ESSAY – MINI MBA NEW ENERGY REALITIES

How young professionals from Generation Y might be the salesmen of the sustainable energy transition within your company

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The objective of this essay is to explore the role young professionals, especially from Generation Y, can play in fostering innovation processes within companies aimed at accelerating the energy transition. I have a personal interest in this topic first of all because of my study background; I finished my study Business Administration with a research on the sustainability leadership of Generation Y. This master thesis concluded that young people between the ages 20 to 32, Generation Y, working on sustainability projects portray a pro-active type of leadership in dealing with societal challenges. Moreover, the literature study as part of this research showed that in general young professionals from Generation Y consider sustainability and climate change to be key issues for business and part of bigger systemic changes within society (Muusse, 2015). This research left me with the impression that many members of my generation agree on the idea that moving towards a more sustainable society can and should be realized through changing business and are thus seeking ways to express this belief in their own careers as young professionals.

My work experiences also match these findings. For the last couple of years I have been highly active, first in my spare time as a student, an later as an entrepreneur to contribute to the sustainability movement in the Netherlands by setting up all sorts of youth projects and working for MVO Nederland (CSR the Netherlands), a networking organisation of more than 2000 companies active in sustainability. My perception based on this experience is that many company leaders, business professionals and public officials, carry high hopes of a new generation business leaders. Many senior business professionals asked me for advise on how to mobilise the younger generation within companies behind sustainability goals. The senior CSR professionals involved in some of my projects seemed to be convinced that young professionals are the perfect target group for a bottom-up approach of employee engagement because of their energy, enthusiasm, digital skills and 'fresh' take on this. Moreover, I have encountered many young people on a daily basis who pursue both positive environmental and social impact within their careers; either as entrepreneurs of intrapreneurs within larger commercial and public organisations.

More recently I started working more and more with young professionals from large energy companies and young entrepreneurs with start-ups in renewable energy. My interest for the energy sector lies in its at the one hand huge potential to change the current (negative) trends in climate change and lead us to a more sustainable society and at the other hand my own experience of the conservativeness that exists within this sector and the challenges to really disrupt and re-invent current business. A recent conversation with a young energy professional illustrated this perfectly. He said: *'When I finished my business administration studies at the university I had two great job offers; one was working for start-up, low-salary but lots of freedom with a team of three other young guys who wanted to launch a new (social) innovation together in the renewable energy sector, the other option was working for one of the biggest energy companies in the Netherlands, bigger salary and good career prospects. I chose the second option. Now I'm with a team of people who are responsible for developing 2 or 3 successful new innovation projects within our company each year; the start-up I was telling about is now with 20 people and really disrupting the energy sector, potentially leaving us out of work within 5 or 10 years. Last week I started this talent development programme preparing me for a management position within the company. But what if I made a mistake?'*

These encounters continue to inspire me and challenge me to think critically and analytically about the role members of my generation including myself can play in solidifying the future of sustainability through our professional careers. Will my generation change the face of business? Are or can we already make a difference within big organisations in our current role as young professionals? How can we contribute to a sustainable energy transition?

1.2 Problem definition and research questions

Most of the existing literature on a new generation business leaders is approached from the perspective of Generation Y entering the workforce. Research in this field is mainly considered with the managerial implications of a new generation workers who are assumed to have characteristics like techno-savvy, highly educated, entrepreneurial, confident, distinguishing them from previous generations (Tulgan & Martin, 2001). Moreover, the entrance of Generation Y into the workforce is often considered problematic or challenging for managers considering the many negative attributes given to this generation like lazy, restless, undisciplined etc.

Some literature exists on generational differences in the workforce and the implications for organizations. In the Netherlands the scholar Aart Bontekoning made name with his studies on this topic, he however raises his concerns about a new generation entering the workforce and getting trapped into the 'old' organizational routines and structures set up by previous generations, hindering their ability and motivation to bring about organizational change (2014). The literature on managing Generation Y within the organizational context still remains little compared with the literature on other generation cohorts. Two scholars explain this by arguing that there's a tendency to study full-time workers because longitudinal data can be gained, instead of younger workers that work mostly part-time. This makes sense since the big entry of members of Generation Y into the workforce has been very recent and is still taking place (Loughlin and Barling (2001:548). Besides, it will take at least ten years for managerial positions and more than twenty years when leadership positions in companies will be taking over by members of Generation Y. At the same time, interesting societal changes might push the age of influential people further down; in the words of the American historian James Kennedy 'power is moving down in age'. Regardless of whether or not this trend will set through; Generation Y will become a more interesting birth cohort to perform research on in years to come as the Baby Boom generation is leaving leadership positions en masse.

Even scarcer to find is research that explores where Generation Y members stand on environmental and social issues and how this affects the leadership they (will) portray as professional practitioners or entrepreneurs. Interestingly, some big consultancy firms and marketing bureaus have taking the initiative in performing large scale research on the perceptions of Generation Y about sustainability topics and leadership, for example in the UK the SKY Future Leaders Study (2011) and more recently by Deloitte with their Millennial Report (2015) providing us with very interesting insights in the way this new generation views career making, leadership and so on. It is therefore remarkable that the scientific literature on this topic is still utterly lacking.

This research aims to fill this literature gap by researching the role young professionals, with a specific focus on members of Generation Y, can play in accelerating the energy transition especially through fostering innovation processes within companies. The problem definition central to this essay is as follows:

> *How can the role that young professionals in the Netherlands, with a specific focus on members of Generation Y, can play within the (sustainable) innovation processes of companies be understood and what factors are important in predicting their success in accelerating the energy transition towards a more sustainable society?*

To answer the main research question the sub-questions below will be answered first:

- How can the role of young professionals in (sustainable) innovation processes within companies be understood from an innovation management perspective?

- How can the role of young professionals in (sustainable) innovation processes be understood from a generational perspective?

- How can the actions from professionals relate to the bigger developments and trends within business; specifically the energy transition?

- What is the role of innovation in the energy transition? How are energy companies in the Netherlands currently using innovation for the benefit of the energy transition?

- What factors are important in forecasting the success of young professionals to contribute to a sustainable energy transition through innovation processes within the companies they work for?

1.3 Relevance

This essay will take on an exploratory approach meaning it will reflect on a topic – or problem- not yet defined clearly and offer suggestions for further research and study. Moreover, it aims to bring together various insights from my personal and work experience, literature from different areas of study and business papers and articles. The social relevance of this essay is that it can inspire and motivate current business leaders of the older generation to acknowledge and do more with the potential of the younger generation to contribute to a sustainable future and it can stimulate managers to actively work on a better understanding between generations within their organization to foster innovation. Moreover, this essay can increase the generational consciousness amongst members of Generation Y and empower young professionals to take on an active approach when it comes to sustainability and innovation within their own area of expertise.

2. Theoretical Framework & considerations

In this chapter I will touch upon a few theoretical concepts and considerations that will form the basis of my final statement and conclusion.

2.1 Generational Theory

The starting point of this essay is my observation that there's a growing interest amongst young people- young professionals - belonging to Generation Y, to differentiate themselves with their work in the field of sustainability. Attributing characteristics, interests, and behaviour to a specific group of people within society born in the same time period is the core of Generational Theory. Although personality might vary from person to person, Generational Theory assumes that people born between for example 1982 and 2000 (Generation Y) have shared the same situational factors while growing up and becoming adolescent and are therefore likely to develop shared norms, values, ideas and perspectives on society, and portray specific behaviour. Belonging to a generation can thus influence individual decisions and actions, make them more likely or unlikely to occur, like portraying sustainable leadership or other types of environmental significant behaviour within professional life.

The foundations of Generational Theory date back to fifties and the work of sociologist Karl Mannheim. Important to reflect upon in this essay is his notion that sharing the same circumstances however is not enough for a group of people born in the same time period (birth cohort) to become a generation. *'A generation is only formed when the shared historical and social circumstances are also defined and interpreted in the same way'*. The effect of belonging to a specific generation is than expressed through a common identity and worldview that results in future action (Adriaansen, 2008:14).

The mentioning of 'future action' in generational theory grabs my attention because of my own impression that my generation shares a common worldview of a sustainable future and thus will act accordingly. Interesting is the distinction Bourdieu makes between passive and active generations. According to Bourdieu 'generations shift from being a passive cohort into a politically active and self-conscious cohort when they are able to exploit resources to innovate in cultural, intellectual or political spheres' (Edmunds & Turner, 2002:562). An active generation doesn't accept the economical, social, cultural circumstances and field of politics as given, but tries to change them. An active generation is often followed by a passive generation, because in consuming existing resources and exploiting opportunities an active generation closes off the advantages of the generation that follows after. Following the reasoning that each generation has a distinct response to its time because of shared generational circumstances we can assume that the interest of today's young people in sustainability is a specific response of Generation Y to current circumstances; sustainability might be Generation Y's narrative. It would be possible to write an entire essay alone about these circumstances but in summary I would like to address the financial and economical meltdown since 2007/2008, resource scarcity, environmental problems (climate change; natural disasters) and geo-political tensions to be important drivers of a general public concern and interest in securing a more sustainable future. Although these issues are as said of general public concern; to members of Generation Y these issues are the first big challenges they face as young adults after a prosperous childhood in the 90's and early 00's. Being brought up in a digital, connected and global world, the response of this generation to these circumstances will differ from other generations as well.
In this essay more importance will go the response of my generation to these circumstances; with the underlying hypothesis of this essay stating that young professionals of Generation Y indeed have a distinct role to play in solidifying a sustainable energy transition for example through their unique role in innovation processes within big energy companies.

Another factor that influences the response of members of Generation Y to current circumstances is phase of life. Phase of life influences the social role a birth cohort plays in society. According to most authors' young adulthood is a phase of activity and vitality in which values are tested, while serving institutions at the same time. All members of Generation Y are currently in the described phase of life in which people are actively trying to find their place in the world. We must keep in mind that the most influential phase in life is between the age of 40 and 60; people than have the most impact and occupy (formal) power positions within society (Bontekoning, 2007:79). However, as briefly touched upon in the introduction power is probably going down in age as power itself is 'eroding' (the end of power)

Concluding, because social change in society can be explained through the variation of active and passive generations throughout history we can expect Generation Y to show signs of an active generation considering their circumstances, life phase and the Bourdieu ruling of 'passive-active' generations; previous Generation X, born between 1960 – 1980 has in most of the generational research been characterized as a passive generation that followed the active Baby Boomers.

2.1.1. Generation Y as young professionals

When we look at the general literature about Generation Y the following characteristics and attitudes are often discussed; self-confident, open-minded, practical, authentic, civic-minded, diversity, instant gratification and fastness, individualistic but also a need to be connected with others, critical, multi-tasking, seeking for purpose in their lives and work, experience and meaning are more important than ownership over material goods, digital and seeking solutions with technology. The causes of these characteristics and attitudes are by most researchers found to be related to a very conscious and generous parenting by late Baby Boomers and Generation X with the credo of 'make your children feel special', the prosperous economic conditions, high educational standards and relatively peaceful, tolerant and diverse societies while growing up (Muusse, 2015:74).

These characteristics and attitudes are also reflected in the way members of Generation Y shape their careers and behave as young professionals within organizations. As young professionals members of Generation Y are characterized by their team and peer-orientation, collaborative decision making, transparency, entrepreneurship, flexibility, transformational leadership, digital skills, networkers, communicative skills, holistic worldview, creativity, intrinsically motivated to contribute, trouble with balancing work and personal life, stress and burn-outs, struggles with hierarchy, discipline, formality and tendency to constantly seek new career challenges (job-hopping).

A side note but must be made to this section; this description of Generation Y as young professionals must only be applied to young people from Western countries since formative circumstances might vary a bit between European countries, the differences with other continents are too big to attribute the discussed research findings to all young people from this birth cohort all over the world. The description of Gen Y's young professionals is also potentially a bit biased because often only the higher educated young professionals are studied; also in my research only higher educated young professionals were interviewed (Muusse, 2015). What we do know however from research findings is that also lower-educated are interested in sustainability, also in their personal lives and not often out of idealism but also cost-reduction. Although searching for meaning and impact in your job is less a trend with lower educated young people; spending more quality time on family, friends, and vacation is. Most young people preferably don't work fulltime; work isn't as important to them compared to previous generations. Many young people have become disillusioned seeing their parents work very hard and not getting in the end the life they dreamt of; also government decisions like a cut on the AOW play a role in the future prospects of this generation. Many of the young people I spoke, high and low-educated argue *'I don't want to put my dreams in life, happiness, seeing friends, having fun, going on vacation whenever I want to, all in the future. I want to live that life*

right now'. I personally recognize this attitude and I think it is also further fed through media and especially social networks life facebook and instagram. A well studied modern phenomena amongst young people and very much related to social media is FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). FOMO is fear that people get from missing out on fulfilling specific desires that they got from looking at the lives of other people and the material goods others use and display on social networks and in the media.

However, at the same time it must be acknowledged that especially amongst the lower educated young people a big group is also struggling to shape their lives. For some developments in society and technology might be going to fast. We also see an increasing tendency amongst young people to live with their parents again or returns to the hometowns were they grow up. Additionally Many young people are facing financial problems and debts. What makes it extra tough for these young people is that 'failure' is not accepted in our generation; failure is considered your own fault or responsibility, as is success. Since social welfare is on its return; this will demand new forms of solidarity within society and from successful members of Generation Y to spread the wealth. New forms of collectiveness will also arise for example for entrepreneurs sharing risks, new ways of social insurance etc. The problem I see is with the organization of these collectives is that it demands long and hard work while profits are low. Does my generation have the strength, patience, and discipline to organize these new structures?

2.1.2. Young professionals attitude on sustainability topics

The attitude of young professionals belonging to Generation Y on sustainability topics has little been researched. Combining research insights from the Dutch Research Institute IPSOS (2014), the newspaper NRC (2011) and CBS (2009) shows that young people till the age of 25 in the Netherlands seem to be more concerned an conscious about climate change than older generations. My own research in which I interviewed 20 young professionals on the biggest challenges facing our society shows the following; climate change, resource scarcity and the energy transition are all top 5 worries and top concerns for young business leaders. Interestingly all young leaders interviewed consider these challenges to be systemic problems or flaws; consequently they reasoned, systemic changes or a paradigm shift is needed to overcome these problems. Despite of the challenges our society faces most young people can be considered optimistic about the future. Research shows that Generation Y is more optimistic than older generations and has more faith in government and other institutions. Other reasons for optimism amongst young professionals belonging to Generation Y is confidence in a different type of leadership of their own generation, companies taking more responsibility, and a general sense or urgency within society.

Another interesting finding in my own research was that the young professionals that already work on sustainability are very intrinsically motivated to do so. The most often given reasons to the question why these young professionals work on sustainability were 'I feel a sense of duty' and 'It makes me happy to help other people and the planet' (Muusse, 2015:91). Based on my observations it seems as though too many young professionals from Generation Y sustainability is not an exception but the most logic and only way to do business in the future. These findings are also backed up by an important Generation Y research held annually by Deloitte; the Milennial Survey. This research shows that young professionals are viewing business through the lenses of social impact and sustainability; more than 70 percent of the young professionals expect business to increase levels of overall prosperity within society. Research also indicated that young professionals from Generation Y are willing to trade off primary job conditions like salary for a job with meaning and sustainable or social impact.

What does this mean? It seems as though indeed many young professionals in the Western world interpret the current circumstances in a likewise manner indicating that there is a generational consciousness amongst members of Generation Y in favor of sustainability. But, how to get there?

What does the response of young professionals who are already active in sustainability look like? The young professionals in my research answered this question with '*by doing and organizing things differently ourselves*','*applying new technologies*' and '*introducing new values and standard / having higher demands*', '*collaboration*', '*positive communication*' and '*creating an (international) movement through social networks*' (Muusse, 2015: 115-116). The young professionals in my research also stretched the importance of making sustainability mainstream. Finally, the research I conducted showed that current young leaders, entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs, are performing today the type of leadership that approaches societal challenges in a pro-active and transformational way; by being a role model yourself, through cooperation and partnering and by approaching sustainability with positivity and stimulating people to think about the little things they can do to contribute themselves. This type of leadership is putting them ahead in terms of leadership compared to other generations on the pathway to sustainable transition.

2.1.3 The power of young people within organizations

In the previous section I have tried to illustrate that young professionals belonging to Generation Y might be well e quipped and motivated to portray the needed leadership in sustainability. But young people are obviously not the only generation within an organization. And like other generations they also have their flaws and difficulties as professionals. What is the power of young people within the organizational context? And what kind of role would be suited for young people keeping the aim of sustainable transition in the back of our minds?

First of all on my personal experience before discussing theoretical concepts. I personally have experienced young professionals to be very enthusiastic and motivated when it comes to taking on extra projects, especially with a sustainable or societal impact, and those that at the same contribute to their career. The strength of young professionals is that they are eager to take on new challenges that can help them distinguish themselves from peers. Moreover, young professionals are often willing to give priority to work when it comes to their work-life balance because of their limited responsibilities, for example children or mortgages, compared to professionals who are in a different life phase. Additionally, I have seen many young professionals portray sustainable leadership through leading by example; inspiring others to take an interest in sustainability by being persistent and conscious in their own behavior. However, I have also seen many young professionals struggle with taking on extra activities or not really sticking out their neck for certain issues because of the performance demands of higher management. Often young professionals don't feel they don't get enough space or support from supervisors to really commit to anything other than the tasks that are given to them. In my own projects the power of young professionals in combination with sustainability often lies in their fresh take on things, the fact that they are more tech savvy than older generation, their enthusiasm and their drive to build a portfolio and distinguish themselves with this topic for the benefit of their careers. From senior managers I often got the observation that young professionals move within different social networks than seniors leading to exciting new engagement with other audiences, clients or stakeholders than their organization normally would engage in. Moreover, other seniors made the observation that many young professionals are good at generating attention, online and offline, for their initiatives and activities. A good example has been a project I closely followed for a while set up by young professionals within a larger energy company. Although having faced much criticism when they started their projected they were eventually invited by their CEO to give a pitch after having mobilized colleagues internally via social media and seeking attention externally with an interview in a large Dutch newspaper.

To continue analyzing how young professionals could be put into place within larger organizations for the benefit of sustainability I would like to use a lens offered by Malcolm Gladwell in his book 'The Tipping Point' (Gladwell, 2000). In his book The Tipping Point Gladwell tries to explain how some ideas or products suddenly spread like viruses do. His explains this with a social theory about how

only a few people, roughly 20 percent of the population with the right social skills can be responsible for the biggest part of the work, 80 percent, namely the outburst of a social epidemic. First Gladwell describes the connectors; these are the type of people who seem to know everybody and move within different professional, cultural, social, political, and artistic networks. Mavens are the information specialists. According to Gladwell this type of person knows how to accumulate specific knowledge and how to communicate this to others; an information broker. The salesman types are people who use their charisma and negotiation skills to persuade others. Adding to his typology Gladwell describes two other rules for causing a social epidemic; the stickiness factor and the power of context. Concentrating on the second, the power of context; the power of context shows that although people can de disciplined to perform certain behavior, events in their environment can also be contagious and evoke specific behavior. The Broken Window Theory on crime and vandalism is very famous; people are more inclined to portray vandalism in a neighborhood that contains houses with a lot of broken windows than in a neighborhood where the houses are neat and unharmed.

The reason that the theory of The Tipping Point has my interest is because I think it might hold some value when thinking about the potential role of young professionals within organizations. First, considering the earlier described characteristics of Generation Y and the current life phase of young professionals I believe that many could excel as sales agents or as connectors within organizations and for the benefit of sustainability projects. I will come back to this point later on in this essay. Second, the theory emphasizes the importance of a stimulating environment or context if you want to activate specific behavior. My experience is that organizations still have a world to win when it comes to stimulating the sustainability leadership of their employees. And even more so for young professionals, who are often put into fixed traineeships and leadership programs at the beginning of their careers, mainly aimed at developing their managerial and leadership skills with an internal focus instead of developing skills with the focus on external developments, sustainability, innovation, social impact etc. My own research shows that the following supportive factors within organizations are very important to stimulate the intrapreneurship of young professionals; a culture that values entrepreneurship and initiative, formal support from higher management, having a place within organizations close to the board of directors and resources (financial, time, social capital).

2.2 Sustainable Innovation Processes within companies

Before continuing on the case for young professionals it is necessary to take a closer look to sustainable innovation. Much can be said and written about sustainability and innovation within companies. A good definition is given by Charter (2007); *'Sustainable innovation is a process where sustainability considerations (environmental, social, financial) are integrated into company systems from idea generation through to research and development (R&D) and commercialisation. This applies to products, services and technologies, as well as new business and organisation models'.* Sustainable Innovation can be divided into four levels (Charter & Clark, 2007:10):

- Level 1 (incremental): Incremental or small, progressive improvements to existing products
- Level 2 (re-design or 'green limits): Major re-design of existing products (but often limited the level of
  improvement that is technically feasible)
- Level 3 (functional or 'product alternatives): New product or service concepts to satisfy the same functional need e.g. teleconferencing as an alternative to travel
- Level 4 (systems): Design for a sustainable society.

In my opinion sustainable innovation within organisations often doesn't surpass the level of incremental improving existing products, services or business processes. The big challenge is to design products and services with the purpose of creating a more sustainable society. The literature

offers various reasons to why it is so difficult to reach this level of sustainable innovation (Charter & Clark, 2007:20-27):

- Lack of strong triggers and drivers for system change.
- System inertia (business as usual)
- There remains a lack of 'breakthrough' technologies that might provide vehicles for higher levels of *sustainable innovation*.
- Social acceptance of technology and behavioural change falls behind on acceleration of technological development
- Lack of market incentives
- Lack of venture and seed capital for sustainability projects or innovations
- The tendency of governments to manoeuvre rather than adopt strategic responses.
- Fragmentation of influence and decision-making
- Uncertainty about policies
- Lack of senior level vision and commitment
- Organisational structures
- Organisational capabilities
- Lack of strategic integration with marketing & communication & sales
- Lack of global shifting consumer behaviour.

2.3 Technology Adaption Theory

I would like to focus on one very important barrier in sustainable innovation; the social acceptance of technology and behavioural change. This barrier carries so much importance because many sustainability projects or technological innovations highly depend on the behaviour of users to be effective from a sustainability perspective. A good example is installing energy saving measures by homeowners without improving the isolation of buildings leading to sub-optimal usage of these new techniques and sub-optimal results.

The basic and most well known theory on social acceptance of technology is the Rogers' bell curve called 'Innovation Adoption Lifecycle' (Hoffman, 2011:44). In summary this theory describes how technology spread amongst defined adopter groups according to their demographical and psychological characteristics. This theory is often used to describe the spread of technology within society but can also be applied to business sectors and organizations. The article describes five categories: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards. Interesting for this thesis is the difference between the innovators and the early adapters. Currently young people belonging to Generation Y are often portrayed as the potential innovators in business. Also in the Netherlands the attention for the innovative power of young people, mainly startups, is rising. The Technology Adaption Theory however offers an interesting perspective on another role for young professionals in relationship to technology beside innovators. The early adopters according to the Technology Adaption Theory are often young, more educated, and less prosperous and tend to be community leaders. Can young professionals be the early adopters of new technology within organizations and thus play a very important role in the spread of social acceptance.

2.4 Organisational capabilities

Another barrier for sustainable innovation that I would like to pay attention to are organisational capabilities and then specifically human resources and intellectual resources. In spite of increasing efforts, the added value of human resources to innovation is poorly understood; most attention concerning innovation still goes out to technological innovation instead of social innovation (European Business Review, 2013). The Dutch scholar Volberda performed many studies on this topic

concluding that social innovation accounts for at least 75% of a company's innovativeness (Volberda & Jansen & Tempelaar & Heij, 2011). The question that can be raised is of course which kind of social innovation is needed to foster sustainable innovation and how young professionals fit into this. Besides social innovation the factual demographics within organizations are also related to innovation. Many studies support a positive relationship between employee diversity and the capability of an organization to innovate; the strongest relationship can be found between cultural en educational diversity and innovativeness. An interesting research on social acceptance of technology in the energy sector shows that when 'participants are from various sectors and interact continuously throughout innovation processes; social acceptance of renewable energy innovations is most likely to occur (Mallet, 2007).

As mentioned earlier intellectual resources are also part of the organisational capabilities. What I find very interesting is that currently there's a shift occurring in where innovation within business comes from or as Volberda describes it 'the fences around the R&D departments are torn down' (Volberda, 2016). More and more often new players, entrepreneurs, without R&D departments or bottom up initiatives within organisations are becoming a source of innovation and shaking up traditional business. How can large companies react? One interesting reaction is managing capabilities that come from outside the company by building networks with suppliers, customers, experts, academics, entrepreneurs, NGO's and so on that extend established business. When linked to sustainability these innovation networks are called 'Sustainable Innovation Communities' (Charter & Clark, 2007:40). Sustainable Innovation Communities nurture and support the development of key technologies, products and services outside, between and within firms (Charter & Clark, 2007:41). These communities can exist both virtually and physically, independently, between or within organisations, contain both informal and formal relationships and various levels of interaction (material, information and understanding).

2.5 The role of young professionals within Sustainable Innovation Communities

According to the literature the key elements of Innovation Networks are: building a virtual and offline community for idea generation and evaluation, community management, leadership support and constant communication / promotion of specific projects. Moreover, to build a successful community it is essential to shape communications processes/ personal encounters for actor cooperation and networking (interaction management). As described earlier, members of Generation Y are characterized as being networkers and good communicators. Assuming these typologies to be correct; involving young professionals in relationship management for example as community manager makes sense. According to (IISD, 2001:14) young professionals can be backbone of network relationships and have the ability to look beyond the network to connect with other like-minded organizations. Moreover, many young people have personal experiences with trends like crowd sourcing, crowd-sharing and crowd-funding, meaning they are experienced with bottom-up, decentralized, digital ways or collaborating and mobilizing. This experience can be very useful when organizing sort like collaboration structures for idea generation and innovation. The digital skills of young professionals thus can be useful when establishing Sustainable Innovation Communities (IISD, 2001:15). As said before, Many Gen Y'ers are digitally skilled and/or and understand the rational behind online communication and community building.

Also the role of salesman as described by Gladwell would fit the typology of Generation Y and come into place when organizing Sustainable Innovation Communities. One of the key aspects of a successful innovation community is the promotion of specific projects. I feel that when it comes to (innovative) sustainable projects young professionals are very suited to act as promoters within companies; first of all because of their energy to keep on pushing even when facing resistance, second because of their confidence and communicative skills, and thirdly because many are at the

beginning of their careers and looking for projects that distinguish them from others and add to their resume. Moreover, many young professionals are capable of talking and engaging people on all levels within a organizations because of their preference of informality and decentralized working instead of hierarchy and formality; this trait can be a very valuable asset when working in these new type of innovation communities that are all about partnerships and collaboration on a more equal level. Additionally, as said earlier, young professionals are increasingly interest in doing 'meaningful' work and life-long-learning opportunities; projects with sustainable, societal impact, working with various organizations in new collaboration forms match their preferences. Finally, the holistic aspects of these Sustainable Innovation Networks seem to match with the attitude many Gen Y'ers have towards work and society.

3. Conclusion

This essay analysed how young professionals within companies can contribute to innovation processes that foster sustainability and/or societal impact. I have touched upon different theoretical concepts like generational theory, the tipping point theory, and theories about sustainable innovation and the social acceptance of technology within organizations. My conclusion is that young professionals have specific roles to play within innovation processes and projects. First of all, when talking about project management, young professionals would be very well suited to play the role of sales agents (promoters of projects) and connectors (networkers and establishing surprising relationships with the outside world). Second, young professionals belonging to Generation Y would fit the needs of Sustainable Innovation Communities because of characteristics like; digital savvy, networkers, decentralized and horizontal collaboration, holistic approach and communication skills. Additionally, as said earlier, young professionals are increasingly interest in doing 'meaningful' work and life-long-learning opportunities; projects with sustainable, societal impact, working with various organizations in new collaboration forms match their preferences. Many young professionals would consider sustainability and innovation projects as an ideal way to distinguish themselves within their organizations build a broad network and build their careers.

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