

Environmental managers as institutional entrepreneurs

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Introduction

Over the past years a new type of environmental actor have been tasked with framing the environmental sustainability challenge within the AEC industry; as well as establishing themselves and an environmental sustainability profession (Gluch and Bosch-Sijtsema, 2016). In literature however, little attention has been given to understand the actual professionalization processes of these roles – and the leadership conducted by these actors – as they act as drivers and executors of an environmental sustainability agenda (Månsson, 2019). A better understanding of these (often forgotten) actors' role and agency is therefore important, specifically in times of climate change, depleting natural resources, and in times of realizing the UN SDGs.

Aim: This study aims to explore and describe the development of environmental sustainability professionals' role over time in the Swedish construction industry.

Based on institutional theory, with a specific focus on institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009), a phenomenological study of six Swedish experienced environmental professionals' life stories was conducted, see Figure 1. Combined these professionals have more than 150 years of experience of environmental sustainability work. Using an interpretative approach, their professional life stories were analyzed following a critical incident methodology (Flanagan, 1954). Incidents leading to changes in the institutional setting or to their professional role was mapped along a timeline. The individual timelines were then synthesized and compared to enable a conceptualization of the development of environmental sustainability professionals' role and agency over time.

Environmental sustainability professional	Length of interview	Years of experience with environmental sustainability work	Professional roles	Type of organizations
A	90 min	21 years	Environmental consultant Sustainability manager Environmental manager Environmental coordinator Project manager	Mainly construction companies
B	150 min	25 years	Environmental consultant Sustainability manager Environmental manager Environmental coordinator Designer	Mainly construction companies
C	105 min	39 years	Environmental strategist Environmental manager Designer	Mainly construction companies
D	90 min	19 years	Sustainability manager Environmental manager Quality, Environment, Safety & Health manager Supervisor	Mainly construction companies
E	60 min	25 years	Operations manager Environmental manager	Mix of construction companies, real estate companies and architectural firms
F	60 min	29 years	Sustainability specialist Environmental manager Quality & Environmental coordinator Environmental engineer	Mix of real estate companies and architectural firms

Figure 1: Summary of the selected environmental sustainability professionals. The phenomenological research design captures how they have perceived the development of environmental sustainability work and of their professional role during the past two decades. In open interviews, the interviewees were asked to share how they have perceived their professional life journeys. They were also asked to elaborate on how their work and professional role has developed in relation to the development of sustainability.

Results – professionalization of environmental sustainability

The results show how environmental sustainability professionals have been able, as well as been enabled by others, to engage in institutional entrepreneurship.

Depending on professional background and available resources; different strategies for introducing environmental practices and for establishing an environmental sustainability profession is used, namely:

- The power of example
- Backcasting
- Rallying of competence

Further, the results show how environmental sustainability professionals' agency is closely interrelated to the sustainability discourse in society. The implication of this is twofold – on the one hand it serves as a way of initiating institutional change – on the other hand it causes frustration when agency to act is challenged or temporarily 'lost' because of a discerning discourse in society.

However, the agency is – over time – revived as the environmental sustainability professionals continuingly work to create and establish environmental practices, through:

- (i) inter-organizational mobilization to create common practice
- (ii) by finding (or creating) ambassadors
- (iii) changing position within and between organizations when agency and power to influence is perceived as low

As a result, specialist roles are created that, in turn, act as ambassadors for further engagement in institutional entrepreneurship, and environmental practices are gradually institutionalized in construction project management practices.

References

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