



Sustainability Jam Sessions for vision creation and problem solving



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ABSTRACT

This article presents a concept for creating arenas where expertise from certain branches of industry can interact with sustainability professionals and researchers to address and solve sustainability challenges. The concept Sustainability Jam Session (SJS) builds upon the idea of conducting creative meetings between professionals in “jam sessions,” similar to those associated primarily with music and improvisation. Approaches such as these have been used in the IT sector over the past decades, but this is the first attempt to apply it in the area of sustainability. SJS's were tested at the 2012 Greening of Industry Network Conference (GIN2012) and here we report our experiences from arranging six SJS's at the conference.

A typical process of an SJS includes a preparatory phase, the actual jam, and documentation and follow up. The preparatory phase mainly involves identifying hosts and topics to be addressed at the SJS, followed by attracting participants. The jam is started by an introduction of the topics, a technical visit (if appropriate), and a problem-solving workshop, ending with a wrap-up reporting. Thorough documentation is necessary for following up the results of the SJS and preparing for implementation of the identified solutions.

We conclude that skill, structure, setting, and surrender of control, as well as finding “red and hot” topics for the jams are the key factors for successful SJS's.

Based on our experiences from GIN2012, we recommend other research conferences in the sustainability field use SJS's if the intention is to boost the interaction between the conference and the host region or non-academic organizations in general. We also suggest that a similar approach can be used in regional development for creating an infrastructure for learning and transformation towards sustainability and initiatives for open innovation.

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1. Introduction

Solutions to major environmental challenges such as depletion of natural resources, climate change, and loss of biodiversity call for an interdisciplinary approach. In addition, despite the tremendous growth over the last decade of academic studies of measures and activities for solving environmental problems, vast practical knowledge and experience, and increased general awareness among citizens, many challenges still are unresolved (see [Rockström et al., 2009](#) for an overview). Many of the improvements achieved so far are of an incremental nature or limited to implementation only at a local or regional level.

One explanation for this failure in solving major environmental problems can be the lack of radical or challenging pictures of future solutions and broadly anchored strategies for how to reach them. In addition, a multi-actor approach including, e.g., industry, governments, academia, and individuals is often missing. This article mainly focuses on the role of industry in being a key actor in sustainability transformations. Industry is responsible for a large share of society's material and energy flows and provides products and services that not only are causing the above mentioned problems but also can provide solutions to the same. Irrespective of this, it is argued that many solutions cannot be achieved without the close incorporation of industry and business dimensions ([Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013](#)), while not neglecting the necessity of other actors.

Several tools and approaches have been developed and applied to facilitate future-oriented studies, the shaping of sustainability scenarios (for an overview, see [Börjesson et al., 2006](#); [Höjer et al., 2008](#)), and the formulation of business strategies to reach a more

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sustainable future (e.g. [Rob ert et al., 2002](#)). Choosing which tool to use depends on the purpose in working with or trying to understand the future. These can be simple forecasts to make different types of prognoses, assessments of how to handle risks due to changing circumstances (e.g. “what if” scenarios), or ways to reach a desired future (e.g. back-casting). One thing many of these tools have in common is the necessity of describing or picturing the future. In relation to sustainable development, this can be problematic since a sustainable future can hardly be defined in detail. This calls for the necessity of expanding the toolbox for future-oriented studies with approaches that can handle strategy and goal formulation, while acknowledging an undetermined future. Such approaches should also stimulate new thinking (outside the box) and be able to handle the idea that the final goal might not be known at the beginning.

One interesting approach used by knowledge-intensive companies during the 2000s in Sweden was called “Jam Sessions.” This was used to manage knowledge, knowledge creation, and knowledge communication in the FENIX program, an action research program involving academia and several large knowledge-based firms in Scandinavia ([B rjesson and Fredberg, 2004](#)). Experiences from using Jam Sessions in the FENIX program were, e.g., that it opened up an arena for discussing matters outside everyday routines and that it helped create a language for as yet unformulated issues of high importance for strategic planning and building trust between the participants ([B rjesson and Fredberg, 2004](#)). These experiences make it interesting to test whether the same or a similar approach could be applied in the field of sustainability to help overcome some of the deficiencies of more commonly used methods and approaches. Whereas the challenges for the participants in the FENIX program to a large extent were related to fast developments in e.g. the IT or biotech sectors, Sustainability Jam Sessions (which are described in this article) combine the general sustainability challenge with management and business development challenges. Thus, it can relate to any actor interested in transforming its activities towards sustainability.

Scientific conferences provide creative meeting places where researchers can present early research findings and exchange ideas. Conferences addressing sustainability also often have the ambition of interacting with society and transferring ideas and experiences between researchers and practitioners. During the preparations for the 18th conference of the Greening of Industry Network (GIN2012), the idea was launched to combine a traditional conference structure with more outspoken information and knowledge sharing between stakeholders in the hosting region of East Sweden and the conference participants. For that purpose, the approach of Sustainability Jams Sessions was developed and applied with the intention of enriching both future research activities and business and regional development.

The aim of this article is twofold. First it aims to introduce the concept of Sustainability Jam Sessions (SJS's). Second it aims to describe how SJS's were applied at the GIN2012 conference and present the achieved outcomes.

This is done by first describing how Jam Sessions have been used in other areas, followed by reporting how the concept of SJS was applied at the GIN2012 conference and discussing the learning outcomes and experiences. Finally, conclusions regarding the general usability and characteristics of SJS's are presented.

2. Jam sessions

Jam session as a term for music improvisation is well known. However, the special group interaction associated with jam sessions has been studied and characterized from a more general point

of view and has inspired the design of creative workshops within management research programs. In the sections below we will briefly discuss the concept of jam sessions from these perspectives. We start by discussing the general characteristics of the concept as such followed by a section discussing the prerequisites for setting up and organizing jam sessions. In the last section we present experiences from two projects where researchers and companies in cooperation have used jam sessions as a tool for creation of actionable knowledge.

2.1. The concept jam session

The term “jam session” is primarily associated with music and improvisation. Jamming is often used in jazz, rock, and folk music to come up with new ideas for songs but may also be a live-creation of music in front of an audience. The real time self-organization of the musicians is a fascinating process and jazz jam sessions have been studied and characterized by [Katz and Longden \(1983\)](#) as an example of small group processes where the authority shifted between the musicians in a democratic type of authority relations. Musicians in their experiment stated that they enjoyed jamming “because of the sharing of the responsibilities for making music” ([Katz and Longden, 1983](#), p 47) and that “the energy and creativity of the group can exceed that of the individuals” (ibid, p 47). Jams were also described as an example of a collaborative type of peer relation that strives to reduce tension with an overall aim towards a common goal and where the degree of intimacy between the participants is of lesser interest while, as a musician in the experiment puts it, the “common objective is to play with sympathy to the other guy” (ibid, p 48).

The unique type of relationship or state of mind that is the basis for a jam session has been further characterized by [Eisenberg \(1990\)](#), who advocates jamming as a desirable way to balance autonomy and interdependence. As an option between a non-disclosive and an intimate disclosive relation, jamming is described as a close, nondisclosive relation based on collective action:

Jamming stresses coordination of action over the alignment of cognitions, mutual respect over agreement, trust over empathy, diversity over homogeneity, loose over tight coupling, and strategic communication over unrestricted candor. (Eisenberg, 1990, p 160)

Eisenberg further states that jamming meets the demands of effective organization:

An overemphasis on intention and personality can paralyze action; excessive openness can jeopardize community; and overly strong cultures can stifle autonomy and impede adaptability. A different view of communicating and organizing is needed; one that considers both sides of the dialectic together and consequently does not privilege openness and consensus over selective disclosure and coordinated action. (ibid, p 145)

With jamming being seen as a model for effective organization, it is not surprising to find that jam sessions have been used as a tool in action and management research for business development. In the above mentioned FENIX Research Program, an action research collaboration between two Swedish universities and several large knowledge-based firms, jam sessions were the central activity of what was called the table tennis research process ([Adler and Shani, 2001](#)), an intensely interactive action research process between academia and industry. Here, jam sessions are described as “boundary-spanning workshops where the actual research takes place. Data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted, conclusions are drawn, ideas for action tested, and redefinition of research issues

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