═══ INVESTIGACIONES ═══

SUSTAINABILITY: A NEW LOOK AT HEALTHY PEOPLAE AND WORKPLACES

SOSTENIBILIDAD: UNA NUEVA IMAGEN DE PERSONAS Y ENTORNOS DE TRABAJO SALUDABLES

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RESUMEN

En este artículo, presentado en el congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Orientación Escolar y Profesional en Buenos Aires, Argentina, en Septiembre de 2009, la sostenibilidad medioambiental se introduce como metáfora para ayudar a examinar la sostenibilidad individual y organizacional.

El artículo comienza con una presentación sobre los retos de la sostenibilidad, y pasa a subrayar la desconexión entre los compromisos públicos para apoyar el equilibrio entre vida y trabajo y la salud en los entornos de trabajo y la realidad a la que los individuos se enfrentan. A continuación se examina el impacto de los cambios laborales en el individuo y las organizaciones, utilizando las iniciativas de sostenibilidad medioambiental como modelo holístico de cambio. El artículo concluye señalando las implicaciones que tiene para los orientadores, profesionales de recursos humanos y equipos directivos el apoyar a sus clientes, estudiantes, colegas y empleados en la consecución de iniciativas sostenibles en la gestión de su carrera y su vida.

Palabras clave: sostenibilidad medioambiental, modelo holístico, recursos humanos, cambios laborales.

ABSTRACT

In this article, based on a presentation at the International Association of Educational and Vocational Guidance conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in September 2009, environmental sustainability is introduced as a metaphor to help examine individual and organizational sustainability. To begin, sustainability challenges are presented, followed by a discussion of the disconnect between public commitments to supporting work-life balance and healthy workplaces and the realities individuals continue to encounter. Next, the individual and organizational impacts of chronic busyness are examined. Finally, solutions are presented from a systemic perspective, using environmental sustainability initiatives as holistic models for change. The article concludes with implications for career and guidance

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counsellors, human resource professionals, and management teams interested in supporting clients, students, colleagues, and employees to embrace sustainable approaches to career and life management.

Key words: environmental sustainability, holistic approach, human resources, busyness.

Introduction

Sustainability is a global concern; the focus is typically on the environment, food sources, and oil. There is a growing recognition that, particularly in developed countries, current consumption rates of many important resources are not sustainable (Gyenis, 2006).

Within the global economy, we seem to be experiencing a similar problem with our human resources. Individuals and organizations are on a slippery slope, striving for continuous improvement and doing more with less (Buhler, 2003). Many developed countries are facing a critical shortage of skilled workers; recruitment, retention, and employee engagement are challenges across sectors and occupational groups (Pickerell & Neault, 2007). Sadly, some of the best and brightest workers are burning out (Lange, 2006). People who could always be counted on to pull the extra weight have no more reserves – they have stretched beyond their capacity to recover. Both absenteeism and presenteeism (i.e., showing up at work but producing very little) are increasing (Ceridian Corporation, 2006).

The Disconnect

It's no surprise that, in response, organizational leaders are expressing commitment to healthy workplaces (Alberta Human Resources and Employment, 2005). Some workers, in turn, are prioritizing health and family – refusing to work overtime and leaving overly stressful jobs. Ironically, this has raised issues within multi-generational workplaces; there tends to be a generational difference in attitudes about getting work done (Kupperschmidt, 2000).

In many organizations, there is also a disconnect between a public commitment to healthy workplaces and the reality of who gets rewarded for what. Chronic busyness is worn as a badge of honour; colleagues compete to convince each other of who has the busiest life (Moses, 1999). Incentives may be linked to productivity that could only be achieved through over-time work and sacrificing other life roles.

The Impact of Continuous Busyness

The frenzy of continuous busyness impacts individual wellbeing and organizational success. At an individual level, relentless stress is associated with burnout (Luban, n.d.). People need breaks – daily (during the work day and after work), weekly (weekends or days of rest), and annually (vacations); Ciccarelli, n.d.). In a workplace impacted by a shortage of skilled workers, however, each of these typical periods of downtime may be compromised; high performers will continue to take on the added responsibilities until they have nothing left to give. Sadly, their breaks may come in the form of physical illness, stress leave, or quitting their jobs altogether. My own organization, Life Strategies Ltd., re-

cently conducted an Internet survey of a small group of career practitioners in Western Canada (n = 31); 75% of the respondents indicated that at least 20% (and up to 80%) of their clients reported leaving their last jobs due to stress-related concerns.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) identified the link between skills and challenge, in terms of optimal performance or "flow" (i.e., high skills matched with high challenge is a recipe for high performance and employee engagement; high skills and low challenge contributes to boredom; low skills and high challenge is associated with worry and anxiety). He reported that too much of an imbalance in either direction may lead to apathy or disengagement.

However, skills and challenge alone may be insufficient to explain flow; sometimes an individual has sufficient skills to meet a challenge but lacks the necessary resources (Neault, 2002). This has important implications for organizations; expecting individuals to produce high quality work with insufficient staff support, time, or physical resources has the potential to contribute to burnout or "presenteeism" (i.e., showing up for work but getting very little done).

Many organizations are struggling with recruitment, retention, and employee engagement issues. Similar to the challenges experienced by individuals, these issues can be interpreted as symptoms of an unsustainable system – without significant change, organizations which appear on the outside to be stable and successful will gradually collapse from within as they try to conduct business as normal with limited resources. With an increase in absenteeism, presenteeism, errors, and tasks left undone, productivity will diminish and good workers will burn out or move on (Health and Safety Executive, n.d.; Kamloops Daily News, 2008; Linzer et al., n. d.).

Solutions

Solutions will not be found in silos; sustainability requires a holistic approach. Systems theory may provide a framework for conceptualizing the interconnectedness of individuals, organizations, government policies, and other influences as they impact the sustainability of people at work (Heylighen & Joslyn, 1992).

> Systems theory has brought a new perspective for managers to interpret patterns and events in their organizations. In the past, managers typically took one part and focused on that. Then they moved all attention to another part. The problem was that an organization could, e.g., have wonderful departments that operate well by themselves but don't integrate well together. Consequently, the organization suffers as a whole. (McNamara, 2007, para. 5)

Environmental sustainability projects can serve as metaphors. For example, recently in Canada the Zone Cooperative of Laval University (2008) introduced an initiative to eliminate the use of plastic bags. Their plan had several phases: first they proactively arranged for replacement products. They selected locally made reusable bags (further reducing environmental impact by choosing to reduce shipping distance and also contributing to sustaining jobs in the local economy). Next, they provided convenient receptacles to collect and redistribute plastic bags. They also integrated financial incentives, both selling the new bags at below cost and also offering a five cent discount for any purchases made without plastic bags. For such purchases, they provided a matching contribution to a sustainable develop-

ment fund. Finally, they identified an end date for the use of plastic bags at their locations, allowing a full semester for the transition to take place.

Applying this process to human sustainability initiatives can provide a road map. The plastic bag example demonstrates that it's okay to start small. Therefore, in contemplating how to influence the sustainability of individuals and organizations, it may be helpful to look for quick wins. Ask yourself what small change, introduced gradually, might make a significant difference.

Next, the example illustrates a systemic approach, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the environment, economy, and business. Prior to embarking on a human sustainability initiative, whether individually or corporately, it will be important to consider potential impacts on other elements within the system. A holistic approach will examine how one change may have a domino or ripple effect (e.g., although one employee reclaiming his or her weekends may have an immediate personal benefit, it may leave a gap in customer service or may impact a project team's ability to meet contracted deadlines).

A Holistic Approach

Counsellors and career practitioners typically work with individuals; human resource professionals and industrial-organizational psychologists, on the other hand, tend to focus on the organization's strategic direction and bottom line. A holistic approach to sustainability crosses that divide, equipping those within organizations to better understand the needs of the individuals they employ and also educating individuals about the complex systems within which they work.

In the previously mentioned Life Strategies survey, career practitioners were asked about their strategies for building capacity within their clients to manage an increasingly busy workload. It was interesting to discover that their strategies were entirely focussed on the individual (e.g., work-life balance, stress management, time management, skill development, setting goals, prioritizing, developing positive attitudes). Not a single respondent identified helping clients to understand organizational systems or equipping them to advocate for organizational change.

On the other hand, Life Strategies' recent consulting projects have revealed an awakening among corporate leaders to the need for workplace-based career management, wellness, teambuilding, leadership development, and training initiatives (i.e., strategic capacity building for individuals that will meet current and future organizational needs). Organizations recognize the human sustainability challenges they are facing; career practitioners and counsellors have skills that can help to solve these problems. However, each group will need to reach beyond their silos to generate holistic solutions. There will also be a role for government – setting policies and funding human sustainability initiatives that will, in turn, impact economic and environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

In a quest for sustainability, every little bit helps. Just as people can master the habit of using canvas rather than plastic bags for grocery shopping, so too sustainable solutions can

be introduced to individual and corporate clients and students. Career counsellors and corporate managers can model sustainability; specific examples include building in a "Sabbath" (i.e., a day of rest) into online courses, making personal commitments to "tithing time" (i.e., waiving fees for 10% of a work week for projects that serve the community), and supporting telecommuting so that staff or students can work from home offices most days, lessening role conflicts as they juggle work and family responsibilities. Individuals who travel extensively for work can be encouraged to maintain contact with family and friends through Internet-based technologies such as MSN and Skype video or by inviting family members to travel with them whenever possible. Rather than wearing busyness as a badge of honour, counsellors and managers can consciously attempt, one step at a time, to live more effectively within the margins of their lives.

Such modelling is a preliminary means of encouraging sustainable solutions. Further discussions and research on this important topic will be helpful in informing initiatives that are culturally relevant for the diverse clients we serve.

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