Short on Time:  
Managing the Time Paradox in Business Sustainability

Natalie Slawinski, Faculty of Business Administration, Memorial University  
Pratima Bansal, Ivey Business School, University of Western Ontario

Abstract

Organizational scholars have argued that companies tend to focus on the short term at the expense of the long term, even in the face of suboptimal, long-term organizational outcomes (Laverty, 1996; March, 1999) and negative societal and ecological outcomes (Hoffman & Bazerman, 2007). Firms, therefore, confront a “time paradox”—the best option in the short term differs from the best option in the long run (Laverty, 1996). This paradox is further underscored by the short-term nature of financial demands and the long-term challenges of societal issues (Graves & Waddock, 1994).

This inductive study of five firms in Alberta’s oil sands examines how organizations manage the paradox between the short term and long term, which is inherent in business sustainability. Drawing from interviews, participant observations, and archival data, we developed insights into how these firms managed the time paradox exposed by climate change. We find that firms whose orientation to time is deeper, slower, more cyclical, and future-to-present oriented are better able to manage this time paradox.

Through these findings, we contribute to the sustainability literature. Prior research on the role of business in society has generally fallen into two broad streams, assuming either a trade-off between business and society or a win–win outcome for both business and society (Margolis & Walsh, 2003). These streams not only avoid tackling the tensions between business and society but also sidestep the underlying temporal paradox. We also contribute to the management research on time by identifying four dimensions that describe organizational time orientation and ground short termism.