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Doing What Feels Right - The Role of Employees in Shaping Sustainability Practices

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Abstract

In the light of the growing concern for sustainability, pressures influence individuals' perception of their moral responsibility which motivates action. This thesis presents a qualitative case study focusing on the role of employees in how sustainability work unfolds in the absence of a corporate sustainability strategy. The findings suggest that individual actors engage in institutional work guided by their moral motivations for sustainability to settle the dissonance between their moral convictions for sustainability and the practices of the company. Institutionalization of norms is outlined as a collaborative process requiring negotiations, where employees aim to institutionalize sustainability alongside pre-existing norms and practices. However, several challenges were identified in relation to the complexity of sustainability, as well as the enabling and constraining structures of the institutional environment, as alignment of interests is difficult to achieve. Moral decoupling on an individual level occur as a means for self-preservation of the engaged actors. The work for institutionalization is dependent on the commitment and interests of individual actors, which are not fixed and needs to be considered. The contributions of this study have both theoretical and practical implications, which concern the integration of moral into institutional work theory as well as a better understanding of how employees drive sustainability work within companies.

Keywords

Sustainability, Institutional work, Employees, Meaning, Moral motivations

Introduction

The Paris Agreement was reached in consensus in 2015 within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and set ambitious goals for all nations to mitigate climate change and its effects (UNFCCC 2019). The agreement validated climate change as a critical issue that needs to be addressed by society, not only by speeding up development but through transformation of entire industries (Politico 2018). In the face of this challenge, the pressure on companies to improve their sustainability practices is increasing, both through stakeholder pressure and stricter regulations (Politico 2018). Furthermore, some expect the innovative powers of companies and the market forces to solve the sustainability dilemma (The Guardian 2011). As a result of this several companies are engaging in sustainability practices from a strategic point of view, making sustainability part of their values or business model (ibid).

However, during the most recent United Nations climate change conference COP24, the Secretary General in the UN António Guterres stressed that we as a collective are not doing enough to mitigate climate change (UN 2018), and frustration amongst people all over the world have been expressed through global protests (The Guardian 2019). Thus, the pressure to act responsibly is also increasing on an individual level. According to the SOM institute national survey climate change and environmental degradation rank highest on the list of societal concerns among the Swedish population (SOM 2018). Furthermore, social movements and activists such as Greta Thunberg are highlighting the issue globally, demanding that politicians and companies take action, and demonstrating the importance of individual commitment to achieve change (SvD 2019). However, young activists stress that it is not enough just to protest, but that it is up to everyone to act responsibly and consider how one's own choices have an impact on the environment (ibid.).

As sustainability becomes internalized on an individual level, it can motivate people to act. In a survey published by Ernst & Young (2012) employees were identified as a key driver of sustainability in companies, ranking second after customers. Furthermore, another survey showed that employee attraction, retention and engagement are increasingly important drivers for companies to engage in sustainability (McKinsey 2017). However, strategic initiatives for sustainability are often thought to be implemented through a top down approach, as outlined in literature reviews on corporate sustainability (see for example, Kitzmueller & Shimshack 2012; Aguinis & Glavas 2012). Furthermore, previous research on corporate sustainability often employ an organizational or field level of analysis (Aguinis & Glavas 2012). This means that the micro foundations of corporate sustainability remain largely unexplored, with the exception of a small number of recently published papers (see Girschik 2018; Sendlhofer 2019). These studies point to the role of employees as the primary drivers of sustainability work by showing how employee engagement transform organizations' understanding of responsibilities from within (Girschik 2018; Sendlhofer 2019). By drawing on the more existential concerns of employees as individuals, these studies point to the sense of moral responsibility as a primary driver of sustainability work within companies (Girschik 2018; Sendlhofer 2019).

Employee driven work to incorporate sustainability in organizations can be viewed through the theoretical lens that institutional work provides, as their efforts are informed by institutional pressures and thus can be interpreted as aiming to institutionalize sustainability. The motivations for doing so could be further related to the meaning making of individuals that fulfilling their moral obligations provide. The relationship between actors and institutions are at the forefront of institutional work theory, which deals with how actors interact with, and influence institutions through purposive actions (Hampel, Lawrence & Tracy 2017). Meaning play a vital part in this process as actors and institutions exist in a recursive relationship of meaning making, where institutions provide meaning and motivation to our actions while also being shaped by the same actions (Hampel, Lawrence & Tracy 2017). Although meaning is described as an integral part of institutional work, the focus of earlier studies is on how it occurs and who performs the institutional work, rather than why it happens and fully problematizing the role of meaning (Lawrence, Leca & Zilber 2013; Hampel, Lawrence & Tracy 2017). Furthermore, the small number of previous studies aimed at investigating the role of meaning in institutional work is situated in for example religious contexts (Creed, Dejordy & Lok 2010) or nonprofit contexts (Zilber 2002) rather than in a business setting. Meaning is also a wide and ambiguous concept as what enables a sense of meaning can vary enormously between contexts, and where moral can be seen as one subcategory. However, the existing institutional work literature does not manage to provide an explanation for how moral motivations can drive purposive actions in a corporate context.

In the light of the current societal development, where sustainability is now a major concern for many individuals (SOM 2018), there is a need for further studies to understand the implications of how individuals deal with this in their role as employees. Furthermore, an increasing amount of companies engage in sustainability for employer branding reasons (McKinsey 2017), which points to a growing recognition of the importance of alignment between personal and corporate values to generate meaning (Hemingway 2005). Personal values have been argued to motivate CSR engagement for employees (Aguinis & Glavas 2012), which could be seen as an enactment of institutional work where individuals utilize their agency to shape organizations. Returning to the previous studies addressing employee engagement for sustainability, these case studies are performed at companies with an already strong and outspoken commitment towards sustainability (Sendlhofer 2019; Girschik 2018). However, even though the corporate engagement for sustainability is increasing, far from all companies have a communicated strategy for dealing with sustainability and even fewer companies have it as an integrated part of the business model (McKinsey 2017). This opts for further studies into how the micro foundations for sustainability can develop in companies that are not as far along on their journey towards sustainability. Consequently, our research question is as follows:

How does sustainability work unfold in an organization in the absence of a corporate sustainability strategy?

In order to study how employees drive sustainability in the absence of a corporate sustainability strategy a single case study has been performed at a young and extremely fast growing organization focused on innovation. The case company operates within the automotive

industry, which is under high pressure to address the sustainability challenges it faces (Green European Journal 2018) but does not yet have a sustainability strategy in place. However, there are some initiatives for sustainability being taken at an employee level. This makes for a unique opportunity to study how sustainability work unfolds through employee engagement, as well as for understanding the implications of not having a sustainability strategy in place.

Furthermore, by incorporating the aspect of moral responsibility we address the gap in existing institutional work literature by providing an explanation of how moral motivations can drive the purposive efforts to institutionalize sustainability in an organization. Thereby we contribute to an increased understanding of why institutional work happens and the role of moral and meaning in that process. Furthermore, this study contributes to the field of sustainability research in two ways. Firstly, it adds to the individual level of analysis by shedding light on the role of employees as the drivers of sustainability work within companies. Secondly, this study extends the scope of corporate sustainability research by moving away from the generally assumed top down approach through illustrating how, and that, sustainability work can occur without strategic direction from top management.

The disposition of this paper is structured accordingly: in the following section the theoretical framework will be outlined, and concepts from institutional theory and work will be discussed in relation to concepts from the sustainability research. After that the methodology of our data collection and analysis will be presented. Following that is the empirical section where the findings of the data collection is presented. The fifth part of this paper consists of the analysis which is concluded with a brief summary of the key findings as well as conclusions and contributions from this case.

Theoretical framework

From institutional theory to institutional work

Institutional theory has become prominent in organization studies over the last decades, which has resulted in a stream of research that provides a better understanding of how organizations are structured and relate to each other (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca 2011). Old institutional theory views organizations as collections of stable roles and rules, and emphasize processes of socialization, isomorphism and standardization where organizations adopt myths in their institutional environment to gain legitimacy (see, for example, Meyer & Rowan 1977; DiMaggio & Powell 1983). Critics of old institutional theory argue that aspects relating to change are not considered, and Scandinavian institutionalism emerged to address the issue of stability and change within organizations (Czarniawska & Sevón 1996). In this new branch of institutional theory organizations are viewed as social constructions, and institutionalization does not occur in a diffusion manner, but rather there is an emphasis on the inherent complexities in that process (ibid.). This view is adhered to in this paper, as acknowledging change and the distinctiveness of organizations opens up for possibilities to examine how institutionalization occur at a micro level. Over the last years a strand of research has formed which incorporates the aspect of agency in the work of creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions through the purposive actions of individuals (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca 2009).

There is a growing interest in institutional work, which suggest a reorientation towards a more agentic approach to institutional change (Hwang & Colyvas 2011).

Institutional work relies on a set of assumptions which are described by Hampel, Lawrence & Tracy (2017, p.1),

Social reality is socially constructed, mutable and dependent on as well as embedded in the behavior, thoughts and feelings of people and collective actors. There is also a key assumption that people and collective actors have the potential to act in ways that involve an awareness of their relationship to institutions.

This recursive relationship between institutions and action are at the forefront of institutional work, where institutions are viewed as ongoing accomplishments that provide meaning to our actions and hold together the structures that shape those actions. Meanwhile, institutions are at the same time being constructed and maintained by people's behavior, thoughts and emotions (Hampel, Lawrence & Tracy 2017). As a relatively new concept, institutional work offers the possibility to ask new questions and explore institutional processes through another perspective. Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca (2011) argue that the reexamination of the relationship between institutions and agency enables researchers to explore which actors engage in institutional work, the opportunities and ways in which they do so, and what motivations that drives them. Going forward, particular emphasis will be on the drivers on institutional work, but also on how it unfolds.

Hwang & Colyvas (2011) argue that there are certain aspects to critically consider when studying institutional work, the problematization of actors as well as the under theorization of institutions. The reversal of causality from viewing institutions as causes to emphasizing the role of actors in shaping institutional structures poses challenges in regard to how actors' identities and interests are treated, as they should not be taken for granted. The authors argue that the inadequate problematization of actors can have consequences for how institutions are theorized. Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca (2011) define institutions as,

Enduring elements of social life that affect the behavior and beliefs of individuals and collective actors by providing templates for action, cognition, and emotion, nonconformity with which is associated with some kind of costs (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca 2011, p. 53).

However, it is not apparent what type of institutions are more or less susceptible to institutional work. Hwang & Colyvas (2011) argue that the rules of the institutional contexts determine what actors can exist as well as their ability to perform institutional work.

Creating institutions

Institutional work is often categorized into three main categories - creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions, which aim to capture the way in which actors engage in purposive action throughout the lifecycle of an institution (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006). The notion of creating institutions becomes of particular interest in relation to the case of this study, as there are clear indications of purposive actions by individual actors aimed at establishing sustainability as a

norm within the case company. Much of the literature on the creation of institutions has focused on institutional entrepreneurship, and the characteristics of and conditions for generating institutional entrepreneurs, rather than outlining the processes unfolding as institutions are created. Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca (2011) are critical to the idea that the only agency of importance is that of institutional entrepreneurs who engage in transformational efforts which result in a new normative order. Alongside those grand accounts of change are the daily instances of agency that subtly produces, reproduces and transforms institutions in everyday situations, often with unintended consequences (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca 2011). Thus, the literature on institutional work and its concepts allows for deeper insights into the relation between agency and institutions by shifting the focus away from single idolized actors (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca 2011).

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) distinguish between rule based and norm based institutional creation work, depending on the type of resources drawn upon by the engaged actors. In rule-oriented work actors make use of systems that can coerce and enforce the new institution and is often, although not always, related to the state. Meanwhile, in norm-oriented work the actors draw upon values and norms to create institutions, and focus lies much on the relation between actors and the institutional field. The efforts aimed at institutionalizing sustainability is in line with the norm-oriented work, as sustainability can be viewed as a societal norm that actors want to integrate into the business of the case company. Furthermore, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) point out that rule-based work is more likely to result in the more dramatic creation of entirely new institutions, while norm-based work more often creates complementing or parallel institutions. This is explained as a result from the dependence on cultural and moral forces to realize the new institution which requires a more cooperative approach, as the sanction of others is needed to establish the new norm (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006). The norm-based work identified through the literature review on institutional work by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) shed light on the various ways in which actors can engage in institutional creation work. For example, by constructing identities one can define the relation between the actor and the field. There is also the changing of normative associations, where the moral and normative underpinnings of practices within a field are altered (ibid.). Although the importance of individuals is emphasized by several authors (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca 2011; Hampel, Lawrence & Tracey 2017; Girschik 2018), previous research also points to the under-exploration of the role of identities, emotions and meaning in relation to institutional work.

Morals and meaning in institutional work

Meaning is an important aspect in institutional work, and an integral part of norm-based work directed at creating institutions through continuous processes of meaning construction (Zilber 2017). However, the role of meaning has historically been taken for granted (ibid.), and the main focus in previous institutional work studies has been on who, what type and how institutional work occurs rather than why (Lawrence, Leca & Zilber 2017). Earlier studies that have explored the role of meaning in relation to institutional work have discussed how meaning has been infused in different practices by actors in order to maintain or change institutions (Zilber 2002; Creed, Dejordy & Lok 2010; Raviola & Norbäck 2013). However, analyzing how

meaning is ascribed to practices suggest a more retrospective approach rather than investigating how meaning can be the driver of purposive action.

When looking into the sustainability research and exploring what drives companies to engage in sustainability, altruistic motives and individual engagement are suggested to be driving forces (Kitzmueller & Shimshack 2012; Aguinis & Glavas 2012). A moral responsibility for sustainability is argued to be a prerequisite for employees to engage in sustainability related activities (Girschik 2018). Morality in relation to sustainability can be understood as,

The feeling or articulation of the individual to take decisions and actions in order to promote CSR, which are based on their own beliefs and their perception of the right thing to do (Sendlhofer 2019 p.19).

Thus, moral responsibility is a central part of the construction and negotiation of meaning and a driver of action. As moral is closely connected to an individual's perception of right and wrong, it can be seen as a sub category to meaning construction on a more profound level as it enables fulfillment of existential needs. Furthermore, exploring the role of personal values and moral considerations as a driver for engagement can open up for interesting theoretical connections between institutional work and sustainability research. Glynn (2017) argue that forging linkages and merging theoretical concepts in a creative way can allow for a deeper understanding of previously unexplored relations between different fields of research. In a similar manner as Glynn (2017) has connected identity to institutional work, we aim to explore the relationship between institutional work and the moral motivations of individuals for driving sustainability. Combined, they provide a conceptual framework for understanding actions undertaken by individuals in pursuit of establishing new norms propelled by moral and ethical considerations.

Establishing sustainability as a norm within organizations

There is an increasing stream of research that emphasizes micro level dynamics as the primary driver of real transformation (Girschik 2018). People who identify with and believe in sustainability can act as internal activists to assert pressure on companies from within to transform the way they think and conduct their business (ibid.). Adding to the research on micro levels is Sendlhofer (2019) who through her studies of the role of employees in shaping CSR in SMEs depict employees as norm entrepreneurs. Sendlhofer (2019) argue that employees experience a moral responsibility for CSR, leading them to engage in norm entrepreneurship by questioning current praxis. Both the concept of internal activist and norm entrepreneur can be viewed as expressions of actors engaging in institutional work (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca 2011). Employees aiming to transform their company from within through negotiations of meaning fit well with the institutional work literature which draws upon norms and meaning to explain how individuals engage in purposive actions (ibid.). The notion of moral responsibility has been found to be a key factor for working with CSR, as it both provides opportunities for organizing CSR while also being the driver of such organizing (Sendlhofer 2019). Incorporating moral responsibility with meaning in institutional work opens up for further investigation into how moral responsibilities can drive purposive action. The findings by

Sendlhofer's (2019) case studies all suggest that employees, through their moral beliefs, make out the driving force for engaging in sustainability which contradicts the common perception that strategic motives from top management should be the driver of such initiatives. This view is strengthened by Girschik (2018) who also find employees in the form of internal activists to "sell" ideas of enhanced corporate responsibility to enroll managers through negotiations of meaning.

To describe the purposive actions by employees to establish new norms of appropriateness Sendlhofer (2019) introduce the concept of contest. Through describing a two-step process, the notion of contest captures both the internal questioning and criticism of their own and the organization's practices as well how employees address these tensions through action (ibid.). Questioning what is taken for granted and engaging in purposive action to change the institutional order is well in line with institutional work as presented by Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca (2011). Contest can therefore be described as an analogy for how actors interpret and manipulate meaning to institutionalize new norms. The sense of moral responsibility makes out the foundation of the process, causing employees to view institutionalized values and practices as wrong and unethical in the light of their moral beliefs on what it means to be sustainable (Sendlhofer 2019). According to the findings of Sendlhofer (2019) employees then engage in small scale, concrete activities to align practices with their moral beliefs and to facilitate a sense of meaning, thereby propelling sustainability work. This engagement in activities to facilitate meaning can be connected to the norm based institutional work where actors draw upon norms to create institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006). The way employees go about to generate a shared sense of responsibility throughout the organization and institutionalize new norms for sustainability is further outlined by Girschik (2018), who talks about both external and internal alignment. While external alignment describes how interaction with external stakeholders causes employees to revise their own understanding of responsibility, internal alignment concerns the process of getting the managers onboard and stimulating action (ibid.). Achieving a shared sense of responsibility through alignment can be viewed as a means of meaning making (Zilber 2017). Interpretation and manipulation of meaning is central in the creation of institutions (ibid.), and alignment can be described as a mechanism for meaning making and inspiring action. According to Girschik (2018), framing sustainability in a way that appeals to the rationale of managers is a key factor for achieving change of practice, which she calls recognizing managers interests. This occurs through negotiations of meaning where the framing of sustainability that accentuates the business case for engaging might be necessary, causing a shift away from the moral motivations for sustainability (Girschik 2018). This again connects to ideas of institutional creation work, where the recursive relationship between actors engaged in institutional work and the institutional setting in which they are embedded become evident (Hempel, Lawrence & Tracey 2017). The need to reframe sustainability also shows how norm-based work requires a more cooperative approach resulting in hybrid or parallel institutions, as sustainability norms complement traditional business norms (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006).

Challenges in institutional work

The efforts of employees to institutionalize new norms for sustainability are not always successful, which is something that Sendlhofer (2019) addresses by arguing that moral

decoupling can occur in different ways when one's moral convictions are not aligned with the practices of the workplace. The pressures on organizations to address sustainability is increasing, but external institutional forces might lead to symbolic conformity rather than actual transformation (Aguinis & Glavas 2012). However, previous studies have explored decoupling mainly through an organizational perspective rather than an individual (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2017). Sendlhofer (2019) argues that as sustainability objectives often are very long term while business concerns are more short term, moral decoupling is a coping mechanism for employees to deal with their moral dilemmas in day to day operations. There are several types of mechanisms for moral decoupling as described by Sendlhofer (2019). One of which is the displacement of responsibility where individuals place the responsibility for sustainability at other levels and functions within the organization. Furthermore, Sendlhofer (2019) introduces the concept of visionary procrastination, which is closely linked to that of contest. By leaning on their visionary conviction of their own moral when it comes to sustainability, employees allow themselves to procrastinate actual engagement and action toward meeting sustainability goals (ibid.). Through justification of one's actions and advantageous comparison individuals aim to frame their actions in a favorable light by comparing themselves with worse alternatives or finding alternative motivations (ibid.).

The contextual difficulties faced by internal activists for sustainability is at least partially addressed by Girschik (2018), who proposes that confronting impracticability is necessary for the institutionalization of sustainability. Only after internal alignment of interests has been achieved can actors begin to address the impractical aspects of working with sustainability to shape new practices. By this, she highlights the need for actors engaged in institutional work to provide the organization with guidance, definitions and suggested courses of action to adopt new norms. This builds on the arguments of Sendlhofer (2019), by illustrating that alignment of interests is not enough to provoke purposeful action for sustainability due to the complexity of the issue. However, internal alignment of interests is a required first step as it is difficult to concretize how to work with sustainability before establishing a common goal and purpose for doing so (Girschik 2018).

Methodology

The case company

The company being studied in this case is CEVT (China Euro Vehicle Technology), which is a Swedish automotive company based in Gothenburg (CEVT 2019b). It was founded in 2013 and has grown rapidly to currently keep some 2000 people busy, whereas half of which are consultants (CEVT 2019c). CEVT is owned by the Zhejiang Geely Holding Group, which is a privately owned global automotive group based in China (Zhejiang Geely Holding Group 2019). CEVT functions as an innovation centre for the Geely group and works with developing new technology for the different brands in the Geely portfolio such as Geely Auto, Lynk & Co, Volvo Cars, Polestar and Lotus (CEVT 2019a; Zhejiang Geely Holding Group 2019). CEVT is a knowledge-based company with the employees as their main asset.

The company was approached because of its unique and interesting structure. Although it is a newly founded company, CEVT currently fulfills the requirements to be classified as a large

corporation (FAR 2019), but the structures and strategies of the company are still under development. One such strategy that has not yet been developed is a corporate sustainability strategy to specify how CEVT should work with sustainability. However, as they have grown in size, higher demands are placed on them to address such issues, for example by now lawfully being required to publish a sustainability report. This creates an opportunity to study how the sustainability work in the organization unfolds without a clear strategic direction.

At CEVT it is custom to assign supervisors to all master thesis students. As our study is about sustainability, we were recommended to contact a project leader in the company who is one of the few people with a formal work role that includes sustainability work. Over the course of the semester we have met with our supervisor regularly, where ideas have been discussed and valuable input has been provided. Furthermore, the supervisor also facilitated contact with relevant people within the company to conduct interviews with.

Research design

In order to gain an in depth understanding of the studied phenomenon, a case study was deemed the most relevant research design for this study. Yin (2018) argue that case studies are well suited to answer research questions formulated in terms of “how” or “why” something occurs, such as ours. Case studies offer the possibility to investigate a phenomenon within the context in which it exists to get a deep understanding about it, whilst at the same time being able to use the case to generalize the conclusions on a higher conceptual level (Yin 2018). Qualitative data is most commonly associated with case studies, but case studies offer the possibility to incorporate a variety of empirical material in the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015). For this study the empirical material is derived from interviews and observations.

Common criticism about case studies concern the inability to generalize from the findings. Flyvbjerg (2005) rejects that notion and argues that even a descriptive case study will contribute to the accumulated knowledge within a field. Furthermore, Yin (2018) emphasizes that there is a difference between statistical and analytic generalization, where analytic generalization is argumentative, and with the aim to corroborate, modify, reject or advance theoretical concepts or principles. The results of this case study will be analyzed on a conceptual level to advance the understanding of the institutional work framework, and the role of meaning as a motivational factor.

Data collection

The process of data collection for this study have been a combination of interviews and observations, which is in line with the concept of triangulation (Martin & Turner 1986). Martin & Turner (1986) argue that using multiple sources of evidence is one of the key principles of data collection, especially in relation to case studies as it allows for more in-depth studies than if one were to rely solely on e.g. interviews. Complementing interviews with observations has enabled a more critical perspective towards the material gathered through interviews by enabling comparison. Another aspect of triangulation employed during data collection is that of investigatory triangulation (Martin & Turner 1986). As one of the researchers has worked at CEVT and the other has no prior relationship to the company this has allowed for two different

perspectives within the same study. Which again has facilitated a more in depth understanding by enabling comparison and the combination of two perspectives, as being an insider and an outsider comes with different advantages as discussed by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015). During data collection this has also enabled and facilitated access and the building of trust with respondents. Having a relationship with the organization one is studying could be crippling as there might be personal stakes involved compelling one to make a certain impression or uphold a certain image (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015). However, despite these challenges Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015) still recommend doing studies in organizations that one already has a relationship with as it enables access in a way that outweighs the risks. The combination of an inside and an outside perspective allowed for us to capture more layers of the data both during interviews and observations.

Interviews

The primary source of data has been derived through semi structured interviews with employees at the case company. During the course of a six-week period twelve interviews were conducted with twelve different respondents. In addition to this, four more informal interviews were conducted with one of the respondents, i.e. the project leader who was the assigned supervisor. Most interviews were scheduled for one hour, although some were scheduled to slightly shorter time frames due to either tight schedules for the respondents or a more limited scope of questions relevant for that particular respondent. This resulted in total time of 13 hours and 10 minutes worth of interviews.

The respondents come from different departments throughout the company and have various types of positions, ranging from employees up to the top management team. A more focused approach to data collection could be beneficial in other cases. However, given that sustainability is not isolated to one particular group our department at CEVT, this approach enabled the capturing a wide range of voices from all layers of the company. Relevant interviewees have been identified through snowballing (Ahrne & Svensson 2015), were our initial contacts at CEVT provided recommendations on who to begin interviewing. From there, further respondents have been chosen based on recommendations from interviewees and our supervisor. Ahrne and Svensson (2015) argue that snowballing can be particularly useful for studying social movements and networks, as the connections among actors can help locate relevant interviewees that might otherwise be difficult to find.

The interviews were conducted through a semi structured approach, meaning that questions and topics were prepared in advance, but these were used in a flexible manner during interviews (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015). Some questions were asked to all respondents while others were adapted depending on what type of sustainability initiative the respondent was involved in and his or her position. A mix of direct and indirect questions were used as suggested by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015). Since talking about sustainability in an organization without a strategy for it might be complex, indirect questions were used to ease the respondents into more sensitive topics to avoid making the respondent uncomfortable or hesitant to answer (ibid.). Furthermore, all interviews have been held in Swedish as this is the native language of the respondents, as a means of reducing language barriers. Another technique employed, which

is also suggested by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015), was the use of primary and secondary questions were follow up questions were often asked to probe for deeper thoughts and get more elaborate answers.

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) highlight the importance of informed consent and voluntary participation when considering the ethical aspects of doing interviews, especially in business related studies as it might be unclear if participation is required by their employer. To ensure that all interviewees understood the nature and purpose of the study as well as that their participation was completely voluntary certain measures were taken. This included proper introductions of ourselves and the study both in email requests for interviews as well as before starting the interview. Furthermore, prior to beginning each interview the interviewee was informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that no names would be used in the thesis, as the anonymity of participants is something that is also stressed by Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015). Lastly, the respondents were asked for consent regarding the recording of the interview, were the purpose of the recording being solely for transliteration was clearly explained.

Observations

Observations have also been performed at CEVT at five different occasions adding up to a total of 7,5 hours. The observations have been made during the sustainability forum meetings which occur for 1,5 hours every second week. According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015) observations is a superior method for capturing events as they unfold rather than relying on someone's perception of what happened. During these meetings a majority of the respondents interviewed in this study took part, which offered great opportunity to observe interactions between these as well as to compare answers about these meetings with reality. Who participated or not differed somewhat from time to time, however on average the meetings had around 9 participants.

The observations were made through a non-participatory manner in order to not interfere with the ongoing discussions but rather watch them unfold as normal (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015). In order to disturb the meeting as little as possible we sat in the back of the room, taking notes. One major aspect and limitation to observations is choosing what to observe and what to leave out (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015). To make the most of the observations, the work was divided so that one focused on what was being said while the other focused on moods, interactions, body language and the different roles that people assumed during meetings. This approach allowed us to capture as much as possible, limiting the need for prioritizing what to include in the observations (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015).

Before starting the observations, and to meet any questions regarding who we were or why we were there a short presentation about ourselves and the research project was held during the first meeting we attended. By having our supervisor introduce us to the remaining group our presence was legitimized. Over time interviews were held with most participants which further legitimized our role as researchers and our presence during observations was never questioned.

Data analysis

The empirical data was categorized and analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Martin & Turner (1986) argue that grounded theory is a relevant method to use when processing qualitative data, and Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015) explain that it is a well-established approach within business studies. Grounded theory consists of a set of procedures aimed at theorizing from, and with the help of the empirical material (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015).

After the interviews were completed the recordings were transcribed which resulted in a total of 112 pages of text. As the interviews were conducted in Swedish, the transcripts were also written in Swedish to keep the material as true to what the respondents said as possible. However, when presenting quotes the material was translated into English, which was done with great care not to risk distorting the meaning of the sayings. The observations provided a complementary perspective on the information that was retrieved from the interviews, where notes from the observations were incorporated with the empirical material from the interviews. When all of the material had been transcribed, the bulk of data was classified and grouped together to form categories in accordance with the open coding procedure as described by Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015). The coded material resulted in 171 different codes, some appearing more frequently in the bulk of data than others. These codes were then sorted into 18 categories. The next step was the axial coding in which the categories were linked in order to uncover patterns and explore how they were related to each other (ibid.). When going further into the process, the level of abstraction increased in order to refine the analysis and form the basis for the theoretical framework. From the 18 groups of codes, 3 conceptual themes were defined which made out the foundation for the merging with theoretical concepts (see figure 1). The three themes that were identified are “value driven motivations”, “no clear direction” and “do what you know”, which can be connected to the notion of agency and purposive actions. That led us towards the theoretical concepts of institutional work, and more specifically creation work which provided a theoretical lens to explore how actors aim to institutionalize the idea of sustainability within the company. Furthermore, the emphasis on personal values in the empirical material led us to focus on the role of meaning in order to investigate how that can act as a driver of the institutional work as well as its influence over how the work is carried out.

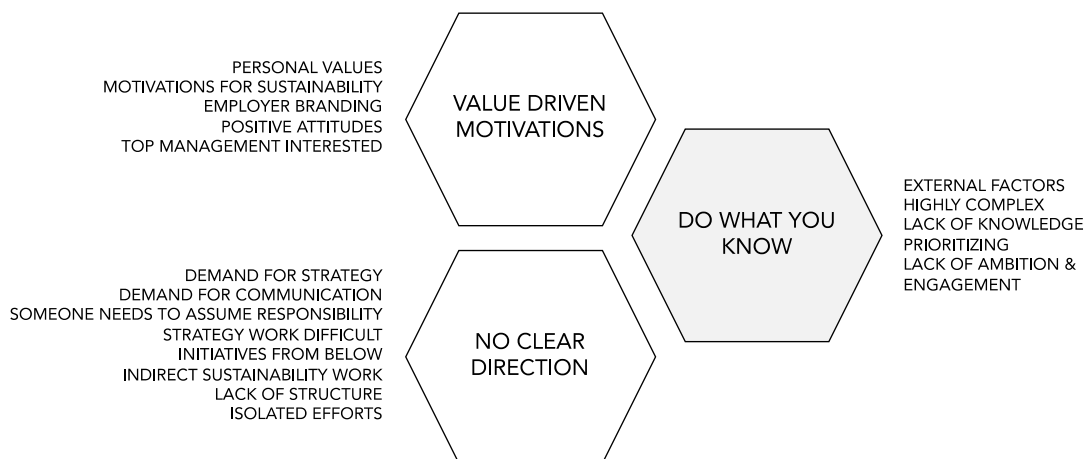


Figure 1. Overview of empirical themes and categories.

Grounded theory has been criticized for being too technical, time consuming and rigid (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015). The approach might not be well suited for large scale studies of societal structures, but it has been proven useful when dealing with qualitative data generated from e.g. case studies (Martin & Turner 1986), as it enables the researcher to break down and link complex and unpredictable data (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015). The inductive nature of the method has also been criticized, but Martin & Turner (1986) argue that preconceptions should not be abandoned altogether, but to remain open minded throughout the process. Furthermore, Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015) explain that every instance of coding and categorizing of the data is subjecting it to interpretation, and the theory is developed through continuous interplay between data collection and analysis.

Findings

The case company and context

The operations at CEVT are focused on two main areas; delivering on projects to provide technology and products and helping the Geely Group prepare for the future through innovation. The two main areas of operations are described by a member of the top management team as “we usually talk about ‘deliver today’, what we are doing in our projects today, how we work with them... The other part we call ‘one step ahead’, which is about innovation” (interview, senior vice president 1). This means that CEVT does not sell products and thereby is not a consumer brand, but rather CEVT functions as an R&D centre and identifies as a supplier to the Geely Group. The implications of this is that Geely has a rather large influence over CEVT as Geely assigns projects for CEVT to work on and also controls the budget. Furthermore, when it comes to the choice of suppliers for the cars, it is not mainly up to CEVT to make those decisions. The growth rate at CEVT have been extraordinarily high and the company still shares many organizational aspects with start-ups in the sense that all strategies and processes are not yet in place, even though the organization is now rather large. Many respondents emphasized that CEVT is still very young and describe it as a fast paced and relatively flat organization where the focus for the first five years has been on quick deliveries and building the organization. This means that certain areas are lagging behind, and sustainability is one of them as CEVT does not have a communicated strategy regarding sustainability.

There are however a number of ongoing initiatives and activities related to sustainability within the company, both in terms of employee initiatives as well as legally required activities. Here follows a brief outlining of the content, character and background of these initiatives and activities.

The sustainability report - Two years ago CEVT fulfilled the requirements of a large corporation and consequently made their first sustainability report in 2017, as is required by Swedish law. The project has involved a number of people from various departments, mainly supporting functions, and has been completed with external help.

The ISO 14001 project - CEVT is currently in the process of getting certified according to the ISO 14001 standard which is an international standard for environmental management, with

the goal of getting the certification during the first half of 2019. The initiative to start this project was taken by vice president 2, who was assigned to make a plan for getting CEVT certified according to the ISO 9001 standard. Even though it was not part of the original assignment a plan for the 14001 standard was drafted as well and presented to top management, who said yes without further questions.

The “my sustainable mobility” innovation program - There are three ongoing innovation programs at CEVT; “my smart mobility”, “my autonomous drive” and “my sustainable mobility”. Sustainability has been identified as one of the main mega trends in society which are affecting the automotive industry by members of top management, leading to the launch of this program in 2018.

The sustainability attribute - In product development sustainability has recently been incorporated by making it a vehicle attribute, such as performance or safety, which enables CEVT to place demands on sustainability factors through their requirement specification. Having sustainability as an attribute had been requested internally at CEVT but became realized as an initiative from Lynk & Co, which is the brand that CEVT is mainly working towards. The main focus is on sustainable materials.

The sustainability forum - Every two weeks the majority of those involved in some type of sustainability related activities at CEVT meet to discuss sustainability issues and share knowledge. The forum is loosely organized and has no formal mandate but is “a group of passionate people who take initiatives and hope that it will result in something good. It’s very ad hoc” (interview, consultant 1).

Value driven motivations

There can be a multitude of reasons for why people believe that companies should engage in sustainability, whether it concerns one’s personal beliefs, the perception of companies’ role in society, or for gaining competitive advantages. At CEVT, many agree that addressing sustainability and acting responsibly is vital in order to gain legitimacy, but the main driving force amongst employees is of a more personal character. For people with an interest in sustainability, working for a company in the automotive industry creates a cognitive dissonance that they aim to settle by asserting pressure on the company to act more responsibly. It is the insight about the inherently challenging task of producing cars whilst being mindful of the environment that has led multiple employees at CEVT to begin questioning the status quo and initiating efforts to make sustainability become a prioritized issue.

It was some sort of self-preservation, to create something positive from this situation that is difficult to change. If I can make the smallest change at a company like Geely, then maybe I can make a difference. And use the influence and competence that I have. (interview, team manager)

The people I have met in this network, they do this by their own initiative because it’s important to themselves. Especially when you are launching another car in the world which... it’s not the most sustainable thing one can do (interview, attribute employee 2).

Personal values and an interest in sustainability by itself might not lead employees to engage with and drive the issue internally. However, many testified that there is an interest and a

positive attitude towards sustainability within the company. As an innovation center with the aim of being at the forefront of development when it comes to automotive technologies, many believe that CEVT has great potential for successfully addressing sustainability issues. Furthermore, several respondents expressed that steps are being taken in the right direction and that there is a positive development of how CEVT is working with sustainability. Being owned by a Chinese company is seen as both an enabling and a constraining factor when it comes to working with sustainability. Some respondents argued that CEVT has great possibilities to influence Geely in regard to sustainability which can have a positive impact on a larger scale. Meanwhile, many also stress the difficulties that come with cultural differences and the fact that several key decisions lie with Geely which causes ambiguity. Attribute employee 2 sums this up by saying that,

The more knowledge the more... power is a negative word I think, but if we have knowledge that they [Geely] don't then it is just to present it. It is so obvious that we are not on the forefront here, so we NEED to put in a higher gear. I think it will be well received, at least here in Sweden. But there is always a cultural clash and I don't really know how they view sustainability at Geely.

Many respondents stress that the structure and purpose of the business at CEVT makes working with sustainability and gaining legitimacy important. As CEVT is an innovation center that does not sell any products directly to consumers, employees are the primary resource for the company, and it is crucial that CEVT remain an attractive employer in order to stay in business. Many of the respondents talked about this as a reason for why CEVT should commit to working more with sustainability, both to retain current employees, but also to attract new talents. The rapid growth and the opportunity to be a part of building and shaping the company has made CEVT attractive in the past, but some of the respondents has questioned whether it will be enough in the future. Many respondents recognized an increased interest in sustainability from younger generations as working for a company with values that mirror their own grows increasingly important, which puts pressure on companies to work actively with sustainability. As vice president 2 puts it,

Another take on this is that we are supposed to be an innovative, high tech and agile company with a lot going on. And the future lies with the younger generation, and with them these values are even more clear. It is almost a requirement in the choice of employer, that it has to be a company that is committed to sustainability. So, it is also something that is right when it comes to employer branding.

CEVT has a corporate culture that encourages ideas and initiatives from below according to several respondents. The core values at CEVT are “think big”, “find a way” and “get inspired”, which is interpreted by some respondents to be mainly concerned with innovative ideas for new technologies, while others are of the impression that sustainability fits there as well. However, the feeling that employees have the ability to influence their workplace is described as a contributing factor for why individuals have initiated efforts towards increasing the sustainability work. There are several instances mentioned where ideas from employees have been lifted to higher levels of the organization, and sometimes it has resulted in concrete

actions. Others argue that as the company has grown bigger, the ability to influence has diminished and the organizational structure has become more hierarchical.

In the beginning you got to do a lot of things and get involved in a lot of different things. But that has successively disappeared. [...] I have had the same role since I came here, but it has changed over time, you can say that I have been moved further down, layers have been added above me (interview, engineer employee).

The company is not as modern as one could believe, from an outside perspective. It's pretty hierarchical in many places. There are surely departments which are flatter, but in the department that I work it's not so easy (interview, consultant 2).

No clear direction - demands for strategy and communication

Currently there is no corporate sustainability strategy in place, which has led to some confusion regarding where the company stand and how they should work with sustainability throughout the company. Many of the respondents express that they would like to see a bigger commitment from the top management and a corporate strategy that could make the sustainability work become more structured. Without a clear direction the prioritizing becomes complicated, and many respondents mentioned that they would like more resources to be allocated towards sustainability. Dedicated resources would send a signal that this is a prioritized area, and many also argue that the complexity of the issue requires responsibilities to be distributed to different departments and people throughout the company. Furthermore, a corporate strategy could widen the scope of the sustainability work and specify which parts are relevant for CEVT to focus on. As vice president 1 puts it,

What we are missing right now is an overall take on this by our top management team, to really put down a strategy. A long-term strategy. Okay, but what does CEVT want to stand for? How do we work with these issues? And what strategy should our sustainability work have? What goals should we put up?

Although there is a number of employees committed towards working with sustainability, several respondents emphasize the importance of having managements' support for things to happen. Again, the importance of a strategy to unify and legitimize sustainability work within the company is highlighted. Opinions diverge regarding how such a strategy can emerge. Amongst the employees some believe that ideas from below can help generate content to fill a corporate strategy whilst others are of the impression that if it doesn't come from top management it won't result in anything real.

I believe that, bottom up in all its glory, but if this is to really permeate the company then it has to come from the top eventually. And that is what I would like to see some indications of, that our CEO and our top management team are at least approaching this area and talk about it. They say that we should build competence within the area, but they are not saying that this should be in the walls and a part of our culture (interview, team manager).

Members of the top management are also in disagreement regarding how and where corporate strategies can be formulated. One of the managers firmly believe that the strategy work needs

to be situated at the top level of the company, although ideas and input from below should be encouraged. The other manager discusses both opportunities and difficulties of involving employees in the strategy creation process but says that a combination of ideas and involvement from both higher and lower levels of the company would be desirable. However, all respondents are in agreement that strategy work is time consuming and a highly complex and difficult task.

That strategies come from the bottom has the advantage that they are anchored... but the strategies coming from the bottom are usually isolated from others... so the strategies have to be married somewhere. And where do you do that? Often within the management team (interview, senior vice president 2).

Another aspect that contributes to confusion when it comes to sustainability is the inadequate communication about it, where many expressed that they were unaware of how the top management team at CEVT view the issue or whether they are discussing sustainability at all. The CEO has mentioned the issue at a couple of occasions, the employees have interpreted those statements in various ways. Some view them as an indicator that sustainability is an important area that CEVT needs to focus on, whilst others still would like some more clarity regarding what that means for them in practice. Either way, it was clear that the mentioning of sustainability by the CEO had a large impact on people as it was brought up repeatedly during interviews. Several respondents also mention the need for communication to specify which areas of sustainability to focus on, whether it is environmental aspects that should be in focus or if they should deploy a broader perspective.

I would like to know at what level we want to work with sustainability. Is it only about getting on the train because there are demands or do we want to do work that actually matters? (interview, attribute employee 2).

One member of the top management argued for the need of clear communication from their end but explained that they cannot communicate before they have a developed strategy not to risk creating more confusion.

Besides planning a strategy and concretizing it in reality, it's also important to talk about it in all different contexts. But it's equally important that we allow ourselves to come together and decide, what is our message, what are our strategies? Because if you start talking about something that is not anchored it can lead to a lot of confusion. So it's about taking it in this order for it to become something real, long-term, sustainable, in the sense that you mean something, stand behind it and it's not just empty words (interview, senior vice president 1).

However, the work that CEVT has done in regard to sustainability is communicated internally on the intranet. They have for example communicated regularly about the ISO certification and plan to post more information when they become certified. The sustainability report is also viewed as a source of information about the commitment of the company. Those involved in the process argue that as the level of ambition and quality of the report increases, they will increase the promotion about it both internally and externally. For employees with an interest in sustainability, scouring the website and intranet to learn about what CEVT is doing was common and that kind of information was described as valuable and appreciated. Another

member of top management also emphasized the need to communicate about sustainability to increase the interest within the company, and that promotion of their existing projects related to sustainability is crucial in order to ensure its future existence.

Initiatives for sustainability: The sustainability forum

In the absence of a corporate sustainability strategy, employees have engaged in different initiatives. One example of which is a sustainability forum where people from different levels and departments of the organization meet to discuss sustainability related issues. The forum was created about 1,5 years ago by a few passionate employees who were frustrated about the lack of sustainability work at CEVT and wanted to do something about it. According to one of the employees who has been a part of the forum since the beginning, the initial idea was to develop strategies and ideas for how CEVT should approach sustainability and create traction from the top levels of the organization. However, that has not been achieved, and the opinions differ regarding why. One of the respondents explain that it has not been necessary for the forum to develop strategies as it has been possible for the members of the forum to have an impact and integrate sustainability into other strategies in their respective part of the company. Another respondent explains that the reason why they have not engaged in such work is largely due to the fact that they don't have enough knowledge within the group and that there is no one really driving the work that they are doing.

In the beginning it was mostly inventory, what are we doing today? Then we started talking about what our goals are, what we are striving for. But we noticed, damn it's hard when no one is taking lead (interview, consultant 2).

When observing the meetings in situ there have been no one taking charge or steering the conversations, no formal agenda and no decisions were taken. The nature of the discussion were rather informal, and topics were often centered around aspects that members of the group are working such as materials. At one occasion a discussion around leather versus vegan alternatives arose, where some argued leather to be the more sustainable alternative due to its longevity. During meetings CEVT was often compared to other actors within the industry for inspiration and benchmarking purposes. Several respondents have also described the meetings as ad hoc, where anyone can bring up a topic for discussion or share ideas. At multiple occasions external guests have been invited with the aim to inspire and share knowledge about their work and how their sustainability efforts could be connected to CEVT.

I thought that people with a lot of knowledge in this area would discuss CEVT, but it wasn't really like that. It's more that everyone was engaged in different ways, which was fun because they were engaged, but I thought it would be a little more structured. It's nothing wrong with that, but I thought there would be more of an agenda, working for CEVT and thinking about this at a higher level. But it turned out to be something different (interview, engineer employee).

However, all of the members of the sustainability forum are in agreeance that the current purpose of the forum is instead to inspire each other, share ideas and support each other's endeavors. Many express that these meeting make them feel inspired and one respondent says

that “It’s the most fun meeting of the week I would say. You leave there with a feeling that we can make a difference” (interview, attribute employee 1). Furthermore, it was seen during observation that the group became very excited in the face of good news regarding the advancement of sustainability at CEVT. One example of this was when the project manager shared that his proposed focus areas for the my sustainable mobility program had been approved by top management. Following this, there was an exhilarated mood within the group, and many had questions and expressed supporting comments. Some respondents express a will to develop and extend the purpose of the forum beyond inspiration although current limitations might prohibit them from doing so at this point. The existence of the forum has not been communicated internally, which means that other interested and potential new members have a hard time finding out about it. One of the respondents explain that being more open about their existence could have positive effects as there can be others in the company with relevant knowledge who could benefit the forum by joining. However, consultant 2 thinks that the reason for why they have not communicated more about their work is because it might lead to high expectations about what they do and achieve within the group and says that,

I think that people want this [sustainability] to exist and work in reality, so if someone hears about a forum like this I think they would be relieved. But I think that they have the wrong idea in that case, about what we really do. Unfortunately. You would like to tell people that this exist, but at the same time there is not much to tell.

Initiatives for sustainability: Sustainable innovation

The decision to include sustainability as a prioritized area for innovation was due to the identification of megatrends the society, where sustainability is one. However, it took quite some time to get the program started after it was launched in the beginning of 2018. When it comes to working with innovation one member of top management explained that it is not possible to tell people what to do, and that “I’m a little careful in allocating resources, because innovation has to be something you’re passionate about. Otherwise it won’t be good” (interview, senior vice president 2). For the three innovation programs, there were multiple employees interested in taking on the first two programs, my smart and my autonomous mobility. However, in regard to the sustainability program it was not as sought after as explained by senior vice president 2,

A lot of people wanted to jump on smart, connectivity. A lot of people wanted to jump on autonomous driving. But sustainability sort of became the orphan program.

The reason for this senior vice president 2 believes to be the complexity of the issue which makes it hard to approach. Furthermore, senior vice president 2 explain that this makes it increasingly important to promote the program internally to build up an awareness and an interest about it. After a time with a vacant post the project manager was appointed to work on the program half-time alongside other responsibilities. Although the project manager explains that while wanting to do a lot time is not enough. The task of the project manager is not to specify measurable goals, but rather to initiate technical development in the right direction. The level of interest in regard to the sustainability program among people working in the company

is described as high. The project manager explains that there is a clear interest, but a lot of question marks, that people sometimes do not know in what direction they should work.

Insecurity leads to inactivity. Sometimes it can be due to lack of time, but sometimes it's because there is a lack of direction, and that's where I come in (interview, project manager).

The project manager has specified the targets and focus areas within the program and delegated responsibilities during the spring and will share that information through the intranet as well as through seminars at the company. However, senior vice president 2 argue that the lack of a corporate sustainability strategy can have consequences for the innovation programs as “our program my sustainable mobility doesn't have a value if it's not attached to a corporate strategy, and we haven't done that” (interview, senior vice president 2).

Initiatives for sustainability: Sustainability as a vehicle attribute

There are a number of different vehicle attributes with different target levels for the product. Some examples of which are security, weight and perceived quality. Each attribute is strategized and then broken down into measurable demands that can be shared with the engineers to be included in the product development process. Sustainability became a vehicle attribute about a year ago with the main focus on sustainable materials. At one occasion the team manager held a presentation arguing for the importance of working with sustainability, and said that if they were to manage this, with the brand profile and the demands from the product planners, they needed to appoint an attribute leader at the product development department. The managers decided to do it then and there, and “it went right according to plan one could say” (interview, team manager).

All of the different attributes are listed in an internal document and prioritized according to how strong the brand needs them to be for their profile, and all have their own strategy for realizing this. However, attribute employee 1 points out that they are not competing against each other but rather they try to make the attributes work together, such as having sustainable materials with a high level of perceived quality. The strategy developed for the sustainability attribute set ambitious goals on a number of different aspects within sustainability. However, the attribute employee 2 also argue that the level of competence in regard to sustainability is low also amongst themselves, making the work more complex. About the formulated strategy for the sustainability attribute the attribute employee 2 says “It's good to have short term and long-term goals. We need to divide things given the ignorance”. However, attribute employee 2 argue that all of the parts in that strategy will not be able to be turned into measurable demands, and that the strategy might need to be adjusted.

I can't take in all of that. There is a lot of talk about emissions and such. And that's not going to be my area and I have made that clear. We are going to need more people [...] They have this big scope on sustainability, while I'm trying to be more about sustainable materials. So I won't be able to answer to all of that. I agree with it but I also feel that it is very early on and it might need to be adjusted (interview, attribute employee 2).

Do what you know

Complexity and the need for knowledge

Despite the value driven motivations for engaging in sustainability and the ongoing attempts and initiatives for doing so, our findings suggest that the complexity of the sustainability issue combined with a lack of knowledge within the organization makes purposeful action difficult. Many respondents highlight just how broad and complex sustainability can be and describe a need to break it down into smaller areas in order for them to be able to apply it to their work. In some instances, as with the sustainability attribute, this has resulted in a decision to focus only on sustainable materials as this is the one aspect that CEVT has the most control over, even though this means neglecting other important aspects.

I'm thinking that it has to be broken down. For my part it is sustainable materials. Because sustainability is too big. In the big picture of sustainability, everything from working environment to processes in production and all that could be included. I cannot grasp all that. So I will focus on sustainable materials (interview, attribute employee 2).

Overall, the majority of respondents had a strong product focus when they talked about sustainability, meaning that the operations of CEVT as a company was much secondary to the product they developed. In addition to this, the respondents were mainly concerned with the environmental aspects of sustainability while the social aspects were rarely up for discussion. As the design manager puts it,

My focus is on the product that we develop, so I don't care so much if we are sorting waste or not even if that is something that I privately can find interesting. That is not my job so to say.

Another indication of the experienced complexity of sustainability was that many respondents felt that the sustainability focus was scattered and lacked cohesiveness, which many related to the lack of strategy and communication. Also among those already engaged in sustainability the interests and perspectives on sustainability differed which was experienced as a problem by some. In addition to sustainability being an undeniably complex issue, one of the main issues identified as standing in the way of CEVT accelerating their sustainability work was the lack of knowledge and experience. All those engaged in driving the sustainability agenda at CEVT have some sort of personal interest in sustainability, but none or very few of them has worked with sustainability before and only one of the respondents had any type of relevant education. The knowledge they possess come mainly from news, social media and their own research. However, a majority of the respondents were aware of their lack of knowledge and thus engaged in different activities to gain more knowledge, where the sustainability forum is a clear example. Initially, the purpose of the forum was to drive sustainability forward. However, as it became clear that there was a big need for further knowledge, the purpose of the forum shifted to focus on knowledge sharing and inspiration. Some of the respondents who have or have had more clear tasks related to sustainability also describe that they have done a lot of research on their own to enhance their knowledge.

It is a lot about transferring knowledge. We have, as far as I know, not a single expert on sustainability in the entire organization. So, what we can find out ourselves we need to share with one another. [...] But the level of knowledge is low, I think. And that stands for me as well. I know that it is important, but I can't... we need more knowledge. And one can wonder why we have not done this work before, but things have gone a bit too fast (interview, attribute employee 2).

On a broader organizational level, the lack of knowledge and awareness about sustainability was described as even more profound and many recognized the importance of increasing the level of knowledge. Those respondents who had been out in the organization advocating sustainability in one way or the other also described how many were unaware that their practices had an influence on the environment, but saw it as rewarding to gain insight.

In order to understand what it means to work with sustainability, I think the level of knowledge needs to be raised on their [top management], on our CEO's, on everyone's level. For the older generation, if you are over fifty, it is a matter of generations. Because it is not so easy to understand these issues. Unless you are personally engaged, I guess that is what you need in that case (interview, engineer employee).

Prioritizing of sustainability

CEVT is recognized as a fast paced and fast-growing organization with many projects that need to be delivered within short time frames and with limited resources. The owner, Geely, puts considerable pressure on CEVT to deliver fast and also has final say in many decisions. Many respondents feel that Geely has a different focus when it comes to sustainability, and that this lack of alignment combined with Geely controlling the budget and certain decisions hinders sustainability work at CEVT. Thus, the focus on short term deliveries, combined with sustainability not being strategically prioritized, results in sustainability being overlooked in many situations. Respondents testify that sustainability gets down prioritized both at an individual level and at top management level, as things like cost and time gets a higher priority. Vice president 1 sheds light on this by saying that,

Time is not enough, so it is more likely going to be that we keep doing small initiatives here and there. There's nothing wrong with that, but it is desirable to take a full grasp on this. But that's reality. We know that now we have to hire 400 people here or architecture have these projects, and now we have a deadline, and then you're sitting there. And then I feel that this type of work is the first thing out the door. Not because you don't think that it's important, but because tomorrow I have a report due to Geely, and then that wins the tug of war.

However, people within CEVT are working towards putting sustainability higher up on the agenda both from lower levels of the organization as well as within the top management team. Furthermore, although described as difficult, there is a generally optimistic view on the possibilities of influencing Geely in these matters as many see that CEVT in their role as an innovation centre could potentially have a large influence. Even though many see great potential for CEVT when it comes to sustainability there is also an experienced lack of commitment and ambition, both in the different ongoing initiatives as well as from top management. In both of the more formal projects, i.e. the sustainability report and the ISO project, those involved say that the level of ambition is quite low. As for the sustainability

report, this is said to be due to this being their second report ever, and that it will have to take time to increase the level of commitment. The design manager says that,

I think it's pretty lame. I would like to see some goals! So that's really... It could be so much better. But then I also think that... we are on our second report. There are still large organizational changes happening in the company all the time regarding how the business should be structured. It's to be expected. It can't be super good the first years but you have to give it a couple of years.

The low levels of ambition are often described in relation to what other companies are doing, which highlights the lack of role models and reflects a generally low level of ambition within the automotive industry. Many respondents emphasize the importance of regulations as the main driver of sustainability work within the industry as it is so heavily regulated, and only meeting regulations is described as a fairly high target as many companies choose to pay fines rather than meeting the requirements.

Many car companies don't reach the requirements, but just pay the fines instead. so just being able to meet the requirements is still, you might not think that in other industries but in the automotive industry it is a pretty good ambition to have (interview, consultant 1).

Many respondents also express that they would like to see more commitment from top management, which again relates to the demand for strategy and communication. Meanwhile, most respondents are aware that the level of ambition is currently low and have acknowledged that that they have not gotten very far yet and have a low point of departure in their sustainability work. The interviewed members of the top management team also recognize that they are not doing much at this time. Even though they are beginning to raise the issue informally they admit they are not working on a sustainability strategy at this time by saying that “we have activities. But do we have a strategy? Then my answer is no” (interview, senior vice president 2). Senior vice president 1 outlines this further by saying that,

We are a few people who have these thoughts that we need to do something more, and we have started some informal discussions. And that's both with different colleagues and with different people in the management team. So we are trying to capture this, but have not really settled on what it is we should discuss and how we should discuss it, but we feel a need for it.[...] Because if there are no clear guidelines and strategies to communicate, the organization becomes a little lost. You have to have something like ‘oh, this is what we’re working for, this is what’s important for the company, important for me, important for everyone.

However, from the top management perspective there is also a lack of engagement from the organization at large which was manifested through the lack of interest in the my sustainable mobility program. Showing that although there are some engaged individuals, the level of commitment on a broader level is still low at CEVT.

Analysis

Moral motivations for sustainability as a driver of institutional work

As the idea of sustainability becomes institutionalized in society more individuals will question how their identity is related to the institutional environment in which they operate, as described by Hampel, Lawrence & Tracy (2017). Traditionally, institutional theory suggest that organizations are influenced by institutional norms in their environment and adopt them in order to gain legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan 1977). This is assumed to be brought in to the organization from top down in order to conform to external pressures (ibid.). In this case however, there is no strategy in place to deal with pressures for sustainability but rather the sustainability work is stemming from lower levels of the organization. This contradicts the traditional view on how institutional pressures affect organizations. Hence, we turn towards institutional work as it is the purposive actions of individuals that are driving the efforts to integrate sustainability at CEVT in accordance with how Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca (2011) describe institutional creation work. Since CEVT is not operating on a consumer market and is in a sense brandless, pressures for sustainability might not influence the organization in the same way as it does many others, but rather the norms have an impact on an individual level. This leads employees who identify with sustainability to internalize those ideas and in turn bring them into the company, as explained by Girschik (2018). The meaning guiding the purposive actions is propelled by ethical considerations as acting sustainably is a matter of individuals' sense of what is right and wrong, resulting in the use of moral motivations to describe the underlying meaning of the institutional work.

Although the number of actors who are actively and purposively engaged in making CEVT more sustainable is limited to a fairly small portion of the number of employees, the general institutionalization of sustainability as a positive concept in society is still visible. All respondents felt that there was a generally positive attitude towards sustainability at CEVT, indicating that although sustainability might not be part of everyone's identity the concept is still familiar and viewed as morally just by most. For many respondents, a personal sense of moral responsibility was described as the main reason for why they started to initiate efforts to institutionalize sustainability, which is in line with how Lawrence & Suddaby (2006) describe norm based institutional work where actors draw upon values and norms to create institutions. Sendlhofer (2019) also consolidates that argument by stating that individuals' sense of moral responsibility leads employees to question current praxis and drive sustainability work, which was seen in the employees' efforts to engage in different initiatives and try to make sustainability become a prioritized issue at CEVT. Many respondents also attested to the notion that engaging in sustainability is a matter of meaning making for the employees (Zilber 2017), as organizing and driving different sustainability initiatives was described as fun and made people feel good. Furthermore, several respondents explained that their work to integrate sustainability at CEVT was derived from a personal feeling of climate anxiety, again illustrating how moral motivations are the driver of purposive action in this case.

A majority of the respondents also brought up the increasing pressures coming from younger generations, demanding serious engagement in sustainability in order to be considered an

attractive employer. Engaging with sustainability thus becomes an issue of legitimization as an employer, but also shows how influence from external actors causes employees to revise their own understanding of responsibility through external alignment (Girschik 2018). Framing sustainability in different ways in order to appeal to the interests of different actors is emphasized by Girschik (2018). Although employer retention could be seen as a matter of staying competitive and profitable, employer branding is ultimately about providing the employees with meaning to make them appreciate their jobs. From this case it is clear that the motivations for engaging in sustainability comes from a sense of moral obligation, rather than the recognition of business advantages for working with sustainability (Sendlhofer 2019). Although the issue of legitimacy is brought up, it is in relation to employer branding and adhering to the values of the younger generation, which again show the importance of moral motivations for sustainability, even for potential future employees.

Institutional work for the creation of sustainability norms

The employees at CEVT who feel a moral responsibility for sustainability begin questioning what has previously been taken for granted, which in turn inspire action. Several respondents explain that the inadequate commitment towards sustainability on a corporate level led them to initiate efforts from below with the hope of gaining traction from above. Although the role of employees is in focus, Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca (2011) highlight the importance of not overstating the influence of single actors by opposing the concept of institutional entrepreneurs. Sendlhofer (2019) and Girschik (2018) both illustrate the importance of employees in the development of sustainability practices by providing useful concepts to further understand their efforts. However, through depicting employees as norm entrepreneurs (Sendlhofer 2019) and internal activists (Girschik 2018) we argue that single actors are idolized and awarded sole credit. Although alignment with different stakeholders' interests is recognized, employees are still treated as primary change agents (Girschik 2018; Sendlhofer 2019). From our case, it was clear that although employees were identified as the main drivers of institutionalization, the adherence of other stakeholders and structures is required. This was manifested through respondents consistent arguing of the need for management support and alignment with Geely in order to inspire real change. This demonstrates the limitations of individuals actors, which might however be more profound in a larger company such as CEVT than at SMEs, which is the setting of Sendlhofer's (2019) studies.

Through the concept of contest, Sendlhofer (2019) describe the process of how individuals begin questioning the current practices and address tensions through action, which corresponds with how Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca (2011) describe the process of institutional work. The employees at CEVT start scrutinizing themselves and their actions in the light of their moral conviction that sustainability is important. This is illustrated through the common understanding that working in the automotive industry is inherently bad, which results in a mismatch between moral understandings and actions in their day to day job. This internal tension is then what drives employees to engage and strive towards an institutionalization of sustainability at CEVT, to enable alignment between moral obligations and practice and meaning fulfilment (Zilber 2017; Sendlhofer 2019). This is done through contesting of current norms and practices by initiating small scale, concrete projects (Sendlhofer 2019), which is in

line with the norm based institutional work where actors aim at creating parallel institutions rather than transforming the entire business (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006). Instead, the work directed at institutionalizing sustainability is ongoing and developing in different ways throughout the company.

This is recognized in the different initiatives at CEVT, where a forum is created, sustainability is becoming a vehicle attribute to consider as well as a focus area for innovation in order to contest current practice and norms (Sendlhofer 2019). Employees use the resources at their disposal to infuse sustainability where they can, often in close relation to their own area of work. This is illustrated through the focus on sustainable materials for the sustainability attribute as well as through the initiative for getting certified according to the ISO 14001 standard. The way actors engage in institutional work by addressing the practices closest at hand for them highlights how the embeddedness of actors in their institutional setting affects the institutional work in which they engage (Hampel, Lawrence & Tracey 2017). The existing structures are both enabling and constraining as employees feel morally motivated to engage in institutional work, whilst at the same time the institutional environment where they exist determines their opportunities to act (Hwang & Colyvas 2011). Several respondents argued that the corporate culture encouraged ideas and initiatives from below, which could be seen as enabling structures that lead employees to engage in different activities with the aim of changing current practices. The possibility to influence one's workplace could be seen as a contributing factor as to why employees decide to stay at the company and try to shape it from within rather than leaving in the face of their moral dilemma. Respondents express that there has been a positive development and that sustainability is beginning to gain traction in the company which contributes to meaning fulfillment for the engaged individuals. However, as the industry CEVT is operating in is conservative, and since they are in a dependence relationship with Geely, the possibilities for employees to institutionalize sustainability are not limitless. This recursive relationship between actors and institutions was also evident during observations, as it was clear how the actors were informed both by their moral motivations for sustainability as well as preexisting norms at CEVT and within the automotive industry. This goes in line with Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) argumentation that norm based institutional work is of a more collaborative nature and that it often results in parallel or hybrid institutions. The way in which the respondents spoke about for example the relationship between leather and sustainability illustrated how the actors were strongly influenced by current norms, which show how these negotiations between norms also happen internally for individuals (Hampel, Lawrence & Tracey 2017). In this case, the embeddedness of agency could be seen as a hindering factor for achieving truly purposeful sustainability work, as the influence of dominating norms narrows the scope of sustainability and many core practices are taken for granted also by those aiming to influence CEVT from within (Hampel, Lawrence & Tracey 2017).

The demand for a corporate strategy as well as increased communication about sustainability by employees can be seen as an expression of their work to make sustainability become legitimized within the company and integrated into the business. Having a sustainability strategy in place would validate the norm and send a signal that it is a prioritized issue at CEVT.

Consequently, the strategy work is viewed by some as a means to institutionalize sustainability within the company. Several respondents emphasize the need for a strategy and a bigger commitment from top management in order to achieve real change, again demonstrating that a cooperative approach is needed to establish the new norm as suggested by Lawrence & Suddaby (2006). However, developing and implementing a corporate sustainability strategy might not lead to institutionalization as it is possible that the suggested practices could still be decoupled from the core business (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2017). As the aim is to create a parallel institution within CEVT that can be incorporated into existing practices (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006), the institutional work that is carried out has the purpose of making sustainability become a higher priority, not to crowd out existing practices but changing the way that they are looked upon. One example of such work is the creation of the sustainability attribute, which is incorporated with the other attributes to guide the product development process. Including sustainability as a vehicle attribute enables the product planners to consider it alongside other attributes. Not at the expense of the preexisting attributes, but rather to find ways that they can work together.

Challenges for institutionalizing sustainability

The institutional work performed in order to generate a shared sense of responsibility throughout the organization requires negotiations of meaning, which relates to how sustainability is prioritized. Girschik (2018) argue that recognizing the interests of managers is vital for achieving internal alignment. As time and cost appear to be the main considerations of managers at CEVT, framing sustainability in terms of the right thing to do might not be sufficient to inspire action on a broader level. Some of the ongoing initiatives have been altruistically motivated, such as the ISO project and the sustainability forum. However, these initiatives do not interfere with the core practices of the company nor take up any considerable amount of resources. Turning to the my sustainable mobility innovation program, this has been framed more through a business perspective as answering to one of several mega trends affecting the industry. My sustainable mobility is also the single initiative that has generated the most traction within the company, even though it was off to a slow start and also runs alongside the core business at CEVT. This indicates that in order to inspire action on a broader scale, and to generate the resources needed to do so, reframing sustainability into business motives might be necessary. This is in line with the reasoning of Girschik (2018), as well as Zilber (2017) who argue that manipulation of meaning is vital during processes of institutional creation work. In this case, recognizing managers interests also extends to the owners, as Geely has such a profound influence over CEVT. According to our findings, the sustainability issue has not penetrated institutional norms in China in the same way as in Sweden, indicating that arguing the business case for sustainability might be necessary to reach alignment (Girschik 2018). This again illustrates the collaborative approach needed in normative creation work, as suggested by Lawrence & Suddaby (2006), where negotiations are necessary to gain the endorsement of others to validate the norm. However, pressures aimed at maintaining the current institutionalized norms were also recognized by respondents, especially in relation to institutionalized priorities and ways of working within the automotive industry. As described by Hwang & Colyvas (2011) actors' interests are not fixed, and the institutional context can also determine the ability to perform institutional work.

The recursive relationship between the institutional setting where institutional work takes place and those performing it also has implications for the engaged actors, as being forced to negotiate the meaning of sustainability to generate action can be problematic (Hampel, Lawrence & Tracey 2017; Sendlhofer 2019). As existing institutional norms hinder the emergence of new ones, moral conflicts occur for those involved in institutional work, which is enhanced by the long-term focus on sustainability and short-term focus of business. Traditionally, decoupling is treated on an organizational level where practices are decoupled from the myths the company is trying to convey (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2017). However, as sustainability is not a part of the formal structures at CEVT, it has not been possible to observe any decoupling on an organizational level. Sendlhofer (2019) does however describe how decoupling can occur at an individual level through moral decoupling between what one thinks is right and what one does. Thus, moral decoupling functions as a means for self-preservation which allows for justification of practices that does not align with the moral beliefs of respondents (ibid.). Advantageous comparison with other companies within the automotive industry was observed as there is a general lack of commitment towards sustainability with many companies barely meeting regulatory requirements. This allowed people at CEVT to depict themselves favorably in comparison to others, and thereby justifying their own practices on an individual level. Furthermore, many respondents have highlighted the focus on short term deliveries at CEVT, which might be seen as a contributing factor to decoupling. In this, the displacement of responsibility, as described by Sendlhofer (2019), was occurring especially in relation to Geely. As Geely owns certain decisions, this allowed respondents to discard their responsibility for aspects such as supply chains and thereby relieving themselves from feeling obliged to deal with sustainability in that area. The findings of this study also suggest that the actors engaged in institutional work at CEVT use the sustainability forum as an outlet for their moral dilemmas, allowing them to postpone purposeful actions. This relates to the moral decoupling concept of visionary procrastination which is introduced by Sendlhofer (2019), where grand talk and visionary strategies stills the need for action. This could also be seen in relation to the vehicle attribute strategy, which stated ambitious goals that some felt were unrealistic and difficult to work with, but where actors leaned on the strategy without actually engaging or committing to realizing it.

Another complicating factor in the institutional work process is the inadequate knowledge about sustainability that was described by a majority of the respondents. Traditionally sustainability has not been a prioritized issue in the industry, meaning that automotive companies have not developed sufficient competence in this area. Several respondents explain that there are no one with expert knowledge about sustainability at CEVT, and those who are engaging in sustainability work do so out of a personal interest. However, achieving purposeful action is difficult according to Girschik (2018), where the complexity of the sustainability issue combined with the lack of knowledge at CEVT are complicating factors. To achieve institutionalization of sustainability, Girschik (2018) suggests that it is vital to confront impracticability in order to guide the adoption of new norms. The way in which respondents describe the need for breaking down sustainability into small measurable actions in order to enable adoption in practice strengthens Girschik's (2018) reasoning. However, suggesting

courses of action becomes difficult without sufficient knowledge, meaning that the lack of knowledge becomes a hindering factor in the strive towards institutionalization of sustainability. Furthermore, as Girschik (2018) also points out, reaching an alignment of interests with managers, and in this case owners, is a required first step before truly purposive actions can take place. In this process knowledge also becomes vital, as more extensive knowledge on sustainability enables for more efficient framing in order to address the interests of different stakeholders. The efforts of employees at CEVT to institutionalize sustainability norms have gained some traction, but there is still a long way to go before the perceived moral responsibility of employees can be met (Sendlhofer 2019).

Who engages in institutional work is important to consider according to Lawrence, Leca & Zilber (2013), and from this case the motivations are driven by a personal sense of moral responsibility, which is not equivalent to specific knowledge in the area. This can be problematic as it means that the possibility to institutionalize sustainability is dependent on individuals own personal interests and knowledge. Hwang & Colyvas (2011) emphasize the need to problematize actors' interests as they are not fixed, meaning that actors interests can change over time, affecting the way that they view meaning making and ultimately the institutional work itself. In order to institutionalize sustainability at CEVT the interest and personal motivations of both employees and managers needs to be maintained as there are currently no other structures upholding the work to institutionalize sustainability. Consequently, when sustainability work is based solely on personal motivations there is a risk for collapse should the interests of the engaged actors alter or diminish. The importance of knowledge sharing and education is highlighted by multiple respondents, again illustrating the need to negotiate meaning and increase the interest and knowledge within the company in order to advance the sustainability work in the absence of corporate strategy.

Conclusion

From this case, it was clear that moral responsibility for sustainability was the driver of purposive action in order to generate meaning on a more profound, existential level for individual actors. The institutional work is then fueled by the desire to ease the tension between the sense of moral obligations employees feel for sustainability on an individual level and the practices of the company where they work. By engaging in small scale initiatives where they can, employees strive to establish sustainability as a norm despite the absence of a guiding corporate strategy. However, the institutional environment is both enabling and constraining, as the recursive relationship between actors and their environment determines the way that they view their own and the company's responsibilities, as well as their opportunities to act. In the face of this, moral decoupling occurs on an individual level as a coping mechanism to settle moral dilemmas. The collaborative nature of work aimed at institutionalizing norms is highlighted through the need for alignment of interests with various stakeholders as well as the call for management support, as without the validation of others there will be no norm. However, as interest are not fixed and as the complexity of the sustainability issues presents challenges in terms of knowledge and impracticability, relying solely on personal engagement jeopardizes the solidity of the institutionalization of sustainability as a norm.

The way in which moral motivations has been incorporated into institutional work concepts in this study contributes to a fuller understanding of how and why individual actors engage in institutional creation work, thereby contributing theoretically to the field of institutional work. Furthermore, by providing a deeper understanding of the role of employees in driving sustainability within companies this study adds both to the literature on corporate sustainability and has practical implications for understanding how sustainability work can occur without strategic direction. This study has shown that moral motivations propel the institutionalization of sustainability while also highlighting the challenges of developing knowledge and aligning interests in doing so. Thus, it is suggested as vital for organizations to acknowledge the importance of meaning fulfilment of employees as it can enable truly purposive action towards sustainability. However, the creation of institutional norms is an ongoing process. One limitation of this study is the inability to observe development over time, which constrains us from being able to draw conclusions on whether sustainability becomes institutionalized through this type of institutional work. Therefore, additional research on institutional creation work and role of moral motivations is needed to advance both theoretical and practical understanding of how sustainability can be integrated further.

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