Stream 14

Competitive Session

Abstract Only in Program

**Making sense of Sustainability Work**

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**ABSTRACT**: *Corporate sustainability is becoming a prominent feature of organisations, yet differing views prevail regarding how sustainability work occurs. A novel approach is introduced to unpack how sustainability work occurs through the theoretical lens of ‘work’ as being purposeful and strategic activities conducted by individuals and organisation to affect their socio-symbolic contexts. Adopting a narrative perspective, we analyse how individuals frame their sustainability work across a range of diverse organisations and industries. We find that sustainability work is distinct, but takes some unsurprising forms through ‘legitimised’ organisational functions (such as reporting and benchmarking). Another dimension intertwined with these activities is work to legitimise the inherent ‘purpose’ of the sustainability work, suggesting sustainability work is likely an organisational rather than occupational profession.*

**Keywords**: corporate sustainability, corporate social responsibility, work, sensemaking

**INTRODUCTION**

Corporate sustainability (CS) is considered as necessary for being competitive (Kiron, Kruschwitz, Haanaes, & Von Streng Velken, 2012), for influencing investment decisions (Unruh et al., 2016), and is becoming a strategic priority for organisations, exemplified by managerial surveys (Kiron et al., 2017), attention from leading management (and strategy) consultants,[[1]](#footnote-1) and board oversight (see for example Bower & Paine, 2017). Corporate sustainability is more than taking responsibility for business activities; it means understanding how business operates within the human and ecospheric systems from which it is enabled (Bansal & Song, 2017).

Surprisingly, most research on corporate sustainability has been at the level of the organisation and on antecedents and consequences, despite seminal (Starik & Rands, 1995) and more recent (Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2015) work conceptualising corporate sustainability as a multi-level construct. Researchers (e.g. Jonker & De Witte, 2006; Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010; Maon, Lindgreen, & Swaen, 2010; Porter, 2008) acknowledge specific gaps in the literature on managerial agency and micro-level processes in the development of corporate sustainability. Other researchers (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Orlitzky, Siegel, & Waldman, 2009) point to the need for cross-level research that can link individual behaviour and attitudes and internal processes with sustainability as an organisational-level phenomenon.

In this vein, Zollo et al. (2013) claim that sustainability is underachieved in organising precisely because the ‘how’ of enabling sustainability processes is under-examined in academic studies, even though the vast breadth of relevant activity is recognised (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). More recently it has been claimed that the ‘how’ is complex and extends beyond a strategic or change management agenda to the enabling of sustainable value across value networks and the embedding of sustainability within the core purpose of the organisation (Bhattacharya & Polman, 2017). Such integration of sustainability across organisational functions, and potentially through the value chain, is challenging, and is further complicated when coordinated action is required through a ‘strategic’ (i.e. comprehensive and integrated) approach.

Given the lack of consensus in the literature regarding the nature of this activity, in this paper we ask: How is sustainability enacted in the context of work? We explore what we term ‘sustainability work’ in this empirical paper, which provides preliminary findings and analysis from a continuing study. To explore this question, we adopt a novel micro-sociological work (Okhuysen et al., 2015; Phillips & Lawrence, 2012) perspective to examine the activity and agency of sustainability work in fine-grained detail. This complements the recent ‘micro-turn’ in sustainability research (Wickert, Risi, & Matten, 2017), in that it responds to the recognised knowledge gap (for example, as argued by Aguinis & Glavas, 2012) on managerial agency and intra-organisational processes in the development of corporate sustainability. In addition to this contribution, our findings have managerial implications for how sustainability work might be conceptualised within organisations.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**What is Sustainability Work?**

Understanding how sustainability has been enabled within organisations is often understood through the role of change agents (Visser, 2007; Wickert & de Bakker, 2016), leaders (Waldman & Siegel, 2008), champions (Walley & Stubbs, 1999) or institutional entrepreneurs (Thompson, Herrmann, & Hekkert, 2015). Those tasked with enabling sustainability within organisations have variously been characterised as leading cross-cutting and multi-dimensional agendas (Galbreath, 2009) and establishing a longer-term strategic focus (Slawinski & Bansal, 2012). They are challenged by selecting or developing multi-purpose objectives and measures (Schaltegger, Lüdeke-Freund, & Hansen, 2012) and negotiating the inherent trade-offs between these (Neugebauer, Figge, & Hahn, 2016) such that they need to coordinate highly pluralised stakeholder interests within and outside the organisation (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2007). The nature of corporate sustainability itself is an additional challenge. It is an ambiguous concept and best understood as a sensemaking phenomenon, constructed and enacted by multiple individuals (Angus-Leppan, Metcalf, & Benn, 2010; Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Guthey & Morsing, 2014). Some have claimed this ambiguity creates incoherence to the extent that executives are often “flailing around, launching a hodgepodge of initiatives” (Lubin & Esty, 2010: 44).

This sustainability work and the organisational roles through which such work is achieved cannot be generalised, as it has been recognised that CS varies widely by industry and specific context, and as such, frameworks for staged models (Lubin & Esty, 2014), phase models (Benn et al., 2014) or developmental models (Landrum, 2017) have been developed. Within such models the role of the change leadership has been signified (Lueneburger & Goleman, 2010), albeit for different purposes and means within different stages (Benn et al., 2014; Miller & Serafeim, 2014) and organisational cultural contexts (Linnenluecke, Russell, & Griffiths, 2009).

Returning to Zollo et al.’s claim, we discern from other scholarly studies, that the ‘how’ of CS is complex, spanning across divisions and departments, being both functional and strategic, sometimes embedded across organisational roles and sometimes concentrated in specific managerial roles. Thereby it is a form of work characterised by equivocality, at times being central to organisational decision-making processes and organisational policies and while also being issue specific, locally-contextualised within an organisational division, thereby characterised as an incoherent set of practices or considered ambiguous when being implemented.

A research agenda encompassing a sensemaking approach (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005) is well suited to such situations and this should be expansive to understand the role of different human actors in enabling sustainability within organisations, including all of the ‘shop-floor’, middle managers and the top management team, irrespective of their ostensible CS leadership. Therefore we adopt a micro-narrative perspective, to examine actor meaning-making in fine-grained detail, drawing on the burgeoning theoretical and methodological literature on the ‘turn to work’ (Okhuysen et al., 2015) discussed in the next section. Our research therefore sought to understand how sustainability is enabled within organisations that are seeking to further their sustainability agendas. We focussed on the emerging role of those purposefully enacting sustainability within organisations and how they made sense of their sustainability work.

**Reconceptualising Agency in Sustainability Work**

In this section we discuss our novel micro-sociological work perspective on the enactment of sustainability. The question of “what people actually do – the skills, knowledge, and practices that comprise their routine work” (Barley and Kunda, 2001: 90) in “the effortful accomplishment of collective tasks” (Okhuysen et al., 2015: 6) is a longstanding (for example, see Carroll and Gillen, 1987) and fundamental concern in management and organisation studies. However, the nature of the work of sustainability, broadly conceived, and which is done within and beyond organisations (Bansal & Song, 2017), is poorly understood. We regard the extant research on the specific role of Sustainability Officers (SO) as under-theorised. It is limited to assessing the prevalence of SOs and equivalent positions within organisations (Miller & Serafeim, 2014; Strand, 2013), observations on the potential activities and significance of the SO (Strand, 2014), and the supposed skills required. It relies on espoused and/or supposed roles and responsibilities of the SO (for example, in ‘executing a sustainability strategy’ or ‘managing stakeholder relations’ (Miller & Serafeim, 2014: 3) or ‘measuring sustainability’ (Sroufe, 2017: 323)).

In contrast with these functionalist and managerialist assumptions, we adopt an interpretive/constructionist perspective as a way of understanding how SOs view their goal-directed actions. Our conception of sustainability work and its potentially different forms enables a reconceptualisation of agency in the enabling of sustainability. Work and organising are “bound in dynamic tension” (Barley & Kunda, 2001: 76) and so our approach to elucidate organising for sustainability (following Zollo et al.’s (2013) comments noted earlier) is therefore to consider the work of sustainability as more than mere metaphor.

The domain of work is vast, fuelled by varied substantive, sub-disciplinary and epistemological perspectives (Korica et al., 2017; Okhuysen et al., 2015). We adopt as our starting point the recent conceptualisation of work as “individuals and organisations purposefully and strategically expending effort to affect their social-symbolic context” (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012: 223). The authors highlight recent research on 15 forms of work (such as strategy work, values work and idea work) which have common characteristics. All involve human actors engaged in a purposeful effort; and the focal phenomena are social-symbolic in that they are constituted by social relations and through language. This specific approach to work (i.e. that it is goal-directed and effortful, irrespective of the perceived success of the actions) is directly relevant to our focus on human actors purposefully enacting sustainability within organisations, in contrast with alternative contemporary approaches to work such as a practice perspective (Korica et.al., 2017; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) where the unit of analysis is the routinised and socially legitimised ways of doing things, ‘practices’, which are variously defined.

In this context, we understand sustainability work as an umbrella construct, defined as any on-going activity where the intent is to purposefully shape the socio-symbolic context such that social and environmental outcomes are prioritised. As noted earlier, the context within which sustainability work is considered is relevant to the interpretation of shaping the socio-symbolic context, as there may be a spectrum of different approaches which differ according to organisational maturity, priorities or values (Landrum and Ohsowski, 2018; Benn et al, 2014; Lubin and Etsy, 2014).

We see three potential benefits of adopting this specific work perspective. Firstly, it provides a nuanced conception of SO and other actor agency as enabled and constrained by context, which includes the specific social-symbolic structures which are the focus of each form of work. Secondly, (as defined), it supplements a functional perspective on the enactment of sustainability (as discussed earlier) with a social-symbolic perspective. This further suggests that enacting sustainability entails aspects of organising (i.e. socially constructing) which have been neglected, because they have been regarded as unremarkable, irrelevant to the enactment of sustainability, or beyond the control of the SO or other human actor. Thirdly, it points to the heterogeneous nature of the work entailed. Researchers adopting this form of work lens frequently identify the coexistence, interplay and sequencing of multiple forms of work (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012). For example, in a non-sustainability context, Cloutier et al. (2016) trace the interplay of four forms of work (structural, conceptual, operational and relational) under the umbrella concept of institutional work in a policy reform process; similarly Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) trace the interplay of boundary work and practice work as two forms of institutional work in the context of institutional change in coastal forestry.

In a sustainability context, Bertels et al. (2014) differentiate between direct and indirect institutional work in in the context of US challenger movements. Studying the enactment of sustainability through our work lens means being alert to a variety of forms of work because SOs and others will seek to manipulate *multiple* aspects of their social-symbolic context. For example, strategy work is recognised as fundamental to the SO function (Miller & Serafeim, 2014; Sroufe, 2017; Strand, 2013), but the broader effort involved may include, inter alia, institutional work (Gond et al., 2013; Gond et al., 2011), emotion work (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), identity (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Ghadiri, Gond, & Brès, 2015), values work (Gehman, Treviño, & Garud, 2013) and idea work (Carlsen, Clegg, & Gjersvik, 2012).

**METHOD**

We sought to understand sustainability work by soliciting accounts from those actively engaged in such work. We adopted a narrative lens for this interpretivist, inductive, interview-based study.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

We took two samples that had been collected for previous studies that related to understanding sustainability work in corporations. In each of those data sets individuals had been identified as those responsible for embedding sustainability within their organisations. We are aware of the limitations of this form of collection, but see this as a pilot study to establish an ongoing field of research. Given we were interested in how people make sense of sustainability work broadly, a representative sample is not necessary. What is of note about the sampling is a key distinction between the organisational types in terms of their own understanding of their sustainability work. Set one were identified through a government-assisted industry program to assist organisations in defining their sustainability work. The second set were identified as being leaders in implementing more advanced sustainability policies associated with industrial ecology.

We analysed interviews adopting Boje’s (Boje, 2001; Vaara et al., 2016) conception of the nature of storytelling in organisations in that individual narratives (i.e. of self or the organisation) are rarely presented full-formed. Instead they typically comprise “fragmented, ambiguous and unresolved” (Dawson, 2013: 260) ‘antenarratives’. Our analysis follows classic interpretative studies (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) in undertaking first-order then second-order steps. Firstly, we developed first-order narratives for each interviewee which stayed close to the text, but they were our own narrative interpretations (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van De Ven, 2013) as well as a data reduction technique. Each narrative was two to three pages in length drawing out interview text where sustainability work was being described, the barriers and enablers of such work and the future directions or vision of their work. While a research product in their own right, these narratives formed the basis of the second step which consisted of the development of a meta-comparative table across the interviewees narratives to determine similarities and differences in the substance and nature of the work being described. These remain first-order themes: the self-reported bundled set of activities that respondents said that they used to shape their socio-symbolic contexts thereby seeking to affect change. In our subsequent second-order analysis, we used our our work lens to identify higher-order categories.

**FINDINGS**

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 provide an overview of the key first-order themes by interviewee consolidated across the two samples. While more detailed analysis falls outside the scope of this conference paper, of interest is to identify the first-order themes (i.e. bundles of activities as tools) that were common and ostensive components of sustainability work. We sought to categorise what the SO said they were ‘doing’. In part, what we find in Table 1.1 and 1.2 is unsurprising, in that they correspond to commonly-held views (as discussed earlier) on the practice of enacting sustainability and specifically to Lubin & Esty’s (2010: 44) ‘hodgepodge’ of initiatives.

In contrast, viewed through our second-order analysis work lens, these themes assume greater significance. Surprisingly, most activity was not focused on what might be considered strategic outcomes but on legitimising sustainability, and conversely on individual identification – meaning-making on the role of the SO and the work entailed.

Firstly, we identified two broad subsets of sustainability work (this categorisation reflects our initial analysis and may prove to be a simplification). We label these strategic work and institutional work. Strategic work refers to goal-directed efforts to further ostensive sustainability performance. Institutional work means efforts to legitimise sustainability strategies, agendas and SO roles and practice. While this latter (institutional) component of sustainability work has been acknowledged in the literature (for example in the context of professionalisation (Miller & Serafeim, 2014)), our first finding and contribution is that all components of sustainability work vary greatly depending on the social-symbolic context of the SO. In short, different levels of organisational ‘maturity’ entail very different forms of work within these two broad categories.

The second key finding is the problematisation of sustainability work expressed by all interviewees. When comparing between the two samples, we find a stark contrast in the context of those narratives. We identified these as being different forms of expressed tension (see Table 2). In the first set the tensions are largely experienced within their own organisations. They discuss struggles with broader engagement from employees, the board and senior management. In some cases this is resolved by working within the existing ‘business case’ (such as a five-year pay back justification) or existing strategic priorities of the company. In the second set of interviews, the tensions were experienced when trying to get buy-in or recognition from external stakeholders. Those in the first interview recognised this, but in the context of ‘future initiatives’ where they recognised their work would require influencing external stakeholders. Therefore we conclude that as an organisation matures in their sustainability journey, they are more likely to encounter work ambiguity derived from other stakeholders being uncertain about the purpose of their activities. For example, Dairy explains being misunderstood by financiers, Designers discuss being misunderstood by suppliers, and Manufacturers as being misunderstood by customers.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

We can discern a thing called sustainability work in context of a contemporary conceptualisation (of work) in the work as activities to shape the socio-symbolic context (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012) with an aim to achieve social and/or environmental outcomes. Typically, sustainability work was facilitated by organisational practices such as benchmarking, reporting, achieving standards and justifying sustainability initiatives within a typical business case (or for example the 5-year payback period). In parallel, the SOs were consumed with orchestrating, making sense and giving sense to a broad and diverse set of responsibilities and activities they undertook within the organisation. Sensemaking and boundary spanning were intertwined with the more typical functions of sustainability work. Prior research has shown the legitimacy struggles faced by SOs (Prasad & Elmes, 2005; Starik & Marcus, 2000), and indeed, as an aside, by sustainability academics (Waddock, 2015). Recent nascent research (Gond et al., 2013; Gond et al., 2011; Risi & Wickert, 2017; Williams, 2017) has examined the agency of SOs in (successfully) institutionalising sustainability as a legitimate strategic agenda within organisations through discursive and other institutional work. In contrast, we found that often the legitimisation and sensegiving of sustainability absorbed much of the SOs’s productive capacity, in lieu of them pursuing any more obviously goal-directed activity.

Despite legitimising being a consistent feature of sustainability work is distinctive, this was always individually constructed within the specific organizational contests and was constantly being (re)defined. Perhaps this recursivity occurs as organisations are in continuous sustainability-related transition, never obtaining an end-state, but rather on a sustainability journey (Milne et. al 2016). Phillips and Lawrence (2012) emphasise the impact of potentially neglected organisational functions that are focused on social-symbolic elements of organisations (e.g. the strategy, risk, HR, and legal functions) and their agency derived from successful interaction with other organisational functions. We see SOs in this light. Our study showed their discursive (sensemaking and sensegiving) practices across many different functions, in parallel with the functional practices which were more obviously intrinsic to their span of control across these same functions. Another component became apparent and warrants future research, that the ongoing sensemaking of ‘purpose’. More so in the mature type organisations as they were trying to undertake new forms of institutional work to modify their external environments, here the very purpose of shaping the socio-symbolic context becomes of interest in and of itself.

Although this line of research is in an infancy stage, and our current sample is limited by size and therefore unable to be generalised, unpacking the work of sustainability officers through our narrative lens suggests further research might look to problematises the role and work of the SO as an occupational professional. Miller and Serafeim (2014) understand the Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO) as the latest in a stream of C-suite roles that have emerged in the face of shifts in the business landscape. In this way, CSOs logically follow in the path of the CFO (Chief Financial Officer) and CIO (Chief Information Officer) among others. The authors infer that the scope and significance of the CSO role will follow the same trajectory as these C-suite colleagues towards their concomitant institutionalisation and professionalisation (Risi & Wickert, 2017) within the organisation. The preliminary work in our study suggests that certain aspects of the work of the SO may be more difficult to institutionalize within a specific role, especially where it entails manipulating multiple aspects of the functional and social-symbolic context. SOs is characterised as an emerging type of *organisational* professional, in contrast with established *occupational* professionals. This means that SOs must rely on their craft-like, generalist, and tacit knowledge base, and that their nascent institutional and professional status may be easily eroded (Risi & Wickert, 2017). Within the organisational context the professionalisation of their roles may be connecting and leveraging sustainability across various socio-symbolic contexts may indeed be the key dimension of their professional status.

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**Table 1.1: Dimensions Of Sustainability Work for Sample 1**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Type of Sustainability work**  | **Summary comparison** |
| ***Benchmarking*** was discussed by SOs in four ways: “investigating how other people did their work”, “meeting with that group (of companies in the same industry) to share ideas”, “comparing” within the industry, and comparing against their own previous performance.  | The most enthusiastic indication of the importance of benchmarking came from Bricks, who pointed to examples of progress within the company based on improvements when benchmarked against their own internal sustainability performance. By the SA definition, Bricks had also made the most progress in transitioning to a sustainable business model.Intra-industry comparisons across all aspects of the SOs’ work were discussed as difficult because of the problem of finding an appropriate benchmark partner.SOs did not appear to make a connection between the difficulty they experienced with benchmarking and their lack of progress in transitioning to sustainability. For example, ClubC repeatedly talked about being “rudderless” when it came to having sustainability goals, but did not connect benchmarking with finding direction. |
| ***Sensegiving***was the process through which SOs attributed coherence and meaning to their sustainability work and seeked to influence the sensemaking and meaning making of others. | All SOs talked about sensegiving as part of their role in transitioning the company to sustainability, albeit each with a different focus and level of detail.ClubT and Hotel discussed their sensegiving processes in terms of promoting behaviour changes. Shipping used information about “risks and opportunities but also sustainability trends” to open sensegiving conversations. Care talked about sensegiving using practical symbols of sustainability like solar panels. The outlier was ClubC who talked about wanting to be a recipient of sensegiving, saying, “I have had very little exposure to this kind of thing except for the Sustainable Advantage. There’s no one telling you what to do here”. |
| ***Upselling***was the work associated with receiving legitimacy from senior management and boards.  | Bricks, Hotel, ClubT and Shipping regarded upselling as something they did well and as important to transitioning the company to sustainable business models. For example, Bricks said, “senior management is starting to get the message” because he reported directly to the MD and proudly said, “I’ve managed to get enviro performance metrics as 5% of everyone’s bonus calculation”. In contrast, Bank, Care and ClubC did not talk about upselling. Care suggested that it was not necessary, saying, “we don’t have barriers in management because we have good business support from management”. Bank suggested that approval for sustainability projects came naturally from strategy and her position as a former board member of the bank.ClubC felt incapable of upselling… “I’m very good at following instructions, if someone could just say this is what the goal is, I’m all there. Let’s go. The CEO and the Board want progress, but they don’t know what to do next either”. |
| ***Developing Strategy/Reporting***was work associated with measuring, evaluating and communicating the outcomes of sustainability work. The development of formal sustainability strategy was important for some SOs but not others. | Bank, said, “one of the first things we did was around vision and planning, we created a board approved document” and she had relied on the document to facilitate funding approval for sustainability projects. Shipping used strategy development as a place to “push it as a sustainability strategy…banging heads sometimes”. In contrast, ClubC, ClubT, Bricks and Hotel did not have a formal written strategy. For Bricks and Hotel strategy was “in my head”, suggesting that they did not use a strategy document or strategy development process as a transition tool. ClubT said that he was “working really closely with the OEH at the moment on a five-year plan”. These SOs also did less formal reporting. Hotel did the least reporting, saying that “I might wait a couple of years to see if something takes over as far as standard reporting”. However, Bricks used internal reporting to the board to leverage (board level) conversations about “other enviros”, after initially trying to do something more formal. Significantly, only Bank and Shipping produced formal reports. |
| ***Accreditation*** was work associated with achieving accreditation of sustainability performance by the SA program. | Most SOs pointed to the usefulness of the SA program in providing guidance for the transition to sustainability. All but one of the SOs (Bricks) said that they were the main driver for gaining accreditation with SA. Bricks said that his company was one of the first to earn the gold standard. Some SOs with silver recognition felt that, in the early days of sustainability transition, the SA program was very helpful, but that in achieving gold accreditation, they took their time as it was “quite daunting” (ClubT) and “a big deal” (Bank). In contrast, Care was very keen to be the first company in their industry to earn gold accreditation and was pushing ahead, despite the conditions for their gold accreditation being “hard to work on”.Not all SOs were enthusiastic about earning accreditation. Shipping saw gaining SA accreditation as “more a recognition and networking program, and less about actual tangible outcomes”. Hotel said that “We don’t yet have accreditation with Sustainability Advantage. I have looked at it and I’m debating”. |
| ***Capturing Innovation*** was work identifying, enabling and creating new sustainability-oriented practices, processes and/or products. | The work of innovating and implementing innovation in their organization fell to the SOs was a continuous process driving the organization’s transition to sustainability. The SOs sometimes grappled with innovation, notably ClubC who said that he was always looking for advice on “what to do next”, and Hotel who said that he faced questions like, “If we start to do well with our waste streams in the kitchens, how do we get customers to separate their trash in the rooms…without overstepping their luxurious experience?”. ClubC was delighted with a breakthrough in innovation that came from his work with SA as “the idea of influencing suppliers is new to us…. With the help of SA we are putting conditions on our suppliers to make sure it is in the best interest of sustainability”.Other SOs grappled with innovating on a tight budget. For example, Shipping has found a company that “take your sludge oil and turn it into a petrol product or rubber for the roads…it’s just a matter of (me) finding what is affordable” and Care is looking at “how can we engage with local suppliers…ensure that sense of shared responsibility among our suppliers…get some wins doing that that won’t cost us a whole lot more”. Finally, more experienced SOs are able to discover innovation within existing operations. For example, Bricks happened upon an innovation that one of the plants had implemented on their own initiative. In another example, ClubT discovered the expertize for the development of an employee wellbeing program within the club, “one of the staff, just finished her PT qualification, she wanted a go at running this sort of thing, so we handed over the reins to her, and she has taken it to a next level, to the point where it is now a full-blown well-being program”. |

**Table 1.2: Dimensions Of Sustainability Work for Sample 2**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Type of Sustainability work**  | **Summary comparison** |
| *Benchmarking*  | In stark contrast to sample 1, for sample 2 SOs, benchmarking is intrinsic to their work. SOs talk about becoming the industry benchmark, about “looking at something that’s Australia’s first” (Dairy), about being the “glue between silos” (Circulate 2). Most sample 2 SOs talk about influencing industry and government policy and about how, due to the interconnected nature of their involvement in industry, it is part of their roles to intimately understand where they stand in relation to other industry players and the whole system in which they are embedded. For example, Recyclers says that as “one of the five approved co-regulatory authorities under the Product Stewardship Act…we have a number of hats in this market and I would consider myself to be very well educated in where we're at as far as the industry's concerned and where I would like to see the industry get to”. One example where the SO talks about transitioning their organisation to setting the new industry benchmark is Circulate. Circulate started out in the cartridge refilling business that was in direct competition with OEMs (printer and copier companies) but wanted to set a new quality benchmark that would involve developing a new machine: *One of the unique selling propositions of our business was I would go to schools everything we supply”. So they’d be giving me all sorts of cartridges back and we’d be supplying all sorts of things and I ended up with half a warehouse full and I realised wow, I need a machine to recycle all this stuff because it’s just such a complex waste stream and poorly designed and it was going to be horrendous to try and disassemble by hand, which we did start trying, we did start to do.* Following an “epiphany”, Circulate decided to “disassociate” from the refilling industry and align with their competitors instead:*I started to think okay, what’s that machine going to look like, how can I fund such a thing? Of course, the OEMs! Why don't I work with the original equipment manufacturers rather than against them which I was doing by refilling their cartridges.*Dairy explains that “from day one, we’ve just set up a business with ethics at the base of it*”* and they aim to be the ethical standard in their industry. Designers alluded to the “close knit” nature of their industry and the industry tendency to emulate new standards.Manufacturers has been instrumental in designing product stewardship programs within their industry.Only one SO, Logistics, talked about internal benchmarks based on the business case.  |
| *Sensegiving*  | Whilst sample 1 SOs discuss sensegiving sustainability *within* their organisations, sample 2 SOs are acting as sensegivers *outside* their organisations, with competitors, industry partners, government and consumers. They talk about being in the business of “challenging the status quo to inspire behavioural change” (Circulate2), “disrupting the model” (Circulate) and “imposing our will on the supply chain” (Designers). An example where cost savings enabled a new sharing model comes from Circulate: *I was able to convince competitors, printer and copier companies who were competitors to cooperate…and share the logistics cost. Get economies of scale on the logistics because instead of bringing one cartridge back with an Australian Post label, we were now bringing 40-50 cartridges back in a bag. Yes there were a lot of different OEMs in there but they were sharing the freight cost.* Another example where cost saving was the key to sensegiving sustainability comes from Logistics: *some (customers) are more sophisticated than other customers. So you might have one of our automotive spare parts customers, and their level of sophistication for a new brand that's just, you know, Chinese brand that's just setting operations in Australia. Their level of sophistication in packaging is about zero, and so they're sending things to us in big metal cases, and we go back to them and go, no this is crazy. This is really inefficient. This costs a lot. This is a problem, and they go, oh. Well how do other people do it? And so we go, well what about this and what about that. So because they're not very sophisticated you can influence them.* Sensegiving sustainability using the broader value of sustainability is largely thought of by this group as part of an ideal future. For example, Circulate2 says, “When the future does change it will be driven by legislation. It will be driven by cost and by the people in the street. People (will) start to understand the real value of food waste when it gets turned into a reusable product”. In this regard, some of the companies in this group are leading by example. For instance, Designers created support for farmers growing ethical wool and Recyclers says of Manufacturers: *(Manufacturers) is one of those companies that their CFO supports their environmental statements. The old saying, put your money where your mouth is. (Manufacturers) is an amazing example of a company that will invest money out of their bottom line to get an environmental outcome for themselves and their customers.*Manufacturers laments the current lack of “moral imperative” for sustainability in Australia these days: “What I’ve seen is less of a focus on the environmental credentials when we go into tenders for example than what there might’ve been a couple of years ago”. However, even in this climate, Dairy have been able to replace less sustainable brands on the shelves of major supermarkets:*XXX supermarket just got in touch with me. They’ve set up a whole department called the Local Buying department or something like that. Their whole job is to source local products, promote local products in XXX supermarket – which they don’t normally promote anything at XXX supermarket – and make sure that we’re looked after properly, all us small, local suppliers. And I’ve sort of been pretty big in that move. You can walk into any one of my (local) XXX supermarket stores and I’ve got all the eye height shelves and a full width of the fridge door and it’s all just sitting there at eye height, all my stuff. Guess what’s down the bottom shelf? Homebrand.* |
| *Upselling* | Sample2 SOs do not talk about upselling sustainability within their organisation because there is “strong sustainability leadership” (Manufacturers) within their organisation and the rationale for sustainability in most of these organisations is intrinsic, a “unanimous belief” (Designers), as demonstrated by the comment from Dairy that, “from day one, we’ve just set up a business with ethics at the base of it” and as exemplified by Circulate’s mission to achieve “zero waste”. Upselling and sensegiving are similar for sample 2 SOs. Many of the sample 2 SOs voiced frustration with a perceived lack of government support for sustainability and talked about the need to upsell sustainability to government, banks, industry, and a “general view that going green is more expensive” (Dairy). Only Logistics suggests some internal blockages to sustainability and suggests a need for upselling: “the biggest issue is just getting the guys (in the warehouse) to sort waste properly” and more of a focus on the business case for sustainability compared to other sample 2 SOs, saying, “at the end of the day the driver is dollars saved”.In contrast, Circulate2 talked about how their strong commitment to sustainability has lost them business and Recyclers say they lost business to non-complying companies.  |
| *Developing Strategy/Reporting*  | For most sample 2 SOs, sustainability is the strategy, meaning that they were founded with a sustainability mandate. Some sample 2 SOs such as Circulate and Circulate2 were founded on sustainability principles like zero waste. For example, Circulate talks about how the mission of Circulate emerged from an epiphany when he was running a printer cartridge-refilling business that took back used cartridges: *I ended up with half a warehouse full and I realised wow, I need a machine to recycle all this stuff because it’s just such a complex waste stream and poorly designed and it was going to be horrendous to try and disassemble by hand, which we did start trying to do. Then I started to think okay, what’s that machine going to look like, how can I fund such a thing? Of course, the OEMs! Why don't I work with the original equipment manufacturers rather than against them which I was doing by refilling their cartridges…and that was the epiphany that was the start of* (Circulate). Circulate says he “immediately disassociated” himself from the cartridge refilling industry “disrupted the whole model” to start effectively recycling cartridges with a zero waste goal. Dairy’s founding sustainability mission “to provide the most healthy and environmentally sustainable dairy products in New South Wales” also “emerged” because contemporary farming methods became financially unsustainable: *We couldn’t afford to farm our property properly as my parents used to, or I used to when I was younger, with all the chemical fertiliser, so I just left the place to go and see what happened and one year it just took off and we’ve got – the carbon in the soil over that four years have increased 25% because I’d actually got some bugs back into the soil again and worms and clover and probably heaps of bacteria and fungi and all that sort of stuff that you need to get a healthy soil* (Dairy).Manufacturers was established with a sustainability mandate to develop technological capabilities to enable remanufacturing: “Remanufacturing was the beginning of the story – in order to foster support for the wider business plan for total product responsibility”. Recyclers was established to as an electronic waste recycler and with a focus on valuing waste.Other sample2 SOs such as Designers and Logistics, have adopted sustainability principles and strategy over time. For example, Designers talks about the point in time when they decided to develop an environmental product:*Around about 2003 we…had a think tank on ideas on what the company should be doing. What direction the company should take. It was about growth but improvement of the company. Two of the attendees came along and said that the company should look at an environmental product. This is in the early days when the environment wasn’t on the table at all. It wasn’t being spoken about. Really by the end of the conference there was a total unanimous belief that this is something as a company we should do* (Designers).For Designers and Logistics, the next strategic step is recycling. Amongst sample 2 SOs, only Logistics talks about reporting, to their parent company on CO2 emissions and internal waste minimisation. These are then reported in the company’s annual CSR report. |
| *Accreditation and awards*  | Unlike sample 1 SOs, sample 2 SOs only mention awards twice when Circulate comments, “we designed and built (the machine) ourselves and won an award for (it)”and Designers mention, “Along the way we…won eight or 10 environmental awards from Green Globe awards to United Nations awards and got nominated for Banksia awards”. Awards and other forms of formal recognition appear less important than indications that they have been instrumental in creating systemic changes, as will be demonstrated in the next device, “capturing innovation”. Recognition through awards and accreditation are “institutionalised” in some sample 2 organisations or “par for the course” in their bid to revolutionise the way things are done in their industry. Circulate does mention winning an award but also says innovating is his “life’s work” and winning the award is a by-product of his work rather than having a functional meaning (such as adding to the business case for sustainability) as it does for sample 1 SOs. *the stimulus for me is to create disruptive business models or disruptive technologies and sell them as unique. Reusing these (non-renewable) resources over and over again is my passion, it’s kind of like my life’s work.* (Circulate) Dairy wins awards and has organic accreditation for some products but doesn’t talk about these “achievements” and they appear “institutionalised”. Circulate2 says, “we are becoming quite well known in the industry for doing things differently. We have a couple of really good ambassadors. These guys aren’t are paid by us but they really love…our philosophies and what we do, and they tell people about it”Recyclers is motivated to “do the right thing” over “winning”, an approach that appears to come from fear of non-compliance in their role as a Product Stewardship co-regulator. Logistics, on the other hand, voice an efficiency rationale for accreditation:“we report in our annual report on our CSR, and I'm sure there's some investors in superannuation funds overseas will say, we only want to invest in companies that have CSR”  |
| *Innovation*  | As with sample 1, sample 2 SOs, view innovation as a continuous process. However, rather than discussing innovation purely in terms of how it drives their organisation’s transition to sustainability, sample 2 SOs often discuss innovation driving change in their industry or ‘system’ as well as discussing how innovation for sustainability gives them a unique advantage in the marketplace. An example of innovation by these SOs to create systemic change comes from Dairy: *I just need something a lot bigger to get compost for this place. What I want is the food compost – the food waste, because here, I send a lot of nutrients into Sydney in the form of milk and yoghurt and cream and I get nothing out of Sydney except some money. So, I want the nutrients to come back so that we can set up a loop. There’s some big supermarkets in there that’d be just fantastic if I could get hold of their stuff, which I’m working on at the moment, but I’ve got to check out whether it’s lawful or not. I supply ten Woollies stores. If I got all the food waste out of ten Woollies stores, that’d be enough to run that. Beautiful story for Woolworths. I’ve got Woolworths coming out tomorrow, so I’ll bring that up with them tomorrow.* For most sample 2 SOs, systemic change comes from working with others in the system, as demonstrated by the example above where Dairy wants to work with a buyer, Woolworths, and as demonstrated by this example from Manufacturers who is working with Circulate on reducing toner waste:*One of the projects that (we) have been working on over the last couple of years is looking at our toner waste and it’s been very revealing to us how much our customers waste our toner…one of the things we’ve been looking at is working particularly with (Circulate) our recycling supplier to be able to measure that wastage and to measure it at a customer site level so we can identify where we’ve got the issues and start to put a process in place.* (Manufacturers) Sample 2 SOs are aware of the appeal that their innovative focus creates in the marketplace and how this attracts supporters in their industry. For example, Circulate2 says, “we are becoming quite well known in the industry for doing things differently. We have a couple of really good ambassadors. These guys aren’t are paid by us but they really love…our philosophies and what we do, and they tell people about it”Some sample 2 SOs thrive on innovation. For example Circulate talks about being a passionate innovator:*I think that the spice in all of this for me, and luckily we’re in the resource recovery industry whose time is now, the stimulus for me is to create disruptive business models or disruptive technologies and sell them as unique. Reusing these (non-renewable) resources over and over again is my passion, it’s kind of like my life’s work.* (Circulate) Only one SO in this sample, Logistics, talks about grappling with innovation that also makes a “positive return”:*Now once we've got this gunk how do we actually make it a positive return* *rather than just a little cost, and I've got it to a little cost but actually making it a positive, I don’t understand how other people are achieving a positive return so I'm a bit frustrated about that* (Logistics)Recyclers’ concern with valuing waste has motivated him to push for innovative legislation:*(The environment government department) were the first government organisation…to really stand up and say, "if you operate a recycling company in New South Wales, and we catch you with stored CRT glass…we will fine you, we will close you and we will put you in jail". So that's good. It was pretty funny because there was some people at the end of it all standing around and they all stared at me because I'm the one that's forever banging the drum and I'm not here to be popular and I'm doing a really good job.* |

**Table 2: Purpose As Tension**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Sample** | **Company** | **Illustrative Quote/s** | **Stakeholder** |
| Sample 1 | Shipping | Even to this day, the company still views sustainability as environmental. That is the sole focus. In the last six months - 12 months, shift to a few different things, but would not connect safety to sustainability. I’ve been trying to convince them it is part of it. I’m trying to show that sustainability is not just environmental, and that it is that social, financial and environmental balance between those. They’re not there yet. /// You talk to procurement team, which I was hoping might be progressing, but they are not there yet. They are too focused on their own specific issues in terms of their job. Day to day, getting their job done sufficiently. They’re not there to think about ethical sourcing, warehousing, where things are coming from. | Senior Management, Board |
| Club C | The (mission statement) only just included the word environment in it as of a year ago. It’s still new. So the culture hasn’t changed yet to adapt that. It’s across all levels. Even the board has to get behind that we want to do more in this area in sustainability and the social side of things… is what the goal is, I’m all there… The CEO and the Board want progress, but they don’t know what to do next either… My main challenge is just in knowing what to do next in terms of sustainability. There is uncertainty about what is valuable and what is not. From both monetary and social point of view. | CEO, Board |
| Care | One of the biggest challenges is communicating and motivating people (internally; staff/volunteers). As part of our orientation we do a presentation on sustainability, but I’m trying to work more at each of our locations to get a team at each location to promote sustainability. We have had green teams in the past, but we didn’t have an environmental sustainability manager and they fell over. But getting actions is probably the hardest part /// Sustainability is not built into KPIs or training yet.  | Staff, Volunteers |
| Club T | Everyone is aware of it. It doesn’t necessarily have the level of involvement I want from everyone, but everyone is definitely aware of it. It is reinforced with the leaders on the floor , there’s not a lot of written structure around it /// it took a while for them (senior management) to get on board with those big ticket projects, to see the benefit they would bring, not just the savings /// early on it was easy to get disheartened when you were making real gains and people just look at you blankly when you tried to explain it because either they don’t care or they don’t understand it.  | Staff, Senior Management |
| Bank | The barriers are that it has taken a while to get commitment from the staff… That is the hardest thing, getting ownership beyond the environmental team. /// When you’re doing little things, everyone says it’s really nice, but when you start spending money a few years down the track it’s important to have board buy in. /// We don’t have sustainability in people’s KPIs. | Staff, Board |
| Bricks | For the first time ever, I’ve presented to the board on enviros. I’m talking pure enviros. I’m talking about pure enviros (noise, emissions, etc.) but it gives me an opportunity to discuss other enviros. And one of the new directors asked “how pervasive is enviro culture within XXX?” I said it’s nowhere near where it should be, and we’re rolling out an environmental management system nationally, and that will help put the pure enviros in front of everyone’s faces so they know what they are. But on the flip side, we’re also doing so much from a sustainability perspective. Reducing energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, saving water, reducing waste, we’re doing so much, but you wouldn’t know it. /// I think once we get more visible and the boss can start reporting more on some of these. He sees it as a positive, but we need to be provided with more information.  | Managing Director, Senior Management, Staff |
| Hotel | Some of the staff want sustainability, but as long as it doesn’t require more work from them. Most of the staff want to take the easy path. It depends on us to create a path that is easy to follow and makes sense to them. If you add an extra two steps to their routine, it’s going to be very hard for them to adopt. If you make it easier and more sustainable you have a good chance at it. We have a multinational staff and for some of them sustainability is a foreign word ////Capital investment is the main barrier to making sustainability changes. Even if there is a good ROI, the capital may not be available. In a big building like this, if I wanted to separate my waste stream to compost some of my waste, if that equipment may be $50,000. For that amount of money, I could redo the carpet in my lobby. Even though those projects are not competing, but the money comes from the same place. So it’s a tradeoff /// | Staff, Investors, Customers |
| Sample 2 | Logistics | So the only way we can influence is to say, right this particular packaging is causing handling issues and those handling issues are causing issues to your product. It’s a long process to go through to get anyone to recognise those instances, and we might have customers that react quicker, but most of our customers their focus will be not in Australia. It will be a manufacturing plant offshore which is very difficult to influence /// you talk to the mobile phone importers and we’re saying, if we resold the phone we could provide you a zero costs solution, and they say, we don’t want any part of that solution. We want you to recycle it and break it down and put it back through the process. So we create new phones, not reuse /// I don’t see enough legislation in Australia versus Europe to actually recycle would be my observation… not enough cost incentive to force people to do things. So if you upped the landfill cost, business will have more of an incentive. | Customers, Suppliers, Government |
| Designers | We challenged that and said well you prove to us that it’s good to down cycle rather than to either up cycle or at least sideways cycle to something that could be maintained in the industrial production cycle. /// We realised then that we could- we asked for the mills to use eco wool. So it had low pesticide residue. But we believed that we can actually go further and say okay to the mills. We now are going to identify farmers that meet this etheco wool. We created that particular specification. /// That was I suppose our way of imposing our will on the supply chain. We wanted to also support those farmers who in reality are the real environmentalists. | Customers, Suppliers, Brokers, Regulators |
| Recyclers | I lost business to competitors because they didn't budget to dispose of their glass and I did. We lose them, “no XXX, you're too expensive”. Why? Because we do it properly. | Competitors |
| Circulate | The XXXXX Association, these guys didn’t want to pay for recycling the waste that that industry generated. So while they hang their hat on clean and green, they actually have no intentions, no interest in any of these environmental or sustainable concepts. // (We need to) really stop some companies from doing business and stop the nonsense about measuring a government’s performance or a company’s performance on GDP, growth. Growth for growth’s sake is a flawed model for measuring the success of a society. // We’ve built a business that is by its nature the more profit we make, the more non-renewable resources we’ve diverted from landfill. Do our shareholders value that as much as I do, no not at all but it gives me a lot of comfort to be part of the solution. /// we need to continue the strong push for producer responsibility and we need to take that to all products…. and make it part of an industry or a company’s licence to operate. Then we need to have strong incentives for companies to design their products with the end of life in mind. If you’re going to borrow a resource from planet earth, you’ve got to design that product so those raw materials can be easily reused by future generations and we should mandate that. We should measure the performance of some of these companies in terms of designing with the end of life in mind and the end of life being optimising the reuse of the raw materials that you’ve borrowed from Mother Earth.  | Industry Association, Business Model, Regulation |
| Circulate2 | We haven’t yet, but there’s certain things, restrictions and hurdles is probably not the right word, but there's reasons why people won't make a decision sometimes about putting one of these food waste solutions in. One is space. If they don’t have the space it’s not viable. There’s another solution to that. Cost is one, but what am I going to do with all this compost is a big one. So if we now have a solution for that it takes away one of those barriers. /// I’m sick of dealing with government and especially councils, because of the lack of accountability. | Customers, Local Government, New Markets |
| Manufacturers | So sometimes we’re actually pushing the envelope with the recyclers because none of the other people that are using that service care where that material ends up particularly. /// The whole product stewardship arrangement is an example of that…we were certainly part of that process and part of designing the product stewardship, the way that it’s structured and I think being at the forefront of this and doing it in the first place helped the government and the legislative bodies to put this in place.  | Customers, Regulators, Competitors  |
| Dairy | Apparently the (Regulator) have put out new laws from the beginning of the financial year that no farm is allowed to have fresh food waste dumped on their property. /// The stupid government stopped all these sorts of projects. /// (National retailer) set up a whole local buying department ... Their whole job is to source local products, promote local products and make sure that we’re looked after properly, all us small, local suppliers. And I’ve sort of been pretty big in that move. | Government, Customers |

1. See for example McKinsey & Company’s consulting practice in Sustainability and Resource Productivity: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability-and-resource-productivity/how-we-help-clients> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)