



Sustainability Awareness of Employees within the Food Industry

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Background

Sustainability is a topic that is becoming more and more important for the food industry due to its reliance on natural resources and its impact on society. However, the food industry is still a long way from becoming truly sustainable. One way to engage more in sustainability is by raising sustainability awareness. By doing so, the majority of an organization, which are the employees, will perceive sustainability as important and are more likely to higher sustainability performance and create internal pressure for management to become sustainable.

Objective

This research aim was to answer the question **“What is the current level of sustainability awareness among employees and how is it raised in the food industry?”** This question will give answer to what sustainability awareness currently looks like since literature has no clear and consistent answers and there is only a small amount of knowledge about sustainability awareness in the food industry.

Introduction

Sustainability awareness can be seen as a tool to higher sustainability performance. Awareness is a broad and complex concept and is mainly connected to the level of knowledge. Knowing the current level of sustainability awareness in the food industry of employees can help to identify if there is a lack of knowledge about sustainability topics and thus where it can be improved to increase sustainability awareness which will might lead to a higher sustainability performance. In addition, it shows whether employees actually feel motivated to engage in sustainability.

Methods

The concept of sustainability awareness is quite broad and complex and therefore this research used a qualitative method instead of a quantitative method. This research used a single interview-based case study in which eight employees of a wafer factory in the Netherlands named Helwa B.V. were interviewed. A semi-structured interview was used to obtain in-depth information about the level of sustainability awareness of employees from different departments and how it is raised within the organization. The questions of the interview were based on the triple bottom line and on previous research of Casey and Sieber (2016).



Figure 1. The triple bottom line

Results

The triple bottom line

- Employees were able to mention various topics of the triple bottom line in combination with the operations of the organization.
- Environmental sustainability topics according to employees are reducing energy usage, usage of gas, the impact of packaging, usage of raw materials, emissions, vegan products, and water usage.
- Social sustainability topics according to employees are the working conditions of employees, employee support, education, payment of the suppliers, child labour, slavery, diversity and food safety.
- Economic sustainability topics according to employees are efficiency, win-win, and investment in sustainability.

Source of knowledge

- The knowledge of sustainability of employees within Helwa is gained from several sources. It is mainly from daily operations and logical thinking. In addition, employees mention the news, the branch organization, the municipality, the government (due to regulations), external audits from customers, and certificates such as Fairtrade.
- The organization itself provides little to no additional knowledge about sustainability.
- Employees would be motivated to learn more about sustainability preferably through trainings or presentations.

Importance of sustainability

- All the employees think that sustainability is important.
- It is important due to customer demand, reputation, and current and future laws.
- All employees feel motivated to engage in sustainability and in some cases they do. Sometimes this is a effect of Dutch regulations such as the CAO for employee circumstances.
- 6 out of 8 employees have trust in the government when it comes to raising sustainability performance. The other 2 employees show a more critical view. Another reason that was mentioned to not engage more in sustainability is the technology that is available such as sustainable ovens.

Conclusions

- Many topics of the triple bottom line from theory were also mentioned by the employees. Therefore, this research states that the level of sustainability awareness is respective.
- The main constraints of becoming more sustainable or costs and the current technology.
- Sustainability awareness is mainly raised by external sources.
- There is a gap between sustainability awareness and sustainability behaviour which is mainly caused by employees not knowing how to implement their knowledge into practices.
- Government support could help to make the food industry more sustainable.

