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From Theory to Practice: A Research Note on *Extraordinary* Pro-environmental Behavior (EPEB) in the Hospitality Industry

Abstract

The urgency to find sustainable solutions in a seemingly non-sustainable industry, i.e., hospitality, has been debated among academics and hospitality stakeholders. Although there is unquestionable need to implement sustainability actions and initiatives, they remain ordinary and basic, and within the same parameters as decades ago. In this research note, we questioned hospitality managers and challenged them to offer alternative solutions that could be considered as *extraordinary* sustainability actions and initiatives. Using a participatory action research approach in three workshop settings, and a sample of 66 hospitality experts, participants responded to our challenge by identifying concrete and feasible actions and initiatives that could become the best practices of *extraordinary pro-environmental behavior*. One of the most significant findings was that contrary to the propensity of sustainability literature that highlights the environmental dimension only, we found that relying on the social dimension of sustainability could indeed be the secret to turning normal pro-environmental behavior into *extraordinary* behavior. Further, although they, too, cited several practical challenges in implementing extraordinary pro-environmental behavior, they suggested that resistance to spending money or making the effort for real change truly affected what sustainability actions and initiatives were introduced in the properties.

Keywords:

Sustainability actions/initiatives; Pro-environmental behavior; Hospitality industry; Competitive Advantage

Introduction

Scholars have examined and re-examined various lenses to define pro-environmental behavior in the hospitality business. Research has been conducted at the property, sector, and industry levels, targeting one or several stakeholder groups. Nonetheless, the literature does not offer concrete solutions and recommendations that hotel practitioners can implement in their daily operations. This leads to the ubiquitous research-practice gap, where what science posits as the best solution may not be feasible in the hospitality industry. This research note explores the topic of sustainability actions and initiatives in the hospitality industry and attempts to bridge the perceptual gap between academia and industry by expanding the existing literature to include 66 industry practitioners' perspectives on what they consider *extraordinary* sustainable behavior that may lead to differentiation and eventual competitive advantage.

Traditionally, the hospitality industry has implemented sustainability practices (Mo et al., 2022) through eco-friendly workplace activities, such as developing green products and processes, and recycling and reusing (Peng et al., 2020). However, to truly understand the role of sustainability behavior, it is essential to distinguish between ordinary and *extraordinary* pro-environmental behavior. Ordinary pro-environmental/sustainability behavior includes routine activities such as energy-saving initiatives, recycling, and using eco-friendly products as part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts (Mo et al., 2022). These behaviors often focus on compliance with existing regulations or industry standards yet fail to create significant differentiation for businesses (Chen et al., 2019).

In contrast, *extraordinary* pro-environmental/sustainability behavior involves innovative, voluntary actions beyond routine practices (Zizka et al., 2024). These are efforts driven by intrinsic motivation and organizational commitment that can provide a competitive advantage by

fostering a green corporate image and enhancing employee engagement (Farooq et al., 2022). For example, *extraordinary* pro-environmental/sustainability behavior enhances employee engagement and organizational commitment (Arshad et al., 2022; Darvishmotevali and Altinay, 2022). This connection between extraordinary pro-environmental/sustainability behavior and employee satisfaction reinforces the idea that sustainable practices are not just about environmental outcomes, but also about fostering a positive workplace culture and enhancing overall job performance.

Thus, *extraordinary* pro-environmental behavior helps businesses exceed regulatory expectations and serves as a powerful differentiator, positioning companies as leaders in sustainability. By embedding *extraordinary* pro-environmental behavior within their CSR strategies, hospitality firms can cultivate a competitive advantage that resonates with environmentally conscious customers and motivated employees (Zizka et al., 2024). This study builds on this theoretical framework by exploring how hospitality practitioners perceive and implement extraordinary sustainability behaviors that can drive competitive differentiation.

Many studies have focused on employee pro-environmental behavior activities that are often seen as ‘extra-role’ activities that employees are required to perform to protect the environment or how hotels benefit from employee participation in these activities (Arshad et al., 2022; Mo et al., 2022). Further, routine policies, like the ‘do not change the towel’ or ‘install low-flow toilets’ have been studied extensively (Chen et al., 2019); however, proposing innovative strategies promoted by industry experts has been overlooked. To bridge the gap between academia and industry, we used a participatory workshop methodology design and conducted three sessions with hospitality managers, addressing the following: RQ1:-Can EPEB lead to a competitive advantage in hospitality firms? RQ2: Can we establish *extraordinary* pro-

environmental/sustainability behavior that exceeds the tasks most hotels currently implement?

RQ3: What are the challenges and opportunities for implementing EPEB at the property level?

Our overarching purpose was to initiate a productive dialogue between practitioners and academics to co-create industry-relevant insights grounded in practical experience.

The workshop findings were organized into the following sections to address the research questions. First, we examined the participants' understanding of EPEB to answer RQ1. Next, we analyzed how the EPEB activities identified can create a competitive advantage for their firms (for RQ2). Finally, the participants were asked to identify the challenges faced in implementing these EPEB activities (to answer RQ3).

Competitive advantage and opportunities/challenges

Previous studies have shown that pro-environmental/sustainable activities can lead to competitive advantage and employee engagement; thus, management is more willing to implement green practices voluntarily (Zizka et al., 2024). Further, employees who are inclined toward sustainability behavior boost the company's reputation and green image (Mo et al., 2022). Hence, organizations should promote sustainability principles (Darvishmotevali & Altinay, 2022) based on the belief that their actions make a difference (Dolcinar, 2020). Employees who are aware of the benefits of green practices while being supported by management are more likely to follow pro-environmental/sustainability procedures and voluntarily engage with the company's green agenda (Darvishmotevali & Altinay, 2022) and engage in altruistic or prosocial behavior beyond their daily duties (Peng et al., 2020; Tandon et al., 2023).

Employee engagement depends on their knowledge of the benefits and results of green practices (Darvishmotevali & Altinay, 2022). While some employees are willing to do 'more',

others resist the *extra* work (Peng et al., 2020) as not all actions are rewarded or required in formal regulations. If there is the perception of forced or excessive emphasis on pro-environmental/sustainability behavior, employees may feel pressure to perform, leading to stress or disengagement (Peng et al., 2020; Zizka et al., 2024). Thus, green actions must be sincere and rewarding.

Methodology

Data Collection

To identify sustainability practices commonly used in the hospitality industry, we analyzed the literature to identify the common themes. Then, we implemented a participatory action research approach based on Bertella et al.'s (2021) study on workshop methodology design. We conducted workshops with hospitality professionals in decision-making roles to evaluate how managers can differentiate between typical and *extraordinary* sustainability activities to gain a competitive advantage. Similar to the study on tourism climate change by Horne et al. (2023), our goal was to co-develop potential solutions with the hospitality stakeholders who face sustainability issues every day. Unlike so many studies that focus on lower-level employees or tourists, we listened to the voices that can make a difference, those of the managers, directors, and/or owners of hospitality/tourism properties worldwide.

Initially, a focus group of hospitality professionals (24) who were enrolled in a graduate executive program was conducted in Lausanne, Switzerland. To mitigate response bias, participants were asked to brainstorm responses to specific pro-environmental/sustainability discussion topics by posting their responses anonymously via Jamboard. All participants were encouraged to write as many responses as they deemed necessary or wanted to share. The questions focused on their properties' environmental activities, the competitive benefits these

initiatives could accrue, and the challenges faced when implementing green actions. Further, we asked what they consider *extraordinary* sustainability initiatives. Questions were answered individually before being discussed in the group. After several months, two additional focus groups (42 participants) were held again in Lausanne under the same conditions to gather further evidence. They, too, were encouraged to respond to the same specific pro-environmental/sustainability discussion topics as the earlier group. Content analysis was conducted on the data collected from the 66 participants in total.

Data Analysis

The first question for each workshop required participants to list all sustainable initiatives in the hospitality industry. Participants were encouraged to add as many Post-it ideas as possible. Across all groups, this table filled up easily and quickly. Their responses were manually reviewed and arranged into three sustainability themes (social, environmental, and economic) and this served as the frameworks for the analysis. For example, an action such as employing local labor force was placed under the ‘social’ theme; a response about donating to charity was classified as ‘economic’; an initiative such as collecting rain water to water the gardens was categorized as ‘environmental’. To enhance reliability, two researchers coded the data independently and reconciled discrepancies through discussion.

Results and Discussion

The findings are presented according to the three research questions. First, we examined the behaviors identified by the hospitality practitioners that were deemed as extraordinary pro-environmental behavior. Second, we analyzed how such behavior may contribute to competitive advantage in hospitality. Third, we identified the main challenges when implementing the identified EPEB behaviors at the properties. Thus, the themes were organized according to 1.

To address research question one, the managers listed 51 ideas for sustainable initiatives/actions that could lead to competitive advantage, with only electric cars and zero waste listed more than once (see partial Jamboard results in Figure 2). The environmental initiatives were listed most often (69%), including zero waste/food waste/carbon emission, paperless workplaces, green vehicles only, and innovative food solutions from pink farming to permaculture. The social initiatives were reported at 25%, with partnerships appearing the most often, be it with local food suppliers, local companies with zero-emission transportation, or private-public partnerships for clean energy. Respondents suggested hiring local staff who would engage in sustainability initiatives even when ‘the boss isn’t watching.’ Figure 2 summarizes participant responses to the following prompt: Name all the sustainable initiatives/actions that you believe could lead to a competitive advantage in the hospitality industry.



Figure 2: Hospitality managers' suggestions for initiatives that lead to competitive advantage

To address research question two, we asked participants to establish *extraordinary* pro-environmental/sustainability behavior that exceeds the tasks most hotels currently implement. Participants first defined 'extraordinary' sustainable initiatives as "extraordinary engagement with all employees at all levels through emotionally-attached sustainability activities" (Zizka et al, 2024, p. 4). From this, 63 comments were provided for *extraordinary* measures. Surprisingly, *extraordinary* measures appear to rely significantly on the social pillar of sustainability (59% of the responses were social, followed by environmental (27%) and economic (14%). Thus, "people" exceed "environmental" initiatives, which have been the cornerstone of sustainability strategies to date. This finding shows that relying on the social dimension can turn normal pro-environmental behavior into *extraordinary* behavior. This confirms the findings of Midgett et al. (2020) who suggested that the future of sustainable solutions resides in the social dimension of sustainability. Examples from the study findings include communicating and engaging customers about their sustainability activities by launching a rewilding campaign, implementing vertical farms, live-streaming sustainability initiatives, and hosting events with local businesses.

To address research question three, we created a table summarizing the challenges hospitality managers face when implementing sustainability initiatives and their frequencies (Table 1). In contrast to questions where responses varied widely, the same challenges were repeated, and some of the challenges cited in the literature, such as lack of stakeholder support or ineffective use of resources, were replicated (Midgett et al., 2020).

Table 1. Challenges for implementing sustainability in the hospitality industry

| # | Challenge | Frequency |
|---|-----------|-----------|
|---|-----------|-----------|

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 1. | <i>Guest expectations/ Environmental impact not a priority for customers/necessity/ is fake news</i> | 12 |
| 2. | <i>Cost (in general, in dated properties, maintenance, replacement of old systems, upkeep of materials)</i> | 17 |
| 3. | <i>ROI</i> | 6 |
| 4. | <i>Awareness of future benefits/tangible impact perception/creating culture across the organization</i> | 4 |
| 5. | <i>Operationalizing processes/implementation</i> | 2 |
| 6. | <i>Lack of resources/ time</i> | 3 |
| 7. | <i>Weakness in supply chain/availability of suppliers</i> | 3 |
| 8. | <i>Local waste regulations/local regulations/politics/government support</i> | 7 |
| 9. | <i>Heritage buildings cannot be touched/not easily applicable to all properties</i> | 2 |
| 10. | <i>Alignment with strategic goals/management buy in/mindset/corporate commitment/ More pressing corporate initiatives/competing priorities/corporate structure</i> | 10 |
| 11. | <i>Change resistance/willingness/attitude</i> | 4 |
| 12. | <i>Awareness and engagement of all stakeholders</i> | 3 |
| 13. | <i>Local decisions have global impacts</i> | 1 |
| 14. | <i>Team work in silos/lack of staff/lack of qualified specialists</i> | 3 |
| 15. | <i>May create new problems</i> | 1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 16. <i>Corporate education</i> | 1 |
| 17. <i>Enjoy status quo; do not want to do the extra steps/old habits/industry is too traditional/not bold enough</i> | 5 |

From Table 1, the most relevant challenges include cost, guest expectations, alignment with strategic goals, local regulations/governmental restrictions, and ROI. These results add new insight to the sustainability literature. While there are several commonly cited challenges, suggesting that sustainability actions are industry-specific, the types of actions/initiatives cited in academic literature were more likely based on the type of property, location, or available resources (Midgett et al., 2020). In the challenges cited by these participants, location and type of property were not mentioned at all, thus showing a discrepancy between academia and practice

To conclude, in each workshop, participants were asked if they had any further comments regarding sustainability in the hospitality industry. These final comments seemed less optimistic than the overall feeling during the sessions. Participants voiced concerns regarding the long-term horizon, the costs for implementation, and the lip service often paid to sustainability initiatives in lieu of real action.

These comments led to further discussion with each focus group to find practical solutions, which unfortunately did not emerge immediately. Participants could not find a panacea for authentic engagement with extraordinary sustainability/pro-environmental behavior. While all groups agreed that monetary resources were a constraint, they were also concerned with making a difference. One group succinctly stated that the hospitality industry as a whole is behind on sustainability issues or interests. Many questioned how they could motivate/incentivize their employees. However, in each workshop, the focus turned toward

communication. For these practitioners, it was not a question of defining or implementing any level of pro-environmental behavior; instead, it was a question of communicating these initiatives to the stakeholders who could support them (morally or financially), thereby increasing engagement and a greater competitive edge.

In this study, we have shown on three occasions, with three separate workshops of 66 participants total, that hospitality practitioners were able to differentiate between ordinary sustainable actions and *extraordinary* pro-environmental behavior, how *extraordinary* might lead to competitive advantage, and the challenges they face when attempting to implement any changes in sustainability behavior.

Academic and Practical Recommendations

Our study provides the following theoretical implications. First, the findings of this study distinguish between ordinary sustainable actions and extra-ordinary pro-environmental behavior. While previous studies (e.g. Arshad et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2020; Tandon et al., 2023) have examined green employee behavior which is expected or encouraged by the organization, this present study identifies sustainability-related behavior that extends beyond formal job requirements. By doing so, we contribute to existing knowledge on employee green behavior by introducing extraordinary pro-environmental behavior as a distinct form of green employee behavior in hospitality, indicating that not all sustainability-related behavior is the same.

Second, this study also highlights an important research gap regarding what can be feasibly implemented at the firm level. Although sustainability literature often provides ambitious recommendations for industry transformation, such ideals are usually constrained by operational realities, resource limitations and context-specific organizational barriers (Dolnicar, 2020; Midgett et al., 2020). The insights gained from this study indicate the need for hospitality

researchers to remain practical in their recommendations. The study also demonstrates the value of participatory and workshop-based approaches in identifying practitioner perspectives and generating context-sensitive insights into sustainability challenges and opportunities (Bertella et al., 2021; Horne et al., 2023).

Past research has offered several recommendations. One of the most cited recommendations from hospitality professionals was the need for training (Zizka et al., 2024). We have created one example in Figure 3 to illustrate how the journey toward extraordinary pro-environmental/sustainability behavior can be accomplished, starting with the general, and often generic, conclusion that employees need training.

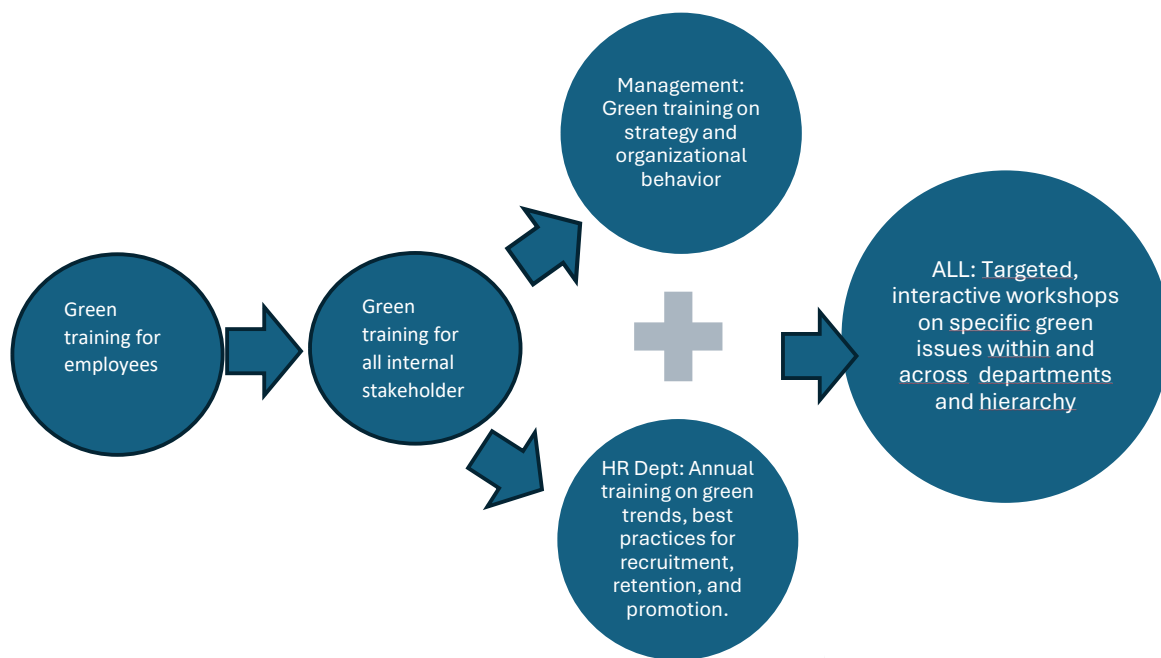


Figure 3: Example of extraordinary actions for all internal stakeholders

Source: Zizka et al., 2024

In this example, the general training for employees would be replaced with a series of training programs that are more inclusive of the greater stakeholder groups and extend beyond

one-shot training programs. For example, a training session on green practices could be extended to include all internal stakeholders, not just employees, to increase its effectiveness. We posit that to make the training *extraordinary*, we need to develop strategic green training for managers linked to their role in leading different sustainability initiatives in the workplace. Similarly, extraordinary training could be created for the HR Department, focusing on green trends in recruitment, retention, and promotion. The academic literature has frequently emphasized the need for effective green human resource management (GHRM) (Darvishmotevali & Altinay, 2022; Tandon et al., 2023; Zizka et al., 2024). Once all the internal stakeholders have completed their relevant training (including top management), the stakeholders could unite to co-create solutions to the sustainability issues found in the workplace. Ideally, everyone would have an equal voice in contributing to the solutions.

Regarding practitioners' viewpoints, which is the focus of this study, the need to communicate more effectively through the use of specific channels seemed salient. Some responses involved modern technology, such as filming a Netflix series, conducting interviews with local media, live-streaming of sustainability actions and initiatives, initiating social media campaigns with influencers, or inviting celebrities to visit their property. Only three practitioners suggested a global partnership (with UNWTO), global certification, or government partnership. Several suggestions were more traditional, including a welcome letter or a turn-down note highlighting the sustainability actions/initiatives the property has implemented. The most prevalent recommendation involved incentives: Practitioners suggested membership incentive programs, reward systems, monetary incentive programs, i.e., to gain or redeem points for green actions.

Conclusions and Opportunities

There is consensus when considering sustainability in the hospitality industry; international hospitality managers agree that there is potential to enhance pro-environmental behavior, although challenges concerning budget constraints and financial interests overriding sustainability interests are prevalent. While the practitioners discussed the importance of their contribution, they remained skeptical regarding the motivations and engagement of the other stakeholders, i.e., customers, owners, and the community. We found that hospitality practitioners often cited pro-environmental/sustainability initiatives regarding the more significant picture issues such as global warming, greenhouse gas emissions, or carbon footprints, but, as practitioners, they were less concerned with the philosophical reason why and more concerned with the daily what, i.e., how this could be financed and implemented.

Our study results are relevant and timely for practice and future research, going beyond the extant literature in identifying the challenges practitioners face regarding implementing sustainability initiatives while fully recognizing the need to do so. More importantly, our findings in the workshop focus groups indicate that hospitality professionals recognize the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary pro-environmental behavior and the likelihood of greenwashing by industry peers. Rather than confining responses to predefined academic frameworks or manipulating the study to confirm our academic findings, we encouraged practitioners to generate content based solely on their real-world experiences. This aligns with participatory action research methodologies, emphasizing the importance of engaging those directly responsible for sustainability initiatives in decision-making (Bertella et al., 2021). However, as Horne et al. (2023) suggested, we now need to track their progress and follow up with the participants to see what significant changes were made. A future study could be conducted by asking these participants to reflect on their responses in the workshop and

comparing them to their reality today. As we have seen, by allowing practitioners to lead the discussion, we aimed to move beyond theoretical recommendations and focus on solutions that reflect the challenges and opportunities faced in daily operations.

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