



SPOTLIGHT

Business Schools, Research & Scholarship

Featured Consortium:

The Network for Business Sustainability

Housed at the University of Western Ontario's Richard Ivey School of
Business

London, Ontario, Canada

and at l'Université du Québec à Montréal

Montréal, Québec, Canada

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The Network for Business Sustainability

The Network for Business Sustainability (NBS) is a consortium of nearly 1000 members, who represent almost 200 academic, corporate, NGO, and governmental institutions in more than 20 countries around the world. The focus of their efforts is the creation of credible research on sustainability issues that matter to practicing business managers. From its dual bases at the Richard Ivey School of Business of the University of Western Ontario and l'Université du Québec à Montréal, the work of the NBS and its members reaches over 1,500 practitioners from different sectors in English- and French-speaking Canada and beyond.

The roots of the NBS were planted in 2005 through the efforts of Dr. Tima Bansal, the current Executive Director of the Network and a professor at the Ivey School of Business. According to Pam Laughland, Knowledge Coordinator at NBS, Dr. Bansal initially obtained public grants from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to build a network of scholars and practitioners who are examining major issues in business sustainability. Current funding for the NBS comes primarily from two multi-year grants totaling \$2.4 million, awarded in March of 2008 by the SSHRC, as well as from fees paid by the organizational members of the NBS' Leadership Council for their multi-year terms of representation on that body.

The Leadership Council of the NBS was formed in the spring of 2007, and includes representatives from organizations leading sustainability across Canadian governmental, industrial, and other sectors. Membership on the Leadership Council is by invitation only, and, according to Ms. Laughland, members are specifically chosen so as to include non-competitors from across various sectors. Current members of the Council include the Canadian Pacific Railway, Holcim Inc., the International Institute for Sustainable Development, the Pembina Institute, Research in Motion Ltd., SAP, Suncor Energy Inc., Syngenta Crop Protection Canada, Inc., TD Bank Financial Group, Teck Resources Limited, TELUS Corporation, Tembec, Inc., and Unilever Inc., as well as two Canadian government agencies, Industry Canada and Environment Canada¹.

The Leadership Council meets annually to identify NBS "Knowledge Priorities," the most important business sustainability questions currently facing Canadian business leaders. Each representative is expected to come to the meeting with two to three topic ideas in mind. These are debated until consensus is reached on the top ten priorities, which are then further refined to those that are both relevant and practical to research. The resulting Knowledge Priorities are subsequently published each year by the NBS². Ms. Laughland notes that while some of the research topics may have a Canadian context due to the nature of the Council's membership, the issues they address nevertheless tend to be global in scale, hence the interest and participation of researchers around the world in addressing them.

The top two annual Knowledge Priorities identified by the Leadership Council become the focus of the Network's Systematic Reviews, the flagship vehicle of presentation for NBS research. Systematic Reviews are so named because they involve the rigorous review of evidence on the topics on which they are based. The most recently completed examples of NBS Systematic Reviews covered business adaptation to climate change, and whether or not consumers are willing to reward firms for their sustainability actions with price premiums or increased purchases³.

Systematic Reviews are set up to be accomplished on a yearly cycle, beginning with the selection of Knowledge Priorities by the Leadership Council each fall. Each Systematic Review is commissioned by the NBS through an open call for proposals, through which researchers may apply for funding. The Network serves a coordinating role, assembling an oversight committee for each project which includes select Leadership Council members, an external academic expert, and a Network manager.

The NBS oversight committee then selects the team of researchers who can best generate results for the Systematic Review topics that are both rigorous and relevant to practicing managers. The researchers whose proposals are chosen for the Systematic Review team need not necessarily already be members of the Network, nor do they need to be based at an academic institution. The team conducts its research with bi-monthly guidance from the oversight committee. The final results are timed to be released when the Leadership Council meets to decide what the Knowledge Priorities for the following annual cycle will be.

Published Systematic Reviews take several final forms. Each includes an executive briefing and/or PowerPoint presentation on the research results aimed at practicing managers, as well as a more in-depth report for researchers, educators, and other academic audiences. Naturally, the members of the NBS, as well as Canadian-based business schools, have historically been the most important channels for information distribution, particularly since Systematic Reviews have led directly to peer-reviewed publications for the researchers. Ms. Laughland and Tom Ewart, Managing Director of the NBS, note that author John Peloza's 2009 article in the *Journal of Management*⁴, as well as a forthcoming article in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, are based on his 2008 Systematic Review, Valuing Business Sustainability.

More recently, published Systematic Reviews have also included press releases and other media information that Ms. Laughland indicates are becoming more important to the NBS' dissemination efforts. She says that the Knowledge Priorities and Systematic Reviews have been the subject of a number of articles by Canadian national news media, including the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*.

The NBS has a cadre of topic editors, who are typically faculty members of various Canadian academic institutions who volunteer their editorial services to the Network on a two-year rotational basis. According to Ms. Laughland, NBS plans to invite non-Canadian academics to become topic editors in the near future as well. Topic editors identify academic literature in their field of expertise that has significance for practicing managers, and oversee its translation into practitioner-friendly executive summaries called Research Insights⁵.

According to Ms. Laughland, the Research Insights in particular serve as the primary means by which the NBS can address the Knowledge Priorities that do not become the basis for Systematic Reviews, as well as follow up on Systematic Reviews from previous years. The Network contacts each author whose work becomes the basis for a Research Insight, in order to ensure that their work is adequately summarized and given the proper context for the practitioner audience at which the Research Insights are aimed. Ms. Laughland says she has consistently been impressed by the level of engagement that many academics have with the Network, particularly their willingness to devote long hours to offering insights and commentary on their research. The benefit for academics is that NBS Research Insights provide a vehicle to disseminate their research more broadly, and to audiences who might not otherwise encounter it. Ms. Laughland notes that NBS also welcomes submissions of peer-reviewed articles as potential Research Insights, which are then screened by the topic editors.

In addition to the Systematic Reviews and Research Insights, the NBS has several other communication lines through which they disseminate information to their various stakeholders. They distribute a bi-weekly newsletter to members of the Network and other subscribers. Ms. Laughland says that the NBS also plans to introduce an online forum exclusive to NBS members, through which they may also share information and seek collaboration for various projects, including those not covered by the Network's own Knowledge Priorities.

Gradually, the NBS has grown the involvement of researchers across Canada and in many other countries in its projects. Membership in the Network is free, and membership is not exclusive to researchers based in academic institutions. The NBS is working to draw in more researchers that can help practicing managers identify actionable items from NBS and business school research, and put them into practice.

Like the membership, the staff and volunteers of the NBS have expanded over time as well, from two part-time individuals to three dedicated and three part-time staffers⁶, as well as an Advisory Council made up of academics and executives from several Canadian institutions⁷, and the aforementioned topic editors. According to Ms. Laughland, the grants through which NBS draws its primary funding also mandate the engagement of business students, which the Network does through involving them in writing

projects and the development of primers and other tools for managers, which the NBS has just begun to release⁸.

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End Notes

¹ Network for Business Sustainability. (2010) Meet the Team; Leadership Council. Electronic document, http://www.nbs.net/aboutTeam_Leadership.html, accessed August 3, 2010.

² Network for Business Sustainability. (2010) Business Sustainability Knowledge Priorities. Electronic document, http://www.nbs.net/aboutWhat_BSKnowledge_Priorities.html, accessed July 22, 2010.

³ Network for Business Sustainability. (2010) Knowledge Search Results; Systematic Reviews. Electronic document, <http://www.nbs.net/SearchResultsKnowledge.aspx?Query=%25&PubYr=0&KT=c54b508e-19be-4dcc-9c51-9802941eb81a&AOS=&Ind=&Topic=>, accessed July 26, 2010.

⁴ Pelozo, John. (2009) "The Challenge of Measuring Financial Impacts From Investments in Corporate Social Performance." *Journal of Management*, Vol. 35, No. 6, P. 1518-1541.

⁵ Network for Business Sustainability. (2010) Knowledge Search Results; Research Insights. Electronic document, <http://www.nbs.net/SearchResultsKnowledge.aspx?Query=%25&PubYr=0&KT=633e3a48-0d10-4d55-8b46-93ecab74743b&AOS=&Ind=&Topic=>, accessed July 27, 2010.

⁶ Network for Business Sustainability. (2010) Meet the Team; Network Administrators. Electronic document, http://www.nbs.net/aboutTeam_Network.html, accessed July 26, 2010.

⁷ Network for Business Sustainability. (2010) Meet the Team; Advisory Council. Electronic document, http://www.nbs.net/aboutTeam_Advisory.html, accessed August 3, 2010.

⁸ Bansal, Tima. (2010) Business Sustainability Primer. Electronic document, http://www.nbs.net/PDF/Primer_Business_Sustainability.pdf, accessed August 3, 2010.