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SOCIAL PRACTICES – A NEW FOCUS AREA IN LCM

*Kirsten Schmidt, Aalborg University. E-mail: kirstens@plan.aau.dk.
Aalborg University Copenhagen, A.C. Meyers Vaenge 15, 2450 Copenhagen SV, Denmark.*

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ABSTRACT

The present understanding of LCM as a product management system supported by a number of tools and methods does not pay attention to the importance of social practices that the employees develop in relation to the systematic approach. A new conceptual model of LCM including the social practices is presented and discussed from theoretical and empirical perspectives. Theoretically, the analyses cover the formalized structures related to the division of labor and the coordination of the tasks on the one hand, and the social practices as meanings, values and priorities on the other hand. A larger Danish company serves as case for the empirical analyses of the formalized structures and their interaction with the social practices developed by the employees over time.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990'ies, life cycle thinking has been a part of the understanding of how organizations should deal with their environmental and sustainable responsibilities by including the whole value chain. Life cycle thinking can be implemented in different ways, including for example Life Cycle Assessments as a part of designing more sustainable products and product systems. Life cycle thinking can also be implemented as a management concept - Life Cycle Management, LCM – with the aim of securing continuous improvements in relation to products and services (Remmen et al, 2007).

The latest definition of LCM presented in the UNEP/SETAC Guideline for Life Cycle Management emphasizes LCM as a product management system aiming at continuously minimizing the environmental and socioeconomic burdens of an organization's product portfolio during the entire life cycle and product chain (Remmen et al, 2007).

LCM is thus understood as a holistic and systematic concept supported by the development of guidelines, tools and methods for implementation on both the strategic and operational levels of an organization (UNEP-SETAC, 2013). Nevertheless, the development of social practices in organizations are generally, but not specifically addressed as a part of the LCM concept.

This paper discusses how a systematic, structured approach interacts with the development of social practices in an organization's internal and external relations. The analyses are constructed in the form of a conceptual model of LCM which is developed from a theoretical as well as an empirical approach. The model serves as inspiration for organizational learning as a way of stimulating sustainability in organizations and in their value chains.

METHODS AND APPROACHES

From a theoretical approach, the analyses are conducted from two different perspectives - the formalized structures of the organization and the social practices. Moreover, the interaction of the two perspectives is included in the conceptual model.

The formalized structures are analyzed from Mintzberg (1983) with special attention to aspects in relation to the division of labor and the coordination between the divided tasks.

The social practices are analyzed from Wenger (1998) and include aspects like working practices; identity; development of meaning; and relations-building among the employees.

Case study – the empirical approach

A larger Danish producer of medical devices serves as the empirical case in the analyses. The company has more than 20 years of experience in working with aspects of sustainability and can thus provide both formalized structures and social practices for the investigation of LCM. The analyses included policies, reports, internal documents and more than 15 interviews with employees in different functions and departments.

The analyses are included in a PhD thesis focusing on the interaction between formalized structures and the development of social practices related to sustainability initiatives in organizations (Schmidt, 2011).

RESULTS – LCM INCLUDING SOCIAL PRACTICES

The developed conceptual LCM model, Figure 1, illustrates the sustainability effort as an entirety comprising the formalized structures and the social practices internally and in the interactions with the organizations' environment. Formalized structures, including the use of specific tools and methods, consolidate a systematic and on-going effort while the social practices play a role e.g. in creating meaning of and prioritizing sustainability initiatives in the daily work.

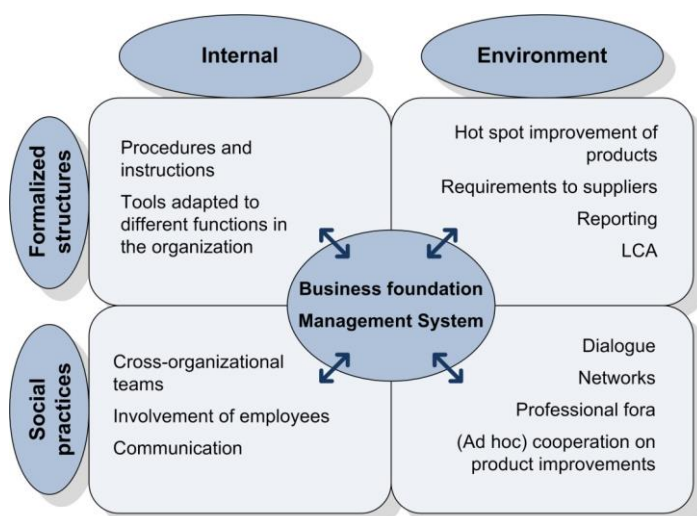


Figure 1. Conceptual model of LCM including formalized structures and social practices (Schmidt, 2011, with inspiration from Remmen, 2001)

In a life cycle perspective, the employees’ active sharing of knowledge and experiences is a potential source of learning and innovation as they develop their social practices through an interaction with external as well as internal persons and structures.

The conceptual LCM model also underlines the importance of understanding the interaction between the strategic and the operational levels of the organization both in relation to the formalized structures and the social practices. By focusing on the interaction between the structures and the social practices, the management of the organization is challenged not only to put structures like management systems in place but also to reflect on, how the employees develop their understanding and practices in relation to these structures.

The model proposes an understanding of the “structures and social practices interaction” as a balance of handling on the one hand the structural organizational aspects related to defining and dividing sustainability related responsibilities and tasks and coordinating these responsibilities – and on the other hand including the meanings, perceptions and identities of the employees as well as the relations developed over time.

DISCUSSION – THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

With his attempt to formalize structures, Mintzberg focus on the division of the tasks and the coordination of these tasks across the company (Mintzberg, 1983). Wenger, on the other hand, brings into focus the relations among people and actefacts and how knowledge and skills are developed over time (Wenger, 1998). Thus, the sustainability effort could be seen as a unity of structures and social practices, since the employees develop their commitment and daily work from both perspectives.

From an empirical approach, the analyses in the case company show that the formalized procedures and tools clearly influence the issues that the employees deal with. But the system alone does not define the social practices – e.g. the meanings, identities and priorities – established around the procedures. Other aspects of daily business, personal beliefs and professional language in a specific department highly influence the attitudes and engagement related to the sustainability effort. The content and focus of the formalized structures and the social practices are illustrated in Figure 2.

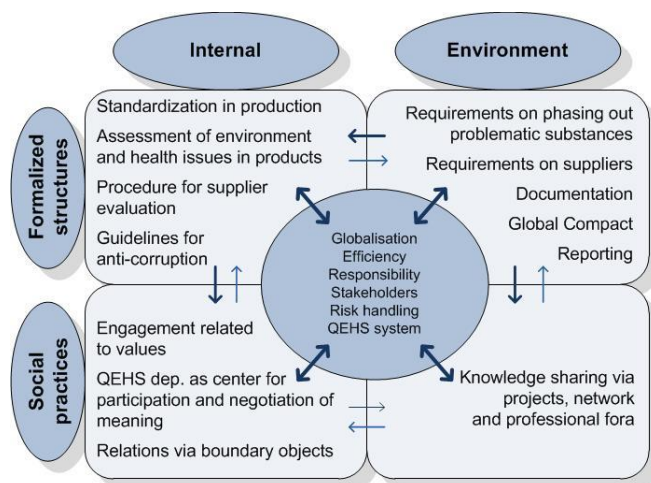


Figure 2. Conceptual model of LCM in a case company (Schmidt, 2011)

In the case company who puts emphasis on the formalized structures, the analyses showed a need for taking the social practices around the structures into account. If the management would like the employees to become actively engaged in taking the sustainability effort further, space for negotiation of meaning across different functions is needed. With a view to the continuous development of the effort, such negotiation of meaning should balance the fulfillment of existing procedures and development of new initiatives. *Balancing* in this context is not necessarily a question of equilibrium in for example priorities or in the use of resources. Rather, it is a question of concurrency in creating spaces for mutual engagement while fulfilling specified procedures. In a company where the sustainability effort is based on the initiatives of the individual employees, it could in reverse be relevant to consider the need for more formalization and coordination to balance the effort.

CONCLUSIONS

The results show the need for understanding sustainability in organizations as a nexus of management concepts, formalized structures and social practices. Formalized structures consolidate a systematic effort while an on-going negotiation of meaning plays a role in developing the sustainability effort. In a highly formalized company, there could be a development potential in creating spaces for participation to allow for learning and sharing of knowledge within the company and with external parties. Among other things, such spaces can foster sustainable business innovations and build an understanding of how the individual employee can see his own as well as concerted options in this regard.

As a first step to include social practices in the development of LCM, the present definition (Remmen et al., 2007) could be extended by adding the following text (*in italics*):

Life Cycle Management (LCM) is a product management system aiming to minimize environmental and socioeconomic burdens associated with an organization's product or product portfolio during its entire life cycle and value chain. *As a management concept, LCM includes both formalized structures and social practices within the organization and in its external relations.* LCM is making life cycle thinking and product sustainability operational for business through the continuous improvements of product systems, and LCM supports the business assimilation of policies such as integrated product policies.

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