

# THE ROLE OF COMPANY INITIATED LEARNING PROGRAM ON EMPLOYEES' LEARNING ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY IN ORGANIZATION

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## Abstract

Many organizations have embedded sustainability strategy in the organization nowadays. Sustainability strategy drive the organization to set an action that focusing on balancing their commitment between planet, people and profit. In the effort to implement the strategy, employees in the organization must possess sufficient knowledge and skills related to sustainability practices. The process of acquiring knowledge about sustainability or sustainability learning (SL) is critical in embedding sustainability in organizations. Due to the urgently needs, this paper is aim to determine how does company-initiated learning program facilitate SL among employees in organization. In exploring the role of company-initiated learning program in facilitating employees in organization to learn about sustainability, this paper also presenting the program offered for SL, the benefits of the program and employees' preferred learning program approach to learn sustainability. Based on this study, company-initiated training program is highly important in ensuring sustainable learning happened successfully. In this study context, company-initiated learning programs that emphasizes on informal learning such as Sustainability event (Corporate Social Responsibility Event) is effective more than formal learning program in supporting employees to learn about sustainability. The finding of this study is significant for the organization in developing learning program about sustainability to employees.

## Research paper

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Sustainability learning, Formal learning, Informal learning, Training, knowledge

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## **Introduction**

Many organizations have embedded sustainability strategy in the organization nowadays. Sustainability strategy drive the organization to set an action that focusing on balancing their commitment between planet, people and profit (Winston, 2022). In the effort to implement the strategy, employees in the organization must possess sufficient knowledge and skills related to sustainability practices. The process of acquiring knowledge about sustainability or sustainability learning (SL) is critical in embedding sustainability in organizations. SL is capable to generate necessary knowledge and understanding towards sustainability, and further enhance the adaptability and attention to underlying worldviews (Moyer et al., 2014). The terms ‘learning for sustainability’ and ‘sustainability learning’ are used to explain the process of learning to embed sustainability. It can be defined as learning engaged by individuals, groups, organizations and societies to achieve and facilitate sustainable development (Hansmann, 2010). The greater the involvement of employees and stakeholders in the sustainability learning process, the greater the understanding and support for sustainability in the organizations (Doppelt, 2003). Learning that focusing on sustainability transition is not just about behavioural change or changing the system, it is a reflexive process that includes positive feedback loops among the learner, collaborators and the wider social context (Rekola & Paloniemi, 2018). It shows that, the process of sustainability learning claims for hybridity and synergy among multiple actors in society through formal and informal knowledge acquisition platforms (Wals, 2011). However, in ensuring the successfulness of learning about sustainability among employees in an organization, company-initiated learning program through human resource development platform such as training are crucial in

enhancing the process (Mishra et al., 2013; Garg, 2014; Angheluta et al., 2014; Mazur, 2014; Tseng and McLean, 2008). In fact, the learning itself is important to identify the effectiveness of the training provided by the organization (Aziz & Selamat, 2016).

Supplementary tools and learning strategies should be carefully considered in promoting sustainability learning (Su and Cheng, 2019). It has been confirmed that, it is very important for the employees to understand the choice of training because it will demonstrate their organizations' approach for performance improvement in any elements of working in organization (Mohamad, Hanapiyah and Hanafi, 2017). Thus, a company has to be wise in strategizing the types of learning program that they want to organise. This is because the findings have proven that not all program is suitable for every purpose of learning. In order to expect return on investment, types and methods of learning program initiated by the company need to be design carefully. Moreover, training is considered adequate if the outlining and execution are in accordance with the learner involvement, learner attitudes change, and opportunity available for the learners to apply new knowledge and abilities in the working place (Mohamad, Hanapiyah and Hanafi, 2017).

Due to the urgently needs, this paper is aim to determine how does company-initiated learning program facilitate SL among employees in organization. In exploring the role of company-initiated learning program in facilitating employees in organization to learn about sustainability, this paper also presenting the program offered for SL, the benefits of the program and employees' preferred learning program approach to learn sustainability (Yakubu et al., 2022; Radović-Marković et al., 2019, 2022; Salamzadeh et al., 2021, 2022). Therefore, the best approach that can be applied by the f in ensuring

effective learning process on sustainability among the employees can be identified.

### **Urgency of learning about sustainability in organization**

As agreed by majority respondents from a survey in the manufacturing industry (multinational companies and Small Medium Enterprise (SME)) in Penang Malaysia, they believed the opportunity of learning and knowledge sharing is a major factor in ensuring sustainability in the companies (Ali et al., 2013). The opportunity can be provided through an efficient medium such as education program and sustainability-related training courses or seminars. This medium has been proven effective to facilitate employees learn about sustainability (Duarte, 2014; Radovic-Markovic & Salamzadeh, 2012). In the Malaysian government link companies (GLC) and construction industry, for example, the companies agreed that the existence of formal training activities related to sustainability is important to advocate the adoption of sustainability best practices at the companies (Putrajaya Committee, 2014; Shari & Soebarto, 2014). However, a study by Sidek and Backhouse (2014) on Malaysian SMEs concluded that 89% of the respondents considered a sustainability training program as expensive, hence put it as less priority on them due to their financial limitation. Regardless of the above challenge, the continuous provision of SL opportunities to employees is still pertinent.

Therefore, the need to find the best approach that can be applied to the program in ensuring the learning process about sustainability happens effectively is highly important. For example, in sustainability education, a deep learning approach is one of the prominent approaches that need to be incorporated into the learning program (Alkhaddar et al., 2012). Like sustainability

education, the same approach can be applied in SL in the organization among adult learners, so that, it will consequently provide constant improvement to the people who are actively involved in the learning process (Alkhaddar et al., 2012). The opportunity to explore and clarify the concept of sustainability in the learning process will help to shape the necessary mindset of learners towards sustainability. By possessing the sustainability mindset, it will influence individual engagement in sustainability behaviour in terms of comprehension, awareness, agency and caring (Fabricatore & Lopez, 2012).

According to Noe (2013), many companies nowadays have placed meaningful value in learning and moving forward to ensure formal training and human resource development (HRD) programs for the employees linked to strategic business objectives. HRD is able to provide the needed educational measures with a focus on self-development, which might be a factor of attractiveness in employee recruiting and branding besides the purpose of social engagement that can be used for sustainability-related activities such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Ketschau, 2017). In addition, many previous studies have found the important link between human resource development programs such as training and sustainability strategy in an organization (Sheehan et al., 2014). The mutual constructive potential between sustainability and human resource development by the reflection process through learning activities that will provide significant experiences to the employees, regardless of the job that is directly related to sustainability or not. This experience will shape the employee's mental models and values that will make sustainability visible in the organization accordingly (Russ, 2012). Clearly, company-initiated learning program through human resource development

mechanism such as training in an organization is highly important in facilitating the sustainability learning to happen effectively (Mishra et al., 2013; Garg, 2014; Angheluta et al., 2014; Mazur, 2014). Consequently, the sustainability strategy of the organization can be successfully achieved.

### **Research Methodology**

The philosophical stance of this study was interpretivism which involved qualitative data collection methods. Interpretivism was selected because it suggests that knowledge is constructed based on experience with the people by which reality is constructed (Creswell, 2013). This stance is also interested in how people as individuals or groups interpret the events or their social setting (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The decision to undertake a qualitative research design is purely based on the past literature that emphasises the advantage of this research design in understanding the sustainability learning process (Lankester, 2013; Duarte, 2014; Iarossi et al., 2013; Dana et al., 2022). In addition, according to Lankester (2013), qualitative study may provide an in-depth understanding of the learning process. Its outcomes provide better insight about the sustainability practices experience in the organization (Iarossi et al., 2013). Moreover, useful information yields from the qualitative research method will help the participating organization to implement changes or act according to the research result (Jackson et al., 2014). This research adopted case study approach to achieve the research objectives. By adopting case study approach, it helps researcher to explore and understand how does company-initiated learning program facilitate SL among employees in organization.

The purposive sampling strategy was used by selecting 15 employees from the organization that professed to be committed to the sustainability learning culture as a sample. Purposive sampling was applied because it can purposefully provide information and understanding of the research problem as well as the phenomena of interest (Creswell, 2013). While, the decision to choose 15 employees was made based on the concept of saturation (Abrams, 2010; Mason, 2010). In qualitative sampling, the researcher may not know the quantity of the sample that needs to be decided in advance, because it is rare to predetermine the size of the sampling by using quantity or numerical size. Therefore, previous scholars conclude that there is no specific sample size dared to be determined by the scholars, but a majority of them such as Creswell (2013) and Mason (2010) did agree 5 to 25 interviews may be considered enough to reach saturation.

In gathering data, the researcher used a semi-structured interview as the main method. Then, the analysis has been done by using thematic content analysis. Nvivo software has been used to facilitate the analysis.

## **Findings**

Based on the thematic content analysis that have been conducted, the result of this article is focusing on the role of company-initiated learning program that facilitate employees in learning about sustainability in organization.

### ***The role of company-initiated learning program on SL***

In exploring the role of company-initiated learning program on SL, this paper has focusing on three sub-theme as a dimension. The dimensions are, company-initiated learning program offered, the benefits that offered by

the company-initiated learning program and employees' preferred learning program approach for SL.

***i. Company-initiated learning program offered***

The finding sought that employee in an organization have deliberately attended company-initiated learning programs that focus on formal and informal method of learning. In a program that applying formal learning approach, the program emphasizes on instilling factual knowledge to the employees about sustainability. The findings show that most of the participants of this study did attend formal training programs before they joined any sustainability-related program. Sort of training, this program act as a platform for the company to share and brief employees about the sustainability program or initiative organized by the company. Usually, this program has been conducted in a leisure mode during lunchtime by a facilitator or presenter in a room. The employees will be informed about the latest issues related to sustainability and other issues as well. Besides being conducted by using the face-to-face method, this company-initiated learning program also has been delivered by using the online method (e-learning) which offers low cost yet convenience to the employees. At the end of the program, the employees must sit for an assessment. Failed to achieve a certain score, they should repeat attending the program. By contrast, findings further illustrate that it was different for employees in other companies, which they must attend the on-board course for two weeks. The sort of orientation training program, the employees will be informed about the company's initiative towards sustainability through this program.



Surprisingly, findings show that the informal learning types of programs is the most company-initiated training program attended by the participants. Sustainability program, corporate social responsibility project and collaborated project with NGO's were the training program that applied informal learning method reported by the employees. Participants generally agreed that sustainability learning occurred mostly on an informal basis through daily routines in an organization. While others believe that, informal learning on sustainability was based on the medium used such as technology-based and social media.

**ii. The benefits of company-initiated learning program on SL**

The following table depicted the findings on the benefits of company-initiated learning program towards SL.

**Table 1.** The benefit of company-initiated learning program on SL

The benefit	Types of learning program	Example of participants' comments
Familiar with company culture	Formal and informal learning	<p><i>"it's together (formal and informal) ... the two weeks' orientation is important when you come on board.</i></p> <p><i>So, when you realize, it's something important to the company, we do it. the way the company work... how the work life style, work balance... no printing. part of culture... you get inspired by the culture. and then...after that you got the opportunity to be part of it. you can join the program."</i></p> <p>(Participant 1, Principal in Sustainability)</p>
Familiar with company's sustainability content or sustainability issues	Formal and informal learning program	<p><i>"Q: What is your opinion on Brown Bag (Formal learning program)?"</i></p> <p><i>A: For me its effective. If we really interested, yes it will be effective. We have a list on Brown Bag issues (sustainability related), if we want to know more about it (sustainability related issue), sure we will attend. so, whatever we don't understand, we can ask the trainer directly."</i></p> <p>(Participant 11, Learning Specialist)</p>
		<p><i>"I think...any sort of training will help.</i></p>

			<p>yeah...yeah...both very importance...experience and exposure. All those thing... because if they not attend class, they can see from how its (sustainability content) work. Then there is lot of important about the program.”</p> <p>(Participant 5, Principal in Sustainability)</p>
Increase self-awareness towards sustainability	Informal learning program		<p>“so, if you do not come to the ground, you will be not able to increase the awareness. so, the hands-on activity must be there. [...] so, we communicate through social media. so that one of the way that we make. it will take some time, but we can't discard go to the ground activity. because that still one of the, I want to say effective, no... but its more much needed.”</p> <p>(Participant 12, Chief Executive Officer)</p> <p>“But it's (sustainability program) really build up our personality. If we want to snobbish, just look back at our self...”</p> <p>(Participant 10, Head of Department)</p>
Gained real experience towards sustainability practices	Informal learning program		<p>“.. for me, by joining the event is more effective. For instance, recently we joined farming activity for greening the planet. Even though we never had farming experience at home, never touch the dirt, is like someone calling for meeting, this week we have Brown Bag about this (farming activity), and we have event CSR, on farming. [...]. As long as we attend, later MARDI will teach us on how to do farming, at least we learn how to do it.”</p> <p>(Participant 11, Learning Specialist)</p> <p>“For me, hands-on activity is closer to people. But we can't deny the module-based activity such as awareness camp etc. But, for me, at this time hands-on activity was preferred, which we can touch, see and feel and creating simple product from recycle.”</p> <p>(Participant 14, Executive)</p> <p>“From there (informal program) we get more idea, what the program will be about. I think if it is my interest, I like to join.”</p> <p>“Q: why you said so?”</p> <p>“because for let say CSR line, it goes formal or classroom... it would be very formal... very constraining... Just like go to class... so for CSR, non-formal is more advantageous, through the experience that we can get.”</p> <p>(Participant 7, Senior Executive)</p>
Creating general knowledge about sustainability	Formal learning program		<p>“For formal, it has pro and cons. For example, when we organized camp, it has advantage as well. Except if we only conduct lecture with lot of audience, it's not much we can get. We may share knowledge (generally), but they can't turn it to something else (recycle). Its limit to only know, but not apply it.”</p> <p>(Participant 14, Executive)</p>
Creating sustainability values	Informal learning program		<p>“the ability of program (sustainability event) to create the values. In this company, the program is fun, and the employees is want it too, together. it has to be fun and create the values.”</p> <p>(Participant 8, Head of Department)</p>

Based on the findings depicted in Table 1, it was proven that, in a certain situation, both types of learning approach (formal and informal) are effective to the employees' sustainability learning process. As depicted by the findings, both are effective to help the employees to learn and familiarise with the company culture and company's sustainability content. However, the study has shown that informal learning programs were found to be most effective in many ways including increasing employees' self-awareness towards sustainability, gained real experience towards sustainability, and creating sustainability values among employees in an organization. Nevertheless, formal learning alone is also considered effective to create general knowledge about sustainability among employees in an organization.

***iii. Employees' preferred learning program approach for SL***

Based on the findings, most of the participants prefer to learn sustainability using an informal approach that can be offered through program such as Sustainability/ CSR event /program, on-the job learning, and e-learning (Hosseini et al., 2022). In Sustainability/ CSR program for instance, participants claimed that, informal learning occurred when they are involved in hands-on activities in the program and is considered as the most preferred approach to learn about sustainability. As mentioned by a participant;

*“if it is more towards sustainability/corporate social responsibility (CSR) line...I would say, I prefer informal.”*

(Participant 7, Senior Executive)

Informal learning that occurred through hands-on activities in company-initiated programs were considered effective because it exposed employees to actual experience related to sustainability practices. Participants

claimed that informal learning through hands-on activities allowed them to gain a better understanding of sustainability and relate to sustainability issues. Therefore, formal learning approach such as lecture method is not considering effective to fit the purpose.

Participants continued suggesting that they prefer informal learning compared to formal learning approach because informal learning approach offers excitement to the learners. It has been found to be more beneficial to the employees in learning sustainability compared to the classroom (formal) approach. Employees get easily disengage in the learning process if formal approach is applied in the sustainability-related learning program (**Participant 3, Senior Asst. Internal Communication**).

Participant agreed that hands-on activities that focus on informal learning will provide opportunities to the employees to gain actual experience related to sustainability through the process of see, touch, and feel (**Participant 14, Executive**).

Besides that, informal learning through electronic platform (e-learning) is also one of the other methods preferred by employees in facilitating sustainability learning. For example, employees will watch videos related to sustainability practices in the organization. Participants believe that, e-learning platform such as videos is useful in disseminating information about sustainability informally to employees. It can be taken as an initial platform to gain knowledge about sustainability informally, and create interest to learn more about sustainability (**Participant 5, Principal in Sustainability**).

Despite the strong preference for informal learning, a combination of both learning approaches (informal and formal) is viewed as a good option to facilitate SL.

*“I think... a mix of both (formal and informal learning approach) is the best... I mean, even the informal setting is something that I like.”*

(Participant 5, Principal in Sustainability)

Many participants agree that employees need both learning approaches to learn about sustainability. Both learning approaches are needed because both of them complement each other. Thus, it is good for the company to be balanced in applying both approaches in the company-initiated learning programs.

Participants suggested formal learning approach is needed before the employees experience informal learning. Formal learning approach is important to ensure employees acquire basic knowledge on sustainability before they become involved in any hands-on activities. Formal and informal learning hold equal importance to support SL. Both learning approaches are important due to different effectiveness that can be offered by each approach.

## **Discussion**

It cannot be denied that; training and development affect the performance of the employee in an organization. The training design determines the effectiveness of training towards the learning process of the employees (Aziz & Selamat, 2016). So that, it is important to the employee to understand the choice for training, because training is imperative criteria to demonstrate that the organizations have great and clear approaches with respect to preparing and advancement (Mohamad et al., 2017). To answer research question on how does company-initiated learning program facilitate SL among employees in organization, this study shows that, company-initiated training program is highly important in ensuring sustainable learning happened successfully. In

this study context, company-initiated learning programs that emphasizes on informal learning is effective more than formal learning program in supporting SL. In line with previous research in the ground, the opportunities to learn sustainability generally occurred in informal bases such as during coffee break (Duarte, 2014) or social conversation among colleagues. While formal training was perceived effective to deliver specific information in creating general awareness on sustainability only. It confirms that, trainees who perceive training content as relevant will also perceive training as reputable (Aziz & Selamat, 2016). Other studies also have stated that frequent campaigns or seminars, for instance, can help to establish a positive perception of the public towards the importance of sustainability issues (Marican et al., 2018).

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the findings indicate that the sustainability learning among employees in an organization was facilitated by the company-initiated training program. Main objectives of this study to determine how does company-initiated learning program facilitate SL among employees in organization have been achieved. Overall, the findings suggested, the sustainability learning in an organization needs both approaches of informal and formal learning method in a company-initiated training program. This is due to benefits offered from the both method that facilitate employees to learn about sustainability.

Therefore, this study recommends the organization that embarked on a sustainability strategy, need to design a learning program that emphasize an informal learning method for the employees. The training program needs to

be experientially designed with lots of hands-on activities so that employees can gain real experience related to sustainability. Besides, the organization must increase interaction with the employees. The interaction can be a communicative platform of information sharing between the organization and its members.

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