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Transformations and tensions in sustainability work

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ABSTRACT

A global sustainability transformation called by The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has important implications for the organisation of production, and structures and processes of work. However, recent scholarship has raised a need to make sense of how everyday work processes are changing to meet sustainability demands and of the factors that may facilitate or hinder this development. Therefore, this article focuses on the workplace as a meaningful site of sustainability transformation and explores practices of sustainability work in Finnish business organisations. We examine how sustainability is done in the everyday practices of these organisations and the kinds of tensions emerge. Sustainability work means practices with which business organisations seek to make their activities more ecologically sustainable. Drawing on interviews with representatives of organisations involved in Climate Leadership Coalition business network and engaging with practice theorising and the literature of strong and weak sustainability, we identify four practices of sustainability work – improving, monitoring, mediating, and mainstreaming – and highlight the tensions involved in them. We conclude that these practices are largely characterised by ‘weak’ sustainability and remain within the remit of ecological modernisation, indicating that sustainability work in organisations is not yet sufficiently aligned with planetary boundaries.

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Introduction

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for a global sustainability transformation, which entails profound changes to societal systems to stay within planetary boundaries. This transformation has deeply felt implications for the organisation of production and the structures and processes of work. For example, some production sectors like coal, oil, and gas will need to be wound down, and others, such as speculative finance and industrial agriculture, will have to be profoundly reformed and restricted (Baldry and Hyman 2022). Many occupations are likely to change radically or even disappear, while new forms of green work will develop. Renewable energy and circular manufacturing also require new competencies and infrastructures (Michaux et al. 2023).

While the sustainability transformation requires both rethinking the concept of work and reorganising its structures, recent scholarship has raised concerns about the insufficient research in this area (e.g. Barca 2019; Bottazzi 2019; Hoffmann and Paulsen 2020; Moilanen and Alasoini 2023; Pettinger 2017; Süßbauer and Schäfer 2019). In particular, there is a need to make sense, both empirically and theoretically, of whether and how everyday work processes are changing to meet sustainability demands and to identify the factors that may facilitate or hinder this

development. Addressing this lacuna, this article focuses on the workplace as a meaningful site of sustainability transformation and explores the practices of sustainability work in Finnish businesses committed to climate change mitigation. By sustainability work, we refer to practices with which businesses seek to make their activities and work processes more ecologically sustainable. These practices include a variety of daily activities that seek to transform existing processes and introduce new, more environmentally friendly ones. However, sustainability work is far from unequivocal but includes tensions, which may both obstruct more thoroughgoing changes and potentially spark new ways of working. Business organisations play an important role in the sustainability transformation by influencing working conditions, developing new products, services, and technologies, and shaping policies and discourses around work (Baldry and Hyman 2022). Their carbon emissions are also centrally fuelling climate change, and they have thus increasingly been called on to find solutions to it (Nyberg and Wright 2016, 618).

In this article, we ask how sustainability is done in the everyday practices of business organisations and examine the kinds of tensions it involves. The article makes two contributions: first, it advances our understanding of the processes of doing sustainability in business organisations by identifying key practices of

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sustainability work in which they are engaged; second, it highlights the tensions involved in sustainability work and thus makes visible the possibilities of and constraints on promoting sustainability. We conclude that sustainability work in organisations is largely characterised by ‘weak’ sustainability and remains in the remit of ecological modernisation, indicating that sustainability work at businesses is not yet sufficiently aligned with strong sustainability respecting planetary boundaries. However, by exploring existing ways of doing sustainability it is also possible to identify points of change towards more sustainable futures.

We begin by presenting the existing research on the topic. We then discuss the theoretical resources on which we draw and describe our research materials and methods. In later sections, we unpack empirical analysis articulated around the practices of sustainability work and their tensions. We conclude by discussing what these practices and tensions can tell us about the possibilities of and constraints on advancing sustainability.

Work and sustainability

Extant research on the connections between work and sustainability includes a wide array of approaches that can be conceptualised as a spectrum, with the technocratic on one end and the more transformative on the other. The technocratic approach to sustainability aligns with the discourse of ecological modernisation. It advocates a transition to a more ecologically efficient production that creates new economic opportunities through technological innovation, entrepreneurial action, market-based solutions, and consumer responsibility (Bottazzi 2019; Johansson and Henriksson 2020). Ecological modernisation suggests that environmental problems can be solved within the existing economic system (Johansson and Henriksson 2020, 150). It relies on the tropes of rationality and progress and tends to overlook power differences and issues of justice (Hagbert et al. 2022).

The more transformative approaches take a critical view of technocratic solutions and the conviction that the combination of technological innovation and market solutions alone is a sufficient response to the ecological crisis (Bottazzi 2019, 4). They question the existing capitalist structures and propose a radical systemic transformation. For example, discussions of post-growth and degrowth (Seidl and Zahrnt 2021), labour environmentalism (Barca 2019), and community economies (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013) have advocated a disengagement from growth-oriented capitalism and suggested alternative, more sustainable models of economy. They have emphasised the need to fundamentally redefine work to recognise aspects other than wage labour, such as reproductive and volunteer labour, and to deconstruct work’s intimate

entanglement with growth. In particular, the anti- and post-work literature has mounted scathing critiques of paid work’s detrimental consequences for the environment (Hoffmann and Paulsen 2020). It has called for overcoming work-centredness and reconsidering what kinds of work are beneficial culturally, socially, politically, and economically (Barca 2019).

The most central literature for the purposes of this article is the so-called ‘green work’ literature, including studies on ‘greening of employment’, ‘green jobs’ and ‘sustainable work’. This literature has focused on analysing structures and practices of work, and whether and how they are becoming more ecologically sustainable, as well as workers’ perceptions, attitudes and beliefs concerning sustainability in the work context. This research includes both conceptual and empirical studies and encompasses both technocratic and transformative approaches described above. On the technocratic end, studies have highlighted the leveraging of small-scale adjustments to make existing jobs greener, such as employers’ capitalisation of workers’ environmental behaviours outside the workplace to enhance sustainability efforts at work (Paillé, Raineri, and Boiral 2019). Studies have also highlighted how corporate greening projects may engage workers in eco-friendly initiatives without fundamentally restructuring the nature of work (Linneberg, Madsen, and Nielsen 2019; Süßbauer and Schäfer 2019) and overlook employees’ reflections on sustainability by following formal sustainability rules in the pursuit of business benefits (Onkila and Siltaoja 2017).

The more transformative end of the green work literature has pointed out the need for deeper, systemic changes not only to the structures of work but also to the societal structures regulating and shaping working life. It has underlined the requirement to restructure social policies and employment arrangements through reduced working time, work sharing, decoupling social protection from waged labour, and other initiatives to enable a more transformative greening of work (Bottazzi 2019; Rääkkönen 2014; Seidl and Zahrnt 2021). Central to these efforts is also a more radical conception of a ‘just transition’ that underlines the importance of a systemic restructuring of work and workers’ mobilisation (Houtbeckers and Taipale 2017; Stevis and Felli 2015). Scholars have also devoted attention to degrowth work that is transformative in nature and not necessarily or solely performed as waged work (Houtbeckers 2025).

Green work research has also highlighted the tensions emerging from the encounters between technocratic and transformative forces that are pulling in different directions and approaching sustainability in different ways (Lankoski 2016). These tensions become apparent, for example, in Crowley’s (1999) categories of light-, mid-, and dark-green that capture the different scopes, aims, and

types of green work. *Light-green* approaches are reactive, focusing on cleaning up and rehabilitating damaged environments, *mid-green* approaches integrate environmental efficiency into existing industries, and *dark-green* approaches are proactive and transformative, aiming to redefine economic growth and achieve long-term ecological sustainability and to create new 'green-collar' jobs by environmental protection (Pettinger 2017). In sum, green work encompasses both the technocratic and transformative ends of the spectrum, with the light- and mid-green examples more closely aligned with technocratic strategies and dark green pointing towards a more transformative change. Many jobs advertised as 'green' are rebranded ordinary jobs, suggesting that greening of work may be superficial and include greenwashing (Pettinger 2017). Thus, distinctions between green jobs foreground the different orientations to economic growth, ecological sustainability, and appropriate levels of consumption and production, and the depth and breadth of changes in industrial processes.

A number of empirical studies focusing on everyday work practices and sustainability in different types of organisations, occupations, and workplaces have accentuated the tensions involved in pursuing sustainability. These include competing strategies for managing sustainability (Lahtinen and Yrjölä 2019, 823), and restrictions imposed by practices inside and outside a company on managers championing sustainability (Koistinen et al. 2022). Balancing economic and ecological concerns in businesses has also been identified as a major tension hindering sustainability efforts. For example, Nyberg and Wright (2013) have shown how sustainability managers try to come up with new products, markets, and forms of technological innovation that could benefit both the environment and corporate profitability, while Sørensen, Lagesen, and Hojem (2018) have highlighted the constrained space for employees' sustainability transition efforts in the face of cost considerations and external demands. In sum, even when sustainability has been elevated to an explicit goal, the status quo of the business seems to seldom change (Gluch and Hellsvik 2023).

This article contributes to this research on green work and the tensions it involves in two ways: first, we identify four practices of sustainability work put forward in business organisations. We suggest that this classification can be a helpful framework for further empirical studies in the field. Second, we showcase the tensions involved in the practices of sustainability work, thus further advancing our understanding of how different pulls and pushes of technocratic and transformative forces manifest themselves and play out in the daily flow of business organisations.

Theoretical framework

To study sustainability work in business organisations, we draw on practice theorising and discussions of strong and weak sustainability. While there is no single practice theory but rather several different ways of theorising practice, it is nevertheless possible to find certain common denominators that unite different theoretical orientations (Schatzki 2001). First, phenomena consist of 'fields of practices' (e.g. science) and sub-practices (e.g. teaching) that constitute the social world. Second, reproduced activities referred to as practices are embodied in humans, mediated in artefacts and natural objects, and carried out by agents (Reckwitz 2002). Rather than understanding individuals as the source of practices, practice theories understand agency as distributed between humans and non-humans (Gherardi 2011). Third, practices, collective and material in nature, are based on shared understandings that require learning embedded in social interactions (Gherardi 2011). They entail contradictions and tensions, are temporally, spatially, and historically situated, and empower certain courses of action over others due to power imbalances.

Thus, practice theorising makes it possible to identify routinised ways of doing and saying beyond individual workers (Süßbauer and Schäfer 2019). We understand sustainability work as a 'large scale phenomenon' that can be studied in 'specific occupations' (Nicolini 2017, 110) – in our study corporate managers and experts in business operations, human resource management and corporate responsibility. When the practitioners use shared understandings to conduct practical activities, such as corporate responsibility reporting, 'it makes sense to investigate the ordinary work of those who produce overviews, vistas and summaries of distributions' and thus make visible what often remains implicit about the phenomenon (Nicolini 2017, 110).

To understand practices of sustainability work and their tensions, we draw on the dialectical approach to practice (Nicolini and Pedro 2016), which combines the situational and configurational approaches. The former enables us to inquire how sustainability work is accomplished in companies and attend to the everyday situations our interviewees engage in when aiming for sustainability. Through the configurational approach, we study how practices 'hang' together: we 'empirically localise complex and global formations, which are simultaneously taking place at different sites' (Nicolini and Pedro 2016). Sustainability is a global formation that is enacted in the studied business organisations. Dialectical movement between these two approaches enables us to identify tensions and conflicts stemming from doing sustainability, such as how sustainability work may serve or complicate the sustainability goals to which companies have committed.

Practice theory focuses on looking at how the social world is produced, maintained, or transformed through practices and their habitual repetition in combination with material configurations. We complement this approach with a 'doing' perspective, taking a cue from the longstanding theoretical discussion on 'doing gender'. This approach has been particularly influential in studies of work and organisations (Kelan 2010), making it a fruitful perspective for our study. The doing gender approach examines gender as a routine and recurring accomplishment involving a complex set of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that help categorise and cast certain activities and expressions as gendered (Gherardi 1994; Kelan 2010; West and Zimmerman 1987, 126). Analogously, we approach sustainability in businesses as something that is produced and enacted in discursive and material practices. 'Sustainability' is done in everyday organisational activities and interactions. This focus on performativity of sustainability is crucial for two reasons. First, it allows us to acknowledge the labour required to reproduce organisational practices and cultures: sustainable – as well as unsustainable – practices are something that need to be daily performed and reiterated. Second, it points to the possibility of change: through refusing reiteration and doing things differently, habituated and routinised flows of action can be disrupted and transformed. We align ourselves here with a materialist feminist stand that refuses to separate materiality from meaning in understanding work, division labour and capitalism as a global system (Hennessy and Ingraham 1997). Meaning-making is intimately connected with socio-material practices. Meanings shape how we come to understand sustainability and the types of responses and policies deemed appropriate, reasonable, justified or impossible (Glasson 2024), which has tangible material consequences.

This approach to doing has been employed in earlier sustainability research, albeit less in the context of work. For example, Linneberg, Madsen, and Nielsen (2019) have studied how sustainability strategies are translated and implemented in everyday work in the hospitality sector, in which reducing material and energy throughput is essential. Onkila and Siltaoja (2017) have analysed 'doing corporate responsibility' and observed that while streamlining organisations' sustainability activities is prevalent in the literature, employees in everyday settings often need to manage tensions between informal and formal corporate rules. Hagbert et al. (2022), for their part, have explored how housing associations 'do sustainability' and identified the tensions emerging from the contestation of power relations in the planning and implementation of sustainability measures.

Finally, we examine sustainability work through the lens of weak and strong sustainability, an analytical distinction that captures different orientations to

sustainability (Lankoski 2016). It reflects the tensions between economic, social, and environmental considerations and between incremental and more transformative changes (Johansson and Henriksson 2020). We utilise Demastus and Landrum's (2024) work on stages of sustainability that characterises *weak sustainability* as attempts to mitigate the risk of disrupting normal course of action by adopting sustainability practice only when required by external forces. Thus, sustainability is understood as a source of self-gain, e.g. image management or competitive advantage (Demastus and Landrum 2024, 710). It represents a technocentric approach that focuses on improving existing structures and reconciling environmental goals with economic growth. In *intermediate sustainability* it is acknowledged that sustainability requires efforts and collaboration to change systems, but it still pursues growth as a measure of success. Finally, *strong sustainability* represents an approach that acknowledges ecological limits and planetary boundaries as guiding factors for actions. Growth is no longer a key measure of success as practices and policies that repair and restore natural capitals are prioritized. Business organisations focus on developing mutually enhancing relationships with the natural world (ibid. 710). Strong sustainability represents a transformative and ecocentric approach that calls for systemic changes, considers the entire system interconnected, and prioritises ecological sustainability over economic growth (Davies 2013, 116). This approach is informed by critiques of global capitalism, which argue that profit maximisation leads to environmental damage by extracting value from labour and nature and prioritising instrumental over intrinsic value (Pettinger 2017, 2). In this article, we conceptualise these above-presented stages of sustainability as a spectrum and use it to assess the practices of sustainability work in our data.

Data and methods

In this article, we draw on 20 interviews conducted in eight companies, seven consolidated companies and one small enterprise that are members of the Climate Leadership Coalition (CLC) in Finland. Founded in 2014, the CLC is the largest non-profit climate business network in Europe, with 99 organisational members, of which 69 are companies. Its members, employing almost a million people globally, represent almost 70% of the market capitalisation of the OMX Nasdaq Helsinki stock exchange (CLC n.d.). The companies included in our study represent energy, mobility, construction, and the business-to-business service sectors, which are traditionally major contributors to carbon dioxide emissions. As CLC members, all the companies are publicly committed to mitigating climate change. CLC helped provide access to these companies.

We interviewed professionals from the firms' human resources, sustainability, and business units. They ranged in age from their thirties to their sixties, and their educational backgrounds ran the gamut from the humanities, social sciences, and educational sciences to law, economics, technology, and engineering. The interviews were conducted either online or face-to-face during 2023. Lasting for one hour on average, they included questions about how sustainability manifests itself in the organisation, whether and how sustainability concerns have changed work practices, job descriptions, and the skills and competencies needed at different levels of the organisation, the organisation's future goals in terms of sustainability, and perceived problems and challenges relating to sustainability transformation and work. The work practices we addressed ranged from the interviewees' everyday work to the activities carried out by their teams, business units, or company management.

This study followed the guidelines of The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. Informed written consent was obtained from all interviewees, who were given written notice about the data protection procedures in line with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. The interviews were confidential, so we do not disclose any details about the firms or interviewees in our analysis.

Interview materials cannot capture practices in action in the same way as, for example, ethnography. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify practices through interviews. In particular, 'critical situations' – in which routine actions and habituated ways of doing become problematised and are objects of conscious reconsideration and reflection (Hitchings 2012, 62) – can help actors to reflect on and verbalise practices. The interviews revealed that our companies were living in such critical situations. The issue of sustainability had become much more pronounced at the companies during the previous five years or so, and they had all been pushed to rethink and reorganise their work processes. We believe that this made our interviewees well-disposed to reflect thoughtfully on the sustainability work in organisations.

In line with our practice-based theoretical framework, we analysed our data by focusing on verbs as indications of practices and doing. Our analysis has been informed by the constructivist grounded theory method (GTM; Charmaz and Bryant 2011). The GTM views data as socially constructed, acknowledges the social conditions of data production, and seeks to discern how research participants' meaning-making and actions may be connected to larger social structures and discourses. It also emphasises reflexivity and rejects assumptions that the researcher could or should set aside their prior knowledge to develop new theories (Charmaz and Bryant 2011, 293). This

method is well suited for our purposes since it focuses specifically on analysing actions and processes.

GTM is an inductive and iterative approach in which codes are formulated based on the data and compared to one another to be combined into broader categories that summarise the key cultural logics of the studied phenomenon (Charmaz and Bryant 2011, 292). We used a two-part analytical process which included initial coding, in which the researcher attempts to be open to defining whatever they see happening in data, and focused coding, which uses the most frequent and significant initial codes (Charmaz and Bryant 2011, 303). The coding process was carried out by two of the authors using the NVivo software package. Through the process of initial and focused coding, followed by clustering, we identified four ways of doing sustainability work – improving, monitoring, mediating, and mainstreaming – which we unpack next.

Findings: doing sustainability

Improving

Constant improving as a form of sustainability work emerged as a must in the companies we studied to respond to external and internal demands and remain competitive. Advancing sustainability required optimisation of work and organisational processes. It entailed the development of new technologies, activities, products, or services, and adapting to emerging needs and requirements. As one of our interviewees succinctly concluded, 'development stops at satisfaction'. Another pointed out that it was easier some years ago to improve ecological sustainability because it was a new focus, whereas it had now become harder to identify appropriate interventions. Due to increasing demands, both the 'ceiling and the floor' were continually rising.

As a rule, improving focused more on modifying existing practices and incremental changes rather than radically altering work and organisational practices. Instead of grand innovations or large-scale investments, improving often encompassed doing things differently in everyday work, such as renewing infrastructure to match climate targets, adopting new energy sources and abandoning old ones, developing circular economy thinking, reducing energy and material throughput, intensifying efforts to recycle, changing the materials used, managing material streams, electrifying processes, greening equipment maintenance, rethinking the compilation of statistical data, reducing food waste, and encouraging public transport and teleworking to reduce transport emissions. Similar improving practices in organisations have also been identified in previous studies (Lahtinen and Yrjölä 2019; Linneberg, Madsen, and Nielsen 2019; Süßbauer and Schäfer 2019). Improving

was often reactive by nature, as it was driven by solving emerging problems and by responding to external demands by customers, legislators, and other stakeholders.

Previous studies have shown that employees' knowledge is important for improving products and services and developing eco-innovations and work processes (Linneberg, Madsen, and Nielsen 2019; Süßbauer and Schäfer 2019). Employees' tacit knowledge was regarded as giving organisations important insights into improving sustainability, as one interviewee explained:

Russia's war of aggression made the cost of energy skyrocket, which meant that our energy costs increased enormously. We began to build an energy efficiency programme. We involved our staff a lot. We nominated, for example, energy ambassadors who spurred other workers to save energy. ... We get a lot of ideas precisely from operational workers, because they know the work best.

Reducing energy and/or material throughput as a form of improving also emerged as a viable business approach. The interviewees mentioned that business-to-business customers increasingly asked for energy-saving services, in which those savings or increased profits were shared with customers and providers. Although energy reduction projects have been standard business for some time, their refinement meant doing things better. Once easy reductions had been achieved, new solutions were sought in daily operations.

Improving gave rise to a host of tensions in the organisations. The most frequently noted tension had to do with reconciling economic and ecological interests. Improving was geared towards securing the simultaneous 'double dividend of economic growth and environmental sustainability' (Crowley 1999) and settling the 'market-industrial-green compromise' (Blok 2013). It was motivated by saving resources, increasing efficiency, and providing a competitive edge in the markets while reducing ecological damage (Koistinen et al. 2022; Nyberg and Wright 2013). Sustainability improvements required investments, but the resulting economic profits were often viewed as uncertain. However, as one interviewee stated,

they can be big investments or they can be smaller ones, but either way, if someone doesn't put resources into them, whether it's work time or just some physical investment, they don't happen.

'Business case analysis' emerged in the interviews as a crucial factor impeding sustainability efforts. The interviewees pointed out that in order for sustainability to be considered, it had to be quantified and turned into a profitable investment. However, the valuation of sustainability in euros was difficult, impeding 'selling

the value of sustainability' (Porter, Gallagher, and Lawong 2016, 214). While energy and material throughput could be measured relatively easily in the existing models, it was exceedingly difficult to estimate the value of other types of actions and turn them into a numerical form. As our interviewees stated,

the valuation of sustainability in euros in the business case analysis is difficult. I would say that in that sector we are still at the beginning of the learning curve.

The aim is to improve cost-effectiveness. We have to make sure that we have that data available, and we are able to process it and highlight relevant issues. Technical people understand numbers, and if some numbers show that something is big or small, it is easy to believe that this is the case.

This highlights how improving tended to be fundamentally adapted to the framework of profit-driven economy; it did not aim to exceed or change it. However, while most of our interviewees accepted the economic constraints and were willing to fit their sustainability work within them, some took a more critical position:

It's nice if we can save some euros in environmental and corporate responsibility issues, but it's secondary. I see that the benefits in these issues are elsewhere than in euros in the long run.

This kind of framing indicates possibilities for companies to develop novel sustainability practices that truly respect the intertwined ecological, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability.

Another major tension was a focus on short-term goals, measured in a fiscal quarter or year, rather than long-term goals measured in decades. As one of the interviewees explained,

when we talk about emissions reductions, for us and other companies, it means strategic choices, for example in terms of investments. You have to look 10 or 15 or 20 years ahead. They inevitably become strategic issues, and you have to try to think about how the world is changing and how different technical solutions will develop during that time and be prepared to make big decisions along the way.

While interviewees readily acknowledged that improving required long-term perspectives, it was often difficult to realise in the everyday flow of work. Ademi, Sætre, and Klungseth (2024) have pointed out how despite their best intentions, managers are often constrained with the possibilities of fostering a long-term change. One interviewee echoed this by saying, 'There is so much daily repetitive work that the bigger developmental work sometimes tends to get sidelined'.

Monitoring

Monitoring as a practice of sustainability work relates to managing, generating, and collecting data, such as

reporting and auditing and creating effective feedback loops. Companies are now increasingly expected to report on binding sustainability targets. For example, EU regulations demand large companies report their environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) activities and efforts.

While monitoring was identified positively for the most part in our interviews for pushing companies towards complying with sustainability demands and implementing actions, it was clear that this form of work took the lion's share of working time devoted to sustainability. This was particularly true for sustainability professionals, but increasingly so for all organisational actors. Reporting, auditing, certifying, evaluating, and measuring activities and meeting the goals of science-based target initiatives and ESG were described as key factors guiding sustainability work. One interviewee concluded that 'when we have to report in a specific form and about certain things much more than what we have used to, it's a bit of a burden for the people responsible for it'. A telling indication of this burden was the interviewees' use of metaphors like the 'legislative jungle' and 'reporting tsunami' when describing monitoring tasks.

Monitoring also necessitates the production of new types of data and increased data management (Adams and Frost 2008). These data were used in organisations not only for external reports but also internally to advance strategic thinking and risk management. Organisations constantly had to monitor which solutions were most sustainable. They had to consider what kinds of data were needed and available about suppliers and how to quantify different aspects of maintenance processes. Crucially, monitoring also involved developing standards for managing sustainability. New projects in particular required the establishment of suitable criteria 'on the go':

We now need to optimise the life cycle for this existing machinery. What the optimum or best solution from the point of view of sustainability is not that straightforward to calculate. A huge amount of energy has been used to make a product which, at the end of its life cycle, would consume less fuel than another product.

Moreover, in order to sell sustainability services to other businesses, processes need to be standardised for efficiency and predictability. One interviewee advocated the standardisation of sustainability measures across the organisation:

You have to encourage and support those people in the organisation to keep their enthusiasm and drive [in sustainability], but at the same time [you have to] say that don't go too far on your own, not to over-promise, not to set up a development programme of your own. Keep that enthusiasm but don't be so eager [laughs].

It's a tricky situation sometimes. It's not so much that we don't have people throughout the organisation behind these [sustainability] things. It's about how we can better align this, so it is similar enough across the organisation and targets the same goals.

The motivation to standardise processes lay in cost-effectiveness and in delivering predictable sustainability-related services to customers. However, this desire for standardisation could risk hindering new, more transformative environmental initiatives and aligning sustainability with the existing organisational culture and practices (Järvenpää and Lämsiluoto 2016).

The crucial tension in monitoring involved its dominant position in sustainability work. When monitoring sustainability consumes a large portion of the working time, it can paradoxically lead to undoing sustainability because it leaves less time for experimenting with new sustainability practices in day-to-day work. Once sustainability work becomes bureaucratised, there is a risk that reporting and monitoring become values in themselves rather than being tools for advancing sustainability. Moreover, monitoring can also focus on specific items rather than broader processes, which may be counterproductive for advancing more comprehensive sustainability goals (Schaltegger, Etxeberria, and Ortas 2017).

Another tension related to monitoring was a lack of resources, including sufficient personnel with the appropriate competence. Although companies had hired new experts to meet specific reporting standards, the organisational resources available for monitoring had not generally increased at the same pace as demands for reporting. Managing this increased monitoring responsibility while developing more impactful sustainability activities was perceived as challenging. Moreover, sometimes the data accumulated at a company were not fully used, which reflects Sroufe's (2017, 324) observations that while companies often measure resources throughout their organization, they do not necessarily make full use of the collected information. Data collection requires dedicating substantial time that could be used on other sustainability activities.

Mediating

Sustainability was also pursued through mediation within organisations and between businesses and the surrounding society. Mediating was not only about the transmission of information but also covered dialogue about and the interpretation and negotiation of meanings and values (Ademi, Sætre, and Klungseth 2024; Koistinen et al. 2022; Lankoski 2016). Mediating as a form of sustainability involved interacting with various stakeholders, including customers, employees, suppliers, owners, investors, financiers, legislators, and competitors, and translating sustainability issues

to these different groups. This mediating role was described as a 'catalyst for cooperation' and 'bringing together people, knowledge, resources, and processes', being 'the point of contact', and serving as 'a filter' between different actors. Others described themselves as 'sustainability coaches' or 'mentors' co-developing sustainability solutions.

Mediation was perceived by our interviewees as a necessity for a successful business. Companies had to be able to meet employee demands, especially from young workers, who easily 'voted with their feet' if the company neglected communicating and advancing sustainability issues. As one interviewee put it, 'our job applicants raise these issues a lot and challenge us on how we give back to society: "Well, what else are you doing?"' Demands also came from other actors such as customers and counterparts in the value chain. The companies had to anticipate these demands and react to them in order to maintain their reputation in a mediated society.

Mediation also centred on exchanging and translating information between different stakeholders. This promised to provide a competitive edge to companies, helping them be forerunners in 'green transition':

we provide information about our views in the ecosystem. If we reciprocally receive views and information, it also helps our business, because we can then better identify where to find the value chains that are the first movers towards the green transition.

It was also necessary to collaborate and align sustainability visions with other stakeholders (Lahtinen and Yrjölä 2019) because the sustainability transformation is such a vast challenge that acting alone is not enough or sometimes even possible. One manager put it this way:

Sustainable society is such a big cake that no one can do it alone, but we need these actors together in the value chains; to see that this is of more benefit to both of us and to everyone, that we are working together.

However, mediation as a form of sustainability work also involved tensions. First, different stakeholders' orientations were sometimes far too disparate or even conflicting to make meaningful mediation possible. For example, one interviewee described how the policy goals stipulated by the state regarding appropriate technologies were too specific and restrictive for companies to mobilise their innovation systems to reduce material and energy throughput. Second, the needs of customers and the company could conflict and hinder mediation of sustainability. For example, customers may expect flexibility and tailored products from a company's environmentally friendly service, but that service can only be organised for bulk deliveries. Third, rather than actually advancing sustainability, mediating and communicating sustainability was

sometimes associated with greenwashing, producing misleading messages about their sustainability work (Glasson 2024), creating distrust and potentially obstructing mediation. One interviewee explained this as follows:

Sustainable development is not about any communicative storytelling strategy, but about the truth. I'm extremely allergic to falsely storyboarded sustainable development. Sustainable development must not become some kind of glued-on communications agency nonsense.

Mainstreaming

Mainstreaming as sustainability work meant promoting sustainability by integrating it into all work and activities. Sustainability mainstreaming was not only a technical matter but also entailed cultural and organisational change that would embed sustainability principles in daily practices and decision-making (see also Ademi, Sætre, and Klungseth 2024; Koistinen et al. 2022; Onkila and Siltaoja 2017). Based on our interview data, mainstreaming meant changing the day-to-day work of people at all levels of the organisation, as it was considered important for everyone to recognise the key principles of sustainability and integrate them into their work. For example, one interviewee commented that 'sustainability is right there at the heart of everything. All our activities and everything we do are based on emissions reductions, so it guides all our daily work, to serve that mission.' Another said that 'sustainability is swimming into all job descriptions', while yet another advocated for 'a holistic view' in which sustainability was 'a filter through which all the activities are done and viewed'. This reflects Sroufe's (2017, 322) observation that sustainability is increasingly integrated into and aligned with corporate values and value creation processes in companies.

As a consequence of mainstreaming, sustainability expertise as a separate job was becoming less important:

Sustainability will hopefully be more and more just business as usual for everyone as the years go by. Even 10 years from now, whether we will need any separate responsibility managers or responsibility teams is a question. Ideally, it would be on everyone's agenda.

Everyone had to be aware of sustainability issues, and although the work itself did not change directly, the culture and environment in which it was done was evolving thanks to through sustainability actions (Linneberg, Madsen, and Nielsen 2019; Süßbauer and Schäfer 2019). One interviewee explained the situation:

For the vast majority of production people, their training and the actual skills that they do as mechanics, it [sustainability] hasn't had a big impact. It's been more

about what they learn in terms of how that day-to-day life is lived here.

While most interviewees identified a need for new competencies and forms of expertise, old competencies were also seen as useful when updated and translated to new contexts.

Customer demand also created pressure to mainstream sustainability. For instance, salespeople had not necessarily been originally hired to sell sustainability-related services, but with the transformation of services towards sustainability, they needed to master those issues:

Our salespeople, for example, who are out there in the industrial customer interface selling a variety of services, there's a really loud cry from them that they should understand these [sustainability issues] better, that they should be able to speak in the right terms, when customers demand and ask how we've taken these things into account.

Like other practices of sustainability work, mainstreaming also created tensions. In our study, mainstreaming appeared to be more of an aspiration than reality: it was a goal to strive for, but achieving it was far from straightforward. First, sustainability could be mainstreamed to the point that it was difficult to monitor and manage (Koistinen et al. 2022; Onkila and Siltaoja 2017). Despite the aim of linking different aspects of sustainability, the overall view of sustainability could become blurred. It was also difficult to gauge the consequences of different sustainability measures:

We constantly raise this issue [sustainability] in all our questions in the company, but it's incomplete, and I think this applies not only to us, but also to society as a whole. We don't know what will happen when we do certain things.

Sustainability thus seemed to be a field that escaped operationalisation. One interviewee concluded that 'the field of sustainability is somehow so broad that it's even a bit challenging to know all or what is the relevant level that people should understand and know'. This echoes Sroufe's (2017, 323) study, in which corporate sustainability professionals expressed frustration with the 'ambiguity of sustainability'.

Second, many interviewees noted the problem of a lack of employees with the skills required in sustainability mainstreaming. Their skills tended to focus more on technical know-how and improvements to environmental aspects of products and services rather than the social and cultural aspects of sustainability, such as values, worldviews, and issues of power, which are also crucial to successful mainstreaming efforts. This reflects Onkila and Siltaoja's (2017) observation that in sustainability mainstreaming, employees' pluralist understandings of sustainability may easily be overlooked.

Conclusions

We have examined practices of sustainability work in companies committed to climate change mitigation, in order to advance our understanding of what doing sustainability looks like and requires in practice. Drawing on practice theorising and the perspective of doing, we have identified four key practices of sustainability work – improving, monitoring, mediating, and mainstreaming – and traced various tensions in them (summarised in Table 1).

Tensions arose not only within different forms of sustainability work, as highlighted in our above analysis, but also between them, which reflects the broader societal context of sustainability work. The findings of our dialectical analysis of practices show that there is a pull for both controlling and 'trusting the process'. For example, successful mainstreaming of sustainability relies on constant monitoring, but mainstreaming may also hinder the possibilities for monitoring. Sustainability as everyone's job makes quantifying harder although there are still demands to manage it within the companies and outside them. Constant improving is important, but improvements can be sometimes difficult to calculate and identify for monitoring purposes. Monitoring and improving can also occasionally lead to failed mediation in the form of greenwashing. Similar tensions have been noted in some recent studies (Ademi, Sætre, and Klungseth 2024; Demastus and Landrum 2024; Sroufe 2017).

Table 1. Sustainability work practices.

	Description	Tensions
Improving	Actions that constantly reduce energy and material throughput in all processes The gradual improvement of existing processes, products, and services rather than wider systemic changes	Sustainability improvements require investments, but profits may be uncertain Economic interests threaten to override ecological ones
Monitoring	Creating and managing data, reporting, auditing, acquiring certifications, environment, social, governance reporting, science-based target initiatives	Tensions between formal and informal rules prevent improvements Monitoring sustainability tends to take increasing amounts of time, diverting focus away from experimenting with new ways of doing sustainability and carrying out tasks such as improving
Mediating	Interacting, integrating, and translating between the company's internal and external stakeholders	Everyday practices among stakeholders may be so disparate that mediating is fruitless or greenwashing occurs
Mainstreaming	Work that mainstreams sustainability	Sustainability is mainstreamed to the point that it is difficult to monitor and manage, with a potential lack of enough skilled people

Based on our observations, sustainability work in the companies includes doing sustainability by improving, monitoring, mediating, and mainstreaming but rarely involves more transformational reimagining, challenging, or redefining sustainability. The interviewees exhibited a commitment to and enthusiasm for doing sustainability, but their actions were often hindered by economic, societal, and organisational constraints. While ensuring profits may encourage companies to develop more sustainable solutions, this profit drive also means that economic interests routinely override ecological ones, and initiatives that cannot be justified in the traditional business case model are cast off (Koistinen et al. 2022; Nyberg and Wright 2013). We conclude that the forms of sustainability work identified in our study align with light- or mid-green work and weak or intermediate sustainability. The companies remain largely in a framework of ecological modernisation emphasising the technocratic solutions and the logic of economic growth. The darker-green aspects of work associated with strong sustainability, such as redefining, re-evaluating, reshaping, stewarding, and future-proofing, are notably absent from the interview material. The prevalence of light- or mid-green approaches to doing sustainability suggests that companies are at best inching towards strong sustainability. Although companies could be key change agents, and although different forms of sustainability work are carried out in them, existing fields of practice appear to prevent a deeper change towards strong sustainability.

Previous research has suggested that businesses are ill-suited to address the ecological catastrophe since their short-term concerns and reliance on the growth-driven model prevents more transformative actions that would go beyond market mechanisms and incremental changes (Gluch and Hellsvik 2023; Koistinen et al. 2022; Lahtinen and Yrjölä 2019). While our analysis finds resonance with this interpretation, it also prompts us to ask whether it were possible to identify pathways towards stronger forms of sustainability in the existing forms of sustainability work outlined here. We conclude by identifying three pathways. First, improving and monitoring include quantification. They often appear as a technocratic mode of organising and profit maximisation. Yet, by extending the timeframe from quarters to decades the business case for socially and environmentally friendly investments becomes justified. This requires modifying accounting practices to reflect strong sustainability (Schaltegger, Etxeberria, and Ortas 2017). Second, mediation and mainstreaming, entailing a normative stance to enhancing sustainability, could be used for encouraging and expanding workers' more in-depth involvement in advancing sustainability and finding new creative ways of doing sustainability (Houtbeckers and Taipale 2017). This could also

advance social sustainability by strengthening workplace democracy. Finally, sustainability expertise has become a viable business strategy, which has arguably increased its weight in companies and created a heightened need for sustainability proficiency. Workers knowledgeable of sustainability are a crucial force driving the transformation forward. While there is no reason to underestimate the powerful economic and political forces shaping the conditions of possibility of sustainability work, no system is ever total; there is always contingency, lines of flight and immanent moments of fissure which may open unexpected spaces of agency and avenues for change.

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