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Enablers for Considering Sustainability in Projects; the Perspective of the Supplier

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Abstract

Companies are integrating sustainability in their strategies, processes and actions. In the implementation of strategies, projects play an essential role. However, there is still a gap between the literature on sustainability in project management and what is carried out in practice. A logical enabler for the consideration of sustainability in projects may be the demand of the client in the project, although the supplier's strategy may also be an enabler of sustainability. This paper therefore reports a study into the enablers of the integration of sustainability in projects as perceived by project suppliers.

The study used Q-methodology to explore different subjective patterns of perceived enablers. Based on the factor analysis of 19 Q-sorts, we discovered three distinct patterns of enablers of the integration of sustainability, that we classified as "Benefits driven", "Demand and intrinsic motivation driven" and "Demand and Strategy driven".

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1. Introduction

The 1972 book “The Limits to Growth”¹⁴ predicts that the exponential growth of world population and world economy will result in overshooting the planet’s capacity of natural resources. Today, it is estimated that we are now every year using up 1.5 to 1.6 times earth’s annual bio capacity²² and industry leaders realize that ‘greenwashing’ of current business practices is not a solution⁵. Development towards a sustainable society therefore requires change¹⁸ and projects play a crucial role in the sustainable development of organizations and society¹³.

The relevance and implications of sustainable development for the management of projects are being discussed in a growing number of publications^{1; 17}. It can therefore be concluded that an academic debate on the relation between project management and sustainability is emerging. Nevertheless, Økland¹⁵ concludes that still a gap exists between the literature on sustainability in project management and what is carried out in practice. *“Sustainability thinking in project management seems to be regarded as extrinsically motivated; it must be pushed onto the project either by external stakeholders, policies or legislation”*¹⁵.

This extrinsic motivation can logically be expected when the execution of a project is contracted to an external supplier. A situation that is frequently found in for example construction, consulting, information technology or event management projects. The project ‘owner’ in this situation outsources the realization of the project to a more specialized contractor or supplier²³. The supplier performs the project to the specifications and criteria of its client, the project owner. The extent to which sustainability is considered in these specifications and criteria is primarily decided by the project owner, although Goedknecht¹⁰ concludes that the project organization itself *“can wield influence to adhering to the sustainability principles”*. *“By having knowledge of sustainability, skills to operationalize the knowledge and grasp opportunities and the attitude to show example behavior, they can wield a lot of influence within their own scope of the project and sometimes even beyond their own scope.”*¹⁰. An interesting question for the supplier of the project will be whether this ‘pushing’ of sustainability in the project is appreciated by the project owner and pays off.

As the suppliers may be balancing their own sustainability ambitions and the consideration of sustainability that is included in the project specifications, this paper reports a study into *What enablers for integration of sustainability in projects are perceived by project suppliers?* In order to be able to identify different subjective perspectives, we selected Q-methodology as our research strategy for this study. Q-methodology has shown its usability in the context of project management research and provides a foundation for the systematic study of subjectivity⁴.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The following paragraph provides a brief review on the barriers and enablers of sustainability, as found in the literature. Paragraph 3 describes the research approach the study deployed and develops the Q-sort statements. Paragraph 4, presents the findings of the study and describes three factors that were found in the analysis. The closing paragraph, paragraph 5, presents the conclusion of our study and the recommendations that we derived from this.

2. Barriers and enablers for sustainability adoption

Several studies (For example Kumar and Rahman¹¹ and Stewart et al.²⁰) addressed the barriers and/or enablers of the adoption of sustainability in organizations. Where a barrier is defined as a factor that hinders implementation of a sustainability approach or measure²⁰, an enabler is defined as a factor that helps the implementation of sustainability¹². Enablers and barriers, therefore, can be considered as opposites.

Kumar and Rahman¹¹ performed a systematic review of existing literature on the adoption of sustainability practices through supply relationships. Table 1 shows the enablers and barriers they found.

Table 1: Enablers of and barriers to the adoption of sustainability (based on Kumar and Rahman¹¹).

Enabler	Barriers
Awareness	Lack of awareness
Top management commitment and support	Lack of top management commitment
Competitive and marketing advantage	Perception of low economic return
External pressure	Poor demand forecasting

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