

# Translating environmental life cycle management through an organization

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## *Business models for sustainability*

**Introduction:** The business logic of corporations working with environmental management has traditionally focused on corporate in-house aspects of environmental issues. Some corporations are extending this focus towards all stages of a product life cycle, referred to as environmental life cycle management (LCM) (Hunkeler et al., 2003; Baumann and Tillman, 2004; Poikkimäki, 2006). But research describing LCM integration is rare (Seuring, 2004; Vermeulen and Seuring, 2009) and often fails to describe difficulties of organizing LCM in practice (Nilsson-Lindén et al., 2014). In this paper, we explore the processes of integrating LCM into an organization, using a model of translation (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). The traditional diffusion theory of innovation imply that an idea diffuses through an organization with the help only of the attractiveness of the idea itself. This is not reflected in our study, instead we have seen a process of change, where change is a result of the actions of many. Thereby, it is useful to apply the translation model, as another theory for the study of innovation, in order to gain improved understanding of LCM practice.

**Methods:** Using interviews, observations and documents, we studied how the idea of life cycle thinking (LCT) traveled in a multinational manufacturing corporation, and how it was translated into practice in two settings: the sustainability and the purchasing departments.

**Results:** An idea of LCT was picked up when a development unit started using life cycle assessment (LCA) to calculate environmental burden along product life cycles. LCT then got picked up at the Sustainability Department and translated into LCM as new concepts, policies, and practices developed, e.g. the development of a green business portfolio. Here, LCT influenced environmental management from being corporate-oriented to product chain oriented (LCM). Members of the Sustainability Department enacted these ideas and practices with the ambition to spread the idea of LCM into the different departments. At the Purchasing Department, another translation process instead took place, picking up sustainability with LCT elements from standards and regulation. Here, the translation process put focus on the upstream supply chain—the context in which purchasing operates.

**Discussion and Conclusion:** LCM became the ambition of the organization, but the translation processes in different departments were not in sync. We found different varieties of the life cycle idea, picked up from different sources. The ambition was to spread a business idea of LCM in the organization, but in the Purchasing Department only upstream sustainability management was in focus, thus differentiating from LCM with business discussions based in the full product chain. Drawing on translation theory, we suggest that practitioners need to go beyond LCM *implementation* and *diffusion*, to engage actively in understanding interpretations

and translations of LCM elsewhere in the organization. Cross-departmental collaboration is one way to enhance practitioners understanding for how sustainability-related issues provides opportunities or challenges for different parts of the organization and thus a way to strengthen LCM uptake in the organization.

## References

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