

## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the ethicality of creating the position of sustainability officer in the current economic business environment. In spite of much win-win rhetoric, the reality, as the Volkswagen Scandal also showed, is that corporate sustainability as a field is characterised by tensions and paradoxes (Hahn, Figge, Aragón-Correa, and Sharma, 2017). Volkswagen aimed to be both the most sustainable and the largest car manufacturer in the world, and one of these clearly had to give. True (strong) sustainability challenges the business-as-usual approach to wealth creation in a political and economic context which is often not set up for companies to be and competitive and sustainable. Serious sustainability calls into question the accepted notion of growth at all costs (Monbiot, 2017, Ehrenfeld and Hoffman, 2013; Hahn and Figge, 2011). In fact, sustainability demands a change of mindset in individuals, organisations and society (Rimanoczy and Laszlo, 2017). Accordingly, firms and their managers are placed in a difficult position in a world where both sustainability and wealth creation are highly desired goals.

To date, there has been very limited research on how such tensions are experienced within organisations. The actual engagement of key employees with and the role they play in, the creation of CSR is undertheorized (Bolton, Kim, & O'Gorman, 2011). The role of sustainability managers in this process is also unclear, although there is some recent scholarship around how tensions at the individual level affect identity (Wright and Nyberg 2012; Carollo and Guerci, 2017) and paradoxical positioning of the sustainability manager (Tams and Marshall 2011). However, while there has been plenty of discussion about non-compliance, weak sustainability and greenwashing (Siano, Vollero, Conte, and Amabile, 2017; Markham, Khare, and Beckman, 2014), it has not been questioned under which conditions it is ethical to hold someone responsible for CSR outcomes.

Hahn et al., (2015) argue that progress in the field depends on both academics and business practitioners adopting an integrated rather than an instrumental logic; thereby embracing a capital rather than a business-as-usual approach to sustainability (Lehtonen, 2004; Goodland, 1995), where there is limited substitutability between capital forms (Costanza, Cumberland, Daly, Goodland, and Norgaard, 1997). Hahn et al. (2015) argue that the social, environmental and economic aspects should be given equal importance despite the inevitable conflicts and tensions. While this sounds good in theory, it is not the practical reality that most sustainability officers face in their day-to-day work. Rather they would be expected to make a business case for sustainability. This begs the question “under which conditions is the creation of the role of sustainability officer ethical?” To explore this question, we compare and contrast three frameworks that address CSR tensions and interview sustainability officers of large corporations across four different countries.

The first framework is that of Hahn et al. (2015) who develop a multi-level conceptual framework of corporate sustainability based on integrative logic to help firms and managers re-frame the way they understand and deal with sustainability issues. The purpose of the framework is to help managers identify the tensions and work through them rather than eliminate them by allowing profit and economic prerogatives to rule the day.

The work of Hahn et al. (2015) encourages scholars and practitioners to accept and face the tensions associated with moving away from the instrumental mindset. The strategies suggested are useful in helping participants manoeuvre through seemingly contradictory goals highlighted by sustainability issues. By rejecting the instrumental logic, Hahn et al. (2015) are also discarding the underlying assumptions of the neo-classical economic paradigm including the notion of *homo economicus*. Hahn et al.'s (2015) framework adopts a capital approach to sustainability which rejects the idea that the human being is an 'atomistic selfish individual acting to maximise their gain' Costanza et al. 1997 (p.168). On the contrary, it is assumed that to be human is to be in relationship with others-family, friends, fellow citizens, the poor, future generations and other species- who share one ecological life support system. Individuals, organisations and the economy must operate in a way, which maintains and/or increases this human and natural capital (Raworth 2013; Rockström et al. 2009; Costanza et al. 1997). Hahn et al.'s (2015) framework gives little space to the tensions experienced by sustainability managers (Carollo and Guerci, 2017). The model assumes the firm and its managers already adopt an integrative logic and suggests strategies to deal with the resulting tensions. However, sustainability managers experience a paradoxical positioning as often they are working towards strong sustainability within an organisation, which adheres to instrumental logic.

Arjoon, Turriago-Hoyos, & Thoene (2018) developed a multi-level conceptual framework which accounts for the tensions between the goals of human flourishing and wealth maximisation in terms of virtue or lack thereof. Accordingly, it assists in making an ethical evaluation of the role of the sustainability manager. The crux of the model is the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic goods. 'At all levels, moral, organisational and economic disorders occur when extrinsic goods are given priority over intrinsic goods' (Arjoon et al. 2018, p. 148). Arjoon et al. (2018) assume the goal of society is *Eudaimonia*, which requires virtuousness at the individual, organisational and economic level. Business and the economy exist for the sake of achieving human flourishing (*Eudaimonia*). This worldview is compatible with a capital approach to sustainability with its assumption that the human being can only flourish in community. It assumes human being is capable of rising above their material self-interest and can prioritise internal goods associated with building human relationships such as kindness, generosity and service. It extends Hahn et al. (2015)'s work by addressing situations where there is a lack of alignment between the goals of the organisation and the individual. In the context of sustainability. It helps explain the tensions in terms of virtue.

While Hahn's model is primarily an ethical decision-making model, and Arjoon et al.'s (2018) model is primarily a virtues ethics model, Lips-Wiersma's (2018) model focuses on Meaningful Work. Meaningful Work too is an ethical concern as meaning is a human need rather than a nice to have (Yeoman, 2014). This model was developed in answer to the question "under what conditions does CSR lead to Meaningful Work" and integrates personal responsibility, job-enrichment, dignity and freedom, worthy work and strong sustainability.

Guided by these three models, the focus of the current study is the ethical meaning attributed by the actors to what is happening around them; their interpretation of the situations and events. Thus, the study is located in the interpretivist paradigm as the social reality is best captured through the perspectives of the actors themselves (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). An interpretive phenomenological inquiry is suitable for the aims of this project as the focus is on what the lived experience of a sustainability manager can tell us about corporate sustainability tensions (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This approach permits the researchers to enrich the subjective meanings of the participants with their ethical decision making, virtue ethics and meaningful work expertise.

Sustainability officers of commercial organisations with five hundred or more employees were contacted through structured snowballing and convenience sampling (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty sustainability managers from Spain, the Netherland, the UK and New Zealand. While all are situated in a Western context, responses are influenced by the differing political and economic jurisdictions. Half of the managers report directly to a member of the board, to the CEO or is on the senior leadership team, and half are positioned at middle management. The majority of the participants were working for companies where the core business (such as clothing) was not related to sustainability, whereas some were working in companies where the core business (such as public transport) could be seen to be more strongly aligned with strong sustainability. The data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The aim of IPA is to examine how people make sense of their life experiences (Smith, 2004; Willig, 2013); to capture and explore the meanings that participants assign to their experiences.

It was found that largely, at the individual, organisational and economic levels, sustainability managers face an environment where the pursuit of external goods in the form of profit, reputation, bonuses and job security, motivate choices. It is clear that pressures at the level of economy drive this trend. This can explain why, mostly, sustainability managers can only carry out changes, which are compatible with operating according to the neo-classical paradigm. Although in some cases political trends alleviated this pressure to some extent. Sustainability managers' choices are characterised by the prioritising or wanting to prioritise internal over external goods. Of course, in reality many felt compromised; meanings of 'compromised' differed depending on the individual and their circumstances. This accounts for the tensions they experience in their work, as they are the ones usually leading the charge to change mindsets. These findings lead us to question the ethicality of creating the position of sustainability manager in the majority of commercial companies. Is it right to create a job which by definition will frustrate the person and probably lead to burnout? If the organisation is not willing to adopt a strong approach to sustainability is it better just to be honest and entrust the job to the marketing or communications department? Moreover, who is to decide

this? Many of the sustainability managers we interviewed felt they had also landed their dream job and were determined to keep working for change.

Taking a step back, the findings confirm that the journey towards achieving a sustainable world requires collaboration at all levels of society. However, successful collaboration necessitates a personal change on the part of each person. The paper argues that virtue could be a practical blueprint for how individual choices need to change.

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