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## CONTRIBUTIONS OF ACTIVITY ERGONOMICS AND WORK PSYCHODYNAMICS TO WORKING FROM A SUSTAINABILITY PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract:**

The article presents the result of a doctoral thesis that makes an investigation from case studies in corporate environments about the relationship between work and corporate sustainability. Although work-related issues have already begun in the theoretical framework of Corporate Sustainability (based on sustainable development), this relationship is still little known in practical situations. Thus, through documentary analysis and case studies conducted in 10 organizations engaged in sustainability, this research aims to establish the contributions of ergonomics of work activity and psychodynamics to the consideration of the theme Work in a context of corporate sustainability. Sustainability actions related to Labor were identified, both in the theoretical universe and in the corporate universe. Common elements of sustainability were also verified. Finally, a dialogue with work ergonomics and work psychodynamics makes explicit the need to recognize and incorporate the centrality of work in the sense of working, considering the fundamental role of subjectivity, content and work organization.

**Keywords:** ergonomics of activity, work, corporate sustainability, work psychodynamics, work organization.

## 1. Introduction

Organizations aligned with sustainable development consider aspects related to environmental, economic and social dimensions in their actions, and must consist of sustainable production systems (DOCHERTY; KIRA; SHAMI, 2009; ZINK, 2014) and, consequently, have working environments healthy. This implies that an analysis of the production system also involves the social aspect, including work itself, highlighting the importance of work for the lives of individuals, as well as its contribution to quality and productivity, as well as for the very development of society and culture.

Since 1972, United Nations documents, which have become the guideposts for companies' actions in the field of sustainability, have addressed issues on the topic of work from different perspectives. At Rio 92 it was made clear that the need to satisfy material desires should not come at the expense of generating negative impacts on human health (SCOTT, 2008, p. 498), which also refers to human beings in a work situation. More recently, United Nations documents mention the concept of decent work, involving Fundamental Rights and Principles at Work (GHAI, 2003). The introduction of this concept resulted, above all, from the need to oppose precarious working conditions, such as sweatshops (BLOCK et al., 2001; CHAN, 2001; O'ROURKE, 2003).

In this sense, corporate sustainability (GLADWIN; KENNELLY; KRAUSE, 1995; MONTIEL, 2008; STEURER et al., 2005; VAN MARREWIK, 2003) is a concept that, even if initially focused only on environmental issues, the actions of companies are mainly based on the Triple Bottom Line approach (ELKINGTON, 1994, 1997). Although corporate sustainability is still a concept under definition, with multiple interpretations and approaches, the theme of work is explicitly mentioned in many approaches as a fundamental element (EPSTEIN, 2008; LITTIG; GRIESSLER, 2005; LOZANO, 2013). In addition  
In addition, there is the introduction into companies' routine of guidelines related to corporate sustainability, as is the case of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), ISO 26000 and Global Compact in which there is also an

approach to aspects related to the topic of work (BRUNORO; BOLIS; SZNELWAR, in press).

Although many organizations meet the requirements mediated by legislation and labor standards that establish minimum working conditions, the challenges of broadly understanding the reality of work, in the sense of human action, go further. One of them would be the case of illnesses in the psychic sphere and the high rate of pathogenic suffering in the corporate universe.

Therefore, the objective of this research is to investigate the relationship between work and corporate sustainability in Brazilian companies with the intention of understanding the perception of this relationship and, in particular, what work would be, in the sense of human action, from a perspective of sustainability for the individual. Also noteworthy are the contributions coming from the ergonomics of activity and the psychodynamics of work as a central element of this analysis. As Haslam and Waterson (2013, p. 343) mention, "there is, it seems, a natural synergy between this domain [sustainable development] and ergonomics, with the aim of understanding and optimizing interactions between systems and humans".

## 2. Work and Corporate Sustainability

As Corporate Sustainability converges with the concepts of sustainable development, it is first necessary to highlight the elements

common to this, such as, for example, the consideration of: values and ethics (respect, cooperation, balance, centrality of the human being); temporality (the actions of the current generation create or restrict the opportunities of the next generations); the multiple scales of analysis and interdependence (local, regional and global or individual, organization and society); and the various dimensions (ecological, social and economic); of interdependence and integration between these elements (see, for example, Martens (2006) and Gladwin et al. (1995, p. 878).

3.

Therefore, in general terms, the change to a sustainability perspective is to understand interdependencies, aiming to identify more clearly the externalities that may be generated and that, in some way, are treated with actions that deal with the main sources, to the detriment of

mitigating actions focusing on effects considered collateral. Consequently, it is considered relevant to identify whether each action or practice (considered “sustainable”) acts on the main sources or simply on the effect, and also whether it considers potential externalities (positive and negative) that can be generated, including considering the temporal dimension.

Considering the multiple scales of analysis, from a perspective of sustainable development and, consequently, corporate sustainability, it is necessary to design production (or work) systems aligned with the concepts of sustainability. As proposed by Docherty et al. (2009), a sustainable work system aims to regenerate the resources it uses – human, social, material and natural resources – returning them to society preserved or improved (developed), with the development of a type of resource not it must occur at the expense of exploiting other resources and, consequently, taking responsibility measures for external costs (see also KIRA; EIJNATTEN, 2009).

In particular, health impacts are closely related to changes in the world of work, caused by new working conditions due to social or organizational changes. This reality requires a greater understanding, for example, of the causes and effects of issues mainly studied by ergonomics, and of psychosocial factors on stress at work (ILO, 2010, p. 2). It is worth mentioning that management techniques focused on reducing costs lead to an intensification of work and a higher level of stress, even generating financial losses.

– which were precisely what would be combated – by illnesses and loss of productivity (ASKENAZY et al., 2006; GREEN, 2006; WESTGAARD; WINKEL, 2011). As Moscovitz (1971, p. 213) states, worker health should be an end and not a means of progress.

In a broader sense, healthy can be understood as something that goes beyond issues related to illnesses and accidents at work, encompassing physical and mental issues and pointing towards a positive agenda, in the sense of construction, understanding the concept of health as the possibility of “having the means to trace a personal and original path, towards physical, psychological and social well-being” (DEJOURS, 1986, p. 4). Relating organizational aspects with health issues becomes a

challenge, especially when the causal link is not so clear, and this becomes worse when the disorders generated are of a mental nature, with few, or no, physical manifestations or possibilities. of quantitative measurement (MAENO, 2011).

Starting from an interdisciplinary vision (WISNER, 2004), ergonomics (DANIELLOU, 1996) seeks positive results for the organization (and its evolution) and for people (workers). In particular, activity ergonomics (DANIELLOU; RABARDEL, 2005; DANIELLOU, 2005; WISNER, 1995) meets this

double objective, considering the impact of work content and work design, also considering the need to regulate the production system promoted by the worker (FALZON, 2004), as well as health as a dynamic process (DEJOURS, 2009). All these elements converge towards the centrality of the human being in the work process. In this way, it is necessary to provide subsidies for the conception of work provided with content, as opposed to alienating work (WISNER, 1994, p. 71–74).

Thus, by providing subsidies for engineering and administration action, human work activity would be considered as one of the fundamental pillars of any project, and not as the adjustment variable to be treated when practically everything is already defined and all that remains is to fit. suitable workers (ABRAHÃO et al., 2009; GUÉRIN et al., 2001; HUBAULT, 2005; NOULIN, 1992; TERSSAC; MAGGI, 2004).

### 3. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This study has an exploratory nature using comparative content analysis. For data collection, case studies were carried out in 10 organizations (companies) engaged in corporate sustainability, with the intention of explaining the perception of the relationship between work and sustainability and related practices. The case studies involved both an analysis of documents (corporate websites and corporate sustainability reports or similar) and semi-structured interviews. With data collected from multiple sources of evidence, the information was evaluated from an inductive view.

The case studies were structured to verify the interviewees'

perception of the relationship between work and sustainability. Next, we investigated whether the elements of activity ergonomics and work psychodynamics, in particular, the influence of work content and organization, are present in a structured way in sustainability actions focused on the topic of work. At the end, a discussion is presented regarding the contributions of activity ergonomics and work psychodynamics.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Work-related sustainability practices

The companies interviewed place work-related sustainability practices at a high level. They practice, in addition to what they themselves consider as a necessary minimum (compliance with laws and human rights/decent work), health and safety programs; health and well-being/quality of life programs, actions in the supply chain; actions aimed at diversity, equality and meeting special needs; professional development actions; use of a code of conduct and/or ethics committee, among other actions.

They consider that benefits and actions must be aligned with the company's purpose. In general, they emphasize that the benefits policy is related to the internal social dimension of sustainability, since these benefits are not random, and must be aligned with the company's business. For example, benefits in education (technological, financial or other knowledge) are better structured if the company considers the generation of knowledge relevant to its business; nutrition and well-being, if in the food sector; health and safety if it is in the high-risk industrial process sector.

Regarding the issue of a healthy work environment, health and safety actions are observed, mainly to deal with physical issues in the work environment. Regarding psychic or mental issues, health and well-being actions, quality of life, with meditation rooms, yoga classes and stress management programs are observed, as well as

individual attention channels.

### 4.2 More sustainable work

Regarding what would be a more sustainable work, there is the consideration of work provided with meaning, that what is being carried out makes sense. Therefore, working must be an action that is positive for both the company and the worker, in a win-win relationship, which, if possible, does not generate negative externalities. "When you have an organization that gives importance to your development and gives you opportunities for it, the worker gives everything, he is the protagonist." "There is always suffering and pleasure. The secret is to have a common thread between work and the meaning you will give to your life." The centrality of the human being also emerges, "the relationship between sustainability and work means focusing on the human being", focused mainly on relationships and trust. "And I say this with pride, I have already worked [at another company] and it is very different, that the trust of people here is at the heart of the company. When you have that, everything revolves around it." "The interpersonal relationship is deeper than any systematic program you will create (e.g. research), it is how I relate to my team or my leader. Interpersonal relationships are what may or may not make all the difference in the company."

### 4.3 Importance of work for sustainability

Work (the worker) is considered the protagonist of sustainability. "The individual is one of the pillars of sustainability." Without it there is no way to have sustainability, since it is with people that actions happen. "What do we do? It's all through people, through people's decisions."

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

If, on the one hand, the analysis of the case studies demonstrates that companies recognize the importance of human action in organizational processes, with the human being being the fundamental piece in guaranteeing corporate sustainability, and work must also be provided with meaning and meaning, on the other hand, it is also evident that: 1) corporate actions aimed at sustainability focus on elements that do not include the work itself and

its content; 2) when there are actions towards improvements, these are generally compensatory or mitigating, focusing on the effects rather than the main sources; 3) the scope of sustainability actions focused on the individual is directed to issues with individual scope and, most often, to direct leadership, with little scope for broader scopes, which involve, for example, the organization of work and the content of the work.

There are many actions related to working conditions, health and safety at work, human development and well-being. In particular, a theme mentioned in the case studies regarding what sustainable work would be, was the fact that, ultimately, “it makes sense”, “it has meaning”, and it must be established in a win-win relationship between the worker and the company. Another highlight was the importance of a vision of comprehensive health in every way, both inside and outside the work environment.

The proposal for work that has meaning, in a collective dimension, permeates the approaches to the ergonomics of activity and the psychodynamics of work, the construction of health, the fulfillment of oneself, and the development of the profession. In this way, the centrality of work is considered a fundamental element for sustainability, understanding the worker as the protagonist of action and work as the protagonist of production (SZNELWAR, 2013). Furthermore, it is proposed that through coexistence in the work environment, with true respect in interpersonal relationships at work (solidarity, trust and cooperation), the possibility, at the limit, of building (or rebuilding) living in society. In other words, the extraordinary strength of work as a source of the civilizing process (DEJOURS, 2012). But, to do so, it is necessary to assume the premise that it is possible to transform work (SZNELWAR, 2011, p. 15).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Analyzing the elements highlighted by the ergonomics of the activity and the psychodynamics of work, the following contributions to work in a context of sustainability stand out:

- Understanding work to transform: more focused on working for sustainability, these disciplines collaborate to identify the content of new tasks, new restrictions, new impacts for workers in work situations that have, for example, premises, sustainability goals and policies.
- Identify the drivers (sources) for sustainable work: merging both work for sustainability and sustainability of work, these disciplines make it possible to identify unknown externalities, especially those related to organizational aspects that are not always considered.
- Organizational alignment regarding issues related to work: from a perspective of sustainability for work, by focusing on work, in the sense of action, activity, on issues directly related to work, these disciplines can help to interconnect departments that influence and impact the work.

According to the approaches of activity ergonomics and work psychodynamics, many issues, especially those related to the content and organization of work, are closely related to sustainability inducers. Working from a sustainability perspective promotes process efficiency by recognizing and enabling the engagement of intelligence at all levels of the organization, contributing to environments that favor the construction of health and professional development. The contributions are in the fields of human relations (trust, cooperation, solidarity, human rights); professional development; the construction of health (in the sense of its positive agenda); and self-realization, in the sense of emancipation (BRUNORO, 2013)

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