

Work in sustainability crisis: The ecological spirit of capitalism and the spectre of sleepwalking

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecsSuvi Salmenniemi¹ 

Abstract

The structures and meanings of work are a central question in the sustainability crisis. However, scholars have recently voiced concerns about the limited amount of research on those topics. In responding to this lacuna, this article explores how sustainability professionals in business organisations make sense of work and its transformation towards sustainability, how sustainability demands are seen as challenging existing business and management practices, and what kinds of conflicts this gives rise to. The article analyses interviews conducted at companies involved in the Climate Leadership Coalition in Finland and identifies four discourses through which work and sustainability are articulated: trailblazing, experimentation, passion and sleepwalking. The first three discourses seek to reconcile the contradiction between economic and ecological interests with the 'ecological spirit of capitalism', which helps professionals legitimate their actions and negotiate the tension between sustainability and a profit orientation. The fourth discourse of sleepwalking challenges the optimistic visions of the other three. It proposes that the ecologisation of work would require a more transformative approach that neither companies nor societies seem prepared to adopt. The spectre of sleepwalking haunts the ecological spirit of capitalism and serves as a reminder of its potential fragility.

Keywords

Business, capitalism, discourse, ecological spirit of capitalism, haunting, sustainability, work

¹University of Turku, Finland

Corresponding author:

Suvi Salmenniemi, Department of Social Research, University of Turku, FI-20014 Turku, Finland.

Email: sutusa@utu.fi

Introduction

The prevailing environmental crisis, manifested in climate emergency, biodiversity loss and resource depletion, has made the unsustainability of our current social formation pressingly clear. It has animated vociferous critique of current patterns of production and consumption and debates about where and how elements of a more sustainable society might be found (see, for example, Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Schmelzer et al., 2022; Soper, 2020). Despite differences and disputes about these alternatives and the pathways towards them, it is widely agreed that changing course to respect planetary boundaries requires large-scale, radical systemic changes, referred to interchangeably in the literature as a ‘sustainability transition’ or ‘sustainability transformation’.

A central question in this crisis relates to the structures and meanings of work. Work is a central pillar of capitalist societies and it is intimately enmeshed with the patterns of a growth-oriented economy. Sustainability transformation requires dismantling of these patterns and a thorough rethinking of both the concept and ways of organising work. However, a number of scholars have recently voiced concerns about the rather limited amount of research on the topic and called for more attention to work and workers as a key dimension of sustainability transformation (see Barca, 2019; Bottazzi, 2019; Hoffman and Paulsen, 2020; Moilanen and Alasoini, 2023; Pettinger, 2017).

This article responds to this call by exploring how understandings and practices of work are transforming (or not) in business organisations to meet the demands of post-carbon societies. More specifically, the article asks: How do sustainability professionals in business organisations make sense of work and its transformation towards sustainability? How are sustainability demands viewed as challenging existing business and management practices, and what kinds of conflicts and tensions does this give rise to? Sustainability crisis is a critical issue for businesses considering that their carbon emissions are centrally fuelling climate change. They are also increasingly called upon to find solutions to this crisis (Nyberg and Wright, 2016: 618). Moreover, businesses wield important economic and social power by determining working conditions, developing new products, services and consumer demands, and influencing policy directions and shaping discourses through which work is understood and regulated (Baldry and Hyman, 2022) – all important factors from the point of view of sustainability transformation.

The article draws on interviews with sustainability professionals working in Finnish companies committed to climate change mitigation. It particularly zooms in on the work of sustainability professionals and the discourses and practices of sustainability management. I have identified four discourses through which sustainability and work is articulated in the interviews: trailblazing, experimentation, passion and sleepwalking. The discourse of trailblazing turns sustainability into a business opportunity and celebrates visionary leadership, while the experimentation discourse conceives of work towards sustainability as a source of innovation, creativity and efficiency, and the discourse of passion approaches it as a form of self-fulfilment and purpose. I argue that these discourses seek to reconcile a deep-seated contradiction between economic and ecological interests with the ‘ecological spirit of capitalism’, which serves as a legitimisation narrative for capitalism and emerges out of a process in which the ‘new spirit of capitalism’

identified by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) is articulated with the ecological critique of capitalism. It embodies the logic of ‘future perfect sustainability’, which creates a seductive vision of attainable sustainability without giving up capitalism (Glasson, 2024). However, the interviews also contain the fourth discourse of sleepwalking, which is more critical in nature and challenges the optimistic visions of the other three. Sleepwalking construes sustainability as something that is taken into account only under duress. It proposes that the ecologisation of work would require a more transformative approach that neither companies nor societies at large seem prepared to adopt. This discourse haunts the ecological spirit of capitalism and questions whether the contradiction between economy and ecology can be reconciled within the prevailing system.

In the remainder of this article, I begin by contextualising this study within extant research on work in the context of sustainability crisis. I then describe my research materials and methods, after which I will flesh out the four discourses introduced above before drawing conclusions.

Work and sustainability

What does a sustainability transformation mean for work and work processes? Existing research on this topic can be broadly divided into three branches that partly overlap, but it is useful to distinguish them for analytical purposes. The first and broadest set of discussions addresses the prevailing economic models and how work is implicated in them. The discussion of *ecological modernisation* has advocated a transition to more ecologically efficient production that could create new economic opportunities through technological innovation, entrepreneurial action, market-based solutions and consumer responsibility (Bottazzi, 2019; Johansson and Henriksson, 2020: 150). It suggests that environmental problems can be solved within the existing economic system, thus aligning with a notion of ‘weak sustainability’ that tends to perpetuate business-as-usual views and adopting sustainability measures only when required by external forces and to gain a competitive edge (Demastus and Landrum, 2023). Ecological modernisation has been criticised for this adherence to the dominant paradigm of economic growth and the conviction that technological innovation and market solutions will together comprise a sufficient response to the ecological crisis (Bottazzi, 2019; Crowley, 1999).

Another strand of research in the wider discussion of economic models has disengaged from growth-oriented capitalism and sought to envisage alternative, more sustainable models of economy and work. Debates on post-growth and degrowth (Schmelzer et al., 2022; Seidl and Zahrt, 2022), labour environmentalism (Barca, 2019) and community economy (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) have emphasised the need to fundamentally redefine work and deconstruct its intimate entanglement with growth. Aligning with the notion of ‘strong sustainability’, calling for systemic changes and prioritising ecological sustainability over economic growth (Demastus and Landrum, 2023), this research stream suggests that the notion of work needs to be expanded to cover aspects other than wage employment, such as reproductive labour. In particular, the anti- and post-work literature has offered scathing critiques of modern societies’ obsession with paid work and its detrimental consequences for the environment and democratic governance (Hoffman and Paulsen, 2020; Weeks, 2011).

The second branch of research can be grouped under the notion of *corporate sustainability*, examining the ways in which corporations develop and implement sustainability policies and practice ‘corporate greening’ (for an overview, see Wright and Nyberg, 2024). This research has analysed, for example, organisational culture (Assoratgoon and Kantabutra, 2023), management practices (Koistinen et al., 2022; Onkila and Siltaoja, 2017), companies’ sustainability schemes (Demastus and Landrum, 2023), corporations’ responses to climate change (Nyberg and Wright, 2016) and sustainable business practices and models (Ademia et al., 2024; Porter et al., 2016). It has also examined how employees can be motivated towards sustainable behaviour and employees’ involvement in transforming firms’ sustainability mission, strategy and values (Süssbauer et al., 2019; Süssbauer and Schäfer, 2019). This body of work has offered helpful insights into the broader organisational context in which efforts towards sustainable work take place.

The third branch of research can be gathered under the umbrella of *green work*. It includes both conceptual and empirical studies of how work processes and practices have been sought to be made more ecologically sustainable. For example, in their ground-breaking work, Crowley (1999) categorised employment into light, mid, and dark green jobs, depending on their ecological impact. Dark green jobs mean ecologically responsible, socially and culturally desirable and ethically defensible jobs that reject the growth-oriented economy and promote fundamental ecological improvements. Light green jobs indicate a superficial and reactive orientation, while mid green jobs show a pragmatic approach that seeks to integrate environmental efficiency into existing industries. This body of work has observed the need not only to advance the greening of existing jobs but also to create new ‘green-collar’ jobs through environmental protection (Pettinger, 2017; Räikkönen, 2011). Moreover, it has pointed to the need to restructure social policies to truly facilitate the transition to more ecologically sustainable work. Reduced working time, work sharing and dismantling the connection between waged work and social protection by adopting a universal basic income scheme are examples of policy measures facilitating such a transition (Hirvilammi et al., 2016; Seidl and Zahrnt, 2022).

This branch of research has also devoted attention to studying everyday work processes and workers’ perceptions and beliefs concerning sustainability in the work context. It has analysed the sustainability transition agency of consulting engineers and how they manage the conflicting demands of different stakeholder groups (Sørensen et al., 2018), tech workers’ ecological habitus and how they understand climate change from the perspective of their class position (Dorschel, 2023), managers’ experiences of running sustainability initiatives (Lahtinen and Yrjölä, 2019; Nyberg and Wright, 2013) and climate work in city governance (Reinekoski et al., 2023). Several studies have explored the constraints and conflicts that professionals face in advancing sustainability issues (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023; Koistinen et al., 2022; Lahtinen and Yrjölä, 2019; Nyberg and Wright, 2013; Wright and Nyberg, 2024). One of the key conflicts identified is the clash between sustainability discourse and the dominant corporate objectives of shareholder value and economic growth. Studies have found that sustainability promotion easily ends up being constrained by a market logic; the very same logic that sustainability promotion is supposed to transcend and transform in the first place. Even when

sustainability has been elevated to an explicit goal, the status quo of the business seldom changes (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023: 900; Nyberg and Wright, 2013; Sørensen et al., 2018). The room of agency for promoting sustainability thus appears highly constrained. Sustainability professionals as ‘green change agents’ can find themselves between a rock and a hard place, facing conflicting demands from top management, the shop floor, clients and other stakeholders (Wright and Nyberg, 2024).

This article contributes to corporate sustainability and green work research, and particularly to the discussion of sustainability professionals’ perceptions and experiences, along with the conflicts they face in their everyday work in trying to advance sustainability. More specifically, it makes three contributions. First, it coins the concept of ‘ecological spirit of capitalism’ to understand the ways in which sustainability professionals seek to reconcile the contradiction between economic and ecological interests, as exemplified by the discourses of trailblazing, experimentation and passion. Second, the article shows that the ecological spirit is haunted by the discourse of sleepwalking, which is critical of existing socio-economic structures and their ability to advance developments towards sustainable work. The third contribution concerns the role of culture and meaning-making in understanding work in the sustainability crisis. Culture plays a vital role in sustainability transformation, since the latter is impossible unless the deep-seated world-views, values and systems of meanings that enable and constrain human action and shape the social world are addressed and transformed (Siivonen, 2022: 445). However, several scholars have recently pointed to the scarcity of research pertaining to micro-level processes and meaning-making in companies (Assoratgoon and Kantabutra, 2023; Koistinen et al., 2022; Onkila and Siltaoja, 2017). This article responds to this lacuna by analysing the discursive work of sustainability professionals to highlight the opportunities for and obstacles to promoting sustainability in their work. Discourses are not merely abstract ideas but are intimately connected with social practices that profoundly affect how we live our lives and our sense of agency (Burr, 2003: 75–76). While these discourses alone do not alter reality in any straightforward sense, changes in our meaning-making practices do shift what is real for us and affect how we perceive and act on the world (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003: 145–146). They shape how we come to understand the sustainability crisis and the types of responses and policies we come to deem appropriate, reasonable, justified or impossible (Glasson, 2024), thus playing a key role in advancing or hindering change towards sustainability.

Data and methods

This article is based on 20 interviews conducted at companies that are members of the Climate Leadership Coalition (CLC) in Finland and committed to climate change mitigation. Founded in 2014, the CLC is the largest non-profit climate business network in Europe and has 99 organisational members, of which 69 are companies. The CLC requires its members to ‘have an ambitious strategy and targets as well as concrete activities for preventing climate change and/or improving material efficiency’ (CLC, 2025). It organises meetings for its members, distributes information about climate research, offers networking opportunities, helps increase awareness of issues related to climate and business and makes policy proposals for governments and other stakeholders.

The interviews were conducted at seven CLC-affiliated companies from the fields of energy, construction, mobility and services. We interviewed sustainability managers, human resource professionals and business unit representatives. Many were in managerial positions, which gave them a good vantage point from which to view the broader context of work in their organisations. The interviewees were aged from their thirties to their sixties. Their educational backgrounds ranged from the humanities, social sciences and educational sciences to law, economics, technology and engineering (see Appendix 1 for more detail). In the interviews, we were interested in learning whether and how work processes had shifted towards ecological sustainability, how sustainability manifested itself in the organisations, and how the role of businesses was understood in sustainability crisis. We also asked about job descriptions and the skills and competencies needed, and perceived problems and challenges related to making work more sustainable. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. The interviews were confidential, so any identifying details about the firms and interviewees are not disclosed in the analysis.

The interviews were analysed using discourse analysis, a method of identifying how social reality is symbolically produced in various social practices (Jokinen et al., 2016). Discourse constructs and produces the objects of knowledge in an intelligible way while at the same time excluding other ways of reasoning as unintelligible. Discourse enables subject positions from which to make sense of the world while subjecting speakers to those discourses; in other words, to speak is to take up a subject position and to be subjected to the regulatory power of that discourse (Barker, 2000: 20, 174). This approach recognises the power of culturally available discourses to frame people's experiences and constrain their behaviour, while also allowing room to engage with those discourses and employ them in social situations (Burr, 2003). Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) make a distinction between 'discourse' and 'Discourse', with the former referring to micro-level studies of institutional discourse and the latter to macro-level studies of broader societal contexts. This article focuses on analysing the micro-level meaning-making (discourses), with the understanding that these discourses are influenced by the macro-level Discourses (e.g. ecological modernisation or the free market) and contribute to shaping them (Jian, 2010).

This article can be situated in the fields of workplace discourse and discourse in institutions, which focus on analysing power and discursive strategies used by professionals in institutional settings (Holmes, 2015; Mayr, 2015). This type of discourse analysis is interested in the ways in which language is used to create and shape institutions and how institutions in turn have the capacity to create and shape discourses and impose them on people (Mayr, 2015: 755). As Mumby and Clair (1997: 181) argue,

organizations exist only in so far as their members create them through discourse. This is not to claim that organizations are 'nothing but discourse', but rather that discourse is the principal means by which organizational members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are.

As is typical in discourse analysis, the process for this article began with several rounds of close reading of the interviews to identify the ways in which work and sustainability

were articulated. I paid specific attention to metaphors and to the similarities and differences in ways of speaking about work in the context of sustainability (Jokinen et al., 2016). I also paid attention to interdiscursivity – that is, how systems of meanings were related to one another – and to whether any of them was more prevalent than others. In the final stage of the analysis, I condensed the different systems of meanings into four discourses that each articulate work and sustainability in a distinctive way. I now move on to unpack these discourses in more detail.

Trailblazing

I begin with the discourse of trailblazing in which the need to ‘ecologise’ work and business practices was construed as a way to survive and thrive amid global economic competition. Sustainable work was framed as a question of turning the ecological catastrophe into a business opportunity (Glasson, 2024; Koistinen et al., 2022). The tension between economy and ecology was addressed by seeking to make the latter serve the interests of the former: ecological ways of work and production could be profitable business. However, to accomplish that goal, organisations would need to be among the trailblazers and take their place at the forefront of new sustainability innovations. Many interviewees framed their organisations as such aspiring trailblazers by saying that they were ‘accelerators’ of the sustainability transformation and had sustainability as part of their ‘DNA’. They were ‘on the crest of the wave’, wanting to be ‘the first ones’ to benefit from sustainability. In the words of one sustainability manager, ‘we want to be pioneers, create something new, succeed and clear the path to the great unknown among the first ones, because being among the first ones creates a positive buzz’. This discourse resonates with the CLC’s (2025) mission, which states that climate protection ‘can and should be an economic stimulus and early adapters can benefit and become more profitable’.

These trailblazers were described in the interviews as ‘preachers’ and ‘evangelists’ of sustainability, showing the way to sustainable work and persuading others to follow their lead. Interestingly, the metaphors employed in this discourse were retrieved from both the religious and exploration spheres. The companies were like missionaries proselytising those with an ‘undeveloped awareness’, or explorers conquering ‘unknown places’. They were pioneers on a mission, an avant-garde ready to convert the masses. This type of talk is typical of the new spirit of capitalism identified by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 73–97), emphasising visionary leadership as a prerequisite for successful business.

The subject position of trailblazer that the interviewees ascribed to themselves obviously did not necessarily or straightforwardly correspond with reality, yet the enthusiasm and excitement with which it was embraced and claimed is noteworthy. Business organisations were regarded as being more agile and effective in advancing sustainability than other actors. For example, national and supranational regulation was seen as too slow and consumer choices as ineffective in moving work and business practices towards sustainability, while companies were actors with enough size to move ahead on their own.

Making work practices and products, services and technologies more sustainable was interpreted as means of securing success and profit. Time and again, sustainability was discursively posited as offering a crucial ‘competitive edge’. Those wishing to survive

amid global economic competition had no choice but to invest in sustainable work. They were expected to successfully suture together the seemingly contradictory elements of endless growth and a finite planet. Sustainability was thus afforded instrumental rather than intrinsic value. Interestingly, the discourse of trailblazing followed a logic that was strikingly similar to the ‘there is no alternative’ discourse characteristic of neoliberal economic policy. Making work and business more sustainable was portrayed as inevitable and even a matter of life and death. One should not waste time fighting it but rather embrace it. As one interviewee put it: ‘This green business is the thing of the future. . . You should be a pioneer in it if you wish to make it. There’s no point in resisting or obstructing it’.

One of the key ways of making work more sustainable was mainstreaming of sustainability. Sustainability was ‘gradually gliding to all job descriptions’, transforming existing ways of working and pushing all workers to adopt new, more ecological ways of doing their work:

Before, we only had a sustainability manager, but now we have begun to take it more strongly also to the business operations. I see that our company is one of those very few ones that genuinely and honestly can say that sustainable development and advancing a sustainable future is part of every job and role in the organisation.

Some five years ago, sustainability was a separate function at the headquarters, a group of people in charge of corporate responsibility that did not really touch us [shopfloor] at all. But now it shows in the everyday life of every employee.

As the quotes above elucidate, sustainability in trailblazing organisations should no longer be a distinctive entity or a specialist’s job but should ideally cut across all jobs and sectors.

Experimentation

The second discourse revolved around experimentation. Organisations were represented as inventive and creative actors able to solve ecological problems through innovation (Süssbauer and Schäfer, 2019: 566). Transformation of work towards sustainability was seen as requiring constant experimentation in work. In many cases, there were no ready-made solutions or straightforward, one-size-fits-all practices; rather, these solutions had to be invented along the way. Companies had to both ‘ecologise’ existing work practices and invent new, more ecological ways of doing things. One manager explained as followed:

We’ve tried these new pieces of electric towage equipment, and we’re now trying solar panels on the roof. We have big halls that we need to warm and the heating costs are significant, so we’ve thought about how to minimise opening doors. We also carried out a project in which we knocked down this [machine] and examined how much we can recycle from it. It was a success. Now we know for a fact what is possible. When we have those knockdowns in the future, we know what can be done and what not, and how we can make it sustainable from the beginning to an end.

This kind of experimental way of doing things is reminiscent of philosopher John Dewey's (1929) ideas about experiments being a key part of problem solving in everyday life. Experimentation involves making changes to the environment and our relationships with it: 'When we are trying to make out the nature of a confused and unfamiliar object, we perform various acts with a view to establishing a new relationship to it, such as will bring to light qualities which will aid in understanding it. We turn it over, bring it into a better light, rattle and shake it, thump, push and press it, and so on' (Dewey, 1929: 85). The companies tried to capture the 'confused and unfamiliar object' of sustainability with various experiments, making them an important site for learning and destabilising existing work practices.

Similarly to the trailblazing discourse, this discourse also constructed sustainable work through the modality of necessity rather than will. Companies were compelled to experiment and find new practices because the old ones were defunct or put a strain on the budget. One interviewee explained this as follows:

We're now doing something that hasn't been done in the world ever before. We're thinking what's good for society, communities and environment. The time for easy solutions is over, because the financial constraints are so tight. That compels us to do everything better and more efficiently than before. This requires a kind of innovation buzz from myself every morning.

Sustainability demands created new forms of work, which also required new types of professional profiles. One sustainability manager compared experiments in sustainable work to baking a cake. In earlier times it was easy to see what competences were needed for a certain job, but now it was less straightforward. The recipe for baking the cake had changed and now new types of bakers were needed:

Doing new things requires new capabilities. What makes it complex in this changing world is that we don't know what these capabilities are. For example, when you bake a cake, you need sugar paste and a confectioner. But we don't have a degree, let's say, for a seller of emissions trading certificates. We don't know what exactly it requires. We need to figure it out ourselves, that okay, maybe it requires competence in engineering, but maybe it also requires competence in economics. The demands of working life change; we need new kinds of competences, and the job positions today are unclear. We're doing a lot of new things in these sustainability and environmental questions; we're creating new work and learning at the same time. Here, learning by doing gains a very concrete meaning. These are new questions in working life to which we don't have clear answers yet.

Sustainable work was viewed as requiring not only new expertise, as described above, but also mobilisation of existing expertise for new purposes. For example, one interviewee used the concept of 'reversed competence' to capture the process of using existing skills for new, sustainable purposes. The competencies and knowledge accumulated in fossil fuel-based industries might be translated for use in advancing post-fossil ways of doing things. The expertise that had helped produce ecological problems, for example in the oil and gas sector, could now potentially be switched to serve the purpose of sustainability. These views echo broader discussions of the sustainability competencies and capabilities needed in the just transition (Bianchi et al., 2022; Salgado et al., 2018).

Worker engagement was portrayed as an essential part of experimentation (Süssbauer and Schäfer, 2019; Süssbauer et al., 2019). Workers' tacit knowledge and creative potential was perceived as important for making products, services and daily work processes sustainable:

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 in it 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.

My team, in a way, lives out of this sustainability transformation. It's encouraging for my team when it can come up with new insights, like 'hey, this is how we can solve this', or 'can we do this entirely new thing?' It's really great to see when we have such epiphanies.

Sustainability experiments did not often mean grand innovations, but rather, small acts of doing things differently in everyday work. Among other things, it meant re-thinking criteria for acquisitions, what materials to use, how waste was sorted and processed, what could be recycled and what not, where to buy materials and in what kinds of packages and volumes, how premises were heated, how machines were overhauled, how statistics were compiled and what issues were documented and followed. Experimentation was occasionally also assigned a utopian function: to paraphrase Tom Moylan (1986), it was important to 'demand the impossible'. Persistence was needed in carrying out experiments, even though they might initially seem impossible or unlikely to succeed. One sustainability professional elucidated this:

I've sometimes encountered this idea that 'hey, we cannot really do that, it's too difficult, we'll never succeed in that, we'll never pull it off in terms of cost calculation'. My attitude is that hey, we can cross all hurdles. Perhaps this is not possible at the moment, but we need to work on it and take one step at the time, and eventually we'll succeed. This requires extreme perseverance, especially in all new projects because they are usually longstanding ones, for decades ahead. I want to do this job so that I have a vision and we go towards it step by step, and not so that if one step doesn't work out, we ditch it all. In my view, we must figure out what's the big picture in the long run, where we want to go, and then just start working towards it.

The discourse of experimentation dovetails with notions of creativity and innovation, which are emblematic of the new spirit of capitalism that calls for inventive organisations that 'will be able to "ride" all "waves"' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 71). In this discourse, workers' creativity is harnessed for advancing sustainable work but still within the prevailing profit-driven economic model. The tension between economy and ecology is navigated by portraying experimentation as a way of producing new innovations and making work not only more sustainable but also more efficient. Experimentation can simultaneously help save resources and improve the bottom line. Thus, as with the discourse of trailblazing, this one aligns with ecological modernisation and weak sustainability.

Passion

The third discourse articulated in the interviews is the discourse of passion, portraying sustainability professionals and their organisations as benefactors. The interviewees constructed their work through tropes of ‘passion’, ‘purpose’, ‘self-realisation’, ‘saving the planet’ and ‘doing good’ (see also Koistinen et al., 2022; Nyberg and Wright, 2013). They felt they were able to promote sustainability in their own work and in the company as a whole. ‘We do meaningful work here and make the world a better place’, as one put it. Others echoed this view:

It inspires me that we are doing right things for the next generations, that I can do work that feels really meaningful for me. I feel I’m doing important work within the organisation and for society in general.

When we try to attract people here, and keep them here, we talk about our purpose, which is a better world for the whole planet, for people, for everyone. Especially today, when finding people and making them commit is so challenging, we believe it’s precisely the purpose that is the most important motivator for work. For us, the purpose comes precisely from sustainability.

Passion and ‘saving the world’ through labour was seen as being particularly important for younger employees, who might easily ‘vote with their feet’ if sustainability issues were neglected in the company. However, passion also had to be managed within the companies. In the interests of standardisation and predictability, it should not go too far. As one sustainability manager explained:

The challenge is excessive enthusiasm. We have plenty of people for whom this issue [sustainability] is very significant. So, you have to simultaneously encourage and support these people, but also caution them not to proceed too far on their own.... That is, preserve that enthusiasm, but don’t be so enthusiastic.

Employees were thus invited to show passion, but they were to do so within clearly defined limits.

The discourse of passion is a vivid example of the new spirit of capitalism. Work is no longer perceived as alienated drudgery or merely an economic necessity but as a source of passion and personal fulfilment (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005:90; Weeks, 2011). However, and like the other two discourses above, ‘doing good’ and ‘saving the world’ frequently collide head-on with the economy; while sustainability is construed as ‘the right thing to do’, economic interests nevertheless routinely overrule it. As one interviewee put it, ‘This is not a charity. We’re not doing this just out of love for the green transition, but we need to benefit from this somehow’. Irrespective of the passion of sustainability professionals, for sustainability to be taken into account and transform the companies’ work processes, it had to be quantified and turned into a business case – that is, a profitable investment. Otherwise, it simply could not exist or be thinkable and sayable within the capitalist grid of intelligibility (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023; Nyberg and Wright, 2013; Sørensen et al., 2018, 2017). It was, however, difficult to

squeeze ecological sustainability into conventional business case analyses, since the valuation of sustainability in euros was seen as difficult:

These [sustainability] themes are important but they should not cost anything. It's not that their role or significance isn't recognised, but it's really difficult to calculate a business case for them.

These thoughts echo Nyberg and Wright's (2013) observation about the trope of the 'business case' as a rhetorical device that has to be used in order to convince companies of the need for pro-environmental initiatives. Porter et al. (2016: 214) have also noted that numerical indicators are often central to 'selling the value of sustainability' and arguing for the 'double dividend' (Crowley, 1999) for both the environment and profitability. Indeed, failed business case analyses were repeatedly mentioned as explanations for deferred investments in sustainable work. Profit held primacy and sustainability came second at best; it could never override the logic geared towards maximisation of surplus value and capital accumulation. The tension between ecology and economy, as crystallised in business case analyses, was a contradiction that the passionate professionals had to navigate in their daily work. One way of doing so was reminiscent of the tactical action conceptualised by de Certeau (1984); the profit-driven model emerged as a strategic grid within which passionate tactical actions, constantly on the watch for opportunities to advance sustainability, had to be carried out. As one professional put it, 'we have this market economy, and you need to play with the chips you have'.

Ecological spirit of capitalism as a new legitimisation narrative

I suggest that the three discourses described above convey an emergent ethos of the 'ecological spirit of capitalism', offering a legitimisation narrative for contemporary capitalism and securing its reproduction. As Weber (2001) famously argued, in order for capitalism to 'work', it must legitimise itself and make people accept and devote themselves to it. He showed that a spirit of religious ascetism was a key backdrop to and legitimated industrial capitalism in Europe. Labour was conceived as a calling: individuals realise their moral duty through labour and serve God by working hard in this world. Gradually the religious roots of this spirit fell into oblivion, but a sense of calling lingered on. The spirit of capitalism is not, however, static but transforms and re-articulates historically, in the face of crises that capitalism inevitably faces. Drawing on Weber's insights, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) suggest that the legitimisation narrative of capitalism was questioned during the 1960s and 1970s through 'artistic' critique taking issue with the destruction of creativity, individuality, self-realisation and authenticity in work. The 'new spirit of capitalism' arose in response to this critique by incorporating it and turning it into its new legitimisation basis. This spirit embraces the qualities articulated in the preceding discourses: passion, creativity, vision and excitement.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) remind us that the spirit of capitalism arises partly from the practical needs of the workers who need to justify their work to themselves and others and solve value conflicts in their daily work. I suggest that the ecological spirit of capitalism helps sustainability professionals to accomplish precisely this; it allows them

to make sense of their work in a culturally intelligible and acceptable way and to navigate the tension between ecological and economic needs that they deal with in everyday work. Faced with a demand for justification, capitalism mobilises existing discourses whose legitimacy is already assured, and ecological critique can be viewed as such a discourse. The critique of capitalism on ecological grounds, while hardly new, has intensified during the past decade as the destructive consequences of prevailing modes of production and consumption have become glaringly apparent. The capitalist system, of which businesses are a key part, survives such challenges by recuperating critique as a key ingredient of its new legitimisation narrative. The three discourses elucidate this recuperating act; they portray businesses as saving the world by pioneering new sustainable products and services, mobilising workers' creative powers for new innovations and experimentation and harnessing workers' enthusiasm for making work and business more sustainable. This elucidates the interplay between everyday organisational discourses and Discourses circulating in society more broadly. However, this compromise is fragile and susceptible to challenges. One such challenge is articulated through the discourse of sleepwalking, which haunts this compromise and points to its limits.

The haunting discourse: sleepwalking

The discourse of sleepwalking conveys doubt over whether sustainability can be meaningfully advanced withing prevailing socio-economic circumstances. It posits sustainable work within the broader socio-economic context and suggests that the ecologisation of work is impossible unless companies and society more generally adopt a more transformative approach to sustainability. While the preceding three discourses enjoy a hegemonic position in the data, the sleepwalking discourse is more limited. The professionals mobilising this discourse can be conceived of as 'tempered radicals'; that is, individuals who identify with and are committed to a cause that may be at odds with the dominant culture of their organisations (Meyerson and Scully, 1995).

I suggest that the discourse of sleepwalking haunts the ecological spirit of capitalism outlined above. Haunting is one way in which systems of power make themselves known and their impact felt, especially when they are supposedly over and done with. Haunting raises spectres that appear when the trouble they represent cannot be contained or blocked from view any more (Gordon, 2008). The domination of nature and the ecological catastrophe are troubles that haunt sustainability professionals. They emerge as an urgent issue that has long been repressed and persistently returns, requiring immediate action and attention.

The interviewees shared the view that sustainability had gained considerably more traction in companies during only the past five years or so. Sustainable work was seen as still in its infancy, and levels of understanding of what it could mean in practice in many ways insufficient. Describing the process of raising awareness of sustainability, one interviewee argued that 'there is more enthusiasm than knowledge in sustainability issues. It's, of course, a lovely and good starting point, but it's not enough, because we don't have time. We take this issue [sustainability] up constantly everywhere, but the understanding of this issue is inadequate not only in our company but in the whole society'. The interviewee was clearly frustrated in the face of the 'slow motion apocalypse'

(Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 1) of climate change and ecological degradation. Another interviewee echoed this by voicing a concern over postponing sustainability changes far into the future, with fatal consequences. They used the metaphor of a 'two-way bomb' to describe a situation in which it was necessary to invest in sustainability, but such investments were not made because they were considered too expensive. This led to a vicious circle in which ecological debt increased, the amount of investment needed to address this debt also grew, and in the end this two-way bomb was passed on, still armed, to future generations.

The discourse of sleepwalking takes issue with the discourse of trailblazing by articulating astonishment about how long both companies and society in general have been able to ignore the sustainability crisis and continue with business-as-usual. Despite long-standing warnings of the looming ecological catastrophe, businesses have shut their eyes, and no one has really been a trailblazer. One interviewee contemplated this self-critically:

Sustainable development has been on the agenda for a long time. You must have been in a really restrictive and sheltered place if you have missed the whole European enlightenment process on this, starting with the Brundtland Commission and so on. We have, as individuals and as a society, lived in a funny bubble in which electricity comes from the socket and money costs nothing. Everything's just happy happy and candyfloss. All of a sudden, electricity doesn't necessarily come from the socket and we need to have a conversation about how it gets to the socket. I would say we began realising this around March 2020 when we had the [COVID-19] epidemic among us. It feels a bit goofy to say this, but the epidemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have drastically accelerated the European energy transition. It would be nice to say that sustainable development has always been close to my heart and that I've always been highly conscious of it. But I haven't concretely understood what it means and what needs to be done differently.

This discourse suggests that little would happen in businesses without external compulsion, echoing the notion of weak sustainability. The interviewees believed that without national and supranational regulation and demands by clients and younger employees, companies would continue to sleepwalk into the future. However, some were also critical of insufficient support from the policymakers responsible for regulation. Companies were viewed as effectively forced to be sleepwalkers due to a lack of the necessary national infrastructure or inadequate legislation. As one interviewee complained, 'it's very difficult to start creating a changing world if society is not strongly involved in it'. Another interviewee voiced their frustration as follows:

A politician was asked what they do for the climate, and they answered: 'I don't eat meat'. Okay, you are a political actor, and your ability to influence is absolutely massive, yet your answer is 'I don't eat meat'. That's so insignificant! They want to highlight such small victories to get people excited, but it can lead people to believe that this is a major achievement with a huge impact. It required a lot of critical thinking and an understanding of the bigger picture from the public to put things into perspective.

Greenwashing was construed in this discourse as a key aspect of sleepwalking. Rather than earnestly trying to make work more sustainable, companies were viewed as evading their responsibility and producing misleading messages about their conduct in relation to

the environment (Glasson, 2024; Nyberg and Wright, 2013: 416). One sustainability manager contemplated this as follows: ‘sustainable development is not about any communicative or narrative strategy, but about the truth. I’m extremely allergic to the narrativisation of sustainable development. Sustainable development must not become any factitious nonsense produced by communications agencies’. This echoes Glasson’s (2024: 2) critique of ‘corporate environmentalism’ as a greenwashing project in which companies seek to re-narrate climate crisis into a climate opportunity.

While in the other three discourses, economic interests took the precedence over ecological ones, that order was often reversed in the sleepwalking discourse. As one sustainability professional argued, ‘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’. It was pointed out that companies cannot inevitably defer sustainability even if it is not profitable in the here and now and does not accord with conventional business case analyses. The sustainability transformation will not happen automatically; it requires investments of both working time and hard cash. As one interviewee concluded, ‘it doesn’t help if we hold each other by the hand and sing “Kumbaya”’. This transition will definitely cost. If someone on the edge of a cloud naively believes that it will just magically happen, they have another thing coming’.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to advance our understanding of the ways in which sustainability professionals in business organisations make sense of work and its transformation towards sustainability, how sustainability demands challenge existing business and management practices, and the conflicts that arise in this context. It has identified four discourses that articulate work and sustainability in different ways. By attending to intertextuality, the article has analysed the dynamics between hegemonic and haunting discourses. The discourse of trailblazing construes sustainable work as a stake in the global economic competition and seeks to translate the environmental crisis into a business opportunity through visionary leadership. The discourse of experimentation portrays sustainable work as an area of innovation and creativity that promises double dividends of economic and environmental benefits. In the discourse of passion, business organisations are seen as ‘saving the world’ by making sustainable work a ‘passion’ and simultaneously seeking to profit from it. I have suggested that these discourses convey an ecological spirit of capitalism that helps sustainability professionals legitimate their actions and negotiate the tension between sustainability and profit orientation in their daily work. This spirit remains in the remit of ecological modernisation and weak sustainability and clings to a promise of future perfect sustainability. While the ecological spirit allows actors at least temporarily to reconcile the conflicting elements in their work, it also effectively traps them within the existing logics of the capitalist workplace.

The article has also identified a haunting discourse, the discourse of sleepwalking, which puts the spotlight on the constraints involved in making work more sustainable. This discourse criticises the slow pace of proactive change in organisations and recognises the need for prioritising ecological drivers to meet the planetary boundaries. It

portrays unsustainable work as business-as-usual and susceptible to change only under external compulsion. Yet, companies' agency is also viewed as being limited due to inadequate socio-political support.

This analysis propels us to ask, following Pettinger (2017), whether activities in business organisations towards more sustainable forms of work can meaningfully tackle the conflict between ecological protection and economic growth. Scholars have 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; Wright and Nyberg, 2017). The ecological spirit of capitalism identified here is in line with this interpretation. However, the analysis also shows that sustainability professionals can act as intermediaries who introduce and translate concepts and insights from sustainability discussions for a business audience, and vice versa (Houtbeckers et al., 2025; Salgado et al., 2018). This role may open room for agency to drive the sustainability transformation forward. Moreover, the discourse of sleepwalking points to the potential for more transformative actions. This potential is currently limited, but it may turn into a transformative force as the ecological crisis accelerates, and the broader context of work may face serious disruptions. This discourse allows the actors to keep transformative change in the picture within their organisations. While the ecological spirit seeks to transform environmental criticism of capitalism into its source of legitimation, the discourse of sleepwalking haunts that effort. While we should not underestimate the power of prevailing economic and political forces, hegemonic discourses are never permanently secured. In spite of all the forces that may work to the contrary, the spectre of sleepwalking is an ongoing reminder of the potential fragility of the compromise between ecology and economy accomplished by the ecological spirit.

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ORCID iD

Suvi Salmenniemi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9339-8673>

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Biographical notes

Suvi Salmenniemi is a professor of sociology at the University of Turku, Finland. She is specialising in utopian thought and political imagination, therapeutic culture, feminist research, ethnography and critical social theory. Her current research deals with the role of political imagination for transformative politics and the changing patterns of work in sustainability transformation.

Appendix 1

List of interviewees.

Interview number	Job title	Sector
1	Corporate responsibility chief	Energy
2	HR manager	Energy
3	Chief business officer	Energy
4	Product group manager	Energy
5	Sustainability manager	Mobility
6	Chief business officer	Mobility
7	HR manager	Mobility
8	Sustainability manager	Services
9	Product and services manager	Services
10	HR manager	Services
11	Sustainability manager	Mobility
12	Key account manager	Mobility
13	HR manager	Mobility
14	Chief operating officer	Mobility
15	Chief sustainability officer	Mobility
16	HR coordinator	Mobility
17	Senior project manager	Services
18	Programme director	Services
19	HR coordinator	Services
20	Managing director	Services