Growing competence for sustainability management

A case study on marketing and communication professionals managing corporate sustainability

Carolina Lassheikki

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Abstract

This thesis explores the competence development of marketing and communication professionals who have taken on a sustainability management role within subsidiaries of [Industrial Group], an international business development group. Using an emergent case study approach and four qualitative interviews, the research examines the interplay between competence, assets, and context in sustainability management. It identifies key competences for sustainability management, such as contextual knowledge, systems thinking, collaboration, critical thinking, professional ethics, and future orientation, while emphasizing the importance of meta-competences and collective competences. The findings suggest that MarCom professionals are well-equipped for sustainability management as there are similarities and overlaps in the competences of both activities. Further, communication workflows can become more efficient by integrating MarCom professionals in strategically important tasks within the organization, since this facilitates sensemaking and verification from the MarCom professional's perspective. The study concludes that the challenges and opportunities of informal competence development are strongly related to organizational support and external pressures, rather than being dependent on the individual's traits and abilities. As a consequence, the study proposes that sustainability management success necessitates organizational resources, leadership commitment, and external stakeholder engagement. The thesis contributes to understanding sustainability management as a contextual and collaborative organizational activity rather than a traditional profession.

Keywords

Marketing and communication professional, sustainability manager, corporate sustainability, organizational change, competence development, informal learning

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Glossary of terms and abbreviations

Subsidiary: a company owned by a parent organization. Case subsidiaries are also referred to as *companies* in this study.

[Industrial Group]: the case organization, also referred to as *organization* or *group.*

BA: abbreviation of Business Area, denotes a sub-segment within the case organization.

CSR: abbreviation of Corporate Social Responsibility.
CSR entails activities that enterprises participate in or organize that contribute to society, such as philanthropy and pro bono programs.

ESG: abbreviation of Environmental, Social and Governance.
Originally a framework for evaluating investment risk, nowadays often used as a synonym for a trifold sustainability approach.

HoS: abbreviation of Head of Sustainability, denotes one of the interviewees in this study.

MD: abbreviation of Managing Director.

SM: abbreviation of Sustainability Manager.

SME: abbreviation of Small to Medium-sized Enterprise.

1 Introduction

The inspiration for this thesis has risen from a personal interest in analyzing how sustainability managers gain confidence in the competence they obtain from informal learning, along with mapping out external factors that might influence or even determine how well they are able to act in the change process of corporate sustainability development.

Sustainability management and *corporate sustainability* are, to some extent, interchangeable terms. Both can be explained as organization of work and resources with the aim of advancing sustainable development (cf. Borglund et al., 2021; Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). However, the more general term *sustainability management* can be understood as activities taking place in all kinds of organizations – be it companies, non-profit organizations, or city councils. *Corporate sustainability*, on the other hand, provides a distinct context for sustainability management. It literally entails sustainability efforts within large enterprises, but it can also be seen more broadly as sustainability management in any business setting – especially when approaches from large enterprises are adopted.

Organizations are introducing sustainability management in an attempt to meet demands and seize opportunities related to sustainable development. As Purvis et al. (2018) identify, the demands on sustainability were originally driven by the general public in the 1960s, from where the theme has advanced to become a globally recognized concern, with the UN as one of its most prominent advocates.

Whereas traditional professions depart from a distinct discipline, the professionalization of sustainability management is still very much in formation, allowing diversity and ambiguities in its theoretical and practical comprehension. Consequently, organizations have much freedom in defining the role and its purpose according to contextual needs. (Borglund et al., 2021, p. 72) When reviewing the research participants of e.g. Borglund et al., (2021, p. 64), and Visser and Crane (2010, p. 9), we find that sustainability managers have diverse professional backgrounds, different hierarchical positions, and variation in both their role and title. As a likely consequence of sustainability managers (SMs) being a recent addition to organizations, along with diversity and transdisciplinarity being recognized components of improved sustainability performance (Dzhengiz & Niesten, 2019, pp. 882, 893), there are few formal requirements for the role that would be common across organizations. It seems quite common for SMs to not have an educational background explicitly in sustainability, rather, they are often someone who has developed their competence through *informal learning*.

Inspired by the observation of sustainability management as an informal learning opportunity for professional development, this thesis is narrowed down to fit the frame of Media Management by focusing on marketing and communication (MarCom) professionals. It utilizes an emergent case study approach with qualitative interviews to explore the competence development of MarCom professionals who have taken on the additional role as SM during their employment at a subsidiary of a large business development group, denoted here as [Industrial Group].

MarCom professionals in general are central to corporate sustainability as the messengers for companies: Miller and Fyke (2020, p. 187) underline the organizational role of communication not only as a tool for providing information and supporting strategy externally, but also as the means for establishing the internal culture, such as organizational customs and visions. As MarCom professionals design and manage communications, they gain substantial influence over the process of collective sensemaking. Additionally – *and especially when considering small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)* – it is not unusual for MarCom professionals to have direct involvement in sustainability management.

Competence development – *as any attempt to widen one's professional proficiency* – can easily be identified as a current professional opportunity and challenge. The future desirable professional skills emphasize lifelong learning along with resilience, flexibility and agility (World Economic Forum, 2023). Kokosowski (2012, p. 26) clarifies that the notion of *"having competences"* has been replaced by *"acting competently"* in new working environments. Changes to the security of employment, production constraints, and segmentation of organizations are traced back to the oil crisis in 1974 by Kokosowski (2012, p. 17). Hand in hand with these changes, Kokosowski identifies a growing increase in work pace, task complexity, collaboration, and frequency of organizational changes – in historic comparison, contemporary organizations apply *"management by chaos"*. For most professionals, this means that competences which support both high adaptability and deep expertise are necessary in order to be seen as an organizational asset. (Kokosowski 2012, p. 17–19) Thereby, in addition to demanding solid methodological competences and domain competences for one's own area of expertise, the way work is organized today places remarkable emphasis on social competences and lifelong learning.

Competence will be approached in accordance with Cohen-Scali (2012a, p. 12) as the processes that determine how an individual approaches a task in professional settings. Fundamentally, these processes are built up by the elements of competence: abilities, skills, comprehension, knowledge, and attitudes. However, Bach and Suliková (2019, p. 290) emphasize that *"Competences are not skills, knowledge or qualifications, but rather a higher-order ability, namely to act creatively and self-organised in unexpected and often chaotic situations"*.

When forming a strategy for competence development, Bach and Suliková (2019, pp. 291–292, 295) present two fundamental conditions to consider: a) *competence is the product of multiple elements in dialogue with one another,* and b) *competence is achieved only after the individual has developed an understanding of how to apply their insights*. The key takeaway here is that competence development should not be approached as a fully linear and predictable process, nor as something that can be achieved through transmission of theory alone.

It is further noteworthy that the expression of competence, *acting*, is not something that happens in isolation or completely dependent on the individual. According to Piot's (2012, p. 61) competence approach, professional activities stem from having the knowledge to act, the desire to act, and the possibility to act. Any one of these three areas can well be influenced by external conditions – *such as organizational hierarchy and company culture* – which consequently may build hindrances to action. Following the same train of thought, Laasch and Conaway (2015, p. 16) propose that: *"internal competencies are as important as the external conditions of a responsible manager"*.

By examining a case organization and relevant theory, this research will attempt to map out which competences are most significant for sustainability management, how competence development for sustainability management can be supported, and how external factors may interfere with the ability to act.

1.1 Sustainability management at [Industrial Group]

[Industrial Group] is an international acquisition and business development group, which is founded and based in Sweden. Although the administration of [Industrial Group] is slimmed down to approximately 20 employees at its headquarters, the group consists of 200 subsidiaries in the technological, manufacturing and industrial fields, adding up to 9,100 employees in more than 30 countries, across six continents.

The business development that [Industrial Group] aims to promote is based on a decentralized leadership model. This allows its subsidiaries to maintain their pre-existing identity and practices to a large extent after acquisition.

As can be seen in *Figure 1,* [Industrial Group] divides its subsidiaries into clusters, *business areas (BAs),* and provides the clusters with contacts, *business area Heads of Sustainability (BA HoS)*. The BA HoS acts as a link between the subsidiaries and the headquarters.

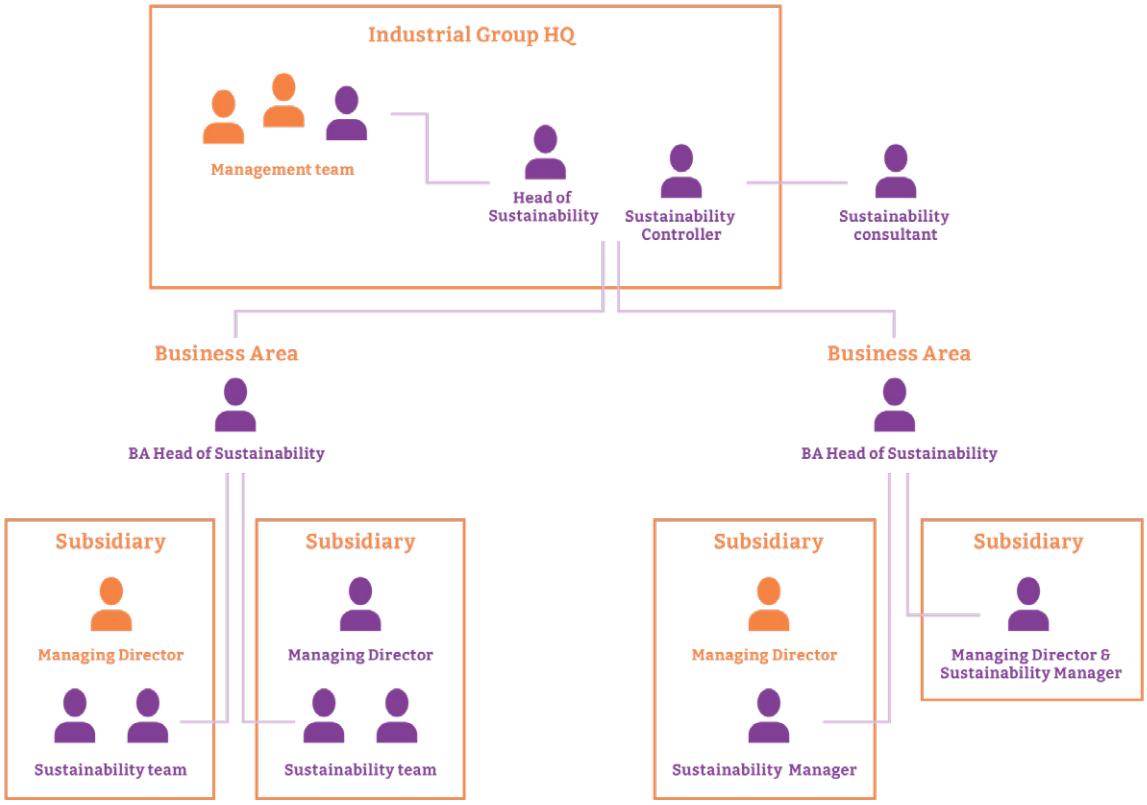

Figure 1: Exemplifying organization chart of [Industrial Group]'s sustainability roles. Sustainability roles are marked with purple.

Whereas public pressure was noted as one important driver for sustainability in the introduction of this thesis, it is noteworthy that the role of public pressure is lessened in *business-to-business* (B2B) markets, as compared to *business-to-consumer* markets. The majority of [Industrial Group]'s subsidiaries operate B2B, which means that their primary sustainability stakeholders are employees, customers, suppliers, and top management – *i.e. the company's board and [Industrial Group] more generally.* End-consumers, competitors, and local authorities or regulatory organs – *such as the EU* – can be seen as indirect or secondary stakeholders.

[Industrial Group] has an ambitious and committed approach to sustainability in all its areas. As a clear environmental target, the group-wide goal to reduce greenhouse emissions by 90 % no later than 2050 has been confirmed by the internationally recognized Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi). To meet this and other targets, [Industrial Group] assumes a highly present role as sustainability stakeholder in its subsidiaries, demanding commitment to sustainable development from all its subsidiaries. The subsidiaries are to provide accurate sustainability data through annual group-wide reporting.

To manage data collection and change processes, subsidiaries have been asked to assign sustainability management to either existing employees or new recruitments. Subsidiaries have full freedom in organizing their sustainability management, allowing them to decide if the responsibility is assigned to an individual or a team, and how the role is named. For many of the case organization's SME subsidiaries this means that the sustainability manager does not come from an academic background with sustainability, but that they are rather someone who has pivoted to build on their existing professional role.

[Industrial Group] is attempting to promote economic growth by means that take several levels of sustainability in account. In addition to collecting data for emissions calculations, [Industrial Group] monitors sustainability development throughout the organization by reviewing the subsidiaries' sustainability performance. In communications where the group's strategic sustainability framework is presented, *sustainable governance* is placed as an overarching theme and approach to advance three sustainability focus areas: *people*, *environment*, and *products and customers*. Each category, *including sustainable governance*, has its own goals, material topics, and key performance indicators (KPIs).

[Industrial Group]'s sustainability framework is not fully corresponding to the standard ESG model (see *Figure 6*). In its framework, the *people* category includes KPIs from both the *social* and *governance* divisions, while the *products and customers* category deals with resource efficiency in product offering and stakeholder driven business development. In the organization's internal communications, the *products and customers* category is often presented as an incentive for sustainability, but it is not placed as the top goal. Instead, all three focus areas are lined up with and made equal to each other as factors of sustainable development.

In order to gather sustainability contacts from [Industrial Group]'s subsidiaries, the *sustainability network* has been founded. The current function of the network is mainly that of a mailing list: it is utilized for sending out invitations to the organization's sustainability webinars, meanwhile the webinars are used as an information sharing platform, where both key themes and, e.g., new reporting directives are introduced. A noteworthy feature of the sustainability network is that it is a rather informal entity, in the sense that the subsidiaries can freely request any of their employees to be added to it. Thereby, the audience that is gathered through the sustainability network is fluid: participation in webinars is voluntary, and themes may be of varying interest between different roles.

[Industrial Group] has an online platform available for all subsidiary employees. On the platform, users can access organization wide information and resources.

Sustainability has its own section in the platform, which includes e.g., webinar recordings, calculation templates, and guidance on materiality analysis workshopping to prioritize company specific sustainability issues. The platform also offers a selection of sustainability related online training, covering themes such as the group-wide Code of Conduct, diversity and inclusion, and the climate crisis.

1.2 Research questions and propositions

The starting point for the research is to assess the relevance and relationship between the three themes of *competence, assets,* and *context*. The research aims to conclude to which extent internal qualities determine proficiency for sustainability management, or whether resource allocation and external factors are more decisive in enabling and directing corporate sustainability development.

The questions this thesis will attempt to answer can be divided into three areas:

1) Competence*, as internal qualities:* Which competences could be determinative for the success of diversifying one's professional role to encompass sustainability management?

2) Assets*, as allocated resources:* How do existing methods and collaboration impact sustainability management? What are the arrangements that have been made to support competence development for sustainability management?

3) Context*, as external factors:* To what extent is competence development influenced by the working atmosphere and outside pressures, such as expectations from the employer and stakeholders?

1.3 Methods and limitations

The method of this research is case study with an emergent approach. Four qualitative interviews constitute the empirical research material. Interviewees include three sustainability managers from [Industrial Group]'s subsidiaries, and [Industrial Group]'s Head of Sustainability.

Several chapters from the book *Competence and competence development* (Cohen-Scali, 2012a) have provided content for the theoretical framework on competence. This section is complemented by Bach and Suliková's (2019) theories on how to activate meta-competence to achieve competence development.

Sustainability management is presented through some of its underlying issues: the academic niche and theoretic foundation of sustainability is presented through Fang et al. (2018) and Purvis et al. (2018). Making the individual the focal point, Borglund et al. (2021) have analyzed the professional logic of sustainability managers, whereas Miller and Fyke (2020) have researched the sensemaking process of communication professionals who are tasked with communicating *corporate social responsibility* (CSR).

Intersections of sustainability and competence development are found in Dzhengiz and Niesten's (2019) research on environmental competences, where they discuss the generative potential of competence on both manager-level and organization-level. Also Laasch and Conaway (2015) provide theory that connects manager, organization, and sustainability, as they argue for adopting a responsible management approach.

The methodology of this thesis is based on Lee and Saunders's (2017) suggestions for case studies, with some contributions from Flyvbjerg (2006). Qualitative interviews are approached through the considerations and recommendations in *Doing interviews* by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018).

The study will not go into detail about the basics of sustainability and its general issues, but rather have a focus on the implications of corporate sustainability management, and the specific context of the case study. It will also refrain from dwelling into current legislation and reporting requirements, since these are constantly developing and are not necessarily relevant for the research questions.

It is worth noting that the interviews present a narrow sample of the available experiences within the case organization: all the research participants are located in Nordic countries, and the three represented subsidiaries are SMEs. Therefore, a consciously chosen limitation to the study is to refrain from providing generalizable knowledge, and rather to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the particularities of the chosen case.

1.4 Theoretical contribution

In their transdisciplinary research exploring sustainability management motives through existential psychology, Visser and Crane (2010, p. 22) conclude that *"deeper investigation into corporate sustainability at the level of the individual gives us both a more holistic view of sustainability management, as well as a broader vision of why it is important"*. Outlining questions similar to those examined by Visser and Crane, this research departs from the proposition that sustainability management benefits from explorations into the relationship of the individual and the organization.

The main theoretical contribution of this thesis is that it examines corporate sustainability through its practical application. It explores how sustainability management is organized in practice, with a specific interest for MarCom professionals' subjective experiences. Through this, it attempts to provide a rich description of both practical and theoretical challenges in sustainability management for a deeper understanding of informal competence development.

Overall, most prior research on change and sustainability management centers on the top management perspective, maintaining values of managerialism in work organization: the role, influence, and change potential of frontline managers remains limited. This thesis seeks to illuminate underlying organizational conflicts that SMs experience, and to clarify the role that top management can have on competence expression in an organization.

Dzhengiz and Niesten (2019, p. 289) suggest that *"future research should study the competences for sustainability, responsibility and ethics in more detail"* when discussing their research on environmental management competence. Here, the environment is one of three themes in sustainability, whereas sustainability is one of three themes in responsible management (see *Figure 8*). This research offers knowledge that can complement Dzhengiz and Niesten's propositions, by presenting a framework of competences for sustainability management (see *Figure 11*).

1.5 Structure

The *Introduction* of this thesis presents the research themes and the case organization, while offering a brief review of the issues that are more thoroughly discussed in the theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework is divided into two main sections presenting the two key concepts of the research: *competence development* and *sustainability management*. In the *Methods* chapter, the adopted research philosophy, epistemological approach, and methodology is presented. This section offers an overview of *case studies* and *qualitative interviews*. In addition to methods, the section also includes a process description, and explains how research ethics have been considered.

Results are presented by first offering a thorough compilation of the *Analysis and thematized interview findings,* upon which the *Interpretation of findings* presents five propositions to reflect both empirical findings and the theoretical framework. Finally, in the *Discussion* chapter, the research questions are addressed and the overall findings are assembled.

2 Theoretical framework

With the aim to explain why hindrances to acting occur for the individual, we will first look over the definition of *competence* by reviewing competence as elements and establishing the social dimensions of competence. From there, we will move on to categorization models, providing a top-down approach to competence, exploring action as a composite of knowledge and experience.

Once we have mapped out the concept of competence, the discussion will shift towards *competence development*. Here, the theory will deal with the challenges and opportunities of competence development, and elaborate on organizational competence expression.

The section on *sustainability management* explores the theme especially in the corporate context, providing background to understand the case. The discourse presented in this section explains action hindrance sources for SMs: we will cover conflicts in both theoretical approaches and professional logic, along with the implications organizational hierarchy can introduce to competence expression. Ethical issues of organizational greening will also be established. A notable theme in this section is the *responsible management approach*, which will be introduced as a remedy to several action hindrances of sustainability management.

2.1 Competence development

Piot (2012, p. 54) states that lifelong learning is a prerequisite for economic development. This statement can be comprehended on a high level, where it implies that society achieves progress through adult education. However, the same idea can be scaled down and applied to organizations, meaning that supporting the advancement of employee competence is beneficial for business growth. This notion provides a tangible incentive to include competence development in business strategy.

Competence is a social construct stemming from a managerial and bureaucratic interest to evaluate professional proficiency (Piot, 2012, p. 56; Cohen-Scali, 2012b, pp. 74–78). Formally, evaluation of competence allows organizations to *"verify"* the qualification of individuals based on established requirements for a task. However, in a less formal sense, competence evaluation is present also when an individual reflects over their abilities and professional capacity. (Cohen-Scali, 2012b, pp. 73–78)

While *abilities* and *skills* may seem rather straightforward to develop through either training or practice, competence is achieved only after the individual has developed an understanding of how to apply their insights (Bach & Suliková, 2019, p. 295). In addition to the challenge of transferring theory to action, competence is also constituted by more intrinsic elements, namely *attitudes, comprehension* and *higher-order abilities*, which require other approaches to form and develop. Although the elements of competence are mostly internal to an individual, much of their emergence and application is socially influenced.

Since competence is situated in the prosperous corporate context, it is a well represented discourse in research. E.g., the European Education Area – *an initiative under the European Union* – has identified development of key competences as an economic growth opportunity, adding it as a sub area to their focus topics (*Development of Skills*, n.d.).

2.1.1 Internal elements of competence

Abilities and *skills* are most easily understood by comparing the concepts. *A skill* is the specifiable technique utilized in a task, meanwhile *an ability* may consist of several skills and be less explicit. E.g., the ability to manage a budget requires skills such as financial analysis, forecasting, software skills, and communication.

Puzzlingly – *or logically* – enough, the *set of skills* that constitute an ability may also be called *skills* in said area. So an alternative way to express "the ability of managing a budget" would be to say "budget management skills" – i.e,. the plural form of skill can be used as a synonymous term for ability.

Attitudes and *comprehension* are somewhat connected. Comprehension, or understanding, can be simplified as a person's individual interpretations of acquired knowledge, whereas attitudes factor into how interpretations are made. Processes of internalizing and assimilating knowledge alter comprehension, meaning that comprehension is a subjective perception of knowledge and how it can be applied. (Cohen-Scali, 2012a, p. 14)

2.1.2 External elements and social dimensions of competence

Piot's (2012, p. 55) definition of competence as *"the functional, contextualised, and assessable action-knowledge of a person or group of people"* offers a clear explanation as to how competence is a social construct. Although assessment may be carried out either internally – *by the individual* – or externally – *by peers or supervisors* – the inclusion of *assessable* in Piot's definition underscores that competence and its evaluation exist in a social sphere: the motive to assess competence stems from factors that are external to the individual.

Power structures and accepted processes within an organization also factor into competence. This is established as direct and indirect limitations to the individual's repertoire of actions in the organization, comparable to having the mandate to implement actions. This further adds social dimensions to competence, clarifying the organization's influence over an individual's actions. Borglund et al. (2021, p. 68) explain that matrix organizations – *where managers are expected to be involved in the hierarchy's both vertical directions* – are favorable for the perceived ability to act: *"Matrix organizations may involve a higher capacity to influence both from an advisory function and within the line organization, implying a stronger mandate."*. External conditions – *i.e. the individual's context* – are not directly elements of competence, but their influence is worth considering in the assessment of competence.

Although not a direct element of competence, a related theme worth noting is *professional identity*. A subtheme to the social study of identity, professional identity can be approached either from an individual, an organizational, or a contextual level. Tomo (2019, p. 11) offers an overview of professional identity themes that studies have explored. As examples of the three mentioned levels, professional identity can be studied by exploring, *e.g.*, how individuals balance differentiation and integration as professionals, how professional identity is influenced by role ambiguity, and how both organizational practices and societal changes influence professional identity.

Professional identity's relationship to competence is first and foremost that professional identity plays into behaviour and sensemaking in several ways, affecting how tasks are approached. Secondarily, we can see that professional identity on all its levels is highly influenced by the perceived relevance of a profession, which directly impacts how specific competence is valued. (Tomo, 2019, p. 8) As a consequence, professional identity may either support or undermine competence development, career advancement, and social status.

Whereas *knowledge* becomes internal once it has been embraced, its validation is a social process: as individuals and groups absorb information and experiences, they approach and evaluate it differently based on its source. Cohen-Scali (2012a, pp. 13–14) suggests three types of knowledge to consider in the context of competence: *theoretical* knowledge, *action* knowledge and *professional* knowledge (see *Figure 2*).

Figure 2: The three relevant knowledge types in competence

> Firstly, *theoretical knowledge* can be described as the predominant theories of an academic or cultural group, accepted based on a truth criterion.
>
> *Action knowledge*, on the other hand, becomes established when a group validates statements around sequences of action as "effective".
>
> Finally, in the question of *professional knowledge*, we find that statements by professional collectives are assessed with criterions of legitimacy and recognition.

It is worth noting that *Figure 2* illustrates a rough categorization of knowledge types, and that there exists overlaps between both the knowledge types and their criterions.

Cohen-Scali (2012a, p. 14) assigns knowledge and comprehension a remarkable role in both competence and identity, explaining that validation and internalization are a dialogue between social and internal processes. She outlines the relationship between competence, comprehension and identity by stating: *"In the same way that there is a close link between competence and identity, there is a close relationship between understanding, knowledge, and identity. Effectively, knowledge and understanding constitute a communicative situation about or for actions and people, and act to some degree as 'markers' and 'foils' for identity."*.

2.1.3 Categorization models of competence

Piot (2012, p. 61) offers a trifold approach for analyzing competence that takes into account both the individual and their context. This triangular model departs from the prerequisite components of human activities: *knowledge*, *desire*, and *ability*. With its origins credited to Le Boterf (2003, as cited in Kokosowski, 2012, p. 26), this approach proposes that professional activities stem from having the knowledge to act, the desire to act, and the possibility to do so (see *Figure 3*).

The more developed these components are, the more likely the person is to be competent. Naturally, action may be hindered if one of the components is lacking. (Piot, 2012, p. 61)

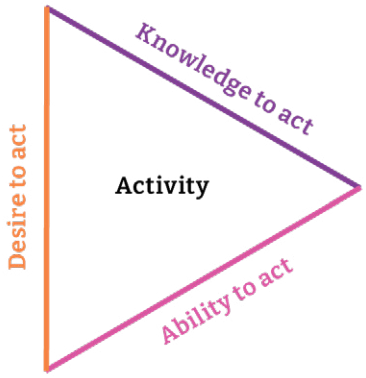

Figure 3: The three components of an activity, Piot (2012)

A common competence model, presented amongst others by Bach and Suliková (2019, p. 291), offers the possibility to contextualise competences to a profession based on four categories: *professional* competence, *methodological* competence, *social* competence, and *self*-competence.

> *Professional* or *domain competences* address the distinctive features of the profession, built up by insight that contributes to expertise.
>
> *Methodological* or *procedural competences* are instead linked to way of thinking: they deal with the processes of knowledge acquisition and which methods the individual has available.
>
> *Social competences* are connected to interaction, but also include skills with social elements, such as self-motivation.
>
> Finally, *self-competences* are more intrinsic contributors to competence, and encompass both values, identity, and outlook.

Laasch and Conaway (2015, p. 37) utilize the same framework with minor differences in connection to their suggestions for responsible management. As seen in *Figure 4*, they have chosen to modify two of the categories' names, since their model is connected to an approach rather than a profession.

Competence group	Typical elements
Domain competences *to know*	Contextualised knowledge, relevant frameworks and perspectives
Procedural competences *to do*	Working methods and processes, way of thinking
Social competences *to interact*	Communication and conflict management skills
Self-competences *to be*	Values, general attitudes, identity

Figure 4: The framework of four competence groups, adapted from Laasch & Conaway (2015)

Laasch and Conaway (2015, p. 37) parallel the four competence groups with competence pillars (illustrated in *Figure 6*) , suggesting that management proficiency – *i.e. the efficient ability to organize action* – is solidified by incorporating all four areas. Also Bach and Suliková (2019, p. 292) propose that the four categories are interconnected, supporting the formation of one another, and being inseparable for comprehensive leadership competence.

Assigning individual elements of competence to competence groups can be somewhat difficult. As an example, attitudes are influential both on the introspective self-competences and on the interactive social competences, meanwhile knowledge in the broader sense could be seen as applicable for all groups. By first contextualizing competences to a profession, we are better able to evaluate which category is most suitable for said competence.

Regardless if we choose to approach competence through its elements or with a model, we can conclude that competence should not be seen simply as the sum of separate pieces of knowledge, but rather as the product of interweaved elements in dialogue with one another, forming an ability to act efficiently (Bach & Suliková, 2019, pp. 291–292).

2.1.4 Challenges and opportunities in competence development

Bach and Suliková (2019, pp. 292, 299) argue that classic training programmes alone are not functional for competence development, since they only provide theoretical knowledge or specific skills. Due to this, classic training programmes may fail to provide practical relevance, or strategies for attaining knowledge in a way that supports continued learning.

Firstly, it should be established that knowledge becomes competence only once it is actionable and being applied, meanwhile insights that the individual is unable to utilize forms *inert knowledge*. The clinical setting of classic training programmes, with their reduced portrayal of reality aids in making the learning process efficient. However, managing in practice includes constant distractions and pressures, which inherently influence actions. When the richness of real-life is reintroduced after *"synthetic"* training, the participants are likely to struggle with utilizing theoretical knowledge in practice and deciding on action in ambiguous situations: with interferences, it becomes more difficult to prioritize issues and to identify how new scenarios relate to previous learnings. (Bach & Suliková, 2019, pp. 295–296)

Bach and Suliková (2019, pp. 292–293) urge to approach competence development through the meta level of competence – *the competence of using competence* – in order to understand where competence development often faces obstacles. Meta-competences deal with factors that determine how successful the individual is in acquiring and applying competence. Three partially overlapping themes are introduced by Bach and Suliková (2019, pp. 293–298) as elements of meta-competence: *action* competence, *transfer* competence, and *volition*.

> As we concluded previously, competence is knowledge that the individual is able to apply and act upon. *Action competence* has been achieved when all four competence categories from *Figure 4* are efficiently utilized to create considered solutions, and when the process of utilizing competence is magnified into several sequences of action. In other words, action competence is the ability to form a plan of action and follow it through.
>
> *Transfer* competence deals with the ability to parallel knowledge between situations, i.e., utilizing and adapting existing competence for new scenarios. The potential of transfer competence can be identified by pairing together Kokosowski's (2012, p. 26) suggestion that modern professionals are *"acting competently"* above *"having competences"*, with Bach and Suliková's (2019, p. 290) proposal that competences are higher-order abilities to achieve a creative and self-organized approach to professional problem solving. Transfer competence is at the core of these suggestions, in allowing the individual to act without having specific prior experience.
>
> Finally, *volition* as a meta-competence focuses on an individual's internal processes behind implementing goals. It encompasses the capacity to regulate emotion and motivation, and the ability to actualize one's will. Bach and Suliková (2019, p. 297) characterize volition with the suggestion that it is *"the link between personal will and the real world"*.

Roughly speaking, transfer competence is the foundation for action competence, while volition is the driver behind action overall. However, all three meta-competences are partially integrated and should not be reduced to a systematic sequence in the process of creating action. Bach and Suliková (2019, p. 293) suggest meta-competences as a possible fifth category to *Figure 4*. The authors state that meta-competences would necessitate a category of their own, since their effect on actions is indirect, whereas the four other categories of *"classic"* competence have a direct impact.

As a strategy for formal competence development, Bach and Suliková (2019, p. 301) propose to adopt a cyclic process where both self-assessment, peer experiences and competence evaluation is recurring. With the main objective to activate transfer competence, the proposed solution is to organize competence development training with a focus on discussions, by facilitating small learning teams for participants who are professionally active, hence being able to assess and reflect on their own actions in the moment. The recurring group sessions would focus on individuals, placing peer experiences in the center, and have a facilitator or trainer in an assisting role. It is worth emphasizing that while the individual is central in this training system, both the trainer and social interaction are highly present throughout the scheme. (Bach & Suliková, 2019, pp. 300–303)

The suggested approach aims not only to solve the issue of inert knowledge and promote action competence through transfer, but the cyclic approach may also succeed with mobilizing meta-competences in the long run. This would lead to competence development becoming a self-maintained and integrated part of the individual's professional life (Bach & Suliková, 2019, p. 303).

In Piot's (2012, p. 55) definition of competence (see section *External elements and social dimensions of competence)*, it is suggested that competence is not exclusively maintained in individuals, but instead it can also be something a group may possess. Therefore, also *collective competences* could provide an additional level to *Figure 4*. Their sphere is organizational methods and collaboration, with the proposition that cooperation between employees accumulates available knowledge, leading to competent organizations. Whereas an individual may have competences – *"possible actions of organisational members"* – an organization has capabilities – *"possible actions of organisations"* (Nooteboom, 2009, as cited in Dzhengiz and Niesten, 2019, p. 885).

Although *collaboration skills* are well fitted both within methodological and social competences, *collective competences* cannot not be directly placed under either category. This is because collective competence switches the focus from the individual to the organization:

genuine cooperation is created through the voluntary interplay of all actors, not just the efforts of an individual (Piot, 2012, p. 55; Cohen-Scali, 2012b, p. 86). Collective competence is thereby an organization specific resource, and not a distinct part of the individual's competence. Built up by shared methods and objectives, collective competence is dynamically evolving with the individuals of the organization.

It is not within the scope of this research to review comprehensively whether other researchers have chosen to incorporate meta-competences in competence frameworks as suggested by Bach and Suliková. However, as an example, Dzhengiz and Niesten (2019, p. 883) have placed what could be classified as meta-competences – *"Competences for learning and development; handling complex information"* and *"Competence in self-motivation and motivating others"* – within the procedural and social categories in their examination of managers' competences for environmental sustainability. They emphasize collective competences as a positive contributor to sustainability development in organizations, but the competences suggested in their version of *Figure 4* all depart from the level of an individual, as internal abilities. Dzhengiz and Niesten (2019) denote collective competences as *organizational capabilities*, and the meta-competence process of assimilating new knowledge as *absorptive capacity*.

So far we have found that: a) competence denotes a set of distinct skills for a specific task – *classic competence*; b) individuals can become competent in maintaining and developing their competence – *meta-competence*; and c) the comprehension of competence can be expanded to encompass the collaboration and attitudes that exist on an organizational level – *collective competence*. To metaphorically illustrate the relationship between action and different levels of competence, *Figure 5* separates between classic competences, meta-competences, and collective competences.

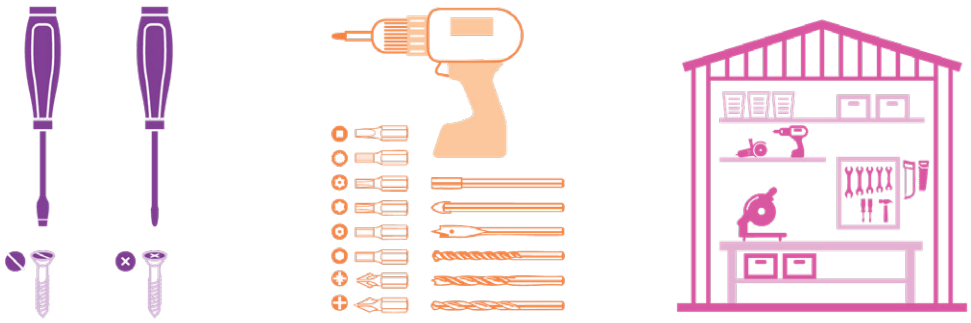

Figure 5: The difference of activating classic competence, meta-competence, and collective competence

With this theoretical framework of competence, we can conclude that any efforts to increase or develop competence need to focus on promoting practical action in order for learnings to be useful for the individual. When meta-competences are activated, the individual's continued competence development becomes more self-sufficient, and vice versa for organizations that succeed with fostering collective competences: these two categories support us in *"acting competently"* as compared to *"having competence"*. From *Figure 5* we can see that when examining the theme of competence development, it is of essence to not only see the individual, but to also inspect their collegial and organizational settings.

2.2 Sustainability management and its organizational tensions

Sustainability is a contemporary concern with flourishing discourse. Sustainability science, with its roots in several disciplines, is distinguishing itself as a use-inspired basic science: a theme of research motivated by the need for knowledge, with the aim to develop information that supports comprehension of the subject (Fang et al., 2018, pp. 11–13). Although corporate sustainability has gained remarkable momentum over the last ten years, the identity, theories, and models of sustainability science are still in formation.

In order for sustainability to be embedded successfully throughout business operations, traditional goals – *where the organization's profit is striven for through competition* – need to be questioned and reconfigured. As sustainable practices are introduced in operations, the *"easiest"*, *"quickest"* and *"most affordable"* are traded off for sustainable values: ethical governance, environmental preservation, and fair economy through responsible production and use of resources.

Therefore, when we position sustainability in the corporate context and examine its relationship to other functions in an organization, it can be seen as competing for existing resources and disrupting present practices. We also find that a prominent feature of corporate sustainability is that it contains a conflict of logics. From the sustainability manager's perspective, there are not only organizational and professional conflicts, but the SM may also face hindrances related to the management approach and hierarchy in place at an organization: a traditional management approach may contribute to disturbances by providing outer priorities and motives which influence sustainability managers' ability to act.

For sustainability to be genuinely realized, its values should not be seen as means for small improvements, while conducting business *"as usual"*. However, challenging the status quo is a momentous task with several hindrances in corporate settings.

As will be argued here, the equivocality, ambiguity, and presence of conflicting logics interferes with and disrupts sustainability management, but is inevitable in the current organizational setting of sustainability.

2.2.1 Ambiguities in the comprehension of sustainability

The prevailing comprehension of corporate sustainability is a three-factor approach: if we are to satisfy the needs of humanity today without compromising future life, we need to readjust business motives and modes of production so that the economy has a positive impact on equity in society, while improving the ecological state globally. This presents us with popular sustainability approaches and concepts, such as:

a) ESG – Environmental, Social, and Governance performance, as a way to evaluate investment risk

b) 3 E's – Ecology, Equity, Economy

c) 3 C's – Conservation, Community, Circular economy

d) 3 P's – Planet, People, Profit – or the triple bottom line (TBL) proposed by Elkington (1997, as cited in Purvis et al., 2018)

Purvis et al. (2018, p. 682) trace the idea of trifold sustainability to 1987, when it was introduced in the Brundtland Report. The concept makes its early reappearances in 1992 through Agenda 21, and in the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. Still building on the trifold concept, *but as a more nuanced approach*, the UN manifested the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The SDGs are founded on five pillars – *people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships* – with the aim to achieve a sustainability vision presented in the 2030 Agenda. (Purvis et al., 2018, p. 682; United Nations, 2015) Three-factor models (see *Figure 6*) as well as the 17 SDGs are commonly used to structure sustainability communication and sustainability assessments.

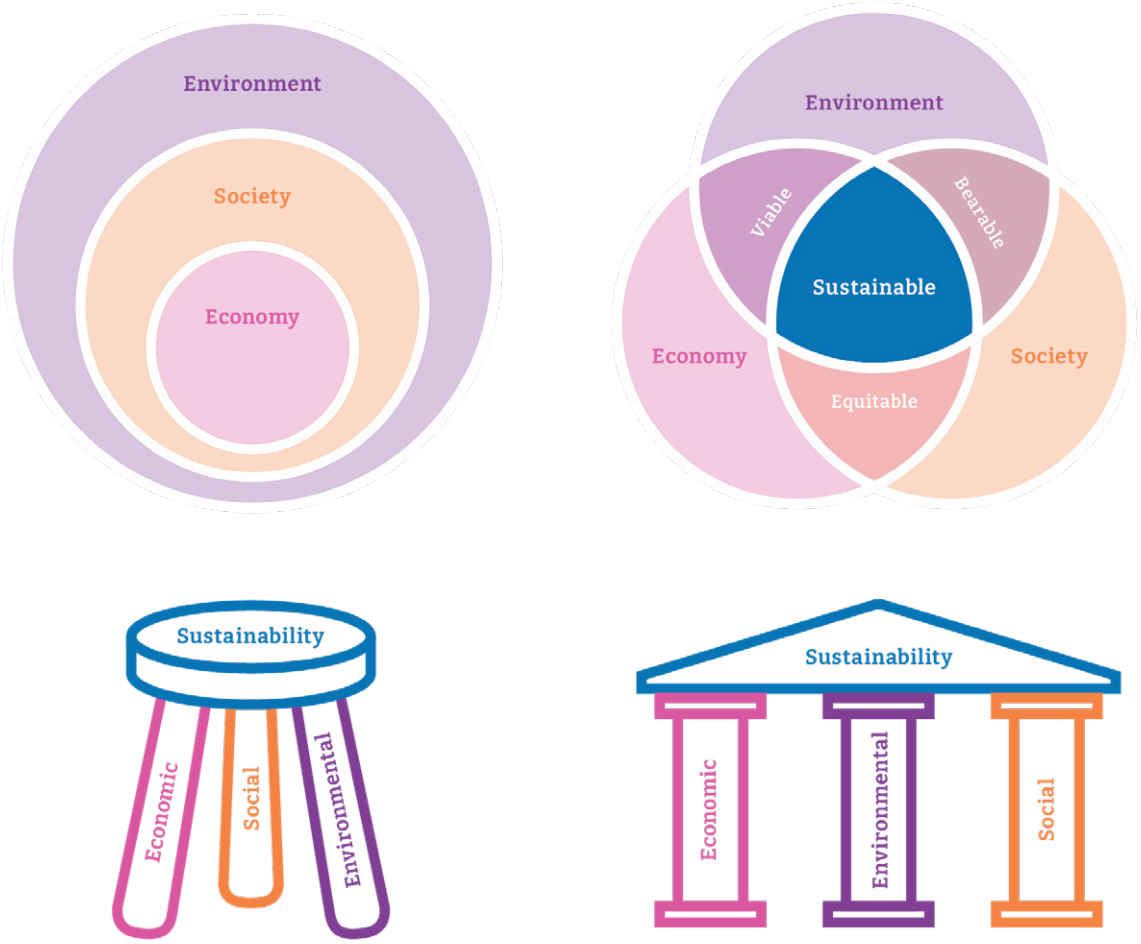

Figure 6: Common sustainability models – three nested dependencies, three overlapping circles, three legged stool, three pillars of sustainability

As we can see in *Figure 6*, where emphasis is placed varies in both definitions and illustrative models of sustainability. We can consider, e.g., the semiotic differences between *equity*, *community*, and *people* which are presented as corresponding categories between different models. The third term, *people*, simply offers an object, whereas the two first can be understood as implied ideal states. Similarly, the relationship and importance between themes change remarkably depending on presentation: the nested dependencies model offers prioritization and clear emphasis, whereas the overlapping circles represent co-dependent relationships between the themes and their sum. The visual representations can also offer different interpretations based on illustrated metaphors: if a pillar is removed from *Figure 6*, the structure might become less sturdy, or it might collapse, but a three legged stool would not be able to stand without one of its legs.

Contrary to common perception, the popularization of a three-factor sustainability model lacks a clear genesis, which explains the coexistence of several interpretations, visualizations and conceptions of sustainability.

Purvis et al. (2018) offer a comprehensive review of how sustainability discourse has emerged and developed, as they examine its (lack of) theoretical origins. In their examination they pinpoint the emergence of sustainability values in the Western economic system to the 1960s, when widespread protests on social issues and environmental concerns caused significant pressure for change in governing bodies and businesses. The authors explain the timing by referring to theories of Dunlap and Mertig (1991, as cited in Purvis et.al., 2018), and Martínez-Alier (1995, as cited in Purvis et.al., 2018): public pressure for environmental concerns rose only after basic economic needs had been fulfilled in the period after WWII. (Purvis et.al., 2018, p. 683)

Gonçalves and Machado (2023, p. 2) build on Purvis et.al. (2018) in arguing that sustainability does not originate from scientific or philosophical concepts, but rather is a policy construct: sustainability has emerged as an organizational reaction to public action, and is both maintained and developed in that locus. Although its origins may be vague, according to Fang et al. (2018) contemporary sustainability science can be seen to have a unique academic niche. Based on their systematic review of definitions, the researchers suggest that sustainability science has three established features: 1) it is a use-inspired basic science; 2) it aspires to understand human–environment interactions while linking knowledge to action; and 3) it utilizes inter- and transdisciplinary approaches (Fang et al., 2018, p. 11).

The different three factored models have been popularized thanks to their perceived communicative effectiveness, without much consideration as to how well they cater to a nuanced understanding of sustainability. Purvis et.al. (2018, p. 689) identify a general critique academics have for corporate sustainability and *"sustainability accounting"* as superficial quick-fixes: the three-factor models have commonly been reduced to act as a reporting framework, which allows businesses to communicate sustainability without obligating a thorough evaluation of the ideal states organizations should advance, and how to support that aim in operations.

A point of origin for the critique of superficial improvements is critical management studies. Jermier and Forbes (2003, pp. 164–169) examine the political content and conceptual adequacy of organizational approaches to sustainability through critical theory, which assumes a fundamentally sceptical position towards the claim that organizations can be sustainable.

The authors identify four predominant organizational greening initiatives, which they argue to be more or less dysfunctional:

> Firstly, *regulatory greening* and associated policy-making brings about political issues – *whose interests are represented in regulatory organs?* – along with concerns around compliance, and the difficulty of apt supervision. Furthermore, the requirements of regulations may have miniscule impact. What goes to follow is a false belief that sustainability is addressed adequately once regulatory requirements are met.
>
> The second option of *ceremonial greening*, also known as greenwashing, is a superficial solution serving only the public image of organization, as it implements minuscule efforts with limited, if any, impact. The construction of a *"green ceremonial façade"* means that the organization utilizes communication to convey an image of being committed to sustainability, meanwhile the environmental performance is not critically evaluated.
>
> In *competitive greening* the issue is a lack of true intention and genuineness. Here, sustainability is introduced through managerial and technical approaches, by applying standardized management systems and cost comparisons with projected returns on investment. The commitment to improving sustainability is volatile in such cases, since it is based on profit, and may well be abandoned when another mission seems more beneficial for capitalist motives. The organization is ultimately striving for dominating market share instead of collaborating for widespread sustainability.
>
> Finally, *holistic greening* is problematic because of the soft totalitarianism it can induce. The concept has been introduced in response to attempts to institutionalize environmentalism, following the systematic approaches organizations may apply to develop their employees according to the goal of achieving cohesion around certain values, emotions, motives and skills. Implications to holistic greening are that blind loyalty to the organization can counteract fertile criticality, and that conflicts between work and personal life may emerge. Ultimately, this may harm the longevity of the organization itself.
>
> *(Jermier & Forbes, 2003, p. 164–169)*

Although the chapter was published two decades prior to this research, much of the analysis by Jermier and Forbes remains relevant when compared to issues identified by Gonçalves and Machado (2023). According to their critical review, there are three main dysfunctions in how organizations implement the SDGs: *greenwashing*, *commodification* and *cherry-picking*.

In each of the cases, sustainability departs from market logic and economic motives, as presented in *Figure 7*.

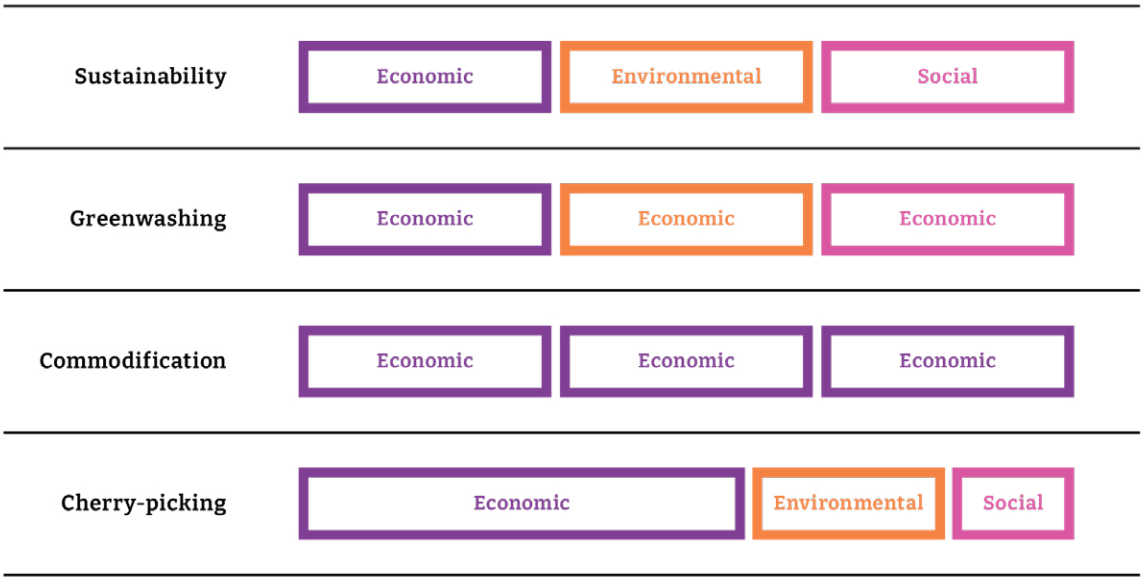

Figure 7: Representation of the three types of systemic dysfunction in corporate sustainability, adapted from Gonçalves & Machado (2023)

Whereas the original sentiment of sustainability was that business motives and the economy should be reconfigured to support equal distribution of resources, many organizations improve their sustainability performance by limiting their understanding of sustainability to processes under their direct influence. What goes to follow is minimal, if any, systemic change.

2.2.2 Conflict of logics

The multitude of sustainability models, their varying emphasis, and the issues recognized by critical management studies can be seen as a manifestation of a conflict between professional logics. Although several disciplines have distinct professional logics, Borglund et al. (2021) propose that sustainability management has not been able to disconnect itself to prioritize sustainability logic above other organizational logics.

Tomo (2019, p. 8) offers a general definition of professionals by stating: *"professionals are conventionally recognized as workers who apply their knowledge, skills, and judgement to complete tasks in the pursuit of their own, their customers, and, in some cases, the public's interests (e.g. accountants, lawyers, and doctors)".*

Where professional logic comes into play is by prescribing specifiable motives, values and approaches to its practitioners. Borglund et al. (2021, p. 62) explain: *"What is particular about a professional logic is not just an understanding of how to perform work, but also an idea of the purpose of the profession and what it should bring about, for example to work in the public interest."*.

Two coexisting logics are commonly present in businesses, being maintained by capitalistic and managerial motives: *market logic* and *bureaucratic logic* (Freidson, 2001, as cited by Borglund et al., 2021). While market logic is motivated by economic growth and competition, bureaucratic logic stems from managerialism, with an aim of imposing rules and standardizing structures. As a disruptive third logic, we have sustainability itself. Sustainability logic is driven by the equal distribution of resources, and is introduced in organizations by societal pressure. (Borglund et al., 2021, pp. 60–62) Since profit and predictability are in line with traditional management interests, sustainability logic causes evident conflicts, which advance from an organizational top level, down to a practical and personal level.

Ultimately, the role and tasks of SMs is vague: Borglund et al., (2021, p. 72) suggest that *"SMs are not professionals in the traditional sense of the word"*, explaining that the lack of a manifested professional logic together with multidisciplinary professionals, do not fulfill the criteria to be seen as occupational professionals. Rather, they are better described as organizational professionals. The role is often defined from within an organization – each organization may have their own agenda regarding the expertise that is expected from an SM, and their own approach to how the SM is involved in, e.g., business or product development (Borglund et al., 2021, pp. 72–73). Therefore, there is not one global identity associated with SMs, but several alternative ways to define responsibilities, function, hierarchical position, and mandate.

SMs are tasked with finding compromise as they balance sustainability and market logic, with their opposing aims. In the interview study of Borglund et al. (2021), with 21 SMs working at medium and large companies in Sweden, the participants recognize that business insight is necessary for sustainability management, in order to find cooperation between the motives. Simultaneously, the interviewees emphasize that sustainability cannot be introduced as an isolated function maintained by a solitary actor: management, in its turn, needs to comprehend sustainability logic and provide operational space for the ensuing compromises (Borglund et al., 2021, pp. 67, 71–72).

Efforts to bridge discrepancies between the logics have been made by e.g. explaining how sustainable products can provide competitive advantage or how improved working conditions and employee satisfaction increase productivity (Borglund et al., 2021, p. 62). However, considering the critical approach that challenges deceptive and disingenuous organizational greening, we find that instrumentalizing what should be secondary logics might well be counterproductive for the SM's sensemaking and ability to act. The prevailing way to motivate sustainability primarily through business value – *instead of crystallizing the motives and values of sustainability itself* – leads to ambiguities in the SM's purpose.

2.2.3 Traditional management as interference

In line with the conflict of logics, there are challenges that a context with traditional management brings to sustainability management. We can understand the challenges by examining the motives of two alternative management approaches: *traditional* and *responsible* management.

Management as an activity can be simplified as the *input* and *process* utilized to achieve a desired *output*. When management is evaluated, we begin with *goals* and available *resources* as *management input*. Criteria for assessing the *management process* is its *effectiveness* and *efficiency*, and, as we finally measure the performance, the *output* is graded against the *initial goals*. (Laasch & Conaway, 2015, p. 28)

The two driving questions of management performance – *"Does management activity contribute to the goals set?"* and *"Has the contribution been reached with the minimum amount of necessary resources?"* – essentially remain the same regardless if the applied approach is traditional or responsible. However, in the traditional management approach, goals are focused on the maximization of economic growth, meaning that resources are utilized however necessary to gain the largest profit. When responsible management is applied, the goals are driven by a three-factor concept, which forces *value-based decision making* above *results orientation*.

As we can see in *Figure 8*, the three themes suggested for responsible management are *sustainability*, *responsibility*, and *ethics*. Here, the trifold *sustainability* concept is established in the principle of utilizing social, environmental, and economic capital so that it is sustained. *Responsibility* is seen as the obligation organizations have to provide optimized value for their stakeholders. *Ethics* prescribe managers to act with integrity and to make morally right decisions. (Laasch & Conaway, 2015, pp. 27–28)

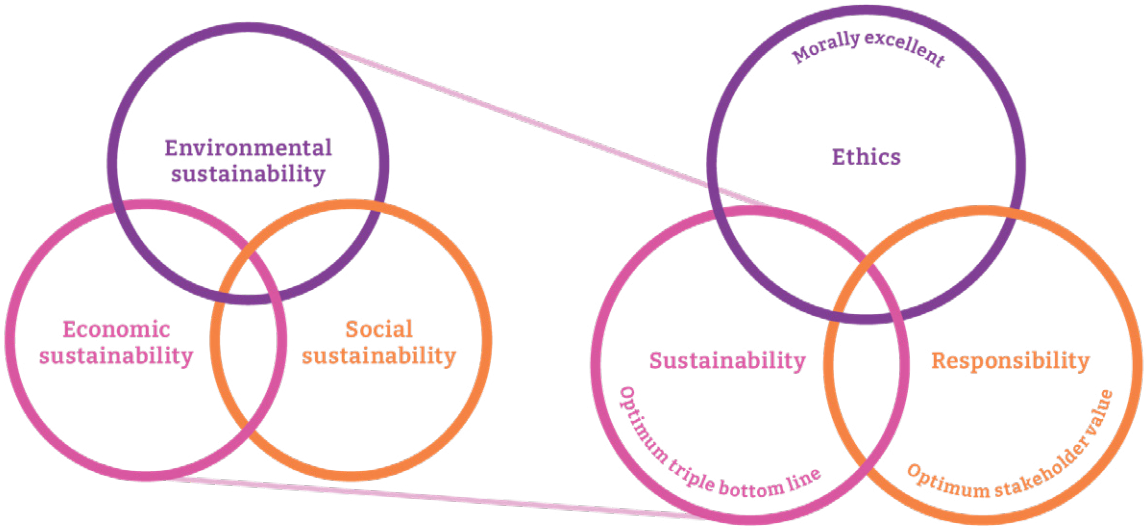

Figure 8: Sustainability in relation to the responsible management domain, adapted from Dzhengiz & Niesten (2019), and Laasch & Conaway (2015)

Responsibility and ethics are often embedded in corporate communication and sense-making around sustainability. Ethics makes sporadic appearances as a fourth sphere of sustainability, or is indirectly communicated through values of social and environmental sustainability. Stakeholders are similarly commonly observed in both economic and social themes of sustainability communication. Therefore, it might seem like the two spheres are already covered in the common conception of sustainability. However, since responsible management is not a sustainability model, but a management approach, the introduction of ethics and responsibility is a necessary source of guidance. Differentiating ethics and responsibility as complementary spheres to sustainability in responsible management is necessary for clarifying their weight for responsible management (Laasch & Conaway, 2015, p. 26). If we only deal with sustainability, we risk getting caught in a weigh-off situation between the elements of the triple bottom line, rather than considering the true ethical implications of business operations. It is noteworthy that Laasch and Conaway (2015, pp. 27, 31) urge to *optimize* both the triple bottom line and stakeholder value, but in the matter of ethics, the goal is *moral excellence*.

Responsible management discards profit and economic growth as the *principal* goal, and instead strives for results after thoroughly considering its three areas. Where traditional management is present, the organization may cater to value conflicts and limit the space for sustainability logic to be established. Laasch and Conaway (2015, p. 29) conclude that when management succeeds with expanding its approach to cover also responsibility and ethics in addition to sustainability, the pay-off is society-wide: *"the organization takes its place as an integral contributor to a healthy world community, creating wealth for all stakeholders"*.

2.3.4 Sustainability as a social process

As we have found, there is equivocality about the role SMs are to assume. In part, this depends on external factors – *how the organization has defined the role* – and in part on factors that are internal to the SM – *what their contextual knowledge and professional identity entails*. In an attempt to unravel the professional positioning of SMs, Borglund et al. (2021, p. 67) list a number of coexisting definitions, as proposed by SMs themselves: *"a business person, an innovator, a coach, an interpreter, the voice of the customers, a node for various stakeholders—and of course someone who works with sustainability"*. A prominent characteristic in these rich descriptions of an SM's function, is the role's dense social dimensions and its demands on interaction competences.

Some desirable social competences for sustainability management can be seen in Dzhengiz and Niesten's (2019, p. 883) propositions for environmental competences, presented in *Figure 9*.

Competence group	Environmental competences
Domain competences *to know*	Knowledge of environmental sustainability Responsibility (for the environment) Cosmopolitan perspective and cross-cultural understanding
Procedural competences *to do*	Systems- or holistic thinking Trans- or interdisciplinary work and integrative work Competences for learning and development; handling complex information
Social competences *to interact*	Stakeholder networking competences and collaboration competences Communication skills Competence to bring change Strategic thinking Critical thinking Entrepreneurial thinking Interactive problem solving Emotional intelligence Conflict management Competence in self-motivation and motivating others
Self-competences *to be*	New attitudes towards nature or personal concern for environmental issues Future orientation

Figure 9: Environmental competences, Dzhengiz & Niesten (2019)

Dzhengiz and Niesten's framework is an adaptation of competences for responsible management, as presented by Laasch and Conaway (2015, p. 37), which is supplemented with findings from their systematic literature review of 154 articles related to environmental competences and capabilities. Although this framework is aimed towards the environmental sphere of sustainability, its suggestions are general enough to seem applicable also for a broader conception of sustainability.

Dzhengiz and Niesten's suggestions include several competences that revolve around collaboration, collegial involvement, and strategization. They pinpoint the necessity for socially emphasized procedural competences and interaction competences to the complexity of corporate sustainability, recognizing the potential of *"trans- or interdisciplinary and inter-organisational collaboration to develop creative and system-wide solutions for environmental problems."* (Dzhengiz & Niesten, 2019, p. 888).

In their interview study, Miller and Fyke (2020) examine the sensemaking and attitudes of communication professionals towards corporate social responsibility (CSR) by involving several communication professionals from a large financial services company. From their results, the researchers recognize employee engagement and collective sensemaking as means to establish an organization's motivation and reasoning behind CSR activities. They argue that a shared understanding amongst employees of the *why* is necessary for making themes such as CSR operational and not only additive (Miller & Fyke, 2020, pp. 186, 197, 199, 200).

As presented in the section *External elements and social dimensions of competence,* hierarchy may interfere with the SMs' ability to act directly and indirectly: hierarchy impacts the expression of both individuals' competence and organizational capabilities. Laasch and Conaway (2015, p. 36) consider there to be three relevant hierarchical levels in organizational management: *top managers*, *middle managers* and *frontline managers*. As we can see in *Figure 10*, Laasch and Conaway prescribe all management levels distinct mandates and objectives within the four tasks of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling.

	Top managers	Middle managers	Frontline managers
Plan	Strategically plan a business's transition to becoming a responsible business. **HIGH PRIORITY**	Plan tactical moves to translate the overall responsible business strategy into concrete objectives and actions. **MEDIUM PRIORITY**	Plan how to use the resources available and involve non-management employees in achieving the responsible business objectives provided by middle management. **LOW PRIORITY**
Organize	Create organizational institutions and responsibilities, and facilitate change processes to become a responsible business. **MEDIUM PRIORITY**	Re-organize frontline management in a way that empowers them to manage responsibly. **HIGH PRIORITY**	Adjust employees' assignments to the necessities of responsible business. **MEDIUM PRIORITY**
Lead	Provide the right tone from the top, giving priority to responsible business change. **MEDIUM PRIORITY**	Lead line managers in the implementation of objectives for responsible business. **HIGH PRIORITY**	Lead employees in the day-today implementation of responsible business activities. **HIGH PRIORITY**
Control	Monitor the responsible business performance of the organization's main areas and decide on corrections in the overall strategy. **LOW PRIORITY**	Observe the responsible business performance of frontline managers and decide about tactical moves to improve their performance. **MEDIUM PRIORITY**	Constantly supervise employees' actions and the responsible business output in order to optimize group performance. **HIGH PRIORITY**

Figure 10: Hierarchical management levels and typical responsible management task descriptions, adapted from Laasch & Conaway (2015)

Laasch and Conaway (2015, p. 32) point to an incompatibility between bureaucratic logic and the desired collaboration of sustainability development. The authors explain issues related to hierarchy by stating: *"The rigid structures envisaged by bureaucratic management conflict with the stakeholder view of the firm, where flexibility, multiple perspectives, and a spider-web of relations, responsibilities, and communication channels are imperative."*. Similarly, Borglund et al. (2021) identify a clash of logics between sustainability and bureaucracy, and emphasize that there are both direct and indirect consequences connected to the assigned position of SMs in the organizational structure.

Borglund et al. (2021, pp. 67–68) conclude that the functional SM should preferably be placed close to top management, while the organizational structure needs to allow collaboration with frontline management. From their interviews, they also recognize the importance of assigning certain priority and hierarchical value to the role as part of building a mandate for the SM:

"Being close to top management (or part of it) generates a better position to deal with sustainability and to affect it.". Hierarchy itself is thereby not the problem – issues arise when hierarchy is ambiguous by not assigning responsibility and mandate, or when it limits collaboration and involvement.

In line with Laasch and Conaway's thought of flexible management *"networks"* within an organization, the main point of Jermier and Forbes (2003, pp. 169–171) is that change should not be controlled and orchestrated at the top management level, but rather dispersed across the organization. I.e., instead of aiming to control and homogenize organizational culture towards an envisioned goal, change management should respect complexity in subcultures. Here, the authors approach culture as a fundamental condition in change processes, since each group within an organization needs to accept the change for it to become established. The suggestion of Jermier and Forbes combines an emancipatory approach to management with a comprehension of the complexity of culture: *"Meaningful organizational change is possible but it is not likely to result entirely from a sweeping mandate from top management. It emerges through a gradual, nonlinear process involving individual and collective (subcultural) actors operating in asymmetrical structures of power."*. Successfully embedding sustainability in operations requires an appreciation of cultural diversity within organizations, and allowing groups to maintain their autonomy, while encouraging collaboration and conversations across borders.

The proposition by Laasch and Conaway (2015, p. 16) that *"internal competencies are as important as the external conditions of a responsible manager"* does not only imply that different contexts will offer distinct challenges for the individual – if we approach the suggestion from an organizational level, it also highlights that change processes cannot be expected to advance without collective efforts. Unless an organization's top management is thoroughly involved with and committed to sustainability development, the middle or frontline sustainability manager is placed in a position of remarkable responsibility and leadership expectations. Depending on the hierarchical position of the SM, this might be in conflict with their mandate and the (un)defined role of the SM. Simultaneously, holistic control mechanisms and excessive direction from top management undermines sustainability of the organization itself, *i.e.,* practices do not become established and self-maintained in the long term.

3 Methods

The aim of this thesis is to explore subjective experiences within a corporate organization structure in order to analyze the suitability of pairing MarCom professionals with sustainability management, and to increase understanding of how competence development can be supported for sustainability management.

The research departs from an emergent case study strategy, and data collection is primarily dependent on qualitative interviews. The case selection was opportunistic: as an employee of a subsidiary, the researcher's relationship with the case organization facilitated both the formation of a research proposal and initiating contact with the organization.

The objective of the interviews was to map out practical challenges and solutions at the subsidiaries with a focus on the SM's experiences, in order to collect insights that contribute towards answering the research questions.

The case study methodology is based on Lee and Saunders's (2017) suggestions for case studies, with an approach guided by Flyvbjerg's (2006) philosophy on the knowledge potential of case-studies. *Doing Interviews* by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) guided the preparations and practical arrangements around the interviews.

Although the proximity of the subject to the researcher might offer an opportunity to adopt the traveler conception of qualitative inquiries, the epistemological approach of the study has more features of the miner approach. It is more inclined towards the phenomenological approach as compared to the discursive one, however, some discursive elements have been present in conducting the analysis. Aspects that have influenced the methodological decisions of this study are introduced in the following sections.

Overall, the research has adopted the seven stages to an interview inquiry as proposed by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, pp. 40–56): thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting. Details about each stage are presented in the *Process description* section.

Research ethics have been approached through the considerations that Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) suggest. The themes that are addressed in the *Research ethic*s section are: *informed consent, confidentiality, researcher integrity,* and *consequences*.

3.1 Case study approach

Case studies attempt to provide rich descriptions of a specific institution or phenomenon in order to surface knowledge through the analysis. An advantage of case studies is that a context-bound explanation can aid in answering research questions efficiently, while the knowledge might be applicable also in other instances. Depending on ontological and epistemological positions, one can regard the case and, *by extension*, also concepts based on them as fully situational or somewhat generally applicable. (Lee & Saunders, 2017, pp. 1–10) Ultimately, the onset for a case study should not be to prove a proposition, but instead to enrich our understanding of reality. (Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp. 223–224, 236–239)

Despite *particular* and *situational* being evident adjectives for case studies, the method can nonetheless be an efficient contributor to theoretical and professional knowledge. In regards to the knowledge contribution of case studies, Flyvbjerg (2006, pp. 221–224) argues for making *experience* and *context-dependency* central to learning processes: *"human behavior cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule-governed acts found at the lowest levels of the learning process and in much theory"*. Thereby Flyvbjerg argues for the necessity of context-dependent knowledge in building expertise. He claims that without practical and nuanced descriptions of reality, learning processes will stagnate at a beginner's level.

This research utilizes an emergent case study strategy, with an opportunistic case selection method. Not only is the emergent approach especially well suited for research that departs from emic – *internal* – knowledge, but it also prescribes an explorative attitude towards the research as an iterative process. This allows initial research propositions to be provoked by personal observations and experiences, while also inviting revisions and fluid movement between the phases of the research. Lee and Saunders (2017, p. 80) note: *"Unlike orthodox case studies, emergent case studies rarely begin with clearly defined research questions; rather these emerge from the case – helping to define the boundaries of the case – and evolve as the study progresses."* and further propose that flexibility in the process overall can aid in making organizational research more feasible in practice.

3.2 Qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews offer us the opportunity to explore subjective experiences in depth, providing knowledge of the studied phenomena through the lenses of an individual. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, p. 51) propose that *"interviews are particularly well suited for studying people's understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world"*.

In *Doing Interviews,* two approaches to the knowledge creation potential of interviews are introduced: the *miner approach* and the *traveler conception*. The difference between these two is that the first views knowledge as extant prior to the interview – *as if it is waiting to be discovered* – while the second views knowledge as a social process, something that is constructed in the encounter. The two concepts can partially, but not fully, be compared with the *phenomenological* and the *discursive* epistemological approaches to interviews. The phenomenological – *experience oriented* – approach sees interviews as a research instrument for gathering reports on experiences, whereas the discursive view is concerned with how the personal accounts are expressed and how the interaction can be analyzed. (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp. 19–22)

Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) urge interview researchers to find a balance between epistemological perspectives, endorsing a view that none of them can solitarily cater to the complexity of human nature and real life. In line with this suggestion, elements of all four approaches have been considered in the philosophy and design of this research. In order to avoid issues of compromised researcher integrity and bias, the epistemological approach was guided towards consciously maintaining a *"safety distance"* in the dialogue between interviewee and interviewer, and respecting the slightly stricter privacy boundaries that professional settings tend to introduce.

3.3 Process description

The decision to utilize an emergent case study research strategy and qualitative interviews as the main method follows a pragmatic approach to the thesis work. The intent was to choose a subject in line with personal areas of interest, while the selected methods offered an opportunity to conduct the research in ways that felt both pleasant, inspiring and challenging.

Foundations for the research were created by thematizing and constructing a research proposal based on tacit knowledge and personal observations. It is worth noting that the research has not been conducted as a commissioned project, but initializing the case study was largely assisted by the researcher's connection to the case organization. As one of the first steps in the research process, the Head of Sustainability at [Industrial Group] was contacted for a dialogue around the research theme and how to approach potential interviewees within the organization.

The specification for suitable interviewees was that they should be communication and marketing professionals who have taken on the additional responsibility of sustainability management during their employment at any of [Industrial Group]'s subsidiaries.

Potential interviewees were identified with the help of BA Heads of Sustainability and the researcher's personal network. Interview candidates were contacted and given a brief introduction to the research, and all candidates who stated an initial interest to participate were invited to a preparational discussion, which is presented in *Research ethics*.

All the interviews were conducted online with Microsoft Teams. Both a video recording and a real-time transcription could be attained, which were utilized for compiling interview insights. Since the platform was not able to generate a fully legible transcript, the transcriptions were reviewed and corrected before being summarized with main statements for each question.

After summarizing and compiling insights from the interviews, the interviewees were contacted to review the interpretations of their statements. Some of them also received follow-up questions with the request to clarify statements or relevant details.

The main statements were compared and combined to create the body of the *Analysis* section. The analysis of the research combines inductive and abductive processes: the analysis examines similarities of the available subjects' statements, and makes interpretations based on the rather limited set of data in order to arrive at conclusions. Once the *Analysis* was complete, the SM interviewees were contacted again for a second review of findings and quotes.

The *Interpretation of findings* and *Discussion* sections were compiled by combining empirical results with the theoretical framework. The content of these sections should be approached literally as the researcher's interpretation of findings, not as the interviewees' direct and personal statements.

3.3.1 Choice of theoretical material

For the theoretical framework, library services of Arcada University of Applied Sciences were consulted for guidance to conduct the literature search.

The primary databases include SAGE Journals, Emerald Journals, and Perlego. The main search terms were: *sustainability management, communication professionals, competence development, informal learning, lifelong learning, organizational change,* and *change management*.

While the themes individually offered plenty of sources, very few results were found with combinations of search terms, such as *"sustainability management"* AND *"informal learning"* OR *"competence development"*.

A few of the utilized sources were found by allowing themes to stretch over to related topics, such as Miller and Fyke's (2020) research *Communication Professionals' Sensemaking of CSR: A Case Study of a Financial Services Firm*.

3.3.2 Interview preparations

The interviews were planned with a semi-structured question approach, and interviewees were provided a question outline beforehand. Overall, the attempt was to construct questions with the capacity to evoke rich answers and to make the interview insightful for the interviewee as well. However, a decision to not utilize the interviews as interactive problem-solving opportunities was consciously made in advance to the interviews.

Designing the interview questions departed from thematizing the research, while considering the distinctive knowledge potential of a qualitative interview as compared to a survey. The interview questions were drafted to reflect a guiding principle presented by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, pp. 40–57): well-constructed interview questions should contribute thematically to the knowledge that the research intends to produce, while simultaneously supporting the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee.

After a review of drafted interview questions by the thesis supervisor, a pilot interview was conducted. Pilot interviewing is encouraged by both Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), and Lee and Sauders (2017) as a preparational procedure: potential issues with content, cognition and usability can be addressed if questions are tested prior to the principal data collection.

The pilot interviewee has had a BA HoS role in [Industrial Group]'s sustainability network and could therefore provide a slightly different organizational perspective in comparison to the primary interviewees. Through the practical trial, a few improvements to the interview design were identified:

a) The interviewee suggested reviewing questions so that more of them would have *"how"* and *"what"* formats, rather than to be worded with *"is"* and *"have"*. Reformulating questions to be more open-ended could encourage personal reflection. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, p. 66) illustrate the impact of interview question wording through an analogy: question design and the procedure of diagnosing a patient should follow the same logic – a research interviewer's objective is to attain *descriptions* instead of *explanations*, in the same manner a medical professional would. A physician asks their patient *"how"* and *"what"* above *"why"*. Forming a diagnosis and answering the *why*, is mainly the assignment of the physician – *or the researcher* – and is preferably done in the analysis stage.

b) The concept of competence was perceived differently between the interviewee and the interviewer. While the interviewer had a *"skills and traits"* oriented approach to competence, the interviewee emphasized knowledge development and expertise. This resulted in two alterations to the interview protocol: firstly, definitions to the key concepts were added, and secondly, the questions on competence were expanded with examples from the competence groups presented in *Figure 4*.

c) A theme that emerged as an interesting tangent to the research theme was the professional identity of sustainability managers. The pilot interviewee implied that they have found it challenging to participate in sustainability discourses in situations where they consider their own knowledge inadequate. The interest for this topic was amplified by a personal observation that the term *manager* seems to be sidestepped by some and embraced by others within the case organization's sustainability network. Therefore, the question *"How do you feel about the term 'sustainability management' in relation to your professional identity?"* was added to the interview guideline.

d) The combination of probing, attentive listening and notes are necessary to maintain an idea of which testimonies are complete and which could be developed. Verifying the content of statements, asking for clarifications and keeping track of spontaneous insights also support the analysis of interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp. 67–72). A practical take-away from the pilot interview was to continuously make notes on the ideas and concepts that seem interesting to tap into, rather than writing down the response itself. Without notes, it became challenging to form follow-up questions, and when the follow-up questions were posed too loosely, the interviewee struggled with answering them.

3.4 Research ethics

While aiming for ethicality, the goal is to conduct research in an honest and fair manner, without causing harm for the subjects, and to avoid reporting with a bias. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, pp. 28–37) present four themes to consider when addressing research ethics in qualitative interview inquiries. These themes are: *informed consent, confidentiality, researcher integrity,* and *consequences*. All of the themes can be viewed from a *micro-ethics* perspective, that is to say, personal and small-scale issues. Some of them can further be considered as *macro-ethics:* broader social effects of producing knowledge with interviews.

The research process has included thorough consideration of especially informed consent, confidentiality, and consequences. The beneficial consequences of this study are anticipated to be found both in micro- and macro-ethics. Given that this research is a case study of a business organization, all ethical themes also need to be complemented with possible implications from a professional perspective.

As the aim is to transform tacit knowledge to propositional knowledge, the case collects and organizes several perspectives. With the focus on subjective experiences, this case study might be successful in building empathy and proposing aspects to socially and culturally sustainable leadership in change processes. By making knowledge accessible the study has the potential to improve collaboration between companies in different stages of their sustainability journey.

The corporate context creates its distinct pressures on the research. Corporations generally aim to safeguard information that might affect their competitive advantage or the perceived desirability as an employer. Also the willingness to share experiences from one's professional life can depend much on the foreseen consequences of doing so. Hence, it might be difficult both to initiate collaboration and to unveil controversies that contribute to a critical perspective in the research. While it seems unlikely that businesses in the Nordic countries would choose aggressive disciplinary measures if procedures and arrangements are sensibly criticized, case studies may surface issues that lead to discomfort for the professional relationships of the participants. E.g. colleagues might feel that they are critiqued, or the interviewee's account might affect their reputation in networks.

Although this study was assessed to have limited negative consequences for individual participants and not necessarily require anonymity, it was evaluated that anonymity is likely to have positive effects on the quality of the interviews, whereas disclosing the participants' identity would not benefit the research per se. By providing anonymity for the subjects they are likely to express personal experiences more confidently, instead of restraining themselves to speak as a representative of the company and providing a general account. Therefore, opting for anonymity can have a decisive role in obtaining valuable data towards answering the research questions. The practical arrangements to ensure anonymity for the interviewees can be reviewed in the *Participant information leaflet,* attached as *Appendix 2*.

The research participants' informed consent was ensured by arranging a preparational discussion separately before the interview. Before the preparational discussion, the participants received both an information leaflet (see *Appendix 1*) and the interview outlines (see *Appendix 2* and *3*).

The information leaflet included a short presentation of the research theme along with details on data handling, storage of collected data, how anonymity will be maintained, and what the planned time schedule is. In addition to reviewing the content of the information leaflet and obtaining consent for interview recordings, the preparational discussion included a brief introduction to how the qualitative interviews would be conducted. In the end of the preparational discussions the interviewees' willingness to participate was confirmed.

The research questions were openly disclosed to [Industrial Group] and the research participants. Disclosing the interview outline to all participants beforehand was evaluated to not impact the research in a negative way. Both the method of exploring introspective observations and the corporate context of the case study are factors that can make interviews feel intimidating and intruding. An important part of building trust and willingness to participate was to clarify that the interviews were not meant to focus on the business itself or on evaluating sustainability performance, but on the interviewee's personal experiences and observations. It was also underlined that the research is not conducted for [Industrial Group], but as an independent research project with the approval of [Industrial Group]. The reasoning behind disclosing the background and interview outline of the research was that the conditions and expectations for the interviews need to be carefully established, so that the participants are able to make an informed decision about their collaboration while feeling reassured that the research is conducted with integrity.

We can easily identify two main ethical concerns of researcher integrity in this research. Firstly, the proximity – *or even complete lack of distance* – between the research topic and the researcher puts significant pressure on the researcher in maintaining a neutral position and compiling an unbiased report. The researcher has a direct connection to the case organization, and therefore the report is at risk of being angled towards a personal benefit instead of prioritizing knowledge creation. This risk can be mitigated partially by acknowledging it, and being mindful of it throughout the process. But more importantly, the supervision from an external perspective can be effective in identifying inconsistencies of argumentation and conclusions. Secondly, considering the researcher's personal connection with the case organization, it felt important to maintain neutrality during the interviews, and to make preparations against assuming the role of an organizational representative: the interview outline was designed so that it would not willingly probe into deep emotions or create a problem-solving situation.

4 Results

As the primary source of case specific information for the research, four interviews were conducted. *Interviewee A, B* and *C* work with sustainability management at three separate subsidiaries of [Industrial Group]. The final interviewee is the Head of Sustainability at [Industrial Group].

The presentation of results begins with *Analysis and thematized findings from the interviews,* where the three themes of the research questions – *competence, assets, and context* – are utilized for structure. The analysis also features an introductory *Background* section.

In the *Interpretation of findings* section, empirical results are combined with the theoretical framework. This section is structured by presenting five propositions as the case findings.

4.1 Analysis and thematized findings from interviews

In order to focus the analysis on *competence*, the findings on this theme will be presented last, so that *assets* and *context* provide a framework to its comprehension.

Assets are approached by advancing through two different levels, where we first explore *role specific assets*: monetary or temporal assets, and human resources provided by the employer, and then *organization specific assets*: educational or guiding materials, and human resources provided by [Industrial Group].

In *Context – External Factors,* findings are presented with a bottom to top perspective, where we begin from the external factors with the most direct influence on interviewees: their *closest manager,* and the *workforce* at their company. From there, we move on to stakeholders for the company beginning with *[Industrial Group],* through to *suppliers and customers*, and on to the *industry* as a final layer.

In the analysis on competence, the competence groups from *Figure 9* will be utilized to structure findings to include *self* competence, *social* competence, *methodological* competence, and *domain* competence. However, first we will examine the *intersection of competences* provided by the interviewees' composite role of marketing and communication management, together with sustainability management.

4.1.1 Background

As we can see in *Table 1,* all of the subsidiary interviewees (SM interviewees) are experienced marketing professionals with a senior role: due to rather small company sizes they do not have direct subordinates, but they organize and execute their tasks in an independent manner while developing their company's marketing and brand strategy.

The fourth interviewee is the Head of Sustainability (HoS) at [Industrial Group]. In their role they are offered the opportunity to coordinate the organization's sustainability strategy while working collaboratively to advance sustainability development at the subsidiaries: their role is both strategic and practical in the sense that it includes implementation and follow-up. The organizational structure of [Industrial Group]'s sustainability management can be reviewed in *Figure 1* in the Introduction.

Table 1: Interviewee set up

Interviewee	Title	Employment duration, approx.	Company size, approx.	Sustainability organization
Interviewee A	Head of Marketing	10 years	20 employees	Sustainability team (MD and Sales Rep)
Interviewee B	Head of Marketing	3 years	50 employees	Sustainability team (MD and HSEQ Manager)
Interviewee C	Head of Marketing	2 years	30 employees	Solo responsibility
HoS	Head of Sustainability	3 years	20 employees (at the HQ)	*See Figure 1 in Introduction*

Interviewee A has the longest employment for their company, allowing them to have been involved in their company's sustainability journey from the beginning. The two other interviewees have been employed to their current role within the last few years. Before *Interviewee B's* employment, sustainability management was organized by having someone responsible for reporting to [Industrial Group]. The interviewee evaluates that at that time, sustainability was not clearly communicated or made central to the company's values. *Interviewee C's* predecessor had a corresponding set of responsibilities, so there had been some sustainability development prior to the interviewee's employment. The HoS has been employed at [Industrial Group] for three years, and has extensive prior experience with sustainability consulting. Before they joined [Industrial Group], there was a platform and foundation for sustainability in place, which have been further developed in the last years.

The sustainability network had been initiated, but their estimate is that the network consisted of 35 contacts, whereas it today has closer to 170 contacts.

None of the subsidiary interviewees have an educational background with sustainability, however, they had all gotten familiar with sustainability before taking on its management within [Industrial Group]'s organization. Each of them have done this in different ways: *Interviewee A* initiated the inclusion of sustainability in external communication at their company, meanwhile *Interviewee B* suggested the introduction of an annual sustainability report at their previous employer, which they personally compiled. *Interviewee C* has previous experience in a customer centric field, where environment, safety, employee satisfaction, and local community were all significant aspects of their job as Operations Manager. As many of these themes are present in corporate sustainability, *Interviewee C* felt confident with accepting a sustainability role. The HoS has an educational background with economics, but during their studies they completed the available courses on corporate social responsibility. After finishing their studies, they began working as a sustainability consultant for a vast array of companies, which eventually led them to the current position at [Industrial Group].

Each of the subsidiaries has had a different approach to the recruitment and organization of sustainability management. At *Interviewee A*'s company, the introduction of a sustainability team began with an open call to all employees. *Interviewee B* took a proactive stance for sustainability development early on in their employment and had discussions on sustainability management with the Managing Director of their company. Their enthusiasm led to the interviewee being invited to the sustainability team once it was initiated. In both companies where there is a sustainability team, the Managing Director is included in the group. As a completely different approach, *Interviewee C* was recruited with sustainability embedded as an additional responsibility. While the organizational chart in *Figure 1* suggests that sustainability is limited to three roles within the HQs of [Industrial Group], in practice the work is highly collaborative. Naturally, the HoS works closely with the organization's Sustainability Controller, but there is also active collaboration with several other roles – *such as communications and finance* – meaning that tasks around sustainability are distributed across several functions.

The HoS confirms that echoing the decentralized leadership model, [Industrial Group] has refrained from providing explicit guidelines on how to organize sustainability tasks within the subsidiaries: it is recognized that some companies benefit from having a sustainability team, while others may have a single person responsible for sustainability management. In small and medium sized companies some of the commonly involved roles include Managing Directors, MarCom roles, HR Managers, Product Developers, and Controllers.

When asked to elaborate on their views around the terms *sustainability manager* and *sustainability management* as a tangent to professional identity, the SM interviewees present high variation between their approaches.

> Although neither *Interviewee A* nor *B* use the term *sustainability manager* directly for their role in the sustainability teams, they feel confident in using the term *sustainability management* about their work. *Interviewee A* explains that their personal involvement has been very hands-on.
>
> *Interviewee C* expresses an aversion towards *"managing"* and explains that they consider the term to carry a notion of authoritarianism and arrogance, as in controlling, imposing and regulating the workforce. Although the interviewee is not quite able to pinpoint a preference regarding *management, coordination* and *leadership,* they communicate that sustainability development should be a matter of setting an example and sharing the burden. In practice, they do not title themself sustainability manager, *instead,* they simply add *"responsibility for sustainability"* as part of their job description.
>
> In contrast to *Interviewee C's* approach, *Interviewee B* takes a clear stance for using the term *sustainability management* above *sustainability coordination*. Their reasoning is that sustainability should be so central and overarching in business operations that it assumes a descending presence. They elaborate on this notion by explaining their understanding of the term *coordination* as a reactive approach to organizing: basic standards – *such as reporting* – might be met, whereas *management* as an activity introduces direction and strategy.

4.1.2 Assets – resource allocation

In practice, sustainability management is fully organized by *Interviewee C,* although individual tasks and processes may require collaboration or delegation. Out of all SM interviewees, *Interviewee C* seems to have been most involved on a hands-on level with developing their company's data handling tools and reporting practices: they bring up that preparing for a report on Scope 3 required approximately two months worth of their full work time. *Interviewee A* and *B* have been able to delegate some tasks – *such as collecting certain data* – to other departments, consequently needing less working hours on the regular for sustainability tasks. Instead, they have been able to focus on the collaborative development process and sustainability communication as an intersection of both roles.

The periodical and secondary character of their role is something all SM interviewees mention. On one hand, the role requires temporary efforts during, e.g., reporting periods, when working hours accumulate. On the other hand, allocating time for sustainability tasks happens in compromise with their regular tasks, since the added workload is not directly accommodated by the companies. This offers some challenges as the interviewees need to balance the increased demand for performance with the high standards they have for their own work. In relation to their professional development in general, *Interviewee A* points out that *"It is my efficiency, as I learn more and more, that allows me to take on more strategic tasks. Operational things can be completed a little faster. But there is a lot of operational work that needs to be done."*. The SM interviewees often balance their primary role and sustainability management based on urgency. This means that sustainability development does not gain a continuous flow, but rather the work stagnates from time to time, and then advances with bigger leaps in between. However, *Interviewee A* stresses that planning schedules and process timelines in advance can resolve the strain of periodical workloads.

Contrary to the SMs, the HoS works continuously with sustainability themes and does not have additional responsibilities. However, their tasks also have periodical qualities. Similarly to the subsidiaries, [Industrial Group] has its own stakeholders and rating organizations to provide reports and information to. Compiling requested information constitutes a seasonal part of the HoS's work. All in all, their tasks include, e.g., participating in BA board meetings, preparing both internal and external communication on sustainability, working with external sustainability consultants, and coordinating the updating of sustainability policies and framework. In practice, their available time does not allow hands-on involvement throughout the organization, which is where the BA Heads of Sustainability come into play. In addition to [Industrial Group]'s own resources, external consultants have been involved in the change management process to support navigation and for the exchange of ideas, and to add more theoretical substance to webinars.

The interviewees do not express a definite stance when it comes to the necessity of financial assets for sustainability development at their company. Overall, it seems that sustainability development can be largely organized through company internal processes, and that there has not been a distinct need for external competence trainings. However, they all agree that funding would be or has been possible where motivated. Not having an established budget for executing their role does not seem to cause unease for the interviewees. The HoS's observations on sustainability resources in subsidiaries is that larger subsidiaries generally have more capital available, rendering them more likely to have full-time dedicated sustainability managers. However, the HoS can easily think of also smaller companies that have chosen to position sustainability central to their operations, allocating significant resources towards it.

Two of the interviewees have participated in sustainability webinars arranged by [Industrial Group]. However, *Interviewee A* has not participated in sustainability webinars, which reveals a gap of communication: the interviewee is not sure if webinars have been arranged since the initiation of the company's sustainability team, or how invitations to the webinars are distributed.

All SM interviewees have utilized [Industrial Group]'s online assets sparingly. They are aware of support materials being available, however, they have either not explored the contents of the online resources in depth, or not had a direct need for a majority of the provided materials. *Interviewee C* mentions that they have utilized mainly one calculation template, but explains that moving between separate organizations' digital spaces is inconvenient, which is partially the reason that they have not utilized more assets.

Social interaction and the exchange of ideas is something *Interviewee A* and *B* both put much emphasis on for successful sustainability management. Both have utilized the opportunity to workshop, brainstorm and discuss company specific sustainability development with their BA HoS, and one of the interviewees has also been in direct contact with the group's HoS to get feedback.

Context: *At the time of the interviews a recent structure change had been made, resulting in the reorganization of business area managers who were shuffled around to new BAs or reassigned to another role within the organization. In some cases, this meant that a new BA Head of Sustainability had to be recruited, which led to a period where a number of companies did not have a BA HoS of their own. Thereby, some of the support and communication issues brought up in the interviews have been resolved since.*

Interviewee A proposes that in periods where a BA HoS is not available, it would be beneficial to have a temporary contact assigned for the exchange of ideas. They also suggest that facilitating and encouraging more collaboration between subsidiaries could bring about positive effects in the long run through networking, along with providing a remedy for missing BA contacts.

The HoS recognizes that the sustainability network has not remarkably promoted cross-company networking and collaboration as the name suggests, however, they consider BA specific meetings for the SMs to have been favorable for these purposes.

Interviewee A also mentions an instance when their company has been used as an internal reference: another subsidiary was introducing a new procedure, and were recommended by their BA HoS to contact *Interviewee A's* company to hear more about their approach. The restructuring of the BAs based on product segment instead of geographical location is something the HoS expects to advance collaboration and connection.

The feedback that [Industrial Group] has received has been appreciative: in general, subsidiaries have expressed interest in more webinars, and are especially valuing the support that BA Heads of Sustainability are offering. As the webinars have included both theoretical and inspirational topics, along with presentations by subsidiaries on their sustainability development, the HoS proposes that: *"I am under the impression that subsidiary SMs appreciate webinars ... It's exciting to hear about [Industrial Group]'s internal cases – which I think are particularly appreciated – and to find out what other companies have done."*. Also [Industrial Group]'s online training programmes have received positive feedback.

All in all, the SM interviewees appreciate both the facilitation, materials, and tools that [Industrial Group] provides, and consider the resources to be of high quality. *Interviewee A* concludes: *"We have received great starter tools from [Industrial Group] that we can use internally. But if we are to achieve sustainability throughout the value chain, then a little more resources are required through either time or money."*.

4.1.3 Context – external factors

All SM interviewees point to the importance of empathetic leadership in managing pressures from the added workload with sustainability management. There is a mutual understanding between them and their management that the development processes require patience. *Interviewee C* communicates this most concretely: their direct manager is attentive to workload and enforces a morale of restricting work to regular hours – as available time is not sufficient for completing everything, there needs to be task prioritization, which is a reality management understands well in this instance.

The interviewees evaluate that the introduction of corporate sustainability themes and the installation of reporting practices in their companies has proceeded rather smoothly. *Interviewee B* explains that the embedded non-formal sustainability in operations formed a good point of departure for sustainability development. I.e., existing policies and business objectives were well aligned with sustainability values – something that all SM interviewees echoe more or less.

Although there has been some social tension in connection to sustainability practices, the interviewees are all rather unaffected. They do not recognize the workforce attitude to be negative, but instead collectively make the point that different professional fields (e.g. engineering, sales, production, management) tend to have individual approaches to change, which might come across as critique. Similarly, the HoS has noticed that those who have a primary role based on accuracy – *such as controllers working with financial reporting* – are more likely to request clarifications on purposes and methods for data collection. However, they stress that the dialogue between the subsidiaries and [Industrial Group] has been pleasant and positive overall. The interviewees acknowledge different strategic approaches in planning their communication activities to some extent, but above that, they strive to participate in so-called *social processing*, such as engaging in dialogues and setting the example. All in all, the SM interviewees consider their colleagues to have been open and welcoming to sustainability development.

The interviewees all agree that leadership at their companies has expressed commitment with making sustainability a central part of business operations. *Interviewee B* states that they consider companies to have a decisive role in sustainability development, adding that they think it is a necessity for leadership of all companies to be committed to sustainability nowadays. As *Interviewee A* puts it: *"It's given that the management wants us to develop and get a better turnover. That is the goal of all management, but they are also fully aware that if we don't work with sustainability, then we won't get any customers. And our management is very keen on sustainability – working with it and having a clear understanding of its value."*. As far as the HoS knows, [Industrial Group]'s management has had a long standing commitment to sustainability as a strategy for growth. They explain that the shared understanding is that sustainability is not only about doing what is *"right"*, but also about accumulating good practices in a way which leads to improved profitability over time.

There are several levels of follow-up in order to advance sustainability uniformly throughout [Industrial Group]'s organization. Subgoals of a trifold sustainability approach have been published to the entire organization as sustainability KPIs. These are monitored both on an organizational level, a BA level, and a subsidiary level. Clear deviations are handled primarily by the BA Heads of Sustainability, but the HoS might step in where necessary to open a dialogue about analyzing and resolving insufficient routines. Overall, the HoS and the administration have been very pleased with the engagement and concrete development in subsidiaries. Efforts have been effective, and the follow-up on results are displaying positive trends.

None of the interviewees consider [Industrial Group]'s sustainability ambitions and connected performance expectations unrealistic or unachievable. However, the interviews make apparent that in-house driven sustainability development is straining for SMEs. *Interviewee A* brings forth a wish for more specificity in [Industrial Group]'s expectations and more concreteness about the desired measures for subsidiaries to adopt, in order to streamline the change process.

The HoS understands the challenge SMs face in formulating company specific sustainability processes with the limited resources of especially SMEs. However, they underline that specifying processes and methods top-down does not align with [Industrial Group]'s decentralized leadership model. And even more importantly, they consider it extremely difficult to gauge what procedures would be suitable and practical given the diversity of subsidiaries. Further, they propose that when subsidiaries concentrate their efforts on in-house development processes, the businesses are likely to receive a larger pay-off: *"[Sustainability development] should take time because it is important work that actually creates value. It's good when it's not approached as 'We have to do that too'. It should be seen as something done for the company's own sake – not [Industrial Group]'s – that really helps to strengthen the company. And then it's often well worth the time and investment, or the resources you need to spend, since you get it back in so many ways."*. By achieving self-sufficiency and a contextualized approach to sustainability management, the individual subsidiaries are fortified as capable entities that have a clear conception of their own operations.

Suppliers, customers and end users as external stakeholders have a clear role in motivating sustainability with market logic. However, the interviewees have not personally experienced external stakeholders to pressure development processes remarkably. Currently, especially *Interviewee A* sees the situation as opposite: their company is challenged by stalling sustainability development in its value chain. Not all of the company's suppliers are yet able to provide requested information on, e.g. composition and material sourcing in supply chains, which is a clear hindrance for them: *"We cannot take apart a component and measure how much plastic is in there. We need to get that information from our supplier, and they do not necessarily have the pressure on them as we do."*.

All companies operate within different markets, which is echoed in the interviewees' conception of how well sustainability as a business value can currently provide growth.

Interviewee A explains that in their company's dialogue with customers, it has become apparent that customers prioritize and value sustainable business opportunities differently between one another. Sustainability in the product and service offering is thereby not yet in a decisive role for all customers, nor a current necessity for maintaining the company's revenue. Nonetheless, there is a pragmatically positive cohesion within the company regarding the opportunities of sustainable business and incorporating sustainability data in the service offering. The interviewee also makes a point for implementing sustainability practices ahead of the curve: *"Some customers have come with direct questions about how we work and want policies and such, so then it's great that you have it ready."*.

Interviewee B's company operates in a heavily regulated market, where safety for users is emphasized. The interviewee regards the company to be at a rather advanced stage in its sustainability journey: presently the company is making sustainability a theme throughout its operations with qualitative communication along with, e.g., marking out the products that have sustainable features and measuring the sales of its sustainable product range. As the market regulations may drive customer decisions, sustainability communication simplifies product selection for the customer. This means that the industry is going through change and the company is actively utilizing new demand to its advantage, strategically configuring its practices to meet anticipated market development.

Lastly, *Interviewee C's* company is at a stage where sustainable product offering has an existing and rising demand. The field of their operations has gone through fast-paced changes in the last few years, which has required quick adaptation to the new regulations and the new customer-driven demand for sustainability. *Interviewee C* elaborates on their strategic positioning with sustainability: *"Yes, we try to be pioneers by offering and highlighting environmentally friendly products. But on the other hand, customers are also already starting to ask for those alternatives"*. Here, the interviewee recognizes that sustainability certifications and product declarations – *such as product specific carbon footprint* – are more and more becoming the standard, rather than a bonus or additional cost in the eyes of their customers. The industry is promoting and sponsoring sustainability through regulations, certifications and targets. This means that sustainable product ranges directly impact business.

4.1.4 Competence – internal qualities

The interviewees see strong associations between their MarCom competences and sustainability management. *Interviewee B* recognizes communication as a tool for sustainability, which enables businesses to both establish their strategic positioning to stakeholders, and to achieve internal cohesion regarding procedures and visions. *Interviewee A* explains that: *"As a marketer, I have the task of communicating the company's visions, ambitions, and added value. And sustainability is of utmost importance for us right now."*.

Interviewee A further identifies that both their roles require high information absorptivity, while professional ethics should constitute a decisive starting point in both marketing, and sustainability communication. Ethical aspects brought up by the interviewees as mutual for both roles include truthfulness, criticality, and transparency.

Interviewee B proposes that companies should make sure to communicate sustainability neither misleadingly, nor remain silent about applied measures. They emphasize that communication about sustainability should be guided by contemplation and efficiency, so that it remains relevant instead of becoming excessive. Similarly to this thought of purposefulness, *Interviewee C* implements the same personal guideline for informative content – *regardless if it is general marketing or sustainability related* – and always strives to make communication either useful, fun, or both.

For *Interviewee A* sustainability and communication often become intertwined: they do not usually consider themself to be working purely with one or the other role. In a broader sense, *Interviewee C* goes on to suggest that the two fields might currently be even more connected than marketing is to sales. They consider sustainability to be an essential part of consumption, to the extent that MarCom and sustainability are inseparable. The relationship between marketing communications and sustainability management is symbiotic in the interviewee's mind, and therefore they think these two functions are beneficial to keep paired. *Interviewee A* recognizes the benefit of a combined role on a practical level: *"In my role as a marketer, I need to be in dialogue with my colleagues as I am not the expert at the product level. But it feels good to have first-hand information on sustainability, so that I don't have to get it filtered from someone else. Instead, I have the direct source. Work becomes more efficient then."*.

Self competences

The personal motivation to take on sustainability management varies slightly between each interviewee. *Interviewee A* emphasizes their value-driven interest with the concept of threefold sustainability, and stresses its importance both in everyday life and as an opportunity to improve the impact businesses have.

Interviewee B and *C* echo this to some extent, however, they primarily highlight sustainability as an integral part of conducting business in a sound and just manner. Also the HoS points to a value-driven interest together with the courses they completed in their studies: the courses offered a conception of how environmental and social issues can be approached in entrepreneurship, and highlighted how businesses provide an impactful platform for sustainable change.

Interviewee A underlines meaningfulness and effectuating one's values as a resource for self-motivation: *"I want my marketing work to feel good in my gut. If the company I work for works with sustainability, I feel that I can stand behind it myself and be more productive – and stand for what I write. It's important to me that we work with sustainability so that it will feel better for me personally to work. It's self-interest really."*. This is also something the HoS points to as a decisive factor while they were initially considering employment at [Industrial Group]: *"It was very important for me personally that there were many sustainable values and principles in the company itself. ... [Industrial Group] denotes long-term approaches and high-quality products. Our subsidiaries don't sell on price, but on quality and knowledge, and added value of various kinds."*.

Whereas the other interviewees affirm their professional motivation to work with sustainability through personal values, *Interviewee C* expresses a somewhat neutral stance in adding sustainability to their assignments: they view sustainability as any other responsibility or task, and they would be completely satisfied to see someone else handling sustainability management. However, this is not to say that they have an apathetic attitude to sustainability – *Interviewee C* expects sustainability to be genuinely included in business operations: *"Sustainable conduct is just so unquestionable to me. And indeed, as I have previously dealt with related issues in practice, it is nice to work with it on a higher level where I am able to influence procedures in a wider sense."*.

When requested to think of a challenging situation in their sustainability management journey that connects to their internal qualities and personal attitudes, *Interviewee A* recognizes that they have battled with finding a suitable level of ambition. This has been established in both the sense that it might feel difficult to present work in progress, and in matching expectations on results to available resources. Therefore, when reflecting on the competence they have gained from sustainability management, *Interviewee A* considers their most beneficial new competence to be acceptance of ambiguity and incompleteness.

As noted in the *Context* section, there are several external factors which dictate the pace of change or restrict applicable measures for sustainability development.

Similarly to *Interviewee A's* acceptance of incompleteness as an important personal philosophy for sustainability management, *Interviewee C* also expresses a strong belief in sustainability development as an undeniable society-wide phenomena, where the green transition becomes more complete over time, although the development may not be evenly distributed currently.

Social competences

Establishing a shared understanding and vision within the workforce is something all SM interviewees recognize as a relevant sustainability management challenge. *Interviewee B* sees the ability to engage and include all employees of a company as the most important competence for sustainability management: *"Because I see it this way: sustainability – if you want to get it right – must permeate the entire company, every single role and position in the company."*. Having a distributed engagement in the administration and sharing the view on corporate sustainability is something the HoS considers beneficial for efficiency when advancing shared values throughout the organization.

As an explanation to why a sustainability vision might be difficult to achieve, *Interviewee A* has identified that the value-driven interest is not as strong for everyone in the workforce. Similarly, *Interviewee B* has experienced an imbalance in the workforce's understanding of sustainability: in the common perception of sustainability, environmental aspects seem to be emphasized, although the threefold ESG framework requests equal attention to social and governance themes. Here, both the SM interviewees and the HoS promote social processing – *as mentioned in the Context section* – and an exchange of thoughts through in-person contact. The HoS further explains that their approach to facilitation is more focused on coaching, as compared to providing direct answers. When they have been in dialogues with SMs, or involved in focus groups, they have strived to inspire, rather than to guide.

Through the SM role, *Interviewee B's* perception of corporate sustainability and sustainability communication has changed to be more critical and cynical. They explain that as they have a deeper understanding and inside-perspective of e.g. certifications, they are also able to assess the essence of sustainability claims in consumer products. To explain the relevance of critical thinking, *Interviewee C* brings up challenges with data consistency and reporting practices: the company has been in situations where separate providers of similar services applied wildly different formulas for their emission calculations. Noticing such discrepancies departs from a diligent approach to provided data – a mindset that can easily be categorized as critical thinking. This type of data interpretation is also one of the skills the interviewee emphasizes as most important for their competence development in sustainability management.

However, critical thinking alone does not solve issues with data consistency. As an example of utilizing interactive problem solving and peer education to improve sustainability performance, *Interviewee C* decided to organize a meeting with the supplier that had the unsatisfactory report. This allowed them to discuss the company's expectations on the accuracy of following reports, and to provide tangible information on which aspects to consider in their reporting practices.

Similarly, strategic communication and interaction is brought up as competences that can advance external stakeholder engagement. At *Interviewee A's* company a question on sustainability has been introduced in their yearly customer satisfaction survey. Contrary to the literal content of their survey question, the aim is not to directly assess the relevance of sustainability as a business opportunity, but rather to open up for a dialogue with their external stakeholders and increase interest in the added value sustainability may offer.

Procedural competences

Interviewee A has noticed in both their roles that it is sometimes difficult to evaluate how informed others in their company are about the interviewee's areas of expertise, and in what way that needs to be taken into account in communication and interaction. *"What is difficult about knowledge in particular is that you don't quite know if it is general knowledge and if it is self-evident. When you have learned something, it sits in the spine."* they explain. The interviewee identifies a risk for tacit knowledge to create distance between different functions: over- or underestimating the receiver's knowledge makes communication deficient and causes frustration.

A practical challenge that has required the sustainability team of *Interviewee B's* company to consider new procedures, is that they have a large product offering that they are attempting to complement with a range of products that are assessed as more sustainable: products which reduce negative impact to environment, or offer improvements to productivity and user safety are included here. The large number of products makes it difficult for the sales personnel to remain informed of individual items and keep track of interchangeable products. Unless the whole sales team is able to efficiently suggest and offer items from the sustainable product range, the demand is likely to remain limited. A solution to this has been to compile a catalog of more sustainable products after examining in which ways their products can contribute to improvements in either safety, environmental impact, or productivity. Additionally, the interviewee sees improvement potential with the introduction of online sales, where information and cross-references are easier to maintain. *Interviewee B* considers these measures to result not only in better information flow with more efficiency, but also in increased sustainability literacy in the whole company:

"By measuring the sales of the sustainable product range now and having made tools for the sales organization, sustainability will permeate the whole company. Because there will be a focus in sales, there will be a focus for the product manager, there will be a focus in customer support – and in the warehouse: they are involved in this too.". In a corresponding manner, also *Interviewee C's* company offers their sales team separate training regarding the company's sustainable product offering and its related certifications.

Interviewee C has been responsible for the ongoing development work to improve their company's backend systems. One of the aims is to achieve automated emission calculations for individual products. They underline that the development is a work in progress: *"The work is still unfinished and will be unfinished for a long time. But it has to be done, and yes, it will eventually be completed. ... There simply needs to be a procedure and custom in place: every time we introduce a new product, its manufacturer must inform us of carbon dioxide emissions. As a part of this, the manufacturer will, in turn, be in contact with their subcontractor, who needs to contact their own subcontractor, and through that the data begins to flow from the bottom up, all the way to the end user."*. The interviewee recognizes that sustainability data collection requires a rippling effect where making requests and setting expectations happens top-down, upon which information can be provided from bottom to top. Therefore the data is not instantaneously available, but needs to be accumulated over time. However, going through the hassle is something the company sees business potential in: not only does the new data system provide a competitive advantage of thorough product information, but it also means that the company has insight of their own procedures and can deliver transparent and clear calculations when requested.

The most important competence for sustainability management that the HoS has identified is what they call *navigation*: a capacity to prioritize and contextualize issues in a way that guides measures to be legitimately relevant, while simultaneously providing direction for long-term development. To elaborate on navigation, they explain: *"Sustainability is about so many issues: environment, climate, and biological diversity, water and energy, and then there is the social dimension with diversity, human rights, as well as health and other topics. The number of questions that fit within the concept of sustainability is, after all, a very long list, and ultimately the task is to figure out 'what issues are material for us and what can we do?'."*. The HoS affirms that assessment of materiality and the formation of priority are fundamental for focusing available resources, if the goal is to achieve a material impact and increased value through the efforts.

Domain competences

In relation to knowledge and perspectives on sustainability, *Interviewee A* expresses that they have grasped the complexity of sustainability by dealing with it in practice: *"I have understood that there is so much I don't know. Before, when I knew less, I thought 'Oh, but we have that covered'. But no, we don't have everything under control, so I suppose that's something I've learned during this time."*.

Overall, the topic of domain competences evokes rather little reflection from the interviewees, likely because of the question setup: the theme does not offer clearly observable challenges that would not be solvable by "*looking things up"*. Similarly to *Interviewee A's* statement, *Interviewee B* concludes that the question essentially circles around the issue of *"knowing what you do not know"*.

However, each of the interviewees' companies operate in separate fields, which is reflected in the difference between standards and central issues brought up throughout the interviews. In addition to sustainability and industry knowledge, contextualised knowledge is proposed to include organizational knowledge: the interviewees consider sustainability management to rely on building an understanding of company specifics.

What might be read between the lines of the interviews, is that domain competences are likely somewhat sidestepped since the SMs either consider their contextual knowledge irrelevant for generalization, or because their sustainability knowledge has become tacit. A third issue that might be causing vagueness when identifying domain competence is the ambiguity and equivocality of sustainability management's professional discourse.

4.2 Interpretation of findings

Proposition 1:
Competences for sustainability management center on multi-faceted and collaborative tasks

The competences that can be recognized from the interviewees' statements add up to stretch over all competence categories. Overall, several of the identified competences are blended, which means that they cannot be unambiguously assigned to one of the four competence categories. The interviewees' propositions and reflections also highlight the role of *meta-competences*, as compared to more task specific *classic competences*.

The focal point of this section, *Figure 11*, present sthe case findings as an extended version of Dzhengiz & Niesten's (2019) competence framework. As this framework departs from the perspective of subsidiary SMs in the case organization, there are noteworthy adjustments in *Figure 11* as compared to Dzhengiz and Niesten's (2019) framework in *Figure 9*. The original framework departs from competences for environmental sustainability, and represents organizational and top management perspectives. Naturally, some of its suggestions are therefore either not fully relevant, or not specified for the role and tasks of sustainability managers.

Competence group	Personal competences	Collective competences
Domain competences *to know*	**Knowledge** of sustainability **Contextual insight**: organization, stakeholders and market and cross-cultural understanding **Industry specific standards, applicable legislation** and **regulations**	**Operational clarity:** internal conception of processes, procedures and task organization **Sustainability literacy:** knowlegde of issues, concepts and objectives
Procedural competences *to do*	**Basic competences for managing a process:** work organization and project management skills **Problem prioritization** and **navigating** ambiguities **Systems-** or **holistic thinking** Competences for **learning** and **development, information absorptivity**	**Procedural malleability:** resource availability, flexibility to redefine processes and integrate new knowledge **Collaborativity:** co-working, trans- or interdisciplinary work
Social competences *to interact*	**Communication** and **sensemaking** skills **Collaboration** and **stakeholder engagement** competences **Competence to advocate change** and motivate others **Strategic thinking** **Interactive problem solving** and peer education **Critical thinking**, data interpretation and analysis **Emotional intelligence**	**Interactivity:** social processing and collective sensemaking **Receptiveness:** willingness to embrace new knowledge **Dialogue readiness:** strength of stakeholder network, possibility to engage in conversations
Self-competences *to be*	**Personal concern** and **values** relating to sustainability **Future orientation:** meaningfulness and impact **Professional ethics** and promoting responsible management principles	**Organizational identity**, culture and shared values

Figure 11: Competences for sustainability management

Most notably, *conflict management*, *competence in self-motivation*, and *entrepreneurial thinking* have been removed, while *responsibility* has been reallocated from domain competences to self-competences.

Conflict management and entrepreneurial thinking were not brought forward in any interviews as relevant skills on their own, and seem replaceable by other competences, such as strategic thinking, collaboration skills, emotional intelligence. The theme of responsibility, on the other hand, is a relevant competence on the top management level, but the establishment of responsible management is not quite applicable for the scope of the subsidiary SM's role and tasks. However, responsible management as an approach is undoubtedly relevant for morals and personal principles.

Further, the amended framework features an additional column for *collective competences* in order to make a distinction between *personal competences* and *organizational capabilities* that contribute to successful sustainability management. By adding the collective competences column, we can assign some competences from the individual to the organization, which seems motivated in the case of, *e.g.*, *trans- or interdisciplinary work* and *stakeholder networking*. Both of these can be improved with personal competences, but given that there are standard organizational procedures setting boundaries to the individual's possible actions, there need to be pre-existing collective competences.

From the findings, we can conclude that *domain competences* center around the SM's ability to contextualize sustainability issues specifically to the industry in question. Prerequisites for this are an encompassing understanding of the company and its field of operations, along with a basic understanding of corporate sustainability, which the SMs approach through trifold sustainability concepts and UN's SDGs.

Based on the case, *procedural competences* for sustainability management begin at the practical level of *work organization* and *project management skills*, stretching over to the more abstract skills of *navigating – as organizing complex information* – and *systems thinking – as identifying interdependencies of large systems*. The last procedural competence, *competences for learning,* is definitely not the least, as it provides the foundation for achieving domain competences.

The interviewees are unified about the importance of establishing a shared understanding of sustainability, and building a vision for their company's role in global sustainability development. We can see that most *social competences* in *Figure 11* relate to this aim. However, embedding shared sustainability values in the organization is something they consider to become established over time, through several actions: it is not something the interviewees assign remarkable resources towards solitarily or approach as an isolated task.

The interviewees convey a high work morale and responsible attitude towards their tasks. They all explain their motivation to work with sustainability through personal convictions and values, rather than professional ambitions. As a fundamental issue, the SM role demands thorough evaluation of possible action in line with responsible management principles, while it has embedded ambiguities with the conflict of logics. In addition to procedural and domain competences to tackle the subsequent indecisiveness, the SM benefits from the self-competences of having a strong sense of purpose and a commitment to their professional standards. The inner motivation can have its origins in personal values or professional reasoning, *however,* both of these depart from the conviction that sustainability is necessary in business operations, and that businesses should assume responsibility to improve the conditions of stakeholders in the trifold focus areas. All of the interviewees also assume a meta-perspective to both their work and corporate sustainability in general, with an acceptance of incompleteness, while regulating their ambitions to available resources. These attitudes build on the interviewees' *volition*, which helps them regulate motivation by offering reasoning to current action, and benefits the formation of action plans.

While considering the categorization, some suggestions stand out as *blended* competences. As an example, *critical thinking* could be assigned to either procedural or social competences. Critical thinking departs from questioning existing procedures and information: the subject assumes a skeptical position towards a proposition, in order to detect inaccuracies or deficiencies of it. For the individual, critical thinking is a) *a method*, and b) *an interactive situation*. It can be seen as both the processes of analysis, and as a matter of the *individual* vs. *external ideas*. In the same way, *strategic thinking* is also placed under social competences. Ultimately, strategic thinking provides the individual with a plan for involving others in chosen objectives.

A third blended competence is *navigation*. With the ability of acting in ambiguity, navigation is a key component in sustainability management competence. In its most effective form, navigation combines systems thinking and domain competence to provide informed direction to actions, i.e. the process of prioritization is a method that utilizes knowledge. Given the complexity of sustainability, it is not only essential to promote action, but also to select actions by evaluating all possible maneuvers against one another. This allows the individual to identify the most efficient solution – *in terms of both resources and impact* – while preferably also recognizing which actions meet the standard of moral excellence.

All in all, the findings from both the interviews and the theoretical framework can be boiled down to *contextual knowledge, navigation, collaboration, critical thinking, professional ethics,* and *future orientation* as the foundations for an SMs competence.

However, as the tasks of an SM are highly collaborative and multi-faceted, it is not quite fair to evaluate an SM's competence in isolation. Especially as the role is managed as a secondary task in the studied case, an individual's competence should not be directly evaluated based on the organization's sustainability performance. Instead, it is necessary to recognize that the organization's *collective competences* provide a context and assets for acting, which impact the individual's expression of competence.

Proposition 2:
MarCom professionals in SMEs are equipped with several competences that support sustainability management

By exploring the interviewees' own understanding of how their roles intersect and how MarCom competence supports sustainability management, we find that pre-existing competence occupies a large part of the interviewees' personally perceived proficiency. This is further underlined by the fact that some of the SM interviewees stated that they had not paid much attention to the occurrence of competence development before participating in the interview.

It seems that the most relevant intersection of MarCom and SM competence is located in the combination of critical thinking and ethical principles, as ethical principles provide standards to sustainability, while critical thinking is necessary for assessing whether standards are realised. The SMs consider ethical standards intrinsic to both marketing and sustainability, and communicate a personal devotion to responsibility, truthfulness, and transparency in their approach to both roles. Critical thinking is established for the interviewees in assessing claims, *"looking beyond numbers"*, and striving to verify statements.

Challenges that the interviewees have encountered within their company highlight change agency and facilitation as necessary competences in sustainability management from a company internal perspective. Corresponding competence is found in the statements which confirm that MarCom professionals in SMEs often collaborate across functions as part of their own sensemaking. Similarly, the collective sensemaking of social processing is brought up as an effective low-threshold method for change. The SMs consider it important to engage in everyday dialogues in addition to providing formal communication, since conversations provide a platform for instant questions, clarifications, and feedback. A well-established *network approach* to coworking, along with familiarity in managing internal communication, are aspects that might factor into the confidence of introducing change, *and in extension*, the perceived ease of applying social competence.

From a collective competence perspective, it may be noteworthy that all of the participating SM interviewees are senior in their primary role: they have achieved a well-established and systematic approach to work organization, along with a clear conception of how collaborative organizations operate in general. The interviewees are able to contribute to the *"possible action of the organization"* with a positive impact by working efficiently, while sharing a pragmatic view on resources and task prioritization.

Both internal and external change processes for the organization are identified to be based on collaboration and communication. When aiming to improve sustainability performance via external stakeholder involvement, the social and methodological competences that are brought forth include strategic communication, strategic action, and stakeholder collaboration. Establishing functional practices in the value chain requires a proactive, resilient and collaborative approach to problem solving.

Beyond offering intersections to competence, the combination of MarCom and SM tasks streamlines processes for sustainability communication. The interviewees see this as beneficial for information quality and, *to some extent*, necessary for efficient work organization with the limited time resources that are available.

Proposition 3:
Sustainability management competence should not be solely attributed to the individual, but rather be seen as an interplay of competence, assets, and context

The SMs are challenged with balancing the added workload of a periodical and secondary role, without receiving formal training, significant resources or additional compensation from their employer.

Beyond their personal knowledge, skills and attitudes, the SMs recognize the importance of their colleagues' collaborativeness. Two of the companies have a clearly collaborative inclination with sustainability management through their sustainability team, which not only makes the workload distributed, but also increases the number of change advocates. All in all, a collaborative approach means that sustainability management becomes less of an individual's task, which in its turn likely reduces personally experienced pressure, and embeds sustainability into operations while fostering collective competence.

Whereas an SM's ability to act could be impeded by social and procedural issues at their employer, all SM interviewees are in a context where their experience is that sustainability development has been welcomed.

In addition to proximate values between employees, the interviewees express that the companies have had a strong foundation for sustainability via existing practices and principles. Therefore the SMs have been able to place more emphasis on developing sustainability communication and installing measurement processes, instead of focusing on large reconfiguration of operations, or making significant efforts with change agency.

Ultimately, the SM interviewees highlight company leadership above their own role in change agency: in their view, sustainability commitment and *"setting the tone"* needs to happen top-down in order for an SM's role to be functional. Existing business values and leadership with an established sustainability commitment provide beneficial foundations for sustainability development.

Furthermore, we can see that external conditions – *such as sustainability advocacy in the industry* – offer both incentives and hindrances for the SMs. Currently, sustainability practices are not equally adopted in all regions although supply chains are global. This may interrupt sustainability development of smaller businesses, which struggle to incentivize sustainability with market logic, or are met by an information barrier that hinders their data collection. These factors partially explain why achieving ESG practices is a process which cannot be completed instantly in industrial SMEs, further underlining the importance of *action competence* and *volition* as significant assets for sustainability managers.

Proposition 4:
Self-sufficient sustainability development is straining for SMEs, but [Industrial Group] provides adequate and well selected resources for its subsidiaries

Monetary assets and external knowledge are not emphasized as prerequisites for sustainability management as a subsidiary of [Industrial Group]. The SMs seem confident that sustainability development can be largely organized through subsidiary internal arrangements, without external competence training or sustainability consultants. In other words, the subsidiary SMs consider their existing competence, paired with human resources and support materials provided by [Industrial Group] an adequate foundation for handling sustainability management.

Factors that have been considered in the formation of [Industrial Group]'s organization-wide sustainability strategy include external pressures, identified market opportunities, and shared values originating from the organization's leadership. [Industrial Group]'s diversity of subsidiaries covers micro companies up to large enterprises.

The obligation of a high commitment with sustainability development covers all company sizes essentially to the same degree. Therefore, the SMEs that adopt the corporate sustainability practices and measures in line with [Industrial Group]'s expectations, are likely to be at a more advanced stage of sustainability than what would be mandatory for their company size – e.g., annual sustainability data reporting has departed from exceeding current and upcoming requirements from EU directives on corporate sustainability reporting.

As a direct measure to support competence development, [Industrial Group] offers sustainability webinars that have been structured to provide both theoretical knowledge and inspirational examples, with cases from within the organization. Examples of theoretical sustainability themes that support domain competence have included strategies to identify emission sources throughout the value chain, due diligence, pending EU sustainability legislation, and sustainability communication. The case presentations, on their behalf, provide applied knowledge and practical relevance to the theoretical content, which should be beneficial for creating action instead of providing inert knowledge. When needed – *e.g. in connection to reporting periods* – [Industrial Group] has also arranged so called Q&A sessions, in order to give specifications and clarifications to questions from the subsidiaries.

Further, competence development and facilitation of the organization-wide change process is clearly promoted through the deliberate effort of having Business Area Heads of Sustainability, who are highly appreciated by the subsidiary SMs. The BA Heads of Sustainability have succeeded with encouraging social interaction and the exchange of ideas as part of subsidiaries' sustainability journeys. Seeing as BAs have been reorganized *– to connect businesses in a way which is likely to feel more relevant for the subsidiaries than previously* – further encouragement to collaborate between subsidiaries should be possible, and has the potential to offer positive effects.

The findings reveal a few practical issues with information sharing in the organization: subsidiary SMs might not be aware of how to join the sustainability network, and do not seem to identify a need for utilizing the online platform. This is not necessarily an issue for the SMs, since it can be assumed that where online materials have not been accessed, specifications and direction has been provided through either [Industrial Group]'s webinars or via direct contact with the BA Heads of Sustainability.

Although the SM interviewees have not experienced remarkable pressure on sustainability development from external stakeholders, both customers and suppliers play a significant role in how straining the change agency is on an SM's volition. If the market is very limited, then sustainability is difficult to incentivise in the strategic positioning, or even to prioritize over operational tasks.

SMEs cannot exert the same influence in their value chain as larger enterprises, who play a more significant part in revenue for their stakeholders. And before sustainability is recognized top-down, it is difficult to promote and foster – either externally or internally.

Proposition 5:
[Industrial Group]'s decentralized leadership model causes some tension, but ultimately benefits sustainable change

In line with the guiding principle of decentralized leadership for business development, [Industrial Group] has refrained from providing explicit guidelines on how to organize sustainability tasks within the subsidiaries. As a result, we find diversity in the approach to sustainability organization, with an influence also on perceptions of the SM role's organizational significance.

Two of the companies have utilized [Industrial Group]'s human resources to a larger extent than the third company, subsequently identifying a larger role for the organization in their company's sustainability journey. However, all of the SM interviewees seem to have a neutral attitude towards [Industrial Group]'s impact: [Industrial Group] is neither placed on a pedestal, nor completely bypassed.

While none of the SM interviewees consider [Industrial Group]'s sustainability ambitions and connected performance expectations unrealistic or unachievable, a wish is brought forth for more specificity and concreteness in [Industrial Group]'s expectations. To clarify, [Industrial Group] has published targets for group wide sustainability KPIs, and compiled general guidance on desired approaches. However, there is not a definite framework available on specific measures to prioritize, or detailed guidance on how thoroughly sustainability should be advanced in operations. Given that available resources are very limited at SMEs, uncertainty and lack of guidance may lead to frustration.

Considering the contrary perspective, [Industrial Group]'s overarching sentiment to its sustainability development is to emphasize solid foundations and well-managed transitions over time, rather than opting for superficial fixes and fast maneuvers. The aim has not been to position [Industrial Group] ahead of the curve, but instead to achieve a facts based and balanced strategy, and a momentum for change where the whole organization is advancing. Therefore, from [Industrial Group]'s point of view, some strategic trade-offs are necessary – while e.g. frustration with open-ended guidance is recognized, their conviction is that the strain of completing change processes within the subsidiary can be justified with expected benefits.

By collecting the findings from the interviews on advantages and disadvantages of organizing sustainability development with an *in-house* approach, we can construct a *SWOT matrix*, shown in *Figure 12*.

	Helpful to achieving the objective	**Harmful** to achieving the objective
Inside and practical perspective on the project management	**Strengths** + Focusing information and knowledge to a small entity within the company can bring efficiency to project management, and provide beneficial task overlaps + Thorough insight in the collection and organization of information can improve data accuracy, and help with identifying material topics + Availability of the SM at the workplace can facilitate collective sensemaking by offering the possibility for instant feedback and low-threshold exchange	**Weaknesses** — Straining on resources, difficult to maintain consistent development — High demands on the SM's problem prioritization and action competence — Necessitates professional ethics and *'safety nets'* to avoid the pitfalls of regulatory, ceremonial, competitive, or holistic greening
External and long-term perspective on sustainability developmemt	**Opportunities** + Can embed sustainability procedures in operations, instead of rendering them into a limited time project + Can improve operational clarity, making the organization able to provide sustainability information – *such as compliance declarations* – more swiftly and with a higher degree of consensus + Can offer wider impacts by promoting sustainability literacy, *e.g.*, directly by affecting interorganizational collaboration, and indirectly by inspiring personal choices	**Threats** — Requires high-level of committedness from at least SM and leadership — If the organization's collective competences are lacking, there will be a high strain on the SM's competences to bring change and improve collaborativeness — Lack of stakeholder expectations make it difficult to insentivize use of limited resources

Figure 12: The case-specific SWOT matrix of sustainability development as an in-house project

5 Discussion

Borglund et al. (2021) argue that sustainability management does not qualify as a profession due to its lack of a distinct professional logic. Similarly, Miller and Fyke (2020, p. 185) identify that an organization's internal and external communication influences or even defines employees' comprehension of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Instead of approaching sustainability management as a *traditional profession*, Borglund et al. (2021) encourage to consider it an *organizational activity* with highly context-bound manifestation. This is demonstrated also in the results from this case study: both the professional identity and organizational role of SMs is dependent on context, meanwhile competence is developed based on personal strengths and organizational needs.

The mix, clash and balancing of logics that Borglund et al. (2021) have identified, offer an explanation to several action barriers for sustainability management. By highlighting the conceptual vagueness that undermines an articulated sustainability logic, Purvis et al. (2018) offer further context to the moderate pace of sustainability management professionalization. Across the references of this research we find that the role and purpose of sustainability managers include suggestions such as *sustainability champion* or *environmental advocate*, *assistant to innovation*, and metaphors like *"doctors" of human–environment systems*. In the analogy of sustainability experts as medical staff, Fang et al. (2018, p. 12) also recognize that human-environment *"healthcare"* demands a multitude of specializations – *e.g. "water sustainability, food sustainability, energy sustainability, corporate sustainability, landscape sustainability, and the sustainability of other subsystems or dimensions of human–environment systems"* – and that addressing underlying issues requires interdisciplinarity.

Similarly to the conflict of logics in corporate sustainability, Miller and Fyke (2020) recognize challenges of sensemaking as a part of CSR in organizations. Although CSR efforts focus on social responsibility and philanthropy, the challenges that communication professionals face with CSR and ESG are interchangeable to some extent. Sensemaking is integral to communication activities, which places communication professionals, SMs, and their intersecting tasks in a distinctive position in organizations: their comprehension and professional approach is decisive to how information is provided to others.

The practicality of conjoining sustainability with communication can be boiled down to Miller and Fyke's (2020, p. 200) statement that the communication professional's assignments *"center on truly understanding and framing these activities, addressing the 'why' behind them, and perpetuating a culture in which CSR is systemic, strategic, and supported…"*. Miller and Fyke (2020, p. 188) further clarify the significance of communication professionals by stating:

"...sensemaking begins with the individual sensemaker, but as meanings materialize in an organization, it becomes a collective action. Therefore, communication professionals charged with communicating CSR help make sense of these activities for others in the organization.". Through the process of sensemaking, communication professionals are likely to become the link between top management and employees. In the matter of organizational change – *such as sustainability development* – communication professionals may well assume the role of ambassadors or change agents in the eyes of other employees (Miller & Fyke, 2020, p. 195).

"As a marketing communications professional, I have worked quite a bit with sustainability prior to my current employment, since it is such an important part of a company's reputation and position – both towards the end consumer, and towards customers, and any other stakeholders."

– Interviewee B

Sustainability managers are challenged with balancing market logic, bureaucratic logic, and sustainability logic, which, *at their worst*, are fully contradictory. In order to handle the conflict and avoid issues of superficial greening, organizations can benefit from introducing the responsible leadership approach suggested by Laasch and Conaway (2015). Not only does it assign necessary precedence to ethical excellence, but the concept of stakeholders as a part of responsible leadership is increasingly established as a central approach to corporate sustainability. Currently, e.g. the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), is introducing an obligatory *double materiality assessment*, making stakeholder involvement a key component of sustainability development. Therefore the principles of responsible management are well applied in the methodology and value base for SMs.

1) Which competences could be determinative for the success of diversifying one's professional role to encompass sustainability management?

Expectedly, sustainability management competence suggestions from the interviews, as presented in *Figure 11*, correspond rather well with Dzhengiz and Niesten's (2019) propositions of environmental competences. Yet, the direct answer to the research question is that few *classic competences* can be isolated as determinative when it comes to professional development for sustainability management.

Whereas the interviews and theoretical framework propose contextual knowledge, navigation, collaboration, critical thinking, professional ethics, and future orientation as foundations for sustainability management competence, the results on specific competences are not fully applicable for generalization.

Firstly, as argued in the theoretical framework, the equivocality of sustainability and sustainability management does not provide a definite SM role description for the analysis of competences to depart from. With an expansive and context-bound set of desired qualities and abilities, the significance of each singular competence is lessened – therefore any one classic competence is not directly determinative. We can see that the subsidiary SMs have developed their competence to succeed with sustainability management, without displaying much uniformity in their attained procedural, social, and self competences.

Secondly, when considering specifics of the case, we find that no singular classic competence clearly stands out for all subsidiary SMs. In the organization, sustainability management resources are easily available and being offered actively. [Industrial Group] is present with a *"support system"* which means that subsidiaries' sustainability development is never entirely dependent on an individual, or their competence.

Consequently, when considering the most determinative assets for diversifying one's professional role, the answer is that *meta-competences* are essential, while *collective competence* has a contextual influence on both development and performance.

Kokosowski's (2012) proposition that competences which support both high adaptability and deep expertise are beneficial for today's professionals, highlights the significance of meta-competences in any instance of informal competence development. So far, we have concluded that competence is a complex system of decision making and creative problem solving. By its very nature, competence – *as the process behind action* – should activate several competence categories simultaneously. Therefore, when attempting to identify the most beneficial competences for efficient management, it is only natural that competences tend to overlap two or more categories, as identified in *Proposition 1* with *blended competences*. While considering the increased task complexity in modern organizations, it also appears evident that the *"next-level"* abilities contained in meta-competences – *as being able to independently learn, adapt, and find purpose in professional activities* – are of high importance, especially in situations of vagueness.

"Sustainability is about so many issues: environment, climate, and biological diversity, water and energy, and then there is the social dimension with diversity, human rights, as well as health and other topics. The number of questions that fit within the concept of sustainability is, after all, a very long list, and ultimately the task is to figure out 'what issues are material for us and what can we do?'."

– Head of Sustainability at [Industrial Group]

As Bach and Suliková (2019, pp. 293–298) argue, each of the three meta-competences offer a distinctive benefit: 1) *volition* promotes a sense of purpose professionally, supporting the *"desire to act"* (Piot, 2012, p. 61); 2) *transfer competence* drives self-sufficiency for competence development; while 3) *action competence* strengthens the formation of strategic and organized plans, essentially rendering an individual able to manage their complex tasks independently.

In this case, we can see that the SMs have utilized volition and transfer competence in order to handle their new tasks, ultimately achieving action competence within their additional role. As a display of transfer competence, they have utilized existing competence from their primary role to create frameworks for new tasks. Volition, on the other hand, can be recognized in that they have found motivation in situations of ambiguity through both introspection and future orientation. Action competence is manifested where they have managed to install sequential action plans with all competence groups utilized efficiently, such as *Interviewee C*'s approach to solving issues with data inconsistency.

In line with Piot's (2012) suggestion that the *"desire to act"* is a necessary component in professional activities, the SM benefits from having an inner motivation to drive them through the vagueness of sustainability management. Here we can also identify that out of *Figure 3*, mainly *"ability to act"* and *"knowledge to act"* are being promoted by [Industrial Group]'s targets and resources, meanwhile the *"desire to act"* is something that both needs to be fostered by the individual, and has complex dependencies with context.

"I want my marketing work to feel good in my gut. If the company I work for works with sustainability, I feel that I can stand behind it myself and be more productive – and stand for what I write. It's important to me that we work with sustainability so that it will feel better for me personally to work. It's self-interest really."

– Interviewee A

SMs ultimately have the main tasks of optimizing the triple bottom line, and identifying where impact reductions can be the most influential by considering long-term consequences of actions. With this assignment, sustainability management is dependent on the combination of contextual knowledge, systems-thinking, and change agency. The conception of competences as *"higher-order abilities"* to act creatively in situations of chaos, as suggested by Bach and Suliková's (2019, p. 290), is clearly manifested in the demands of sustainability as an organizational task.

2) How do existing methods and collaboration impact sustainability management? What are the arrangements that have been made to support competence development for sustainability management?

All in all, the results manifest that collaboration and delegation skills are inevitable for managing sustainability in organizations. Whereas sustainability development of SMEs can be managed by either an individual or a small team, several tasks within the process require delegation or interorganizational collaboration.

Collaborative competence is, *however,* not necessarily a personal competence: as Borglund et al. (2021, pp. 67–68) suggest, being able to allocate the time and mental resources of others towards *"additional"* tasks is highly dependent on organizational priorities and having a hierarchical mandate to do so. Therefore, it is more reflective of reality to approach the *process of collaboration* as *collective competence* or *organizational capability* – also in the case of interorganizational collaboration.

In essence, arrangements for sustainability development have been rather *"light"* for the case subsidiaries, in the sense that they have not needed to make new recruitments or allocate a budget separately for sustainability related activities. [Industrial Group], on the other hand, has invested in both full-time employees and external services.

"We have received great starter tools from [Industrial Group] that we can use internally. But if we are to achieve sustainability throughout the value chain, then a little more resources are required through either time or money."

– Interviewee A

From the available support and the measures to promote competence for sustainability management, we can deduce that competence development within the subsidiaries is something [Industrial Group] has identified as a strategic priority. Further, it seems that [Industrial Group] shares Piot's (2012, p. 54) understanding that competence development not only improves employee wellbeing, but in extension also benefits businesses, as they retain expertise and gain collective competence.

3) To what extent is competence development influenced by the working atmosphere and outside pressures, such as expectations from the employer and stakeholders?

In the matter of pressures from within the subsidiaries and from external stakeholders, we find that the demands on an SM's competence correlate with market development. This, again, highlights the organization"s role in defining sustainability management, as identified by Borglund et al. (2021).

Whereas stakeholder pressures may have a negative connotation, Dzhengiz and Niesten (2019) recognize them as drivers for competence development. The interviewed SMs have all managed to overcome the following challenges, *but generally speaking*, it seems that if sustainability is introduced without an existing demand, then the situation is likely to cause hindrances to action. Here, apathy from customers can be connected to non-existing requirements on sustainability in the industry, or that the end user is not assigning sustainability a decisive role. As a consequence, the company might not yet have identified sustainability as an opportunity, or considered the changes that adopting sustainability values should obligate. In this stage it might be difficult for communication professionals to formulate relevant sustainability messages, since there are not set examples and an existing audience to target, while the SM role itself might seem trivial. This setup offers barriers to all areas in *Figure 3*: while the lack of direction and priority is an issue for both *"knowledge to act"* and *"desire to act"*, the introduction of a vague mandate can cause confusion for the SM regarding their role's purpose, essentially affecting the perceived *"possibility to act"*.

The expectation on SMs is to be skilled at change management and even to act as *"change agents"* (Borglund et al., 2021, p. 71; Dzhengiz & Niesten, 2019, p. 891). However, the case subsidiaries do not seem to assign remarkable hierarchical value to the SM role, and the SM interviewees do not clearly emphasize change agency actions – *such as company wide briefings, workshopping, or change management strategizing* – as the main focus of their sustainability management journey. What we can find is that the SM interviewees distinctly underline the importance of leadership commitment and existing organizational values. Correspondingly, Miller and Fyke (2020, p. 195) underline the crucial role of top management in establishing and cultivating the values that frontline managers are to effectuate.

Thereby, we can conclude that when applying an *in-house* approach to sustainability development that a) *is based on informal competence development*, and b) *assigns sustainability management to be a secondary task*, there needs to be foundations that cater to the conflicts that sustainability values inevitably introduce. If that is not the case, the findings on sustainability management competence in *Figure 11* and *Figure 12* become inapplicable.

"It's given that the management wants us to develop and get a better turnover. That is the goal of all management, but they are also fully aware that if we don't work with sustainability, then we won't get any customers. And our management is very keen on sustainability – working with it and having a clear understanding of its value.".

– Interviewee A

The demands and expectations on sustainability throughout the company's value chain affect volition, and impact how readily SMs can form a strategy for their actions. Simultaneously, the organization's prioritization of sustainability is a highly relevant condition for enabling functional sustainability management. Crystallized organizational motives and market logic offer professional incentives and focus areas for learning, and can therefore be decisive promoters of informal competence development.

5.1 Conclusions

The point of departure for this thesis was to assess the relevance and relationship between three identified key themes – *competence, assets,* and *context.* The aim was to determine the importance of an individual's internal qualities when adapting to manage sustainability, and to contextualize the process of informal competence development by examining the influence resource allocation and external factors may have.

The focus of the study was on the subjective experiences of MarCom professionals at subsidiaries of [Industrial Group], and the main data was collected through qualitative interviews. In order to gain a holistic understanding of the interviewees' situation, the research encompasses perspectives from [Industrial Group] through an interview with the Head of Sustainability, which is complemented by assessing interpersonal communications available to the sustainability network. All in all, the research has adopted a case study strategy with an emergent approach.

Findings and the theoretical framework of the research provide a rich description of both practical and theoretical challenges in sustainability management. It offers perspectives on competence development and sustainability management by providing an understanding of the processes behind action, and how the current organizational qualities of sustainability management impact its practitioners. The findings can benefit both sustainability managers, their employers, and organizations in the beginning of their sustainability journey, by providing theoretical background to tacit concepts.

5.1.1 Key conclusions with implications for theory and practice

First off, the findings provide explanations to why MarCom professionals in SMEs may be tasked with sustainability management: not only are there task overlaps leading to efficiency when the roles are combined, but MarCom professionals in SMEs are often equipped with several competences that support sustainability management.

When it comes to sustainability management specific competences, *Figure 11* offers theoretical implication by extending prior frameworks. Simultaneously, *Figure 11* supports professional practice by guiding individuals on which skills to develop for sustainability management. However, while the findings state that competences for sustainability management can be identified, it is necessary to account for its professional and organizational ambiguities. Through this, we arrive at the conclusion that sustainability management competences are, *ultimately,* contextual and difficult to determine.

The subsidiary SMs did not necessarily perceive themself to have undergone competence development, but rather to have been acting with existing competence. With the theoretical framework of competence, we can identify this as *transfer competence*. Nonetheless, when asked to reflect on their professional identity and their sustainability management competences, they all displayed development of especially *domain competences* and *procedural competences*.

Through the available sample of interviewees, we find that sustainability management offers a promising outlook for mature and experienced professionals interested in diversifying their professional role. In the current organizational comprehension of sustainability management, its successful adoption does not necessarily require a specific educational background or formal training. Rather, someone pivoting to manage sustainability can succeed by utilizing *meta-competences* and *collective competences*.

The findings and the discussion argue for an approach where sustainability management success is not solely attributed to competence, but rather seen as an interplay of competence, assets, and context. As an intersection of competence, assets, and context, and as a factor to professional performance, we find *collective competence*. Competence is thereby not exclusively something that individuals govern – competence is also maintained on an organizational level.

Assets and context become influential on the expression of competence in instances where they impact *"the desire to act"* and *"the possibility to act"*. While the context can offer incentives for action and foster volition, the impact of assets happens mainly in the individual's perception of their role's significance and purpose. Similarly, we can conclude that assets and context may influence *"the desire to learn"* and *"the possibility to learn"*, rendering the context of an individual relevant for their competence development.

Sustainability managers are expected to introduce operational changes, which should be supported by a hierarchical relevance and adequate mandate. This suggestion is not based on the intent to communicate superiority, but to promote action and a sense of urgency. The role needs to be approached with responsibility and seen to carry significance both strategically and organizationally. Although sustainability management can be successful as a secondary position such an approach should apply *"safety nets"* and methods for follow-up – *as identified to be the case for [Industrial Group]* – in order to avoid falling within the pitfall of superficial organizational greening.

All in all, the measures adopted by [Industrial Group] to support sustainability development in subsidiaries have been effective for advancing set goals.

The decentralized leadership model of [Industrial Group] has the potential to foster collective competence, and promote self-sufficiency within the subsidiaries. However, change management with this model requires significant human resources, something that is confirmed by [Industrial Group]'s sustainability organization in *Figure 1*.

A practical implication to consider for industry application, and an improvement suggestion for [Industrial Group], is to offer competence development support to SMs by striving for meta-competence activation with a cyclic competence development process as suggested by Bach and Suliková (2019). Smaller networks – *such as the Business Areas in this case* – offer excellent foundations for introducing this strategy. To elaborate on this suggestion: the aim of [Industrial Group] is to incorporate sustainability in a well-considered and profitable manner throughout operations. This introduces high expectations on the SMs' management capacity. Here, Bach and Suliková's (2019) training program suggestion, with an emphasis on regular exchange of peer experiences, along with recurrent self-evaluation, can promote formation of professional identity and a conception of purpose. At best, this can provide tools for the self-maintained generation of competence – both for individuals and for organizations.

5.2 Evaluation

Overall, the most pressing evaluative question for the thesis might be whether it is relevant to discuss competence development for sustainability management, as it can well be defined as an organizational activity, rather than a profession. Firstly, the SM interviewees consider themself to have been acting with existing competence, underscoring the lack of formal requirements on sustainability managers. Secondly, as the literature review makes apparent, the definition of a profession is not fulfilled by sustainability management due to its equivocality regarding professional purpose and the consequential multitude of professional identities. The problem is sidestepped in the selected terminology of this thesis – the choice to ignore this underlying question is made for the sake of clarity, placing priority on the aim to map out experiences in order to provide professional knowledge, as compared to theoretical knowledge.

From a methodological and practical point of view, it can be noteworthy that the research project was allowed to fully adopt an emergent case study strategy: initial propositions were based on tacit knowledge, and several stages were advanced simultaneously, without solidifying the timeline in detail. In practice, interviews were conducted far ahead from completing the theoretical framework. Earlier completion of the theoretical framework could definitely have guided thematizing in a more streamlined fashion, and assisted with a more practical interview design.

By selecting relevant sources earlier, suggestions from prior research could also have been more efficiently utilized to guide research questions. Although fluidity in the process has been beneficial in some regards, the approach lengthened the analysis process.

When assessing the results, it is good to keep in mind that the interview questions on competence departed from the interviewees' experiences of challenging situations relating to each competence group. The utilized question setup proved to be rather inefficient, and not all competence groups evoked an equal amount of reflection from the interviewees. It is also noteworthy that a few of the competences in *Figure 9* were mentioned by the interviewer in order to exemplify each competence category. This might have guided and altered the interviewees' reflections. The competences that are presented in *Figure 11* have, *however,* been identified by an analysis of the complete interviews, not just the direct questions on competence.

While the aim has been to recognize sustainability management competences with *Figure 11,* the empirical data collection of the research is limited. Given the narrow and small sample of interviewees, the results should be seen as highly specific to the subsidiaries in question, and to each company's organizational understanding of the SM role's mandate and responsibilities. Further, as none of the interviewees brought forth experiences of clear shortcomings, the findings can only be seen to highlight the benefits of a functional relationship between the themes of competence, context and assets. The findings may help with identifying where shortcomings stem from in other cases, but such instances have not been available for forming the analysis.

5.3 Suggestions

The themes of this thesis leave much room for further investigations. What identities and attitudes do SMs assume when their background is other than MarCom? How do SMs overcome hindrances in instances where there is not a functional relationship between competence, assets, and context?

It seems that most academic research on competence development remains limited to formal adult education, focusing on pedagogy. Given that lifelong learning has assumed a key position in desirable professional skills and is being promoted as a strategic focus area by corporations as well as policy makers, there will surely be a rising demand for transdisciplinary explanations of the processes behind informal and lifelong learning. Further, explorations into fluid and expanding professional identities could well serve interests across several sectors.

Future research into the themes of this thesis could surely benefit from utilizing a larger sample, while narrowing down research questions for a specific area of study. If the aim was to provide knowledge for generalization, each of the three main questions could provide a starting point for research on their own.

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Appendices

Appendix 1) Participant information leaflet 1/(2)

Interviews on Sustainability Management at [Industrial Group]'s subsidiaries

Carolina Lassheikki
[email removed]
[phone number removed]

Media Management, Master's Programme
Arcada University of Applied Sciences (FIN)

Selected persons at [Industrial Group]'s subsidiaries are invited to participate in qualitative interviews as part of a thesis project. The research adopts a case study strategy and information collection will largely be based on qualitative interviews. The interviews are estimated to require one hour.

The interviews will explore challenges of competence development when expanding one's professional role from communication and marketing to encompass sustainability management. They will also explore the relationship between [Industrial Group] as the change management agent and the subsidiaries as independent executors.

The researcher is Carolina Lassheikki, who is a Media Management master's thesis student at Arcada University of Applied Sciences. This research is being completed under the supervision of Tomas Träskman (Arcada). The research is not conducted as a commissioned project, but is initialized in agreement with [Industrial Group].

Your collaboration and interest in participating in the interviews is highly appreciated. Feel free to ask questions at any point of the process by contacting Carolina (FIN, SWE, ENG).

BACKGROUND

This thesis aims to analyze factors that might influence or even determine how successful a company is with their sustainability development journey and their change management in the green transition. **Key concepts are corporate sustainability, change management, competence development and personal motivation.**

As the field of study is Media Management, the research will depart from MarCom professionals who have taken on the additional role of Sustainability Manager during their employment at a subsidiary of [Industrial Group].

DATA COLLECTION AND HANDLING

The report will not disclose the identity of interviewees from the subsidiaries. The researcher will notify the interviewees about any deviations from the principles below that might occur in the process.

All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The full interviews will be accessible only to the researcher and the interviewee.

The recordings will be saved on Arcada's organizational Office 365 account in the researcher's personal folder for 365 days. Transcriptions will also be stored on the researcher's personal Google account for five years. Any stored personal information will be deleted as soon as it is no longer required for the research.

The report will be compiled in a way which does not expose individual interviewees. Quotes that might be used in the report will be anonymized before publishing. At the point when transcriptions are being analyzed, at least one cross-check with the interviewee will be made, where all instances of interpretations to their statements will be provided to them.

The research will be published as open-access on theseus.fi, an online platform for theses and publications from Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences.

Interviewees have the right to withdraw from the thesis project and request the removal of all their data at any point up until publication. Do not hesitate to get in contact with the researcher if you have concerns regarding your participation.

Interviews on Sustainability Management at [Industrial Group]'s subsidiaries

Carolina Lassheikki
[email removed]
[phone number removed]

ARCADA
Media Management, Master's Programme
Arcada University of Applied Sciences (FIN)

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1) Introduction

- Job description as a whole
- Duration of employment and changes to it
- Company size
- How the sustainability management role(s) was appointed in the company

2) Resources

Could you explain how sustainability management is organized at your company and how time consuming the role for you?

How has the added workload of sustainability management been attended to for you? What resources, *such as compensation or possibility to participate in seminars*, does the company offer to support sustainability management?

How influential has [Industrial Group] been in your company's sustainability development? Are there materials or resources that you have found especially beneficial?

3) Corporate Sustainability Development and Motivation

Could you reflect on the personal reasoning you had in accepting the role initially?

What has been the reception from the workforce regarding sustainability development at your company? How has this influenced you?

What kind of a role do stakeholders currently play in your sustainability development?

What's your view on your company's leadership commitment to sustainability?

4) Competence Development

What kind of connections do you see between your professional roles, how can they support each other?

If we consider a competence model of the four following competence groups, can you then think of a challenging situation for each in your sustainability management journey?

- **Domain competencies** – *knowledge about sustainability as a topic, its regulatory requirements, awareness of perspectives to the topic*
- **Procedural competencies** – *transdisciplinary work, systems thinking, capability to organize complex information*
- **Social competencies** – *stakeholder networking, interactive problem solving, critical thinking, self-motivation, change leadership*
- **Self competencies** – *internal qualities, personal attitudes, empathy, altruistic mindset*

Overall, which competencies do you think have been most important for you to develop for sustainability management?

Can you reflect on some areas or situations where you have excelled in your sustainability role?

5) Prospects for Sustainability Management

How do you feel about the term sustainability management in relation to your professional identity?

Do you think that the competencies you have mentioned will have the same significance in five years as they have had up until now?

Returning to the question in the beginning, would your reasoning be the same as then or has it changed since?

Given the opportunity, would you consider transitioning fully to a sustainability management role?

Interview outline

Carolina Lassheikki
[email removed]
[phone number removed]

ARCADA
Media Management, Master's Programme
Arcada University of Applied Sciences (FIN)

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1) Introduction

- Job description and duration of employment
- [Industrial Group]'s organizational chart
- Sustainability roles within the company

Can you reflect on your personal reasoning for working with sustainability? What makes your work rewarding?

Which of your competencies do you perceive as most prominent in the work with sustainability management?

2) [Industrial Group]'s organization of sustainability

What terms are used at [Industrial Group]'s management level for the different sustainability roles throughout the group?

How was the work with sustainability development initiated at [Industrial Group]'s management level?

Which people have been involved or prominent in the organization of sustainability work? What role have external actors played?

2) The subsidiaries' sustainability work

What differences have you identified in the organization of sustainability work between small-medium-sized (<100 employees) and large companies (>100 employees)?

How have you experienced the dialogue and cooperation between [Industrial Group] and the subsidiaries? Have there been any differences in the dialogue with the companies' CEOs compared to the sustainability managers?

Which of [Industrial Group]'s resources for sustainability work (e.g. webinars, materials in the Sustainability Toolkit, human resources) have you found to be most appreciated?

What view has [Industrial Group] had of any shortcomings in the subsidiaries' sustainability work and what measures have been applied in these cases?

2) Conclusion

What would be your overall evaluation of the whole group's progress in sustainability?