

ECOLOGY IN THE WORKPLACE: KEY VALUE OR REDUNDANT LUXURY?

Katarzyna OLEJNICZAK-SZUSTER

The Management Faculty, Czestochowa University of Technology; k.olejniczak-szuster@pcz.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0002-7820-4746

Purpose: In the face of the global challenges of climate change, environmental degradation and increasing consumption of natural resources, the question of whether a green approach in the office is a core value or an unnecessary luxury is gaining importance. Integrating sustainability principles into the daily operations of companies not only affects the image of the company, but also contributes to improving the quality of life of employees and protecting the environment. The purpose of this article is to identify and evaluate key environmental values that influence workplace operations and employee behavior in the context of sustainability.

Design/methodology/approach: In addition to the analysis of the subject literature, this study uses the results of a survey of 174 SMEs operating in the Częstochowa county. A chi-square-based empirical analysis workshop used the T-Chuprov convergence coefficient.

Findings: The study showed that trust, commitment and environmental responsibility form a triad of values that determines employees' approach to environmental protection. Acceptance of this triad contributes to sustainable development and reduces the negative impact of a company's activities on the environment. Ignoring them, on the other hand, can lead to so-called employee betrayal, i.e. lack of recognition of environmental values in the workplace.

Originality/value: The study draws attention to issues of ecology as a value in organizations. The added value of the study is the determination of the importance of ecological values in the activities of modern enterprises, as well as the indication of recommendations for SME enterprises in the field of ecological activities.

Keywords: values, sustainability, ecology, responsibility.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

It is a widely accepted truth that organizations contribute to environmental deterioration as a result of a number of factors related to their activity. Industry, manufacturing, transportation and consumption, associated with occupational activities, generate a significant amount of waste, pollution and greenhouse gas emissions (Robertson, Barling, 2013; Rodríguez-García et al., 2019). These negative effects of economic activity are often the result of mismanagement

of resources, overexploitation of the environment, and lack of adequate regulation (Farooq et al., 2022). Faced with these challenges, many organizations are beginning to recognize the need to incorporate sustainability and responsible environmental practices into their organizational processes (Gao et al., 2017; Kühner et al., 2024). In addition, more and more companies are engaging in projects to protect biodiversity and natural resources, and publishing transparent reports on their environmental impact (Richards, 2022). These efforts are not only a response to stakeholder expectations (El-Kassar, Singh, 2019; Zhou, Jin, 2023), but also a strategy for long-term development that can bring both economic and reputational benefits (Kelly, Moen, 2020; He et al., 2021; Ones, Dilchert, 2012). Decisions to incorporate the green factor into the company's structures can be the result of a multi-faceted analysis that includes both external and internal factors, taking into account the long-term strategy and the values the company intends to promote. According to Hashami (2023), adopting ecologically sustainable (responsible) methods, also known as “green business practices”, is now crucial for an organization, thus becoming its core value. As a result, today's companies need to rethink their existing business models in order to adapt to the new reality, in which environmental responsibility is becoming a key element of growth strategies and of gaining competitive advantage (Chaudhary, 2020; Cheema-Fox et al., 2020).

This article helps fill that gap by examining whether green activities are really the key to an organization's future, or just a temporary trend that will soon give way to other priorities. To fill this gap, this study focuses on ecology as a value. Therefore, it was important to determine the importance of ecological values in the activities of modern companies. Studying people's values can help managers design management strategies that align with them (Jones et al., 2016).

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

The steady increase in sustainability-oriented activities over the past decade suggests that managers are beginning to see the business case for the green factor (Gómez-Bezares et al., 2016). The moral argument for environmental responsibility is based on the fundamental premise that any individual who contributes in some way to the destruction or degradation of the environment, has an obligation to take corrective action. A key problem in the context of this responsibility is the specificity of natural resources, which often have no clear owner. It uses the principle of the so-called “common goods”, meaning that the use of these resources by one person does not necessarily preclude their use by others (Sheehy, 2023). As far as companies are concerned, environmental responsibility takes on special significance. Companies, as entities that produce and consume natural resources, have a huge impact on the condition of the environment. This responsibility extends from resource management practices

to how waste and emissions are handled (Subramanian, Sures, 2023). In such a context, modern companies should focus on integrating environmental aspects into every stage of their operations (Przychodzen, Przychodzen, 2013). For this reason, companies have begun to increase their environmental awareness, to carry out environmental protection activities and increase investment in environmental protection, while actively adopting environmental responsibility as an organizational value (Klemke-Pitek, Majchrzak, 2022).

There is no doubt that values are the foundation for effective strategy implementation, affecting the quality of interactions between the organization and its environment, including customers, employees and other stakeholders (González-Ordóñez; 2024). Values can serve as guides that shape how an organization conducts its business and how it is perceived in the community (Argandona, 2003). It is a kind of moral compass that indicates what is important and desirable in a company's operations. These values are stable because they are often embedded in the organizational culture, tradition and personal experiences (Zbiegień-Maciąg, 2005). Companies guided by a strong value system are less likely to engage in activities that may be perceived as unethical, thus fostering reputation and trust among stakeholders. This approach is conducive to increasing profitability, boosting productivity and stimulating innovation. In practice, this means that organizations that care about their values are often more open to new ideas and methods of operation, allowing them to adapt to changing market conditions (Bugdol, 2007; Macey, Schneider, 2008).

Environmental values can be divided into three broad categories, including: core values, ideas or principles related to nature or society that are considered important by individuals or groups; contextual values – assigned, preference-based, context- and attitude-dependent; relational values, which take the form of both core and contextual values (Kuster et al., 2024). These three categories of environmental values help to better understand the diverse ways in which employees perceive and engage with environmental issues, which is key to effectively protecting the environment and promoting sustainable development. According to Bugdol (2007), lack of respect for values is the cause of employee betrayal, which means violation of organizational values, principles and ideas, loss of faith in the activities undertaken by the organization, or involvement in competitive activity. Employees may feel that their private values are in conflict with what the organization stands for, which in turn may result in a potential desire to withdraw from active participation in its activities (Lohuis, 2008). In addition, loss of faith in the activities undertaken by the organization occurs when employees notice a low level of transparency in management, inconsistency in decisions made, or lack of respect for their input and opinions. In such an atmosphere, there is a growing risk that individuals who feel undervalued or ignored will seek alternative career paths, including employment with competitors (Wolor et al., 2022). Ecology as an organizational value thus refers to the integration of sustainability and environmental principles into an organization's strategies, processes and culture (Guardani et al., 2013). It is also development of green

workplace behavior, defined as the degree to which employees perform the required tasks in a way that conserves resources and protects the environment (Zhang et al., 2021).

Given the above, it can be assumed that ecology (environment) must be taken as a new value: environmental protection – a value understood on the one hand as a stream of resources, and on the other – as costs of lost opportunities (Kaczmarek, 2011). This study poses the following hypotheses:

H1: Employees' recognition of environmental values leads to increased voluntary environmental behavior in the workplace.

H2: Absence of environmental values in the workplace leads to a number of negative consequences for both employees and the organization itself.

3. Research Methodology, Research Subject and Research Sample

The main objective of this study was to identify and assess key environmental values that influence workplace operations and employee behaviors. For the proper conduct of the study, a research model was developed (Figure 1) which took into account the key variables and their interrelationships.

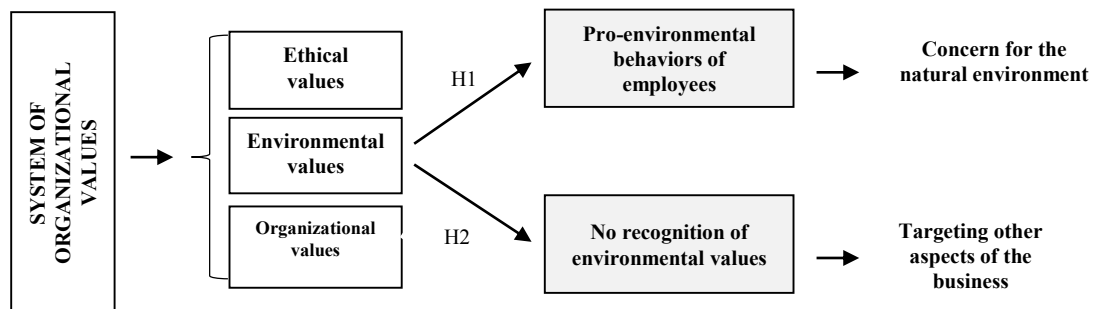


Figure 1. Research model.

Source: own research.

An opinion poll was used in order to gather data. The research tool used in the study was a survey questionnaire (PAPI and CAWI) addressed at 174 companies. The subjects of the survey were both managers (45.5%) and non-management employees (54.5%). The survey primarily involved companies in the SME sector (73%). To analyze the relationships among the variables included in the study, the T-Chuprov convergence coefficient was introduced based on the chi-square and their statistical significance was verified.

4. Results and Discussions

In order to realize the purpose of the study, a set of ecological values was first identified that provide the foundation for further activities and analysis. These values were selected based on studies by Chan et al. (2016), Arias-Arévalo et al. (2017), Bieling et al. (2020), Kuster et al. (2024). The results of the resulting analyses are shown in Figure 2.

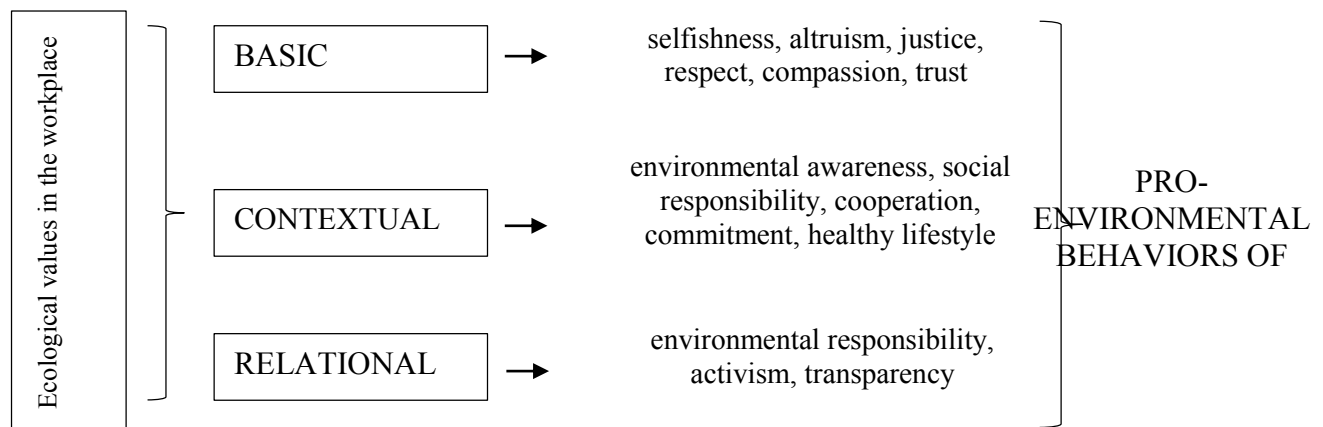


Figure 2. Environmental values in the organization.

Source: own research.

The environmental values presented should be considered as individual beliefs and standards that promote sustainability, environmental protection and ecological responsibility in the organization (Arias-Arévalo et al., 2017). The study determined which of the values that emerged could be considered key in the context of environmental protection (Figure 3). It can be said that trust, commitment and environmental responsibility form a triad of values that determines employees' approach to environmental protection.

As Drucker (1999) rightly noted, “organizations are not built on strength, but on trust”. This is because trust is the foundation of all interactions, both at the individual (employee) and social levels. Its level depends on management's decision-making philosophy, activities, structures and expectations of employees toward mutual benefits, leading to loyalty and dutifulness of employees (Sunil Kumar, Sumitha, 2023). In the context of environmental protection, trust refers to belief in the intentions and actions of others, as well as the organization in which they work. Commitment, in turn, refers to employees' activity and willingness to act to protect the environment. This requires them not only to be aware of environmental problems, but also to actively participate in solving them. This fact is confirmed by a study by Renwick et al. (2013) or Paille et al. (2017) according to which green employee engagement prompts employees to take actions that support sustainability.

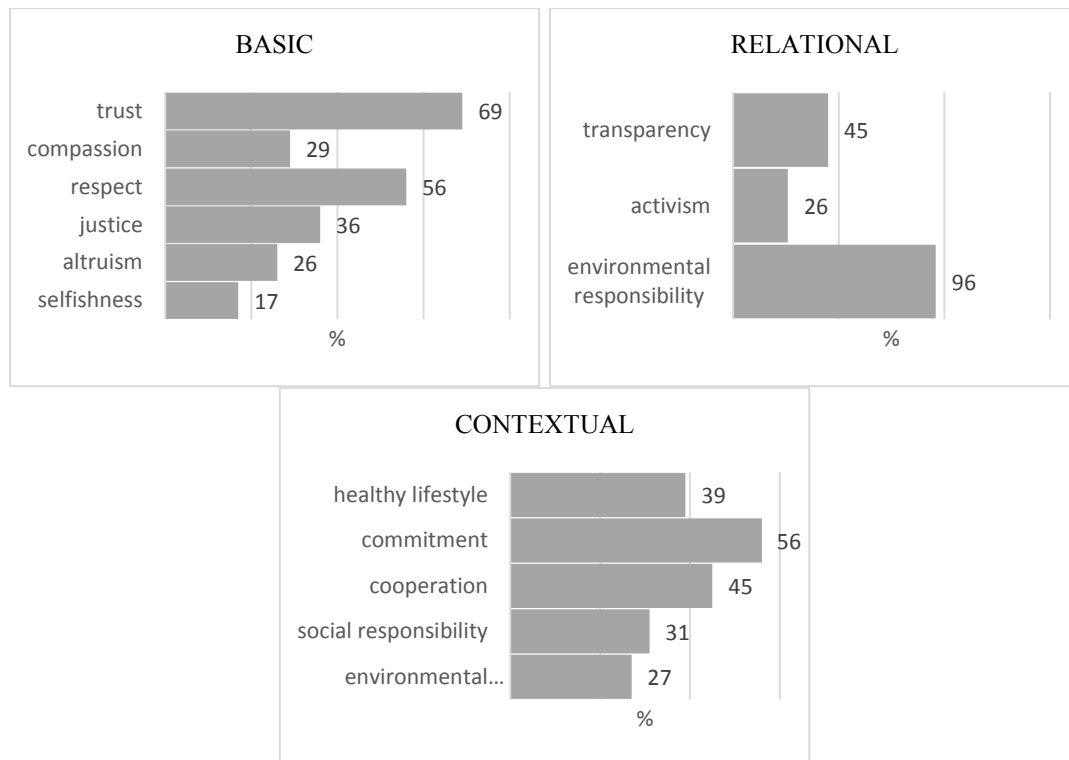


Figure 3. Ecological Value Systems in the Organization.

Source: own research.

Environmental responsibility as a value involves recognition that every action generates certain consequences that affect the state of ecosystems, health and quality of life. Essentially, employees' green behavior can range from everyday green behavior to initiating green ideas or actions (Chou, 2014).

The results showed that in the case of H1, the null hypothesis should be rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis, while the reverse is true for hypothesis H2 (Figure 4).

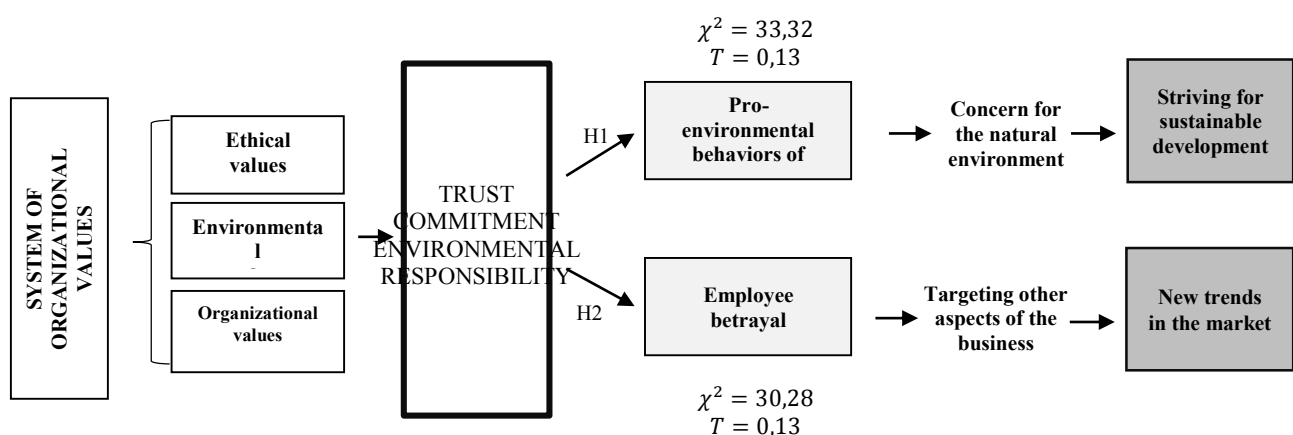


Figure 4. Model Ecological Values in the Organization.

Source: own research.

In view of the above, it can be concluded that employee recognition of environmental values, especially trust, commitment and environmental responsibility, leads to increased pro-environmental behavior of employees ($\chi^2 = 33,32$; $T - Czaprowa$ 0,13). Employees who recognize the importance of environmental activities and feel that their contributions are valued and that they have an impact on the organization's decisions, become more inclined to take environmentally friendly actions. On the other hand, however, the lack of support from managers can lead to discouragement and a sense of powerlessness among employees (referred to as employee betrayal), which can lead them to take actions in violation of the principles of sustainable growth and environmental protection despite the fact that they may be obliged to comply with them ($\chi^2 = 30,28$; $T - Czaprowa$ 0,13).

5. Summary

Ecology in the workplace is becoming increasingly important in the context of economic development around the world. It refers to companies' commitment to operate in a way that not only earns them a profit, but also minimizes negative environmental impacts and supports conservation efforts. In the course of the research, a triad of environmental values was identified, the recognition of which contributes to sustainable development and minimizes the negative impact of the company's activity on the environment. While a failure to recognize them can lead to employee betrayal, understood as a lack of recognition of environmental values in the workplace, in the long run it can result in serious consequences for both the company itself and the surrounding environment. Arguably, this is due to the stricter environmental regulations imposed by the European Union. On the other hand, in the face of increasing social and legislative pressure, companies that ignore green values may face not only legal problems, but also risk to reputation and loss of trust from customers and business partners. For this reason, SME companies should adopt a sustainable approach to operations. Among the recommendations are: implementing an environmental management system to help monitor and minimize the impact of the company's activities on the environment, developing an environmental responsibility policy that defines environmental goals, guidelines and operating procedures, regularly monitoring and reporting on the results of environmental activities so that progress can be assessed and necessary changes can be made, involving employees in environmental activities, informing stakeholders about environmental activities and the company's approach to sustainability.

Despite several theoretical and practical implications, this study has some limitations. First, it focuses only on ecology as a value, without concentrating on specific environmental activities in the workplace. Second, the data collected in the survey was only in the form of a survey, and should be expanded in order to identify specific pro-environmental activities in each of the companies surveyed. Finally, future studies should take into account the views of all employees, not just their representatives.

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