

## Plastic as the great unknown

We fill the oceans with it, but we do not analyse it. We do not know how much plastic leaks into the environment during industrial production processes. While MVO Experts would like to know this, they do not even have hard figures about their own organisation. Let alone that they know what happens during transport or what the end-user does with the plastics. It is high time for a Plastic Footprint.

Plastics make our lives easy. It is not only cheap, but we can make all sorts of useful items from it. The demand for plastics is thus huge. The production of plastic has increased twenty-fold over the last fifty years. This is an enormous increase and it comes at a price. Environmental activists and advocacy organisations have been talking about the advantages and dangers of plastic for years. Given that the vast majority of plastic is synthetic and does not break down in the environment, where it often ends up, the level of hidden pollution has reached a vast scale. What is needed is greater understanding and awareness.

**More information on the consequences** of plastic on the environment and the food chain, among others, is being publicised. At present, only 28 percent of used plastic is recycled. The rest is not reused. Forty percent of the used plastics ends up in landfills or incinerators and the other 32 percent 'disappears' in the environment. Plastic that ends up in the environment – be it in water, in air or on land – in the form of macroplastic, microplastic or even nanoplastic, is called 'plastic leaks'. The figures do not lie. It follows that environmental activists and governments come up with proposals to reduce the use of plastic.

**The predominant thought** is that if individuals or organisations reduce their use of plastic by using alternatives and reusing, the plastic leaks and thus the environmental damage will decrease. Despite these attempts, the production of plastic still increases by eight percent every year.

Why is it so difficult to mobilise organisations to reduce their use of plastic? It is because of economic factors? As the base material for plastic is very cheap, the advantages – read cost savings – that go hand in hand with the reduction of plastic are minimal and are not immediately seen as an objective. Perhaps the reason lies in social responsibility. Very little is known about the use of plastic in general; the hazards of plastics; and the commercial considerations of plastic use. In order to gain greater understanding in how organisations think about and deal with plastics, the Impact Centre Erasmus (ICE) had done a survey among its members on the MVO Expert Panel.

**The majority (76 percent)** of the MVO Expert Panel members recognise the importance of gaining an understanding into the use of plastics in their own organisations, and almost as many members (73 percent) believe it important to gain an understanding of the use of plastic throughout the chain. However, practice is more fractious and shows different results. While almost half the respondents stated that they had insights into the use of plastics in the facility organisation, only a minor 15 percent stated that they had insights into the use of plastics throughout the chain. Apart from this, the picture of plastic leakage in their organisation in the production process (21 percent), assembly (17 percent), transport (17 percent) and the end user (13 percent) is limited. The results of the MVO Expert Panel show that organisations have a better view of the plastic use and plastic leakage in their own organisation than throughout the chain.

The same pattern can be seen in the experts' understandings of how to reduce plastic usage and leakage. The majority of respondents have ideas on reducing plastic usage in their own organisation (61 percent). In contrast, only a quarter (24 percent) of the experts have ideas on how to reduce plastic usage in the chain. This also applies to plastic leakage. Fewer than half the respondents (42 percent) know how they could reduce the plastic leakage in their own organisation. Of these, half (20 percent) have ideas of how to reduce plastic leakage in the chain. In terms of understanding and awareness, much needs to be done. Strikingly, many state that plastic usage or plastic leakage is not a relevant issue to their own organisation.

**One relevant question** to any goal to reduce plastic usage is where does the responsibility in the organisation lie. A high percentage of the respondents (see the table) believes that this is not the responsibility of one person or department, but of several people in the organisation. The overriding view is that this should be taken on board by the management and the procurement department. In practice, if different departments are held responsible, it is often unclear who should take control. And without firm control, there will rarely be concrete results.

**Surprising too** is the lack of transparency on plastics. No less than 83 percent of the MVO Experts stated that their organisations do not report on the use of plastics and 94 do not report on plastic leakage. Several respondents gave the reason for this as not relevant. Other MVO Experts state that the emphasis in their organisations lies on other environmental issues or that plastic reduction is still a relatively little known subject.

**Despite the limited implementation** of plastic usage related objectives, the lack of clarity about responsibility and the lack of transparency, the reduction of plastic is nevertheless a subject of discussion in the organisations. According to 39 percent of the respondents, their organisations are committed to initiatives designed to reduce plastic use. These could include Cradle to Cradle, Green Deal, sector initiatives and circular economy programmes. That the subject 'plastic reduction' plays a role in the organisations is apparent from the fact that the majority (57 percent) of the experts stated that reducing the use of plastics in their organisations is a subject of discussion. It is also a subject that is discussed during contact with suppliers (40 percent). Twenty-four percent of respondents stated that plastic reduction is a subject of discussion in the chain and 21 percent state that this is also the case in their sector.

**The policy regarding** the reduction of plastic usage and leakage is under development and far from being practiced. It is discussed here and there but there seems to be little or no coordination, minimal commitment and little goal setting. Awareness seems to be the first step. However, are organisations open to put their efforts into 'plastics' alongside their existing CSR portfolio? Forty percent of the experts believe that organisations are committed to working on reducing plastic usage. Forty-three of the experts are neutral on this and 17 percent believe that they would not be committed. This predominantly positive stance shows the confidence of our MVO Experts in the organisations and gives us hope. But major steps need to be taken to increase the awareness of organisations on plastics. More research and more publicity are required to make the quantity of plastic that is used, reused and wasted visible, as well as the resulting costs and responsibilities for the chain, the sector and the individual organisations.

**If organisations** could see the impact of plastics on the chain, and if the advantages of reduction measures are clearly promoted, many organisations will probably push 'plastic reduction' higher up the CSR agenda. But how can we create greater sensitivity for the scale and consequences of plastic on the environment and on human health? Or would you only see the scale of the problem if you go surfing in Bali and the fin of your surfboard slows you down because it gets stuck in the plastic soup? Or would the dead whales that recently stranded on the German Wadden Sea coast whose stomachs were full of plastics – including a 13 metre fishing net and 70 centimetre pieces of car parts – be

more poignant? Perhaps we could use a liquid that would highlight the nanoplastics in the food on your plate? That may just create a sense of urgency. How can we prevent people from hiding behind statements such as “Oh, it’s not that bad. Japanese scientists recently discovered a bacteria that eats PET so tackling the source is not really necessary, is it?”

**In the face of** the growing problems around the plastic soup and the results of this survey, work is being done to develop the Plastic Footprint. The Plastic Footprint is an initiative of the Plastic Soup Foundation (PSF), the Impact Centre Erasmus and PwC. It aims to make organisations more aware of current plastic streams in order to create support to reduce and simplify these and thus to pave the way for recycling and circularity. By tackling at source, we can minimise the leakage of plastic into the environment.

**FOTO**

MVO Experts: there is a large chasm between concern about the consequences of plastics and the will within organisations to prevent plastic leakage into the environment.

*If plastic enters the environment (water, air or land) in the form of macroplastics, microplastics or even nanoplastics, this is called ‘plastic leakage’*

**Responsibility for reducing plastic in an organisation**

	Yes, responsible	Neutral	No, not responsible
Management	71%	16%	13%
Procurement	79%	15%	6%
Production design / production	52%	34%	14%
Quality control, labour conditions, environment department / Sustainability	61%	24%	15%
Logistics/Distribution	48%	35%	17%

**Responsibility for plastic leakage in the organisation**

	Yes, responsible	Neutral	No, not responsible
Management	59%	31%	10%
Procurement	49%	37%	15%
Production design / production	48%	37%	16%
Quality control, labour conditions, environment department / Sustainability	56%	32%	12%
Marketing / Communications	23%	45%	32%
Logistics/Distribution	49%	34%	17%

*At least 83 percent of the MVO Experts stated that their organisation does not report on plastic usage and 94 percent does not report on plastic leakage.*

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### **Do you want to be part of the MVO Expert Panel?**

**The MVO Expert Panel was founded by the Erasmus School of Accounting & Assurance/Erasmus School of Economics and consists of CSR professionals and decision-makers from industry, government, advocacy organisations, not-for-profits, development agencies and charities. The participants are mostly CEOs/general managers and CSR managers from companies including from AEX/AMX companies and organisations from the professional networks of the participants. They are all decision-makers and/or advisors on Corporate Social Responsibility. The MVO Expert Panel also has teachers, former teachers and alumni of the Executive Program CSR.**

If you would like to take part in the MVO Expert Panel, please submit your application by email to **[mvo-expertpanel@ese.eur.nl](mailto:mvo-expertpanel@ese.eur.nl)**