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Emergence of Sustainability Based Approaches in Healthcare: Expanding Research and Practice

Malliga Marimuthu^{a,*}, Hanna Paulose^b

^aUniversiti Sains Malaysia, School of Management, 11800 Minden, Penang, Malaysia

^bOhio State University, Department of Human Sciences, Columbus Ohio 43210, USA

Abstract

The study explores the scope of sustainability practices in healthcare by systematically examining studies conducted on healthcare related issues within the context of sustainability. The review is focused on three main conceptual aspects – dimensions of sustainability practices in healthcare, drivers of sustainable practices within the industry and strategies to implement sustainability effectively in healthcare. Relevant literature on sustainability in healthcare is referred to address the developed research question. Based on the identified expanding dimensions of sustainability research and practices, future research insights are proposed as conceptual models that reflect the scope of sustainability practices in healthcare. This could enhance understanding of the literature and stimulate researchers to expand the research of sustainability in healthcare in a more widespread and holistic perspective as to ensure service excellence formation for business sustainability. The implications of the study are threefold. Firstly it provides researchers and practitioners interested in healthcare literature an overview of how the concept of sustainability has evolved over time in the healthcare sector. Secondly, the paper highlights the driving forces for sustainability implementation in healthcare and strategies to continuously enhancement the sustainability implementation in healthcare.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6-014-653-2332; fax: +6-014-657-7448.

E-mail address: malliga@usm.my

1. Introduction

The word sustainability has been used to indicate a variety of problems, even though its introduction to management research was through the issue of environmental degradation caused by the business sector. Today, the meaning of the term sustainability cannot be restricted to environmental wellbeing alone, rather it has to be extended to accommodate a set of other aspects such as the wellbeing of the customers, the employees and the community. Leading the business practices with elements of sustainability is importance for efficient resource management, continuous improvement of the services and cost effectiveness, in the provision of forming service excellence for business sustainability. However, the present literature on sustainability in healthcare is not structured enough to effectively differentiate these implicit categories within sustainability related issues. A clear explanation of what sustainability means in healthcare is only possible with an in depth examination of structured research questions. Therefore, through a qualitative investigation, this study applies a content analysis regarding the issue of sustainability in healthcare literature. The discussion and concern of sustainability in healthcare was organised based on (1) dimensions of sustainability practices, (2) drivers of sustainable practices and (3) strategies to implement sustainability effectively. This study referred only to articles in which investigation on healthcare was the main research agenda of the paper.

2. Definition of sustainability

The idea of 'sustainability came into being as a result of people's realization about the impact of their activities, both commercial and non-commercial, on environment. People remained rather blind about the after-effects of their exploitative actions until there were large scale repercussions in the form of global warming, climate change and public concern. It was such consequences that triggered an active discussion on the need for cautious actions concerning the environment. Subsequently more systematic examination of the role and relevance of sustainability in shaping the world into a sustainable environment have emerged.

One of the initial formal articulations of sustainable development is in the Burtland Report published by the United Nation in 1987. The report defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Johnson et.al, 2007). This definition not only conveyed different meaning for different people, but also included a wide variety of things under the name other than fundamental meaning- action against environmental degradation, was scaled down in the multitude of other similar concepts that were brought in. While it need not be essentially bad per say in terms of having a common name for similar things, the term 'sustainability' being used to address a variety of issues (from environmental stability to organizational stability) which makes it difficult to distinguish who's sustainability is being discussed.

Two of the prominent definitions of sustainability in environmental perspective are, 1) "of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged" [sustainable techniques][sustainable agriculture] and 2) "of or relating to a lifestyle involving the use of sustainable methods" [sustainable society]." However, stewing from the fact that these definitions are vague and less useful at an operational level, Swedish scientist Karl-Henrik Robert came up with a more practice oriented approach for sustainability which delineates the characteristics of a sustainable society. According to him, an ideal society would strive to reduce its contribution towards:

- the increase in concentrations of substances from the Earth's crust.
- the increase in concentrations of substances produced by society.
- physical degradation of nature.
- conditions that systematically undermine people's capacity to meet their needs.

There has also been a detailed examination of the concept in the organizational literature as well, covering the streams of business, marketing, as well as social sciences. These works mainly focus on the literal definition of 'sustainability' which means the ability of a firm to survive over a long time across wide range of phenomena. The key here is that the sustainability of one particular organization or system does not matter; it is at the stake of other entities in the environment. However, the definition of the European Union is more holistic in the sense that it takes

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