Behind Closed Doors: Understanding how Canadian Companies Utilize Internal Communication to Engage Employees in Corporate Social Responsibility

by

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Abstract

Engaging employees in CSR programs contributes to the overall success and progress of these sustainability initiatives, while simultaneously increasing employee job satisfaction by adding meaning and purpose within the workplace. However, ineffective CSR communication may hinder employee engagement. Considering the reciprocal benefit and challenge of communicating CSR to employees, this study aims to understand how internal communication can support organizational efforts to encourage employee participation in CSR by answering three research questions: (1) how is internal communication used to communicate sustainability initiatives within a workplace?; (2) how does communicating sustainability initiatives contribute to employee engagement?; and (3) what are the best approaches to communicating sustainability initiatives to employees? Using a qualitative exploratory research methodology, thematic analysis of nine interviews with sustainability and communication managers from Canadian companies revealed several overarching themes: adopting a wide array of communication methods and engaging in two-way communication can reach a wider audience and accommodate individual needs; message co-creation that allows employees the opportunity to voice their own ideas and have message ownership may contribute to increased engagement and reputational risk mitigation and collaboration between sustainability managers and communication teams or cross-functional teams supports information dissemination across an organization. Findings also revealed that fragmenting the meaning of sustainability may contribute to the issue of tangibility and the continued challenge of effectively evaluating employee engagement beyond quantitative data.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, sustainability, internal communication, employee engagement, collaboration, communication challenges, message ownership, tangibility, sustainability elusiveness, reputational risk
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Introduction

In 2014, the National Association for Environmental Management identified employee engagement as a top priority and a macro trend for global sustainability management at all levels within an organization (Radhakrishnan, 2015). From an organizational perspective, employees are key stakeholders that drive corporate sustainability initiatives forward (EY, 2012), and for employees, being engaged in corporate sustainability initiatives adds meaning and purpose within the workplace (Glavas, 2012; Mirvis, 2012).

Companies can adopt varying approaches for incorporating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into operational and strategic planning. CSR can be linked to profitability and can build corporate citizenship through legal, ethical and philanthropic initiatives (Carroll, 1991; 1999; 2015). It can also support transparency and accountability by placing social equality and environmental stewardship equal in importance to profitability for business performance (Elkington, 1998). Historically, corporate sustainability included social and environmental issues, whereas, CSR focused primarily on the social perspective (Montiel, 2008). Some argue that sustainability and CSR have converged and now cover organizational initiatives focused on implementing governance, management practices and policies that balance economics with both environmental and social impacts of corporate operations (Montiel, 2008). Varying definitions among academics and corporations persist, and how one company defines CSR or sustainability may differ from another (Dahlsrud, 2008; Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). Generally, CSR activities fall into five prominent categories: environmental, social, business economics, stakeholder relations and management, and voluntary or beyond legal obligations (Dahlsrud, 2008). For the purpose of this study, sustainability and CSR are used interchangeably and are defined as philanthropic
and voluntary activities that include internal and external stakeholder groups on initiatives that fall into Dahlsrud’s (2008) five categories.

While CSR is meant to contribute to society (Elkington, 1998), corporate decision making on these initiatives are typically done internally, which has been criticized by some to fundamentally exclude public input, the target group many of these programs aim to benefit (Banerjee, 2014). Adoption of voluntary CSR standards and best practices can also challenge internal corporate structures, as CSR often requires changes in organizational governance (Gond, Akremi, Swaen & Babu, 2017; Vigneau, Humphreys & Moon, 2015). In some cases, internal barriers can strengthen stakeholder integration (Delgado-Ceballos, Aragon-Correa, Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Rueda-Manzanares, 2012). When managers are constrained by limited resources, collaboration with stakeholders can be the key in overcoming challenges and can lead to the adoption of sustainability strategies (Delgado-Ceballos et al., 2012). Understanding that working with various stakeholders can help to overcome barriers offers an opportunity to further explore how communication can impact CSR integration and employee engagement.

Leveraging communication channels as tools to increase engagement can be an effective strategy for building awareness and facilitating engagement and interaction in organizational CSR (Glavas, 2012; Karanges, Johnston, Beatson & Lings, 2015). From an employee’s perspective, establishing internal awareness of sustainability programs is linked to the belief that organizational sustainability translates into overall success of the company (Craig & Allen, 2013). What’s more, employee awareness and engagement can be further enhanced by adopting strong internal CSR communication, leading to greater integration of sustainability throughout an organization (Strandberg, 2009). Conversely, when CSR communication is unclear or inconsistent, it hinders employee CSR buy-in (Slack, Corlett &
Morris, 2015) and CSR communication that assumes employees are homogenous in their interest and needs can be detrimental to program success (Bhattacharya, Sen & Korschun, 2008; Hemingway, 2005; Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008). In some cases, a communication approach that assumes a monolithic audience can result in pushback and disengagement (Heijjas, Miller & Scarles, 2018). Recognizing that there is a reciprocal benefit for companies and employees when staff are involved and engaged in CSR, the goal of this study is to understand the broader themes of internal communication approaches used to engage employees in CSR across multiple organizations regardless of industry by answering the following research questions:

(RQ1) How is internal communication used to communicate sustainability initiatives within a workplace?;

(RQ2) How does communicating sustainability initiatives contribute to employee engagement?; and

(RQ3) What are the best approaches to communicating sustainability initiatives to employees?

Existing research often only combines two areas of either sustainability, employee engagement or internal communication research. This study considers all three simultaneously, adding to an area of research that is scarce. Previous studies that considered these three research areas have either applied these lenses to one organization or a specific subset of employees (Duthler & Dhanesh, 2018; Edinger-Schons, Lengler- Graiff, Scheidler & Wieseke, 2018; Meader 2009). Furthermore, this study is unique in that it applies a broad approach that does not focus on companies with specific ownership structure (Nielsen & Thomsen, 2009) or company size (Arvidsson, 2010). As a result, participating companies are both private and public, ranging in size from 1,200 to 50,000 employees. This study also
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addresses the gap in the current literature by adding a Canadian perspective, as country
culture can impact organizational communications (Ki & Shin, 2015), and contribute to
variation in CSR frameworks and implementation approaches (Matten & Moon, 2008).
Participants represent Canadian companies from a variety of sectors including mining, retail,
food processing, live entertainment, professional data analytics and marketing services, real
estate, media and communications, telecommunications, and manufacturing. Participants
were not chosen because of their industry, but rather because of their mature CSR programs
and efforts to engage employees using internal communication.

Literature Review

This section provides an overview of the literature related to internal communication
and employee engagement in the context of CSR to establish a stronger background and
understanding of existing research for the study that follows. The literature review will cover
the following sections: CSR communication, internal communication, and employee
engagement.

CSR Communication

Given that sustainability is a complex issue that is challenging to convey, CSR cannot
be implemented in the absence of communication (Signitzer & Prexl, 2008). Communication
is also central to public relations and is important for organizational stakeholder relationships.
Recognizing that employees are internal stakeholders, this section begins with an overview of
dialogic public relations theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002), followed by stakeholder and
employee CSR communication (Brunton, Eweje & Taskin, 2017; Devin & Lane, 2014;
Sloan, 2009), integrated communication (Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, Bogel & Koch, 2017; Craig
& Allen, 2013), and employee CSR understanding (Brunton et al., 2017; Carlos & Rosell,
Stakeholder communication that moves stakeholders into a state of information seeking through open and reciprocal communication, known as two-way communication, was first introduced by Grunig and Hunt (1984). However, this form of communication has been criticized for being mission oriented (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), persuasive and manipulative (Burchell & Cook, 2006; Dickerson, 2012; Fawkes, 2007), and absent of complexity, which is needed in order to address multiple perspectives (Hejjas et al., 2018). Dialogue, however, includes ongoing communication and assumes organizations are tied to their stakeholders, requiring collaboration, support, interaction and commitment that is less process oriented and more relational (Heath, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002; Pearson, 1989). More specifically, dialogic public relations theory requires mutual understanding between an organization and their stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Lane & Kent, 2018). It also necessitates that both parties perceive the other positively and that neither attempts to dominate or manipulate the conversation (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Lane & Kent, 2018). Kent and Taylor’s (2002) dialogic communication consists of five foundational principles: mutuality, propinquity, commitment, risk, and empathy. Applying these principles can create an inclusive communication approach that considers the sensitivities, needs and beliefs of others, setting the foundation for dialogic communication (Lane & Kent, 2018).

Devin and Lane (2014) argue that engagement at any level cannot be realized without transparently communicating back the breadth of organizational efforts for CSR engagement to all stakeholders. Generally, CSR reporting often lacks details regarding stakeholder engagement, more specifically, which stakeholders were engaged, how they were engaged and the outcome of this engagement from the perspective of the stakeholder themselves (Devin & Lane, 2014). The need for closing the communication loop by sharing back organizational CSR activities and performance with stakeholders is important for creating
stakeholder awareness and managing risk (Sloan, 2009). Omitting this level of detail in CSR communication signals a lack of organizational transparency, which may lead to uncertainty around CSR legitimacy (Devin & Lane, 2014). Similarly, increased transparency may be coupled with increased self-censorship, whereby companies hold back comprehensive details behind corporate decisions to protect management from public scrutiny (Jahansoozi, 2006). While both Sloan (2009) and Devin and Lane (2014) are framing this CSR communication toward external stakeholder audiences, these concepts are also applicable from an internal perspective.

Recognizing that employees consume both internal and external communication, integrated CSR communication aims to align these two forms of organizational communication (Bekmeier-Feuerhahn et al., 2017; Bruhn & Zimmermann, 2017). Integrated communication includes all organizational levels and external stakeholders (Elving, 2013), and requires “reciprocal coordination of all communicative channels and contents in terms of time settings and formal structure for realizing effective CSR communication” that starts with building a strong internal CSR communication strategy (Bekmeier-Feuerhahn et al., 2017, p. 91). Integrated communication contributes to employee perceptions and interest in learning more about organizational sustainability initiatives by framing sustainability consistently and in an accessible way across all communication platforms (Craig & Allen, 2013). While internal and external organizational communication promote employee awareness and knowledge building of corporate CSR strategies (Craig & Allen, 2013), it also contributes to sense making, which could motivate employees to participate in these initiatives (Bekmeier-Feuerhahn et al., 2017).

In order to garner greater employee CSR participation, clear messaging that effectively relays information is important (Brunton et al., 2017). Characteristics of poor
internal CSR communication can include: not communicating all CSR efforts in a consistent and clear way and planning CSR strategies using uniform programming that ignores the diverse needs and skill sets of their employees. When managers are having difficulty clearly communicating CSR initiatives within an organization, it can lead to employees misunderstanding and misinterpreting sustainability information (Brunton et al., 2017). This challenge is intensified if company senior leadership rarely share organizational information or if there is a limited understanding and awareness of the concept of sustainability among employees (Brunton et al., 2017).

CSR abstractness and ambiguity may also contribute to the challenge of understanding (Carlos & Rosell, 2012). In the context of business education, CSR discourse can both enable and constrain CSR meaning among students (Carlos & Rosell, 2012; 2019). Discourse can be defined as “a group of statements that provides a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge on that topic” (du Gay, Salaman & Rees, 1996, p. 265). Carlos and Rosell (2019) have found that CSR meaning can be shaped through discursive, co-creation exercises like storytelling. Whereas, Iivonen and Moisander (2015) recognize that organizational CSR communication can influence internal and external stakeholders sensemaking. This sensemaking is contextual and can therefore change over time in response to changes in organizational CSR focus or prioritization (Iivonen & Moisander, 2015).

This section has highlighted the importance of open dialogue between employees and organizations, the need for transparent and consistent CSR communications across organizational boundaries and the issues related to CSR communication and employee understanding and meaning making. The above noted literature is particularly important in
framing and understanding all three of the research questions of this study. This next section will further explore the literature related to internal communication.

**Internal Communication**

Internal communication has been defined as an “exchange of information and ideas within an organization” (Bovée & Thill, 1998, p. 7), the formal and informal communication between organizational levels (Kalla, 2005), a process of information flow between organizational groups (Welch & Jackson, 2007), and a catalyst for company knowledge sharing, active dialogue, collaboration and creativity (Mazzie, 2010). Considering these varying definitions, this study adopts a more comprehensive definition of internal communication which is the “process responsible for the internal exchange of information between stakeholder at all levels within the boundaries of an organization” (Karanges, 2014, p. 34). Furthermore, this study is predominantly focused on the methods and products of communication known as internal communication, as opposed to the plural internal communications which refers to the process of communication (Argenti & Forman, 2002; Kalla, 2005). Considering this, the following section explores academic conversations pertaining to the usefulness of internal communication from an organizational perspective (Karanges et al., 2015; Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014; Reilly & Hayne, 2014), its usefulness from the perspective of the employee (Bortree, 2010; Welch, 2012), and how self expression and variation can contribute to engagement (Plowman, Wakefield & Winchel, 2015; Ryynänen, Jalkala & Salminen, 2013).

Internal communication can both develop and maintain employee engagement (Karanges et al., 2015). In order for internal communication to function properly there needs to be consideration given to the audience both in terms of how they access information and if these methods of internal communication are useful (Bortree, 2010; Reilly & Hayne, 2014;
Ryynänen et al., 2013; Welch, 2012). Internal communication between employees and supervisors provide opportunities to discuss and share organizational information, which can facilitate workplace interaction, engagement and meaningful relationships (Karanges et al., 2015). Similarly, it has been found that two-way communication between executives and employees using appropriate communication channels builds trust with employees by exhibiting transparency (Mishra et al., 2014). Face-to-face conversations can be especially effective at instilling trust because employees are kept aware of corporate strategies developed at the executive level and feel their work contributes to organizational goals (Mishra et al., 2014). However, Welch and Jackson (2007) argued that face-to-face internal communication between strategic management and all employees is unrealistic and suggests that employee ideas and concerns are communicated to leadership by way of those managing projects and team stakeholder groups. Others have found that channels such as intranets and online medium are effective for internal organization communication and for reiterating core company values and goals (Reilly & Hayne, 2014).

Companies should be careful not to assume that the most commonly read materials are the most useful (Bortree, 2010; Welch, 2012). Bortree (2010) found that the most commonly sought-after communication channels for environmental information within an organization were the internet, websites and employee newsletters. Unfortunately, Bortree (2010) found that from the employees’ perspective, these were not the most useful communication channels. Instead, employees identified twitter, wikis and podcasts as the top three most useful channels of the eleven methods tested (Bortree, 2010).

Welch (2012) also explored internal communication preferences to understand which forms were most sought out and useful for the target audience. Welch (2012) assessed various internal employee communication methods between senior managers and all
employees at several organizations and found that electronic communication was the most preferred method of internal communication among polled employees. These results highlight that internal communication must consider three main factors: (1) controllability of the message; (2) the ways in which the information can be disseminated effectively; and (3) the usability or accessibility of the information by the target audience. Controlled messaging includes the content, format and channel by which the information is received. Distribution, or dissemination, includes the way in which the shared information can be attained, and may include receiving information directly (push communication), or by retrieving information proactively when it is needed (pull communication). Finally, usability is evaluated by the characteristics that allow those receiving the communication to process the information quickly and accurately. Understanding what communication formats are most effective at reaching employees is important because presented information may be ignored, or poorly understood.

Similarly, providing employees with the tools and channels for self-expression and participation are important for facilitating interaction and engagement. Ryynänen et al. (2013) argue that effective internal communication depends in part on using a variety of communication channels. Given that employees are individuals with unique communication preferences, offering the choice of multiple, alternative communication channels can better accommodate the needs of each individual (Ryynänen et al., 2013) and is a key component for “encouraging active employee behaviours” (Mazzei, 2010, p. 231). Plowman et al. (2015) argue that individuals and their desire to engage must be triggered by specific forms of communication, resulting in response and engagement. If organizational communication lacks variation in communication methods, certain audiences may be excluded from
organizational conversations because the information has neither reached, nor triggered interest from the all those who may be impacted (Plowman et al., 2015).

Tailoring internal CSR communication to employee groups can also empower employees, thereby increasing the potential for CSR success (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). Welch and Jackson (2007) recognized internal communication as a matrix with multiple touchpoints and communication streams, which increases the likelihood that organizational information can reach all employees. It should be cautioned however, that if communication and information is poorly managed in ways that result in an inundation of organizational information, an audience can become overwhelmed, and thus disengaged (Jahansoozi, 2006).

The above literature emphasizes the need to develop a variety of communication channels that consider the needs of the audience as a whole and at an individual level and is contextually relevant to research question three (RQ3) that asks what the best approaches are for communicating sustainability initiatives to employees? The literature focused on internal communication also informs research question one (RQ1), that considers how internal communication is used to communicate sustainability initiatives within a workplace. This current study will examine communication channels from the perspective of the sustainability and communication representatives only. Consideration will be given to the employee’s perspective by capturing how participants perceive their company’s internal communication approaches to be useful for employee engagement. Employee engagement literature will be further explored in the following section.

**Employee Engagement**

Organizational engagement has been historically conceptualized as being needs-based (Kahn, 1990), providing cognitive satisfaction (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002), preventing burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001), or as multidirectional, contributing to cognitive,
emotional and behavioral benefits for employees (Johnston, 2016; Saks, 2006). This study follows Taylor and Kent’s (2014) definition of dialogic engagement, which is an interactive process that encompasses interest, awareness, and knowledge building, that can lead to action and involvement. In some cases, employee engagement can be perceived as an attitude that is influenced by organizational communication or as a personality trait, which is less malleable (Taylor & Kent, 2014; Welch, 2011). Taylor and Kent (2014) position dialogic engagement as an exchange of ideas that result from communication that facilitates interaction which in turn shape a person’s self, thought and reality, aligning with the ontological view of social constructionism. This section examines academic research related to employee engagement at the individual and organizational level (Hejjas et al., 2018; Hemingway, 2005; Johnston, 2016; Mirvis, 2012; Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008), as well as the timing, structure and measurement of employee engagement (Johnston & Taylor, 2018; Opoku-Dakwa, Chen & Rupp, 2018). These employee engagement concepts are important for understanding the findings from this current study and their practical implications.

Mirvis (2012) offered three top down employee engagement models when implementing CSR: transactional, which leads to company recruitment, retention and employee benefits; relational, anchoring sustainability within the organization’s identity where the company and employees work toward socially responsible goals; or developmental employee engagement that results in activating a workforce to produce greater value for the business and society. Alternatively, Hemingway (2005) recognized CSR engagement as bottom up, understanding that employee personal values and attitudes impact their motivations to participate in organizational CSR initiatives. Employees may be categorized as being frustrated with or apathetic toward CSR, or they may conform or actively participate in CSR efforts (Hemingway, 2005). The work of Mirvis (2012) will be important for informing
the second and third research questions which ask how does communicating sustainability initiatives contribute to employee engagement and what are the best approaches to communicating sustainability initiatives to employees, respectively. Exploring employee and organizational needs related to CSR engagement and whether these needs are recognized by participants through their internal communication methods can lead to a greater understanding of how these forms of communication can influence support and involvement in CSR programs and initiatives. As internal CSR stakeholders, employees’ existing attitudes towards their workplace and society as a whole can further influence their response to CSR implementation (Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008). This categorization of employee’s attitudes and needs is mirrored in their level of engagement, whereby individuals fall within a spectrum from actively engaged to disengaged (Hejjas et al., 2018). In response to CSR implementation, varying attitudes towards CSR can emerge (Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008).

Employees may:

1. become more committed and enthusiastic about CSR because of their existing concerns for social welfare;
2. be indifferent, as their primary focus is their own personal goals; or
3. be dissident in response to CSR adoption, as the employee is preoccupied and focused on CSR cost and resources (Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008).

From an organizational level, employee engagement requires foundational processes that establish structural support in order for engagement to occur (Johnston, 2016). Community interaction, networking and connection can be supported by:

1. establishing mechanisms to listen, understand and respond to stakeholder’s opinions;
(2) ensure that there is an internal process where stakeholder’s views are reflected on, and valued in a way that may result in a collective progression toward common goals; and

(3) a response approach that lessens power imbalances to ensure all stakeholder’s interests are addressed (Johnston, 2016).

These various CSR stakeholder and employee profiles suggest that internal communication strategies ought to consider specific audiences and variations on messaging to engage each type of employee, and understand how to evaluate organizational progression toward engagement embeddedness.

Employees are integral to any organization, and for CSR, there are varying perspectives on when to engage employees in these initiatives and who should be involved (Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Bolton, Kim & O’Gorman, 2011; Craig & Allen, 2013; Hemingway, 2005). Bolton et al. (2011) break down organizational CSR into three phases – initiation, implementation and maturation. The first stage, initiation, includes early stage CSR program planning and creation and has been found to exclude employee input (Bolton et al., 2011). Often, it is not until the maturation phase that employees are recognized as having a major role in the overall success of CSR programming (Bolton et al., 2011). From the perspective of an organization with hindsight, early employee integration can bolster a CSR program at the beginning of the initiation and planning of the implementation process, and staff ought to be involved throughout all three stages (Bolton et al., 2011). Similarly, when companies involve employees during all stages of CSR programming, including the conception and planning stages, through to resource allocation and completion, it is more likely that perceived barriers expressed during the initiation stage are overcome (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). Opoku-Dakwa et al. (2018) argue that employees with direct
involvement in CSR initiatives, either through assignment or self-appointment, play an important role in CSR maturation. When an organization implements CSR, it is an opportunity for employees to align with their place of employment on shared values and to achieve their goals, fostering engagement through a mutually beneficial collaboration (Opoku-Dakwa et al., 2018). Their participation provides meaningful impact for themselves at a personal level as well as for the organization as a whole through CSR program success (Opoku-Dakwa et al., 2018).

Once a company begins to engage employees, Johnston and Taylor (2018) conceptualized how engagement can manifest and be measured using a graduated approach. Table 1 outlines the three levels of engagement that are commonly observed within an organization. Level 1 is engagement that can be measured quantitatively through the number of likes, clicks or impressions, indicating that interaction is present and occurring, but ultimately signaling a low level of engagement. Level 2, or mid-level engagement can manifest through relationships, connections and understanding that can be measured by indices of interaction quality and behavioral change. Finally, the third and highest level of engagement within an organization involves action, impact and involvement that benefit society and can be measured through participation of marginalized groups, or by assessing before and after social capital. This framework provides a starting point for understanding engagement beyond likes and clicks, moving toward engagement measurement indicators that prevent organizational tokenism and the tendency to focus on counts and totals (Johnston & Taylor, 2018).
Table 1: Engagement Tiers, Criteria and Engagement Measurements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Engagement Measurements</th>
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<tr>
<td>Low level</td>
<td>Presence</td>
<td>Indicator of activity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Occurrence</td>
<td>Counts/amounts of interactivity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Manifestation</td>
<td>Social Media likes, page visits, click-through</td>
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<td>Monitoring – Social media and traditional</td>
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<td>Reading/viewing/visiting/impression/awareness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Indicators of relationship qualities</td>
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<td>Connecting</td>
<td>Trust, reciprocity, credibility, legitimacy, openness,</td>
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<td>satisfaction and understanding</td>
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<td>Interaction quality</td>
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<td>Diffusion – patterns and networks</td>
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<td>Indicators of engagement at the micro (individual level) –</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>i.e. measuring behavioral outcomes</td>
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<td>Mid-level</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Indicators of social embeddedness</td>
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<td>Impact</td>
<td>Social awareness and civic indicators</td>
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<td>Acknowledgement of others/empowerment</td>
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<td>Social capital</td>
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<td>Indicators of action, change and outcomes</td>
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<td>Recognition of diverse opinions</td>
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</table>


In this current study, Johnston and Taylor’s (2018) framework will be used to better inform the second research question (RQ2), which is focused on understanding how communicating sustainability initiatives can contribute to employee engagement. Johnston and Taylor’s (2018) framework will also provide contextual support when interpreting participants’ responses to the interview questions (see Appendix A). These three questions link internal communication methods with employee engagement and consider the ways in which participants evaluate engagement and their audience’s understanding of the concepts that have been communicated. The tiers, criteria and measurement examples listed in Table 1 will provide guiding principals when interpreting participant’s responses to these interview questions and will better frame these ideas in the context of engagement manifestation.
The review of the above literature related to employee engagement manifestation in CSR establishes foundational concepts that has specific implications for the research question concerning how communicating sustainability initiatives contributes to employee engagement (RQ2) and what approaches are best when communicating sustainability initiatives to employees (RQ3).

**Summary**

Establishing an understanding of the various perspectives of employee engagement, as well as the internal communication and CSR concepts in the literature, builds a strong foundation of knowledge to support the objectives of this current study. All three areas of literature are important in contextualizing research question three (RQ3), which aims to identify the best approaches to communicating sustainability initiatives to employees, the overarching theme of this study. Overall, the concepts reviewed in the literature will be considered in the data collection, analysis and findings of this study.

**Research Methodology**

This section provides details of how this study was conducted, and will discuss the guiding research paradigm and philosophy, research design, data collection and data analysis.

**Research Ontology and Epistemology**

This study is influenced by and examined through the research ontology of social constructionism, which asserts that knowledge is social in origin (Allen, 2017). The general ontological assumption of social constructionism is that individual identity and thought are influenced by social surroundings, in other words “people create and are created by their social conditions” (Holman, Pavlica & Thorpe, 1997, p. 140), and therefore we create meaning and understanding through social interaction and personal experiences (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). This study is influenced by Berger and Luckmann (1966), who argue that as
individuals, day to day life involves a level of intersubjectivity because we are connected and influenced by a web of relationships (Cunliffe, 2008). In the context of this study, this intersubjectivity may include the organizational culture experienced by each participant, but it may also extend to their relationships outside of the workplace. This study is further influenced by the social constructivism view that includes a dialogical perspective that recognizes how conversations are shaped by those around us, both in terms of their ideas and experiences (Cunliffe, 2002; 2008). Furthermore, dialogic interaction involves multiple voices and that “in our moment to moment dialogue with many others we shape our understanding of possible worlds, of ways of orienting ourselves in these possible worlds and of new ways of being and acting” (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 130). Therefore, how we perceive and interpret the world is expressed through our dialogue and conversation with others and in turn, the experiences and perceptions of others further influence and shape our realities. In the context of this study, which involves collecting and analyzing data in the form of interviews, it is understood that these conversations explore the experiences of each participant within their organization.

This study also adopts an inductive, interpretive epistemology for the research analysis approach. This inductive design follows a ‘bottom-up’ framework whereby themes emerge within the data and are identified, resulting in findings that are strongly linked to the data and may uncover broader themes or patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 1990). Given that the aim of this study is to better understand the ways in which internal communication can be used to engage employees in CSR initiatives, a thematic analysis has been applied, which follows an inductive approach and further supports an interpretivist exploration of the data and may uncover or highlight connections among the experiences shared by participants.
Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research methodology using interviews to understand how Canadian companies, representing a variety of sectors, use internal communication to engage employees in sustainability. Among published studies focused on internal communication, employee engagement, or sustainability communication strategies, exploratory qualitative methodologies are commonly used (Han, Henninger, Apeagyei & Tyler, 2017; McShane & Cunningham, 2012; Mishra et al., 2014). This specific methodology was applied for two reasons. First, an exploratory approach provides an opportunity to gain a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of a specific area of study (Quinn & Dalton, 2009). Having a deeper understanding of the various approaches participating companies have adopted or implemented to interact with employees will provide the necessary detail required to explore the various themes that will emerge from the data. Second, an exploratory qualitative research methodology is often used for areas of research where limited understanding and knowledge exists (Quinn & Dalton, 2009). This exploratory approach further draws upon a subjective interpretation of the participant’s experiences within the workplace and beyond, aligning with the ontological perspective applied in this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to answer the three research questions, a total of nine interviews were conducted with representatives from each company. Details regarding the data collection and analysis procedures are provided in the following paragraphs.

Data Collection. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. This study aims to uncover overarching themes, or meta-themes, which are considered the highest level of coded concepts when thematic analysis is applied (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). When purposively sampling interviews, a sample size of six to
eight has been found to support the emergence of metathemes (Guest et al., 2006; McShane & Cunningham, 2012). In contrast, to achieve saturation within a sample size, which is the point when no new concepts are presented (Guest et al., 2006), is more difficult to determine and has been found to occur with as few as twelve interviews (Guest et al., 2006) to as many as 44 (Beckman, Colwell & Cunningham, 2009). Therefore, the target sample for total participants to establish metathemes for this study was six. In the end, nine companies participated in the study. Participants were selected using snowball sampling. Professional sustainability consultants who were known to have vast experience working with Canadian companies were contacted via email and then consulted over the phone to determine which companies were thought to be good candidates for this study based on the research questions and the following two criteria: (1) participants must have a history of sustainability within their organization with established strategies and programs, and (2) they have used internal communication as a means to engage employees in their sustainability initiatives. Once a company was identified as meeting these criteria and profile, the sustainability consultant would send an introduction email to the appropriate individual or representative within the participating company. When the contacted company representative confirmed that the two noted criteria resonated within their organization and that they were interested in participating, an interview was scheduled. Six of the nine interviews included a single participant for the interview. These individuals were responsible for sustainability within their organization. The remaining three interviews included two representatives, each of whom played a role in either general corporate communication, internal communication, or sustainability (see Table 2).
Table 2: Participant Pseudonyms, Industry and Role/Department

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Role/Department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A</td>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>• Internal Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Online Media Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant B</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>• Sustainability Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant C</td>
<td>Food Processing</td>
<td>• Sustainability Lead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant D</td>
<td>Live Entertainment</td>
<td>• Corporate Social Responsibility Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Internal Communication and Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant E</td>
<td>Data analytics and marketing services</td>
<td>• Corporate Sustainability Lead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant F</td>
<td>Real estate</td>
<td>• Sustainability Lead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant G</td>
<td>Media and communications</td>
<td>• Environmental Affairs Lead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant H</td>
<td>Telecommunications</td>
<td>• Sustainability Lead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant I</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>• Environmental Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Corporate Communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pre-set questions were formulated using an understanding of internal communication approaches, and employee engagement from the literature (see Appendix A). Following guidelines for semi-structured interviews laid out by Farquhar (2012), the guided interviews relate to the research objectives and used language familiar to the participants. Efforts were made to schedule and conduct interviews face-to-face. Seven interviews were done in person, in a quiet room either at their place of work, or at a mutually agreeable location. The remaining two participants were not able to meet in person due to geographical limitations and interviews were carried out using a video conferencing service to mimic the experience of being face-to-face.

All interviews began with the same three questions to frame the conversation and provide additional context for the remainder of the interview: (1) with which industry sector does your company identify?; (2) how would you describe your sustainability program?; and (3) which team, or individual is responsible for delivering internal communication related to sustainability? The remaining pre-set questions were addressed in random order, following
the natural flow of the conversation (see Appendix A for full interview guide). In-depth interviews ranged from 40 to 65 minutes, which allowed enough time for a deeper exploration of ideas and to accommodate new ideas and directions (Curwen, Park & Sarkar, 2012; Fowler & Hope, 2007; McShane & Cunningham, 2012). This length of interview also allowed time to return to previously asked questions (Quinn & Dalton, 2009). Interviews were digitally recorded with the participant’s permission (Curwen et al., 2012), using an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder WS-852 as the primary recording device and the Voice Memo application on an iPhone 6S as the secondary backup recording device to ensure the whole conversation was accurately recorded. During the conversations, jot notes were taken regarding the information provided and further jot notes were made immediately after each interview to capture general themes and ideas, overall impressions, and important points (Farquhar, 2012). Once all interviews had been completed, audio recordings were uploaded to rev.com to be digitally transcribed in preparation for data analysis. Complete records of qualitative data including notes, audio recordings and transcripts have been kept well organized for the purposes of traceability, reliability and completeness (Farquhar, 2012).

**Data Analysis.** Thematic analysis was applied to the gathered data and used to identify the overarching themes that emerged from the nine interviews. Thematic analysis is an approach used to identify and analyse qualitative data, drawing themes or patterns which are then used to address the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017), and is an approach that has been commonly used in studies that have explored concepts of CSR research using interviews as the method of data collection (Bolton et al., 2011; Han et al., 2017; McShane & Cunningham, 2012). The objective of using thematic analysis for this particular study is to find repeated patterns of meaning across the data set. The data was coded using inductive logic, the process of coding data without using an
established framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which allowed for flexibility in understanding the research question in this specific context (Fletcher, 2014). Inductive thematic analysis is data driven, allowing for the possibility of new, emerging themes unique to this area of research (Duarte, 2017), and is further enriched using the literature at a later stage of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data analysis was guided by the six-step thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and applied by Maguire and Delahunt (2017). Phase one included a thorough review of the data, to allow for increased familiarity with the depth of information found within the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once all nine transcriptions were complete, these were read repeatedly as a whole. During the first reading, the audio recordings were played simultaneously to ensure transcriptions were accurately recorded, allowing for a full immersion in the data. Notes on initial ideas and codes were taken. Phase two involved identifying codes found in the data. For this study, coding was done manually, but was organized and managed automatically using the software NVivo 12.1.1 Pro, which supported a more efficient data analysis process (Bolton et al., 2011; Curwen et al., 2012). Working systematically through each of the nine interviews, interesting or repeated segments of the data were manually tagged and named resulting in “nodes”. All tagged data segments under one node were automatically collated together using the NVivo software. Phase three, involved sorting through the various codes to identify broader themes, which were then organized in a mind-map. Codes that were deemed as miscellaneous were set aside and excluded from the mind-map (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Phase four involved reading through all of the collated extracts under each theme to ensure that each theme followed a logical pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and then the entire data set was reviewed to confirm that the identified themes were reflective of the overall meaning of the whole data set. No themes
were found to be missing during this stage of analysis. Phase 5 clearly defined each theme for what it was or was not, and finally, phase six produced a coherent account of the prevalent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which are presented in the following section.

**Findings**

The purpose of this section is to present the findings from the thematic analysis. A total of four major themes emerged from the data analysis, as well as some individual and group challenges. Each theme is reviewed and presented in the following order: multiple internal communication channels, two-way communication, message co-creation, and measuring engagement, followed by a review of organizational challenges.

**Theme 1: Multiple Internal Communication Channels**

Based on the information gathered during the interviews, all nine participants confirmed that multiple internal communication channels are used in a variety of ways to engage staff in CSR. Generally, these channels are not uniquely used for CSR, rather, participants are using all available communication channels already adopted within their organization to communicate about CSR initiatives. Table 3 provides a list of the various communication methods mentioned during the interviews, and while it may not be comprehensive, it highlights the numerous communication tools used to share information and to engage staff in CSR. The particular choice of communication methods and tools varied slightly among participants and may depend on the operational structure of each organization. For example, participants from the mining, manufacturing, retail, food and live entertainment sectors have business units that work offsite, or with limited access to a computer.
Table 3: Utilized CSR Communication Channels & Participant Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channels</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Meetings</td>
<td>general/manager/companywide meetings, CSR strategy, CSR ambassadors, green team meetings, National Sustainability Council, presentations (PPT or other)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(various freq.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reports &amp;</td>
<td>summary publications &amp; briefs, integrated financial &amp; sustainability reporting, newsletters, case studies/articles, internal magazine, weekly notices, posters/flyers, metrics, charts, KPIs, scorecards, annual report, press releases, environmental compliance reports, sustainability report, director reports, posters, billboards, weekly notices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>publications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Various freq.)</td>
<td>Workshops, CSR offsites, behaviour change training sessions, policies/best practices/guidelines/frameworks, CSR training sessions, CSR strategy (targets, commitments, roadmaps, action plans), onboarding/orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Training &amp;</td>
<td>videos/animations, website, YouTube channels, webcasts/webinars/video conferencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Digital Material</td>
<td>town halls, global/regional/site events, volunteer opportunities, sponsorships, skill matching volunteer opportunities, conferences, donation/community investment, integrated campaigns, competitions/contests (gamifications), spontaneous activities &amp; events,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Events</td>
<td>open information sessions, morning meetings/huddles (various freq.), face-to-face, casual conversations, phone calls, anonymous phone help line, voicemail, emails, text messages, quick facts, wallpapers for computers, TV screens, bulletin/community boards (various freq.), storytelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Downward</td>
<td>campaigns (regional, global, site level, video), HR communication, survey follow-ups, CEO communication (letters, emails, messaging, videos), company Q&amp;A events with leadership or CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Upward</td>
<td>surveys &amp; questionnaires (various freq.), company Q&amp;A events, exit surveys after major events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Horizontal</td>
<td>global employee events, continuous improvement campaigns &amp; programs, employee empowerment campaigns, team meetings, team presentations, intranets, engagement &amp; collaboration software/apps, monthly dashboard updates, sustainability &amp; energy software &amp; dashboards, sustainability stewards, weekly project tracking meetings, social media platforms (internal, external &amp; mobile), employee meetings, social media posts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By leveraging existing channels participants can increase their reach to capture all audiences within their organization. Similarly, consistent and frequent communication using
a broad communication approach means increased exposure to CSR. Participant A summarized this best,

> If you want to change minds you need to have a sustained exposure to an idea and from different locations. It can't just come from social media. Or it can't just come from one thing. You've got to pick it up in lots of different areas. That's why all of the tools, I think, are really important in reinforcing that key idea.

Participant A’s comment highlights how frequency and consistency in messaging can also support increased understanding of sustainability. Participant E, however, explained that using various forms of communication can lead to CSR integration:

> If it's a successful communication, it's not communicating about sustainability. It's that in every communication where there is an opportunity, the sustainability element will be present. So, it's not just about saying, "Oh, we have a CSR," because I don't want to create like a silo on the side of everything else. . . . It's embedded in the way we do business.

Participant E’s thoughts on integration were also shared by Participants A and H. Integrating sustainability into all forms of corporate communication can lead to CSR and sustainability embeddedness across an organization, instead of being perceived as an isolated department or team. Furthermore, Participants E and A noted that their communication is neither internal, nor external, but rather fluid between the two and fully integrated as employees can access information from many sources and that there should be alignment in all messaging. Integrated communication can ensure that employees draw sustainability knowledge and information with consistent messaging.
Theme 2: Two-Way Communication

Two-way communication was commonly mentioned by participants as an important approach and benefit for employee engagement, primarily because it provides opportunities for employees to provide feedback often through organizational surveys or questionnaires. 

Participant B explained,

If we get strong feedback that we should really be focusing on this one particular thing that we haven't been spending enough time on, maybe people feel like energy hasn't been really focused on, then we'll incorporate more energy things into our program. . . . It's almost an expectation that we adjust our programs according to [our survey] results.

Based on Participant B’s experience, surveys provide important feedback to the company and are recognized by employees as an effective tool that allows their voices, thoughts and opinion to be heard. Interestingly, Participant G who also uses surveys, has not recognized their benefit for feedback or employee engagement. Participant A confirmed that they do not carry out surveys or questionnaires within their organization. Participants who do use surveys confirmed that they follow-up on the suggestions and recommendations they receive from staff.

Others highlighted the value of two-way, face-to-face communication. These could be in the form of Questions and Answers (Qs and As) events, team meetings, organizational forums, or one-on-one conversations. A common component of face-to-face communication is that it provides a meaningful opportunity for engagement and understanding in all subjects including sustainability. As Participant H shared, “The most effective [conversations] are when you can actually sit down and talk to somebody.” By having conversations, one is able
to make connections and understand where there are challenges and how to make sustainability meaningful. Participant B elaborated about their approach,

Meet them where they're at. They may not connect to, "Hey, did you know if you are running your car, or idling your car outside, you're releasing this much pollution".

[Instead] they might like, "Hey did you know that you're wasting this much gas? And it's costing you this much money when you're doing that." That might be a way for them to connect with somebody who doesn't necessarily care about sustainability.

However, sometimes competing priorities can impede progress and understanding, as Participant H explained,

This guy over here is telling me “I got to get my sales in. That's my focus right now. Why am I looking at this?” Well, “We think we can be a differentiator in the marketplace.” . . . Here's the reason why. Here's the benefits. We can have that conversation. We can communicate with them, and they're listening.

For these participants, connecting the concept of sustainability to daily work through conversations demonstrates that employee participation is important and may lead to organizational alignment.

Participants C, D, E, and H also identified social media networks and mobile applications as platforms for two-way communication and open dialogue. These platforms allow sustainability teams to solicit immediate feedback on preliminary ideas, and establish a level of interest from a wider audience. Participant C mentioned how they use the tool, “if we come across a unique initiative or a program that we're working on that I feel is relevant for the company, I'll just post it on Yammer and a whole community internally gets going.”

Participant E also shared, “I really like this idea of using the capabilities of social media internally, because it's kind of a two-way communication, . . . you have feedback that's more
current, more often, and you can feel the sense of community.” Based on these two comments, these platforms allow for quicker feedback and interaction, especially compared to questionnaires and surveys and help unify employees within their organization, building a sense of community and fostering interaction by sharing experiences and engaging others.

**Theme 3: Message Co-Creation**

Message co-creation was an important theme that arose during many of the interviews in two ways: (1) by giving both individual employees and groups the freedom to add their unique perspective to messaging; and (2) by adopting a collaborative approach and shared responsibility for developing sustainability communication and disseminating information. In one interview, Participant I shared that their approach for developing sustainability messaging and corporate communication is to develop the tools and messages, but to then let the individual facilities and offices improve these communication by making them their own, “Now, it's for them to use, and maybe to enhance the communication, add more to it. . . . We kind of set the table, and then people can reinforce the message, making sure it is told to them locally.” This participant encourages each team to relay the information by adding on their unique experience. Participant D, however, expressed concern over losing control of the sustainability message through social media when staff are enabled to share their own experiences:

> So they can post it. They can be the owner of that, which is a good thing, but it also means that we don't necessarily control the narrative. . . . For instance, a very common activity that touring teams like to do is a trash clean-up of the area that they're in. . . . My message would be that, "CSR is more than cleaning up trash", but from their perspective, that's what they did on this week.
Participant D is concerned that social media gives employees a means of communicating their thoughts and experiences, which might not always align with organizational CSR messaging and may lose the ability to convey certain understanding among employees for what sustainability means to the organization as a whole.

A beneficial outcome of allowing employees to have message ownership was reputational risk mitigation. Participant F shared how engaged employees will speak up and correct the general public in casual conversations if they hear misinformation, “people will gladly talk about the company, they'll defend the company”. Similarly, Participant A shared, “if there's anyone that has a negative comment [on social media], there's usually five or six [employees] that will jump in and say, ‘No, they're a really good operator in the community’.” Allowing the employees to have a voice, means that they will be more likely to share their opinions on the work that their company is doing with the general public.

Participants A, D, H, and I confirmed that their approach to communicating involved collaboration between the sustainability and communication teams. Often, resources available to the sustainability team can be limited and working closely with communication colleagues can mean additional support through shared workload and by framing sustainability messaging and integrating these messages into other corporate communication. One participant representing the Communication Team shared, “Sustainability is always a part of a lot of the communication that [our department does], so it's definitely a shared responsibility.” Conversely, Participant G noted that communicating across their organization is difficult because of limited support, collaboration and resources. Participant G explained how company communication must go through one channel:

"Communicating across the entire company is very difficult. It's a challenge. It's one of the big challenges that we have. . . . [If I want to communicate to everybody, it}
always has to go through [the internal communication person]. She controls the messaging, or the communication department controls the message, which makes it difficult for me.

Based on Participant G’s comments, the challenge of effectively communicating across the organization is linked to the issue of controlling the message and lack of collaboration between the sustainability department and the communication team. In other cases, Participants E and F shared that they have the skillsets to develop communication strategies and key messages given their backgrounds in internal communication and marketing. Even still, these two shared that they continue to look for support and insights from their colleagues, leveraging complementary backgrounds and knowledge to ensure that the information they share is comprehensive. Participant F shared,

I often . . . turn around to the rest of my peers in the company and say, "Hey you guys, do you have initiatives that you could talk about with regards to climate change?" . . . From my professional background, I'm a marketing communications person, so it's also easy for me to start a thread and then we will complement [each other].

Participant F’s approach suggests that working collaboratively with other experts within your organization can create a stronger, informed communication campaign. Similarly, Participants B, G, H, and I confirmed that they have established cross-functional teams that provide input and support for sustainability planning, and these teams work together collaboratively to communicate and disseminate information throughout their departments or facilities. Working with representatives with diverse backgrounds across an organization increases exposure to sustainability initiatives and the number of channels through which these initiatives can be shared. From Participant D’s perspective, collaboration between teams, especially with communication and sustainability is a key component to engaging
more employees and getting greater participation, “The link between communication and CSR, is the underlying belief that if we have more employees engaged in it, then our program is simply stronger, more people would be participating.” Collaborative communication efforts can contribute to a strong sustainability program that involves the whole organization.

**Theme 4: Measuring Engagement**

Many of the participants confirmed that they use various qualitative and quantitative approaches to evaluate and measure the reach of their internal communication channels and employee engagement. Identified quantitative approaches include: views, shares, likes, clicks, emails sent and opened, subscribers, participants, attendees, and other forms of social media and website analytics and impressions. Overall, comments on social media, surveys and questionnaires were the most common methods of qualitative analysis. Unsolicited comments on social media can be used to monitor overall engagement of employees and can be used to evaluate employee thoughts on various company programs and direction. Employee feedback collected through online surveys helps gather opinions on sustainability initiatives, gauge level of interest in the sustainability programs and determine general thoughts on overall progress of the organization.

For some, active and direct monitoring of employee engagement does not occur. *Participant A* confirmed that their organization does not complete employee surveys and instead, evaluates employee engagement through performance:

> I think we let the measure be the performance. . . . I feel that's where we consider that to be quite weighty in terms of what that's telling us. When we have good performance metrics, then I think people are thinking ‘well that's employee engagement converting into strong performance’.
Performance and metrics demonstrate overall progress toward sustainability targets and strategies, which indirectly measure engagement and employee participation in CSR. Conversely, Participant B shared how metrics and performance may not be the only way to measure engagement:

*I think it's really hard to put a metric to planting a seed inside somebody's head to try and foster change down the line. . . . In certain cases like that, I don't think that metrics are the be all to end all, especially when you're thinking really long term and changing people's behaviors.*

This comment suggests that engagement is difficult to measure because it can be a slow process that builds over time. Similarly, Participant E highlighted how integration of sustainability drives CSR engagement:

*For me the outcome of doing CSR is employee engagement. You want to create a workplace that embeds, in everything that we do, this idea of social value, and environmental value. . . . So you want to see that in the workplace, it's becoming part of the culture. This comes through all different means.*

Participant E’s comment highlights how engagement can be demonstrated and evaluated through more indirect means including integration, and outgrowth.

Overall, participants did share that they do not have the necessary frameworks or methodologies that can support them in truly assessing engagement and instead, it continues to express itself through other outputs or outcomes that are more difficult to quantify.

Participants E, H and C expressed that even with all of these quantitative measurement tools and qualitative approaches that can be interpreted to demonstrate engagement, they still lack the ability to truly ascertain whether or not their employees are engaged and understand sustainability.
Recognizing the Challenges

Every participant highlighted the challenges they face when engaging their employees in sustainability. Many were unique to the sector or the individual company, which are presented in more detail in Table 4.

Table 4: Unique Challenges That Can Impact CSR Employee Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Unique Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>variation across operations where sustainability issues are not common from one site to another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>moving from an unstructured network of people that support CSR to a culture of CSR that applies for everybody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>change in staff, or organizational structure which impacts continuity of messaging, program rollout and buy-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>company growth through acquisition which can lead to misalignment in corporate culture and sustainability strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lack of tools (example: intranet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>managing global communication across different time zones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>making CSR matter to all departments, especially those that feel more removed (example: accounting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fully integrating CSR within the organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These challenges were not recognized as being barriers, but as realities of their operations, or corporate structure. As such, each organization had adopted their own way of managing these challenges to ensure their ultimate objectives were met.

Interestingly, there were many challenges that were common to more than one participant, as noted in Table 5. Inundation of information was mentioned by five of the nine participants. Some organizations identified how using a common digital communication platform helps to streamline communication in the workplace, reducing the sense of inundation. A second common challenge was creating a unified definition of sustainability and tangibility. Even though these participating companies highlighted the challenge of multiple CSR definitions, none identified it as a major issue that impedes overall CSR progress. Participant D pointed out, “it’s not a big problem, and people, I would say,
understand the basics [of sustainability], but they won’t have the same words to explain it.”

Some participants are working toward clearly defining the concept, moving away from a fragmented concept and meaning to one that could capture the concept as a whole, creating a unified sense of understanding and meaning all at once. Participant C and E, for example, have chosen to adopt an alternative terminology to describe organizational sustainability, in part because CSR and sustainability can mean so many things to so many people. Instead, Participant C and E are focusing on the concept of social purpose, which is an easier concept to grasp and to make meaningful to all employees in all departments.

Table 5: Shared Challenges That Can Impact CSR Employee Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Shared Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A, C, D, G, H</td>
<td>information overload and limited time to gain audience attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A, C, D, I</td>
<td>creating a unified definition of sustainability and tangibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B, C, D, I</td>
<td>Limited access to computers or email access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D, G, H, I</td>
<td>getting the attention of the whole organization at one time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C, H, I</td>
<td>making sustainability relevant and understanding how it impacts each employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A, D</td>
<td>variation across operations where sustainability issues are not common from one site to another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E, F</td>
<td>engaging all demographics with available tools and events (example: millennials, or those who do not use social media)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C, I</td>
<td>multiple operational languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B, H</td>
<td>competing priorities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Considering the reciprocal benefit for companies and employees when there is engagement in CSR, and the challenge of communicating these initiatives to employees, understanding how to leverage tools, particularly communication, may support organizational efforts to encourage employee participation in CSR. In this study, thematic analysis of nine interviews with participants from Canadian companies that used internal communication as a means to engage employees in their sustainability initiatives aimed to answer the three research questions as noted in Table 6.
Multiple communication channels and two-way communication are used to communicate sustainability initiatives within a workplace, answering RQ1. Participants shared that they try and measure engagement to understand how communicating sustainability may contribute to employee engagement, providing insights into RQ2 and multiple communication channels as well as message co-creation were more notable approaches to communicating sustainability initiatives to employees, addressing RQ3.

The next section begins with a critical discussion of the major findings from this study, specifically, the theme of message co-creation, and the theme of two-way communication, which is coupled with the challenge of creating a unified definition of sustainability and the issue of tangibility. These subsections are then followed by a discussion of multiple communication and how this contributes to information overload, and the theme of measuring engagement. These findings will be linked to the literature and then contextualized for practical purposes.

**Message Co-creation**

Co-creation of CSR messaging that allows employees to have message ownership is an important finding from this study. Providing various teams and employees with the opportunity to add their own perspective to communication and messaging either through co-creation with the sustainability or communication teams signals to all employees that their
opinions and thoughts matter. Creating space for individual message ownership, where employees can share their opinions or experiences is empowering and may increase CSR engagement frequency for those individuals or have a knock-on effect whereby other employees within the organization are triggered and they too become engaged and participate in initiatives. Communication and employee message ownership expands on the work of Opoku-Dakwa et al. (2018), adding a new dimension to their finding that employee self-appointment in CSR initiatives provides opportunity for employees to align with the organization, fostering engagement through a mutually beneficial collaboration.

Allowing employees to have a voice about the work that their company is doing was also found to contribute to reputational risk mitigation. The sense of empowerment that results from organizations permitting and even encouraging employees to express themselves and exercise their own voice through message ownership may increase the likelihood that they will speak up and correct misinformation. As two of the nine participants confirmed, employees are known to speak about their organization in social settings, correcting misinformation. Employees are recognized as internal stakeholders, but they should also be recognized as organizational ambassadors and as members of society. Employees may instinctively provide risk management support outside of their daily work and beyond their organizational boundaries.

The findings also emphasize how collaboration with communication professionals supports workload management and information dissemination through numerous channels within an organization and beyond. This finding contradicts Signitzer and Prexl (2008), who recommended that public relations and communication professionals, and environmental and sustainability managers work closely together given that public relations practitioners have unique skillsets and expertise to communicate complex issues (Signitzer & Prexl, 2008).
Interestingly, participants in this current study did not specifically note unique skillsets and expertise as the rationale for working with their communication team. Instead, participants highlighted how defining sustainability remains a challenge, including sustainability managers who work closely with their communication team. This suggests that despite their expertise and competence for explaining complex issues to various stakeholders, co-creation of messaging through collaboration with public relations and communication practitioners has not solved the issue of communicating the complexity of sustainability.

**Two-way Communication**

Two-way communication on the whole was found to be rooted in open dialogue that encouraged transparency, awareness and CSR understanding. Closing the loop on the communication between staff and the organization through actions in response to employee feedback such as surveys and questionnaires addresses the issues as identified by Devin and Lane (2014), and considers their needs and sensitivities, which was recognized by Lane and Kent (2018) as being an important characteristic of dialogic communication. When feedback is shown to influence company decisions, this demonstrates that the organization is actively listening to their employees, their internal stakeholders, who are impacted by the decisions or changes of an organization. This form of active listening may also elicit increased engagement from employees.

Face-to-face conversations, as noted in the findings, can provide more meaningful opportunities for two-way communication and open dialogue. This form of communication allows organizations to engage directly with staff in CSR initiatives, increasing sustainability awareness and knowledge, which is consistent with the literature (Brunton et al., 2017; Mishra et al., 2014; Ramus & Steger, 2000; Signitzel & Pretz, 2008). If an employee can either understand why sustainability is important to the organization, or even more,
understand how it is relevant to their daily work, then it becomes more possible to garner their participation in these initiatives. With this in mind, personal interactions either through face-to-face conversations, team meetings, or events are important channels that can gain employee attention, address their concerns and respond to employee push back or attitudes in a direct and meaningful way, a finding consistent with the literature (Hemingway, 2005; Mirvis, 2012; Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008).

Unfortunately, connecting with individuals one-on-one to discuss CSR has its limitations. For one, there is the issue of scalability. Addressing every individual within a small organization may be realistic, however, once a company is a certain size, this becomes more difficult. It is interesting that face-to-face was still identified as a useful approach despite participant organizational size ranging from 1,200 to 50,000. Digital communication platforms, on the other hand, address this scalability challenge and make participation easy for employees. As participants remarked, these platforms for communication facilitate engagement and contribute to a sense of community. This is consistent with the research that suggests that these platforms can facilitate connection and engagement through open communication (Bortree, 2010; Reilly & Hayne, 2014; Welch, 2012).

Secondly, in the context of meaning making and CSR, two-way communication can support increased awareness and understanding at a micro-level, however, at the macro-level, it may be contributing to issues of sustainability tangibility. For example, face-to-face conversations aid staff in gaining a clearer understanding and grasp of how their work contributes to the company sustainability efforts, however, this practice of contextualizing CSR at an individual level fragments the definition, contributing to the issue of tangibility at the organizational level. As a result, no one person can clearly define sustainability for the organization as a whole. The iterative nature of CSR that includes evolving definitions of
sustainability within an organization may lead to misunderstandings or confusion and contribute to the issue of tangibility when communicating about CSR. Participant D shared that their experience of working through multiple, evolving phases of their sustainability program, has led to fractured meanings, ultimately creating confusion as to how sustainability is defined within their organization.

While this issue of multiple CSR definitions was highlighted by participants, none identified it as a major issue that impedes their organizational sustainability progress. This finding builds on the work of Valero-Gil, Rivera-Torres, & Garces-Ayerbe (2017) who found that perceived barriers related to organizational CSR adoption are usually overcome and do not impede efforts and progression toward change. While Valero-Gil et al. (2017) recommended that little focus ought to be given to perceived barriers considering that they have limited consequences for sustainability program success, participants in this current study continue to be aware of this issue of tangibility. As Participant A noted, their company is now trying to pull together these fragmented ideas and definitions of sustainability to formulate one single concept that captures the concept across the organization. This may be indicative of a future trend for organizations with mature sustainability programs, where they start to work toward a convergence of ideas, in an effort to address years of diverging concepts and definitions of sustainability.

**Multiple Communication Channels**

Offering a variety of internal communication materials and methods gives employees the option to choose the communication tools they prefer to access information in CSR. It also demonstrates that participants are considering the unique communication needs at an individual level, allowing those who want to know the basics, or the finer details, and all those in between. This finding is consistent with the existing literature, specifically the work
of Ryynänen et al. (2013), who suggest that a variety of internal communication channels is most effective at capturing the widest audience. Multiple channels also suggest that interviewees do not assume one shared perspective among all of their employees. Several studies, including Hejjas et al. (2018), Hemingway (2005), Mirvis (2012), and Rodrigo and Arenas (2008) have highlighted that employees as a stakeholder group are not analogous in terms of their engagement needs and level of interest in CSR. Therefore, from a communication perspective, the need for various communication channels attempts to address the spectrum of individual needs and preferences.

Numerous touchpoints within the organization provides opportunities to build general awareness of sustainability objectives and programs among employees. This theme is consistent with Mazzei (2010), who found that companies that adopt a communication strategy utilizing numerous channels including push, pull, and interactive methods promote active communication within the organization, contributing to knowledge sharing and company success. By applying a broad CSR communication approach that makes use of numerous communication channels, companies may also increase the likelihood of triggering engagement, as individuals may adopt one of these communication channels and participate in the conversation. The concepts of triggering participation from a dormant audience, group or individual by offering varying forms of communication is consistent with Plowman et al. (2015).

However, leveraging multiple communication may in fact contribute to this overwhelming feeling of information and communication overload, a challenge that was identified by many of the participants. Inundation of information and communication aligns with the work of Ganster and Schaubroeck (1991), who found that employees that receive frequent communication from supervisors and organizations can be overwhelming and
burdensome. While not explicitly identified during the interviews, excess of communication has the potential to result in counter-productivity (Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991; Maltz, 2000), and disengagement (Jahansoozi, 2006).

Aligning external and internal CSR communication is important because it is assumed that external communication is just as likely to reach employees as internal communication is consistent with Craig and Allen (2013), Bruhn and Zimmermann (2017), and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn et al. (2017). Strategically managing all communication channels and applying an integrated approach can also support organizational transparency from the employee’s perspective and may streamline the messaging in a way that could lessen the sense of information and communication overload.

**Measuring Engagement**

Participants shared how they have no systematic way to evaluate and measure employee engagement aside from quantitative means such as clicks, reads, likes, etc. Based on Johnston and Taylor’s (2018) framework for engagement manifestation and measurement (see Table 1), most participants fall within Level 1, which includes measuring engagement quantitatively by counting the number of likes, clicks or impressions, for example. While these forms of measurement may provide insights into the reach of specific communication channels, they do not demonstrate actual employee engagement, willingness to participate, or understanding of sustainability. This noted gap aligns with Opoku-Dakwa et al. (2018), who recognized a lack of understanding within the existing research of evaluating characteristics for CSR initiatives and how these impact employee CSR engagement. This finding underscores that there remains a knowledge gap and an opportunity to more effectively understand methods of evaluating employee engagement in sustainability within organizations. *Participants A, C, B, E and H* did note elements of employee engagement that
included behaviour changes and indicators of embeddedness, Level 2 & 3 of Johnston and Taylor’s (2018) framework respectively. While these higher levels can serve as aspirational, it is important that companies first establish an organizational culture, or foundation that supports higher level of employee engagement, forming building blocks that can transition a company from one level to the next.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

When interpreting the findings of this study, it is important to consider that there were two specific limitations that may have implications on the results. First, the small sample size of nine participants, each of which represented a different industry sector with presence in Canada may not represent the views and communication methods implemented throughout each industry, or Canadian companies as a whole. Second, data in this study only captured the ideas and opinions of one or two representatives from each organization. To this point, the information provided by the informants was not verified with the employees within each organization and this study excludes the employee’s perspective.

Given the limitations noted above, additional research could build on this current study by increasing the sample size, gathering more data from a greater number of participants to understand if the themes that emerged in this study apply to a wider group of participants. Similarly, future research drawing data from additional companies within one of the nine sectors identified in this study could be pursued. Future research could expand on this current study by including the employees’ perspective, exploring how employees perceive the effectiveness of the identified communication channels for informing and engaging staff within their organization. Other studies have applied this verification approach to test which forms of communication were most useful and effective at clearly communicating CSR to employees from the employee’s perspective as well as from the
perspective of the sustainability and communication managers (Brunton et al., 2017; Chong, 2009; Karanges, et al., 2015; Mishra et al., 2014); however, these specific studies were more limited in scope, adopting a case study approach working with one single company rather than collecting data from multiple organizations.

Several themes that emerged from the data could be useful for further research, most notably CSR tangibility. Given that all participants have been implementing their CSR programs for several years, it would be valuable to explore why companies with established sustainability programs that include strategic sustainability plans expressed difficulty developing a unified concept of sustainability that applies across the whole organization. Further exploration that expands on the findings from this study will contribute to a greater understanding of how internal communication can be utilized by companies to improve and facilitate employee engagement in CSR.

**Conclusion**

The findings revealed several themes that provide a greater understanding of how internal communication can be used to engage employees in CSR, including: leveraging multiple communication channels; engaging in two-way communication through face-to-face and social media, intranets, or software platforms; message co-creation by providing employees with the opportunity to voice their own ideas and have message ownership, and through collaboration with sustainability managers and communication teams, or cross-functional teams; and measuring engagement. The themes that emerged identify ways that internal communication can engage staff and highlighted some challenges that are commonly faced by any organization.

An ongoing challenge faced by participants included grappling with the issue of tangibility as it relates to sustainability. Given that all participants are further along in
implementing their sustainability strategies and programs, this challenge highlights that sustainability is a complex issue that requires strong communication strategies that can support greater staff awareness and understanding, ensuring individuals recognize how their work contributes to organizational goals.

Participants shared that it is difficult to effectively evaluate employee engagement. This aligns with the scholarly work of Bailey, Madden, Alfes and Fletcher (2017), who found that only a few have examined the practice of organizational employee engagement, and therefore, drawing a conclusive understanding of how this can be measured remains. Participants also expressed interest in being able to demonstrate more meaningful evaluation criteria for engagement beyond counting total impressions and employee questionnaire responses. This finding concurs with the preliminary engagement manifestation levels developed by Johnston and Taylor (2018), suggesting that there is a need to develop a more sophisticated methodology to track indicators that measure interaction, understanding and connectedness, and while many academics have studied the concept of measurement from a theoretical perspective, the variety of approaches limits the development of one overarching methodology (Bailey et al., 2017).

Based on the overall experiences of the participants in this study, adopting an internal CSR communication strategy with multiple channels using an integrated approach is the first step in better understanding and evaluating engagement as it provides greater opportunities for employee interaction and conversation. Understanding how to leverage organizational tools, particularly communication, can support other organizations at any stage of their sustainability journey to encourage, or foster employee engagement and increase participation in CSR.
References


Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. With which industry sector does your company identify?

2. How would you describe your sustainability program?

3. Which team, or individual is responsible for delivering internal communications related to sustainability?

4. a. What internal communication methods are used to share corporate strategies and changes with employees related to sustainability?
   b. Who are your target audiences with each of these strategies?
   c. What are your key messages in your internal communications on sustainability?

5. How have your internal communication approaches varied across departments?

6. How have your internal communication approaches varied among organizational levels? Both up and down?

7. In your opinion, which of these internal communication methods are the most engaging and why?

8. a. In the context of internal communications and sustainability within your organizations, what are some of the more important criteria that you consider when communicating with staff?
   b. Do you think that this criteria is unique to the subject of sustainability, or is it important and applicable to all forms of internal communications?

9. a. In your opinion, which of these methods are the most effective at communicating sustainability programs and initiatives with employees?
   b. In terms of evaluation criteria, have you established ways to understand how well your message, your method of communication was received?
10. a. In your experience, have there been internal communication challenges when engaging your organization on sustainability?

   b. Why do you think that may be?

   c. How were these overcome?

11. a. Is it important to engage employees on sustainability initiatives?

   b. At what stage in the sustainability planning is it important for them to be involved?

   c. Does the level of interest or disinterest from employees impact the likelihood of initiatives moving forward?
Appendix B: Mind-map