Effective Internal Communication: A Way Towards Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

The burgeoning concern about environmental degradation has impelled governments and other stakeholders to promote awareness about sustainability issues. Keeping this in mind, this study intends to gain insight of employees’ perception on the communication of sustainability practices and identifying the preferred source used for obtaining information about sustainability issues as well as what kind of messages would be most effective to engage employees in sustainability related initiatives. Furthermore, the paper explores how to utilize potential of employees as internal communicators to spread sustainability within the organisation. The paper outlines findings from in-depth interviews with a range of employees from a manufacturing concern in India. Employees have high level of awareness on sustainability issues and initiatives concerning company’s sustainability activities. Well defined messages might encourage them to consider sustainability initiatives in their own jobs and informal meetings are the best venue to share their ideas with their colleagues. To overcome their unwillingness to approach peers directly with sustainability related suggestions and encourage them to share sustainability ideas, it might be useful to assign a sustainability manager to each department. The paper contributes to a better understanding of how employees see organisations’ sustainability strategies and help business organisations to formulate communication strategies to engage employees in sustainability activities.

KEYWORDS: Communication Channel; Employees; Internal Sustainability Communication.

JEL CLASSIFICATION: L64, M31, Q56

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, sustainability issues have received prominent attention, reflecting growing public awareness and concern of unsustainable development. Multiple stakeholders, including customers, community groups and social responsible investors have expressed their concern towards the increased environmental, social and economical imbalances (Wagner, 2003). Organizations must understand and accommodate to the demands and concerns of all stakeholders, including clients, customers, employees, communities, and other authorities pertaining to sustainability issues.

A fundamental aspect in managing sustainability and stakeholder relationships in organisations is internal communication (Ligeti and Oravecz, 2009) however, previous studies unveil that communication is rarely treated as a primary link in the implementation of sustainability related initiatives (Dawkins, 2005; Juholin, 2004; Clark, 2000). Similarly another core link forgotten in sustainability is one of the key stakeholder groups: employees. Employees are a key group in implementing sustainability related initiatives in practice (Collier and Esteban, 2007). And are considered a credible source of information by other stakeholders, therefore, they can be helpful for enhancing a company’s reputation (Dawkins, 2005). Employees are seldom asked to participate in decision making, oftentimes they are just sent one way messages about decisions made in the organisation (Ligeti and Oravecz, 2009). And by doing so, companies fail to harness employees full potential as active sustainability communicators (Kuvaaja and Malminen, 2008; Dawkins, 2005). Particularly, there is little insight into how employees’ view organisation’s internal sustainability related communication.

Given the importance of employees in reframing business, this study is designed to fill this gap by investigating employees’ viewpoint on internal sustainability communication of an organisation. This research presents findings from interviews that were conducted within a manufacturing concern in India. By examining this issue, this study benefits the field of sustainability and communication research as it sheds light on the role of employees in implementation of sustainability related initiatives and secondly, it examines the role of internal communication in sustainability-related knowledge creation and use. In addition, it will facilitate companies to improve their internal sustainability communication to their employees.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows; first section includes all relevant literature on sustainability and internal communication is reviewed. This discussion will offer dimensions used in the empirical investigation. The second section represents the interviews conducted within a manufacturing concern and the third part outlines the main findings of the study. Finally, conclusions are drawn, including recommendations for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is defined by World Commission on Environment and Development as - “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987: pg. 43).” The major corporate initiatives related to sustainability encompasses: material processing and manufacturing system, environmental impacts of final product, energy consumption...
sources of energy and waste management systems, employees health and safety, fair trade practices, programs for community development and customer safety.

In the past decade, research on sustainability related topics has proliferated, and an increasing number of studies have centred upon sustainable production, sustainable consumption, corporate sustainability reporting. However, there is a dearth of studies on employees’ perspective of sustainability communication. The following paragraphs will discuss the main aspects such as why it is significant to extend sustainability related studies to employees and how internal communication may help in engaging all employees in an organisation’s sustainability related initiatives.

2.2 Sustainability Communication Studies

Previous studies on sustainability communication have mainly centred upon external communication i.e. how sustainability practices are reported to external stakeholders. These studies have looked at say how sustainability related practices are communicated in mission and value statements, how companies have structured and presented their sustainability reports (Borkowski, welsh & Wentzel, 2012). Past researches have moreover looked at sustainability reporting in certain countries (Dawkins and Ngunjiri, 2008; Hartman et al., 2007; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2007). Apart from the sustainability reporting, researchers have lately also looked at how sustainability can be promoted within the organisations and extended to employees private life (Muster V. 2011).

However, there exists knowledge-to action gap about sustainable consumption, at all levels of society (Thogersen 2005). This study focussed upon understanding the reasons for the gap between existing knowledge and actual action towards sustainable consumption as well as formulating strategies and instruments for consumer policy actors and others.

2.3 Stakeholder approach to Sustainability communication

Previous researches on sustainability communication have pointed to the significance of adopting stakeholder approaches. As Dawkins (2005) stated, communicating sustainability should involve cautiously listening to stakeholders, and then implementing the suggestions received from them. In addition, companies need to operate in a transparent manner so that concerned stakeholders can understand how the organization operates. The concept of ‘stakeholder’ as defined by Freeman (1984), “include any individual or group who can affect the firm’s performance or who is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives (Buyse and Verbeke, 2003).” It is clear from definition that stakeholders affect, as well as get affected by strategy of the company. In order to analyze stakeholders’ strategic importance to the firm (O’Riordan and Fairbrass, 2008; Cornelissen, 2004), the first step is to identify and prioritize key stakeholders (Polonsky, 1995; Elias et al., 2002; Preble, 2005; Shah and Bhaskar, 2007; Garvare and Johannson, 2010).

In most of the previous studies, sustainability is studied with focus on only customers and govt. authorities as key stakeholders. As different stakeholders have different interests, therefore the focus of organizations should not be limited only to know the customers and government, but it should also consider other key stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995; Polonsky, 1995; Maigman et al., 2005; Camino, 2007). Since, the successful implementation and overall impact of sustainability policy depends on the capability and commitment of the employees (Wehmeier, 1996), it is crucial to look at the role of employees as producers, consumers as well as the communicators of sustainability knowledge in organisations.

In sustainability related initiatives, employees represent a key stakeholder group because they are treated as a credible information source by other stakeholders and can endorse an organisation’s true sustainability related activities. Thus, employee communication to other stakeholders is crucial (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009b; Morsing et al., 2008; Dawkins, 2005).

As well as from the employees point of view how sustainability is communicated externally is significant because organisational members often see these external messages as serving internal purposes such as building and reinforcing corporate identity (Morsing, 2006). Employees can therefore, enhance the company’s reputation by effectively communicating with external stakeholders.

2.4 Effective Internal Communication

Working towards sustainability is not the sole responsibility of top management rather it requires collective efforts of each member of an organisation. And that is possible only through effective internal communication. As defined by (Chong, 2007), “effective internal communication is the first frontier in the battle for the customer”.

The significance of effective internal communication is evident in past researches (Muhammad Arif et al., 2009; Mark Chong, 2007). For example, Barrett (2002) accentuates, the best way to reach employees is face-to-face communication than relying on indirect channels such as electronic media. Vaaland and Heide (2008) emphasises on bottom-up communication. Furthermore, Welch & Jackson (2007) claims that, rather than treating employees as a single public, they should be segmented based on say structural levels of demographics. This can help in ensuring that the information targeted at any one audience is as relevant and meaningful for them as possible (Barrett, 2002). These findings direct to the significance of conducting sustainability communication studies that centre on employees as a key stakeholder group.

2.5 Channels of Sustainability communication

The crucial concern when internal communication is being implemented in organizations relates with the channel and content of the communication that is targeted towards the organizations’ internal stakeholders.

Companies use both traditional as well as online sources of channel for communicating with the employees. Traditional sources of communication consist of face to face and written communication. Face to face communication enables the receiver to listen and observe the non verbal communication transmitted by the sender and respond with immediate feedback (Lee, 2010). On the other hand, printed publications such as newsletters, brochures, annual reports are a part of written communication. And online communication tools comprises of intranet, e-forums, online chat rooms, e-mail and social media (Miller, 2009). The effectiveness of a communication channel depends on their fit in a strategic communication process and their contribution to the bottom-line of the business goal (Kalla, 2005).

Though enormous communication media choices available to
business organisations, most companies have used paper-based medium such as stand-alone sustainability reports and annual reports to communicate its sustainability related efforts. Lately, the change in media landscape and significant growth of internet has encouraged organisations to make use of online channels as a sustainability reporting vehicle (Reilly & Weirup 2012; Scott & Jackson, 2002). However, the employees’ perception on internal sustainability communication is yet to examine.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

So far, however, little research has focused on employees’ point of view on sustainability communication. To fill this gap, this study aims at examining employees’ perception about sustainability related issues and their perception of the internal sustainability policy. In addition, this research concentrates on how the different aspects of sustainability can best be communicated internally to get employees committed to the organisation’s sustainability related initiatives.

The present study is designed to address the following research questions: 1.) Are employees aware of the organization’s sustainability strategies? 2.) Are employees engaged in the planning of these strategies? 3.) Do employees believe these sustainability strategies relevant in their jobs? And do they attempt to integrate these sustainability strategies into their own jobs? 4.) What are their preferences with regard to the organization’s internal sustainability related communication? 5.) Do they see themselves and their peers as potential sustainability actors within the organization and if not, what potential constraints might influence this?

4. METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, we approached a Pulley manufacturing company. At the time of the study, the company had communicated its internal sustainability policy all over the organization for a little over one year that enabled healthier discussion with the employees and made it possible to evaluate the communication better. Though initial cost of sustainability is high but in long term it brings cost savings to the firm. Sustainability policy of the company comprises activities such as - producing eco-friendly products, reducing company’s ecological footprint, employee health and safety programs, implementing environmental management systems, and human capital investment both within the company and in the supply chain by the end of 2012.

4.1 Interview data

This paper reports on findings from 12 employee interviews from a manufacturing concern in India. The purpose of the interviews was to get deep insight of the kind of sustainability-related communication employees believe would be most effective in engaging all employees in sustainability practices. The interview themes were developed based on the literature discussed above and as well as the findings from the interviews. There were four major themes: first, employee awareness of the organisation’s sustainability policy; second, the relevance of sustainability policy in the employees’ own jobs; third, employee perception on the content and channel of sustainability communications; and fourth, employee perspective on potential constraints to communication and implementation of sustainability issues. The analysis then focused on emerging features related to all themes. Convenience sampling was used to select the interviewees.

Table 1 depicts some background information about the employees, including their age and the position they had in the organization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Position</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Quality inspector</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Salesman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Database Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Developer of Instruction manual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Safety &amp; environment co-ordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Salesman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Project Manager in key technologies</td>
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5. FINDINGS

The analysis focused on four key issues: what are the employees’ perspectives about the sustainability in general and their organisation’s sustainability policy, the employees’ ability to see the relevance of the organisation’s sustainability policy to their own jobs, interviewees’ viewpoints on the content and channel of sustainability communications, and on potential barriers to communication and action in sustainability issues.

5.1 Employees level of awareness on sustainability in general and sustainability policy of the company

Sustainability is defined by employees as -

- Sustainability is preserving the earth, river, forest and physical environment.
- The ability to maintain ecosystem for long term
- Sustainability is about transforming the way society’s needs and wants are met so that the resources can be sustained for our future generations to live in an eco-friendly world.
- Sustainability is consuming resources in harmony with nature.
- Creating a world where everyone can fulfill their needs, enjoy well being within the capacity of nature to reproduce.
- Sustainability is a long term view of how our consumption practices affect future generations and ensuring less depletion of resources.

Here are few business sustainability efforts reported by the interviewees: energy and water usage minimization, recycling, energy efficient products, social issues, employee health and safety programmes, equal opportunities for disadvantaged individuals respectively. Among all energy savings was the top priority of the company whereas, sustainability marketing is nonexistent in the current sustainability programs.
5.2 Relevance of sustainability policy in their own work
The interviews suggest that determining the relevance of sustainability policy in their own work depends on what their job is. All interviewees felt that they can do little things for the environment and society, whose work involved environmental considerations felt that they can do things such as - shutting down the computer’s at the end of the day, properly utilizing raw material, travelling less and minimizing packaging whereas those whose work did not entail any such thing believed that the small things were far away from the corporate level sustainability policy. Therefore, they would have liked to receive more specific and concrete messages about what they can do for environment and society. This finding suggests that it might be valuable to communicate customize messages to diverse groups in the organisation (Welch and Jackson, 2007; Barrett, 2002). In other words, to enable employees’ link sustainability policy to their own jobs, organisations need to address individual responsibility in creating sustainability by linking and supporting sustainable behavior at work as well as in their private lives (Muster and Schrader, 2011).

5.3 Content and channel of sustainability communications
Pertaining to the internal communication of the sustainability policy a number of interviewees stated that they had received such information from several sources such as - Intranet, company website, face to face meetings and E-mail. The employees generally felt that if they had suggestions, they could bring these up and the bottom-up communication would function appropriately. Three of the employees whose jobs responsibilities included making social and environment related suggestions further thought that the two-way communication was symmetric, whereas others felt that their suggestions would not necessarily lead to any major changes.

Three themes emerged across all interviews relating to the improvement of sustainability communication within the company, and these themes were related to the perceived barriers to sustainability communication and practices: arrangement of informal meetings, reconsidering the structure and content of the messages, and assigning a sustainability manager to each department for sustainability related suggestions to overcome pervasive unwillingness to make suggestions directly to peers.

Theme 1- arrangement of frequent, informal meetings
As Table 2 depicts that a number of interviewed employees were in favour of regular meetings to discuss and deliver information about sustainability related initiatives. This is consistent with the findings of study by (Welch and Jackson, 2007 & Kitchen and Daly, 2002) who claimed that face to face meetings are vital for communicating strategy and organisational effectiveness.

For example, one of them stated: “We have many internal issues but we have a lack of internal communication. Many current issues only discussed in the meeting or come up at the coffee machine.”

Instead of e-mails, employees preferred meetings for discussion and an effective way of delivering sustainability related information. However, they felt that being extremely busy at work did not allow these sorts of informal meetings. As commented by one interviewee, “in our department we usually don’t have time to take breaks as we are always busy with work. And that could be the main reason for why environmental & societal issues are not implemented by the employees or why these issues may often be ignored altogether.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred channels of communication</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentages (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company newsletters, Bulletin boards, memos</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to face informal meetings</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another interviewee said, “Environmental issues are not at the top of the agenda, when you are extremely busy at work,” and “it is the viewpoint, but then there is always being in a hurry, which overrides everything else.”

One of the interviewee revealed that his suggestion of reusing the waste paper for printing purpose which the top management thinks a good idea for development but had not been implemented due to lack of time. If they could save the little bit of resources by doing so, they might maybe do it.”

Theme 2- Structure and content of sustainability messages
Concerning the second theme, Barrett (2002) emphasizes that the information should be audience oriented and Hamalainen and Maula (2006) stress that the strategies should be expressed in easy-to-understand format. Supporting this recommendation, the interviewees wanted very lucid, short, and pragmatic messages about what they can do for the environment and society.

For example, one interviewee suggested that: “It’s better to put clear actions that you just do this, this and this instead of 20-30 pages of presentations.”

Focusing on straight and simple messages might be better because many interviewees felt that they themselves as well as other employees would take initiatives for the environment & society only if the actions would not require too much effort. In order to persuade employees to take action, a number of interviewees felt that the top management should emphasize on the cost-benefits ensuing to the firm, because people tend to prioritise financial concerns over environmental or social benefits. As Halme (1997) asserts, a better way to persuade people to internalize sustainable thinking is by emphasizing the facts that motivate people professionally than centring on sustainable values per se.

Theme 3 - Assigning a sustainability Manager to each department
Employees could be a great source of generating new ideas for sustainability implementation. Findings from the interviews unveil that the employees were reluctant to approach co-workers directly with sustainability related suggestions. Thereby, another important theme emerged from the interviews i.e. how the potential of employees could be harnessed for...
implementing sustainability.

As evidenced by previous researches that people are in general well cognizant of sustainability issues, yet unwilling to engage in these essential activities because “sustainability issues affects almost every aspect of human activity i.e. modern lifestyles and the existing paradigm to consume freely” (Lorenzoni et al., 2007, p. 454). Moreover people generally think that their individual initiatives would not make significant difference to environment or society (Hinchliffe, 1996) but, at the organisational level, individuals would have potential for more collective action. There are several sustainability related initiatives that demand little effort and in which a firm may try to engage its employees, such as, printing less or using two sided printing, using less electricity in the office, minimizing waste can surely bring cost savings to organizations.

This research, therefore, aimed at finding why people are reluctant to discuss these issues with their co-workers. Based on the interviews, there seems to be two main reasons. On the one hand, employees feel like they are not in a position to render others advice, and they think their suggestions would not be welcomed by other person or they may feel insulted. As one interviewee commented: “If a person has decided to do something in a certain way, it is (at least with the people at same level) inconsiderate to go and say “don’t do the way you are doing, but do the way I’m telling you to do”.

Another interviewee’s unwillingness to tell others what to do is reflected in his statement, “If you know the other person doesn’t easily take things personally, only than it’s possible to make suggestions regarding sustainability.”

The other interviewee stated that “we are all normal people and everyone thinks the same way. I don’t need to advice people what should they do or not.”

The interviews suggest that the assumptions about others might work as a barrier to sustainability related communication among employees. For this reason, the employees felt the need of a separate sustainability manager, who could deliver messages about what should be done as well as allocate responsibilities, time, and resources to employees for incorporating sustainability into organizational culture.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

At a time when most companies are endeavouring to be sustainable, organisation’s approach of just not doing bad or just doing good for the society and environment is not enough. But it is essential for them to engage all employees in sustainability initiatives to maximize value and use sustainability as a competitive advantage. This study has aimed to shed deep insight into the role of employees as participants in an organization’s sustainability related activities. In particular, it set out to identify how well employees are aware of their company’s sustainability policy and whether they consider the policy as relevant in their own jobs. Furthermore, the study aimed at identifying what kind of sustainability related messages a company should communicate for them to be effective. Exploring employee perspective is essential, because the success and failure of any organisation depends upon its employees (Muster and Schrader, 2011).

Based on the findings, the employees of the case organization had high level of awareness on sustainability as well as sustainability related initiatives carried out by the organisation. It seems that employees are well communicated about organisation’s sustainability policy. The study also reveals that all the employees do not get to participate in these initiatives. And the reasons for putting these issues aside are – being too busy due to work, incomplete or lack of information and unaware about the sustainability activities.

To engage all the employees in sustainability related activities, this study recommends tailoring customized messages to diverse groups of employees based on the relevance in their jobs. This is in line with the study done by (Barret 2002; Welch and Jackson 2007) where communicating environmental messages based on what is relevant to employees in their jobs was found influential in engaging them in environmental work. Particularly, it would be significant to explicitly communicate what different types of employees can do for the sustainability.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that well defined and pragmatic messages might encourage employees to implement sustainability initiatives in their jobs.

Employees might be oriented towards sustainability only if it requires little effort from them. Another important factor that might encourage employees to incorporate sustainability practices in their work is emphasizing the cost-savings to the organisation. However, it would be significant to study different companies situated overseas to understand what types of the motivational factors best work in these contexts.

Finally, to utilize potential of employees as internal communicators to spread positive word of mouth throughout the organization, it might be useful to assign sustainability manager who everyone could then approach with sustainability related suggestions. This finding points to the significance of discussing sustainability issues formally and informally with employees.

7. LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has investigated the employee perception on internal sustainability communication and their preferred channel of communication to obtain information about sustainability issues from a manufacturing concern in India. However, this study has examined a single company; thus, the results were not able to generalize to other organizations in India. Therefore, future studies can further explore the phenomenon in other different industries. In addition, this type of approach could also be applied cross-cultural settings to understand the differences among individuals i.e. why they think and act in a certain way. Specifically, contrasting developed nations with developing nations such as US and India can provide significant insights. Focusing on these areas would be significant in designing local as well as global communication strategies.

8. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study provide significant insights into employees’ perception on the communication of sustainability initiatives from a manufacturing concern. This study would help corporations design sustainability plan, educate internal stakeholders. In addition, the rationale given by the employees for their preferred channel of communication will persuade the firm to arrange regular meetings for communicating and engaging internal stakeholders in sustainability related practices. Further, this study would facilitate marketing
managers to develop effective sustainability related messages which may lead to desired employee engagement consequently making external efforts much more successful.

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