

## **Sustainability and Organizational Climate in Brazilian Companies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Some authors point that organizational sustainability is not yet a concept, once this phenomenon reveals to be complex and involves the integration of economic, environmental and social dimensions. This paper promotes a discussion about the evolution of organizational sustainability from the literature and proposes the idea that sustainable

practices may explain a more favourable workplace, which leads to a higher employees' satisfaction. And a better place to work directly influences the organizational performance. Theoretical-empirical fundamentals through a bibliographical research were collected in the specialized literature. The content of this study involved initially the main definitions, adopted premises and a survey to measure the organizational sustainability and the climate index. The data were obtained through a survey with 403 companies which are active in the Brazilian marketplace. The results allowed to verify the influence of sustainable practices in employees' satisfaction and, consequently, in the participants' results.

**Keywords:** Sustainability; Organizational Sustainability; Sustainable Practices; Organizational Climate.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Numerous events and trends – the discovery of acid rain, the increasing damages to ecosystem, the destruction of tropical forests around the world, repeated oil shocks that create serious economic problems, ecological disasters, the hole in the ozone layer, the risk of global epidemics, the 2004 tsunami, the earthquake that shook regions of China in 2008, the persistence of poverty, disease, hunger, lack of water and sanitation in large areas of the world, and the continued growth of world population – reinforce the perception of a shared and fragile world.

Given this scenario, the vision of sustainability is more than a fascinating subject; it is a question of survival and acceptance of the interdependence of different aspects of the human

existence. In a world that seems to be much smaller and more threatened, it is difficult for any company (including the business community) to affirm that social, economic or environmental problems, which afflict cities, countries and the world, are irrelevant. "Sustainability is respecting the interdependence of all living things among themselves and the environment, (...) it means to operate the company without causing damage to living beings without destroying the environment but, rather, restoring it and enriching it" (Savitz and Weber, 2007, p. 3).

This fact has stimulated, since the last decades of the twentieth century, a large number of academic studies and researchers to seek for a definition and for an understanding about the evolution of the concept of sustainability, its importance and its role for the organization and for the larger social context.

Some studies show the benefits obtained by companies that adopt sustainability into their managerial and operational practices (Fischer, 2008; Bovespa, 2008; Atkinson, 2000; Hoffman, 2000).

The contemporary models of management aimed at attending the basic needs of human beings, maintaining the equilibrium of ecosystems, the prevention of environmental degradation, the end of waste and the elimination of social injustice.

Additionally, sustainability is intrinsically linked to the environment, to culture in the corporate world and involves an integrated work with the stakeholders. Sustainability is a concept that depends on everyone: enterprises, government, society and individuals; it should

be understood as a systemic approach which posits all elements that are influencing – and are influenced by – each other.

When the companies search for sustainability, it seems that the organizational climate takes an important place to a large extent by changes from organizations in transition – to a new context of management with sustainable practices. Coda (1997) highlights that the organizational climate reflects a trend or inclination on the care of the needs of the organization and the people who are part of it, which is an important indicator of organizational effectiveness.

If one considers that the organizational climate is the collective perception that employees have about the organizational practices, policies and values, and also the levels of motivation and credibility, it is believed that there is a relationship between organizational climate and sustainability. By understanding that the company is organized to adopt sustainable practices, one can not overlook the involvement of people who feel part of a team and not only responsible for the results, but also by the impacts of the company's actions. Among these actions, the impacts of the activities of extraction, processing and utilization of resources, manufacturing, and consumption deserve special attention.

Thus the hypothesis is that a feasible scenario for sustainability can emerge from the identification of specific traits of a company's organizational climate; what can be shown as an important tool to concentrate the efforts toward sustainable management?

This paper, therefore, had the objective to promote a discussion on the ongoing implementation of the concept of organizational sustainability from the literature research

and to propose the idea of sustainable practices explaining a better workplace and, therefore, a higher satisfaction of employees. And this satisfaction directly influences the company performance and its competitive advantage. This scenario includes both success of the company and the success of the community.

The methodology for this study included: literature review, survey in companies, and statistical data processing. The survey covered 403 companies that operate in several industries in Brazil; they are organizations that are references to the Brazilian market, and still present high rates of organizational climate diagnosis.

The theoretical frame, therefore, brings the issue of sustainability and the organizational climate, which measures the employees' satisfaction.

## **THEORETICAL FRAME**

The organizational sustainability has been a recurring theme in both business world and academic works. But it is early to say which model of sustainability serves as a reference for organizations. Facing a business environment of increasingly complexity and competitiveness, there are those who understand that companies should prioritize social issues with whom they have relations with their business (Baldo, 2002; Rezende and Santos, 2006), and also share with the employees the importance of dissemination of actions related to sustainability (Fischer, 2008). Thus, the adopted notion of sustainability in this study refers to economic, social and environmental activities, and yet, to the people management in this context, taking into account the organizational climate.

## ***Sustainability – the Evolution of a Concept***

Sustainability comes from the Latin *sustentare*, which means to support, to bear, or the possibility of an organization to ensure its continuity and survival. This continuity is not only a repetition of what is done here and now, it is a proposal of transformation and continuous renewal, having the ability to innovate for the stakeholders with whom it has relationships (Fischer, 2008). According to this author, the determinants of this transformation are: the stakeholders; the movements of awareness; the public policies and legislation, and the intersectoral collaboration. Working with the results which aim the sustainability, it is necessary to use all these elements; but using mainly the change of culture and power, or a change from the inside out. In this sense, there is a growing concern for the Brazilian companies to understand this concept and its dimensions, and incorporate it to their reality.

In the mid-1980, sustainability has become a very used concept, gaining a broader sense from the concept of social responsibility. The new concept begins from the premise that the sustainability of an enterprise depends on the competent management of their natural complexity, as well as its ability to consider the legitimate interests of different stakeholders and the impacts on the environment on the business plans (CESFGV-EAESP, 2008). Thus, it has assumed economic, social and environmental dimensions, trying to find a new form of development.

The concept of development has been interpreted as a synonym for promoting economic growth and increase in wealth. From the social, environmental, ecological and geographical consequences of those models – which could lead to the collapse of an entire civilization – it

becomes necessary to adopt a new model that is capable of ensuring the sustainability of this society.

In essence, sustainable development is a process in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and the institutional change are harmonized and strengthen the present and future potential, to meet social needs and aspirations (CMMAD, 1988).

Thus, when discussing the concept of sustainable practices, Stuart and Mark (2004) affirm that this is related to the creation of sustainable value, which requires that companies take into account each of the four broad sets of motivators, cited by authors (Table 1):

Table 1 – Global motivators of the sustainability

<b>Motivators</b>	<b>Understanding</b>
1. The growing industrialization	At the same time that the industrialization produced enormous economic benefits, it also generated significant consequences, as consumption of natural raw materials, pollution and waste.
2. Proliferation and interconnection of stakeholders in the society	As the power of national governments fell soon after the regimes of global trade, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society groups have occupied the scene, assuming the role of monitors and, in some cases, users of social and environmental patterns.
3. Emerging technologies which offer powerful and revolutionary solutions	They can make obsolete the bases of many current industries that use energy and raw materials intensively.
4. The increase of population, poverty and inequality associated with globalization	The number of human population jumped from 1 billion to 6 billion in just two generations. This rapid population growth has led to growing inequalities of income.

Source: Stuart and Mark (2004).

According to Rezende and Santos (2006), adhesion from companies to the sustainability is tantamount to a commitment to the integrity of the environment and the principles of social responsibility. This concerns the adherence of organizations to a project of social commitment.

According to these authors, companies are challenged to minimize the loss of current operations (against the pollution), while they are redirecting their portfolio of competences toward more sustainable technologies and abilities (clean technology). Companies are also challenged to engage in an extensive interaction and dialogue with stakeholders, looking for existing offers (product liability), as well as how they might develop economic and interesting solutions to social and environmental problems of the future (vision of sustainability).

For Stuart and Mark (2004), the challenge for the company in this process is deciding which actions and initiatives pursue, and how to best administer them. Thus, the authors recommend specific steps in the search for sustainable value: a diagnosis (a balance of the company portfolio), an opportunities evaluation (strengths and weaknesses in terms of training) and an implementation (the project and experiments planning).

These authors acknowledge that these tasks are, in fact, very challenging and complex, suggesting that only a few companies will be able to achieve the successful activities in the four axes simultaneously, especially those that require the greatest efforts in terms of vision, creativity and patience.



Sachs (1993), has affirmed that sustainability is achieved when it is given the same level of importance to social, economic, ecological, and cultural aspects. These variables are inter-related so that any change in one affects the other.

In this sense, the concept of sustainability represents a new approach of doing business that promotes social inclusion, reduce and optimize the use of natural resources and the impact on the environment, without ignoring the economic and financial profitability of the company. This new approach creates value to the shareholder, provides the continuity of the business, and contributes to the whole society (Bovespa, 2008; Atkinson, 2000; Hoffman, 2000).

The concept of sustainability itself can be applied mainly considering the human being develops in the context in which it develops its living conditions. That is, if organizational practices of sustainability are linked to improved conditions for the work environment, one can say that the company would be concerned about the satisfaction of its employees and, therefore, with its performance.

### ***Organizational Climate and the Employees' Satisfaction***

The organizational climate refers to what people believe that exists and what is happening in the environment of the organization at any given time and therefore being the characterization of the image that people have from the major issues (Coda, 1998).

The concept of organizational climate began a new approach to business management when it looked for arguments for the human labour performance, through relations between this factor and other aspects of daily life, such as leadership, satisfaction, ethics, motivation,

performance, and turnover, among others. In recent years this issue has gained importance to be considered a variable to be investigated by those who seek explanations for the productivity and quality of people work in organizations (Oliveira, 1996).

For Schneider and White (2004), three are the sources for the organizational climate development:

- Exposure of members to the same structural and objective characteristics;
- Practices and procedures for selection, retention and designation of tasks that produce a homogeneous set of members of the organization, and
- Social interactions that generate the shared understanding among members.

So, one can say that the organizational climate is formed by shared feelings regarding the organization. These feelings, positive or negative, influence the people behaviour and, consequently, its performance.

Studies done by Morse e Reimer (1956), de Likert (1961) e de Katz e Kahn (1966) focused the human context in organizations for performance and organizational effectiveness, emphasizing in their analyses the results of productivity and human performance. These authors advocated the idea that organizational performance is more than productivity in the short term, and that the conditions (atmosphere, climate) created in the workplace for employees may have important consequences (Ashkanay et al., 2000).

### ***Practices of Sustainability and Organizational Climate – a Relationship in Debate***

The organizational sustainability, according to Holliday, Schmidheiny and Watts (2002), should go beyond the traditional model of return on financial assets and creating value for shareholders and customers, as it also involves the success of the community and stakeholders. It reinforces their natural and cultural environments, so they are as precious as its technology portfolio and skills of their employees.

The corporate sustainability must include, among their goals, the care of the environment, the welfare of stakeholders and the constant improvement of its own reputation. For Holliday, Schmidheiny and Watts (2002, p.174) "the transformation towards sustainability concerns extending the success, value and flexibility of the company in the long term."

In this way, to deal with an organization toward sustainability, as said before, everything indicates that the inclusion of the organizational climate presents as one of the key parts, because this can contribute to the search and internalization of commitment. Lucena (2004, p. 46) defines commitment as "the result of the approval, acceptance and commitment to adopt something that was believed necessary and constructive, or the advantages absorbed, which were highly rewarding."

The management of organizational climate is a challenge for organizations, but also to several authors (Coda, 1998; Oliveira, 1996; Fischer, 1996) it is structurally a solid basis that can be deployed to the search for better results.

The analysis of the climate was originally developed by Litwin and Stinger (1968) and its objective is to determine the organizational climate by measuring the degree of motivation of

members from the same organization, which analyzes the “health status” of the organization, through the diagnosis of a statistical research analysis.

Aiming to link the organizational sustainability with the organizational climate, is trying to verify whether positive or negative perception regarding sustainable practices adopted by the company, or in relation to different aspects and variables that can influence the organizational climate, because of such practices.

This shows that positive results can be achieved through satisfied employees, who are aligned and in line with the working environment in which they are inserted. If a more favourable work environment to the satisfaction of employees brings superior performance to the company, then business practices of sustainability could promote a more conducive organizational climate to the satisfaction of its employees? The following items below propose to show this last relationship and its results.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The adopted methodology in this study was the descriptive research. To achieve this, a survey was done to “accurately describe some characteristics of known populations which are typically represented by studies of survey” (Tripodi, Fellin and Meyer, 1981, p. 39).

The chosen population is composed of 403 companies that used to operate in diverse sectors of the Brazilian market, all of medium and large size; they are organizations that adopt quite consistent practices and are reference to the Brazilian context, and besides showing high rates in organizational climate diagnosis. The selection process of these companies considered the

availability of data, since companies had to expose their rates of organizational climate and its practices of sustainability in detailed levels.

The questionnaire sent to the companies contained 36 questions about management practices, and seven of them were related to social and environmental responsibility, which include the sustainability theme. The questions came from a form prepared by an important Brazilian foundation that conducts an annual research on business practices; the issues addressed are aligned to the theoretical framework adopted in this paper.

The objective of this search, then, was to verify the elements of evidences' analysis, which are the pillars of corporate sustainability and, according to Bovespa (2008), "the relationship with employees and suppliers, the relationship with the community, the corporate governance, and the environmental impacts of their activities".

Because of this, there was a deeper understanding and theoretical basis of the problem, from theoretical references already published, followed by a research to obtain information that provided an overview of the object of study. Value drivers (practices of sustainability) and their degree of importance to the surveyed companies about the level of organizational climate were identified (Raupp and Beuren, 2003).

From the description of the organizational practices of sustainability, the obtained results from the survey are presented below. The statistical method of analysis was the simple linear regression (SLR), so it could examine the relationship among variables.

## **RESULTS ANALYSIS**

The seven questions of the questionnaire related to social and environmental responsibility of the organization are shown below. Such practices, which include the sustainability theme, are listed in Table 2.

Table 2 – Practices of organizational sustainability in the surveyed organizations

Question	Multiple alternatives of answers
Does the company adopt specific programs to enhance the care, attraction and retention of women in your staff?	Yes, and there are facilities to assist and care employees' children.
	Yes, and there are educational or complementary education programs to the employees' children.
	Yes, and there are counselling and support to family planning.
	Yes, and there is assisted discussion to debate and promote actions that should improve women's life quality in the work environment.
	Yes, and there is orientation about the development of women's career.
Did the company develop any social responsibility action in 2006?	Yes, and the actions involved the employees.
	Yes, and the actions involved the employees' family.
	Yes, and the company stimulates and supports periodically employees' actions of volunteerism.
	Yes, and the company stimulates and supports periodically employees' family actions of volunteerism.
	Yes, and the actions involved the community nearby the facilities of the company.
	Yes, and the company adopts formal mechanisms to evaluate results from social and environmental programs and actions.
	Yes, and the company adopts programs or actions to prevent sexual or

	moral harassment.
	Yes, and the company adopts programs or actions to promote social, racial and gender diversity.
Does the company have any organized program to preserve the environment?	Yes, and there is a program to separate the garbage.
	Yes, and there are campaigns to preserve the environment.
	Yes, and there is financial support to third parties that help to preserve the environment.
	Yes, and there is support to employees' social actions to preserve the environment.
Does the company adopt any action to the handicapped employees?	Yes, and the company employs 5% of them in its staff.
	Yes, and the company employs less than 5% of them in its staff.
	Yes, and the company is engaged to employ 5% of them in its staff.
	Yes, and the facilities are adequate to the handicapped.
	Yes, and the company supports organizations that assist the handicapped.
Has the company elaborated and disseminated any ethic and/or conduct code to guide the employees' behaviour?	Yes, and the employees has had the opportunity to question, to criticize and/or contribute to the clauses that constitute the code.
	Yes, and the company disseminates the code through any internal communication mean, such as organizational newspapers, magazines, intranet and billboards.
	Yes, and the company formally disseminates the code through interactive activities, such as meetings, workshops, seminars and formal training.
	Yes, and the managers were formally trained or guided about how to disseminate the code.
	Yes, and there is a formal program to monitor the code accomplishment.
Is there any formal process to integrate	Yes, and the company has specific programs to assist the new employees' integration.

employees to the organizational culture?	Yes, and there is a formal program to disseminate the culture, mission, vision, values and the ethic code of the organization to all employees.
Is there any formal process to integrate outsourced contracted to the company?	Yes, and the outsourced employees are involved in activities to integrate them to the organizational culture.
	Yes, and the outsourced employees are invited to integration activities, such as parties and other commemorations.
	Yes, and the organizational strategy is disseminated to outsourced employees.
	Yes, and there are trainings about culture, mission, vision, ethic code of the organization to the outsourced employees.
	Yes, and the company adopts formal policies to guarantee equality between employees and outsourced employees.

Each alternative could be checked, unless it was not exclusionary with another practice already confirmed by the respondent. They were also considered as weaker action (weight 1), medium action (weight 2) and stronger action (weight 3).

It was calculated, therefore, the SLR between these practices of sustainability with the general rates of organizational climate, which represent the satisfaction of the employees with their workplace.

Table 3 – Simple linear regression between practices of organizational sustainability (factor of explanation) and organizational climate ratio (explained factor)

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	69.86889	0.957349	72.98164	0.0000



PRAT_SUST	0.163333	0.025669	6.363146	0.0000
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<b>R-squared</b>	<b>0.091711</b>	Mean dependent var	75.36952	
Adjusted R-squared	0.089446	S.D. dependent var	8.654714	
S.E. of regression	8.258582	Akaike info criterion	7.065333	
Sum squared resid	27349.88	Schwarz criterion	7.085179	
Log likelihood	-1421.665	F-statistic	40.48962	
Durbin-Watson stat	1.906869	Prob(F-statistic)	0.000000	

The Table 3 shows the obtained results of the survey data: the organizational sustainable practices explain the variability of only 9.17% of the organizational climate index, which represent the employees' satisfaction.

So, one can conclude that practices applied by companies aiming to promote sustainability are very weakly related to the index of organizational climate. That is, it is not possible to prove that such practices involve greater business performance.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to the investigated literature, one may realize that the organizational concept of sustainability has been consolidating as an intrinsically interdisciplinary and multidimensional concept, and also linked to a systemic approach, focused on relations between stakeholders directly and indirectly involved to the business.

It was expected that there would be a medium or high correlation between organizational practices of sustainability and a more favourable organizational climate to the employees' satisfaction, but this relationship has not been validated. This shows that the sustainable

practices applied in the companies do not explain the people satisfaction, however it is important to state that both actions are fundamental to the success of the company.

The organizations, to ensure their competitive advantage, must invest in policies and practices that bring sustainability and also promote conditions that create a favourable working environment. Although there is no relation of cause and effect between these two aspects, the companies should be aware that supporting the society to keep up themselves perpetual is essential.

As a contribution, this study suggests that, when thinking about sustainability it is necessary to go beyond a concept which is within the limits of social, economic and environmental development, but something that also incorporates the internalization of a sustainable culture.

One should, in the future, investigate other organizational factors that may prove links between practices of sustainability and superior performance.

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