

## A sustainable work environment?

Exploring harmonies and tensions in the role of sustainability leaders in architectural and building consultancy firms

Master's thesis in Industrial Ecology

HELENA THIM

DEPARTMENT OF TECHNOLOGY MANAGEMENT AND ECONOMICS  
DIVISION OF INNOVATION AND R&D MANAGEMENT

CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
Gothenburg, Sweden 2025  
[www.chalmers.se](http://www.chalmers.se)



MASTER'S THESIS 2025

## **A sustainable work environment?**

Exploring harmonies and tensions in the role of sustainability leaders  
in architectural and building consultancy firms

HELENA THIM



**CHALMERS**  
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Department of Technology Management and Economics  
*Division of Innovation and R&D Management*  
CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
Gothenburg, Sweden 2025

A sustainable work environment?  
Exploring harmonies and tensions in the role of sustainability leaders in architectural  
and building consultancy firms  
HELENA THIM

© HELENA THIM, 2025.

Supervisor & Examiner: Pernilla Gluch, Department of Technology Management  
and Economics

Master's Thesis 2025  
Department of Technology Management and Economics  
Division of Innovation and R&D Management  
Chalmers University of Technology  
SE-412 96 Gothenburg  
Telephone +46 31 772 1000

Cover: Harmonies and tensions in the activity of managing sustainability in a con-  
sultancy firm in the building industry visualised in the activity model developed by  
Yrjö Engeström. Described further in Chapter 6.

Gothenburg, Sweden 2025

A sustainable work environment?

Exploring harmonies and tensions in the role of sustainability leaders in architectural and building consultancy firms

HELENA THIM

Department of Technology Management and Economics

Chalmers University of Technology

## **Abstract**

Sustainability leaders are leading the development toward a sustainable society. Their responsibilities are constantly increasing with the growing demand for expertise in all parts of the organisations. Previous studies have examined how the role has evolved and the challenges they experience. However, the effect on their work environment and their view of the role remains unclear. This thesis aims to investigate the harmonies and tensions that sustainability leaders in consultancy firms within the building sector experience with a focus on organisational structures and practices. Highlighting what should be nurtured or improved expands the basis for how the role could develop in the future. An abductive qualitative approach was applied, based on semi-structured interviews with nine sustainability leaders and two HR professionals. The collected data were analysed with activity theory with focus on tensions and the complemented concept of harmonies. The findings indicate harmonies relating to inter-organisational networks and leaders' passion for sustainability work, as well as tensions relating to increasing responsibilities, the broad need for expertise, limited personnel resources and challenges relating to the consultancy profession. The relationship between creativity and sustainability work is explored, and structures that promote or inhibit both are discussed. It is concluded that sustainability leaders are drawn to a creative and innovative profession that is transforming toward a more controlling function with increasing reporting demands, which decreases flexibility and creative space within the role. To ensure a sustainable work environment for sustainability leaders, their networks and passion should be nurtured, and consideration should be given to the tension between their expectations of the role, what they want to accomplish, and the direction in which the role is developing. The resources allocated to them should reflect the scale of their responsibilities, and the relationships with management and colleagues develop to ensure supportive, collaborative structures within the organisation.

Keywords: sustainability leader, work environment, organisational structures, practices, creativity, activity theory, harmonies, tensions.



## Acknowledgements

Thanks to all of you who contributed with your stories and personal experiences of your work environment. It was a pleasure meeting all of you and hearing your amazing drive and passion for sustainable development shine through, even when sharing some tougher experiences. Thanks also to the great HR professionals that I met who contributed with interesting knowledge to broaden the perspective of the study.

I also want to thank my supervisor and examiner, Pernilla Gluch, for her invaluable guidance and support throughout the project. I remember how grateful I was already after our first meeting that someone understood what kind of project I wanted to do and I have continued to really enjoy our meetings ever since. Thanks also to Stina Hellsvik for contributing with valued support and advice in the initial phase.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family, especially Fredrik, for all your wonderful support and encouragement throughout this process. I am proud of what I have achieved and hope that it will give guidance on how to support the people who drive change in society.

Helena Thim, Gothenburg, September 2025



# Contents

|  |             |
|--|-------------|
| <b>List of Figures</b>   | <b>xi</b>   |
| <b>List of Tables</b>  | <b>xiii</b> |
| <b>1 Introduction</b>  | <b>1</b>    |
| 1.1 Aim and Research questions . . . . .                         | 3           |
| 1.2 Focus of the study . . . . .                                 | 4           |
| <b>2 Work conditions of a sustainability leader</b>              | <b>5</b>    |
| 2.1 The complexity of the role . . . . .                         | 5           |
| 2.2 Work environment conditions . . . . .                        | 7           |
| 2.3 Organisational creativity for sustainability . . . . .       | 8           |
| <b>3 Activity theory</b>   | <b>9</b>    |
| <b>4 Methodology</b>   | <b>13</b>   |
| 4.1 Research approach and process . . . . .                      | 13          |
| 4.2 Literature review . . . . .                                  | 14          |
| 4.3 Interview study . . . . .                                    | 15          |
| 4.4 Data analysis . . . . .                                      | 16          |
| 4.5 Use of AI . . . . .  | 17          |
| 4.6 Ethical issues . . . . .                                     | 17          |
| 4.7 Research quality . . . . .                                   | 17          |
| <b>5 Findings</b>  | <b>19</b>   |
| 5.1 Passion and belonging . . . . .                              | 19          |
| 5.2 Management and the consultant business model . . . . .       | 21          |
| 5.3 Fragmentation, loneliness and performance . . . . .          | 24          |
| 5.4 Creative or controlled? . . . . .                            | 28          |
| 5.5 Wishes for the future . . . . .                              | 30          |
| <b>6 Analysis with theoretical framework</b>                     | <b>33</b>   |
| 6.1 Development of the theoretical framework . . . . .           | 33          |
| 6.2 Analysis of harmonies and tensions . . . . .                 | 35          |
| 6.2.1 Harmony with networks, passion and creativity . . . . .    | 35          |
| 6.2.2 Tensions within division of labour of the role . . . . .   | 37          |
| 6.2.3 Tensions that affect the sustainable development . . . . . | 37          |

|          |  |            |
|----------|--|------------|
| 6.2.4    | Tensions relating to supportive structures . . . . .           | 38         |
| 6.3      | Evaluation of certain components . . . . .                     | 39         |
| <b>7</b> | <b>Discussion</b>  | <b>41</b>  |
| 7.1      | From creative freedom to a more controlling function . . . . . | 41         |
| 7.2      | Management support and meaningfulness . . . . .                | 43         |
| 7.3      | Changing role descriptions and fragmentation . . . . .         | 44         |
| 7.4      | What to nurture and possible improvement of the role . . . . . | 46         |
| 7.5      | Future research recommendations . . . . .                      | 48         |
| <b>8</b> | <b>Conclusion</b>  | <b>49</b>  |
| <b>A</b> | <b>Appendix A</b>  | <b>I</b>   |
| <b>B</b> | <b>Appendix B</b>  | <b>III</b> |

# List of Figures

|     |  |    |
|-----|--|----|
| 3.1 | A model of Engeström's activity system . . . . .                       | 10 |
| 6.1 | Managing sustainability in the building industry as an activity system | 34 |
| 6.2 | Harmonies and tensions within the activity system. . . . .             | 36 |



# List of Tables

|     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 2.1 | Qualities in the work environment that affect creativity . . . . .     | 8   |
| 4.1 | List of interviewees . . . . .   | 16  |
| B.1 | All codes used in the development of the theoretical framework . . . . | III |



# 1

## Introduction

The sustainability field has developed significantly over the last decades, from a solely environmental focus, preventing leaking of hazardous substances into nature, to a systems perspective that considers ecological, social, and economic thinking to ensure long-term strategic development in society (Gluch and Månsson, 2021). The laws and regulations of the EU and the Swedish government also increase, ensuring transparency and awareness of the impact, risks, and opportunities of reporting companies, as well as increasing the incentive for transitional work, such as the EU taxonomy and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD; Directive (EU) 2022/2464).

The development of the field affects the view of the manager leading the sustainability work and the demand for expertise continuously increases (Gluch and Månsson, 2021). In a role description for "Head of Sustainability" at Framtid.se (n.d.) the list of areas of responsibility includes expertise such as implementing strategies for social, ecological and economic sustainability, as well as making sure the organisation follows laws and regulations regarding sustainability, reducing emissions of carbon dioxide, improving the efficiency of resource use, collaborating with departments for production, marketing and purchasing and contributing to a strong brand. Furthermore, Klint (2025) adds that the role also has become more about understanding the business and complex relationships, leading change, while delivering results. These expectations on the role require broad experience and education, including systems thinking and business understanding, as well as a high degree of technical expertise to be able to succeed in the role.

Previous research by Gluch and Hellsvik (2023) shows that moving between generalist and specialist can cause overwhelm due to fragmented work and high expectations on the role, posing a risk to the well-being of sustainability professionals. In a study by Cripps (2024), 62% of the respondents, all working with the sustainability transition, had during the last year felt burnout related to their work. They also found that 69% had a hard time staying motivated due to the scale of the transition and that 53% felt that they received enough support for their well-being. The reasons for the high burnout rates are, according to Cripps, the pressure on the role and the lack of support they achieve. The conclusion of that study is to invest in human capital and the development of soft skills such as communication, systems perspective, and influence, since the role has become more about engaging people and finding ways to make colleagues see the importance of developing their work in a sustainable direction.

Working with sustainability can also be challenging due to the many emotions that often arise around the topic, leading sustainability professionals to have to balance emotions of both resistance and passion within the organisation (Wright and Nyberg, 2012). The people who work with sustainability are themselves emotionally invested in the topic and have a strong intrinsic motivation to develop society in a sustainable direction (Cripps, 2024), causing tensions related to their role according to the study by Wright and Nyberg (2012).

Another tension that can be found in previous research is that sustainability work within organisations is often assigned to a small number of people (Cripps, 2024), even though collaboration is a key to successful sustainability work (Daily and Huang, 2001). This is because collaborative social networks are a source of invention, knowledge creation, and social well-being (Sandow and Allen, 2005), which are all necessary components when working with the sustainability challenge. When the sustainability leaders work alone there is a risk that the degree of innovation in the organisations will be hemmed. However, the leaders often seek networks with people in similar roles that can relate to their challenges, where they can share knowledge and get support (Gluch, 2009).

The consultant profession also has its challenges with regard to the work environment. The main challenges are lack of control of one's own work, deadlines from clients, and demands on billable time (Thorsell, 2019), and this is something both engineering and architectural consultants experience. According to a study by Försäkringskassan (2024), architects and technical consultants have a high degree of stress related sick leave compared to other industries with qualified professional services. It is further stated that the organisational and social work environment (referred to as work environment in this study), such as the balance between demands and resources or the amount of support received, has a significant impact on stress related sick leave. These are therefore conditions that can be developed to improve well-being in the work place.

As mentioned previously, the study by Cripps (2024) indicates that only half of the people who work with sustainability feel that they achieve enough support for their well-being. Support can be shown in different ways and according to DuBois and DuBois (2012) the budget that the sustainability manager receives is a reflection of the sustainability vision and the priorities of the organisation and its management team. The uncertainty of sustainability investments, due to its long-term perspective, can cause leaders to prioritise investments that will generate profits in the near future (Smith et al., 2016), however, this can risk the capacity for development in the organisation and their survival in the long run. According to Daily and Huang (2001) employees will be empowered and motivated to engage in organisational change and sustainable development if supported and provided with good conditions to succeed. It is therefore important that sustainability leaders achieve a proper amount of resources to feel supported by the management and thrive in their role. Clear management support can also contribute to culture development

within the organisation to one that is more accepting of change (Daily and Huang, 2001).

The reviewed literature indicates a harmony related to supportive inter-organisational networks, but mostly tensions and challenges related to the role of those leading the sustainability transition and the risk it poses to their well-being. Therefore, there is reason to further investigate how sustainability leaders experience their role and what supports and challenges their work from a work-environmental perspective.

This study shares stories of sustainability leaders working in consultancy firms within the building industry in Sweden, since the consultancy profession has its own challenges in relation to the work environment, and it is relevant to investigate the combination further. The thesis analyses the responses of the interviews with the activity theory developed by Yrjö Engeström, due to its ability to discuss tensions related to a certain context and between its participants (Engeström, 1999a). In order to clearly highlight the positive aspects of the work environment, the concept of harmonies is introduced to complement the theory. The focus is on how the structures and practices that sustainability leaders are part of affect their work environment and what should be nurtured or improved to promote a sustainable work environment for those leading the transitional work.

## 1.1 Aim and Research questions

This thesis aims to investigate the harmonies and tensions related to the organisational structures and practices that affect the work environment of sustainability leaders working in architectural and building consultancy firms. It uses the concept of activity theory to discuss and make sense of the relations and regulations that contribute to these harmonies and tensions in the work environment. It further investigates the sustainability leaders' experience of their role and what they would like to develop in the future.

The intended outcome is to contribute to the sustainability transition by increasing understanding of the support and challenges sustainability leaders experience in relation to their work environment and what should be nurtured or improved to provide favourable conditions for sustainability leaders to succeed in their role.

The following research questions have been designed to guide the study in achieving its aim and outcome.

1. How do organisational structures and practices contribute to harmonies and tensions in the work environment of sustainability leaders in architectural and building consultancy firms?
2. How would sustainability leaders want their role to develop to improve the work environment?

## 1.2 Focus of the study

This study investigates the work environment of sustainability leaders working in architectural and building consultancy firms in Sweden, presenting their view and perspectives on the matter. There is some input from HR in companies included in the study, but the views of managers or colleagues have not been included.

It has been delimited to respondents from consultancy firms in the building industry since the consultant profession has its own challenges that affect the work environment with fragmented tasks and demand of billable time (Thorsell, 2019). The building industry is also reasonable to evaluate since the domestic emissions from building and renovating barely have changed in the last 30 years (Boverket, 2025) and to ensure that the work toward a sustainable building industry is driven forward, it is reasonable to assess the work conditions.

# 2

## Work conditions of a sustainability leader

This study investigates the work environment for sustainability leaders working in architectural and building consultancy firms. Here, a sustainability leader is defined as someone who is leading the sustainability transition within their organisation or in the industry. The people interviewed for this study are people who manage sustainability, either from a position of manager or as someone with a strong passion for transitional work that brings it into their own role.

This chapter further outlines the context and role of sustainability leaders. In Section 2.1, the complexity of the role is elaborated, in 2.2 the relevant work environment conditions are further described, and in 2.3 the relations between sustainability, creativity, and organisational structures and practice are elaborated.

### 2.1 The complexity of the role

Sustainability managers are often responsible for a broad set of tasks, including strategy development, reporting, spreading knowledge, and business development (Framtid.se, n.d.; Klint, 2025). This causes a fragmented work environment, which is common for sustainability leaders and has been for their predecessors for two decades (Gluch, 2009). When the profession was first established they were responsible for preventing leakage of environmentally hazardous substances, and it has then developed with the sustainability field over the years to include more environmental aspects, as well as social and economic aspects (Gluch and Månsson, 2021). Currently, the person responsible for sustainable development is also assigned to incorporate it into the strategic business development, and influence the entire organisation from within (Gluch and Månsson, 2021; Klint, 2025).

Having so much included in one role can be difficult to manage, because they constantly have to shift perspectives and time frames (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023). This also results in them encountering many different areas and colleagues within and outside the organisation in their daily work. They use and combine different logics and adapt the ways of communication depending on who they are talking to be able to influence them to integrate sustainability into their practices. Gluch and Hellsvik (2023) reported that sustainability professionals felt that having to pursue

and persuade colleagues to engage in sustainability issues took a lot of time and created a stressful work environment.

Their role is often about staying updated on recent research and development in the field and they are also responsible for driving what they think is the right way to go (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023). Because of that they often write their own agenda and since there is so much to do, different kinds of tasks, and they have their own ideas and passion for sustainable development, their agenda becomes quite full. Furthermore, having to balance personal and professional convictions can cause unnecessary pressure on the sustainability leaders (Gluch, 2009), such as the balance between profits and doing something good for society (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023).

In the study by Gluch (2009) it is described how it is important for the role to have a clear identity to be able to forward their expertise, however, it often appears the opposite with the role descriptions often ill defined and vague. When the role description includes a broad set of tasks, it can undermine the professional expertise of the role and result in an even wider range of tasks being assigned to them (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023).

According to Gluch (2009), there is also the risk that they are assumed to be responsible for embedding environmental issues in all parts of the organisation. This means that they are assigned to integrate environmental considerations into existing practices and routines throughout the organisation, which is a challenging task for one person and nothing that can be done alone. Sustainability work rather thrives in collaboration (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023) and seems to be an important factor to whether sustainability gets well integrated into existing practices or not. Collaboration can also increase the sense of meaningfulness in the sustainability professionals' work by finding common goals to work towards together (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017). Many who work with transitional work also find their work meaningful due to their personal drive related to the field (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017). This passion can be necessary to stay motivated when encountering challenges at work and without the right support, this passion can be affected and suppressed.

Even though the field has developed to include many more aspects over the years, the allocated resources have not increased to the same extent (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023). Cripps (2024) acknowledged this by stating that many sustainability leaders often work alone or in small teams, indicating that additional personnel resources are needed. During the whole development of the role, it seems that they have had to constantly mobilise resources after what was available at the time, and have seized windows of opportunities to establish new ways of sustainability work in the organisations (Gluch and Månsson, 2021).

Sustainability management includes more and more aspects of sustainability and is affected by more strict and shifting regulations from politicians. Sustainability leaders often work alone in a profession with great challenges, in terms of both the extent and the complexity of transitional work. These passionate individuals are

leading for a better society and their work environment can affect their motivation and how well they manage to do their work without risking their own health. It is necessary to evaluate the work conditions for sustainability leaders to ensure long-term and healthy transitional work.

## 2.2 Work environment conditions

In Sweden, a large share of architecture firms are consultants that work on projects owned by a client. Other organisational types are turnkey contract and architects employed by the municipality. There are also several large engineering consultancy companies. The architects and engineers working in these consultancy firms are experts hired by clients to advise and contribute with solutions that meet the client's demands. Consultancy firms often have project-based business plans, which means that their income comes from invoicing hours worked to the client. Tasks that are carried out internally cannot be invoiced and are considered a cost to the company. This type of cost is called overhead cost.

According to Försäkringskassan (2024), architects and engineering consultants have a higher degree of stress related sick leave. This can be related to the consulting challenges of demand for billable time, project deadlines set by clients that can lead to overtime work, and lack of control over one's work (Thorsell, 2019). In some companies, overtime is negotiated away so that work hours are supposed to follow the demand for their expertise. However, since demand stays high, it often leads to a constantly high workload.

Work environment refers to the conditions provided by management to minimise the risk of illness (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2025). They include leadership, communication, participation, division of labour, and the balance between demands, expectations, and resources available to the employee. More social aspects of the work environment are also included, such as collaboration and support within the organisation. These are conditions that are closely linked to stress in the workplace and should be addressed to ensure a good work environment.

Having a lot to do is not necessary a risk, it is when the person is dissatisfied with their workload that it should be examined (Hasson et al., 2023). The study by Hasson et al. (2023) shows that when people have a high workload and are always satisfied with it, they achieved good results when rating indicators for stress, well-being, and work environment. Satisfaction is here related to the sense of control and support from colleagues and management. On average, a high workload is correlated with positive health outcomes, even if people are dissatisfied. However, ratings of extreme workload seem to be common for those who are constantly dissatisfied. It is important to consider the level of satisfaction when assessing workload, if not, there is a risk of putting measures in place when they are not needed.

## 2.3 Organisational creativity for sustainability

Creativity helps break and challenge existing unsustainable mental models, which is needed to develop sustainable societies (Lozano, 2014). There are many definitions of creativity, however, the one by Mayer (1989, p. 205), “Creativity is the ability to solve problems that one has not previously learned to solve.”, can be part of the explanation why creativity is a necessary mean for how to begin to solve the sustainability challenge. Creativity needs certain qualities of the individual and the environment to thrive (Amabile, 1988). Regarding individuals, some important characteristics mentioned are persistence, curiosity, self-motivation, problem solving skills, expertise in the area, and social skills when working in smaller groups. However, in this study, the ones regarding the environment are of the most importance, as they are related to the organisational structure and practices. Some environmental qualities mentioned by Amabile that promote and inhibit creativity are listed in Table 2.1. The inhibiting ones are most commonly opposites of the ones promoting.

| Promoting                              | Inhibiting                           |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Freedom and control                    | Constraint and no control            |
| Enthusiastic and communicative manager | Poor management communication        |
| Organisational support                 | Reluctance to change and take risks  |
| Enough resources                       | Lack of resources                    |
| Organisational collaboration           | Lack of organisational collaboration |
| Appropriate recognition and feedback   | Unrealistic expectations             |

**Table 2.1:** Qualities in the work environment that affect creativity

For creativity to blossom, the environment should give them a sense of freedom and control of one’s work. Individuals should feel supported by the organisation and have an enthusiastic manager with good communication skills. This could be expressed by getting enough resources, including information, financial, personnel and time. The organisational climate should encourage innovation and learning and give a sense of acceptance with regard to experimentation and possible mistakes. The organisation and its employees should also be open to change, and to take risks, and collaboration across all divisions and levels should be possible. Individuals should also not be burdened with unrealistic expectations and rather feel that their work is appreciated and recognised.

Amabile further describes individual creativity as the raw material for organisational innovation and enlightens the importance of fostering creativity for organisational innovation and development. For both individual creativity and organisational innovation, resources, techniques and motivation are necessary elements. Techniques are referred to the necessary skills for creative work or organisational innovation. When these three coexist, the level of creativity and innovation is at its highest.

# 3

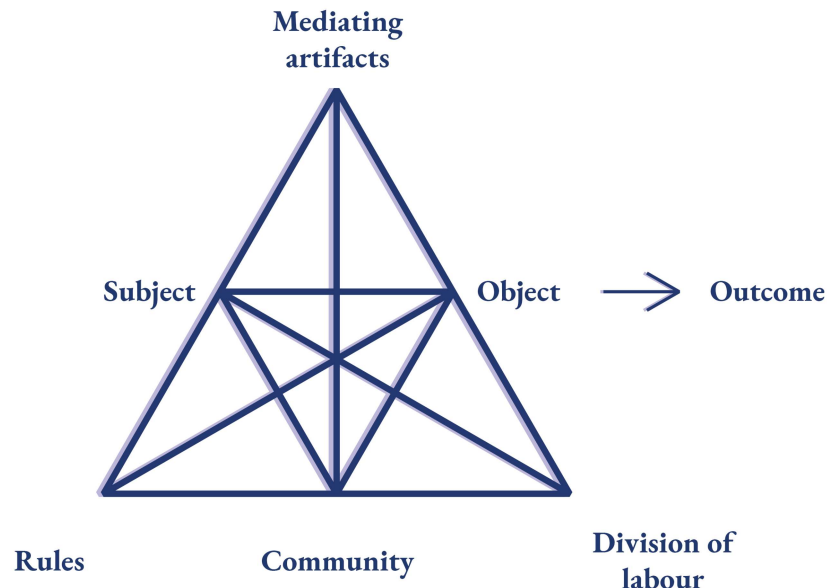
## Activity theory

The theory used to discuss the empirical data from the interviews is the activity theory. It has been developed by Yrjö Engeström based on Vygotsky's and Leontiev's work (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999). This theory has been chosen due to its enabling of discussing contradictions between different participators in an activity (Engeström, 1999a), since this is something many sustainability leaders experience in their daily life, having to balance the different logics as well as individual and organisational goals (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023). Contradictions refers to tensions between the organisation's way of performing and the alternatives or by contrasting opinions in an individual, such as between profitability and a larger mission for a better society (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). The theory of the activity system was developed to be able to take a systems perspective and discuss the context of an activity (Engeström, 1999a) and to analyse the subject's relations to other participants and conditions. The activity theory model facilitate the analysis (Engeström, 1999a), and changing between individual and activity perspective can help to explain the causes for individual experiences and outcomes in an activity.

The model of the activity system developed by Engeström can be seen in Figure 3.1, and visualises the relations between the different participants and the context (Engeström, 1999a). In a study by Gluch and Räisänen (2012) activity theory was used to analyse tensions within the activity *managing environmental issues in construction projects* and the complex relations experienced by the environmental function in project-based organisations. The framework developed to discuss the results in that study will be used to describe the context of the activity theory model developed by Engeström.

The **Subject** in the model represents the individual or group whose perspective is being analysed within the activity. In the article by Gluch och Räisänen (2012) the perspective of *environmental officials* is being analysed, and the **Object** is *the projects' environmental objectives*, which is what the environmental officials working on construction projects are aiming for. According to Engeström (1999b, p. 381), the Object can "never be fully reached or conquered", meaning that it should not be equated with a goal. This is instead equated to the main vision that guides and drives the Subject and the connected **Outcome** of the activity is what gives meaning to the activity and the reason for why the activity is performed. In the example the desired Outcome is *efficient and sustainable construction*.

**Mediating artifacts**, according to Engeström (1999a, 1999b) are what the sub-



**Figure 3.1:** A model of Engeström's activity system

ject uses, why it uses it, how it uses it and where it uses it to reach the Object. It can be seen as a way for humans to control their behaviour from the outside by using and creating different means. For the environmental officials these can be the *environmental management tools*, such as *EMS, audits and policies* (Gluch and Räsänen, 2012). The **Community** consists of other people that also work towards the Object or are part of the activity context. In the example, they are the rest of the *construction project team*. The **Division of labour** refers to how the responsibilities and actions taken toward the object are divided between the participants in the activity (Engeström, 1999a), such as the construction team. They are all constrained by certain **Rules**, such as regulations, conventions, and norms that constitute boundaries within the activity (Engeström and Sannino, 2010). In the activity of managing environmental issues in construction projects, the rules consists of *environmental demands and regulations*, affecting interaction, norms and routines.

As mentioned, activity theory is used to discuss tensions between different participants within a context. However, what are tensions and how can they be observed? In the example by Gluch and Räsänen (2012), several tensions were found that complicated the work of the environmental officials in projects. The tensions included constraints on innovation due to short-term focus in projects, how the used environmental management tools were not supporting the objectives, and how the environmental management did not align with the project logic. By doing this study and analysing the contradictions within the activity, they shed light on what could be developed to improve the conditions for managing environmental issues

and increase the possibility of the desired outcome to ensure efficient and sustainable construction. In other words, if tensions can be found in the system, the search for improvement will lead to change and development (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999). In the model, the tensions are visualised with lightning-shaped arrows placed on the different relations.

Another example in which activity systems theory has been used in practice is to evaluate different expectations of internships for physiotherapy students during their education (Virkkunen et al., 2010). The students were supposed to collaborate with their teachers during this time to learn from each other. Using the activity system model, the researchers mapped their situation and found that they had different objectives. The finding of this tension in the activity could be used to discuss together how they would like the activity to develop from there. In this case, they had a couple of researchers who collected interview data to compare and evaluate, and then it became clear that the students and teachers envisioned different outcomes in their common activity. Based on their common view of the future development of the activity, a new activity systems model was designed that represented their general idea of the future activity.

Activity theory has also been used to analyse communication within organisations (Daniels, 2010). In the article by Daniels it is mentioned how institutional and social structures are shaped by each other and both affect how the organisation is handling multi-agency work. It is also discussed how working in the boundaries between different professions or fields requires the ability to customise language depending on setting, something that they call hybridity. If not being considerate of this, it can create tensions between these different professions. In all these three articles by Gluch and Räisänen (2012), Virkkunen et al. (2010) and Daniels (2010) the activity systems theory is used as a tool to discuss an existing situation or activity with several parties to enlighten tensions within the system that have reason and force to change (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999) and are recognised places to intervene. So, activity theory can be about finding common ground, understanding each other's situations, and trying to find better settings to work towards a better performed activity for everyone and the outcome. This makes it a good lens for analysing work conditions for sustainability leaders.

In the reviewed literature on activity theory, the focus is always on tensions in the system and how to work through them. In addition to addressing tensions, this study aims to acknowledge structures and practices that have positive outcomes within the activity. Therefore, the concept of harmonies is being introduced to better highlight well-functioning and supportive parts of the system. A harmony will be marked by a circle in the activity model.

Introducing harmonies as positive things in the system risks marking tensions as exclusively negative, which is not the intention. Harmonies should be viewed as aspects of the current system that are generally positive. There could still be outcomes for certain elements that have a slight negative impact. In the same way, tensions

### 3. Activity theory

---

can consist of positive things, but the overall impression of the relation is observed as a tension. Relations and conditions are rarely either good or bad, and neither are harmonies and tensions in this study. As mentioned before, activity theory is often used to highlight tensions in the system to know where to intervene and improve the activity. There are often tensions that lead to change and development. In that sense, observing tensions are also a part of change management and a step towards something new.

# 4

## Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology used to answer the research questions. It begins to address the research approach of the study along with the process described in chronological order. Thereafter, a discussion of each stage in the process follows and the chapter ends with a statement about AI used in the study, a reflection of ethical issues and a discussion of the research quality.

### 4.1 Research approach and process

The thesis was exploratory in nature and adopted a qualitative research strategy due to the focus on the experiences of the sustainability leaders interviewed in the study (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The qualitative strategy is good for exploring relations and complex contexts, which in this context enables finding and observing of existing structures and practices in the sustainability leaders' organisations. It also allows flexibility in the process by being able to adapt the questions and the study over time as further insight into the situation is gained.

The study applied an abductive approach, in which the empirical data from the interviews were iteratively analysed in relation to theory (Bryman and Bell, 2015), and the concept of harmonies was introduced to complement the original theoretical framework of activity theory (Engeström, 1999a). In contrast, a deductive approach begins with theory and formulates hypotheses to be tested with empirical data, while an inductive approach derives theory directly from the data. The abductive approach aligns well with qualitative research, as it allows the collected data to guide theory development and analysis throughout the process.

To understand the situation of the work environment for sustainability leaders, the thesis began by reviewing a few articles and finding interview candidates for the study. As the first sustainability leaders showed interest, interviews were scheduled. The literature reading continued and, simultaneously, three semi-structured interviews were conducted. After the interviews a first quick summary was made to catch the first impression and later on the interviews were fully transcribed and anonymised. This provided a first broad mapping of practices, structures, and support for leaders working with sustainability in architectural and building consultancy firms. After the first two interviews, there was a gap before the third interview, which gave time to compare the answers, briefly analyse them, and slightly adjust the interview guide. The mapping of the first interviewees' perspectives and the

initial brief literature review provided a basis for further investigation in the study.

The following three weeks were spent researching literature to deepen the knowledge on topics that had arisen in the introductory phase. At the same time, the search continued for more interview candidates for the second round, and communication and planning of interview dates with those who wanted to contribute. At the end of this period, the interview guide was slightly updated again to narrow down the questions and make the interviews a bit more structured.

The next step included the larger part of the interviews with eight semi-structured interviews conducted over a couple weeks. As during the first round, a summary was written right after, and later the interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised.

After that, the study continued with analysis of the collected data from the interviews to develop the theoretical framework based on activity theory for further analysis. Finally, a comparison with the existing literature was made. This analysis was performed iteratively as new literature was reviewed and the relevance to the study was evaluated. The data was structured and restructured many times to find the best way to tell the story of the work environment of sustainability leaders.

As indicated, the exploratory nature of the thesis led to an iterative approach that moved between literature review, interviews, and analysis. Especially within the analysis, where the developed components of the activity model were evaluated in the context and renamed several times to ensure the relation to the original framework as well as the relation to the aim of the study. In the following sections, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4, a description of each step of the process is presented in the order of when they were first introduced. This description will go deeper into the implementation of each step and discuss why they were done this way. In section 4.5, the use of AI in the report will be presented and discussed, and in section 4.6, the ethical issues relevant to address in relation to the study are reflected upon.

### **4.2 Literature review**

The literature review explored whether there has been research done on the specific topic before to be able to develop it instead of repeat it. Due to difficulties in finding specific literature on the topic, the perspective was broadened to search for challenges and work conditions for sustainability leaders in general, and research on sustainability roles, not exclusively in consultancy firms was examined and evaluated after relevance to the study. In line with the abductive approach of the study, literature was reviewed continuously during the course of the study when new perspectives emerged through interviews, analysis, or other literature (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), to broaden the understanding of the situation or certain theoretical concepts, as well as developing the connections to other research, such as between sustainability and fostering creativity in organisations.

Literature was found using Google Scholar, Chalmers Library database and Scopus, as well as backtracking references in read literature. Some keywords used were: work environment sustainability, organisational structure, creativity organization. The references were managed and organised with Rayyan, a web-based tool for systematic review to maintain structure and documentation of the reviewed literature.

### 4.3 Interview study

Following the literature review was collection of data through interviews. The interviews were semi-structured to maintain flexibility and the possibility to ask follow-up questions and discover the paths that the interviewee found interesting and relevant (Bryman and Bell, 2015). They were carried out as a conversation where the interview guide was used more as a support and to remember to cover all areas. This was also done to facilitate further exploration of interesting topics that emerged during the interviews, while ensuring that all questions were addressed.

Three of the interviews were conducted during the beginning of the process, before the extensive literature review, to obtain a first broad mapping of the structures and practices sustainability leaders in architectural and building consultancy firms are part of. These interviews were semi-structured, but with a couple more open questions than the later ones, to promote dialogue and investigate further what was mentioned by the interviewees to be able to better understand the situation. The responses from the first interviews were used to update the otherwise reused interview guide before the next round of interviews. The interview guide used in all interviews with the sustainability leaders can be seen in Appendix A. The next round contained eight interviews, leading to eleven interviews in total included in the study. The responses from all eleven interviews were used in the analysis, making no difference to when it was conducted.

The interviews with sustainability professionals lasted 40-60 minutes and those with people working in Human Resources lasted 30-50 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Swedish. Six of the interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, while the remaining five took place in the interviewee's office. When the meeting ended, a short summary of the interview was written to catch the overall feeling and important responses as a first step in the analysis. All interviews were recorded with consent. Later, they were completely transcribed with Microsoft Teams' or Microsoft Word's built-in transcription services and then reviewed and revised to exclude errors. All quotations used in the report were translated into English and accepted by the interviewees to use.

The interviewees were chosen based on their role or their main tasks within a consultancy company. The contact and correspondence was made by email. A list of the interviewees can be seen in Table 4.1. The HR-workers were also chosen from similar consultancy firms and contacted to gain another perspective on the issue, as several articles discussed HR-function when talking about providing conditions for sustainability work.

**Table 4.1:** List of interviewees

| Interviewee             | Type of Consultancy Firm | Duration [min] |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Sustainability Leader 1 | Architecture             | 40             |
| Sustainability Leader 2 | Architecture             | 55             |
| Sustainability Leader 3 | Architecture             | 55             |
| Sustainability Leader 4 | Architecture             | 55             |
| Sustainability Leader 5 | Building Engineering     | 55             |
| Sustainability Leader 6 | Architecture             | 55             |
| Sustainability Leader 7 | Building Engineering     | 40             |
| Sustainability Leader 8 | Building Engineering     | 60             |
| Sustainability Leader 9 | Architecture             | 55             |
| HR Professional 1       | Architecture             | 50             |
| HR Professional 2       | Architecture             | 30             |

## 4.4 Data analysis

The analysis began with the short summaries directly after the interviews. Later, the transcribed interviews were coded with QualCoder, a tool to categorise and sort qualitative data. Coding is an important means of narrowing down extensive data from interviews, beginning to analyse them, and finding patterns in the responses (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Inductive coding was used due to the exploratory nature of the study, where the codes emerge from the collected data (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Examples of codes used are External networks, Management support and Alone/Team. All codes can be seen in Appendix B.

The different codes were then categorised in QualCoder according to the different components of the activity system (Subject, Object, Mediating instruments, Rules, Community, Division of labour). Reports were taken out for each category, analysed, and used to develop the theoretical framework used in this study to facilitate further analysis of the data with activity theory. References such as the article by Gluch and Räsänen (2012) about tensions for environmental professionals in the construction industry were also used to name the different components, connect to previous research and ground the decisions.

The coded data were later discussed with support from the developed framework, with a focus on the relations between the different components and to analyse whether they support or challenge the work environment of sustainability leaders, concluded in harmonies and tensions within the system. To support the analysis, important findings were noted and connected to one of the twelve different relations in the activity systems model using the canvas function in Obsidian, a knowledge management and thinking tool. The different relations were then categorised according to overarching themes that could be discussed consecutively.

The results were later compared and discussed with the reviewed literature to further analyse the findings from the interviews and their relevance to the research field. Here, Obsidian was again used to structure important findings with existing literature to facilitate connection making and to maintain a structured overview of the content in the study. Finally, a reflection of the process was performed and future research recommendations were discussed that could develop the findings from the study.

## 4.5 Use of AI

During this thesis AI was used as a tool to transcribe the interviews and improve the text. Microsoft Teams' and Microsoft Word's built in transcription services were used to facilitate transcribing and DeepL and Writefull in Latex were used to develop syntax and grammar in an otherwise self-written text.

## 4.6 Ethical issues

The interviews began by asking for consent to gather and store personal data during the project and if they were okay by being recorded during the interview, which was necessary in relation to GDPR. They were also informed of the process and purpose of the study, in accordance with the ethical issue of informed consent (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Personal data collected through interviews was stored until the end of the project and then deleted. The names of the participants and their respective company were excluded from the report so that the risk of identifying individuals was minimised.

When conducting an interview study it is important to acknowledge the effect it can have on the participating individuals (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), and whether the outcome of the study can contribute to a better situation for the interviewees. Investigating work environment is associated with health and personal data of the people being interviewed. This thesis focused on the structures and practices related to the work environment and how it affected the individual experience in the workplace. These experiences were collected with informed consent to be able to analyse the effect on the individuals. Any data collected related to health was treated with extra care, and anonymity ensured. The aim of the study is to shed light on the issue and start a conversation about what supporting structures and practices contribute to good work conditions for sustainability leaders, in the hope that the conditions will be favourable for everyone.

## 4.7 Research quality

In this section a reflection on the quality of the research is performed based on the *trustworthiness* concept developed by Guba and Lincoln for evaluation of qualitative research (Bryman and Bell, 2015). It constitutes of the four criteria: credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility** can refer to the relation between the researcher's observation and the experience of the interviewees participating in the study (Bryman and Bell, 2015). *Respondent validation* can be used to confirm the findings correlation to their perspectives. In this study, the sustainability leaders and HR professionals interviewed were contacted for acceptance to use quotes. The context in which the quote was used was included to provide a complete picture, and if feedback was received, the quotes were updated to better align with the view of the interviewee. *Triangulation* is somewhat also applied by checking the collected data from one interview with the responses from another. Conclusions were drawn on experiences of several sustainability leaders, that could also to some extent be related to the perspectives of the HR professionals.

**Transferability** in qualitative research is centred on creating a *thick description*, which includes many details of the studied scenario to help others judge whether the findings can be applied in other contexts (Bryman and Bell, 2015). This study describes the background and characteristics of the role of sustainability leaders, the structures and practices within the organisations, and some personal characteristics of the leaders that facilitate comparison to other contexts.

**Dependability** focusses on the stability and consistency of the research process, relating to documentation and keeping structured records of all completed steps (Bryman and Bell, 2015). In this study organised notes were kept of all decisions and everything done throughout the thesis. Full transcriptions of all interviews were made with AI and cross-checked with audio recordings. Notes from the interviews and the literature review were also kept throughout the process.

**Confirmability** concerns neutrality and objectivity of the study and that the findings are not only a reflection of personal values and preconceptions of the author (Bryman and Bell, 2015). This study shares the perspectives of the participants in the interviews and includes many quotes to support this. Bryman and Bell (2015) mention that it is impossible for a study to be completely objective, since the topic, methodology and questions have been chosen and the responses interpreted by the author. However, this study has received continuous feedback during the process and allowed the collected data to shape the structure and content of the report.

# 5

## Findings

The findings share the views of the interviewees on the structures and practices that support or challenge the work environment of sustainability leaders working in architectural and building consultancy firms. It will be presented in four different themes that have been derived from the interviews and end with a section summarising the interviewees' responses on what they would wish developed in the future with regard to their role and the work environment.

### 5.1 Passion and belonging

Sustainability leaders face different challenges in their role with regard to their work environment, which will be explained in the following sections. However, there are some structures and practices that have a clear positive effect on their work experience after listening to the interviewees. These include the external networks of which all sustainability leaders in this study are part. Their networks contain sustainability leaders in the building industry or some are part of networks where the participants are from different industries. What unites them, regardless of type, is that they share both the passion and challenges for how to reach the societal goals for a sustainable future and that they are leaders of change within their organisations. These networks are used for knowledge sharing and discussions about how to work with these common challenges. The interviewees share that this fosters a sense of belonging and makes it clear that they are not alone in pushing for change. So, even if the official purpose of the networks is knowledge sharing, many feel that they are a great source of emotional support and that it recharges their energy levels.

To have found this network and to feel the support in the fact that I am not alone, that it is not just me who is having a particularly hard time, that gives a lot of comfort. I can air things with the network in a way that I might not be able to with people in the office. So for me, this network has been very important in maintaining engagement. That may also be why I have not really experienced that many setbacks in my role, because I can see that it is part of the process. A part of change management.

— Sustainability Leader 5

According to the interviewees, networks also provide sustainability leaders with an understanding of the different types of organisations and roles within the building

industry by hearing their perspectives on the challenges they face. Despite coming from different companies, the challenges they face in encouraging and teaching their colleagues are very similar. It tends to create bonds between participants, with some interviewees reporting that the networking has led to official collaborations between firms. As they all share a vision for a better society, they also tend to support each other as much as possible and share how they are tackling the challenges. By sharing perspectives, they create new and better ideas. Furthermore, some sustainability leaders share that networks can reduce frustration with other parties by providing a forum to discuss tensions and misconceptions, which is a prerequisite for lasting collaborations.

I believe [networks] are very valuable. Sustainability is such a broad field that can mean a lot of different things and it is hard to define even for yourself. So, it is very good to hear different perspectives and how other people work with this. It helps you to develop and see possibilities of what we can do in our company that you would not have thought of otherwise. It prevents you from becoming too narrow-minded. I also believe that it is a great place to get ideas for collaboration opportunities. That is one thing I find important and the other is that if you raise a question when working together, it may get another value or become even better. Sustainability is such a topic where nothing works if only one person or one company does it.

— Sustainability Leader 7

Within the networks, the interviewed leaders bond over their shared passion for developing the industry in a sustainable direction. The strong motivation they possess drives them to persevere even in challenging circumstances. This is also relevant to the workload since several mention how their passion for sustainability work makes them accept more tasks, or come with own ideas to develop. They all have high ambitions and want to develop and implement faster, so in periods they have to remind themselves where they started and to admire all they have accomplished since then.

My own ambitions are a challenge, and I want to make things happen faster than what is possible, since we are a large organisation and ideas need to be anchored. [...] I need to remind myself to calm down and look back at everything we have accomplished.

— Sustainability Leader 9

Sustainability Leader 6 shares how they maintain a positive perspective on sustainability work by making it their mission to move the building industry one step at a time. Each step towards a more sustainable building industry is a win. This leader also talks about how much potential there is in a larger firm and how much they achieve by just doing a little better in every project.

I have made it my mission to move [the industry] forward. It is my goal with sustainability work. Moving can be a change from zero climate focus in a project to climate neutrality, or from zero climate focus to 10 % climate focus, then we have made a move forward. That is what I believe is important. To work in a project where everyone agrees on climate neutrality is not difficult, but to move a project manager that does not usually consider the climate issue, then you really have contributed. [...] And then to get a whole organisation [...] to have that attitude, that is stimulating, because imagine the power when 150 architects move their projects from 0 % to 10 % climate focus. It is super cool to have that power and the opportunity to make a change.

— Sustainability Leader 6

Several sustainability leaders also share that they can be assigned to maintain a positive attitude toward sustainability work. It has become easier over the years, and people have stopped questioning the sustainability transition in itself. However, there can still be some resistance when people have to change their own behaviours or limitations of older linear business models striving for minimised costs. According to the interviewees, it can also be challenging to motivate colleagues when their own encouragement comes in ways depending on responses from other people or political events. Including sustainability in the brand and business model is also a way to indicate its value to the company and thereby supporting the sustainability leader in their work since they will not have to push for it to the same extent.

It is demanding to always be the positive, driving person. Through the years, I have had to remind people to always consider sustainability issues. I do not have to do that anymore, but there are still deprivatisations and cutbacks. Sustainability is integrated in our business model and cannot be discarded, which is very good, but we are dependent on our customers, who not always have the same ambitions as we have. Business networks are important to encourage each other and share good examples.

— Sustainability Leader 4

The networks are important structures both within and outside the sustainability leaders' organisations since they are forum for knowledge sharing, help, and they foster a sense of belonging and hope that motivates the sustainability leaders interviewed to continue the drive for a sustainable transition within the building industry.

## 5.2 Management and the consultant business model

The sustainability leaders share different perspectives on the consultancy profession in the interviews. Some benefits mentioned are that they have all the possibilities to be creative and come up with sustainable solutions to include in the projects. They

sometimes find it challenging when the customer does not want to pay for extensive sustainability work as mentioned previously, however, they still have the opportunity to sell and convince them to do at least something better from a sustainability perspective.

Working as an architect [or consultant] means that there are no filters in the beginning, no restrictions on what you can propose. Then it is up to me to argue why they should do it. It has some limitations, but I have control over my proposals and actions. [...] So I am not really restricted by my business model, as an architect we are selling consulting hours. [...] Can you do it by adding sustainability in projects, you have the possibility to sell more hours for doing an investigation or implement reuse or timber construction, so it is rather that the more sustainability you can achieve, the more work for the consultancy business.

— Sustainability Leader 6

The business model of consultancy firms is about invoicing hours to the client, that is how they achieve their income. In other words, the idea is to have their employees booked full-time in projects. Therefore, some sustainability leaders interviewed struggle to find time to plan ahead and reflect on their work in busy periods. Sustainability Leader 8 talked about that and also shared that when time was found, they had explicit ways to be proactive, such as discussing upcoming deadlines with clients well in advance and therefore being able to plan ahead to greater extent. However, in fully booked periods it was not possible to find this space, which meant that it was more likely that the workload would stay high for a longer period of time. This indicates that a little less time spent on projects could in relation lead to an improved work environment by giving space to plan ahead, learn from previous experiences, and divide the workload over a longer period of time.

I can plan and be proactive as long as I am not fully booked with other tasks. As a consultant, the business idea is really about being allocated in projects and if you have a good hourly rate, it is better from a purely business perspective. However, it is not a good work environment. In an ideal world, I would have time to reflect and take a proactive approach, but in practice it depends on the situation at hand. This autumn I was unable to do so. Then I could not be that proactive, because I had up to ten projects that I managed simultaneously, if the usual amount is five to six the last couple of years.

— Sustainability Leader 8

Since their income consists of hours reported on projects, everything done for internal development is a cost for the company, since it cannot be invoiced. According to the interviewees, this becomes a stressful environment to work in since the external work in projects must always be prioritised. Therefore, the internal work can be standing still for a long time and affect the internal sustainability work within the

organisation. This can also affect other people in the firm, and the sustainability leaders seem to feel guilty for not being able to manage everything on time.

[My workload] is quite heavy, I would say. What I find most difficult related to workload is that I could basically work any amount of time. It is the balance between external and internal time. There are a lot of internal things that I would like to do, but then I have to complement it by doing several external things to not only log internal time. It is also difficult that external projects always come first. An external deadline is always prioritised over an internal deadline. I work with another person [in an internal project] [...] and she needs a few things from me that I never have time to do because I am fully booked in projects. That is the problem. I would not say that my workload due to [internal] sustainability work is unsustainable, rather that I have to prioritise external projects, [...] and then the [internal sustainability work] is sometimes pushed aside, unfortunately.

— Sustainability Leader 3

Some leaders interviewed share that they would also appreciate more guidance or acknowledgement from their manager about their work. They find the freedom in their role a privilege and a challenge. It is perceived as a great opportunity to be trusted to carry the sustainability field in the organisation and be able to follow up one's own ideas. However, it can also be difficult to prioritise sometimes, since they have so many different tasks they are responsible for and many areas in need of improvement. Some leaders also say that they do a lot of work behind the scenes that their manager does not always recognise. One sustainability leader also shared that their organisation had not had a clear idea of what they were supposed to do in their role when they started and the uncertainty was still present a few years later. This had affected their motivation and sense of being appreciated by the company.

[When I started here] the management trusted me to focus on the right things and I also got some guidelines for where to start, [...] but most of it has been my own responsibility. That has been a dream in many ways [...], but it is also very difficult because you need guidance when you have many ideas and things that you want to do and be part of at the same time. It has been a privilege and a challenge, you could say.

— Sustainability Leader 2

An interviewee talks about how there is always some resistance to overcome in the structure. In addition to the challenge of gaining new expertise and finding sustainable solutions, there is also the aspect of the cost and whether the management or the client will view and prioritise sustainability as a long-term investment or a cost. Having a different view of sustainability work compared to management also causes tensions in the work environment, and the sustainability leaders sometimes feel less valued and that they receive too little support from the organisation.

I would say that there is always a resistance to overcome. Nothing is easy to accomplish, not only from a perspective of knowledge and finding solutions, but also because there is a built-in resistance to implement sustainable solutions. Then there is always the cost aspect, that they imagine will affect profitability. That is mentally tough actually. [...] You have to constantly fight to get [decisions] through.

— Sustainability Leader 6

According to the interviewees, constantly fighting for sustainability takes a lot of energy. This, along with its impact on the work environment will be further elaborated in the next section.

### 5.3 Fragmentation, loneliness and performance

The amount of work that a sustainability leader is responsible for seems endless. For some leaders interviewed, it includes reporting, strategic planning, networking, internal training, external and internal communication, process development, project work, and more. Fragmented work is a challenge from a work environmental perspective, since it is a lot to keep in mind at once. Sustainability in itself is a broad field that includes economic, social, and ecological aspects and with increasing reporting demands from the EU with new CSR directives, the workload increases according to the interviewees. At the same time, the management in the leaders' organisations acknowledges their experience and knowledge and wants them to contribute to more activities within the organisation. However, some interviewees report that nothing is ever removed from their list of responsibilities. Several of the sustainability leaders interviewed expressed a sense of inadequacy and that they lack time to do everything to the extent that they would like.

What I find hard is being enough. I lead the development of our sustainability initiatives, work in marketing, follow up on data and perform reporting, as well as organising educations. I also provide support and knowledge sharing, both internally and externally, which is very important to push development forward. That could have been a full-time work itself.

— Sustainability Leader 4

In HR professional 2's company they have had some challenges with the fragmentation of the sustainability specialists' workload. They realised that the practice for how to include them in the architects' projects was not institutionalised, and they were often brought in late or asked quick questions during a break. This is challenging for the specialists since they cannot plan ahead or be prepared when asked for advice. They are addressing the issue by introducing a guide for hiring specialists in their office to help the architects reflect on their need of a specialist in

their project and what the process should look like. In addition to that, the policies and guidelines in the company for how to do sustainability work are not developed to the same extent as the architects'. This is reasonable as sustainability is a quite new and changing field, but it means that the sustainability professionals have to develop their own practices along the way. However, they are supported by the management, who are well-informed of the challenge.

What we are working with quite a lot at the moment in [our office] is a guide for how to hire a specialist internally. What is required to have a specialist or someone to bounce questions off? Or someone who is responsible? It looks at different levels. I think it can help to put yourself in someone else's shoes and understand that if I want this result, then I have to involve this profession in my project. [This guide] is quite new, but we have contacted all managers and hope that this will improve the working environment. [...] As a [sustainability] specialist you have less quality tools than the architects [...] at your disposal and you have to create and develop the processes on your own. However, they receive more support from us in the office management [...] because they lack the necessary support structures. So, if this guide enter our quality system, it can become a process for how to work with this.

— HR Professional 2

Extensive workload in combination with low personnel resources and the scale of the sustainability issue could be one of the reasons why almost all sustainability leaders mention that they sometimes feel lonely in their role. They either miss someone to discuss questions regarding strategic sustainability with or feel lonely by feeling like they are the only ones pushing for sustainability in their forums. It seems that sustainability is not always a natural part of the agenda, and several sustainability leaders express that they have to constantly push for it to be on the table. They feel alone with their passion and assume that if they do not bring it up, no one else will, putting pressure on themselves to carry the sustainability issue within their teams or firms. According to the interviewees, they seek forums to be able to reach many people at once and spend a lot of time developing guidelines and supporting practices to help colleagues bring sustainability into their projects. Some also experiences that colleagues expect them to have every answer with regard to the transitional work, as Sustainability Leader 5 compare to being an encyclopaedia. Sustainability includes many different perspectives, and it is not possible to know everything about it. What the sustainability leaders really know is how to address the issue and where to start, using their creativity to bend the question. However, when they are asked difficult questions that they do not have the answer to, it seems to lead to feelings of incompetence or not being able to help their colleagues enough. This in turn can make them put pressure on themselves to always learn more about new research in the field and to develop their way of communicating to be able to teach and foster the creative thinking that sustainability issues benefit from.

I have a group of people with me, in a local sustainability group, which acts on an organisational level. We can discuss all questions related to sustainability, but I sometimes feel lonely anyway. The reason I think, is because when talking to colleagues outside of this group, I always become the person who pushes for sustainability. I am always expected to have the correct answers, for example how to communicate with the client, which design choice that is more sustainable than another, and so on. There are a lot of questions being asked, but I do not have all the answers. People don't always understand that when it comes to sustainability, no one can give you a precise answer. It's more complicated. But I do know how to rephrase the questions, see different perspectives and how to start their search for information. I think this is the purpose of my role. I am not an encyclopaedia, I am a guide. So, it becomes lonely because you always have to be on your toes, and you are always expected to be able to push the issue.

— Sustainability Leader 5

Many sustainability leaders have colleagues who are engaged in the sustainability issue and who want to contribute, however, they report that they cannot always support them regarding strategic choices in the firm, which also makes them feel lonely in their role. The feeling of loneliness affects their energy levels and their motivation and commitment to their work. Having someone to bounce questions off or being more involved in the management could ease some of the load and make them feel more included.

I feel very lonely and I feel that my commitment comes in waves because I do not really have anyone. I have very committed junior colleagues, that are enthusiastic and I can absolutely get energy from them in individual questions, but not this strategic support.

— Sustainability Leader 1

Some had a better situation, and in Sustainability Leader 9's firm they had a rule that no one should be alone in their role. So, even though this person was alone working with strategic sustainability in their firm, they had a colleague they could discuss with or who could relieve the workload occasionally. For Sustainability Leader 2 it had improved by hiring several sustainability specialists and building a team that could discuss and plan together. Another perspective was shared by Sustainability Leader 8, who as a consultant was often brought in as someone for sustainability managers to bounce questions off and support them in their work. When organisations do not have enough resources to employ someone to relieve their sustainability leader, they can instead hire another consultant for strategic support.

Generally, I think those who work with sustainability and sustainability leadership often are quite lonely in their roles, and that is also why we

have our business. [...] [For example] it is common for there to be one who is responsible for sustainability in a real estate company, and this person needs people to bounce questions off. [...] It is impossible for one person to have all the expertise, but at the same time, I do not know why, they want to have quite small organisations. However, that is when they can seek help from firms like ours.

— Sustainability Leader 8

The high workload could also be affected by sustainability leaders accepting more tasks due to passion for the issues, as mentioned in Section 5.1. One leader mentioned that their colleagues sometimes volunteer and say that they want to work overtime to finish a task, and as a leader, you will trust them in their judgement, because it can be hard to keep up with everything and knowing when the workload becomes unreasonable. This leader indicates that the most important thing for a manager is to ask if they are satisfied with their choice and workload, and argues the importance of self-leadership and setting boundaries to ensure one's own work environment. HR Professional 1 shared their view on division of labour, highlighting how it also can be difficult for managers to delegate tasks differently when there is no one else with the necessary expertise in the firm.

The managers' challenge is to divide the assignments, and the ones that have a lot to do must delegate to their colleagues to get an even occupancy rate and to ask for help. [...] It is not ideal if one person works overtime and someone else has little to do, which is obvious but not easy to solve in a practical context. It sounds easy, but the person must also have the right competence and be able to perform the task. It can be a challenge.

— HR Professional 1

For the sustainability leaders, it can also be difficult to delegate their tasks to others, as most of them do not have any personnel they are responsible for and are only managing sustainability as a field. According to some leaders interviewed, colleagues who work with sustainability or have complementing expertise in the field are often fully booked in other projects. Some leaders share how they have to plan a few weeks ahead to have someone to discuss with or wait until they are free to be able to develop sustainability work in their companies. This contributes to them feeling lonely in their role and can also affect their sense of progress and development of the sustainability work. When Sustainability Leader 6 was asked what they wish for the future, this was their response:

That would be to have personnel under my responsibility with whom I could work together with to develop [the company]. Currently, things only get done when we have time, which is either when we are not busy in projects or are between two. There is no real structure or drive in

things when you have to sit and wait for a day in the future when I do not have any projects and when I get permission to use this person to develop something.

— Sustainability Leader 6

This structure indicates less flexibility and space for collaboration and innovation which affects their motivation and sense of support from management.

### 5.4 Creative or controlled?

Several of the interviewees come from an architecture background and are used to working in a creative environment. They share that they believe the sustainability issue is a great challenge that will require a lot of creativity and innovation, and some interviewees also think that the architecture profession will have to develop to become less about new buildings and more about renovation, reuse and transformation. Along with this, the sustainability leaders see their role as a chance to explore and find new solutions and processes to implement within their organisation and the industry.

My observation is that we, the architecture firms or our projects, will change a lot from now on. Sustainability will be a central element, and I do not mean that we will continue to work as we have done up to now, but that we will work much more with renovation and the existing stock. And that is what I am passionate about.

— Sustainability Leader 2

The interviewees share that some colleagues are more creative and take the initiative to explore new sustainable ideas, while others want clear guidelines and an explanation of how to implement sustainable solutions. They mean that this difference between individuals' need for support demands flexibility and the ability to read and follow up with colleagues to ensure that they receive the right support. The sustainability leaders have to be creative to come up with different ways to foster creativity in different individuals and find processes that facilitate creative thinking, while also not becoming too strict.

There are a lot of different individuals [in the company] that takes in information in different ways, who has a mix of different personal commitment, a variation in how much they dare to do and how much they want to be told what to do. Some just go for it and some need a lot of support and clear guidelines. [...] So we have been working on many different fronts so that we can meet the needs of all these individuals, and then it goes without saying that you will never reach everyone. [...] It is a challenge, but also a lot of fun.

— Sustainability Leader 9

Several interviewees mention how much energy it can give to teach colleagues and see them develop their sustainable thinking and explore ideas in their projects. In Sustainability Leader 9's organisation they have come a long way and established decentralised decision-making power where many engaged colleagues can drive their own projects. They have developed tools and processes that they can use if they want to, while also being able to go their own way. It is described as a coordination challenge for the manager to support everyone and catch and upscale their good ideas. However, in the end, the benefits exceed the challenges according to Sustainability Leader 9.

We have a high degree of self-leadership and decentralised decision-making. Many people drive their own projects and have their own client contact. There are also great opportunities to develop your own ideas and receive support to implement them. It is a very permissive structure. However, it is also very difficult to manage for that reason, so you have to find ways to reach many. Perhaps it is more of a culture work, but there should be things that facilitate for everyone to drive sustainability issues in their projects. [...] There are so many benefits with the culture we have, it is nothing that I would wish differently. To be more controlling of what people do, kills creativity a bit.

— Sustainability Leader 9

While the sustainability leaders in the organisations explore options for how to influence and educate colleagues, the reporting regulations from EU and the Swedish government increase or change, increasing the workload of sustainability leaders with reporting responsibility and affecting the ability to explore within their own role. Some interviewees share that they have to spend more and more time as a control function that seeks data for reports. Others mention that they think the increased reporting demands are necessary for the development in the industry, since some companies would not prioritise it if it were not legally binding. However, this adds to their workload and the interviewees mention that they would rather spend their time investigating how the regulations can interact with their projects and bring about change, indicating their creative character.

I think the most interesting part is to work with sustainability in projects. I actually think it is kind of boring to do a climate calculation. I do it, but I do not think it is that interesting in itself. I find it interesting when related to what we draw, like, what can we change to get a better result here? It is the interaction that is fun, rather than doing the actual calculation.

— Sustainability Leader 3

In the interviews, their creative side emerges and they indicate that the passion for sustainability is fostered by the creative challenge. When the controlling tasks

increase, this takes time from what they enjoy with their role and can affect their motivation and, in the long run, the development of sustainability within the organisations.

### 5.5 Wishes for the future

In the interviews, many sustainability leaders shared what they would like to change with their work environment or what they would like to develop with respect to their role. This has been narrowed down to four overarching wishes that will be presented in more detail in this section.

One wish is that sustainability would be a natural part of the organisation and be seen as an investment, embedded in the structure and the business, so that they would not have to spend so much energy on pushing and encouraging people to consider sustainability in their projects.

Sometimes I wish it had been given a little more space naturally. I can never relax, thinking that I have pushed a subject hard for a while and that people must have got the context, and never assume that they will come to me with things that I can work on. I have to constantly be in movement and can actually feel a bit overlooked in certain contexts sometimes.

— Sustainability Leader 7

The second wish is to become more people working with sustainability in their organisations and to have colleagues on their strategic level with whom they can discuss. The interviewees would also want an organisational structure that supports collaboration within, such as having personnel that they are responsible for, since most are responsible for sustainability and not any people. The interviewees indicate that having personnel on hand would mean that they would have more resources to develop the work within the organisation. They would also not have to plan a couple weeks in advance to discuss an issue with a colleague in the same organisation. Sustainability Leader 4 points out that having a colleague would mean that they could spend more time helping people and developing the organisation and that it would also relieve some of the stress.

It was very nice to have a close colleague that was also very knowledgeable. [...] We could have an equal discussion of factual issues and we complemented each other. It also relieved stress knowing that someone else was working and answering questions when I was away on other commitments. It made the work moving forward in a more efficient way.

— Sustainability Leader 4

A third wish is for the support and leadership of their managers to develop. Some interviewees, who are currently not, want to be more involved in the management work or part of the management team. They mentioned that they want to feel more included in daily work or that they want to be part of the team to be able to come with sustainability insight directly instead of having to discuss it afterwards. They believe that this would lead to them having a better forum to push sustainability and be part of the decision making that will affect their work. When asked how Sustainability Leader 1 experienced the collaboration with the CEO, this answer was received:

If I say it like this, it is difficult if there is no structure, but I still believe that we have tried to find ways to check in with each other. We have tried some alternatives, but I feel that my main forum is during our meetings with the management team, which take place three times over six months. So, every other month I feel like I have a place and a space. [...] I do not feel that included in the daily conversations, which may be because [we work in different cities]. There is a lot that I am not aware of. [...] I believe that I could have done a much better job, if the conditions had been a bit different.

— Sustainability Leader 1

Since many of the leaders interviewed also have a lot of freedom in their role to develop what they feel necessary, they also desire clarity regarding expectations and priorities, as well as better response from managers on their performed work, as they believe this is important when working with creative processes such as sustainability.

[...] I really had to take responsibility for myself and plan my own time, and it's very difficult to plan when you're working with creative processes, such as sustainability. So, to answer your question, it is very important to have somewhat clearer leadership if you want to do a good job as a sustainability specialist, leader or manager, and that has been difficult in our organisation anyway.

— Sustainability Leader 2

The forth and last wish is to have more time, and the interviewees especially want to use this extra time for development and interaction because this is what they love about their job. Currently, a lot of time is spent reporting, time that, according to the interviewees, could be better used for sustainable development. Other interviewees who are not working full-time with sustainability would also like to have more time in their role for the sustainability work, for the same reason, wanting to focus on what they love about their job.

It is more fun to drive development that brings about change in our projects, because then it brings change for our customers, and that

contributes to societal development. I work with sustainability because I want to make a difference and contribute to change.

— Sustainability Leader 4

The findings show that sustainability leaders are passionate about their job and are motivated to creatively encourage change in society together with colleagues in their networks. However, they also face several challenges that affect their experience of their work environment. These include the increasing number of quite different tasks they are assigned in combination with the amount of resources allocated and the support they receive from management and their colleagues. The extent of the workload and the sustainability challenge puts the sustainability leaders under great pressure that can often cause feelings of loneliness. In the coming chapter, the findings will be further analysed with activity theory by developing the theoretical framework and using it to understand and discuss what contributes to harmonies and tensions in their work environment.

# 6

## Analysis with theoretical framework

This chapter applies the lens of activity theory to the findings from the interviews to first develop a framework that then will be used to analyse and discuss the relations between the components in the system. These relations are categories in harmonies and tensions and indicate whether the relation supports or challenges the work environment of sustainability leaders.

### 6.1 Development of the theoretical framework

Based on activity theory discussed in chapter 3, the theoretical framework was developed based on coded data collected from interviews to guide the analysis of the results. The codes, sorted into categories based on the components of the activity model, can be seen in Appendix B. The resulting framework is shown in Figure 6.1 and is explained in further detail in this section.

The focus of this study is to find what works well and what needs to be improved regarding the work environment for sustainability leaders who work in architectural and building consultancy firms. This puts the *sustainability leader* as the **Subject** in the activity model, and the **Activity** and the context they are part of are the situation of interest to the study and are connected to their main responsibility, which is *managing sustainability in a consultancy firm in the building industry*.

They seek to *develop the sustainability work within the organisation* in their positions, making it the **Object** in the study. This is something they can continuously work on and with the leaders' passion for sustainability maintain as a lasting vision for their role.

This guides and drives them at work and in the transition towards *a sustainable building industry*, the desired **Outcome** of the activity and what makes them continue to encourage change and development.

Other people surrounding the sustainability leaders who are participating in the activity, working towards the Object, or are part of the context, are the *external networks* that consists of people managing sustainability in other firms, *colleagues* in their own organisation who are affecting the work of the leaders by either driving



roles. They also have a high level of expertise in the field of sustainability which is necessary for their role and to work toward the Object. Continuously, they also develop *practices* to support them and their colleagues in transitional work, while also being part of existing practices within the firm. These are the main **Mediating artifacts** used by the leaders in their work to develop sustainability work within their organisations.

The next section will further analyse the relations between these developed components of the activity *managing sustainability in a consultancy firm in the building industry* and determine which harmonies and tensions that can be observed in the system.

## 6.2 Analysis of harmonies and tensions

This section analyses the findings with the developed framework (see Figure 6.1) and discusses the tensions and harmonies found in the system. It will start by presenting the harmonies that could be observed and then continue to assess different kinds of tensions.

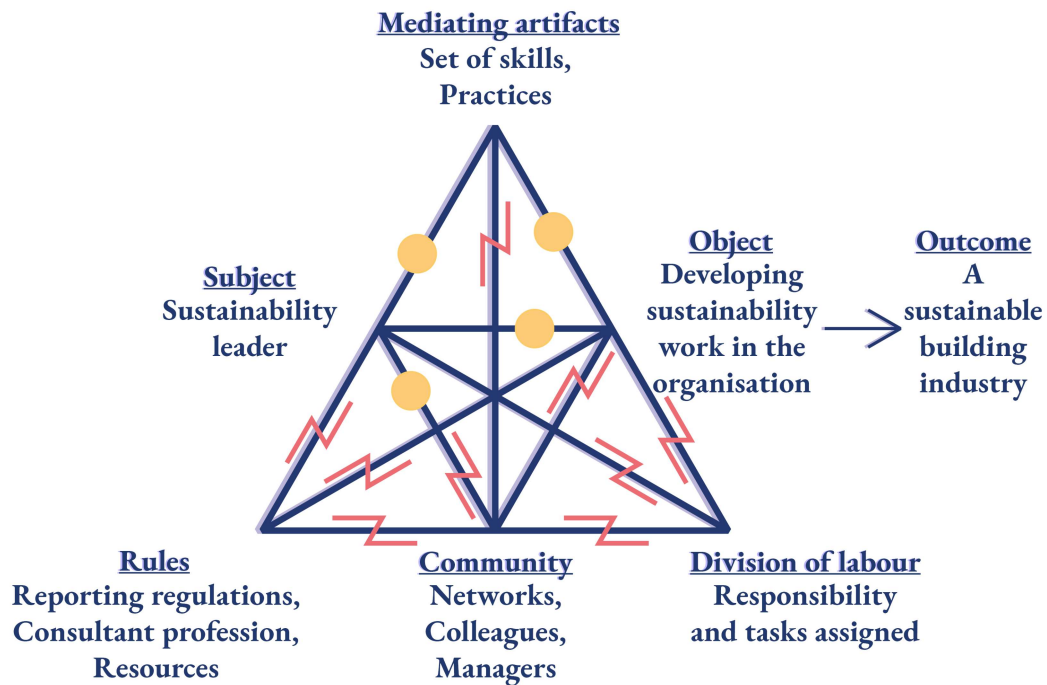
In the analysis, the terms from Engeström's model will be used to keep the connection to the original framework and then coloured and elaborated with explanations from this study. A summary of all tensions and harmonies are displayed in the activity model in Figure 6.2.

### 6.2.1 Harmony with networks, passion and creativity

When analysing the results of the interviews, some existing structures and practices seem to be important for the well-being of sustainability leaders. These are conditions that should be cared for, reinforced, and encouraged. Some of the harmonies mentioned have related tensions, however, they are important factors for a healthy work environment and therefore considered harmonies.

It is also important to mention that harmony in this study refers to aspects of the work environment that already bring support or joy. What would be desirable is that there would not be any tensions in the system and that harmonies could be found everywhere. This is possible with the right support and development, and this study aims to enlighten what could be improved to increase harmony within the activity.

In the interviews it was clear that the sustainability leaders need people to discuss the complexity and extent of the sustainability challenge with. Since they often work alone, it is great that they can find the connections with like-minded people with the same passion and who understand their challenges in the inter-organisational networks. This indicates a harmony between the **Subject and the Community**, since the networks entail the important and often necessary practices of knowledge



**Figure 6.2:** Harmonies and tensions within the activity system.

sharing and collaboration, as well as a sense of belonging and emotional support. However, other parts of the community are more often related to tensions and will be further discussed in Section 6.2.2.

There is also a clear harmony between the **Subject and the Object** of developing sustainability work in the organisation, since the sustainability leaders' have a great passion for transitional work. They find it to be a meaningful and interesting challenge given their backgrounds as architects and engineers. Their strong driving force to make a difference for society also leads them to contribute as much as they are able to within their role. With such intrinsic motivation, they also have enough energy to continue their work even when they encounter resistance and setbacks.

Another harmony related to this is the one between the **Subject and the Mediating artifacts** needed and used by the leaders to manage development of sustainability work. The fact that they are passionate about their job and continuously develop practices that facilitate the implementation of sustainable solutions in projects will also contribute to iterative learning that will lead to better practices for the organisation. They want to make it easier for their colleagues to analyse the effect of sustainable choices which is closely linked to the Object. Therefore, their creative ways of thinking and the new practices developed, as **Mediating artifacts**, are also in harmony with **the Object**.

### 6.2.2 Tensions within division of labour of the role

The interviewees share a fragmented picture of their role. A role that includes development, educating colleagues, reporting, marketing, and more. These are very different tasks that need different kinds of expertise, which indicates a tension between the **Subject and the Division of labour**, since assigning the responsibility to manage everything related to sustainability to one person is not sustainable. They often have to carry it all on their shoulders and are expected to push the issue and find ideas to implement in different parts of the organisation. The sustainability leaders' strong intrinsic motivation for the transitional work can also lead them to take on more responsibility and work overtime to be able to finish everything, since they want their organisations to develop. However, as mentioned previously, passion is foremost a great characteristic that facilitates their work.

This is related to a tension between **Division of labour and the Community** since they are alone assigned tasks of creative nature that would benefit of knowledge sharing and discussions. However, it can also be hard for their managers because no one else may be capable enough to do the tasks, since the sustainability leaders are the best in their field within the company. Managers and colleagues also want them to do more and be part of many different things, leading to more tasks assigned without any ever being removed.

In the relation between the **Subject and its Community** there are several tensions. As mentioned previously the networks are supportive in their nature, but experiences with colleagues and managers includes some contradictions. Several of the interviewees mentioned that they would like more support and appreciation from their managers. This has to do with several feeling that their managers do not grasp all the work that they do behind the scenes and that the in some cases limited budget on internal sustainability work makes them feel less supported by the management. It also has to do with the lack of internal contexts and supportive colleagues with similar expertise. The loneliness that interviewees feel in their role can be related to the pressure the colleagues can put on them to have the right answers and clear guidelines on how to implement things. The development of practices to support every individual also requires them to assess drive and emotions of the colleagues to give them the right conditions. They also have to balance emotions of both resistance, passion, and overwhelm in themselves and others while maintaining a positive attitude towards the sustainable transition. The sustainability leaders also feel that they do not have time to help as much as they would like and they sometimes feel bad for not being able to support their colleagues on time.

### 6.2.3 Tensions that affect the sustainable development

With all these different kinds of fragmented tasks that they are assigned, sustainability work can suffer because they do not have enough time to do everything to the extent that they think is necessary. This indicates the other tension between **Division of labour and the Object**, affecting the mission of the sustainability leaders. Feeling alone and not having someone to discuss the complexity of sus-

tainability work with, as well as time pressure, affect the passion and creativity of sustainability leaders, which then affects the development of sustainability work.

The consultant profession enables endless opportunities to influence clients to increase the sustainable solutions in their projects which is great for the development. However, the consultancy firms' business plans based on projects work and invoicing hours results in a tension between the **Rules and the Object**, since internal development work is a cost for the company. The budget assigned sustainability leaders differs in the interviewees' organisations. Some have a little room for internal, and some work only internally. When some experience that they have to work in projects to finance the internal sustainability work, it can lead to more solutions being implemented in the short term, however, long-term strategic development can be hampered due to less allocated time. This is also the case for increasing reporting demands that force the sustainability managers to spend more time on finding data and less on developing innovative sustainable practices that could take the industry forwards.

What was just mentioned regarding increased workload that is not supporting long-term development can be argued to be contradictory to the Object and the sustainability leaders' own vision to develop sustainable practices, in other words, tensions between Subject and Mediating artifacts as well as Object and Mediating artifacts. However, increased reporting regulations can be supportive when giving organisations greater incentives to change their usual way of working to a sustainable one, and the chance of further legitimise the work of sustainability leaders, which could lead to an improved work environment. More aspects of this will be discussed in Section 6.3.

When less supported in the structure, in line with what was written previously about the division of labour, resources, and limited number of personnel, the difficulty in developing sustainable practices increases. If their colleagues and managers are driven to change and transform their practices, the sustainability work is facilitated. However, if they meet resistance from colleagues and they have to push the issues more and persuade people to make it part of the agenda it requires more energy. As it is now it indicates a tension between the **Community and the Objects**, since most organisational management teams do not provide the necessary conditions for sustainability leaders to thrive in their role, which limits the development of sustainability work. The networks on the other hand, align well with the object since they have similar passion and driving force as the subject to develop sustainable practices. They also provide knowledge that is very relevant to transitional work and the networks can help overcome obstacles between parties, leading to less frustration with each other and better collaboration within the industry.

### 6.2.4 Tensions relating to supportive structures

The consultant aspects of the profession also pose risks to the work environment due to pressure on high amount of billable hours and being fully booked in projects.

When the workload is very high, it is harder to find time to be proactive and plan ahead, and it also creates personal stress. This shows a tension between the **Rules and the Subject**, in the aspect of the consultant profession. When observing how resources affect the work environment for sustainability leaders, it becomes clear that limited resources, especially personnel, lead to high workload, personal stress, and that they feel lonely in their role. In particular, since they do not have any colleagues under their responsibility, which makes it difficult to plan, delegate, and collaborate. This also indicates a tension between Rules and the Subject, as well as for reporting regulations, since the demand for reports increases and leads to more tasks on their agenda, without any other being removed.

As the profession is constantly evolving and is quite young in comparison to architects or engineers, there are not that many supportive guidelines to lean on to facilitate the work in the role of sustainability leaders. In some companies, the structures are being developed and guidelines are implemented to improve the work environment. However, the responsibility is still often assigned to the leaders themselves to develop their supportive structures and guidelines. The sustainability leaders are responsible for the development of sustainability work in the organisation, but it is reasonable that they get enough support from their managers and colleagues in regard to policies and help to prioritise different practices. Therefore, a tension could still be observed between the **Community and the Mediating artifacts**, while it is necessary to mention that the relation is improving.

Many leaders feel that they cannot do everything that they would like to, including not having enough time to support and help their colleagues. With more colleagues in the sustainability field, or their own personnel to manage, they could have more force to spread sustainable ideas in the organisations. This demonstrates a tension between **Rules and the Community**. On the other hand, the increased reporting demands can create stronger incentives to change within the company which could result in higher legitimisation of the role and more support within the structure. However, as it is today, the reporting demands seem to be causing more administration for everyone in the company, including management, not aligning well with their business development.

### 6.3 Evaluation of certain components

In the analysis, it becomes clear that the components consisting of several elements can have different relations to other components. This section will therefore discuss the different components developed in Section 6.1 and assess their impact on the analysis and observed tensions in the system.

An important factor is that the network part of the Community differs from the colleagues and managers. The networks are above all providing the sustainability leaders, Subject, with necessary conditions to thrive in their role, including support and knowledge, while colleagues and managers are more often related to challenges. According to Engeström (1999a) the Subject can consist of either an individual or a

group whose perspective is being analysed. Looking at the findings, it can be argued that the networks consist of sustainability leaders and could therefore be considered a relatively homogeneous group who could make up the Subject as Sustainability leaders. However, with regard to the collected data from the interviews, it felt important to also be able to highlight the problem of loneliness within the profession, as well as to push the importance of networking as a source of support. Therefore, the choice to have an individual focus and include networks in the Community was made.

It could also be argued that the networks could be the only ones in the Community as they are supposed to be the other ones working towards the Object (Engeström, 1999a). On the other hand, they could also be included if part of the activity context and previous research by Gluch and Räsänen (2012) using the activity lens in the construction industry, includes the whole project teams and highlights the resistance within the Community. In this study, it was also important to highlight their contribution in the context and their affect on the work environment.

Another component that needs to be discussed is the Object, because to *develop sustainability work within the organisations* focusses on development within the organisations and could in itself directly lead to tensions to Rules and practices that affect and are included in the role description. All tasks assigned are not necessarily of developing nature, such as reporting demands, which can increase incentive for development, but are not innovative in itself and therefore not directly related to the set objective. However, the Object is related to the Outcome, which is to work towards a sustainable building industry. In order to achieve this, development and innovation are required, as not all methods have yet been developed. In light of this perspective, reporting as part of the Rules, is an observed tension to the Object. This is necessary to highlight, as many see it as time consuming and less motivating, affecting the work environment.

The Object is also in line with the passion of the sustainability leaders and what they have ambition to work towards. It may be that the other parties in the Community see a different Object, this is something that would have to be further studied, since it affect the work of sustainability leaders to a large extent. Especially if they are assigned tasks that align more with other objectives.

# 7

## Discussion

This chapter builds on the findings and the analysis in the context of structures and practices to answer the two research questions (1) How do organisational structures and practices contribute to harmonies and tensions in the work environment of sustainability leaders in architectural and building consultancy firms? (2) How would sustainability leaders want their role to develop to improve the work environment?

From the analysis, the recognised harmonies in the work environment of sustainability leaders are primarily related to their passion for the sustainability transition and how it gives them energy to cope with the challenges they face at work, their creativity for how to develop practices for sustainable development, and the networks that support by providing space for knowledge sharing and increasing energy levels. The tensions observed that have a significant impact on their work environment include their increasing responsibility for more and more tasks with a broad spectrum of expertise needed, relatively low resource allocation, especially personnel, which contributes to them feeling lonely in their role, the consultant professions pressure for billable hours, and the stress all this can cause the individual. The harmonies and the tensions will be further discussed in relation to reviewed literature in the coming sections. The chapter ends with recommendations for further studies.

### 7.1 From creative freedom to a more controlling function

According to the interviewees, analysis, and previous research, creativity is a great skill for people leading sustainability work, and something that they all use daily while developing new practices and supportive structures to meet different individual needs in a whole organisation. The extent of the sustainability challenge demands new ways of working and innovative solutions, and the sustainability leaders creative characteristics blossom in the challenge it provides, as observed in the harmonies between the sustainability leader, Subject, and the set of skills and practices developed, Mediating artifacts, and the Mediating artifacts and the Object of developing sustainability work in the organisation. According to Lozano (2014), creativity is great for breaking mental models, which is necessary when working with change management and creating solutions to problems that have never been solved before (Mayer, 1989). As most sustainability leaders interviewed have a creative background, it makes them well suited for the challenges that their role includes.

For creativity to thrive, freedom is important to be able to take initiative of one's own (Amabile, 1988). Many sustainability leaders interviewed express freedom to develop what they feel necessary, which aligned well with this. However, increasing demands for reporting reduce flexibility and freedom due to more controlled practices and less time for creative thinking. In the analysis a harmony was stated between the set of skills the leaders possess and develop and their practices (Mediating artifacts) and the development of sustainability work in the organisation (Object) due to the positive effects of their ways of thinking creatively to develop practices to the overall development of sustainability work. If the practices are shifted towards more reporting and less flexibility, it could affect the development due to restricted conditions for creativity. As many find the creative work and the teaching of practices meaningful and what they enjoy about their role, less time for it could also affect their passion. In the harmony between the sustainability leader (Subject) and the development of sustainability work in the organisation (Object), it was stated that passion has many benefits in their role and a positive effect on the work environment. Therefore, a decrease in passion could further restrict sustainable development.

When the sustainability leaders talked about freedom, it was often in a double sense. They said that they found freedom to be a privilege and something they enjoyed, but in the next sentence they followed up with the difficulties related to it, including receiving little support when having high ambitions, and a wish for clearer leadership. Amabile (1988) states that organisational support and good management communication are necessary elements to foster creativity. Here, another tension between freedom and little support can be observed. Having a lot of freedom without supportive structures seems to result in perceived pressure from the structure and themselves to be able to deliver top results in many different areas without having all the optimal conditions for it to be possible, as considered in the tension between the sustainability leader (Subject) and the responsibilities and tasks assigned (Division of labour). It could therefore be argued that the sustainability leaders do not experience freedom in their role as they do not have the conditions to exercise it. Paradoxically, as they lack the support and resources to pursue them, having many ideas and possibilities only increases pressure on the leaders instead of fostering their sense of freedom and supporting their creative development. The effect of this tension in the context will be discussed further in Section 7.3.

According to Amabile (1988), freedom is closely related to a sense of control over one's tasks. Some interviewees mentioned that they could manage their own time, while others shared that being a consultant could make it difficult due to the balance between internal and external time and that external always had to be prioritised, as it generates income. The tension between the consultant profession element of the Rules and the sustainability leader (Subject) further elaborated the impact of the consultant business model on the work environment stating that pressure on billable hours, being fully booked in projects, leading to high workload, caused personal stress for the leaders due to little time to plan, be proactive, and few periods of less

intense work. This aligns well with the work by Thorsell (2019), stating that the high demands on consultants, which can lead to a lot of overtime and lack of control of one's work, are usual causes for stress.

## 7.2 Management support and meaningfulness

As presented in the findings, there is a wish for clearer leadership and increased management support, including greater appreciation for all the work they put in. This was also acknowledged by the observed tension between the sustainability leader (Subject) and the managers of the Community in the analysis. As mentioned previously, Amabile (1988) states that an enthusiastic and communicative manager is important for creativity. She also describes the importance of appropriate recognition and feedback on one's work. What has been observed in the findings and analysis is therefore not optimal conditions for creative and innovative work, since many feel that their work is not always appreciated or acknowledged. The support of course varies, but the message that should be considered is that support is important when working with sustainability and creativity, and in some organisations it must be developed to ensure a sustainable development with a good work environment for those responsible.

Support can be shown and practised in different ways, such as allocated resources and space for help and feedback. Previous research by DuBois and DuBois (2012) explains that the budget received is a reflection of management support and that the right support leads to higher motivation for sustainability work. This again relates to Amabile's (1988) description of structures, since enough resources promote creative work, while lack of resources inhibits it. With the tension between the resources (Rules) and the sustainability leader (Subject) it becomes clear that the lack of resources causes a high workload, loneliness, and overwhelm due to the few people employed to take the lead on the topic. In other words, some of the support received through resources is limited and affects the extent of creativity-promoting structures.

In connection with the tension between the managers (Community) and the set of skills and practices (Mediating artifacts), it was mentioned how one of the HR Professionals had developed a guideline to support the use of sustainability expertise internally and how this could hopefully improve the conditions of the work environment. This is an example of how supporting structures are being established, and demonstrates that the challenges faced by sustainability leaders in their work are being recognised by management. However, the profession is quite young and the structures are not as far established as for the other professions in the organisations, such as for the architects. The need for expertise in different parts of the organisation may further complicate this as many different processes are to be developed to facilitate sustainable practices.

Another couple of things that inhibit creativity within organisations are reluctance to change and courage to take risks (Amabile, 1988). As stated in the tension between the colleagues (Community) and the development of sustainability work in

the organisation (Object), some interviewees experience resistance from individual colleagues, and having to convince and influence these people can be exhausting. This is supported by the article by Gluch and Hellsvik (2023) which also states that it creates a stressful work environment. As for the organisations, they are publicly supporting and encouraging implementation of sustainable solutions, but it takes a considerable amount of time and more concrete support is needed for it to thrive.

Without good support, passion can fade (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017), and as stated in both findings and analysis, passion is important for managing the extent of the workload as a sustainability leader. According to Mitra and Buzzanell passion is also important for maintaining motivation, a necessary element for creativity (Amabile, 1988) and sustainability work. This was observed in the harmony between the sustainability leader (Subject) and the development of sustainability work in the organisation (Object). Motivation can be nourished by increasing the sense of meaningfulness to one's work and one way to do that is through collaborative activities (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017), which also promote creativity (Amabile, 1988). In line with Gluch's (2009) research many sustainability leaders seek networks for knowledge sharing and support, which the distinctive harmony between the sustainability leader (Subject) and the networks (Community) argues for. These networks can often lead to inter-organisational collaborations between participating leaders and firms that contribute to the spreading of knowledge and the development of the industry. However, as observed in the tension between the sustainability leader (Subject) and the Community in the analysis, there are not collaborations to the same extent within the companies. Instead, as discussed in the tension between the responsibilities and tasks the leaders are assigned (Division of labour) and their managers and colleagues (Community), the sustainability leaders are often alone assigned tasks that would benefit of collaboration. This contributes to leaders feeling lonely in their role, not having someone to discuss the complexity of the sustainability challenge with. Increasing the ability for collaborative practices within the organisations would have many benefits, including improved conditions for creative and innovative sustainable development, as well as contributing to a less lonely work environment for the sustainability leaders.

### 7.3 Changing role descriptions and fragmentation

The sustainability leaders in the study are often assigned many different kinds of tasks, similar to the description by Framtid.se (n.d.) creating a fragmented role, as observed in the tension between the sustainability leader (Subject) and the responsibilities and tasks assigned (Division of labour). With an increased amount of tasks the prioritisation becomes more difficult and the flexibility decreases. The sustainability leaders also have to adapt to the shifting regulations from the EU and the Swedish Government. As discussed in the article by Klint (2025) and Gluch and Månsson (2021) the role has evolved into a more strategic and business-orientated position, that influence the whole organisation. When the regulations on sustainability reporting increase and give organisations greater incentives to include sustainable thinking in all their practices (2022), it is not unreasonable that they turn to those

with the highest expertise. In the article by Gluch and Månsson (2021) it is further described how changing political climates and regulations over the years have had a significant impact on the evolution of the profession and the support and space they receive in the organisation and society. If the regulations continue to increase, it is possible that the role shifts again, to a more controlling function. In the observed tension between reporting regulations (Rules) and the development of sustainability work in the organisation (Object), the increased reporting demands involve the sustainability leaders in an extensive search for data that decrease the amount of time available for organisational development. A shift of the role could therefore mean that it moves away from the more creative and developmental sides of it, which seem to be the parts that motivate sustainability leaders the most. This would affect their view of the role, their passion for it, and thereby their work environment.

In the analysis that resulted in a current tension between the reporting regulations (Rules) and the managers and colleagues (Community), it was discussed how the increasing reporting demands also could have a positive effect on the legitimising of the role and that it could give incentive for development. This could in turn lead to more resources and more power within the organisations to drive change. Gluch and Månsson (2021) discussed how the ones leading environmental or sustainability work during the last decades always have had to mobilise available resources and seize opportunities to develop the sustainability work. Perhaps increasing legislation could in time give force and support for the role to develop a clearer role in the organisations with more wind in their sails.

The fragmentation of the role was further described by Gluch (2009), including how the broad set of tasks requires sustainability leaders to move between a generalist with strategic business perspective to a specialist role with in-depth technical expertise. This can be difficult to manage due to constant shift of perspectives in their daily work. In the already highly elaborated tension between the sustainability leader (Subject) and the Community, it was also observed how colleagues sometimes expect quick and easy answers to complex sustainable choices, putting pressure on the sustainability leaders. Perhaps the fragmentation and the different perspectives of the sustainability leaders' assigned tasks could have an impact on the colleagues' impression of the responsibility of the role and the expertise they have. In the article by Gluch och Hellsvik (2023), it was mentioned how fragmentation could undermine the profession by increasing the ambiguity surrounding the role. Perhaps people's increasing understanding of the complexity of the challenge makes them put all their confidence in the sustainability leaders and expect them to have all the answers. Gluch (2009) mentioned, related to fragmentation, how important it is for the role to have a clear identity to clarify to colleagues what the role of a sustainability leader includes. This should be taken into consideration, and the responsibilities of the role should be explained more clearly to help the leaders gain more control of their workload and relieve some of the pressure on them.

Techniques and expertise are important elements to be creative (Amabile, 1988), and reasonable to expect of people in leading positions for sustainability work. However,

it puts a lot of pressure on the individual to expect them to single-handedly lead the increasing amount of sustainability-related activities within the organisation, and it is understandable that this sometimes creates a stressful work environment, since they do not have enough time to prioritise everything. This was elaborated in the tension between responsibilities and tasks assigned (Division of labour) and the development of sustainability work in the organisation (Object), and it was also discussed how the division of labour also entail feelings of loneliness due to the absence of colleagues with the same level of expertise with whom to discuss their tasks and its effect on their passion and intrinsic motivation. Unreasonable expectations also inhibit creativity (1988), which according to previous reasoning can affect sustainable development.

### **7.4 What to nurture and possible improvement of the role**

Based on the sustainability leaders' wishes for the future shared in Section 5.5, the harmonies and tensions in the system, and the organisational structures supporting or challenging the creative work of the sustainability leaders, this section elaborates what should be nurtured, as well as possible improvements of the work environment of sustainability leaders looking forward.

The harmonies stated in the analysis represent structures, practices, and aspects that currently support a healthy work environment and, therefore, should be cared for and encouraged to ensure good conditions for the role. These include the networks and their passion for the development of the sustainability work.

Inter-organisational networks are important to nurture since they support them by providing different perspectives on the issue, help to tackle challenges, and learning through knowledge sharing. Collaborative activities that sometimes also result in official cooperation in the industry that contributes to the overall development of sustainable building. The networks also brings emotional support and belonging that refills their energy levels so that they manage to face the challenges included in the role. Ensuring that the sustainability leaders have the option and the time to participate is trivial for their well-being related to the role.

It is also important to foster their passion. All sustainability leaders interviewed shared their drive to make a difference for society, to help their colleagues learn through guidance, development of practices, and giving them the freedom to explore their own path toward sustainability. Structures that have been discussed to promote creativity and sustainable development in the organisations (Amabile, 1988). In the study, it has been observed that their passion is essential for them to continue to push and it also motivates them when encountering setbacks, and it is important to nurture the passion to ensure well-being. This can be done by ensuring time for their creativity and passion to blossom and increasing the sense of meaningfulness in their work (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017). As mentioned, this can

be done through collaborative activities, increasing the importance of networks if it cannot be satisfied within the organisation.

The first wish was for sustainability to have a more natural space in the organisation. This could be improved by being more people working with sustainability, as they would have been more people pushing for it be a part of the agenda. This clearly relates to the second wish of being more people and to have colleagues on their level of expertise. This could facilitate the sustainability work and relieve some of the workload and pressure from leading a complex challenge alone. The third wish further pushes for participation in the business by being part of the management team or receiving better support and feedback on their work. The fourth wish was to get more time for development and innovative work, further indicating how they are not satisfied with all the extensive tasks that fragment their role and take time and focus away from what they enjoy. This could be related to increased personnel resources, as this could include colleagues to collaborate with or delegate tasks to. In summary, the sustainability leaders want more resources, primarily personnel, to receive enough support to succeed in their roles, and to promote sustainable thinking within the management team, to have more strength to develop the sustainability work within the organisations and the projects.

What was established in the interviews is that the sustainability leaders primarily want to influence the projects. Some would rather work less internally and more in the projects to use their creative thinking on how to apply new directives. Some leaders also mentioned the importance of spreading the knowledge in the organisations and have several that drive the issues on many fronts. This relieves the pressure on the leader, and it was also noted that none of the people who mentioned a strong team or decentralised decision making did not feel lonely in their role. Indicating further the importance of encouraged colleagues and good collaborating teams. If not having the financial support to employ more people, perhaps it could help to hire a consultant for sustainability management support, as mentioned in the findings, to ensure someone for the sustainability leaders to bounce strategic questions off. In the long run, it should be considered whether to split the role to a more administrative one handling reports and data, and one with more focus on improving sustainable practices and strategic business development.

In workload assessment, satisfaction is a significant factor in stating the impact of workload on well-being (Hasson et al., 2023). The level of satisfaction is related to the sense of control and the collegial and managerial support they receive in the organisation. This is something that has been observed as tensions in the system and therefore poses a risk to their well-being. Furthermore, the balance between demand and resources also has a significant impact on stress-related sick leave, according to Försäkringskassan (2024), which has also been observed to be off in this study. As indicated in the wishes they are not either satisfied with several other aspects of their role, such as all the pushing of sustainability, and it is shared how it consumes a lot of energy, affecting their free time and recovery time. All this indicates that there is a risk to the well-being of the sustainability leaders and that there is a need

to consider this to ensure a sustainable development.

## 7.5 Future research recommendations

This study has focused on investigating and analysing the working conditions of sustainability leaders. It is about sharing their perspectives and trying to understand what works well and what could be improved. The perspective was broadened with experiences shared by HR Professionals, however, for further studies, it is recommended to interview managers and colleagues to get a broader perspective of the organisational structures and practices and receive their view of their relationships with the sustainability leaders, as these seem to have a significant impact on the work environment. As mentioned previously, it may be that management, colleagues, and sustainability leaders have different objectives of the role, which can increase the fragmentation of tasks. This should be further investigated to ensure a well-functioning work environment.

It could also be interesting to talk to other types of companies within the building industry, such as their clients, to learn if the perspectives of sustainability leaders in those firms align or differ from those in consultancy firms.

The study has also observed a possible shift of the profession toward a more controlling function with increasing reporting responsibilities, and, as mentioned previously, the effect this has on the work environment of sustainability leaders should be further studied, as well as the overall future development of the role.

It would also be interesting to see how well the findings of this study could be applied to other industries or fields characterised by high levels of personal passion and structural tensions.

# 8

## Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate the harmonies and tensions that sustainability leaders in architectural and building consultancy firms experience with a focus on organisational structures and practices. Highlighting what should be nurtured or improved expands the basis for how the role could develop in the future.

There are many things that the sustainability leaders interviewed enjoy and love about their job. They are motivated by the creative challenge of sustainability work and are passionate about contributing to a sustainable development of society. In their role, networks are an important structure that contributes with knowledge, broader perspectives, and a sense of belonging that can be difficult to find in their own organisations. However, they also experience tensions between what they want to achieve and what the role is developing towards. Many have been drawn to a creative and innovative profession, but end up in a role that does not always get the appreciation and resources that it deserves and needs. The responsibilities are also constantly increasing, and it looks like the growing reporting regulations will have a significant impact on the future of the role. From the individuals behind the profession, they would rather creatively work with how the updating demands can be applied to their operation than report climate data. The future requires clear communication with and from the management and clarified role descriptions to manage the workload and expectations from the rest of the organisation. Perhaps some things could be delegated to another colleague with enough experience with reporting, or someone could be hired to take on the main responsibility for it if the financial state allows it. Either way, the sustainability leaders should be allocated more resources, if not personnel then time or internal budget, if that is what they want. When looking into the conditions of the work environment, the most important thing is to have a clear dialogue between the different parties and that both are honest with themselves and each other about what they manage and appreciate with their job.

What sustainability leaders want are to be able to lead the development of sustainability work in their organisations and in the long-run for the whole industry, for example by being in the management team, having personnel that can develop sustainability practice within the organisation, or to be able to focus on what they love about their job. They want to be part of a team of colleagues engaged in the sustainability challenge that works together with complex sustainability issues and learn together. They want sustainability to be valued and prioritised by management and for it to be embedded in the business.

This study further elaborates the relation between creative and sustainability work. It is stated that expectations on the role to lead and develop sustainability practices thrive when creativity is used. However, the role develops toward a more controlling function that leaves less space for creative and innovative practices that promote future sustainable development. These are aspects of the role that motivate and nourish the passion of sustainability leaders and factors that are important for their experience of their work environment.

# Bibliography

- Amabile, T. M. (1988). A model of creativity and innovation in organizations. *Research in organizational behavior*, 10, 123–167.
- Arbetsmiljöverket. (2025, May 2). *Organisatorisk och social arbetsmiljö* [Accessed: 2025-08-20]. <https://www.av.se/halsa-och-sakerhet/organisatorisk-och-social-arbetsmiljo/>
- Boverket. (2025, January 29). *Utsläpp av växthusgaser från bygg- och fastighetssektorn* [Accessed: 2025-05-21]. <https://www.boverket.se/sv/byggande/hallbart-byggande-och-forvaltning/miljoindikatorer---aktuell-status/vaxthusgaser/>
- Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2015). *Business research methods* (Fourth edition). Oxford University Press.
- Cripps, K. (2024, September). *Holding back climate progress: Sustainability's critical skills gap* (tech. rep.) (A research project in partnership with Climate Change Coaches). Oxford Brookes Business School. [https://climatechangecoaches.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Holding-back-climate-progress-sustainability-critical-skills-gap.pdf?mc\\_cid=e6830345a4&mc\\_eid=e9048bac9e](https://climatechangecoaches.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Holding-back-climate-progress-sustainability-critical-skills-gap.pdf?mc_cid=e6830345a4&mc_eid=e9048bac9e)
- Daily, B. F., & Huang, S.-c. (2001). Achieving sustainability through attention to human resource factors in environmental management. *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, 21(12), 1539–1552. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01443570110410892>
- Daniels, H. (2010). Mediation in the development of interagency work. In D. Harry, A. Edwards, Y. Engeström, T. Gallagher, & S. R. Ludvigsen (Eds.), *Activity theory in practice: Promoting learning across boundaries and agencies*. Routledge.
- Directive (EU) 2022/2464 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 amending Regulation (EU) No 537/2014, Directive 2004/109/EC, Directive 2006/43/EC and Directive 2013/34/EU, as regards corporate sustainability reporting (Text with EEA relevance). (2022, December). Retrieved August 30, 2025, from <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2022/2464/oj/eng>
- DuBois, C. L. Z., & DuBois, D. A. (2012). Strategic hrm as social design for environmental sustainability in organization. *Human Resource Management*, 51(6), 799–826. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21504>
- Engeström, Y. (1999a). Activity theory and individual and social transformation. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen, & R.-L. Punamäki (Eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Engeström, Y. (1999b). Innovative learning in work teams: Analyzing cycles of knowledge creation in practice. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen, & R.-L. Punamäki (Eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory*. Cambridge University Press.

- Engeström, Y., & Miettinen, R. (1999). Introduction. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen, & R.-L. Punamäki (Eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Engeström, Y., & Sannino, A. (2010). Studies of expansive learning: Foundations, findings and future challenges. *Educational Research Review*, *5*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2009.12.002>
- Framtid.se. (n.d.). *Hållbarhetschef* [Accessed: 2025-01-31]. <https://www.framtid.se/yrke/hallbarhetschef>
- Gluch, P. (2009). Unfolding roles and identities of professionals in construction projects: Exploring the informality of practices. *Construction Management Economics*, *27*, 959–968. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01446190903179728>
- Gluch, P., & Hellsvik, S. (2023). The influence of multiple logics on the work of sustainability professionals. *Construction Management and Economics*, *41*(11–12), 893–909. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01446193.2023.2214252>
- Gluch, P., & Månsson, S. (2021). Taking lead for sustainability: Environmental managers as institutional entrepreneurs. *Sustainability*, *13*(7), 4022. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13074022>
- Gluch, P., & Räisänen, C. (2012). What tensions obstruct an alignment between project and environmental management practices? *Engineering Construction Architectural Management*, *19*, 127–140. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09699981211206070>
- Hasson, D., Okazawa, S., & Villaume, K. (2023). Workload assessment: Time to emanate from accurate conclusions instead of preconceived notions. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *96*(3), 707–724. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12436>
- Klint, E. (2025). Så landar du hållbarhetsjobbet. *Miljö & Utveckling*, (3), 66–67.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun* (Second Edition). Studentlitteratur AB.
- Lidwall, U. (2024). *Psykisk ohälsa i dagens arbetsliv* (tech. rep.) (Accessed: 2025-08-31). the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Försäkringskassan). <https://www.forsakringskassan.se/download/18.22814c2e194887717f99d/1738569517962/psykisk-ohalsa-i-dagens-arbetsliv-forsakringskassans-lagesrapport-2024-1.pdf>
- Lozano, R. (2014). Creativity and organizational learning as means to foster sustainability. *Sustainable Development*, *22*, 205–216. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.540>
- Mayer, R. E. (1989). Cognitive views of creativity: Creative teaching for creative learning. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *14*(3), 203–211. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-476X\(89\)90010-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-476X(89)90010-6)
- Meyerson, D. E., & Scully, M. A. (1995). Tempered radicalism and the politics of ambivalence and change. *Organization Science*, *6*(5), 585–600.
- Mitra, R., & Buzzanell, P. (2017). Communicative tensions of meaningful work: The case of sustainability practitioners. *Human Relations*, *70*(5), 594–616. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726716663288>
- Sandow, D., & Allen, A. M. (2005). The nature of social collaboration: How work really gets done. *Reflections*, *6*, 1–14.

- Smith, W. K., Lewis, M. W., & Tushman, M. L. (2016). Both/and” leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, *94*(5), 62–70.
- Thorsell, K. (2019, March 15). *Fem områden som stressar ingenjörer* [Accessed: 2025-08-31]. <https://ingenjoren.se/2019/03/15/fem-omraden-som-stressar-ingenjorer/>
- Virkkunen, J., Mäkinen, E., & Lintula, L. (2010). From diagnosis to clients: Constructing the object of collaborative development between physiotherapy educators and workplaces. In D. Harry, A. Edwards, Y. Engeström, T. Gallagher, & S. R. Ludvigsen (Eds.), *Activity theory in practice: Promoting learning across boundaries and agencies*. Routledge.
- Wright, C., & Nyberg, D. (2012). Working with passion: Emotionology, corporate environmentalism and climate change. *Human Relations*, *65*(12), 1561–1587. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726712457698>



# A

## Appendix A

This Appendix shows the interview guide from the interviews with sustainability leaders translated from Swedish to English. The questions added after the first three are marked with an asterisk (\*). The **bold** questions are the main ones, and the others are explanatory and in-depth questions. The interview was carried out as a conversation, so the interview guide was used mainly to see that all areas were covered and as a way to structure the notes taken.

### Introduction

Presentation of the study, the underlying causes and why I personally think it is an important topic.

### Research questions

1. What are the main challenges for sustainability leaders in consultancy firms within the building industry related to the working environment?
2. What are the inter-organisational and organisational structures that affect the work of sustainability leaders and in which way?
3. Do organisational practices support sustainability work?

### Process questions and information

- Is it okay if I record this meeting to be able to focus on our conversation? It is only for personal use.
- Is it okay if I save data and audio files until the study is finished?
- The report will be published through Chalmers.
- The answers will be anonymised. If I want to use quotes I will ask for permission.
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

### Background

- **Can you describe your role in the company and your main tasks?**
- Do you have decision-making power?\*
- Are you responsible for internal environmental issues or internal training?\*

### Organisational structure

- **How is the sustainability work organised within your organisation?**
- Who are you working with? Is it decentralised or centralised?
- What do you think of how it works?
- **With whom are you collaborating within the company?**

- What has your experience of this collaboration been like?
- **Do you feel able to bounce ideas off your colleagues?\***

Support, response and commitment

- **What do you think of the company's sustainability work in general?\***
- What kind of response do you get from colleagues? How does it affect you?
- What do you think of the sustainability work in the industry?\*
- **How would you describe your workload?\***
- Are you satisfied with it? What is the reason?\*
- If unsatisfied, have you talked to HR or your manager about it?\*
- **Have you heard other people in similar roles express their views?**

Driving force and challenges

- **What do you enjoy most with your job?**
- **What do you think are the biggest challenges of your job?**
- Can you focus on your main tasks?
- Special reasons?

Outside the organisation

- **Are you part of any inter-organisational network? What role does it play for you?**
- Support? Knowledge sharing? Collaborative learning?
- How do you incorporate your experiences into your daily work?

Final questions

- **If you could change anything in your work environment, what would that be?**
- **Do you want to add anything that we have not touched upon?**
- **Thanks for contributing, are you okay with answering any questions that arise later during the study?**

# B

## Appendix B

In this appendix, all the codes used in the development of the theoretical framework is presented in Table B.1 in the category they were assigned. All codes have been translated from Swedish to English.

| Category              | Code  |
|-----------------------|---|
| Community             | Management support<br>Response on their work/sustainability<br>External collaboration/networks  |
| Division of labour    | Alone/Team<br>Internal/External<br>Internal development<br>Much included/unclear role description<br>Personnel responsibilities<br>Lack of time                                       |
| Mediating instruments | Decision-making power<br>Education<br>Communication<br>Perspective/Attitude<br>Push/Soft skills<br>Reward<br>Organisational structure<br>Selling sustainability<br>Kind of employment |
| Object                | Sustainability in the office (internally/externally)  |
| Rules                 | Business plan<br>Client/Industry<br>Economy/Recession<br>Politics<br>Advisor/The consultant role<br>The profession  |
| Subject               | Driving force<br>Hopes for the future<br>Satisfied?<br>Personal vs. Professional<br>Well-being/Workload   |

**Table B.1:** All codes used in the development of the theoretical framework

DEPARTMENT OF TECHNOLOGY MANAGEMENT AND ECONOMICS

CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Gothenburg, Sweden

[www.chalmers.se](http://www.chalmers.se)



**CHALMERS**  
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY