

Sustainability work and the continuous crafting of workplace identity

Abstract

The UK Government notably claims to be at the forefront of delivering the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (HM Government, 2019). However, there remains little empirical research which explores the ways in which sustainability is enacted and interpreted by sustainability practitioners. Of particular interest is the need to understand the ways practitioners respond to the sustainability targets set nationally and internationally. In this study, life-story interview research method is used to better understand the unfolding practices of sustainability work and how practitioners make sense of this concept and craft their associated workplace identities. Based on the life-story interviews with 25 sustainability practitioners from across a broad range of organisations within the built environment sector, the study sheds light on the stories, work identities and self-ascribed informal roles that emerge in response to the sustainability agenda. Storytelling and sustainability work are highlighted as central to the enactment of responses to the sustainability agenda.

Keywords: storytelling, sustainability work, sustainability development goals, work identities

Introduction

There is a widespread acceptance that climate change constitutes the major social, economic and political challenges of the 21st Century. The need for action is increasingly prioritized within the accepted sustainability agenda which embraces the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2019) and national sustainability strategies (HM Government, 2019). The need to respond to the 2030 agenda for sustainable development comprises an influential 'grand' narrative which shapes the voluntary targets set by different

industries and new forms of regulation. But it also challenges our understanding of ourselves as individuals, our practices, and the projects and organisations within which we are situated.

The contextualization of sustainability in actions enacted by professionals has not been investigated much in literature. Practitioners, contextualizing abstract concepts into their practices continuously translate ideas into objects and actions (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1998). The ‘translation’ of ideas into actions involves distinct interpretation and practices by the many actors involved in the process, however, not much attention has been paid by existing research to the process of ‘sustainability translation’ itself. In management, most common theoretical approaches to translation are: actor–network theory, knowledge-based theory and Scandinavian institutionalism. The Scandinavian institutionalism perspective on translation (see Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016 classification) defines the process of translation as “the process in which ideas and models are adapted to local contexts as they travel across time and space” (Lamb & Currie, 2012, p. 219). The implication of this, according to Wæraas and Nielsen (2016) is that “ideas and practices travel across social levels, shifting from being abstract ideas to objects with real existence (ideas transformed into objects) or enacted practices (ideas transformed into action)” (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016, p. 246). Therefore, when ideas are contextualized, or ‘materialize’, even if the translation is carefully designed and scrupulously implemented they tend to produce “unintended consequences” and “unexpected results” (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1998). The process of translating is part of the sustainability work which includes understanding practitioners’ perceptions of sustainability concept and crafting their workplace associated identities. In this paper we are not focusing on sustainability practices per se, but on perceptions and stories of sustainability practitioners about sustainability and its related practices, their roles and identities.

Recent years have seen an exponential growth in the number of practitioners whose job titles include the word sustainability (e.g. sustainability managers, sustainability consultants). One of their responsibilities is to assist their organisations in being seen to be responding to the internationally accepted ‘grand’ narrative of sustainability. The aim of the current paper is to highlight the ways sustainability practitioners respond to the sustainability agenda in the context of their working lives. The focus lies on those managers whose role explicitly includes responsibility for sustainability. i.e. specialist sustainability consultants, sustainability managers, environmental managers, and other related roles. A particular emphasis is given to exploring the ways individual and collective identities are discursively crafted and communicated. The guiding research questions are:

- *How do sustainability practitioners make sense of sustainability and respond to sustainable development goals?*
- *What stories, work identities and roles emerge in response to the sustainability agenda?*

By addressing these two questions we seek to enhance current understanding of the sustainability work and how practitioners make sense of the concept of sustainability through their stories, work identities and roles. As introduced earlier, sustainability has become popular concept with associated formal and informal roles and need for addressing and achieving sustainability goals. However, to date there is little empirical research that explores perceptions of sustainability professionals about their roles, identities and responses to the goals. This paper aims to fill this gap in the existing knowledge by addressing the above two research questions.

This paper is structured as follows. Our theoretical framework is informed by the “sustainability work”, work identities and storytelling literatures. Our empirical fieldwork contains life-study interviews with sustainability practitioners sharing their stories about perceptions of sustainability, their workplace identities and roles. We discuss our empirical

fieldwork findings in relation to the reviewed literature and theoretical framework. We conclude with the summary of the original contribution to knowledge, practical implications, acknowledging limitations and suggesting future research directions.

“Sustainability work”

Williams et al. (2021) have adopted a novel theoretical lens of ‘sustainability work’ and a narrative perspective in examining the activity and agency of corporate sustainability managers. They have analysed how individuals across a range of diverse organisations and industries frame their activity associated with corporate sustainability as a priority for organisations. They identify three overlapping and co-occurring broad subsets of sustainability work: goal-oriented, other-oriented and self-oriented. Understanding how sustainability has been enabled within organisations is often understood through the role of change agents, practices and interactions of managers. Sustainability work is recognised to be enacted by people in their encounters of work. Williams et al. (2021) refer to such individuals who have a wide range of titles and formal roles as sustainability agents.

Blazjewski et al. (2020) apply an identity work perspective to identify four strategies that lower-level employees use in negotiating and enacting their green identities at work. These strategies are exposing (display green attitudes, actively resist), enduring (accept non-resolution, postpone, do not let up), dodging (hidden green action, building niches), and dissolving (changing roles or employees, starting up green, shift engagement). Blazjewski et al. (2020) demonstrate identity struggles and tensions associated with lower-level employees’ green identities at work.

There is growing literature on sustainability and its constituent agendas in the built environment context. Green and Sergeeva (2020) outline the need for built environment

professionals to continue responding to the changing policy landscape related to sustainability and zero carbon agendas. They suggest a narrative perspective as a useful frame of understanding and analyses of built environment professionals' perspectives, stories and narratives about sustainability and evolving policy landscape. Such perspective enables understanding of built environment professionals' workplace identities and roles. Sergeeva and Lindkvist (2019) argued that construction sector firms respond to the sustainability agendas set both nationally and internationally through their practices and promotional narratives on their websites. They found that key industry players are willing to go beyond the expectations of policy and targets set. These firms respond to the sustainability agenda at the industrial policy level by formalising their sustainability strategies; using innovative and sustainable technologies; creating new job roles with sustainability in their titles. Building upon this work we argue that work identities of practitioners and their perceptions play an important role in influencing and responding to the sustainability agenda.

Bordass and Leaman (2013) proposed a set of elements for a 'new professionalism' specifically orientated towards a more sustainable future. They also raise important questions in terms of who should be responsible for the resulting knowledge base:

“Today’s tasks for building professionals include adding much more value with fewer natural and financial resources and not just minimizing negative consequences but helping to bring about regenerative change. Truly sustainable solutions require a broad view, responsiveness to context and attention to detail. Better outcomes also require innovation: Purposeful and painstaking improvement to processes, techniques and technologies, based on knowledge of what actually works in practice and what needs improving, or abandoning” (Bordass and Leaman, 2013: 5).

Work identities

Identity means the ways in which people understand and define themselves in relation to themselves and their social environment (Alvesson, 2010; Brown *et al.*, 2008). Social identity theorists argue that people may have several socially constructed labels attached to identity, sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory (Gluch, 2009; Tomkins and Eatough, 2012). Alvesson (2010) suggests the following seven images of the individual identity are revealed in the research literature:

- Self-doubters: identities are viewed as circling around the anxiety, undermining identity constructions.
- Struggles: Identities are understood as a struggle, enacted in order to construct a self-identity that provides a temporal sense of coherence.
- Surfers: Identities are considered as processual and open in a dynamic world.
- Storytellers: The reflexive construction and re-construction of a narrative of identities.
- Strategists: Identities craft their sense of collective identifications that are then mobilised for the accomplishment of a personal and collective objective.
- Stencils: Identities are viewed as an effect of the operations of regulatory forces, aiming to replicate the dominant templates of being.
- Soldiers: Social entities such as organisations often made appealing through constructions of organisational identities.

The above distinction relates to how the individual is metaphorically understood in terms of self-identity. By providing an overview, Alvesson's (2010) work acknowledges that people may attach several labels to their or others' identities, especially in the context of dynamic social conditions.

Wright et al. (2012) identify and label multiple identity narratives of sustainability managers who presented themselves as such in response to the broader engagement with climate change discourse: “green change agents”, “relational manager” and “the committed activities”. They argue that such identities are dialogical as they are constructed through interaction with others. They are also seen to be situated as they are dependent on available discourses pertaining to specific cultural and social contexts. Heizmann and Liu (2018) further demonstrate how identity narratives reproduce individualist ideals of leadership. They argue that ‘sustainability leaders’ are fashioned via a quasi-Buddhist narrative through which they traverse three stages: calling, awakening and transforming. Our research study builds upon these previous studies to focus on how sustainability practitioners in the built environment sector make sense of sustainability with a particular emphasis their associated work-related identities.

Research on work-related identity has proved to be a useful framework for understanding the relationship between individuals and organisations (Collin, 2008). An individual’s work identity refers to a work-based self-identity constituted of a combination of organisational, occupational and personal identities that shapes informal roles an individual adopts and the corresponding ways he or she behaves when performing work. Work identity is constructed at the intersection of the organisational, social and individual. Work-related identity is constructed at the intersection of the social and the individual. There might be multiple work identities ascribed to an individual, and these may also change over the years (Hennekam, 2017; Johnson et al., 2006).

Storytelling

Storytelling is best understood as a dynamic process that is continuously (re)created through the elaboration, contestation and exchange of different stories. Storytelling plays an essential role in the social construction of identities and roles (Alvesson et al., 2008; Sveningsson &

Alvesson, 2003; Sergeeva and Green, 2019). By telling stories, individuals seek to bolster their identities, both in the eyes of themselves and others (Alvesson et al., 2008; Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Brown, 2015). Stories are inherently social and emotional in the way people may seek empathy and understanding from others when constructing work identities and roles (Caza et al., 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2019).

Storytelling has a long history within the study of organising (Boje, 1991, 2001; Gabriel, 1995, 2000, 2004). The contribution of “storytelling organization” (Boje, 2008) research lies in understanding the sensemaking that takes place in pragmatic ways between storytellers and their audiences. Some stories are concerned with specific events or people, while others take the form of biographies. In this research, storytelling is defined as the activity of telling and sharing stories about personal experiences, life events and situations. We distinguish between storytelling and narrating, arguing that the first is more personalised, entertaining, and emotional in nature, whereas the latter is aimed more towards coherence, stability and performative intent (Sergeeva & Green, 2019; Sergeeva & Winch, 2021). Hence by definitive narratives are characterised by performative intent, i.e. they are mobilised to serve a particular purpose. Performative narratives are often repeated in organisations because repetition serves to stabilise particular meanings (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Stories and storytelling, and a sense of humour, are important means through which individuals strive to make sense of such narratives.. They hence comprises “fragments” of organizational discourse that craft identities and interests in time and space. In organising, individuals are using both storytelling and narratives.

Research process

The rationale for the story-life interview method is that it enables the interviewee to reflect on personal and working experiences, life events and share stories with the interviewers (Easterby-

Smith et al., 2001). Of particular note is that identity work is often revealed in career stories through which leaders seek to make sense of their career progression and share lessons learned (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Such stories can yield important insights into how practitioners relate to individual and work identities, roles and actions they take. Their inherently retrospective nature helps provide insights into how changing contextual conditions might consolidate practitioners' sense of work identity throughout the course of their careers.

The study focuses on sustainability consultants and managers to explore how they make sense of sustainability, their responses to sustainability agenda and associated work identities.

The interviewers were listening to stories recited by sustainability practitioners in interview situations. The life-story interview questions were deliberately open-ended to encourage practitioners to talk about their own interpretations and personal experiences: Tell me about your view on sustainability? What motivated you to become a sustainability practitioner? How do you practice sustainability? Tell me about yourself and your response to sustainable development goals? What is your vision for the future? In response to such prompts the interviewees shared stories about the ways in which they make sense of sustainability, practice sustainability and also about the ways in which they seek to respond to the sustainability agenda. There is little reason to assume the stories articulated were in any way replicable; a different researcher would inevitably elicit a different set of stories.

In total 60 life-story interviews were conducted online with UK sustainability practitioners. The interviews were transcribed in full, thereby aiding subsequent thematic analysis. The analysis method comprised repeated detailed reading of the transcripts, with a focus on identifying points of commonality and points of difference. The themes identified in the analysis are presented below. NVivo 12 software was used for the purposes of coding and data

management. Coding involved the distinguishment between different stories and work identities.

Emerging findings

Defining sustainability

The majority of the participants agreed that sustainability is a very broad term that involves various different aspects. When defining sustainability, most of them referred to the three sustainability pillars: environmental, social and economic. These come from the UN's 2030 agenda for sustainable development that seeks to strengthen the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability (UN, 2019). Sustainability has been commonly defined in relation to the three pillars - social, economic and environmental - and with the mind that decisions made today will impact the future generations and creation of a more sustainable World. Some participants put more emphasis on environmental, some on social aspects of sustainability. For example:

“It's what construction does to support the environmental issues and part of it is waste management. So, it's design, how do we improve the design, how do we improve the constructability. There were a number of things that we looked at as saving costs but now we are more on a sustainable environment that supports future generations rather than what we do now. So, it's more holistic and includes other things like design, like managing the risk of waste, managing the risk of...” (Sustainability Manager, Construction firm)

In the above quotation there is an emphasis on a holistic perspective on understanding sustainable environment, continuous improvement and impact on the future generation of people and environment. Other participants highlighted social aspects associated with sustainability:

“I suppose right now I’m particularly interested in the social aspects of sustainability because I see there is in many ways the environmental stuff which is what I’ve been involved for a long time now for about, well, nearly 30 years since I started at University, I feel that we know what we need to do and it’s a case of implementing that, but I think we’re just starting to understand the social elements it seems to be the next phase really. And because I worked in commercial property, I strongly believe there is real opportunity for a lot of our clients who are trying to do the right thing and trying to rebuild or to build some trust with the wider public with the wider stakeholders, and I think that’s where the social elements of sustainability very much comes into play. And you might have heard terms like social value and the value that development and property investment can actually bring to places.” (Sustainability consultant, Construction Management Firm)

In the above quotation the social aspects of sustainability refer to social values, building trusted relationships with clients and better understanding social aspects associated with sustainability.

The interviewees argued that sustainability has become an important narrative over the years. It has become popular, and practitioners in the industry are engaging with this narrative. Sustainability is seen as important and influential, but subject to multiple interpretations, and was often associated with behavioural changes:

“I think sustainability is about changing our behaviour, in all senses of how do we have a concrete that's less carbon intensive? Sustainability's gone from being important to influential stakeholders, certain politicians, certain scientists, it's becoming a popular topic. So, your Sky cycling team has 'save the oceans', it's become a mainstream narrative, not just a technical narrative or a political narrative, so it's risen.” (Sustainability Consultant, Infrastructure firm)

Other definitions of sustainability were:

“For me sustainability is wider than what we do outside. So, for me sustainability is and making sure that we do not take more out, we put more back in. In terms of the Earth and the World it is more about using our resources more efficiently.” (Sustainability Consultancy, Management Consulting).

“A new way of looking at almost anything and saying this is not as good as we thought, it could be changed, or this needs to stop completely because this is negative, or this needs to be encouraged.” (International Business Development Professional, Environmental Consultancy)

Most participants highlighted the impact associated with sustainability and the need for everyone to become aware of the impact they have and what changes they need to make. This was referred to making improvements, creating value for society through sustainability practices, providing more positive impact rather than just minimise the negative impact (e.g., on the environment, on the society). Some further emphasised that this needs to be more visible in terms of what people know and understand and what their impact is. The impact is seen about the actions and choices people make, the paths and outcomes they want in life. At the level of a project, where there is a perceived possibility to work towards an embodied carbon (e.g., renewable energy use, energy sufficient resources). The sustainability assessment is maintained throughout a project life-cycle and at post-project evaluation phase. At the level of individual, the impact referred to the personal choices and actions people make: choose whether to drive or take train to minimise pollution, to minimise waste and recycle etc.

Sustainability practitioners, their work identities roles, and personal experiences

The participants emphasised their motivation, passion and enthusiasm for sustainability and in responding to the sustainability agenda. Sustainability roles were seen as diverse and multi-disciplinary; involving self-learning and education in the form of obtaining new knowledge,

training and networking. These roles are wide and include the following activities but are not limited to: supporting organisations in their journeys towards net zero carbon emissions; forming sustainability strategy(s) for organisations and its ongoing monitoring; green building assessments and audits. The view was consistently expressed that more and more organisations recognise the need and importance of a sustainability strategy that not only sets the vision and objectives, but also responds to the wider sustainability agenda. A continuous process of monitoring organisational process was increasingly emphasised in relation to the sustainability strategy.

The participants further pointed out that there are some partnerships and institutions that provide guidance for sustainability and net zero carbon agenda. IEMA, an international membership committed to global sustainability, was most commonly recognised among participants. The participants also recognised other professional intuitions where there are themes of sustainability, among them are Association for Project Management (APM), Institution for Civil Engineers (ICE), Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS). Some participants expressed their wish for another more specialised sustainability professional institution.

In talking about sustainability practices and work activities in response to the sustainability goals, participants presented themselves with work identities. The interviews demonstrate that work identities and roles emerge in response to the sustainable development goals including: champions, activists, facilitators, supporters, motivators, influencers, enforcers, coaches, communicators, promoters, educators, dreamers. These work identities pertained informal roles that were adopted and for particular audiences. Some selected work identities are demonstrated below.

Activists of sustainability

Many interviewees saw themselves as *activists* of sustainability, as individuals who are proactively driving the sustainability agenda among colleagues, responding to the sustainability goals. One example is shared by the sustainability consultant from a construction management firm who is proud of his achievement and shared his vision for the future:

“One of the reasons that I’ve enjoyed my career in construction has been because I can show people, my family, friends, whatever, as we go around the place I can point out things and say, “Well I did that,” or, “I was involved in that,” or, “I know the people that did that,” or, “My business did that bridge or that building.” Because I think those things are impressive. So that’s where I came from. We’ve played our part in getting on top of the climate change challenge. So we’ve continued to provide all of the infrastructure, whether that’s housing or roads, or transport, whatever it is that society needs we continue to provide that, but we’re doing it in a way that is sustainable.” (Consultant, Construction Management Firm)

Many interviewees were keen to talk about their vision for a future of sustainable development of their firms and industries. Activists of sustainability thought to practice sustainability both within their organisations and outside of work by engaging in sustainability events and networks.

Facilitators of sustainability

One of the work identities presented by the participants was that of the *facilitator* of sustainability, an individual who guides and ensures the team works effectively towards meeting the sustainability goals in an organisation and through professional networks. Participants emphasised their commitment to meeting the carbon agenda in the construction industry and their life at home. The Environmental Manager from a large owner and operator infrastructure firm saw himself as a facilitator of sustainability who is aiming to embed a low

carbon efficient approach into project work. He described his role of working together with the project team towards common objectives and achieving sustainability development goals:

“So this is where my role as a facilitator comes in, I need to work with that project team and I deliberately say the project team because I’m including the project manager, the cost manager, the engineers and designers, the construction manager, the procurement people, they all have a role to play. So I’m working with all of those to try and say, right, resource efficiency, low carbon etc.”

Underpinning the work identity and informal role of the ‘facilitator’ of sustainability, interviewees provided examples of the activities they undertook as sustainability and environmental managers and consultants. They emphasise the need to speak the language of the various professionals with whom they work and engage to achieve shared understanding towards achieving common sustainability goals.

One participant saw herself as somewhere between two roles:

“I would be between a sustainability champion and facilitator. Probably more work as a champion but outside as a facilitator. What drove me to sustainability was challenge that it was not really widespread in where I am from. I believe so much in what I do that I think I need to get outdoors of the office and make something to my community and that is why I think I am facilitator because I am helping community.” (Senior Sustainability Consultant, Engineering and Architecture Consultancy).

Of further note is that the role of champions of sustainability was also seen to include encouraging people to change behaviours and mindsets.

Supporters of sustainability

Many interviewees saw themselves as ‘supporters’ of sustainability, as individuals who support the sustainability agenda and provide guidance to other stakeholders and employees for implementing sustainability practices. Some examples include below:

“I guess I am a proponent, and I will do whatever is in my power. But I also understand the limitations on what you cannot do overnight.” (Sustainability Consultant, Sustainability Construction Consultancy).

“I connect, support and challenge people. Ask them a question what do their children think and hope you are doing at work tomorrow.” (Director, Association of Sustainability)

Coaches and educators of sustainability

Several interviewees saw themselves as ‘coachers’ or ‘educators’ of sustainability who support, provide guidance and educate people on how to become more sustainable:

“I am a life coach. I am trying to coach people on how to be more sustainable in their jobs and their workplaces. I am trying to take everybody on that journey.” (Head of Sustainability & Environment, Architectural Practice)

This role comes naturally with the nature of sustainability consultants’ professional role. There has also been agreement among them about the importance of understanding of *psychology* of people.

There was further evidence that sustainability professionals are not only responding to the sustainability agenda and goals through their work roles, but also in their day-to-day life experiences. Here are some examples of it:

“We bought a new build house two or three years ago and I wanted my house to be as sustainable as possible. My house has one solar panel...” (Sustainability Consultancy, Management Consulting).

“I have an electric car and I do try to cycle...I obviously try to live a sustainable life by eating organic food. And trying not to use too much plastic.” “I’ve been volunteering with the community energy organisation.” (Sustainability Consultant, Sustainability Construction Consultancy)

“On a personal level I have just put together like a reading list which I feel sort of keep up to date with all the new developments that are relevant. Friends and colleagues who are interested in that stuff help.” (Sustainability & Physics Engineer, Construction Engineering Consultancy)

“I keep in touch with previous colleagues which are also working as sustainability consultants in the real estate world so that’s quite useful to see what they are doing and what their companies are offering.” (Sustainability Consultant, Real Estate Company)

“I do attend the live webinars. Actually, it’s quite easy at the moment. You can just sign up and then it plays in the background, while I’m watching on something else.” (Head of Sustainability & Environment, Architectural Practice)

So the big themes?

Collective identity of becoming more sustainable

The empirical data from individual life-story interviews have demonstrated a strong sense of a collective identity (‘we’) - a sense of shared understanding of sustainability and its goals and shared values for society. They very often talked about shared mindsets and common values.

Here are examples that show a strong sense of a collective identity:

“The Paris agreement, for instance, is a great example of how all countries can work towards the same goals.” (Sustainability Consultant, Real Estate Company)

“I think if you went to some industry event about sustainability in a particular topic I think in general sustainability practitioners, as in the people that are trying to improve the sustainability of their projects and their organisations, I think you could almost put together like a collective output or collective outlook rather so I think everyone is... so massively generalise, I'd say on the whole people are always trying to learn more, always happy to share what they've done and are on the whole, where they can, happy to engage with industry initiatives to try and make things better. If you put all that together it then becomes a, we, as the industry.” (Environmental Manager, Owner and Operator Infrastructure Firm)

The above quotation places emphasis on a culture of continuous improvement and learning in the construction sector and people's willingness to share and engage with sustainability development goals. Other examples of a need to act collectively in response to the sustainability agenda are:

“We are all towards the same goals in the future. Sustainability consultants are sort of pulling it all together.” (Sustainability Consultancy, Management Consulting)

“The whole thing about sustainability is that everyone knows we can't do it alone, so the collectiveness is important.” (Sustainability Consultant, Construction Firm)

“I use 17 sustainability goals with career for students. I just asked students to pick one and say why they picked this one. These students are resonating with a goal and it's helping them to understand who they are and what they are passionate about”. But what it's also showing is that all of the goals are important.” (Director, Association of Sustainability)

“Globally, by governments, businesses, individuals, universities etc. we have to work together to resolve this.” (Director, Association of Sustainability)

It is further emphasised that through employee engagement with the sustainability agenda and goals that people, their mindset and behaviour will respond and act upon. The sustainability strategy acts as a vision and a reminder for employees to comply with the sustainability goals and agenda.

Future vision for achieving sustainability goals

In this study there was an interest in finding out the sustainability practitioners’ vision for the future in terms of achieving sustainability goals, the profession of sustainability and general vision of the extent to which sustainability will be practiced in the future. There was a general agreement among the participants about the importance of sustainability in the future. There was generally a positive vision for the future:

“Sustainability is becoming more and more important to companies, and I think it will become more and more important in the future. We’ve already started seeing companies that include sustainability in their high-level senior meetings, on the board meetings.”

“The great work has started and we are not there yet, but at least we have made the first step towards a more sustainable world. This is something positive to see.” (Sustainability Consultant, Real Estate Company)

Some interviewees argued that the role of sustainability consultant may not exist in the future, as all practitioners would respond to the sustainability agenda. They further suggested that in

the future there is likely a need for a wider sustainability coordinator role who would oversee and coordinate sustainability consultants and have a more strategic view:

“I do not think the role of sustainability consultant should exist in the future. I think all disciplines should all be sustainable...But I do not think there is a wider coordinator role and I think that is probably what sustainability consultants are working towards as there is a lot of information and there is not one coordinator, at least a few that kind of really understand the whole essence and able to piece it together.” (Senior Sustainability Consultant, Engineering and Architecture Consultancy).

A number of interviewees highlight the need for investment in sustainability, especially from Government:

“Maybe we need more investments from different sources, Government and I think it is just more about proving to people that on a long term it saves a lot of money to build a building sustainably with energy savings and things like that.” (Sustainability Consultant, Sustainability Construction Consultancy).

Of further interest is the importance of inspiring stories, case study examples and creation of spaces for individuals for practicing sustainability:

“We need evidence to justify and to manifest what the vision is, but you don’t use data to create the vision, you use inspiring stories and create spaces to do that. And the vision is extraordinary positive, despite all I know.”

“I do believe we will get to the point where we have much greater equality and equity around the world. I do think we will learn very quickly to live in balance and harmony with nature.”

(Director, Association of Sustainability)

Case studies and stories are seen as important part of promoting sustainability in organisations and motivating employees to come up with innovative sustainable solution:

“If we do not capture the story we never move forward. It will take forever the next one to pick up an idea and try it again, instead of us all reading about it and then using that experience. And it is important, even if we have negative case study that is also very positive thing, we can then understand how not to do things. Stories are also good for inspiring people to make a change. These people need to be rewarded and recognised.” (International Business Development Professional, Environmental Consultancy)

A holistic approach to sustainability

Most practitioners agreed that a more holistic approach to sustainability should be adopted actioned: for example, in practical terms this involves systemic air purification, greening the planet, systemic water purification, changing people’s behaviours and mindsets etc. Some examples from interviewees are:

“It needs to be a very holistic system in achieving sustainable development goals.”
(Sustainability Consultant, Built Environment Consulting Firm)

“For example, if we give a recommendation to a project, it wouldn’t be just because if you don’t do that you won’t get your points into a sustainability matrix; it’s more holistic and considering what would add value to the project.” (Senior Sustainability Consultant, Engineering and Architecture Consultancy)

“Certain frame of mind just stays as problem solving, so we have got this problem that we been designing building in ways that are not sustainable, healthy or equitable, we need a whole

change and approach. My job in the business with my colleagues to unlock that process, change the way people behaving.” (Head of Sustainability, Architecture and Design Practice)

Some practitioners highlight that multi-level approach to sustainability should be encouraged: global, industrial, organisational, project, team and individual. Here are some examples:

“Investors in most cases are very keen for sustainability, there is a big drive within the team, so it comes from top to bottom rather than bottom-up or holistic approach. I’ve been on projects where there has been scrutiny from the top on why certain level is not achieved that, and I think it is probably a better way to deal with things and to engage design team rather than just leaving sustainability at the back end and this makes our jobs as consultants difficult.” (Sustainability Consultant, Engineering and Architecture Consultancy)

Discussion

The interviewees agreed that sustainability is a very broad term that involves various different aspects. This is in agreement with the literature that identified multiple definition of sustainability agenda in the context of the mining industry and built environment (Bordass and Leaman, 2013; Sergeeva and Lindkvist, 2019). There have been multiple definitions on sustainability; some were placing more emphasis on social, environment or economic or all three aspects. Nevertheless, there has been emphasis on need to understand the term sustainability from a holistic perspective that takes into consideration impact on the future generation of people and environment of sustainability-related work and personal activities. The impact is seen about the actions and choices people make in their work and everyday life. The empirical findings reveal that sustainability has become an important narrative over the years. It has become popular, and practitioners in the industry are expected to engage with this narrative and respond to the sustainability agendas set both nationally and internationally.

The life-story interviews with sustainability practitioners revealed that work identities emerge in response to the sustainability agenda. These included but not limited to: champions, activists, facilitators, supporters, motivators, influencers, enforcers, coaches, communicators, promoters, educators, dreamers. As shown in the empirical findings, activists are individuals who are proactively driving the sustainability agenda among colleagues, responding to the sustainability goals. Facilitators are individuals who guide and ensure the team works effectively towards meeting the sustainability goals in an organisation and through professional networks. Supporters are individuals who support the sustainability agenda and provide guidance to other stakeholders and employees for implementing sustainability practices. Coaches and educators are individuals who support, provide guidance and educate people on how to become more sustainable.

We are in agreement with the research by Collins (2008) that work-related identity has proved to be a useful framework for understanding the relationship between individuals and organisations. Work-related identities ascribed to an individual could be multiple and could also change over the period of lifetime (Hennekam, 2017; Johnson et al., 2006). Wright et al. (2012) identify multiple identity narratives of sustainability managers who presented themselves as such in response to the broader engagement with climate change discourse: “green change agents”, “relational manager” and “the committed activities”. Identities are viewed as dialogical and constructed through interaction with others. In our research study we found our work identity labels of sustainability practitioners.

Our findings on work-identities of sustainability practitioners contributes to the literature on sustainability work (Blazejewski et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2021). Understanding how

sustainability has been enabled within organisations is often understood through the role of individuals, change agents, their practices and identities.

Conclusion

The UN sustainability goals provide a foundation for industries and firms to achieve these goals. Sustainability becomes a norm and important part of every practitioner regardless of his or her professional role. There is a strong sense of individual and collective responsibility for achieving SDGs. The motivation, enthusiasm and belief in sustainable future by sustainability practitioners should motivate other practitioners to engage and respond to the sustainable development goals. The personal stories shared by participants of this study are valuable for sharing experiences and learning from each other.

The construction sector plays an important role in achieving the global sustainability goals. Sustainability professionals more generally are seen as agents of change and agency can lead to the modification of structural rules. Personal commitment and values, and self-identity more generally, can contribute to and shape self-identities and collective identities which inform social sensemaking and sense giving. The past can be reconstructed and can influence present agency, and so stories, narratives and discourses may operate as processes for transformation. Based on life-story interviews with sustainability professionals, we observe that different stories (performative stories, stories about everyday experiences, future-oriented stories, stories about self-identities) and self-identities (facilitators, activists) emerge in response to the sustainable development goals.

In this report it is demonstrated that understanding sustainability as inclusive storytelling to which individuals and firms respond by their practices and actions opens opportunity for better

understanding of the meaning and enactment of sustainability by professionals. It also has important implications for constructing individual and collective identities.

Future research directions may include the following:

- Interaction between sustainability and digital transformation agendas
- Inclusiveness of sustainability: narratives, stories, case studies, practices
- Circular economy thinking on sustainability: implications of it for the future
- Narratives of health and wellbeing and new emergent themes

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