

Gatekeepers of Sustainable Innovation

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Abstract: Sustainability raising from the drivers of climate change, resource and energy scarcity is often seen as a source new kind of growth and therefore innovation. However, there seems to be a lack of cases of new business creation especially in services. We present here the gatekeeper model based on the idea that some professions have special potential in bringing about behaviour change that accelerates the shift towards sustainable business practices. Gatekeeper model has been tried out in a series of innovation workshops that bring together professionals from often neglected service sectors. We have focused especially on business related to consumer based greenhouse gas emissions, such as homes, transportation and food. This paper sheds light in the professions own estimates on how much they can impact consumers' lifestyles. Our hypothesis is that by naming and entitling gatekeepers one unfolds new

resources for innovation.

Keywords: Sustainability; service innovation; gatekeepers; professional identity; engagement; customer interface; wicked problems; climate change.

1 Introduction

Driving sustainability into business has traditionally been synonymous to resource efficiency. This has created a plenty of both technological and business process innovations, such as sidestream utilisation, closed cycle production, metering and auditing standards for improving business performance alongside material efficiency. In a word, sustainability has a driver for internal improvement.

Despite the wide discussions of green consumerism a few, if any, companies have managed to make sustainability an external driver for business. However, during the past ten years companies have identified new consumer segments that have special interest in environmentally friendly lifestyles. This "eco-niche" segmentation includes product and service design, marketing and PR-action that are designed for the needs of special value-defined user groups. This has kept sustainability from mainstream both in consumer supply and business processes.

There is a growing body of research highlighting the different dimensions of benefits created by corporate investments, including also increased sales, development of new markets and product differentiation. All in all, there are at least some signs that green product and process innovations contribute to company's competitive advantage (Albino et al. 2009).

In this paper we wish to present fresh way of linking sustainability and business. Our work focuses on using sustainability as driver in service concept and client interface innovation. We hypothesise that user-centric innovations are missing due to failed positioning of sustainability as a professional competence among consumer sector companies. This is most clearly demonstrated by sustainability being a distinct unit and profession and there it remains siloed out of service innovation activities.

Existing studies do not shed light to the question of how sustainability issues gain ground within a corporation, how they are seen as sustainable solutions for consumers and how they get introduced as daily issues for different professional groups. This is an example of the style for a second level heading.

2 Approach: Gatekeeper model for sustainable innovation

This study is based on think tank Demos Helsinki's innovation concept called Peloton. Peloton was initiated from the need to develop new tools for raising public awareness on energy-saving. (Kaskinen et al. 2009)

It was based on the insight that there often is sufficient level of awareness and even motivation, but a lack of turning motivation into action. Therefore what is needed is “nudging” with more proactive supply and delivery of sustainable goods and services.

Based on this assumption Demos Helsinki designed a gatekeeper model that depicts professional professionals and other groups that are involved in making choices that have long term impact in family level energy consumption – the gatekeepers. Secondly, Demos Helsinki identified motivations and perceived business benefits that gatekeeper profession could have helping their customers to save energy.

The focus Peloton was on the biggest energy consuming sectors of personal consumption (direct and indirect) namely homes, personal transportation and food. The assumption was that whilst demand and supply of energy diverge innovations these sectors would see increased potential and demand for innovations. In a word, Peloton became a tool for raising innovation capacity of these sectors via involving gatekeeper-professions.

3 Description of work

So far Peloton has been operational for four year with fifteen innovation workshops with gatekeeper professionals from distinct, even competing, companies. The core idea of the workshops has been to give participants the fundamentals of the drivers (energy supply, climate change, energy security, green consumption and user centric innovation) to create quick prototypes of products and service innovations that enable new behavioural patterns and initiate mass-markets for energy-smart business’.

Each workshop has comprised of two days of intensive work among 15-35 participants, mostly unknown to each other, but often 2-5 from the same company.

Participating companies have been invited by Demos Helsinki with relatively small participation fee (bulk of the cost has been covered by the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra). Companies were encouraged to send employees from different functions and management levels, with special focus on service delivery and -design personnel.

The outcome of the workshop has been descriptions of the new process’ on powerpoint presentations, surprisingly many of which have been further developed and implemented in the participating.

This paper grows from the desire to understand why some organisations have been quick implement concepts created on the workshops and why some seems to be barriers for have been implemented and why some organisations drop the service concept and client interface innovations. We acknowledge that the limited scale of the intervention (one two-day workshop) leaves a lot for chance. However now we attempt to study the more structural drivers for innovation from the best material we have, the pre-workshop interviews of the participating professionals.

The interviews’ original function was to motivate the participants and gain a way to understand their expectations towards the workshop. The interviews were freeform and casual “chats” consisting of 15 questions regarding the interviewees work, relationship sustainability and the practicalities of workshop.

Comprised of series of workshops and their follow-up work with over 40 Finnish consumer sector companies, focusing mainly on practical development and innovation work. This work contains interviews on employees in different functions within participating companies. This phase provided both observations on how sustainability issues touch different professional groups (as state of art) and what are the potential new approaches that would enable them to gain more ground within the corporation as a key driver for innovation.

In order to achieve larger consumer markets new market opportunities are to be created through new products and services. The use of these products and services typically help people to diminish their environmental impact and in doing so decrease costs. Quite often these products and services are completely new from the perspective of consumers. They lead consumers to the path of behavioural change that will help them to reduce the environmental impact and costs of their every day life. These new products and services are leading company to new (blue ocean) market.

4 Analyses on gatekeeper interviews

Article is based on a qualitative data of 88 interviews collected during years 2009 - 2011 in Finland as a part of “Peloton” innovation project. 58 interviewees are female and 30 are male. All are working age adults at the time of interviews. Interviewees represent various different professions in six different types of gatekeeper fields, namely residential property managers (10/88), tourism and hospitality (22/88), hardware store assistants and managers (15/88), restaurant professionals (12/88), grocery store assistants and managers (10/88) and lifestyle media journalists and editors (19/88).

In the beginning of an interview, the interviewer asked about the interviewees experience towards the practices of sustainability. When asked Are you familiar with issues related the environment, energy and consumption? In your personal or at work? interviewees acknowledged three different contexts from which they had gained their knowledge considering sustainability; work, private life and common knowledge, like media. Only five of the interviewees answered that sustainability is only slightly familiar, if even that. To explore which of these three environments – work, private life and common knowledge - is the most common environment to learn sustainability practices, we calculated how many times each of these environments was mentioned when questioned about the familiarity of sustainability. This analysis showed us that working life is the most commonly mentioned (57) environment to gather familiarity about sustainability, when private life (48) was second common. Common knowledge, like media, was mentioned 15 times.

Although majority of the interviewees said that they are familiar with sustainability through at least two of the mentioned environments, like “work and home” or “work and common knowledge” or “home and common knowledge”, but interesting result is that 17% (15/88) of interviewees mentioned only their work as an environment from where

they have learned sustainability issues. This result emphasize the possibilities of work life to bring up the knowledge about sustainability.

Interviewees were chosen to Peloton innovation project to represent their occupational profession. That might have an effect that interviewees emphasize the role of their workplaces in assumption that interviewee is interested particularly about that.

The interviewees were asked who or what are the agents who have the key role to promote sustainability in their own field. When answering this question, 37% (31/83) of the interviewees mentioned their own work field as a one of the key agents and 63% did not mention their own field (40/83) or mentioned themselves as a part of the bigger group of “us all” (12/83). From this result raises one of our main conclusion so far: that in the beginning of the Peloton project, major part of interviewees – gatekeepers – did not think themselves to be in an important role considering sustainability.

The people whom did not mention themselves as agents in advancing sustainable practices (energy efficiency, climate change, emission reductions) mentioned more than hundred different key sustainability agent. Out of these one hundred most frequently mentioned groups were 1) politicians 2) business enterprises and the industry and 3) us all (in that order).

In the next section of interviews, after the spontaneous naming of of sustainability agents interviewees were suggested that their professional group has been identified by Demos Helsinki as a “gatekeeper of sustainability” and interviewees were asked how they felt about the position that entails a possibility to influence sustainability of peoples’ lifestyles. One of the most interesting findings is that overall, our data shows that majority (53/83) of the interviewees had a positive attitude towards the role as a gatekeeper or they took as self-evident fact that they were already actively familiar with (9/83). However, 19 % (16 /83) of the interviewees did not believe that they are gatekeepers in the sense of having influence over peoples’ lifestyles or that they are critical towards the given position for other reasons. The most prevalent reason (5/16) for peoples’ reluctance over the gatekeeper position was that the role of a gatekeeper felt too challenging or even scary. These different attitudes are illustrated in the quotations below.

Interviewer: We have identified you as a gatekeeper, a key-person that can impact many peoples’ climate emissions, and therefore the wellbeing of our society and the environment – how does it feel?

Interviewee I: First is impression is panic, that what have I got involved with now, but all this [energy and climate issues] are the thing of today.

Interviewer: We have identified you as a gatekeeper, a key-person that can impact many peoples’ climate emissions, and therefore the wellbeing of our society and the environment – how does it feel?

Interviewee II: I’ve got to the point where I feel cynical about many things, so one can think that way, but it challenging for me.

[Translation from Finnish]

The interviewees (like the one quoted below) were categorically hesitant about their ability of becoming gatekeepers, referring to structural barriers. The reasons for taking distance to the role of a gatekeeper varied a lot. For example, more than once was mentioned that their own job has no relevance for the big picture or that the money rules and there is little to do if sustainable practices are more expensive than “normal” ones. Altogether one fifth of the interviewees who were identified as gatekeepers by Demos Helsinki took distance or even denied that they have a role considering sustainability, might be critical to promote sustainable lifestyles.

Interviewer: *We have identified you as a gatekeeper, a key-person that can impact many peoples' climate emissions, and therefore the wellbeing of our society and the environment – how does it feel?*

Interviewee III: *I cannot see myself in such role, I'm just project manager there are many decision makers above me.*

[Translation from Finnish]

All in all, the interviews and the outcomes of the workshops demonstrate that although rather few representatives of the “gatekeeper professionals” involved saw themselves having opportunity to have influence on people’s lifestyles, they could be rather easily convinced (by simply naming them as such) to see themselves gatekeepers and encouraged (in 30 hour co-creation workshop) to look for new innovative solutions that combine lifestyles change and business opportunity. From this we could make preliminary conclusion that they lack support and incentives to innovation around sustainability (an area that is expected to be a substantial area of new business and growth) in their work.

Areas for feedback & development

We have failed a theoretical context to our work, which we could describe as emansipation by naming and repositioning the participants professional identity. Therefore we would like to have feedback on how to develop our research within the field innovation management.

Additionally, we are interested in finding references to what we describe as gatekeeper-led service and customer innovation model. We feel that most innovation theories and research framework are suitable for technology led innovation, but rather irrelevant to our work.

This paper was presented at The XXIV ISPIM Conference – Innovating in Global Markets: Challenges for Sustainable Growth in Helsinki, Finland on 16-19 June 2013. The publication is available to ISPIM members at www.ispim.org.

References and Notes

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