



## Work for sustainability: Case studies of Brazilian companies



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### ABSTRACT

The introduction of strategic corporate sustainability policies is expected to result in the improvement of several issues in companies. One of these issues is work, which should involve greater well-being for workers. Within the context of production engineering, this research connects sustainability and work-related issues, the latter seen in light of the discipline of ergonomics. Based on case studies conducted at four companies considered sustainability benchmarks, we examined how the introduction of the theme of sustainability has influenced work-related issues. The elements analyzed here were the corporate sustainability strategy, organizational practices for deploying the strategy, and the work design phase. The last element is the moment in which work is prescribed in the organization. The results show that, despite the announcement of the inclusion of changes in work, there is not any explicit evidence confirming that such changes are considered as a requirement for corporate sustainability projects.

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## 1. Introduction

The last few years have been characterized by the widespread inclusion of the theme of corporate sustainability. When a company declares its commitment to sustainability to the external community, the expectation is that it will introduce strategies and actions of a more systemic nature through improvements incorporated into its operation. In this context, the concerns of corporate social sustainability would include worker well-being, whose strategic priority would be on the same level as that of other economic, social and environmental aspects. However, evidence suggests that when sustainability strategies are deployed at the tactical and operational level, the systemic objective of the initial intention may end up being left behind. This paper, based on a PhD thesis, seeks to address three main research questions:

- What concepts related to sustainability are announced and introduced by organizations, and how are work-related issues (like work design, professional development and issues related

to health and safety) included in the policies of corporate sustainability?

- Are the organizational mechanisms used to deploy corporate sustainability able to fully disseminate sustainability policies within corporations?
- In relation to work design, are tasks designed in compliance with explicit strategic sustainability policies?

These questions are essential for the confirmation of the thesis of this research, i.e., that albeit reportedly included, there is no explicit evidence that changes in work are taken into consideration as one of the key issues during the conception of sustainability policies, as one of the key issues. Work, defined by how different subjects are engaged in performing tasks deploying different actions, should be considered also during the implementation process of these policies, reinforcing the need to integrate work and production. For ergonomics, adapting tasks to human characteristics is the main issue.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Sustainability and work

The theme of sustainability originates from the international discussion about the solution of humanity's major problems and is related to the concept of sustainable development. Concerns about the future of humanity are perceived not only by public opinion but

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also by large corporations, which have included corporate sustainability (CS) policies in their operations. Based on the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) concept proposed by Elkington (1997), a sustainable company is one that is concerned about dealing simultaneously with social, economic and environmental aspects. This view is the one adopted by the largest global initiatives that promote the inclusion of sustainability issues within organizations, such as the United Nations Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) or Global Compact (GC). In this context, work is one of the aspects highlighted in the introduction of corporate sustainability policies, specifically discussing actions of social sustainability within the organization. Work-related issues currently considered in Corporate Sustainability (CS) or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies are: human rights linked to labor; employment and employment relationships; work conditions and social protection; social dialog between or among representatives of governments, employers; health and safety at work; and human development and training in the workplace (GRI, 2014; ISO, 2010). Work-related issues are introduced in CS policies because of an effective interest in workers, in increasing the organization's performance and improving the corporate image; hence, for the company to become sustainable means there is work (Bolis et al., 2014a) and, according to the sweet spot concept (Savitz and Weber, 2007), there are reciprocal benefits with the other dimensions of sustainability. Companies that are committed include corporate sustainability in their strategic policies, deploying it across the organization in order to modify its production and service processes. Based on knowledge of production engineering, the following subsections describe the steps that lead to a generic strategy (which may pertain to sustainability, as well as to other types of strategies such as quality, pricing, safety, etc.) to be introduced and concretized in production processes.

## 2.2. From strategy to operation

Corporate strategies denote how companies plan all their resources, particularly those of marketing, finance and production (but also those of other areas) to gain competitive advantages in the marketplace. Establishing a corporate strategy involves developing and implementing an action plan that will result in a long-term competitive advantage for the company's business operations (Henderson, 1989). In this context, companies should include some competitive priorities in their strategic choices so that they can continue competing in the market. Four of these priorities were identified in the 80s (Hayes and Wheelwright, 1984), i.e., low cost, high quality, fast delivery and flexibility (large product mix). Services were added as a new competitive priority, starting in the 90s (Vandermerwe, 1993). In the first decade of the new millennium, other new competitive advantages were identified. Jiménez and Céspedes (2001) and Davis et al. (2001), for example, identified the need for companies to offer environmentally friendly products or services focusing on environmental sustainability. Collier and Evans (2011) consider that sustainability which encompasses economic, environmental and social issues, is an organizational strategy, and that its broader scope may be a competitive priority (because it subsumes changes in organizational culture).

The corporate strategy gives rise to other functional strategies, which are created by each functional area of the organization to support the business strategy. According to Porter (1996), the success of a corporate strategy depends to a large extent on the alignment of efforts in the development of numerous activities in the functional sphere. The corporate strategy can be deployed to the operational level in all the functional areas of the organization through certain organizational mechanisms. Four main mechanisms for deployment were identified in the literature: acting

through the organizational structure, through the organizational culture, through performance management, and through projects (Fig. 1).

Organizational structure is understood as the formalization of responsibilities, authorities, communications and decisions of the organizational units, designing, ordering, standardizing and coordinating the activities and the relationships of their hierarchical levels and their decisions (Rezende, 2008). Pursuant to the definition of the organizational structure, the responsibilities of each area and the interrelationships among them are established to achieve the business strategies. In the case of the theme of sustainability, for example, a department can be created specifically to handle this issue.

Organizational culture can be defined as the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered or developed to learn to deal with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration (Schein, 1984). This culture can be influenced by different mechanisms, such as basic assumptions, shared values, beliefs, and norms of behavior. The corporate culture may depend on the external environment in which the company operates (Hofstede, 1980), or it can be created, cultivated and developed in-house, as in some cases described by Morgan (1986). Some authors, such as Johnson and Scholes (1999), identify close links between culture and strategy, while others (Bate, 1995) identify culture and strategy as similar concepts. Hofstede (1997) proposes that organizational culture and organizational practices are mutually dependent. Moreover, Schönborn (2010) shows that organizational culture can lead to corporate success, by addressing specific corporate responsibility conditions, namely, participative leadership, consideration of external stakeholders and employees.

Within the strategic process, performance management is responsible for planning, monitoring and evaluating performance in the organization, in order to align the work of all its employees with the organizational goals, so that these may be achieved. Performance management can be carried out using different approaches. The balanced scorecard (BSC) model developed by Kaplan and Norton (1992) is one of the models that seek to help managers achieve strategic alignment and develop achievable goals, objectives and organizational requirements. In addition to focusing on economic and financial aspects, the BSC also considers intangible assets (customers, learning and growth, and internal processes) that create value and competitive advantage for

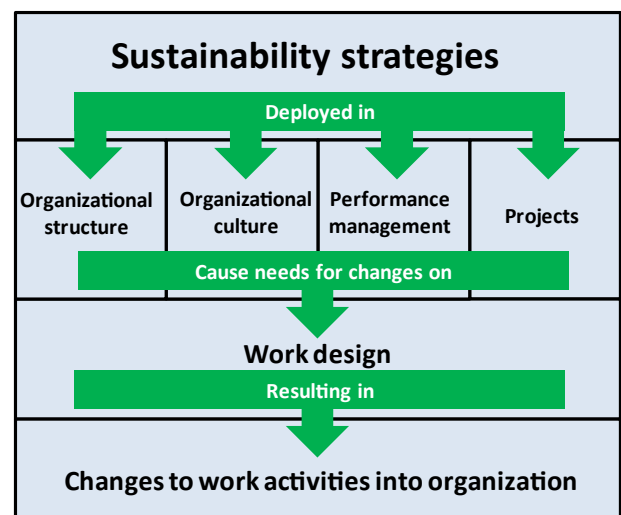


Fig. 1. Impacts on work activities due to sustainability strategies.

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