

**Internal Communication Strategies to promote Pro-Environmental
Employee Behaviors in line with Environmentally Focused Organizations’
Sustainability Goals**

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Abstract

The current study aimed to research the pro-environmental employee behaviors that the participant organizations promoted to align with their sustainability objectives, as well as the communication strategies that were used to encourage these pro-environmental behaviors. In order to investigate the communication strategies used to communicate the desired pro-environmental employee behaviors linked to the organizations' sustainability goals, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with communication specialists of the participant organizations. All of the participant organizations were environmentally focused organizations. The interviews showed that the main objectives of all organizations were lowering CO₂ impact and increasing circularity. The desired pro-environmental employee behaviors all contributed to those two main goals.

Before the organizations promoted pro-environmental behavior, they focused on raising awareness among their employees. The strategies used to raise awareness and increase knowledge about sustainability were using training sessions and workshops, consistent messaging and using various communication channels. Additionally, the organizations used different communication strategies to promote pro-environmental employee behavior that were in line with the organizational sustainability goals. These strategies included highlighting exemplary behavior, highlighting CSR commitments, and incorporating gamification elements. Finally, there were two characteristics that were incorporated into the communication strategies, namely using gradual communication, and adopting an enjoyable and friendly tone.

In contrast to previous studies the participant organizations barely used incentives to communicate with and motivate their employees. Since all interviewees in this study had influential positions on the organization and sustainability, it would be interesting to conduct future research in which employees from all organizational levels were also questioned. By adopting these strategies, organizations can enhance their sustainability initiatives, strengthen their corporate social responsibility, and motivate employees to perform pro-environmental employee behavior in line with the sustainability initiatives of the organization. The findings offer valuable insights and practical implications for organizations aiming to align their employees with sustainability objectives and providing a framework of communication strategies for organizations starting their sustainability journey.

Introduction

Since the effects of global warming have become more obvious in recent years, world leaders and governments are creating more sustainability goals (Fawzy et al., 2020). The idea of sustainability is to satisfy current needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to satisfy their own needs. It requires finding a balance between social progress, environmental preservation, and economic growth in a way that encourages long-term sustainability (Purvis et al., 2019). To limit problems caused by global warming, companies, organizations, and governments should take the lead in implementing improvements to lower their carbon footprint (Hardy, 2003; Fawzy et al., 2020).

To achieve long-term sustainability, companies and organizations can adopt existing sustainability goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals or obtain certifications such as B-corp. B-corp certification is a certification for organizations that incorporate social and environmental objectives into the core of their business activities and corporate objectives (Stubbs, 2017). However, despite the adoption of sustainability goals and initiatives, a gap remains between the implementation of sustainable practices and actual changes in employee behavior (De Vries, 2020).

One of the primary challenges organizations face is the need to align sustainability goals with broader organizational goals to maximize the impact and create a sustainable environment inside the organization. As Hahn and Kühnen (2013) remark, to maximize impact and create an environment of sustainability inside the organization, sustainability goals must be integrated into the company's broader strategic objectives.

Furthermore, there is need for a comprehensive strategy that considers both short and long-term effects due to the complicated nature of sustainability changes (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010). Due to the continued effects of global warming, sustainability concerns are anticipated to last for a long time. Sustainability related changes will have to be made more often and on larger scales, as the global warming continues. More systematic methods are required in sustainability science to mobilize knowledge in support of transformative change (Caniglia et al., 2021).

To achieve environmental policy goals and sustainable behavior, organizations need to encourage their employees to change their behaviors. Pro-environmental employee behavior refers to actions taken by employees that are intended for reducing the negative impact of organizational activities on the environment. Pro-environmental behaviors in the workplace can for example be cutting back on waste and conserving energy (Canova & Manganelli, 2020).

Promoting changes in pro-environmental behavior, however, can frequently meet with resistance from employees who may not comprehend the need for change or believe that it disturbs their current working patterns (De Vries, 2020). Organizations need tools to encourage their workers to change their behaviors (De Vries, 2020). To encourage employees to adopt more pro-environmental behaviors, internal sustainability communication is important (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2016). According to Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2016) internal communication strategies can help increase sustainability awareness and engagement among employees. This is important because the success of organizational sustainability initiatives frequently depends on the engagement of employees (Wehrens et al, 2019; Allen, 2016). Engaging in sustainability initiatives can in turn lead to a more positive impact on the environment (Wehrens et al., 2019).

Sustainability communication strategies are crucial for organizations to effectively communicate sustainability changes with employees. According to Chen and Chang (2013), one effective communication strategy is to develop clear and consistent messages. Additionally, providing training and education about sustainability can be a useful strategy for organizations to help employees understand the importance of sustainability and their role in contributing to it (Jackson et al., 2012).

However, despite the growing interest in sustainability and pro-environmental behavior among employees, there is still a lack of scientific research on the effectiveness of internal communication strategies in promoting sustainability in the workplace and its impact on positive employees' attitudes and pro-environmental employee behaviors in reducing organizations' environmental footprint and achieving organizations' environmental goals (Ansari et al., 2021). According to Jones and Lynch (2016) organizations should employ evidence-based techniques to create communication strategies that are based on empirical data (Jones & Lynch, 2016). Additionally, Lakoff (2010) argues that there is a lack of frameworks especially designed to address challenges related to climate change and sustainability.

As sustainability communication is crucial in motivating pro-environmental employee behaviors it is important to thoroughly understand the different strategies of organizations in promoting such behaviors (Chen & Chang, 2013). Environmentally focused organizations can provide information about their sustainable communication strategies, initiatives and practices, which can be an example for organizations starting with sustainability focused goals.

In-depth interviews will be used in this study to gather more information about internal communication about sustainability and pro-environmental employee behavior. Interviews were held with communication professionals from environmentally focused organizations to get a thorough understanding of the mechanisms behind the development of sustainability communication strategies and the motivation of pro-environmental behaviors in the workplace. Additionally, interviews can provide insights into the implementation process of such internal communication strategies of organizations, information that can be hard to obtain via other research methods. The interviews are used to answer the following research question: What are the internal communication strategies that environmentally focused organizations use to promote pro-environmental behavior among employees, and how are these strategies influenced by organizational sustainability goals?

Theoretical framework

Organizational sustainability goals

Every successful company or organization is built on a solid foundation of organizational goals (Popova & Sharpanskykh, 2011). Organizational goals provide direction, focus, and a sense of meaning for everyone associated with the organization (Popova & Sharpanskykh, 2011; Allen, 2016). Understanding the company's mission and vision is the first step in the goal-setting process. While the vision offers a long-term view on where the organization wants to be in the future, the mission describes the organization's purpose and what it hopes to accomplish (Campagna & Fernandez, 2007).

Short-term and long-term goals can be used to categorize organizational objectives (Harackiewicz et al., 2000). Usually accomplished in a few weeks or months, short-term goals are intended to move the business closer to its long-term objectives (Harackiewicz et al., 2000). Smaller goals must be set in order to achieve sustainability, a long-term aim (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010). Examples include promoting environmentally friendly transportation, using digital alternatives to cut down on paper use, and developing recycling programs (Thøgersen et al., 2021; Atherton & Giurco, 2011). Long-term aims can for example be lowering the organizations' carbon footprint to a quantifiable degree by a certain year (Butler et al., 2011).

Combining organizational goals and sustainability goals is possible, and it is often referred to as corporate social responsibility (CSR) in literature (Tai & Chuang, 2014). When

companies adopt CSR practices, they take responsibility for the impact of their operations on both people and the environment (Tai & Chuang, 2014). By integrating corporate social responsibility into their organizational goals, organizations can achieve their objectives while also making a positive impact on society and the environment.

To create clear sustainable goals, organizations can use existing frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations approved a set of 17 global objectives aimed at promoting social, economic, and environmental sustainability (Eyhorn et al., 2019; Fuso Nerini, 2019; Sachs et al., 2019). Incorporating the SDGs into organizational sustainability goals or working towards sustainability-focused certifications, such as B-corps (Benefit Corporation), demonstrates a commitment to sustainable development and Corporate Social Responsibility (Stubbs, 2017). According to McMullen and Warnick (2016, p. 12) B-corp certified organizations ‘transform the market structure intentionally and directly by creating economic, social, and/or environmental value simultaneously’.

Using existing goals like the SDG goals or certifications like the B-corp to create organizational goals can be helpful to create a sustainable organizational culture (Soini & Dessein, 2016). Goals and certifications can also be helpful because measuring and tracking goals can be a great motivation for sustainable behavior in the workplace (Ganta, 2014). To be able to measure the sustainability goals the goals should be quantifiable (Butler et al., 2011). Measuring and monitoring sustainability metrics, such as energy use and waste reduction, can show development and offer insight for ongoing improvement. Sharing this information with employees can reemphasize the importance of sustainability and increases employee engagement (Ganta, 2014). This brings us to the study's first focus, which is on the sustainability goals that the participant organizations are working toward and how they are incorporated into their overall objectives and activities.

Pro-environmental employee behavior

Pro-environmental employee behavior refers to “any action taken by employees that she or he thought would improve the environmental performance of the company” (Ramus & Steger, 2000, p. 606). Examples of actions employees can take are activities like cutting back on waste, using eco-friendly items and conserving energy (Canova & Manganelli, 2020). These activities can be realized by for example using the stairs instead of the elevator, using double-sided paper for printing, turning off unnecessary electronic devices and decreasing car

use and meat consumption (Allen, 2016; Canova & Manganelli, 2020; Farrukh et al., 2022; Laestadius et al., 2016; Takacs & Borrión, 2020; Thøgersen et al., 2021).

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), being conscious of environmental issues and understanding the consequences of individual actions are necessary for employees to take sustainability related actions. Awareness is a prerequisite for engaging in pro-environmental behavior. Providing employees with relevant information can help create awareness among employees about sustainability efforts (Allen, 2016). Additionally, as noted by Allen (2016), the information needed for pro-environmental action should be precise. When employees are informed about environmental problems and what actions the solution to these problems requires, organizations can encourage them to engage in pro-environmental actions.

There are different factors important for motivating employees to perform pro-environmental behavior. First, leadership support and exemplary pro-environmental behavior can predict pro-environmental behavior in organizations (Blok et al., 2015; Junsheng et al., 2020). The results of the study of Blok et al. (2015) showed that leadership support and exemplary pro-environmental behavior had a significant positive impact on employees' intention to act pro-environmentally.

Secondly, a properly designed reward system can effectively encourage employees to engage in environmentally responsible practices (Daily & Huang, 2001). By providing rewards, companies can reinforce positive behaviors and enhance employee motivation and commitment towards environmental sustainability (Daily & Huang, 2001; Lent and Wells, 1994). There are various ways to implement rewards, such as financial compensation and recognition programs. For instance, companies can offer profit-sharing programs, salary increases, benefits, incentives, and suggestion programs to acknowledge and reward employees for their environmental efforts (Atwater and Bass, 1994; Leitch et al., 1995; Laabs, 1992; Patton and Daley, 1998 as cited in Daily & Huang, 2001).

Lastly, to motivate pro-environmental behavior, organizations should invest in their corporate social responsibility efforts (Raza et al., 2021). Tian and Robertson (2019) showed that employees' perception of corporate social responsibility has an indirect impact on their willingness to engage in pro-environmental behavior. In line with these results, according to Raza et al. (2021) corporate social responsibility has a direct positive impact on employee engagement. Employee engagement refers to the degree of commitment and emotional involvement an employee has toward their job and organization (Raza et al., 2021). Employee engagement is, in turn, an important factor in predicting pro-environmental behavior. Organizations should put a strong emphasis on engaging employees (Paais et al.,

2020), as employees with high employee engagement demonstrate pro-environmental behaviors at higher levels than employees with low engagement (Karatepe et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2012; Shiu et al., 2019).

All in all, there are different ways to motivate employees to demonstrate pro-environmental behavior. Organizations can for example try to increase employee engagement and the perception of corporate social responsibility. Additionally, leadership support and exemplary pro-environmental behaviors can also be beneficial in encouraging employees. This leads us to the second focus of the current study and interviews which is on the specific pro-environmental employee behaviors the participant organizations are promoting among their employees.

Sustainability communication

Sustainability communication is a specific type of communication that tries to build awareness and promote the understanding of sustainability issues and their implications for society, the economy, and the environment (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). Sustainability communication refers to the ways via which a company updates its internal stakeholders, including employees, about its sustainability activities, goals, and developments (Bednárík, 2019). With the aid of efficient internal sustainability communication, an organization may establish a sustainability culture, enhance employee engagement, motivate behavior change and eventually achieve its sustainability objectives (Chung & Lee, 2018).

Any organization's sustainability strategy must include internal sustainability communication (Chung & Lee, 2018). Internal sustainability communication can be implemented through various levels of communication strategies. The first level involves communication directed from the corporate to its employees. Chen and Chang's (2013) meta-analysis revealed the importance of clear communication in developing a sustainable culture within organizations. According to the study, organizations must develop clear and consistent messages that stress the value of sustainability and motivate employees to take action. The messaging should be consistent and reinforced through various internal communication channels such as company newsletters and email updates (Chen & Chang, 2013; Nwagbara & Reid, 2013).

Another aspect of internal communication involves the communication strategies employed by management to communicate with employees. Managers can for example provide training and education to employees about sustainability (Jackson et al., 2012).

Managers who share information about sustainability should be well knowledgeable about the information they share to enhance the effect of the information on employees (Allen, 2016). Sustainability training and education can increase the occurrence of pro-environmental behavior in different ways. Informational sustainability interventions can for example use prompts to remind their employees to perform sustainable behavior or justifications by giving them several reasons for performing sustainable behavior (Jackson et al., 2012). Other possible way to inform employees is by giving them instructions, information, and feedback (Nielsen & Randall, 2012; Jackson et al., 2012). All in all, current research findings suggest that, by providing training and education sessions on sustainability practices employees can get a better understanding of the importance of sustainability and how they can contribute.

Effective communication of sustainability information from management to employee level is crucial to ensure that employees comprehend the information adequately (Allen, 2016). Along with providing training, organizations should also focus on framing the information communicated in a considered way. One way of achieving this is by framing the information in moral terms, which can be realized by incorporating an emotional component to the sustainability information shared (Lakoff, 2010). Providing a structure to the information can also make it more comprehensible, finding overarching themes or narratives that encapsulate the key points. Overall, it is essential to communicate sustainability information in a way that resonates with employees and enhances their understanding and engagement with the organization's sustainability efforts.

The last level of communication occurs on employee-to-employee level. Employee communication can happen through different channels of communication such as email, phone calls or informal conversations with their colleagues (Potoski & Callery, 2018). Although informal communication can be unreliable in terms of factual accuracy, employees tend to perceive their peers as more trustworthy when it comes to discussing emotionally charged or identity-related issues (Sias, 2005). This is because individuals tend to have greater trust in those within their own group, which reduces their skepticism towards the motives of the messenger (Sias, 2005). Additionally, individuals tend to evaluate their own behavior by comparing it to their perceptions of peer norms (Allen, 2016). As a result, workgroup peers can have a significant impact on one another's attitudes and behaviors, for example about sustainability (Potoski & Callery, 2018).

Managers and corporate organizations can motivate peer communication among employees. Organizations can for example create Green Teams (Allen, 2016). A Green Team is a group of employees within an organization who are dedicated to promoting and

Commented [TDA1]: Paragraph #2 discusses corporate-employee level, paragraph #3 management-employee level and paragraph#5 is employee-employee level. However, this paragraph seems to discuss framing which could be used in messages of the two first levels mentioned above. This paragraph could be restructured so its focus is clearer.

implementing sustainable practices and environmentally responsible behaviors within the workplace. In a study by Potoski and Callery (2018), a bank created green teams that were appointed by the management. The green leaders of the teams communicated environmental programs through formal and informal channels. Green leaders could give small rewards to employees with high environmental performance. Results of the study showed that using green peer communication teams increased the participation rate of employees in environmental programs as well as the engagement of employees with the organization (Potoski & Callery, 2018).

In conclusion, organizations can use different strategies on different levels to communicate sustainability to their employees. Organizations can use clear and consistent messaging to inform managers. Managers can use training and education to enhance awareness and engagement among employees. Additionally, managers can promote employee communication through green teams. This leads to the final focus of the current study and interviews, which is on the communication strategies participant organizations are using to raise awareness and change employee behavior on environmental topics and practices.

Method

The data collection method used in this qualitative research consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are an effective way to provide insights into the factors that encourage or discourage employee engagement with sustainability goals, because in-depth interviews allow for rich and detailed data (Morris, 2015; Granot et al., 2012; Patton, 2014). Additionally, interviews can give an insight into the fundamental values and objectives of organizations and the motivations for choices made by the organizations in terms of objectives, behaviors and communication strategies. Overall, conducting in-depth interviews can be a useful research method for examining the complexity of the link between internal communication and pro-environmental behavior as well as the difficulties that organizations encounter in this area (Morris, 2015; Patton, 2014).

Sampling strategy and sample characteristics

For this study purposive sampling was used, since the participants were selected on pre-determined criteria. Due to the research objectives, purposive sampling is a fitting sampling method as it allows for specific characteristics in participants like knowledge and experience (Campbell et al., 2020; Etikan et al., 2016). The participants chosen in this

research needed to meet two requirements. Firstly, the participants had to work for an organization that actively worked with sustainability objectives in their long- and short-term purpose, vision, and goals. Secondly, the participants had to be involved in the internal communication about those sustainability objectives within the organization.

A total of 10 organizations were recruited. A variety of organizations in both the profit and non-profit sector were included in the study. The organizations that were interviewed were either B-corps certificated or non-profit organizations actively working on sustainability. The interviewees were all communication professionals from the recruited organizations. An overview of the sample characteristics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

Name (Anonymized)	Function	Organization	Type of Organization (Profit vs. non- profit)
'G'	HR manager	Product store	Profit (B-corps)
'Z'	Communication specialist	Charity organization	Non-profit
'A'	Brand manager	Product store	Profit (B-corps)
'H'	HR manager	Food company	Profit (B-corps)
'C'	Junior Brand Manager	Food company	Profit (B-corps)
'W'	Head of Engagement	Fintech startup	Profit (Currently getting a B-corps certification)
'M'	Office manager	Health care innovation company	Profit (B-corps)
'S'	Communication specialist	University	Non-profit
'N'	Sustainability manager	Design studio	Profit (B-corps)

'V'	Marketing and communication manager	Accountancy company	Profit (B-corps)
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Procedure and interview guide

The interviews were either face-to-face or via video conferencing. The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed. All interviews were held in Dutch as that was the participants native language. Participants received the consent form and were asked to sign it before the interview started. Additionally, the participants gave oral permission to be recorded. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their communication strategies regarding employee engagement with sustainability changes and about their communication strategies to encourage pro-environmental behavior. For instance, one of the questions asked to participants was: Are there any rewards or incentives that the organization offers to encourage pro-environmental behaviors?

The interview guide (Appendix C) was formulated beforehand as it were semi-structured interviews. The interview guide exists of all three of the sensitizing concepts mentioned in this study. The first sensitizing concept was organizational sustainability goals, which focused on the sustainability goals of the organization. The second sensitizing concept was pro-environmental behavior. Here the participant was asked about the pro-environmental employee behaviors the organization was promoting and how. The third and last sensitizing subject was sustainability communication and the interview questions focused on role of sustainability communication strategies on employee engagement and behavior.

Data Analysis

To analyze the interview transcripts a thematic analysis was used. The conduction of the thematic analysis involved identifying patterns and themes within the data through the process of coding. The transcripts were coded via an iterative coding process. By using flexible coding, the coding framework was improved, with codes being added or changed as necessary. Due to the flexibility of this coding method, new themes that were not initially considered were able to arise. The software ATLAS.ti was used to organize the data and identify patterns and themes within that data. The code scheme existed of 16 codes with another 34 subcodes. In total a number of 1264 text passages were assigned to the codes.

Transcribing the interviews was the first step in the analytical process, and the transcriptions were read through several times to ensure a thorough comprehension of the information. After the thorough reading, the coding process was conducted by identifying and categorizing sections of the text that related to specific themes. After adding a new code to the list, previous transcripts were checked again to see if they applied there as well. This procedure made sure that all relevant data was recorded and provided for a deeper understanding of the data.

Reliability and validity

To ensure the reliability of the study, the interview guide was followed in all interviews. Additionally, notes were taken by the researcher to increase the reliability. To enhance the reliability of the data analysis process, the data analysis was conducted using the software ATLAS.ti. To improve the validity of the study, a thorough description of the methods and sample were provided. These steps ensured that the study was both reliable and valid.

Results

The results section will present the outcomes from the ten in-depth interviews conducted for this study. Firstly, the result section will describe the organizational sustainability goals of the participant organizations, highlighting shared characteristics. Secondly, the results will go into the pro-environmental employee behaviors that align with the two main sustainability goals from the participant organizations. Lastly, the results will describe the communication strategies used to raise awareness and promote pro-environmental employee behavior.

Organizational sustainability goals

The current study focused on interviewing organizations that prioritize sustainability. These organizations had specific corporate goals centered around sustainability. Given the broad nature of sustainability, most organizations utilized various certifications to provide a clear definition of their sustainability objectives. The certifications employed by the participant organizations included B-Corp, Biological, Cradle to Cradle, Climate Neutral,

Fair Trade, Skal, Social Enterprise NL, and Vegan. Additionally, many organizations incorporated the sustainable development goals established by the United Nations to shape their sustainability objectives.

Long- and short-term goals. The participant organizations were asked about their sustainability goals and the difference between long- and short-term sustainability goals. Many organizations, however, mentioned not having a clear distinction between long- and short-term sustainability goals. The B-corp certificated organizations especially mentioned that the difference between long- and short-term sustainability goals is not present. One organization for example mentioned using goals for the medium term instead of long- or short-term: *And if you don't take your steps in that, you just lose your B Corp label. So, for all of our policies, for the future in the medium term, there are sustainable propositions in there 7:86 ¶ 96.* Another organization agreed on goals not being specifically short or long, as their junior brand manager put it: *But that's long term and short term. Because they're working on that now, but they're also working on how we are going to lay it out a year from now 8:47 ¶ 75.* The organizations, although not differentiating substantially between long- and short-term goals as expected, still maintained a clear set of sustainability goals.

Participant organizations' sustainability goals. Companies operating in the sales industry were interviewed, and all shared a common goal of maximizing the utilization of recycled materials. These organizations were actively striving to minimize their use of packaging materials. For instance, a consumer goods company focused on employing natural materials and avoiding the use of plastic. Another consumer goods company aimed to achieve 100% circularity and 100% renewable energy by 2035, with 70% already attained. Lastly, a design studio prioritized reducing and offsetting CO₂ emissions. To be able to offset they are calculating the CO₂ emissions of all of their products. Their sustainability manager said about this:

If I had to say specifically what are goals are, is that our organization, so the offices and stores, want to go to zero emissions, that we offset all products emissions from in carding and that we're not just going to produce new products but offer services because that's just the future 1:113 ¶ 53.

The food industry organizations focused on enhancing their B-Corp scores and promoting sustainable and organic products throughout the production chain. Additionally, one organization emphasized the importance of ensuring that the value of products remains within the countries of origin, thereby reducing global inequalities. As their HR manager put it: *But we have a very clear mission and that is to leave as much impact as possible with the farmers where we get our food from 6:142 ¶ 7*. The other food organization also highlighted their commitment to addressing packaging and food waste. Additionally, that organization aimed to significantly increase the proportion of organic and vegetarian products in their sales to 90% and 95%, respectively, while prioritizing biodiversity conservation.

Two companies in the study provided advisory services. These organizations shared the goal of improving their B-Corp scores. One organization focused on gaining more points from B-corp and the other organization focused on gaining a certification from B-corp. One of the organizations had a sub-objective of enhancing their impact with customers, aiming to allocate at least 1% of their profits toward sustainability consulting between 2025 and 2050. Sustainability consulting in their case meant advising partners and customers about sustainable options in their industries. Most of their customers are farmers which makes it relevant to discuss sustainability options in their work practices. As their marketing- and communication manager put it:

And ensuring that our customers also become more and more sustainable. Just for your image, 40% of our customers are in the agricultural sector. So, they are farmers for example.

Needless to say, there is a lot of commotion in the field of sustainability. So, we're always talking to our customers about that. And that translates for us into sustainability consulting.

4:178 ¶ 129

Their intention was to contribute to the establishment of a circular economy through their advisory services. The other company is a fintech startup that facilitates charitable giving for organizations, enabling them to support a more sustainable society.

In addition to the aforementioned industries, the study also involved an educational institution and one nonprofit charity organization. The educational institution aimed to achieve a carbon-neutral campus by implementing sustainable buildings and reducing CO₂ emissions resulting from transportation. Their goal was to reduce the carbon footprint of both employees and students' travel by 75% before 2030. They also emphasized circular practices, such as circular coffee roasting and food re-use initiatives. The nonprofit organization aimed

to expand their reach and focus on prevention, reintegration, and family reunification, as the organization focuses on children in need. While their primary goals were social in nature, they also aimed to reduce their CO₂ impact, such as by minimizing plane usage. Their communication specialist said about this: *And certainly since corona we have started to fly much less indeed. And we have actually discovered that we can do our work much better from, well from home 9:81 ¶ 87.*

Commonalities and differences in sustainability goals. Overall, the study findings indicate that sustainability goals and practices vary across organizations, but there is a prevailing trend towards waste circularity and carbon emissions reduction. Each interviewed organization incorporates sustainability into its goals and practices in distinct ways, with some formulating specific strategies while others adopt a more general approach. However, it is worth noting that all organizations emphasized that sustainability appears in every aspect of their operations and, in some cases, even serves as the core principle of their company. As the interviewed design company stated it:

We just find it very important that sustainability is not a separate department. So that you just have finance, marketing and sustainability, but the sustainability actually collaborates with every department because sustainability goes way beyond using sustainable wood. It's really about, yes what I'm saying, also how we communicate 1:110 ¶ 69.

Pro-environmental employee behavior

Organizations are attempting to encourage pro-environmental employee behaviors that align with their environmental and organizational goals. By doing so, they aim to not only achieve their business objectives but also contribute to a greener and more sustainable future. The participant organizations' main objectives are to reduce CO₂ emissions and to increase circularity. To achieve these main objectives, organizations are motivating a range of different pro-environmental employee behaviors that are related to the main objectives.

CO₂ Impact. The results revealed that participant organizations employed various strategies to reduce their CO₂ impact. The first strategy concerned sustainable transportation. This included encouraging employees to walk, use bikes, utilize public transportation, or choose for electric cars. One of the organizations that chose for electric cars said: *But just for your image, for a year and a half we no longer provide lease cars that run on fuel. All electric 4:179 ¶ 156.* Notably, one organization even implemented a tire pump to ensure optimal energy efficiency for the (predominantly electric) vehicles used by their employees. Additionally, the organization asked their employees to use green electricity if they had a charging station for their electric car in the garden. As their marketing and communication manager put it: *And just a simple example, if you put a charging station in your home with us, we do also ask you to put in green power 4:126 ¶ 246.*

While most organizations only encouraged sustainable transportation, one organization even forbid their employees to travel to their office by car. Their communication specialist mentioned: *Because, for example, we have a mobility policy where we are no longer allowed to come to work by car, mainly to work from home 9:36 ¶ 39.* Another organization even encouraged moving closer to the organization by paying employees' moving costs. The interviewee from the organization mentioned: *We now have some kind of relocation arrangement. If you move closer to the organization, you get reimbursed for certain expenses on your move. So, they do try to really encourage that 3:108 ¶ 201.* Additionally, all organizations supported hybrid working arrangements, allowing employees to work from home and thereby reducing transportation-related emissions.

Another area of focus for reducing CO₂ impact was online clutter and energy consumption by servers. The participant organizations implemented different solutions to address this issue. One organization organized a "clutter contest," motivating employees to clean their servers. The organization said about this:

Yes, well, now is also, for example, because we're doing a clean-up exercise internally, so to speak. And besides we were already paperless, we want to have all the document structure as minimal as possible anyway. Because you just overload that service, that's also ballast again. Again, that's energy. 5:107 ¶ 230.

Another organization encouraged employees to communicate through Teams rather than relying on energy-intensive email exchanges. The last organization that focused on

energy consumption by servers worked on deleting unnecessary videos, further minimizing energy usage.

Lastly, the topic of lunch also emerged as an area where CO₂ impact could be addressed. Meat consumption was mentioned by four out of the ten organizations as an area of focus, as the production of meat produces large amounts of CO₂. Those four organizations all provided a vegetarian lunch for their employees. A design company said about their vegetarian lunch: *The lunch used to be so much meat, fish too, mackerel, everything was there. And so internally we did take steps to say, okay we as a company actually don't support that at all. So, lunch is now completely vegetarian* 1:114 ¶ 59. One organization sourced their lunch from a local farmer. By doing so the organization had way less transport emissions for their lunches and reduced waste.

Circularity. In addition to CO₂ impact, the participant organizations also emphasized circularity, focusing, among others, on recycling and waste reduction. Sustainable employee behaviors in this area were promoted through various strategies. Firstly, organizations encouraged giving sustainable presents for birthdays and offered employees the option to donate money to charity instead of receiving traditional gifts during Christmas. One organization even reported that employees expressed a desire to declutter and stated that they no longer wanted unnecessary items: *For example, we don't give birthday gifts anymore, because everyone has enough stuff, everyone gets to donate to a charity.* 5:106 ¶ 34.

Reducing paper usage was another important aspect addressed by all organizations. They implemented measures such as printing less or utilizing double-sided printing. In the case of double-sided printing all organizations put it as the default setting on the printer. In the case of printing less, one organization used a sign above the printer that said 'print less', others communicated paper usage restrictions via e-mail or face-to-face. Some organizations even achieved a paperless office environment. Furthermore, a communication department mentioned being selective about promotional materials, especially in cases where items like posters were requested for short events. The interviewee said about this: *When it comes, for example, to really heavily printed flyers or posters or you name it. We do try to be really conscious about that* 3:109 ¶ 236.

All participant organizations demonstrated a commitment to waste separation and recycling. One organization highlighted their focus on minimizing food waste by ensuring that nothing from the fridge was discarded. Additionally, the organization that sourced lunch from a local farmer acknowledged that this approach decreased their overall food waste. The

interviewee from the organization said about this: *We naturally eat healthy from the farmer, so we don't have any waste from that either* 5:62 ¶ 134.

In addition to waste separation and recycling, participant organizations also promoted re-using materials like coffee cups and water bottles. The communication specialist from a university said about this: *We may still have paper coffee cups, but people actually hardly use them. In fact, when we go with colleagues to get coffee on campus, somewhere else, then more and more colleagues are bringing their own reusable coffee cup* 3:107 ¶ 141.

Overall, the findings indicate that organizations translate their environmental goals into employee behaviors as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Desired pro-environmental employee behavior and their contribution to CO₂ impact and circularity goals.

Desired employee behavior	CO₂ Impact	Circularity
Sustainable transport	High	N/A
Vegetarian lunches	High	N/A
Local lunch	High	High
Conscious server use	High	N/A
Hybrid working	High	N/A
Inflate tires	High	N/A
Sustainable presents	N/A	High
Reduce paper use	N/A	High
Sort waste	N/A	High
Recycle	Medium	High
Re-use	High	High

Sustainability communication

The key characteristics and experiences of participants were divided in the focus on awareness and on behavior change. The characteristics of the strategies of raising awareness are knowledge acquisition, training sessions and workshops, communication channels, and consistency. The communication strategies focused on behavior change were highlighting exemplary behavior, incorporating gamification elements, and leveraging CSR commitments. All the mentioned communication strategies were focused on increasing engagement among

employees and had two common characteristics: trying to gradually communicate changes and using a friendly and enjoyable tone while communicating about sustainability changes.

Knowledge acquisition. The current findings indicate that the participant organizations employ various communication strategies aimed at raising awareness and driving behavioral change. The findings suggest that awareness is a prerequisite for actual pro-environmental behavior change. According to the interviewees, knowledge acquisition is a key step in raising awareness among employees. Employees are better able to comprehend the urgency and importance of the pro-environmental behaviors promoted by the organizations when they have access to accurate information about environmental challenges. As the sustainability manager of a participant organization mentioned: *Anyway, we hope that by just making employees aware of the impact that things have they end up making better decisions themselves* 1:117 ¶ 135.

Training sessions and workshops. Firstly, the participant organizations used educational workshops and training programs to offer employees insightful information on environmental challenges, sustainable practices, and the benefits of adopting pro-environmental behaviors. All participant organizations provided training sessions to their employees. Some training sessions focused on raising awareness about the environment and environmental problems in general, whereas some organizations chose to focus the training sessions specifically on their own environmental goals. As the sustainability manager of a design company quoted it:

And involve employees in general. We also try to inform them very much about sustainability topics not only related to our organization. So, for example I gave a presentation once about sustainable fashion with then tips of I can look out for here or here and these are maybe some nice brands that you can look at, but also just: don't you know what the impact is 1:112 ¶ 117.

The participant organizations employed a variety of approaches for their training sessions and workshops. Some used online webinars, while others selected face-to-face meetings or hired external companies for training. Certain organizations attended sessions provided by B-corps or social enterprises, such as B-corps' B-leader training, which one organization followed.

Additionally, organizations tracked sustainability progress to share that information with their employees. One organization for example tracked the CO₂ emission of their previous meat consumption and compared it to the CO₂ emissions now that their lunches are vegetarian. Their sustainability manager said about this: *So, also for example when we started making that lunch vegetarian, then we had calculated what the impact was of our average lunch with meat and what the CO₂ impact was without meat. 1:119 ¶ 219.* Showing the numbers and the direct impact had a positive effect on the attitude of their employees.

Communication channels. Secondly, organizations used various communication channels to make sure that environmental information is widely spread across the organization. This can include internal newsletters, intranet portals, and regular email updates that highlight interesting environmental initiatives, successes, and challenges. Providing employees with up-to-date information organizations maintained a constant discussion and kept environmental concerns on top of employees' minds. All organizations used both online and offline channels to communicate about sustainability with their employees. For the online channels the participant organizations mainly used e-mail and intranet portals. When communicating about sustainability communication offline it was mostly from manager to employee in team meetings.

There were no organizations that used paperwork to share sustainability information as using less paper is one of the pro-environmental behaviors all organizations pursue. There was only one organization that had a specific intranet channel for sustainability communication, they mentioned however, that they still used other communication channels to inform their employees about sustainability. The other organizations did not express any interest in having a sustainability only channel. As the head of engagement of an organization said when I asked about this: *I have to laugh, because it's not that we say we're going to communicate on sustainability now. It just comes up in team meetings. Team meetings, threaded conversations with employees and through the mail 2:94 ¶ 247.*

Nonetheless, one organization mentioned that using too many channels might have a negative effect. When the organization made an influential change in their transportation fees, they wanted to make sure all employees knew about this change and could reach out to the organization to ask questions. The organization did not have a clear communication channel to share sustainable and influential messages like their new transportation rule. As a solution they shared it on all channels both online and offline. The interviewee mentioned:

You also notice a certain yes, panic soccer there, this really needs to be known to everybody, so we're going to deploy everything. Because that can also create irritating situations. Because people who did read that message in one go and took those steps, and then received ten reminders through another channel, that they are going to travel in a new way, yes they can at some point think, yes I know it now. 3:106 ¶ 262

Consistency. Additionally, organizations also focused on the consistency of these messages. As multiple communication channels were used, consistency was important to monitor among all these communication channels. Seven out of the ten participant organizations mentioned that consistency in their sustainability messages was well maintained because it matched the mission and vision of the organization. One of the interviewees mentioned: *Yes, I think we can ensure consistency because it is so encoded in the Mission & Vision. So that already gives a lot of direction 2:112 ¶ 286.* All messages related to the environmental goals were clearly linked to the organizational goals, so this remained in line with the organizational goals that were set up throughout all the actions. To put it concisely, the organizations focused on consistency between actions and messages, which ensured consistency in their messages as well.

Communication strategies

Once awareness has been established with the aid of knowledge, organizations utilize different communication strategies to promote the desired pro-environmental behaviors. So, knowledge influenced awareness and awareness was the starting point for sustainable communication strategies to promote behavior change. A total of three communication strategies were derived from the accounts of the participant organizations (Figure 1), namely: incorporating gamification elements, highlighting exemplary behavior and leveraging CSR commitments. All communication strategies were focused on increasing engagement among employees and had two shared characteristics. These two characteristics were trying to gradually communicate changes and using a friendly and enjoyable tone while communicating about sustainability changes. While highlighting exemplary behavior and leveraging CSR commitments were supported by the theoretical background and therefore incorporated in the interview questions, incorporating gamification elements came up during the interviews, without specifically asking about it. Additionally, gradually communicating

changes and using a friendly and enjoyable tone came up during the interviews as well and there were no specific questions formulated beforehand about the two characteristics.

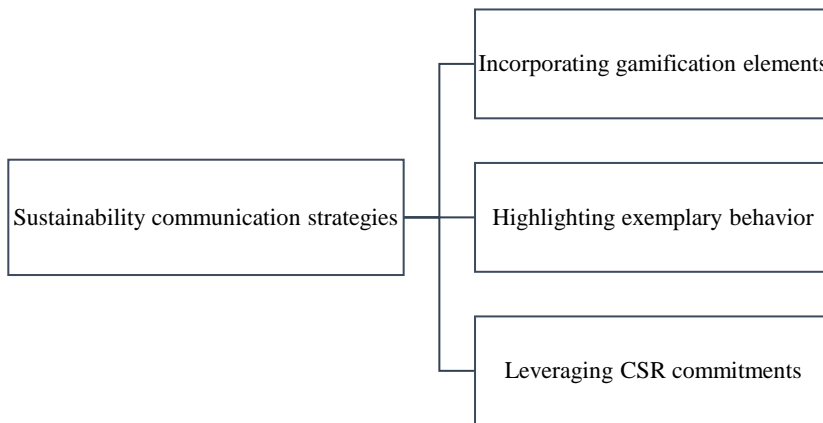


Figure 1. Sustainability communication strategies used by the participant organizations to motivate behavior change among their employees.

Highlighting exemplary behavior. One of the communication strategies focuses on exemplary behavior. By highlighting and showing eco-friendly behavior, organizations strive to inspire employees to follow these examples. Examples were for example using eco-friendly transportation methods, re-using coffee cups and double printing for corporate documents. All the participant organizations agreed on the importance of exemplary behavior. In the case of exemplary behavior, organizations often focused on both exemplary behavior from management positions as from employee positions.

As for the management to employee level of communication, all companies focused on positive example setting by the management. But organizations did notice individual differences among managers, their sustainability communication, and example setting. Some managers are more motivated themselves and always show good exemplary behavior, other managers need more support from corporate to motivate them to show certain pro-environmental behaviors. For this reason, some organizations incorporated sustainability goals in the individual goals and plans of the managers. As one consumer goods company said: *So, sustainability goals are in every year plan of every manager. That's monitored and*

the manager presents that 2-3 times a year and eventually you get your assessment on that as well whether you did well. 7:57 ¶ 108.

To communicate and motivate sustainability from employee-to-employee level, four out of the ten organizations used green teams. Green teams were in all cases employees that were not in manager positions and communicated to their colleagues about sustainability. These colleagues showed pro-environmental behavior in the workplace to motivate other colleagues to show the same behavior. In two of the four cases this was fully voluntary, in the other two cases the organizations selected employees and asked them if they would be interested to join a green team. One of the organizations that had them choose voluntarily said: *In each region, we had a sustainability project leader appointed. Or in other words, we had them nominate themselves 4:102 ¶ 162.* This bottom-up communication method was very positively perceived by participant organizations. Bottom-up communication in general was seen as a way to appeal to the intrinsic motivation of the employees. The marketing and communication manager of one of the participant organizations said that using bottom-up communication helped with motivating their employees intrinsically:

We consciously chose bottom-up, with those project leaders, to let everyone think for themselves. That's a longer trajectory though, we've really been working on it for 10 years, consciously with B-Corp certification. If you build it from the bottom up, then you appeal more to that intrinsic motivation 4:21 ¶ 278.

By creating an atmosphere where bottom-up communication is encouraged, organizations noted that employees provided the organization with helpful feedback. According to a manager their employees keep them sharp: *So, our employees keep us on our toes as well 4:136 ¶ 253.* The manager also shared an example about feedback they received when they suggested to organize a car puzzle tour as a fun activity for their teams: *we're organizing a car puzzle tour and there are employees who send our chairman of the board an email, that's not sustainable 4:173 ¶ 359.*

Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility commitments. Communication focused on communicating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts also emerged as a significant communication strategy. CSR meant for the most organizations that they incorporated sustainability within their organizations mission and vision. For example, the head of engagement of an organization said about this: *Yes, in fact, our mission and vision already*

include a contribution to a sustainable and social world. So actually our services connect to that anyway 2:113 ¶ 48 . By incorporating sustainability in the core values of the organization, the participant organizations integrated sustainable practices into various organizational activities, considering the interests of their employees. As the HR manager of a big consumer goods organization mentioned: We don't add sustainability it on top of it, but it's a role, it's a task. It's an integral part of our business 7:60 ¶ 127.

In order to effectively demonstrate corporate social responsibility activities to their employees and maintain a culture of transparency and honesty, organizations frequently monitored their sustainability initiatives with the intention of sharing progress updates later. Transparency was the most important subject in CSR communication strategies. All the B-Corp certificated organizations acknowledged that the certification facilitated the governance of their sustainability efforts. Despite the fact that CSR efforts are voluntary and can be apart from legal and regulatory requirements, incorporating CSR efforts in statutes was also helpful. A sustainability manager from a design studio mentioned:

Well first of all, so we have now become B-Corp. So that also means that legally you have to make a change. So really in our bylaws it's now stipulated that in every decision that we make, we also don't just think about profits, we also think about people and the environment 1:115 ¶ 63.

The participant organizations that were not B-Corp certificated also tracked some of their sustainability efforts but felt less content about these tracking efforts and their overall governance on sustainability in comparison to the B-Corp certificated organizations.

The significance of communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts was clearly exemplified by a non-B-Corp organization. The organization acknowledged that their lack of previous communication about CSR efforts which resulted in heightened resistance when they implemented new sustainability measures. The organization wanted to implement new measures in the field of reimbursement, but hardly communicated information about sustainability or their CSR efforts about the measure beforehand. The communication expert of the organization said about this:

So, we actually started communicating concretely now only at the time when people could really start taking steps. And so only when employees could start checking the box of I'm

coming by train then from January. And we really should have started there earlier like, guys, we're working on the policy but know that changes are coming. 3:81 ¶ 258.

The strong commitment to CSR was perceived by the interviewees as a way to enhance the consistency of organizational messages but also to contribute to the overall effectiveness of promoting pro-environmental behaviors. Communicating CSR efforts was only communicated top-down in the participant organizations.

Incorporation of gamification elements. Three organizations incorporated gamification elements into their sustainability communication. Adding a gamified aspect increased competitiveness among employees and improved their engagement in the desired pro-environmental behaviors. One such example was a health care innovation organization that organized a 'clutter contest' to motivate employees to clean up their computers and reduce server load. The organization found that transforming the cleanup into a challenge enhanced employee motivation. The communication expert of the company stated: *Every time like we have now with the cleanup, we always make a challenge of it. Everyone here can be competitive. So there's always room for another challenge, now with the cleanup as well. 5:89 ¶ 243.*

Similarly, two other organizations created challenges to encourage their employees to walk more. They used gamification techniques to turn walking into an engaging and interactive experience. Both organizations were enthusiastic about the positive impact of these challenges on employee engagement. A communication specialist for a charity organization said about their March On walking challenge: *That March On was really nice, I do feel like people are still going to walk here, so to speak. So, I thought that was successful. 9:67 ¶ 251.*

Gamification in sustainability communication introduced a playful aspect and appealed to employees' competitive nature. The participant organizations were able to inspire employees to actively participate, increasing engagement and desired behavior by turning tasks and behaviors into challenges. Although gamification successfully increased employee engagement in organizations, the communication strategy used was just top-down.

Engagement

Engagement was an overarching theme in all the communication efforts by the participant organizations. All previously mentioned communication strategies were focused on increasing engagement among employees and had two common characteristics: trying to gradually communicate changes and using a friendly and enjoyable tone while communicating about sustainability changes.

Gradually communicating change. The gradual communication of changes emerged as a characteristic of the communication strategies. Recognizing that introducing too many changes within a short period of time can lead to employee resistance, organizations emphasized the importance of gradual and targeted communication. This approach allows employees to understand each change before moving on to the next one. The sustainability manager of a design company said about this:

Yes, and people are just creatures of habit and they don't want change all at once. So I just said, we have a five-year plan. And of course that's also intentional, because we can now also say, we're going to stop completely how we produce now and we're only going to do it 100% circularly. 1:98 ¶ 159

Moreover, a gradual communication strategy provides opportunities for dialogue and feedback. It allows employees to express their opinions, ask questions, and seek clarification regarding the changes. Seven out of the ten organizations focused on giving employees time to give feedback on their sustainability efforts and changes. All organizations were positive about using employee feedback to foster employee engagement and an overall sustainable work culture.

Adopting a friendly and enjoyable tone. As the last factor, organizations stressed the importance of using a friendly tone and making sustainability communication enjoyable. Moralizing or adopting a preachy approach was counterproductive according to the interviewees. Three organizations specifically emphasized the need to avoid moralizing and instead create an atmosphere that is engaging and fun for employees. One example was a food production company whose director highlighted the significance of maintaining a positive and non-moralistic tone. The interviewee from this organization stated: *But okay, it's*

always very important, I've noticed, not to be too moralistic, because then everyone will drop out. And then to stay positive about like, hey it's a lot of fun though. 6:117 ¶ 446.

By adopting a friendly and enjoyable approach, organizations aimed to boost enthusiasm and active participation among employees. The participant organizations recognized that people are more likely to engage in sustainable behaviors when they perceive them as enjoyable and rewarding. To make sure sustainability is not only a restriction but also fun the sustainability manager of a design company said that creating good alternatives is important. The manager mentioned in the interview: *How we deal with resistance is simply by also offering them good alternatives 1:118 ¶ 201.* When they changed from their regular lunch to a vegetarian lunch, they made sure the lunch was appealing to their employees.

And how we actually solved that, just again the lunch as an example, is that we always try to communicate that we're not just taking something away, but in return we now have a very large kitchen. The lunch is now cooked by our office manager two to three times a week 1:111 ¶ 82.

Both gradually communicating changes and using a friendly approach were characteristics that organizations used to enhance their sustainability communication. The two characteristics enhanced sustainability communication and promoted bottom-up communication because the characteristics created an open space for two-way communication.

Discussion & conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to investigate the pro-environmental behaviors that organizations aimed to promote in line with their sustainability objectives, as well as the communication strategies used to encourage these behaviors. Hence, this study sheds new light on the internal communication strategies utilized by organizations to inspire pro-environmental behaviors among their employees. In the current context of increased societal and political focus on sustainable practices within organizations, understanding how environmentally focused organizations motivate their employees to align with their sustainability efforts is of great significance. The findings from this study provide valuable insights that can serve as a framework for other organizations, facilitating a smoother and more transparent transition towards sustainability for all stakeholders involved.

Overall, the participant organizations had two main goals regarding sustainability, namely decreasing CO₂ emissions and increasing circularity. In order to achieve these main sustainability goals, organizations need employees to perform certain behaviors. Therefore, all of the pro-environmental employee behaviors organizations were promoting were related to the main organizational sustainability goals. Examples of pro-environmental employee behavior promoted by the participant organizations were for instance sorting waste and re-using materials or products.

The participant organizations used different communication strategies to promote the desired pro-environmental employee behaviors. Before the communication strategies to change behavior and create engagement, the organizations tried to increase awareness among their employees, by increasing their knowledge about sustainability by using training programs, sharing sustainability information via multiple communication channels, and focusing on the consistency of their sustainability messages.

The interview data showed three different communication strategies that were widely adopted by the participant organizations. These strategies include, highlighting exemplary behavior, leveraging CSR commitments, and incorporating gamification elements. Additionally, there were two characteristics that were incorporated into the communication strategies, namely using gradual communication of changes, and adopting an enjoyable and friendly tone.

The first strategy, exemplary behavior entails the communication between either manager to employee or employee to employee. This strategy showed that giving the right example on sustainability behavior had a positive effect on the pro-environmental employee behavior for both top-down and bottom-up communication. These findings align with those of the study of Blok et al. (2015) which showed that exemplary behavior from management to employee had a significant positive effect on employee intention to act pro-environmentally. Additionally, these results are in line with the results of Potoski and Callery (2018) who showed that the use of green teams increased the participation rate of employees in environmental behavior as well as the engagement of employees with the organization. Less than half of the participant organizations used green teams however, the reason mostly being that they are time consuming to create and to support long-term.

The second strategy, increasing the CSR of the organization, was adopted by all the participant organizations. The current literature shows that CSR has a positive effect on employee engagement (Duthler & Dhanesh, 2018). In line with the literature, communicating CSR had a positive effect on employee engagement in the perception of the interviewed

participant organizations. As the organizations were environmentally focused and their organizational goals were thus aligned with their sustainability goals, they also felt like they attracted more like-minded employees, which made it easier for them to promote pro-environmental employee behaviors. Additionally, the B-corp certification was a helpful tool for communicating CSR efforts transparently according to all B-corp certificated participant organizations.

The third strategy, gamification is known to be engaging (Gupta & Gomathi, 2017), but has not been widely studied in the context of internal sustainability communication in organizations (Kumar et al., 2021). The interviews did show that environmentally focused organizations sometimes use gamification aspects in their sustainability communication. All organizations that used gamification in their sustainability communication were positive about the results, especially on employee engagement.

In addition to the communication strategies there were two characteristics that were incorporated into the participant organizations' communication strategies. The first characteristic was friendliness. Organizational sustainability changes can cause employees to have to change their behaviors too. Sometimes this means employees must stop with certain behavior, like eating meat at their work lunches for example. To lower resistance for these changes' the participant organizations took a friendly approach and provided their employees with nice alternatives. Being moralistic worked counterproductive according to three of the ten interviewees. While this is an interesting characteristic, there is barely any scientific literature on the topic. There is however a study by Men (2015) that looked into communication styles by CEO's and the effect on employee relational outcomes, that showed that responsive communication styles, which are characterized by being warm and friendly, were in general the best way to communicate with employees. The use of a friendly and warm communication style is consistent with the results of the current study.

The second characteristic, gradual communication, was barely mentioned in the literature of internal communication but occurred in many interviews as a key communication strategy. In change communication studies, however, gradual communication is a well-known tool to decrease resistance among employee during corporate changes (Mento et al., 2002). Instead of changing or communicating everything at once, organizations focus on providing information and changes in phases. Even though organizations mentioned they might want to move at a faster pace, they try to make sure employees understand each change before moving on to the next one.

In contrast to the previous literature (Atwater and Bass, 1994; Leitch et al., 1995; Laabs, 1992; Patton and Daley, 1998 in: Daily & Huang, 2001), the participant organizations did barely employ the use of incentives. Only in the case of transportation, most organizations utilized reward systems to promote sustainable transport. Using incentives specifically for transport has been proven in the literature to be an effective method for increasing sustainable transport (Elvik & Ramjerdi, 2014). In total, nine organizations indicated that they did not focus on reward systems to encourage pro-environmental behaviors. A notable exception was one organization that rewarded employees for relocating closer to the organization by covering their moving costs. Incentives were not so popular because the participant organizations believed incentives do not appeal to the intrinsic motivation. A few organizations even mentioned that they thought incentives would negatively affect the motivation of their employees to participate in pro-environmental employee behavior.

All in all, the desired pro-environmental employee behaviors from the participant organizations were in line with their organizational sustainability goals, and engagement and bottom-up communication appeared as important comprehensive factors in creating awareness and promoting behavioral change. To promote engagement and bottom-up communication, two-way communication was important. Both factors, adopting an enjoyable tone and gradual communication, touched into two-way communication. The communication strategy gamification also created a space for two-way communication. CSR communication was a one-way communication technique only practiced in a top-down manner. Lastly the communication strategy highlighting exemplary behavior happened both top-down and bottom-up and was therefore a two-way communication method.

Implications

The implications of this research extend beyond individual organizations. In order to encourage sustainable behaviors among their employees, other organizations can modify and use the suggested communication tactics as best practices. By adopting these strategies, organizations can enhance their sustainability initiatives, strengthen their corporate social responsibility, and motivate employees to perform pro-environmental employee behavior in line with the sustainability initiatives of the organization.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing knowledge by examining the communication strategies employed by environmentally focused organizations to promote

pro-environmental behaviors among employees. It underscores the significance of internal communication, employee engagement, and behavior as key elements in an organization's sustainability journey. The findings offer valuable insights and practical implications for organizations aiming to align their employees with sustainability objectives and providing a framework of communication strategies for organizations starting their sustainability journey.

Limitations and future research

This study has identified several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the use of interviews with communication experts introduces the potential for response bias. The interviewees may provide answers that they perceive as more favorable or socially desirable, potentially skewing the results. To address this issue, all data from the interviews were anonymized to create a safe environment for interviewees to share information about their organizations.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the interviewees in this study were communication experts from environmentally focused organizations, holding influential positions within their respective organizations. This could introduce a pro-sustainability bias and a high-level perspective, which may not fully represent the viewpoints of employees in lower-level positions or those with limited knowledge or passion for sustainability. Additionally, the current study got into the actual CSR efforts of the participant organizations and the effect of those efforts through the eyes of the communication experts of the organizations. Although this gave an interesting insight into the internal communication strategies about CSR efforts, the perception of the employees on these CSR efforts would also be interesting to research. To obtain a better understanding, future research should include employees from various organizational levels and diverse job functions to capture a broader range of perspectives. This would also provide more detailed insights into the organizational sustainability culture.

The research primarily focused on the overarching goals and objectives, without getting into the specific components of the communication strategies that were used by the participant organizations. To address this limitation, future research could delve deeper into these components of communication strategies by analyzing various factors such as message styles, content, channels utilized, and the perceptions of specific target audiences. By examining these aspects in more detail, a more comprehensive understanding can be gained

regarding the effectiveness and nuances of communication strategies in the context of organizational sustainability goals.

In future research, it would also be interesting to further investigate the use of gamification elements in internal sustainability communication. Gamification did not appear in the theoretical framework as research about internal sustainability communication is very scarce. The topic of gamification, however, occurred in many interviews as all the participant organizations using gamification elements were very positive about the effect those gamification elements. In future research gamification in internal sustainability communication could be further investigated.

All in all, even in the cases of environmentally focused organizations, there was still a lot unknown to the participant organizations regarding sustainability goals and efforts. There is a lot of experimentation and search for the right way to deal with this issue among the participant organizations. This lack of knowledge highlights the need for additional research to delve into the dimensions of communication strategies and their potential role in facilitating and supporting sustainable organizational change.

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Appendix

Appendix A: *Informed consent to take part in research*

Formulier Geïnformeerde Deelname voor Participanten
Tilburg University

Studie	Onderzoeker
Interne communicatie over duurzaamheid binnen organisaties.	Judith Zijdenbos J.c.zijdenbos@tilburguniversity.edu 06-40357027

Lees dit document alsjeblieft grondig door. Je dient dit formulier te ondertekenen voor deelname. Je dient minimaal 18 jaar oud te zijn en je toestemming te geven om deel te nemen aan deze studie.

De informatiebrief bevat alle informatie die nodig is om deel te nemen aan deze studie. Als je verdere vragen hebt over deze studie, over de informatiebrief, of over het formulier 'geïnformeerde deelname', stel deze dan aan de onderzoeker.

In dit formulier 'geïnformeerde deelname vragen we je om het volgende te bevestigen:

Ik heb de informatie die mij is vertrekt en de informatiebrief gelezen en begrepen, en ik heb de mogelijkheid gehad om vragen te stellen. Ik ben minimaal 18 jaar oud. Ik begrijp dat mijn deelname aan deze studie vrijwillig is en dat ik mijn deelname te allen tijde kan beëindigen zonder opgave van reden. Ik geef toestemming voor het verwerken van de gegevens die ik heb aangeleverd. Ik begrijp dat ik een kopie krijg van dit formulier. Ik stem in met vrijwillige deelname aan deze studie.

Ik geef toestemming om geluidsopnamen te maken. Ik begrijp dat deze opnamen niet gepubliceerd worden en dat ze worden vernietigd na transcriptie voor verdere analyse:

- Ja, ik geef toestemming voor het maken van geluidsopnamen
- Nee, ik wil niet dat er geluidsopnamen worden gemaakt

Handtekening participant

Datum

Naam participant

Handtekening onderzoeker

Datum

Naam onderzoeker

Appendix B: Information letter

Studie	Onderzoeker
Interne communicatie over duurzaamheid binnen organisaties.	Judith Zijdenbos J.c.zijdenbos@tilburguniversity.edu 06-40357027

Deze informatiebrief bevat alle informatie die van belang is voor je deelname aan deze interview-studie. Lees de informatie in deze brief alsjeblieft grondig, en laat het de onderzoeker weten als je nog vragen hebt.

De resultaten van deze studie zullen worden gebruikt voor de masterthesis van Judith Zijdenbos onder begeleiding Tatiana Domingues Aguiar. De masterthesis wordt uitgevoerd voor de Masteropleiding Communicatie-en Informatiewetenschappen van Tilburg University. Het doel van deze interviewstudie is te exploreren welke strategieën duurzame bedrijven gebruiken om acties met een positieve uitwerking op mens en milieu onder werknemers te promoten.

Tijdens het interview vragen we je om een aantal vragen te beantwoorden en te reageren op verschillende onderwerpen die zijn gerelateerd aan duurzaamheid en werknemersgedrag. Het interview zal 30 á 45 minuten duren.

Procedure & risico's

Er zijn geen fysieke of psychologische risico's verbonden aan deelname. Ook zijn er geen goede of foute antwoorden op de interviewvragen; alle gegevens zijn waardevol.

Je deelname aan deze studie is vrijwillig en we doen onze uiterste best om je persoonlijke gegevens vertrouwelijk te behandelen. De verzamelde gegevens worden alleen gedeeld binnen het onderzoeksteam dat bestaat uit Judith Zijdenbos en Tatiana Domingues Aguiar. Het presenteren van de resultaten van deze studie gebeurt alleen in de vorm van samengevatte gegevens waarbij nooit persoonlijke gegevens worden vermeld.

Verder vragen we je of je toestemming geeft voor het maken van geluidsopnamen. Deze opnamen worden alleen gebruikt voor het analyseren van de verzamelde gegevens. Opnames worden nergens gepubliceerd en worden onmiddellijk na transcriptie vernietigd.

Als je besluit om deel te nemen aan deze studie dan staat het je te allen tijde vrij om je deelname te beëindigen zonder dat je hiervoor een reden moet geven. Als je je terugtrekt voor of nadat de dataverzameling is afgerond dan worden al je gegevens vernietigd.

Compensatie

Er is geen compensatie voor deelname aan deze studie.

Contact

Als je na afloop van deze studie vragen hebt, of als je nadelige gevolgen ondervindt van je deelname aan deze studie, dan mag je altijd contact opnemen met Judith Zijdenbos.

Indien je besluit om deel te nemen dan vragen we je het Formulier Geïnfomeerde Deelname in te vullen en te ondertekenen. We zijn je zeer erkentelijk en we danken je graag bij voorbaat voor je deelname!

Appendix C: Interview guide

1 Introductie & controle inclusiecriteria

Hoi, ik ben Judith Zijdenbos en ik ben student Communicatie- en Informatiewetenschappen aan Tilburg University. Wat fijn dat je aan deze interviewstudie wil meedoen!

Had je al begrepen dat het over duurzaamheidscommunicatie gaat?

Ik ben momenteel aan het afstuderen. In totaal zal ik 12 interviews afnemen met vooruitstrevende bedrijven op het gebied van duurzaamheid. Ik ben blij dat jullie me willen helpen met mijn masterthesis en dat ik jou vandaag mag interviewen.

Voordat we beginnen wil ik je een paar hele algemene vragen stellen om na te gaan of je echt bij de doelgroep van onze studie hoort:

Werk je als communicatie professional voor het bedrijf?

2 Geïnformeerde toestemming

Goed, ik zal je eerst even wat meer vertellen over onze studie. De interviewstudie gaat over duurzaamheidscommunicatie. Ik ga je straks verschillende vragen stellen over het duurzaamheidsbeleid, duurzaamheidscommunicatie- en strategieën en werknemersgedrag. Het doel van het onderzoek is om te onderzoeken hoe interne communicatieprofessionals duurzaamheidscommunicatie gebruiken om milieuvriendelijk gedrag van werknemers aan te moedigen. In totaal zal dit interview ongeveer een half uur duren.

Ik wil graag goed kunnen luisteren naar de antwoorden die je geeft, dus ik zou het interview graag willen opnemen zodat ik geen aantekeningen hoeft te maken.

Ter info: deze opname zal alleen beluisterd worden door mij en mijn scriptie begeleider.

We gaan de informatie die we verzamelen met de interviews vertrouwelijk behandelen. We zorgen ervoor dat je naam niet gekoppeld wordt aan de opname en de uitgetypte bestanden. Ik neem nu eerst even twee formulieren met je door. Dit zijn de informatiebrief en het toestemmingsformulier die ik je al had gestuurd.

Heb je deze kunnen bekijken?

Zo nee: geef de participant de tijd om de brief en het formulier te lezen.

Doorloop kort de informatiebrief en het toestemmingsformulier met de participant.

Heb je nog vragen over het interview of over de studie?

Laat beide toestemmingsformulieren door de participant tekenen en teken ze zelf ook. Geef één exemplaar mee aan de participant.

3 Start interview

Start de geluidsopname en noteer hier de starttijd van het interview:

Ik heb de geluidsopname aangezet.

4 Interview

Dan gaan we nu beginnen aan het interview! Ik heb allereerst een paar algemene vragen over jou en het bedrijf waarvoor je werkt.

- In what field or industry does your organization work in?
- How long have you been working for this organization?
- Could you tell me more about the department you work in?
- Could you please elaborate on your function? What do you exactly do in this function?
- What is your definition of sustainability?

Topic 1: Organizational sustainability goals	Introduction: I will now ask you some questions about the organizational sustainability goals to get an idea of the goals your organization pursues and how these goals are integrated in the organization's practices.
Goal: To describe the sustainability goals and how the organization integrates those goals in their organizational culture.	
Initial question: How are the sustainability goals integrated into the organization's goals and practices (i.e.: long and short-term objectives, etc.)?	
Questions:	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What are the sustainability goals your organization wants to achieve?2. Can you describe any changes that the organization has made to its products, services, or operations in order to align with its sustainability goals?

-
3. How have the sustainability goals been integrated into the company's overall mission and values?
 4. Did your organization use the SDGs (or any sustainable certification) to create its organizational sustainability goals?
 5. Can you describe any challenges or obstacles that the organization has faced in implementing its sustainability goals?
 6. What are the long-term sustainability goals in your organization? Do you have specific examples?
 7. What are the short-term sustainability goals in your organization? Do you have specific examples?

Corporate social responsibility is when organizations take responsibility for the impact of their operations on both people and the environment.

8. Do you have CSR goals? How did your corporate social responsibility goals change with regard to the environmental goals?
9. How do you measure and track progress towards the organizational sustainability goals?

For the B corps:

10. How has the B-corp certification helped the organization to align its goals with environmental goals?
-

Close topic 1: So far, we have discussed organizational sustainability goals. Do you feel like there is anything else you would like to add?

Topic 2: Pro-environmental employee behavior

Goal: To describe different pro-environmental behaviors and the role of the organization in promoting those behaviors.

Initial question: Which pro-environmental behaviors are participant organizations promoting among their employees?

Introduction: Now I will ask you some questions about pro-environmental employee behavior.

This refers to any action taken by employees that would improve the environmental performance of the company. Examples of pro-environmental behavior can be: using the stairs instead of the elevator, using double-sided paper for printing or turning off unnecessary electronic devices.

This brings us to the first question.

Questions:

1. What different types of pro-environmental employee behavior take place in the organization? Can you give specific examples?
2. How does the organization engage employees in showing the expected pro-environmental behaviors?
3. Do employees show resistance in showing the expected pro-environmental employee behaviors? If yes, How so?
4. Are there any rewards or incentives that the organization offers to encourage pro-environmental behaviors?
5. Does the organization support and empower employees to engage in pro-environmental behavior outside of work? If so, how do they do this? What kind of

behavior does your organization promote?

6. Does your company focus on leadership support and exemplary pro-environmental behavior in motivating their employees to perform pro-environmental behavior? If yes, how so?
-

Close topic 2: We have yet discussed pro-environmental employee behavior. Do you feel like there is anything else you would like to add?

Topic 3: Sustainability communication

Goal: To analyze the role of sustainability communication on employee engagement and sustainable culture.

Initial question: Which communication strategies do participant organizations use to raise awareness and change employee behavior on environmental topics and practices?

Introduction: I will now ask you some questions about the last topic, namely sustainability communication. By doing so I hope to get an idea of the communicational strategies your organization uses to raise awareness and change employee behavior.

Questions:

1. How does your organization communicate about sustainability with employees?
 2. Which channels and strategies have been used for which specific sustainability goal?
-

-
3. How do the chosen strategies vary for long and short-term goals?
 4. Can you describe the sustainability communication campaigns or initiatives that have been particularly successful within the organization?
 5. Are there any communication channels or strategies that you find particularly effective or ineffective?
 6. Can you describe any challenges that the organization has faced in effectively communicating sustainability messages to employees? What was the hardest challenge?
 7. How does the organization ensure that sustainability messaging is consistent across different departments or teams?
 8. How are employees in leadership positions communicating about environmental goals and behaviors with their teams? How do you give support to the leadership in their communication?
 9. What steps has your company taken to increase awareness and understanding of sustainability among employees?
 10. Are there any training or education programs offered to employees to help them understand the environmental goals and to promote sustainable behavior?
 11. Does the company actively motivate peer sustainability communication? If yes, how so? Peer communication is communication between employees and
-

can for example be motivated by choosing green leaders or green teams in an organization.

12. Does the organization gather feedback or input from employees on sustainability communication initiatives? If so, how do they do so?
-

Close topic 3: Lastly, we discussed sustainability communication. Do you feel like there is anything else you would like to add?

Wrap up interview

Last reflection question

Thank interviewee for his/her participation

Stop recording

What tips do you have for organizations that want to get started with incorporating and communicating sustainability objectives within their organization?