

Work in a sustainability perspective: corporates' perception and ergonomics

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Abstract. Although much has been discussed about corporate sustainability practices, little is known about the work that supports them. How do corporations actually manage such complex issues? Can one say that human efforts for sustainability are sustainable as well? These questions were investigated through interviews with 10 large corporations in Brazil. Results show: how organisational features end up leveraging or limiting sustainability efforts; how this issue can actually introduce severe tensions into workers' routine; and how corporate culture, power relations, and wider social and political issues also have to be addressed if work's sustainability is to be considered in depth.

Keywords. Work, Corporate Sustainability, Health, Qualitative interviews

1. Introduction

Following the evolution of an international debate on sustainability, corporations are striving to include social issues besides environmental ones, thus entangling their task to balance non-economic variables with financial performance, often under unstable market, macroeconomic, and geopolitical conditions (Kiron, Kruschwitz, Rubel, Reeves, & Fuisz-Kehrbach, 2013). Companies aligned with corporate sustainability take into account variables of environmental, economic, and social dimensions (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Elkington, 1994, 1997; Savitz & Weber, 2006; Steurer, Langer, Konrad, & Martinuzzi, 2005), and shall make use of sustainable production systems which favour healthy working environments (Docherty, Kira, & Shami, 2009).

The motivation for this paper is the investigation of corporate sustainability initiatives as well as the sustainability of the work itself, in other words, both ends and means of sustainability. Therefore a central question is: regarding the efforts on which sustainable results depend, are they sustainable for the workers as well? Or, in a broader sense, how is work being considered in corporate sustainability policies? Much has been published about sustainable practices, but little is known about the human endeavours that support them.

This paper shows how global preoccupations with sustainability unfold in the level of worker's routine and expose severe tensions and dilemmas, thus inviting society to question the legitimacy of sustainability the way it has been addressed to date.

2. Methods

The major sources of information in this research were in-depth interviews with large companies engaged in corporate sustainability, combined with document analyses (corporate annual reports and official websites). Inspired by the work of Islam and Deegan

(2008), who investigated social and environmental reporting practices, qualitative interviews were deemed to be the best way to obtain information on corporations' routine and internal tensions surrounding both sustainability and work-related issues. Data collection covered a one-year period from September 2012 to September 2013 in a total of:

- Twenty interviewees among directors (5), managers (13), and analysts (2); and
- Ten large companies in Brazil, among the industries of consumer goods (5), packaging (1), aerospace (1), chemicals (1), financial services (1), and audit, tax and consulting services (1).

As the research focuses on how corporations address sustainability and workers' well-being in operations, the authors looked for conversational partners that were representatives of sustainability, production & operations, and human resources departments.

Before each interview, research purposes were briefly explained. All interviews were conducted in person with two to four researchers, and lasted between one and two hours. With the consent of conversational partners, all sessions occurred with intensive note-taking and only two were tape-recorded for later transcription.

A semi-structured interview guide was used, and questions were open-ended. The main issues addressed in interviews were: 1) corporate sustainability: visions and examples; 2) management practices and communication channels; 3) organisational culture and sustainable work: vision, reality, and challenges; and 4) individualisation of collective work-related issues. As the authors reached the last interviews it was realized that information obtained did not modify the main findings, hence the number and variety of interviewees were satisfactory for research's objectives.

In order to analyse the collected data, Rubin and Rubin's (2012) methodology for qualitative interviewing was followed. Notes and transcriptions of each interview were joined, and each excerpt was commented and coded according to the themes it reflected. This coding process later allowed each theme to be transversally evaluated along different interviews. As Islam and Deegan (2008) argue, given that information came primarily from interviewees, biases and inaccuracies must be considered in the results.

3. Results

As interviews were conducted, it became clear that in order to investigate work and sustainability in corporations, it would be also necessary to consider wide issues at organisational and social levels.

3.1 *Corporate Sustainability: Visions and Examples*

According to the conversational partners, the sustainability department is responsible to promote, identify, and coordinate opportunities concerning sustainability. Its performance also depends on a similar and shared understanding of the concept, and projects can be fostered if recognised as sustainable by representatives of different areas. In some companies the concept is still formally limited to environmental matters, but there is a strong trend to include social ones.

The interviewees explained how environmental sustainability affects nearly all departments and numerous examples were given, such as more efficient production processes and technologies, green product development, green marketing, environmental impact analysis in planning activities, and changes in offices' routine and spaces (e.g. waste reduction, recycling).

Concerning social sustainability, even when it is officially considered there is no consensus that all departments have their share of responsibility – yet, various examples can be cited. Among them, and targeting external audience: programmes for community

well-being; social foundations; sponsorship of arts and culture; and more rigorous supply contracts, in the sense of assuring decent jobs along the supply chain. Practices addressing internal audience were also enumerated: voluntary work; workplace exercises; safety trainings; home office; psychological assistance; rehabilitation and return-to-work programmes; channels to report harassment complaints; and a wide range of benefits and life quality programmes, e.g., quit smoking programmes, private health and retirement plans, kindergartens, meal and transportation allowance, etc. How such investments actually affect work sustainability is an issue that will be resumed in section 3.4.

3.2 Management Practices and Communication Channels

Companies' sustainability efforts can be either leveraged or constrained by their own organisational characteristics. Depending on how different units interact with each other, sustainability department can either fulfil its function of fostering such efforts, or be reduced to the unpleasant role of 'sustainability inspector'. Thus, corporations will face extra difficulties in dealing with sustainability if their own 'architecture' does not help.

Interviewees cited various management techniques and concepts, e.g., creating shared value, continuous improvement, lean production, total quality management, etc., which serve as existing 'platforms' on which sustainability matters are usually introduced. Isolated management tools may nevertheless be insufficient, as some interviewees (one from chemical and another from consumer goods industry) reported a lack of comprehensive rational schemes to address sustainability in a more efficient manner. In some cases, large projects strongly depend on team leaders' initiatives and keen interrelationships to be successful.

In one company, however, top-down comprehensive strategies were so dominant that although sustainability was a shared concern, it was considered in a very fragmented way, as 1) each area was strongly bonus-oriented towards its own clear goals, and 2) meetings between units and departments were concentrated in a few months of the year.

In regard to communication channels, some interviewees (consumer goods industry) told how regular meetings among work colleagues allow them to discuss improvements on operations, rules, projects, and other aspects which directly influence their activities. In some companies, managers should regularly evaluate bottom-up proposals and help implement the feasible ones. In contrast, one conversational partner narrated the gradual extinction of informal communication channels (e.g., proper space for conversation during work pauses, face-to-face feedbacks, casual meetings) along the last years. This led to a situation in which talking about daily constraints and delicate issues became a much more difficult and frustrating task. Therefore, in order to properly address sustainability or any other issue, both formal and informal organisational mechanisms are necessary.

3.3 Organisational Culture and Sustainable Work: Vision, Reality, and Challenges

Different approaches to corporate sustainability were identified, but when interviewees were asked to talk about the work itself, similar ideals and worrying realities were revealed. The visions interviewees presented for a sustainable work were holistic and convergent, in the sense that it should favour a work-life balance, make sense, promote health and well-being, and contribute to achieve happiness. Some of them told how changes in labour and pension legislations drove companies to reduce accident and illness by investing on health and safety programmes, so as to avoid paying heavier fines or higher contributions. Nevertheless, even companies regarded as exemplary in organisational climate have to face worrying data concerning staff turnover, sick leaves due to mental disorders, and job dissatisfaction; presenteeism is also a troubling issue, though hard to be measured. Even when channels for direct dialogue between work colleagues or hierarchical levels exist,

why has it been so hard to advance in this issue?

As interviews proceeded, it became clear that there is a mental model for the successful worker. The ideal professional would gather the necessary characteristics to cope with intense, varied, and unpredictable demands. He should be proactive, multi-skilled, resilient, and able to deal with all sorts of unforeseen challenges, but without sacrificing a systemic view. In some companies, due to a strong commitment with operations safety, boldness is a personal trait to be watched over, but even in these cases one is expected to accumulate an increasing number of responsibilities. Some interviewees explained that higher management levels still present an older profile, in which paternalism and a strong control over subordinates prevail. Still, the trend is walking towards the new profile, which is already well established in many corporations.

The situation can be synthesized in an apparent paradox: while tasks are complex and heterogeneous, idealized professionals are fundamentally homogeneous. An interviewee used the term 'super professional' to describe his virtually infinite capacity, and from whom an attitude of leadership and entrepreneurship is expected independently from his actual position. Some conversational partners explained how candidates are essentially selected on the basis of an ambitious attitude, giving little consideration to particular knowledge or skills.

The downside of the 'super professional' is that his extraordinary expected performance happens to the detriment of physical and mental health, as human capacities are anything but infinite. Furthermore, the accumulation of responsibilities occurs in a context of constant pressure for cost reduction, staff shrinking, outsourcing of non-core activities, and substitution of low-performance workers. In one company, individual performance was strongly based on a cruel comparative basis, i.e., even when all tasks were accomplished, evaluation would be negative if below colleagues' performances. Some compared the organisational climate to a pressure cooker, in which those who show poor performance are at high risk of punishment, transference, or dismissal. Thus, given the harsh working conditions, valuing the 'super professional' means resigning to health problems related to the growing number of responsibilities and pressures to perform, and such idealization is therefore an obstacle for work sustainability.

Most interviewees pointed that sustainability can cause significant work intensification, for it means another relevant, usually abstract responsibility that individuals are obliged to assume. One of them narrated the case of a green product, whose environmental impact was lower comparing to the previous ones. When the product was released, customers believed that the company was trying to sell lower quality for the same price; not only the product was rejected but company's image was damaged. This example shows how even society can become an obstacle to corporate sustainability, and workers have to consider all sorts of variables – some of which are external to the company and hard to predict. In the same enterprise, the sustainability speech was so rich and refined that the interviewee confessed a general feeling of silent frustration among employees, as everything they could actually do fell short of expectations.

In another company (audit, tax, and consulting services), the preoccupation with internal transparency was so high that individual performance results were openly shown, and criteria for career promotions were clearly defined. The interviewee revealed how such situation made people feel as if living in a showcase and locked in a 'corporative game', for actions were under strong vigilance and had to be carefully deliberated. These examples show that, in a background of pressure for aggressive and sustainable results, even the best intentioned initiatives can eventually raise workers' psychic workload to severe levels.

3.4 Individualisation of Collective Work-related Issues

It must be highlighted that the organisation of work and production shall be highly flexible in terms of task variability (content, schedule, and location), yet fundamentally rigid concerning negotiation of targets, lead times, or priorities. Given the corporations' resistance to expand staffs – which would unburden workers' required performance –, pressures for productivity culminate in an intense psychic suffering that, under the name of 'stress', are often interpreted as a physiological response which should be individually managed. Costs of human resources are allegedly high and turn hiring unfeasible, but this argument should be weighted aside extreme income inequality among the workers of the same company.

Hence, here lies the cornerstone of a political and social impasse: it is known that abusive pressures for productivity can contribute to degenerate workers' health; however, many perceive there is no other way except keep struggling for the sake of companies' survival. As explained by an interviewee, companies make up for State's deficiencies when employees are provided a large benefits package (e.g., kindergarten, retirement plan, health plan for the whole family). Consequently, without social securities the position of workers toward companies is one of strong dependence and submission.

More precisely, interviewees pictured an ideal not only for the professional, but for the couple professional and company. On the one hand, an exemplary corporation should offer the worker a wide range of benefits and life quality programmes, besides trainings, structure, and technology support. On the other hand, he should give always more from himself, in terms of skills, flexibility, and moral compromise. Such investments therefore stimulate individual capacities and at the same time legitimate an unfair individualising approach to complex demands. Furthermore, a strict alignment of the individual to corporate values is expected, which clearly indicates that there is little room for human variability when it comes to psychological characteristics (only one interviewee told total alignment is not mandatory, as employees should be able to express their own personalities). The 'super professional' should hence incarnate corporation's interests itself, but without the organisation having to share the responsibility for individuals' suffering in the 'pressure cooker'. As long as these points remain unaddressed, social sustainability practices will remain essentially palliative in regard to workers' health problems and dissatisfaction.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Many results and analyses match those existing in literature, e.g., the description of intense and flexible working; loss of social securities in the context of neoliberalism (Grint, 2005; Harvey, 1989; Sennett, 2000); stress and suffering as individual problems (Flach, Grisci, Silva, & Manfredini, 2009); the new multi-skilled and proactive professional profile; the role of subjectivities in work's organisation; pressure for productivity; psychic suffering at work (Abrahão et al., 2009; Dejours, 2007). This paper shows relevant nuances of these questions in the specific context of corporate sustainability, which have so far been little investigated. In-depth interviews allowed to understand how sustainability issues can aggravate tensions in workers' lives, and also to uncover dilemmas and conflicts that hinder advances in work sustainability. Considering the background of intense psychic suffering (the means), the legitimacy of so-called sustainable results (the ends) has to be questioned. However, due to the qualitative nature of this investigation, it must be pointed out that results depict non-negligible aspects of reality but have limited power of generalization.

It was analysed how complex demands are usually interpreted through the

individualising lens of corporations' culture and ideologies, when actually they should be also collectively addressed in the level of organisations and societies. In this sense, both activity-centred ergonomics and work psychodynamics can contribute to explain how organisations can effectively contribute to work sustainability, e.g., understanding the gap between prescribed and actual work; considering human limitations and variability; engaging workers in organisational decisions; creating opportunities to discuss constraints and impasses without fear of punishment; favouring the construction of a collective identity and a mutually supporting environment at workspaces. These are examples whose nature are not palliative the way corporate social responsibility practices use to be; instead, they enable workers to act upon the causes of physical and mental suffering (Abrahão et al., 2009; Daniellou, Betiol, Sznclwar, & Zidan, 2004; Dejours, 1986).

The authors of this paper were not given the opportunity to properly interview workers of lower hierarchy, which are directly involved with operational activities. Although the interviewed managers and directors revealed precious information for the purposes of this research, this can be considered an important methodological limitation as well as a suggestion for future investigations. Another question that deserves deeper elucidation is whether and how corporations perceive high staff turnover, sick leaves due to mental disorders, dissatisfaction, presenteeism, and related issues, as significant problems also in terms of productivity loss and economic costs, and their willingness to pay for larger staffs or to reverse outsourcing.

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