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**An Essential Guide through Unavoidable Techno-Babble: Introducing a Must Read Guide to Sustainability Reporting**

Understanding G4 Framework: This book could very well become essential pre-reading for anyone starting a sustainability report.

Submitted by: **Guest Contributor**  
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 Series: **DōShorts: 90 Minute Reads on Business Sustainability**  
 Tags: doshorts, sustainability, gri, g4, sustainability reporting, csr, disclosure, transparency, research and reporting, technology, metrics, standards

By **Alan AtKisson**

Part of the *DōShorts* collection

In a minute, I am going to tell you why Elaine Cohen's *DōShorts Understanding G4: The Concise Guide to Next Generation Sustainability Reporting* is a must-read for anybody working in sustainability. But first I need to give you some background.

I have been a keen observer, and user, of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and its sustainability reporting guidelines since the GRI was first hatched by a couple of Boston-based visionaries, Bob Massie and Allen White, in the late 1990s. As I was one of the founders, back in 1991, of the Sustainable Seattle initiative – the world's first urban sustainability indicators program, which became (and this was a big surprise to us) a widely recognized and replicated model for sustainability indicator work generally – I took special interest in the spread of the GRI.

While I continued working with many other colleagues on globalizing and standardizing the general practice of measuring sustainability (throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s), it was inspiring to watch the GRI's concept of *corporate* sustainability indicators get born, clarified, institutionalized ... and then sweep the planet. Today, many thousands of companies and organizations use these voluntary guidelines to report on their social, environmental, health and other impacts.

Over the years I have promoted, used, consulted on, and occasionally criticized the GRI guidelines. This long familiarity has probably made me a bit blasé and complacent. And in fact, during the intensive process whereby the GRI upgraded itself from version "G3" to "G4," I did not pay enough attention to what was actually happening. What attention I did give was focused on joining a chorus of voices, orchestrated by sustainability sharpshooter Mark McElroy, complaining that the GRI's concept of "sustainability context" – that is,

the part of a report that defines what the planet and its people can actually tolerate and how the company relates to those limits – was once again left far too mushy.

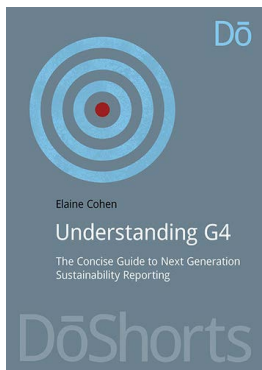
**A Primer to GRI's Latest Upgrade**

What good is a sustainability report if it doesn't actually tell you whether a company's operations are sustainable?

But then, I am a raging idealist on these matters.

**Elaine Cohen**, who is no doubt idealistic herself (why else does anyone work in sustainability?), is clearly much more practical. That, plus the great wisdom, experience and indeed humor that she brings to the subject of GRI's latest upgrade, is likely to prove invaluable to readers.

In fact, it is entirely possible that you, like me (prior to reading it), do not yet realize how much you



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need this book. As Cohen makes clear, **G4 is no mere upgrade**. It is a paradigm shift. To understand how to make the shift, you are well advised to employ her as a guide. (At a price of £30, her book is a steal because of all the time it will save you.)

Cohen's no-nonsense writing style is refreshing. But don't be fooled: she is also a non-ironic, tireless promoter for sustainability reporting and for the new G4 approach in particular, labeling it a "major leap forward" and "the future." Whether that is true remains to be seen, but G4 is, in any event, the *near* future for corporate sustainability reporting. And therefore unavoidable for anyone working in the field.

### Sustainability Reporting: Why G4 Matters...

For people who know the GRI and its previous G3 guidelines (or the interim upgrade G3.1), the biggest question is, "What's different?"

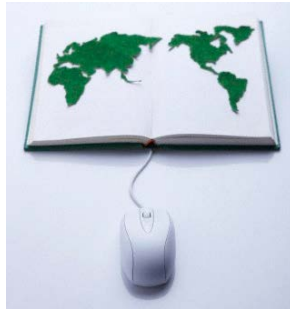
Cohen helps you understand the biggest differences quickly, and more importantly, she helps you orient yourself in the new GRI reporting environment. G4 is far more focused on "materiality," which basically means identifying and prioritizing the issues that are actually relevant to the company. She tells you what to look for in navigating this new environment, but also how to know when you've found it:

"If, when you pick up a G4 report, you cannot identify the material issues within five seconds, it's not G4."

### ...Despite its Quirks

G4 aimed to dramatically improve the universe of sustainability reporting, and Cohen marshals both facts and quotes that establish that it very likely succeeded. But G4 has also worsened the English language. Performance indicators are no longer called indicators, for example; they are now referred to, in G4-techno-babble, as "Specific Standard Disclosures." These indicators-in-disguise have even earned their own acronym: SSD. Cohen rightly calls the increasingly mysterious language of GRI "a bit cult-like" but notes that she, like you, has "little choice but to use this language."

Then, in one of the many useful things you will find crammed into this **DōShort**, she provides you with a useful lexicon. I will no doubt be turning to this lexicon often in the coming two years, because I am one of those who find GRI language impossible to remember in any detail.



How do you start with G4? What should you focus on? Why should you care? Cohen tackles all these questions with verve, and builds a sense of trust with her reader by combining irreverence with a deep appreciation and knowledge of her subject.

Cohen's book could very well become essential pre-reading for anyone starting out on G4 reporting, and I would highly recommend it even for very experienced consultants. There were things I thought I understood about G4 that I clearly did not; but a quick romp through Cohen's lucid text and concise diagrams helped me (1) figure out where I was lacking in understanding, and then (2) rapidly feel like an expert again.

Kudos to Elaine Cohen and her publisher, **Dō Sustainability!** With this 115-page book on my computer, I am no longer afraid of the mysterious G4. I might even be able to talk intelligently with my clients again. Well done ... and thank you!

### About the Author:

*Alan AtKisson has worked with sustainability initiatives in over 40 countries. He has held several chief executive roles, in addition to his business role as President and CEO of AtKisson Group, a network of nine private consultancies, three national-level non-profit foundations, three prominent university centers of expertise and about 15 other independent associates, in 18 countries around the world. In 2013, Alan was appointed to the President's Science and Technology Advisory Council by the President of the European Commission and elected into the Sustainability Hall of Fame by the International Society of Sustainability Professionals. Alan has served as a transitional chief executive to lead institutions through major change processes. One of these was the global Earth Charter Initiative in 2006-2007.*

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