

Institute for Business Ethics  
and Sustainable Strategy



MASTER THESES AT

# INSTITUTE FOR BUSINESS ETHICS AND SUSTAINABLE STRATEGY

*Application-oriented research, effective teaching, strong networks*

*Version: November 2022*



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## 1. ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR BUSINESS ETHICS AND SUSTAINABLE STRATEGY

The Institute for Business Ethics and Sustainable Strategy (IBES) at Vienna University of Applied Sciences for Management & Communication (FH Wien der WKW) is a leading national and internationally renowned research centre in the fields of “Business Ethics” and “Sustainability Management”. Urgent issues in ecologically, economically and socially sustainable corporate management are examined against the background of relevant topics such as “globalisation”, “human rights” and “climate change”.

A special focus is placed on the areas of “Business Ethics”, “Corporate Governance”, and “Sustainability Management”. With its work, the Institute for Business Ethics and Sustainable Strategy contributes to a responsible and sustainable transformation of corporate practice.

We offer master students of FH Wien the opportunity to write their Master’s theses in our centre and to acquire key academic research competences

## 2. BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS

Students of all Master’s degree programs at FH Wien der WKW benefit from the following advantages:

1. Collaboration on research in interesting and innovative issues in the fields of “**Business Ethics**”, “**Corporate Governance**” and “**Sustainability Management**”
2. Acquisition of scientific competence through active involvement in ongoing research projects
3. Access to
  - renowned local and international companies
  - exclusive academic networks (e.g., George Washington University, INSEAD, WU Vienna)
4. Sound monitoring of the Master’s thesis, which includes, among other things, targeted support for rigorous methodological implementation

The results of the research projects at IBES are regularly presented at international conferences and published in leading scientific journals. A Master’s thesis at IBES promotes students’ scientific competence building by teaching them to work on a novel problem in a systematic and structured way. Students are supported both in identifying and sharpening relevant issues from science and business practice and in conducting the empirical research. Outstanding performance in the preparation of the Master’s thesis can lead to consideration for publication.

## 3. REQUIREMENTS & APPLICATION PROCESS

Convince us that your Master's thesis meets the thematic and scientific requirements of IBES. An essential prerequisite for this is a high level of interest in the current issues being worked on in the research center (see appendix for current announcements of research topics).

We are looking for ambitious students who would like to deal with a clearly defined research question within the IBES topics. Students should have the ability to conduct a systematic literature search on their own and to answer a clearly defined research question in a structured way. From the empirical

results they will derive possible solutions for the identified problem and discuss theoretical and practical implications.

If you have demonstrated very good performance in your Bachelor's program as well as very good English skills and already have some experience in writing a scientific paper (e.g. seminar paper, Bachelor's thesis), then we would be very pleased to receive your application.

Students who are interested in working on one of the topics described below can contact Dr. Daniela Ortiz ([daniela.ortiz@fh-wien.ac.at](mailto:daniela.ortiz@fh-wien.ac.at)). Contact should be made early, i.e., ca. one month before submitting the first topic proposal (deadlines will be announced in the respective program).

Your email should include:

- your CV
- a short explanation of why you are interested in the specific topic and which research question you would like to work on (max. one page incl. bibliography).

Please note that a prerequisite for acceptance of your thesis proposal is the signing of our Supervision Agreement. You can find it [here](#).

## 4. RESEARCH PRIORITIES AND SUPERVISORS

### Research Priorities Business Ethics and Sustainability Management

(see chapter 5 for current master thesis topics)

The research areas of Business Ethics and Sustainability Management focus on "Political CSR", "CSR driven by intrapreneurial action", and "Strategic CSR and Sustainability Management":

#### Political CSR

The research on political CSR is concerned with questions of political responsibility of companies, including motives and drivers of companies and CEOs, legitimacy concerns, managerial strategies, as well as implications for global governance regimes.

#### Social Intrapreneurship

Social intrapreneurial initiatives inside profit-maximizing firms, drivers, and skills of successful social intrapreneurs as well as the influence of the organizational level in the context of social value creation (e.g., climate action, gender equality) can be investigated within this research area.

#### Strategic CSR and Sustainability Management

In cooperation with companies, governmental and non-governmental organizations, the advantages and limitations of instrumental approaches in the field of "sustainability and CSR management" are being researched. In this context, it is also investigated how such concepts can be successfully operationalized and implemented.

## Supervisors

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## 5. CURRENT MASTER THESIS TOPICS (VALID UNTIL OCTOBER 2023)

### *Research priorities: Business Ethics & Sustainability Management*

The following two topics are supervised by members of the City of Vienna Competence Team *Change for Corporate Sustainability*. For more information about the Competence Team and its projects please visit <https://ibes.fh-wien.ac.at/en/transforms/>

### **Topic 1: The management of sustainability-oriented innovation processes**

In order to achieve the goals of sustainable development, as formulated in the United Nations' Agenda 2030 - the so-called Sustainable Development Goals or SDG - innovations are needed that are geared to the creation, redesign, adaptation and dissemination of environmentally sound and socially relevant technologies. These are referred to as "sustainability-related" or "sustainability-oriented innovations". According to the definition of Adams et al (2016), these include "the deliberate modification of the philosophy and values of an organization and its products, processes or practices (e.g., existing business models) in order to create and realize social and environmental values in addition to economic goals". Sustainability-oriented innovation (SOI) involves making intentional changes to an organization's philosophy and values, as well as to its products, processes or practices, to serve the specific purpose of creating and realizing social and environmental value in addition to economic returns (Adams et al., 2016, 181).

For example, a business model innovation takes place when a company decides to move away from mere product-selling to providing of a service (e.g., leasing of hardware, offering mobility as a service) in order to reduce waste production, as well as energy and material consumption

The management of these innovations presents companies with major challenges. Among other things, the change towards more sustainability in companies requires the development of new strategies and skills to integrate the environmental and social requirements of different stakeholders into daily business operations. The goal of the thesis is to derive a theoretically and practically relevant question from a concrete challenge for companies in the implementation of these processes (e.g., in the application area of the Circular Economy) and to develop it - based on the current state of scientific knowledge.

Introductory literature:

- Adams, R., Jeanrenaud, S., Bessant, J., Denyer, D. & Overy, P. (2016). Sustainability-oriented Innovation: A systematic review. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 18(2), 180 – 205.
- Gordon, G., Nelke, A. (Hrsg.) (2017). *CSR und Nachhaltige Innovation – Zukunftsfähigkeit durch soziale, ökonomische und ökologische Innovationen*. Berlin: Springer.
- Inigo, E. A., Albareda, L., & Ritala, P. (2017). Business model innovation for sustainability: exploring evolutionary and radical approaches through dynamic capabilities. *Industry and Innovation*, 24(5), 515–542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13662716.2017.1310034>
- Jay, J., Gerard, M. (2015). Accelerating the theory and practice of sustainability-oriented innovation. *MIT Sloan Research Paper No.5148-15*. 1-102. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2629683>
- Klewitz, J. & Hansen, E.G. (2014). Sustainability-oriented innovation of SMEs: a systematic review. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 1 – 19. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2013.07.017>
- Mousavi, S., Bossink, B. & van Vliet, M. (2018). Microfoundations of companies' dynamic capabilities for environmentally sustainable innovation: Case study insights from high-tech innovation in science-based companies. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 28(2), 366-387. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.2255>
- Schaltegger, S., Lüdeke-Freund, F., Hansen, E.G. (2012). Business cases for sustainability: the role of business model innovation for corporate sustainability. *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*, 6(2), 95 – 119.

## Topic 2: Promotion and development of Organizational Capabilities for Sustainability

In order to achieve competitive advantages from the pursuit of sustainable development (e.g., according to the Agenda 2030 or Sustainable Development Goals), companies must generate and implement economically, ecologically and socially sustainable product, process or business model innovations. These innovations contribute to increasing pressure for organizational change in small, medium and large companies. In particular, this often requires companies to implement strategic change (see Bennett et al., 2018). This type of change requires specific entrepreneurial skills at the individual and organizational level, which companies in most cases have to build up.

Among these are the organizational capabilities that are defined as a “high-level routine (or collection of routines) that, together with its implementing input flows, confers upon an organization's management a set of decision options for producing significant outputs of a particular type” (Winter, 2003, p. 991) A specific subtype of them are the so-called Dynamic Capabilities for Sustainability that are applied in the context of sustainability-related change processes (see Amui et al., 2017). Dynamic Capabilities are those organizational capabilities that enable a company to adapt its resource and competence basis to changing environmental conditions. Among other things, these competencies are intended to support companies in (1) recognizing the need for change, (2) generating innovation and change ideas that can be (3) implemented in line with the corporate strategy (see Teece, 2007; 2014).

In the context of the final thesis, concrete case studies will be used to investigate in more detail what these types of competencies consist of and how they can be fostered and developed. The goal of the thesis could be to focus on a type of Organizational Capabilities and to analyze its microfoundations, antecedents and consequences. Alternatively, students can perform research on specific Dynamic Capabilities for Sustainability that are engaged in one of the three underlying processes - sensing,

seizing, reconfiguring (see Teece, 2007). In addition, they could also analyze the antecedents that enable the Dynamic Capabilities for Sustainability at the different levels of analysis - organizational, individual and environmental (see Schilke et al., 2018).

## Introductory literature:

- Adams, R., Jeanrenaud, S., Bessant, J., Denyer, D. & Overy, P. (2016). Sustainability-oriented Innovation: A systematic review. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 18(2), 180 – 205.
- Amui, L. B. L.; Jabbour, C. J. C.; de Sousa Jabbour, A. B. L. & Kannan, D. (2017). Sustainability as a Dynamic Organizational Capability: A Systematic Review and a Future Agenda Toward a Sustainable Transition. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 142, 308–322 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.07.103>).
- Castiaux, A. (2012). Developing Dynamic Capabilities to meet sustainable development challenges. *International Journal of Innovation Management*, 16(6), 1-16. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1363919612400130>
- Dangelico, R.M., Devashish, P. & Pontrandolfo, P. (2017). Green Product Innovation in Manufacturing Firms: A Sustainability-Oriented Dynamic Capability Perspective. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 26 (4), 490-506. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.1932>
- Inigo, E. A., Albareda, L., & Ritala, P. (2017). Business model innovation for sustainability: exploring evolutionary and radical approaches through dynamic capabilities. *Industry and Innovation*, 24(5), 515–542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13662716.2017.1310034>
- Hutterer, P. (2013). *Dynamic Capabilities und Innovationsstrategien – Interdependenzen in Theorie und Praxis*. Wiesbaden: Springer
- Mousavi, S., Bossink, B. & van Vliet, M. (2018). Microfoundations of companies' dynamic capabilities for environmentally sustainable innovation: Case study insights from high-tech innovation in science-based companies. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 28(2), 366-387. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.2255>
- Schilke, O., Hu, S., & Helfat, C. E. (2018). Quo Vadis, Dynamic Capabilities? A Content-Analytic Review of the Current State of Knowledge and Recommendations for Future Research. *Academy of Management Annals*, 12(1), 390–439. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2016.0014>
- Strauss, K., Lepoutre, J., & Wood, G. (2017). Fifty shades of green: How microfoundations of sustainability dynamic capabilities vary across organizational contexts. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 38(9), 1338–1355. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2186>

## **Possible Theoretical Perspectives for Topics 1 & 2:**

Sustainability-oriented innovations require specific entrepreneurial skills (processes, structures, procedures, mindsets) at the individual and organizational level, which companies in most cases have to build up. Among these skills are the **organizational capabilities** that are defined as a “high-level routine (or collection of routines) that, together with its implementing input flows, confers upon an organization’s management a set of decision options for producing significant outputs of a particular type” (Winter, 2003, p. 991).

A specific subtype of organizational capabilities are the so-called **Dynamic Capabilities for Sustainability** that are applied in the context of sustainability-related change processes (see Amui et al., 2017). **Dynamic Capabilities are those organizational capabilities that enable a company to adapt its resource and competence basis to changing environmental conditions.**

## Exemplary research questions for Topics 1 & 2:

1. *How do companies active in the Austrian construction industry deploy dynamic capabilities to innovate for sustainable business models?*
2. *What (dynamic) capabilities do companies need in order to promote sustainability-oriented innovations for the circular economy?*
3. *Or you can choose a theoretically and practically relevant question from a concrete challenge for companies in the implementation of these innovation processes (e.g. in the application area of the Circular Economy) and to develop it - based on the current state of scientific knowledge: e.g., **involving stakeholders in the innovation process, required skills for open innovation for sustainability, etc.***

*The following topics are supervised by members of the Institute for Business Ethics and Sustainable Strategy.*

## Topic 3: Political Corporate Responsibility / Corporate Diplomacy / CEO Activism

The first 20 years of the current millennium have been characterized by a global health crisis, global ecological problems (e.g., climate change), hefty business-driven technological disruptions (e.g., big data, AI, digital technology that has the capacity to influence public elections) and a return to nationalism that is often accompanied by human rights violations (e.g., in Belarus, China, Turkey, USA). This unfortunate situation is accompanied by limited capacities of (some) national governments and supra national institutions to efficiently address and regulate these challenges.

Against this background, some management scholars as well as influential shareholders and CEOs argue that business has a distinct *political responsibility* to address these as well as other social and ecological challenges. Some companies already follow this call for political action. Among many other examples, we see companies engaging in private governance processes to create norms for a more responsible and sustainable business (e.g., the Forest Stewardship Council). Other companies use their resources to promote and protect human rights (e.g., freedom of speech) where local governments fail to do so (or even actively violate these rights). In addition, we see companies as well as their upper echelons speaking up confidently in pursuit of promoting their own and sometimes controversial political agendas and religious convictions (e.g., their ideas on abortions, data privacy, immigration, LGBTI\* rights, nationalism, racism etc.).

Clearly, the political activity of companies is not undisputed and creates challenges, reaching from legitimacy to managerial issues. Why would companies have the legitimacy to promote their own political worldviews? Can companies or their leaders serve as diplomats and thus extending the (global) governance regime? When a company or its CEO act politically, how can they do it right? How do relevant stakeholders perceive the political activity by a company or its CEO?



We are looking for master thesis that aim to help to answer the following questions: (1) *What motivates and drives companies / or CEOs to act politically (what are the antecedents)?* (2) *How can corporate political initiatives be managed (dimensions/ strategies/ tactics)?* (3) *Are political initiatives by business firms (or their CEOs) legitimate or illegitimate (i.e., tyrannical) activities?* (4) *How does the political action of business influence the global governance regime?*

## Literature:

- Chatterji, A. K. & Toffel, M. W. (2018). The new CEO activists. *Harvard Business Review* (January-February Issue), 78–89. Available at <https://hbr.org/2018/01/the-new-ceo-activists>
- de los Reyes, G., Scholz, M., & Smith, N. C. (2017). Beyond the “win-win”: Creating shared value requires ethical frameworks. *California Management Review*, 59(2): 142–167.
- Friedman, M. (1970). The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. *The New York Times Magazine*. September 13.
- Hambrick, D. C. & Wowak, A. (2019). CEO Sociopolitical Activism. A Stakeholder Alignment Model. *Academy of Management Review*. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2018.0084>
- Kaerer, J. (2018) A decision to make – and what really matters. Available at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/decision-make-what-really-matters-joe-kaerer>.
- Scherer, A. G., & Palazzo, G. (2007). Toward a political conception of corporate responsibility. Business and society seen from a Habermasian perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(4): 1096–1120.
- Scholz, M. & Smith, N. C. (2020). Six ways companies can promote and protect human rights. In responding to a government’s human rights abuses, companies have effective options beyond standing by or cutting ties. *MIT Sloan Management Review*. Available at <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/six-ways-companies-can-promote-and-protect-human-rights/>
- Smith, N. C. & Korschun, D. (2018). Finding the middle ground in a politically polarized world. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 60 (1). Available at <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/finding-the-middle-ground-in-a-politically-polarized-world/>

## **Topic 4: CSR driven by intrapreneurial action / Social intrapreneurship**

Ecologists employed at energy companies, vegans in food companies or feminists working in male-dominated industries – employees are often required to foster change from within, as companies are trapped in inertia. Such employees create microinsurance products for low-income people and businesses unable to afford insurance contracts (e.g., Allianz), found a start-up of a business unit to improve climate action (e.g., DHL), launch renewable energy businesses within a major oil company (e.g., BP) or engage in gender, diversity and inclusion initiatives by shaping company values (e.g., Microsoft).

This special type of employees has been identified as social intrapreneurs (Grayson et al., 2014). While social entrepreneurs create social impact by establishing new businesses, social intrapreneurs drive social entrepreneurial activities within companies (Mair & Marti, 2006). Social intrapreneurs develop practical solutions to social and/or environmental challenges, by maintaining a long-term economic performance (Miles et al., 2009). A firm has adopted social intrapreneurship if it fulfills the following three sustainability components: “responsible environmental management, social accountability, and long-

term economic performance – as well as the presence of significant innovation with respect to the firm’s products, processes, strategies, domain, or business model” (Miles et al., 2009, p.69).

The proposed master’s thesis topic provides an opportunity to discuss one of the following research questions:

I. How do social intrapreneurs recognize and exploit opportunities/ place social intrapreneurial initiatives inside profit-maximizing firms? What are the drivers/skills of successful social intrapreneurs?

II. What are social impact measurement parameters? How do you measure social impact? What are the most efficient impact measurement tools?

III. How do companies ensure that social intrapreneurial change occurs and endures? How do social intrapreneurs encourage the implementation of gender equality initiatives within organizations?

Literature:

Alt, E. & Craig, J. B. (2016). Selling Issues with Solutions: Igniting Social Intrapreneurship in for-Profit Organizations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 53(5), 794–820. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12200>.

Alt, E., & Geradts, T. (2019). Social intrapreneurship: unique challenges and opportunities for future research. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 1, <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2019.188>.

Grayson, D., McLaren, M. & Spitzack, H. (2014). *Social intrapreneurism and all that jazz. How business innovators are helping to build a more sustainable world*. Sheffield: Greenleaf.

Haski-Leventhal, D., & Glavas, A. (2021). Social intrapreneurship: unleashing social innovation from within. MIT Sloan. <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/social-intrapreneurship-unleashing-social-innovation-from-within/>

Kistruck, G. M. & Beamish, P. W. (2010). The Interplay of Form, Structure, and Embeddedness in Social Intrapreneurship. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 34(4), 735–761. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2010.00371.x>

Mair, J. & Marti, I. (2006). Social entrepreneurship research: A source of explanation, prediction, and delight. *Journal of World Business*, 41, 36-44.

Miles, M. P., Munilla, L. S., & Darroch, J. (2009). Sustainable corporate entrepreneurship. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, 5(1), 65–76. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-008-0074-3>.