

WORKING IN THE GAPS: THE ARDENT STRATEGY WORK OF INFLUENTIAL SUSTAINABILITY PROFESSIONALS

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Private sector contribution to the sustainable development requires that sustainability goals, commitments, and practices become integrated into a firm's mainstream strategy, investment decisions and operations (Hengst et al. 2020). Yet, integrating sustainability goals into a for-profit organization's business activities can be fraught with tensions (Siltaloppi et al. 2020). Working at the nexus between sustainability and strategy is a growing cadre of sustainability professionals whose role is to affect social performance and bring about sustainability transformations (Fu et al. 2020) – sometimes referred to as "activists in suits" (Carollo & Guerci 2018). Despite the critical role of sustainability professionals in achieving such transformations, we have a limited understanding of the day-to-day work these actors do to integrate sustainability into a business's strategy and operations (Aguinis & Glavas 2012).

This paper poses the question: how do experienced sustainability professionals bring about sustainability transformations? The aim is to advance emerging research on the micro-foundations of sustainability practice (Gond et al. 2017; Hafenbradl & Waeger, 2017; Walls et al. 2020) by focusing on the micro-level strategy work sustainability professionals employ to break down barriers, build strategic presence and integrate sustainability (Hengst et al., 2020; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Methodologically, we undertook an inductive theory building study (Gioia et al. 2013), carrying out 40 in-depth interviews with highly experienced sustainability professionals in India. These interviews lasted 90-120 minutes and were recorded and transcribed.

Our inductive data analysis (Strauss et al. 1990) revealed that sustainability professionals bring about sustainability transformations by iterating between "gap opening" – bringing attention to shortfalls between where the business is and where it ought to be – and "gap closing" – enrolling others to move towards integrating sustainability into the strategy, operations, and systems (cementing closures). Our main contribution is a fine-grained analysis of the subtle practices sustainability professionals use to oscillate between opening and closing persistently – e.g., being a detached insider, creating attention spaces, building presence, seeding ideas. We also theorise the critical importance of framing practices in mobilizing oneself and others to affect sustainability transformations and draw attention to the immense emotional labour, energy, and courage involved in performing this strategy work.

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