We investigate how cognitive frames and role identities jointly shape individuals’ engagement in corporate sustainability. Drawing on a longitudinal case study of a sustainability project within a medium-sized firm, we show that sustainability in companies is strongly dependent on (a) the interaction between individuals’ cognitive frames and role identities and (b) their evolution over time.

Motivation
- Strong increase in number of studies that examine role of cognition for corporate sustainability (e.g., Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, & Figge, 2014)
- Much of the previous work in the area is either conceptual or limited to studying the senior management team (Hahn et al., 2014)
- Studies provide limited insights into relationship between individual cognition and sustainability action for a broader range of organizational members who may differ in their role identity, i.e., their perceived self-view of their role within an organization (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007)
- Existing work focuses on classifying frames in a static way, not providing a detailed understanding of how individuals dynamically adjust their frames over time (Cornelissen et al., 2014)

Method
- 18-month qualitative case study of a sustainability project within a medium-sized car retailing and service firm in Germany
- Prior to the start of the project, company showed very limited efforts related to sustainability
- Data collected from various sources in three phases to track sustainability-related cognitive frames, role identities, and action at the individual level
- Data analysis using analytical induction (coding and pattern matching) to develop process framework

Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COGNITIVE FRAME</th>
<th>ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Win-Win Frame</td>
<td>Limited, Instrumental Sustainability Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade-off Frame</td>
<td>No Sustainability Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Role Identity</td>
<td>Hybrid Role Identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implications
- Sustainability action depends on both cognitive frames and role identity: Even if an individual perceives sustainability as a win-win, sustainability action remains limited if the individual’s role identity does not include sustainability aspects (“not my business”)
- Organizational role identity moderates changes in cognitive frames: individuals who perceived their primary role to consist of economic activities often ignored information about sustainability practices, thereby preventing cognitive frame adjustments
- Personal identity as important driver of changes in roles and related role identity; resource and legitimacy conflicts as inhibitors of changes in roles

Dr. Jörn Hoppmann

Research interest
- Strategic management
- Sustainability management
- Innovation management

Lectures
- Einführung in die Betriebswirtschaftslehre (Bachelor)
- Unternehmensstrategien (Bachelor)
- Strategisches Management (Master)
- Corporate Social Responsibility (Master)
- Unternehmen und institutioneller Wandel (Master)

Literature