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Infusing Sustainability into New Product Development Practices: The Role of External Triggers and Internal Actors in Pursuing Change

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Business and academia alike recognize the pivotal role of embedding environmental and social sustainability into business activities. The growing interest in sustainability among business firms is evident from the high number of organizations that now participate in evaluative firm rankings that benchmark their sustainability performance (Chabowski, Mean, & Gonzalez-Padron, 2011). Furthermore, external pressure from various stakeholder groups to increase sustainability is rising. While some internal actors are trying to pursue change towards more sustainability, it is often difficult for them to initiate a cultural shift. Many organizational members do still perceive sustainability as a threat. One reason for this resistance might be that the impact of not being sustainable is seldom immediate, but ‘something for the future’ to deal with. Hence, sustainability initiatives often lack a sense of urgency (Slawinski & Bansal, 2012). Change processes towards sustainability frequently start as local initiatives that need to be ‘sold’ internally to create a momentum for change (Howard-Grenville, 2007). Also, the translation of sustainability as a strategic goal at the corporate level into the operational implementation of sustainable practices is a complex maneuver that creates many tensions. Strategic directives to not only generate economic, but also ecological and social value are often visionary and abstract and do not necessarily translate into operational innovation decisions (Haugh & Talwar, 2010). Hence, many companies struggle with the question of how to achieve cultural changes to allow the infusion of sustainability practices into their existing organizational processes.

While existing multi-disciplinary research has shown the relevance of addressing sustainability as a part of normal business activities, little is known about how sustainability is or can be successfully infused into business practices. The goal of this paper is to propose a framework for understanding how sustainability practices are created and mainstreamed into companies’ innovation activities by characterizing it as a process of emergent organizational change. We think that most firms moving towards more sustainable practices will do so in an evolutionary fashion, rather than through a radical change program (see Howard-Grenville, Golden-Biddle, Irwin, & Mao, 2011). We draw on structuration and practice theory as theoretical frameworks, because they provide an evolutionary explanation for organizational change, in what Orlikowski (2000) calls emergence.

We decided to study the issue of sustainability infusion in the context of innovation. During new product development (NPD) projects, many decisions are made that determine the environmental and societal impact of future products and production processes, which may create more leverage for change than decisions made later in the process, while providing an ideal occasion for research into sustainability infusion and its effects. We have conducted an in-depth qualitative study, interviewing more than 100 company representatives from different industries, namely chemical, food, and energy distribution. Our analysis focuses on the different activities of initial development and the enactment of sustainability practices. Our results deliver a theoretical framework for change processes around sustainability that incorporates the effects of external triggers and individual internal actors in initiating and mainstreaming sustainability-focused NPD practices. Our article aims to contribute to the literature on organizational change by analyzing how sustainability practices emerge and develop, and by providing a model of how sustainability practices can be mainstreamed throughout an organization. We investigate 1) initial sustainability practices in innovation, 2) the routine enactment of these sustainability practices as they unfold within the organization and 3) the tensions that these sustainability practices may create. This allows us to identify and discuss drivers and barriers for infusing sustainability practices in NPD.