbs, paint cans, computers and leftover medications after they were done with them. Use them up, throw them away and leave it to the city to figure out how to dispose of them.

Today, that paradigm has been flipped on its head, with companies engaging in product stewardship initiatives that make disposal the responsibility of the manufacturer.

In today's post, we'll look at the business case for product stewardship, including how it directly impacts Environment, Health, Safety and Quality (EHSQ) performance.

Product Stewardship vs. Extended Producer Responsibility

People tend to use the terms product stewardship and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) interchangeably. In reality, the two have slightly different meanings:

- **Product stewardship:** According to the [Product Stewardship Institute](#), this term refers to activities that reduce the "health, safety, environmental and social impacts of a product and its packaging throughout all lifecycle stages." Product stewardship may refer to voluntary programs as well as regulatory requirements.
- **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR):** EPR is a specific type of product stewardship mandated by regulatory policy. Nearly [three dozen states](#) have EPR laws on the books, covering items from appliances to pharmaceuticals.

In addition to placing responsibility for end-of-life product management on manufacturers and others in the supply chain, product stewardship focuses on improving product design to minimize negative impacts. This includes activities like:

- Reducing or replacing toxic materials.
- Making a product easier to recycle.
- Creating products that last longer and/or are easier to repair.

Environmental Sustainability

One of the biggest impacts product stewardship has on an organization is in terms of environmental [sustainability](#). At its core, product stewardship is a strategy for reducing waste, but it also affects many other areas of environmental performance.

Product stewardship can have an impact on metrics such as:

- Quantities of waste generated.
- Amount of material recycled.
- Hazardous material usage.
- Toxic releases and unplanned events.

Ultimately, product stewardship requires companies to take a lifecycle approach that's also a part of improving environmental performance. Companies can't just design products to ship them out and then forget about them. Instead, they must provide for

them from cradle to grave, giving companies a vested interest in creating more sustainable products.

Efficiency is Quality

By reducing waste, product stewardship helps increase efficiency, a central goal of quality management. Waste reduction has a direct impact on a company's bottom line. Not only does it limit waste disposal costs, it reduces the amount of material needed for new products through more efficient recapture of recycled components.

A proactive approach to reducing waste and toxic materials across the product lifecycle also resonates with today's customers, helping companies better meet their expectations.

Healthy Products = Safer Employees

A primary goal of product stewardship initiatives is to reduce the human health impacts of manufactured products. In cases where companies are able to replace toxic product constituents with safer alternatives, that means a safer work environment with fewer health exposures for employees.

Limiting quantities of hazardous materials also limits opportunities for safety [incidents](#) at every step in the process. It all adds up to reduced risk for employees and lower safety costs for companies.

Whether or not you're currently engaged in product stewardship efforts, it makes sense to start thinking about how to step up proactively. Businesses today have a chance to work with regulators and the public to shape EPR policies, rather than waiting for local governments to pass fragmented policies that are difficult to comply with.

