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# The Temporal Structuring of Corporate Sustainability

Sébastien Mena<sup>1</sup> · Simon Parker<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Research on corporate sustainability has started to acknowledge the role of temporality in creating more sustainable organizations. Yet, these advances tend to treat firms as monolithic and we have little understanding of how different temporal patterns throughout an organization shape perceptions of and actions toward sustainability. Building on studies highlighting how the temporal structures of work shape employee engagement with different organizational processes and issues, we seek to answer: How does the temporality of work practices structure perceptions of corporate sustainability throughout the firm? Using data from an ethnography of a small European sustainable bank, we provide an account of the variety of ways in which employees in different departments perceive the bank and how they engage with sustainability. We then go on to show how the temporal structures of work practices within different departments help explain some divergence in perceptions of sustainability. Our study highlights the variegation of temporal structures in organizational processes of meaning-making and its role for a better understanding of the efforts to make corporations more sustainable.

**Keywords** Corporate sustainability · Temporality · Temporal structure

This paper explores how work practices and their temporal patterns can shape employee perceptions of sustainability. Indeed, time has been shown to be a crucial aspect of corporate sustainability (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014). Because sustainability is at its core concerned with present and future needs (WCED, 1987), temporality matters for how firms engage in sustainability (Nyberg et al., 2020; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015; Slawinski & Bansal, 2012). Extant research has shown, for instance, that firms that have a longer time

horizon deal better with environmental problems (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015). Other studies have examined the role of directors' and executives' temporal orientations for sustainability performance (e.g., Galbreath, 2017; Ortiz-de-Mandujana, Bansal, & Aragón-Correa, 2019).

Yet, while we know that corporate sustainability is driven in a large part by executive commitment to the agenda (Banerjee, 2001; Maxwell et al., 1997), we also know that organizations can be fragmented and differentiated. This is based, for instance, on the occupation some employees belong to (Bechky, 2003) or on characteristics of different areas or subsystems within an organization, such as these subsystems' work tasks or the environment they face (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). As a corollary, while a common view of sustainability may prevail in an organization (driven for instance by a clear identity, culture or values), there may be differences in how employees perceive sustainability as well (Hahn et al., 2015). For instance, Wright et al. (2012) show that employees identify themselves in different categories, such as 'green change agents', 'rational managers' or 'committed activists', that each imply different perspectives on sustainability both within and without the firm. Variations in identity were drawn upon, adopted and performed in particular circumstances depending on the audience and individual sense of self.

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✉ Sébastien Mena  
mena@hertie-school.org

Simon Parker  
simon.parker@nottingham.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Hertie School of Governance, Friedrichstr. 180,  
10117 Berlin, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Nottingham University Business School, Jubilee Campus,  
Nottingham NG8 1BB, UK

So far neither this literature on occupational differences nor the literature on time and sustainability sufficiently acknowledge the important role played by the temporal structure of work—defined as the regular patterns that regulate organizational life (such as deadlines and business cycles) (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002)—in explaining these differences throughout a firm. If we take temporality seriously for corporate sustainability, we need to account for how the temporal structures of day-to-day work—among other influences, such as sense of self, the logics driving action within the firm or the specific situation in which employees find themselves in—shape sustainability perceptions, rather than seeing sustainability as homogenous within a firm and mostly imposed from the top. This is important because how employees perceive the sustainability of their company ultimately matters for how that firm engages in sustainability (e.g., Howard-Grenville, 2007; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020).

To examine these issues, we build on theories of temporality. There is both a long-standing and renewed interest in management and organization studies on the structuring role of temporality, whereby organizational actions and practices generate temporal structures, such as entrainment between activities (Ancona & Chong, 1996) or a given temporal orientation (Das, 1987; Rowell et al., 2016). Temporal structures affect how “time is perceived and handled” (Zerubavel, 1981: xii) by organizational members, and how in turn these structures constrain and enable organizational action (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002) and shape organizational processes and outcomes, such as strategic planning (Das, 1987; Kunisch et al., 2017), ‘entraining’ organizational members to a broader organizational rhythm (Ancona & Chong, 1996; Shipp & Richardson, 2021), or help coordinate work between different occupational communities in an organization (Barley, 1988; Oborn & Barrett, 2021). Thus, theories of temporality provide robust explanations of phenomena at the organizational level, but also at the individual and group levels. In this paper, we highlight the structuring role of temporality in relation to corporate sustainability. Our according research question is: How does the temporality of work practices structure perceptions of corporate sustainability throughout the firm?

We address this question by building on an ethnographic study of a small European sustainable bank, whose business model is premised on sustainability and seeks primarily to promote social good and environmental preservation through their economic and financial activities. We provide an account of how this bank’s employees’ perceptions and interpretations of the sustainability of the bank were shaped by the temporal structures of their own work practices. First, we show how the perceptions of sustainability differ between four departments in the bank (Business Banking, Customer Services, Marketing and Personal Banking). Furthermore, contrary to assumptions in the literature, these perceptions

were also different, to an extent, from the management-dictated view of the bank’s sustainability efforts. We then elaborate on how the temporal structures of the departments’ work practices shaped to an extent their differing perceptions. For example, members of Customer Services were mostly present-oriented, as they engage in low complexity and highly repetitive tasks, which limit their outlook to both past and future. This temporal structure explains, in part, why Customer Services tend to see the bank as different in its sustainable goals from mainstream banks—like the other departments—but similar to these banks in terms of their day-to-day operations. In contrast, members of Business Banking are mostly past-oriented, reflected by their work relying on well-established lending guidance and sporadic meetings with long-standing clients, which in turn informs their view of sustainability at Sustainabank as that of a traditional bank of the past, focused on its community. Ultimately, this leads to overlapping views of sustainability in the bank, with sometimes important differences that temporal structuring helps explain.

We offer important contributions to the literature on sustainability and temporality. First, we emphasize a structuring view of temporality for corporate sustainability. While extant studies have tended to focus on monolithic understanding of temporal orientations or time horizons of firms and/or their leaders (e.g., Ortiz-de-Mandojana et al., 2019; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015), we show how temporal structures in day-to-day work activities of employees can shape sustainability interpretations throughout the firm, resulting in heterogeneous perceptions. We show that in order to more fully understand the dynamics of temporality and sustainability, we need to consider how temporal structures, in particular as they may differ within an organization. Second and relatedly, we provide an additional explanation for tensions related to sustainability within an organization (Hahn et al., 2015), that stem from the underlying temporal structures of particular organizational members’ work practices rather than mainly identity-related characteristics (e.g., Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Wright et al., 2012) or the logics at play in the firm (Dahmann & Grosvold, 2017).

Our paper is structured as follows: We first review several important literatures as our main conceptual scaffold, the literature on sustainability and time, theories of temporality in both sociology and management—in particular the concept of temporal structuring—as well as the literature on occupations. We then outline our methods, ethnographic research site, related data sources, and analytical approach. After that we detail our findings on how temporal patterns of work structure perceptions of sustainability in different organizational departments and eventually discuss these findings in light of the extant literature.

## Conceptual Background

Time is of the essence for corporate sustainability to be effective. For instance, Slawinski and Bansal (2015) show that, given the multi-faceted and complex nature of environmental issues, firms that juxtapose the short term and the long term are able to develop solutions adapted to this complexity, as opposed to firms only focusing on the short term at the expense of the long term. The same authors (2012) also unveil how a firm's perspective on time, linear vs cyclical, generates different types of responses to climate issues (e.g. immediate, technology-based vs longer-term, multi-sector responses) and affects how rapidly they are able to adapt to changes (fast vs slow). Tuan and colleagues (2024) highlight how, in countries facing more uncertainty, firms are more likely to use present-oriented communication around sustainability to help manage this uncertainty.

Such research has tended to focus on the firm's temporal characteristics (e.g., orientation, horizon, etc.) in a monolithic way. This is understandable as it stems mostly from a strategic view of sustainability, whereby the sustainability strategy is decided upon by top management and sometimes integrated into corporate strategy (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014). For instance, Flammer and Bansal (2017) study how a firm's long-term orientation, operationalized as longer-term rewards for executives, can create both economic and social value. Other research looks directly at the impact of executives' temporal orientation on the firm's sustainability performance, where CEOs with a future orientation are more likely to invest in environmentally friendly technologies (Ortiz-de-Mandojana et al., 2019). Research on temporality in organizations, beyond a focus on corporate sustainability, has focused on how leaders and managers can leverage temporal resources and use interpretations of past, present and future in order to effect change, develop strategy or shape the identity of the organization (e.g., Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Ybema, 2004). Our take in this paper moves down the hierarchy to examine the overlooked role of temporality in perceptions of sustainability not just at the higher echelons, but throughout the firm.

While not building on the role of time, studies have shown how employees working with sustainability adopt different identities and orientations as a way of understanding themselves, relating to others and conducting their work (Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Kok et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2012). For example, when it comes to corporate responsibility and sustainability, employees can be grouped as believers, straddlers or cynics (Costas & Kärreman, 2013). For Wright et al. (2012), such identities are considered roles or characters that can be adopted depending on audience or context. For example, "green change agents" are passionate about climate change and this personal commitment leads

to positive change toward sustainability within the organization, whereas "rational managers" were more concerned with business operations such as efficiency, shareholder value and downplayed environmental matters. As this study also highlights, research has pointed out the important role of middle management that has discretionary power to shape sustainability and its perceptions at lower echelons of the firm (Drumwright, 1994). Yet, as opposed to upper echelons research, these lower echelons studies have overlooked the role of temporality for corporate sustainability, something we remedy in this paper.

In particular, we build on the sociology of time that defines temporality as the socially and locally constructed understandings of time (Dubinskas, 1988a). This departs from an objective view of temporality that exists outside of our social lives and that imposes order on our behaviors (Shipp & Jansen, 2021). Yet, from this perspective, temporality is not just subjective, it also structures our social lives (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Zerubavel, 1981). Our practices shape our socially constructed view of temporality (e.g., the teaching term in academia shapes academics' view of [their] time), but this view also then shapes the practices of an academic: they often go on leave or to conferences after the teaching term has finished. Part of the management and organization literature has examined these constructed patterns of temporality as temporal structures (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015). Temporal structures are regular and orderly patterns that regulate, guide and coordinate our lives and thus shape our views of the world in specific social groups, such as families, departments, organizations or countries (Barley, 1988; Zerubavel, 1981). The relative regularity of temporal structures serves as the temporal background against which we interpret events, particularly unexpected events (Zerubavel, 1981: 21). Even if socially constructed, we most often perceive temporal structures (e.g., the week, shops' opening and closing times, bank holidays, etc.) as objective. Such readily 'observable' (Barley, 1988) or 'descriptive' (Schultz & Hernes, 2019) parameters of temporal structures include, for instance, the duration or the sequence of social practices (Zerubavel, 1981). But as emphasized by Barley (1988: 129), temporal structures are not only about these descriptive, usually objectively perceived patterns, but also reflect less "immediately obvious" interpretive or expressive components about temporality (see also Rowell et al., 2016; Schultz & Hernes, 2019), such as short, mid or long time horizons (Ancona et al., 2001; Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988), temporal orientations (a tendency to be past, present, or future-oriented, Das, 1987; see also Bluedorn, 2002), and temporal depth (how far in the past and future one thinks, Bluedorn, 2000).

Organizations, as complex social structures, are likely to exhibit different temporal structures in different areas, based on the nature of work and its patterns in these areas,

something the literature on occupations has long shown (e.g., Barley, 1988). For example, Dubinskas (1988b) shows how different temporal structures between two occupational communities, scientists and managers, in bio-technology firms lead them to see strategic planning in different ways: the temporal structure of scientists' work is characterized by much longer activities and projects than that of managers' and leads the former to plan with a longer time horizon. Thus, the patterns and rhythms of work practices—their temporal structures—can generate corresponding views of time at work, such as how long one can take a break, or what time horizon one must plan with for some tasks. Asymmetry (Zerubavel, 1981) in temporal structures between groups, such as occupational communities or departments within organizations, can, but not necessarily will, lead to disorder, tensions, and sometimes conflict (Barley, 1988: 129). For example, Reinecke and Ansari (2015) examine how Fair-Trade certification managers had to bridge competing temporal structures that different actors, such as farmers in the South and companies in the North, relied on. Organizations are thus often home to various subsystems, based on the nature of their work, their work practices, and the associated temporal structures. Differences in these “temporal subcultures” (Barley, 1988: 160) are useful to understand how the temporal structures of organizational members' work practices affect their views of work (Oborn & Barrett, 2021), how they approach stakeholders (such as clients or contractors) (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002), as well as several other aspects of their organization, such as its identity, strategy or management processes (Schultz & Hernes, 2019; Zheng et al., 2021).

In this paper, we build on this structuring view of temporality and look at the role of temporal structures of work for corporate sustainability. Given that temporal structures shape our views of the world, we are interested in examining how temporal structures shape interpretations of sustainability throughout the firm. Before turning to these findings, we detail our research context, data and methods.

## Methods

We employ an inductive, grounded theoretic research design (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), based on a six-month full-time ethnography of Sustainabank in 2012 (throughout this piece, we will be using ‘we’ even though only one of the authors was in the field—we discuss implications of this insider–outsider perspective below). Sustainabank (a pseudonym, as are all other names from our data) is a small, self-described “sustainable bank” that we studied as part of a broader research project on alternative organizations.

## Research Site

Sustainabank has branches in several European countries, created in the late 1970s by a group of founders all holding similar spiritual principles. As it grew, Sustainabank established a variety of green funds and investment opportunities for businesses, established itself as a savings provider for individual customers, and engaged in a variety of activities to promote sustainable development and to establish a political voice for alternative banks in Europe. Telling of how sustainability is core to the bank's business model, the furniture that they used is sustainably sourced and has a tag with details on it outlining, for example, the use of recycled materials and renewable energy in its production. Indeed, Sustainabank were first and foremost a pioneer in sustainable banking and finance. They distinguished themselves from other banks by only investing in sustainable ventures, but also by relying on strong ethical standards and values that drove their actions. Sustainability is an essential element of the bank, without which its strategy would not be complete. This means that sustainability is fundamental to the organization and is both important internally (e.g., the furniture they use) but also externally (e.g., the clients they do business with).

The particular branch we studied (also called Sustainabank—we only talk about this specific branch from now on) opened in the mid-1990s in a European country. At the time we undertook the ethnography (2012), it had just over 100 employees. During our ethnography, Sustainabank was very much on an upwards trajectory in terms of growth. For instance, the bank had outgrown its previous premises on the outskirts of town and recently moved to a new, tailor-made, sustainable building. Due to fallout from the 2008 financial crisis, which had far less of an impact on Sustainabank's performance in comparison with other banks whose business models are not premised on sustainability, they were receiving substantial media interest and were increasing their employee numbers, aiming to create new products and stretch their marketing reach into mainstream media. Growth was (and still is) therefore an important aspect of sustainability at Sustainabank during our study.

The bank was structured in a similar way to most banks, with a senior management team, made up of the managing director and the heads of the seven main departments of the bank (e.g., Business Banking, Customer Services, Compliance, etc.). As we explain in more details below when discussing our analytical approach, we first looked at employees' sustainability perceptions, work practices and their temporal structures, our analysis then focused on four departments (details in Table 1): Business Banking, Customer Services, Marketing and Personal Banking. We excluded other departments, due to their small size



**Table 1** Organizational departments at Sustainabank

Department	Number of employees	Main work practices	Tenure
Business Banking	21 (1 senior manager, 4 team leaders)	Meeting with established and prospective clients Discussing, developing, reviewing lending policies Drawing on these lending policies to substantiate proposed loans, overdrafts and financial services to clients Weekly credit committee monitoring of clients and problem cases	Over half Business Banking employees had been with the bank for more than 7 years. Among which three had been with the bank for over 15 years Six joined the bank less than 2 years ago
Compliance, Finance and Risk	8 (1 senior manager)	Planning, organizing, auditing, accounting for and controlling the company's finances Evaluate the potential losses in the future and to take precautions to deal with these potential problems when they occur Ensure that the organization is conducting its business in full compliance with all national and international laws and regulations	Finance and Risk—Two (out of four) employees joined in the last 2 years Compliance—Two (out of three) joined in the last 2 years with the other being at the bank for 5 years
Customer Services	26 (2 middle managers)	Actioning overdrafts, loans and financing Opening accounts (ID checks, address clarifications, system updating, etc.) Dealing with and dealing with complaints, account requests and information seekers	Three long-standing supervisors (7 + years) Four long-standing employees (10 + years) The majority of the department have been at the organization for less than 3 years
Human Resources	2 (1 senior manager)	Recruitment and selection Creation of management information for Senior Management Team Engagement (values initiatives) and skills development Various HR projects and initiatives	HR assistant (10 + years) Head of HR and an intern (less than a year)
Investments	16 (1 senior manager, 2 team leaders)	Investing customer/investor money into sustainable businesses and entrepreneurs Issuing public offerings Managing some Sustainabank assets	Majority have been with the organization for over 3 years
IT	3 (1 manager)	Maintenance and oversight of computer network Troubleshooting faults and problems Responding to new products and needs from the organization	One long-standing employee (7 + years) One for less than 2 years
Marketing	9 (1 senior manager, 1 team leader)	Market research, surveys, working with external market research companies Marketing particular products: In the media Via brochures/prints Via presence at events Supporting/sharing information with Personal Banking Implementing Marketing and communications strategy from Senior Management Team	All long-standing employees (7 + years) apart from three: one who just joined and two others less than 2 years

**Table 1** (continued)

Department	Number of employees	Main work practices	Tenure
Personal Banking	5 (1 senior manager)	Collation of management information regarding ISA rates, customer numbers, account applications, etc. Occasional work on ongoing projects for customer services Creating new financial products Increasing customer deposits	All less than 3 years with the bank
Other	11	Employees in satellite offices, interns, cleaning services and non-office based staff	N/A

such as IT/Estates (3 employees) and Human Resources (2 employees), or because they did not engage significantly in the discussions we observed (Finance/Compliance) or were a separate legal entity (Investments). Our ethnographic data covers the whole organization, however, and we use data from the departments we do not analyze focally as supporting data.

## Data Sources

Primary data consists of ethnographic observations and informal conversations, corresponding field notes and 44 ethnographic interviews.<sup>1</sup> The ethnographic interviews were structured around the broad questions of how individuals came to work at Sustainabank, their experiences of working at the organization, their understandings and reflections of the values of the organization and the problems facing the organization. Our data sources are comprehensively listed along with relevant details in Table 2. Our observations were both participant and non-participant, depending on the department we were observing at the time (for example, we worked on a HR project but only sat as a non-participant observer in Personal Banking). We had no ethnographic access to top management apart from observing a couple of meetings. Nevertheless, we interviewed all members of the senior management team multiple times, discussed with them informally on several occasions, and had access to internal strategic documents. We spent approximately two to three weeks in each department and were able to decide when to move from department to department, and decided to do so when we felt we were not obtaining any more useful observations. We also observed regular multi-departmental or organization-wide events and interactions, such as organization-wide Monday morning meetings, client visits with Business Bankers, lunchtime seminars and joined the “Values Team” (a group of self-selected employees focusing on employee engagement with the bank) for regular discussions. We observed interactions between members from different departments both formally when their job required it (e.g., Marketing and Personal Banking working on a new product) or informally (e.g., a coffee break). We also formally interviewed (Spradley, 1979) 44 organizational members, mostly toward the beginning and end of the ethnography. We maintained relationships with people from departments we had previously visited when we moved on to others, thus increasing the number of informal conversations we had with organizational members. We took careful

<sup>1</sup> Ethnographic interviews are a type of semi-structured interviews, undertaken during the ethnography and in the field, yet characterized by a particular “rapport” (Spradley, 1979) developed during the ethnography between ethnographer and informant, and driven by evolving ethnographic knowledge and questions (Heyl, 2001).



**Table 2** Data and sources of evidence

Department	Days observing	Ethnographic interviews	Secondary data
Business Banking	Days 51–72 (22 days)	4	Lending documents Policy documents unique to each lending team and credit committee (all collected during ethnography, 2012)
Compliance, Finance and Risk	Days 48–50 (3 days)	2	
Customer Services	Days 87–99 (13 days)	13	
Human Resources	Days 15–48 (34 days)	1	HR management report Employee handbook Appraisals documents Job advert templates (all collected during ethnography, 2012)
Investments	Days 73–87 (15 days)	2	
IT	None	5	
Marketing	Days 1–14 (14 days)	5	
Personal Banking	Days 1–14 (14 days)	5	
Senior Management Team	Observed one meeting and presented findings at another	8	Vision and mission document (collected during ethnography, 2012)
Organizational context	Days 1–99 (99 days)	N/A	Employee survey results (2011) and management/employee response Annual Reports (2010–2018) Sustainabank “Impulse” documents (discussing mission, vision and values) (2012) Information sheets regarding the Monday morning poem (2012) Documents outlining the spiritual roots and history of the bank (available on intranet—collected in 2012) Sustainabank 2015 vision document (targets, vision and mission)—written in 2011 Values History (2003–2012)—collected in 2012 Induction material (2012) Monitoring of social media accounts and newsletters (2012–2019) Minutes from values meetings and a brief history of the department (2012)
Total	99 days over 6 months	44 interviews	Over 600 pages of text

field notes every day, complementing those with our initial thoughts and feelings that helped us create a roadmap of work activities, positions, and views of the bank.

These ethnographic data constituted the main material for our analysis. We also collected additional data to triangulate, contrast and confirm the findings from this main ethnographic material (see Table 2). We conducted three semi-structured interviews with former employees of Sustainabank after the ethnography and kept in touch with a number of current (at the time of the study) employees. We participated in general annual meetings from 2011 to 2017 and collected extensive secondary data on Sustainabank, totaling more than 600 pages including newsletters, website pages, reports and many other strategic documents. We collected these archives prior to the ethnography (to prepare for the fieldwork), during the ethnography (e.g., from the Sustainabank intranet) and afterward (via publicly

available annual reports and the company website). When we use publicly available data in this paper, we paraphrase them carefully to preserve anonymity. Finally, from 2011 to 2017, we monitored and collected, when necessary, social media output from the bank and relevant individuals (e.g., CEO, journalists). Overall, our evidence reflects our continuous engagement with the organization and allowed us a deep knowledge of Sustainabank. Drawing on a plurality of sources allowed us to triangulate our data and assess, for example, whether what was said in ethnographic interviews reflected what appeared in company reports and vice-versa, and to see how these articulations manifested in action via observations of day-to-day practice. Interviews with organizational members who were not part of the focal departments for our analysis (10 interviews) were used as supplementary data that provided context.

## Analytical Approach

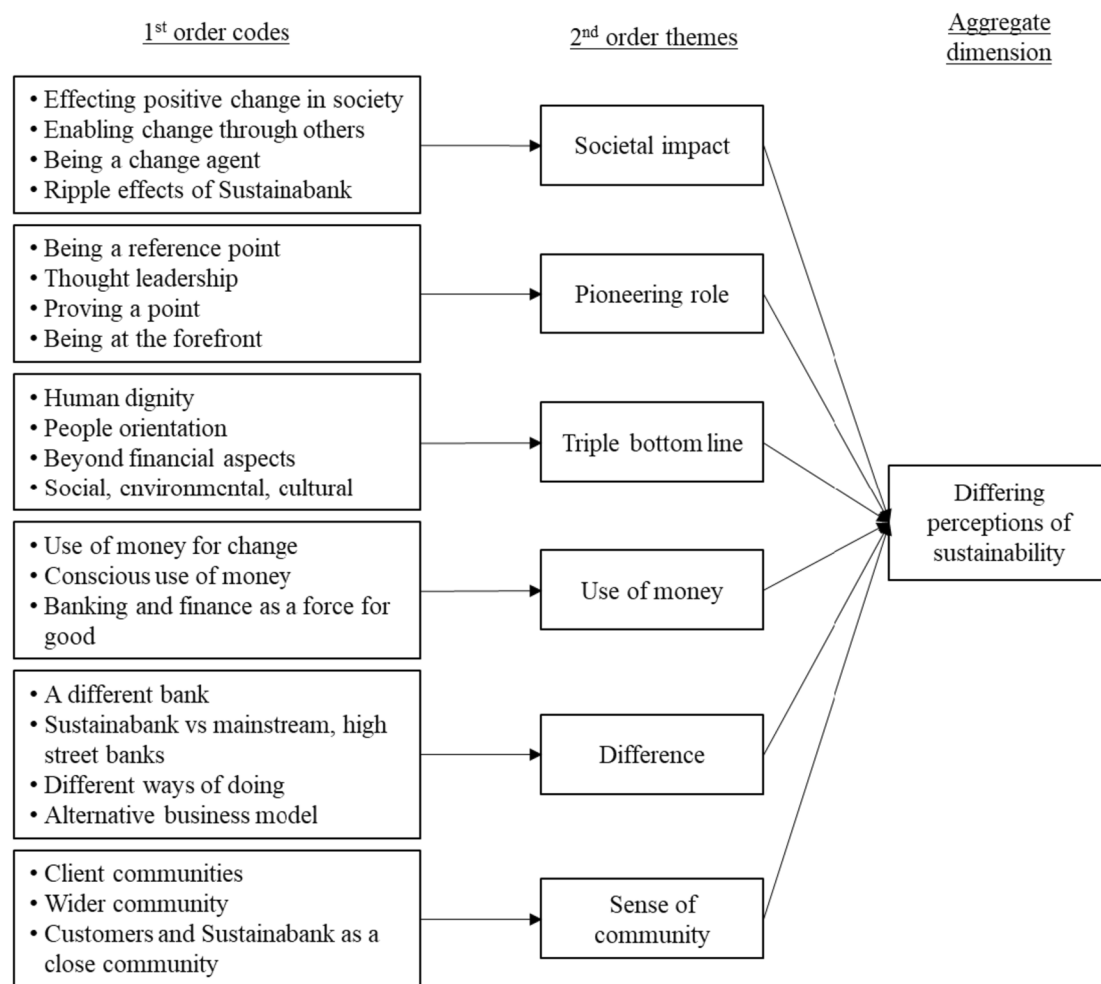
Given that one author conducted the fieldwork and the other did not, we relied on an interpretive, grounded theoretic, insider–outsider process to analyze our data. In such a process, the insider ethnographer, while providing immersive and in-depth knowledge about the setting, can sometimes adopt and articulate the interpretive view of organizational members (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Subsequently, the outsider researcher can therefore provide an external, more dispassionate perspective in the analytical process. Combining these two perspectives allows for an informed but balanced and trustworthy interpretive analysis (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 2010).

Our analytical approach unfolded in four main steps. First, in a preliminary step that started with our fieldwork and continued more formally once we left the field, the insider paid particular attention to how members perceived and described the bank and its efforts toward sustainability. The insider noticed the role of temporality for these interpretations early on. This first analytical step resulted in an insider, ethnographic account of manifest themes (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) related to temporality in relation to members' views of the bank's sustainability (e.g., the trajectory of the bank from its "hippie" and spiritual past to the current professional stance toward both sound business and sustainability).

Second, four years after data collection, the co-authors discussed the importance of temporality concerning sustainability again. What triggered our curiosity at the time was how such a future-laden concept like sustainability could be reconciled with the past and present obsession of some within the bank. We therefore proceeded to question our data further while iterating with various studies on temporality and sustainability. At this point, we noticed key differences between members regarding sustainability perceptions. To probe these differences better, we engaged in a grounded-theoretic (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) analysis of both managerial and employees' perceptions of sustainability—because we know top-level sustainability discourse is important for how employees and the firm more broadly view and engage in sustainability (Banerjee, 2001). We thus systematically analyzed similarities and differences between employees and management, but also between employees. As usual with such analyses, we coded segments of texts from our field notes, interviews, and archival data pertaining to perceptions of sustainability, and in a first, open-coding step we looked at what was said (first-order codes), such as depicting Sustainabank as a reference point or how different it is from high street banks. In a second step of axial coding, we regrouped these manifest first-order codes into latent second-order themes which showed different facets of perception of sustainability, such as the pioneering role

Sustainabank plays or its alternative nature. Figure 1 shows the data structure for this analysis. In both open and axial coding phases, we constantly compared (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) our emerging results with the departments from which the coded segments came from, because it became clear to us that there were differences across departments. We found that perceptions tended to be homogenous within departments, and sometimes substantially different across departments. (We explain these similarities and differences in our findings below.) While there were subtle differences in perceptions of sustainability *within* departments, departmental belonging most often overruled individual differences.

In a third step, having realized that these differences were demarcated by membership to different departments, we decided to focus on the departments within the organization as our level of analysis. To better understand and explain these departmental differences, the insider produced an in-depth ethnographic account of work practices of the different departments based on observations and field notes. The departments were homogenous in their work in large part because their members belonged to the same occupational communities (e.g., bankers in Business Banking and communication and branding professionals in Marketing). At this stage, we iterated between our data and different literatures to try and understand departmental differences in perceptions of sustainability, such as institutional logics (Kok et al., 2019), identity (Wright et al., 2012), or values (Hahn et al., 2015). As per step one, we realized that temporality played an important role beyond these existing explanations. Further iterating with the literature, in particular on the sociology of time (Barley, 1988; Zerubavel, 1981), we ended up analyzing the temporal structures of each department in more depth. To do so, the insider coded the directly observable temporal parameters of the departments' work practices, again based on observations and field notes. Systematically analyzing each of the work practices identified above (e.g., Business Banking developing lending policies), we coded their sequential structure (in which order work practices unfolded), duration (for how long), temporal location (at which time of the day/week/month they occurred) and rate of recurrence (how often they were repeated), following Zerubavel (1981). There were some variations within departments (e.g., the rate of recurrence of substantiating loans by Business Banking employees varied according to their client portfolio, acquisition of new clients, etc.), yet most work practices showed substantial homogeneity in these temporal parameters across members (see Appendix for details of this analysis). As mentioned above, temporal structuring is not only about these directly observable temporal parameters but also about interpretive aspects. While coding for the former, we paid particular attention to the latter. Further iterating with



**Fig. 1** Data structure for perceptions of sustainability

the literature and our data (adding interviews to observations and field notes at this point), we found temporal orientations (Das, 1987)—whether one is more past, present or future-oriented—to be particularly important, as they anchored the departments’ perceptions of sustainability and provided them with a point of reference (Zerubavel, 1980) when something that challenged their view occurred (e.g., the implementation of a product that was not aligned with how they viewed sustainability at the bank). We further found temporal depth (Bluedorn, 2000, 2002)—how far back or forward were departments typically thinking and planning—to be important to explain the basis for some perceptions beyond the observable patterns of the departments’ temporal structures. Indeed, as most departments were working on projects with loose deadlines and relatively unclear timelines, their temporal structures were sometimes indiscriminately fluid, irregular and arrhythmic (Ancona et al., 2001). The insider thus coded the temporal orientation and depth of the departments. While these aspects sometimes differed per work practice, further

going through our data, we induced the general tendency of a department (e.g., do members often reflect about the long-term future impact of their projects, do they tend to be focused on the task at hand, etc.). A summary of this step of analysis, detailing work practices and coding their temporal structures (sequential structure, duration, temporal location, rate of recurrence, temporal orientation, temporal depth) is found in Table 5 in our findings below.

In a fourth step, we parsed out how such temporal structuring shaped how organizational members would perceive the sustainability of the bank. Together, both the insider and outsider researchers matched the temporal structures of each department (step 3) with their perceptions of sustainability (step 2). We then systematically compared this matching across departments. As usual in inductive analysis and relying on the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we proceeded to analyze similarities and differences and how we could explain them, leveraging the concepts our emerging theory indicated were important: work practices, temporal structures and different perceptions of

sustainability. We also iterated with existing theory explaining differences in perceptions of sustainability at this stage (e.g., Dahlmann & Grosvold, 2017; Wright et al., 2012). We ultimately arrived at an understanding of how temporal structures were related to perceptions of sustainability. While we identified some individual differences within departments (driven by personal values or education, for instance) the valence of similar work practices and their temporal structures drastically toned down these individual differences.

## Ensuring Trustworthiness

We took several steps to ensure trustworthiness of our data and analyses. First, we used several data sources to triangulate our findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, thanks to our ethnographic methods, we became deeply embedded within our context and thus established trust with the actors involved (Small & Calarco, 2022). Yet, as mentioned above, one author served as a “dispassionate” outsider, further enhancing the trustworthiness of our interpretations and analyses (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Third, we carefully considered alternative explanations and theories in our analytical process (Langley, 1999), constantly comparing with our emerging findings. Fourth, we also constantly compared (as described above) between our codes, themes and the departments we analyzed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Finally, we also kept in touch with informants from our setting and exposed them to our emerging ideas to assess their relevance and consistency with our informants’ experience (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Overall, our research follows the key criteria of transparency, justification, and trustworthiness for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Findings

Our findings start by outlining the claims made by management with regard to how sustainability is understood and done at Sustainabank, since we know that top management provides a general direction for sustainability and consequent perceptions thereof in the firm (Banerjee, 2001; Bansal & DesJardine, 2014; Strand, 2014). Then, moving beyond this top-down, monolithic view implicit in the literature, we highlight the differing perceptions of sustainability across different departments that co-exist in the organization (illustrated in Fig. 1). We then move on to explain how these perceptions stem, in part, from the actual work practices of these departments and how they are temporally structured.

## Perceptions of Sustainability at Sustainabank

Sustainability appeared in almost every internal and external document about the organization, explicitly or

implicitly—underlying how core sustainability is to the bank’s business model. A “sustainable approach to banking” (Sustainabank annual report, 2012) is always emphasized when speaking about the bank: “the bank of choice for the leading environmental, social and cultural organizations and for individuals who want to bank ethically and sustainably” (Sustainabank internal vision document, 2011). Our analysis uncovered four main aspects through which sustainability at Sustainabank is described by management: the bank’s societal impact, its pioneering role, a specific understanding of the triple bottom line and how the bank uses money. First, management emphasized how Sustainabank’s efforts will ultimately effect positive change in society: “Sustainable 100%, driven by values and ideas to make the earth a happier, healthier and more wholesome place” (Sustainabank webpage, 2018). Management’s view of sustainability often related to being a “change agent” that enables others (such as clients) to bring about sustainable change, underlining the ripple effects of Sustainabank, beyond its immediate circle of stakeholders.

Second, management promoted the pioneering role of Sustainabank in such societal impact. Management underlined the bank as a “reference point for mainstream banks” (Sustainabank, annual report, 2012), pointing to the novelty of the bank’s approach and aim “to become synonymous with a new, sustainable approach to banking” (Sustainabank internal vision document, 2011). Management also articulated that the bank aimed to enact change “through expertise, innovation, partnership and both opinion and thought leadership” (Sustainabank internal vision document, 2011).

Third, a particular version of the triple bottom line was at the core of the sustainable approach at Sustainabank: as they looked to invest in social, environmental and cultural initiatives. In particular, the ‘people’ aspect from the traditional triple bottom line (people, planet, profits) was core to the Sustainabank approach: human dignity and well-being were emphasized by management as core goals for the bank’s work.

Fourth and finally, how Sustainabank used money was a key aspect of how management described the firm’s sustainability. Money was used specifically to bring about change, in a “conscious” way. Banking and finance, more generally, were thought as a positive force: “harnessing the power of money for good” (Sustainabank internal vision document, 2011).

Tied up within these four aspects was the understanding that the bank needed to grow in order to show their model is viable and that the bank could be a beacon influencing others in the financial industry but also encouraging other businesses to be more sustainable:

**Table 3** Summary of perceptions of corporate sustainability at Sustainabank

Perceptions of sustainability	Management	Marketing	Personal Banking	Business Banking	Customer Services
Societal impact	Managerial view	Aligned with management	Aligned with management	Aligned with management	Aligned with management
Pioneering	Managerial view	Aligned with management	Aligned with management	Aligned with management	Aligned with management
Triple bottom line	Managerial view	N/A	N/A	Aligned with management	N/A
Use of money	Managerial view	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Difference	N/A	Non-managerial perception	Non-managerial perception	Non-managerial perception	Non-managerial perception
Sense of community	N/A	N/A	N/A	Non-managerial perception	N/A

“Growth is important, and central to our business strategy, because it means we are lending more to sustainable entrepreneurs and increasing our impact in the sectors where we’re active.” (Sustainabank internal vision document, 2012)

For management, the future of the bank and the future of its mission to act as a pioneer of sustainability, leveraging money to do good, involved considerable growth—an idea that was not held by everyone in the organization.

While all perceptions of sustainability within the bank shared a common ground based on this managerial view of sustainability and often overlapped extensively (e.g., effecting positive change in society), they also differed in different ways. We identified differences between Business Banking, Customer Services, Marketing, and Personal Banking and how they interpreted managerial views of sustainability, as well as adding their own nuances. Table 3 provides an overview of these perceptions, and Table 4 provides additional evidence.

First, the four departments were aligned with management’s views of sustainability around the societal impact of the bank and its activities, as well as its pioneering role in bringing about such impact. Marketing was a team of nine (two managers and seven employees), seeking to attract new customers and communicate about the activities of the bank externally. Similar to management, they saw the bank’s aims as “reach[ing] more people to effectively spread the message of sustainable banking” (Amy, Marketing, interview). The prospect of leading the way toward sustainability was something Marketing were keen to support: “we were the first bank to be sustainable in this sort of way” (George, Marketing, interview). This pioneering role is something that Marketing particularly emphasized compared to the other departments.

Personal Banking was a team of five, who closely monitored customer numbers, account applications, and other banks’ interest rates and product offerings, working mostly

on spreadsheets. For many in Personal Banking, the bank’s “purpose is to effect change” and “changing policy not just [of those] among us and organizations that we are friendly with” (Roger, Personal Banking, interview).

Business Banking (a team of 21) were responsible for investing customer money into “sustainable” businesses such as organic farming, Fairtrade companies, but also larger scale endeavors such as renewable energy projects. Like the other departments, Business Banking thought Sustainabank was “leading by example” (Adam, Business Banking, field notes) and “doing something that is a bit of a first” (Alan, Business Banking, interview). Employees also saw Sustainabank as “making a positive impact” (Bill, Business Banking, field notes), “and it’s having this influence [on the industry]” (Kenneth, Business Banking, interview).

Finally, Customer Services (a team of 26) were responsible for two main activities and accordingly split into two teams: responding to customer calls and back office work. Sustainability for them, as for the other departments including management, was about taking customers’ “money and use it for a positive change” (Sally, Customer Services, interview). They also related to Sustainabank being “ahead” (Olivia, Customer Services, field notes) and “trying to be a thought leader” (Sue, Customer Services, field notes).

Beyond alignment in perceptions of sustainability with management’s views, there were differences too. While Business Banking aligned with management in emphasizing an understanding of sustainability as a particular triple bottom line, focused on social, environmental and cultural activities, Customer Services, Marketing and Personal Banking did not appear to define sustainability in this particular way. These departments did not reference this triple bottom line, going beyond financial aspects or, in particular, the human aspect that management and Business Banking emphasized. These aspects were particularly



**Table 4** Additional evidence for perceptions of corporate sustainability

Perceptions of sustainability	Department	Evidence
Societal impact	<i>Management</i>	“Our approach is based on the fundamental belief that economic activity can and should have a positive impact on society, the environment and culture. [...] We call this sustainable banking. And it explains why we only lend to and invest in organizations that contribute to a more sustainable society.” (Website, 2012)
	<i>Marketing</i>	“I was going to work for charities but they are too small really. And when I saw the job going at Sustainabank, at a much bigger level, making the world more sustainable, at a much bigger level it is helping others to do the same. Fixing the foundations.” (George, interview)
	<i>Personal Banking</i>	“I suppose the purpose, you’ll have to forgive me for starting in the broadest sense but in my opinion the purpose of Sustainabank is to effect change. The way that we have set up our business model.” (Roger, interview)
	<i>Business Banking</i>	“And I think what Sustainabank is doing is facilitating businesses that might not have the kind of financial clout to go and get a loan from your [names of other high street banks].” (Bill, interview)
	<i>Customer Services</i>	“Retail investment funds, they call themselves ethical but in fact all they really do is avoid guns, tobacco and alcohol. And they can brand themselves as ethical as long as they don’t invest in those companies. Whereas [Sustainabank is] making a positive difference.” (Phillip, interview)
Pioneering role	<i>Management</i>	“Our Mission: Sustainabank aims to be a pioneering force in the world of sustainable banking. [...]” (Intranet, 2012)
	<i>Marketing</i>	“What I think we realistically can do is act as a beacon, act as a reference point for those other organizations and provide another model. Now for that to be effective, as a bank we need to make a profit.” (Malcolm, interview)
	<i>Personal Banking</i>	Announcing a new product, a green savings account, the Personal Banking team compared Sustainabank to well regarded and pioneering organizations when it comes to sustainability, such as Unilever and ‘best in class’ others (field notes)
	<i>Business Banking</i>	“But you know, the credit committee, often we’ve got something in there where we are doing something that another bank wouldn’t do. We are doing something that is a bit of a first, you know. And that is one element of the job where you do feel quite tangible that you are making an impact” (Alan, interview)
	<i>Customer Services</i>	“We offer professional banking services but at the same time we are trying to be a thought leader.” (Peter, interview)
Triple bottom line	<i>Management</i>	“Our business principles. We are committed to: ●Promoting sustainable development—considering the social, environmental and financial impacts of everything we do. [...]” (Website, 2012)
	<i>Business Banking</i>	“We report in the 3 sectors: cultural, social and environmental. [...] Those 3 areas of lending focus are derived from, you know, how they are supposed to relate to three-fold being: spirit, soul, physical which is a [specific spiritual approach core to the bank founding].” (Alan, interview)
Use of money	<i>Management</i>	“To become synonymous with a new, sustainable approach to banking; harnessing the power of money for good” (Sustainabank internal vision document, 2011)
Difference	<i>Marketing</i>	“We have had customers who are happy to take no interest, but that is not sustainable. So you know, we have to play within the game, and when we do have bonuses the drop is not so steep as the mainstream banks.” (Rupert, interview)
	<i>Personal Banking</i>	“for all intents and purposes [Sustainabank] looks very similar to a lot of other banks but in fact it is totally different in its consequence even though it looks the same. It’s kind of weird like that.” (Cassandra, interview)
	<i>Business Banking</i>	“There is a lot of people who have got every right to be kind of pissed off with the world around them, but all they can do is critique what they see rather than finding another way of doing it. The way Sustainabank does business.” (Alan, interview)
	<i>Customer Services</i>	“[Sustainability at the bank is] about offering professional banking services and at the same time saying that there is a different way of doing it” (Sally, interview)
Sense of community	<i>Business Banking</i>	“The sense of community we have here, what we are trying to do together. What’s the impulse? Somebody had this great metaphor of an arrow moving through the building and people latching onto it. From different places and being dragged along with this sort of unstoppable force that is Sustainabank” (Alan, interview)

important for Business Banking that used them as criteria for lending to clients:

“We’re not making judgments about the businesses we invest in. If you go back to the three folding [referring to social, environmental, cultural based on the spir-



itual roots of the bank], the central premise of it all is always about sustainability, about sustainable living in society, making those conscious choices and caring for the people in it.” (Alan, Business Banking, interview)

We found, however, that one of the characteristics of sustainability put forward by management was not echoed by any of the departments: the use of money. As detailed above, management, in particular in their public material, made a point to emphasize “the idea of a more conscious use of money in society through the banking system” (Prospects for the future, financial report 2011).

And yet another theme we found was raised by the departments but not management: how the bank differed from mainstream banks. This perception, central to the bank’s sustainability for all four departments, was highly prominent, yet scarcely registered—if at all—in management’s material and talk. The departments emphasized how different the bank was from other, so-called “mainstream” or “high street” banks, and the alternative business model underpinning it. A Business Banking employee stressed that:

“The big difference really between ourselves and the other banks is that we don’t access the whole-sale funding markets—where they borrow from the market and lend at a margin—we don’t do that. And obviously that is what led to the banking crisis to a large extent.” (Adam, Business Banking, interview)

A Marketing employee emphasized that “as an alternative bank, [Sustainabank] means something different to society, something better, something [...] with more meaning” (George, Marketing, interview). Personal Banking was keen to highlight a “different business model of banking”, “where [Sustainabank] proposes something and says: ‘this is another way of doing the same thing: business’. But business in very different ways and with different outcomes” (Cassandra, Personal Banking, interview). Customer Services also underlined the difference of the bank. Yet, for them, Sustainabank did “things differently” but mainly because “the concept [was that] of being a smaller bank” (Sarah, Customer Services, field notes). Hence, Customer Services saw Sustainabank as different in its goals (“lend customers money to more sustainable projects than what high street banks do”—Sarah, Customer Services, field notes), but not much different to a normal bank in its operations: feeling like a “factory line” (Phillip, Customer Services, field notes), Customer Services was a place where “passion comes to die” (Reginald, Customer Services, field notes). For many in Customer Services it was “just a job” (Phillip, Customer Services, field notes). This is summarized by the Head of Customer Services, Judith:

“We shouldn’t have to answer the phone in 3 rings. We shouldn’t have to process all of our work in 3 days. We shouldn’t have to process a loan within 2 weeks... but we should!—we need to have all of that, what all of the high street banks do.” (Judith, Customer Services, interview).

Finally, our analysis uncovered one last theme important to sustainability for only one department: the importance of the community for Business Banking. Despite similar growth targets as Personal Banking, Business Banking were more inclined to seeing the organization as similar to the community-focused and more personal banks of the past “where you knew your local bank manager” (Kenneth, Business Banking, field notes), yet slightly different: a “very old fashioned traditional banking model overlaid with this liberal new world ethos” (Bill, Business Banking, interview). The wider community was important, as were client communities supported by Sustainabank: “guarantor communities and voluntary communities, these were things that no other banks were doing. And they are truly enabling. And we no longer do them...” (Simon, Business Banking, interview).

## The Temporal Structuring of Sustainability

So far, our findings indicate that, at Sustainabank, certain departments within the bank held different perceptions of sustainability. In some instances, there was alignment with management views and in other instances there was misalignment and different ideas on what sustainability should entail. There are other factors that might help explain these differences, such as, for example, personal values, resistance against management and situational factors (e.g., Dahlmann & Grosvold, 2017; Hahn et al., 2015). Yet, beyond such explanations, our analysis highlights the importance of the structuring role of temporality for these differing perceptions of sustainability, structures that are apparent within patterns of working practices. We now detail these working practices, their temporal structures and how they shape, in part, perceptions of sustainability. Table 5 highlights the main work practices of the departments as well as their temporal structures (see Appendix for more details).

**Business Banking.** Most Business Banking employees were relationship managers responsible for business client relationships. Their work mainly involved reviewing existing portfolios and maintaining current relationships, while also researching new clients sporadically. The structure of their work was mostly arrhythmic as most of their relationships had particularities and implied different, irregular, actions. At least once a week, a Business Banking employee would be out of the office visiting existing and potential clients. Business Bankers’ temporal depth was typically between three and six months, as they focused on short-term

**Table 5** Summary of work practices and temporal structures at Sustainabank

Department	Work practices	Temporal structures
Business Banking	Meeting with established and prospective clients Discussing and developing lending policies Drawing on these lending policies to substantiate proposed loans, overdrafts and financial services to clients Weekly credit committee monitoring of clients and problem cases	Mostly arrhythmic structure (client meetings/proposed loans) Some consistent rhythm (monitoring of lending) Short-term financing working with clients with often well-established relationships (sometimes in excess of 10 years) Rare instances of longer-term large projects (2+ year deadlines) Nostalgic and past-oriented, premised upon traditional understandings of banking
Customer Services	Actioning overdrafts, loans and financing Opening accounts (ID checks, address clarifications, system updating) Dealing with and communicating complaints, account requests and information seekers	Highly organized and scripted Rare unpredictable tasks Strict schedule with designated lunch breaks Short temporal depth (no more than one day, as little as 10 min) Realist, clockwork and present-focused orientation, lacking longer term perspective
Marketing	Market research, surveys, working with external market research companies Marketing particular products in the media, via brochures/prints, via presence at events Supporting/sharing information with Personal Banking Implementing Marketing and communications strategy from Senior Management Team	Mostly arrhythmic structure (e.g., work on magazine, market research and product marketing) Some rhythm and structure (e.g., producing management information) Deadlines fluctuate from 2–3 weeks to 1 year Branding looks to 5 years ahead Future-looking, growth-focused orientation
Personal Banking	Collation of management information regarding ISA rates, customer numbers, account applications, etc. Occasional work on ongoing projects for customer experience Creating new financial products Increasing customer deposits	Some consistent rhythm (e.g., monitoring and checking work) Mostly arrhythmic and unstructured work (e.g., projects, new product creation) Some day-to-day monitoring, short-term temporal depth Yearly targets to reach Some long-term projects (e.g., current account, 5+ year deadlines) Future-looking and growth-oriented, with some present focus to establish an alternative

financing options with existing clients. While there were some future-looking tasks (such as seeking new clients), the temporal orientation of Business Banking was often constrained to the near past and present. Mostly, the department focused on the near past as many of Business Banking practices relied extensively on Sustainabank's lending guidelines (reviewed yearly by the department), which provided guidance and rules for providing credit options for current and potential clients. This past orientation was reinforced by the fact that Business Banking employees' average age was both much older than that of employees in other departments, but also that they were at Sustainabank for longer (see Table 1 for an indication of each department's employees' tenure).

It is not surprising then that Business Bankers mostly perceived sustainability at the bank as "different" but also "old fashioned" and "traditional" (i.e., from the past). In line with the other departments, Business Bankers would define the bank as a "slightly different model to the rest of the banks", but, unlike the others, "in many respects as a historic" one (Kenneth, interview)—one which is still close to clients and does not engage in complex financial instrumentation. During our ethnography, a client (a spiritual hub) was struggling financially. Instead of sending in the bailiffs and taking the possessions of the client to service the debt

held by Sustainabank, Business Banking employees chose to grant grace periods and worked closely with the client to help them get back on track—a more humane course of action. This was, in part, because "historically it had always been how the bank behaved" (field notes) in such circumstances, thus directly linking the "historical" behavior of the bank to Business Banking's perceptions of sustainability, in particular the triple bottom line, which they saw emphasized human dignity and a people's orientation (as elaborated on before). As this illustrates, work practices, in this case past-oriented, are thus directly aligned with the department's perceptions of sustainability.

In contrast to management, the temporal structure of Business Banking made them less sure about the future direction of Sustainabank, as they did not see the current direction well aligned with its past: "You need to know, you need to understand where you are coming from and where you are going. And I think that's not always so clear now, where we are going" (Graham, interview). This would also often translate into rejecting growth even when justified in terms of sustainability, which according to most Business Bankers would hurt the bank's alternative orientation: "the bigger the organization becomes the harder it is to retain the link back to those early days and those roots" (Kenneth,

interview). Historically, sustainability—for Business Banking employees—came organically from your relationships with your community of clients:

“A lot of our clients are doing what they are doing and are passionate about that. That feeds into you. [...] But it has been them coming to us in the past, not the other way around. And the thought leadership tends to be on the press releases, that kind of things, organising events, marketing.” (Simon, interview).

*Customer Services.* Sustainabank’s core mission is to only lend customer’s money to 100% sustainable ventures and so every action in the organization was, in essence, a sustainable act in the eyes of most employees. This was the case even in Customer Services where employees had to follow precise scripts and policies closely, in a structured, regular and repetitive fashion. Unlike practices in Personal Banking (e.g., launching new sustainable products) or Business Banking (e.g., lending to sustainable businesses), for employees in Customer Services work was much less obviously connected to sustainability. Given the nature of their work, Customer Services’ temporal depth was very short, mostly around a few days at best, and often shorter. For instance, employees answering calls would have three rings to answer an incoming call before this was logged as a “late pickup” and typically would “end” any queries five minutes after a call had finished. Their repetitive and scripted tasks, along with a short temporal depth was paralleled by a strong present, day-to-day temporal orientation, focusing on the task at hand without outlook to the past or the future during work hours. In their words, they answer the phones and “just sit and do the paperwork” (Philip, field notes). This present orientation was exemplified by how their daily activities were monitored: in real-time, via large TV screens placed high up on the walls. On the screens individual names were shown in a table and it was easy to see who was on a call, who had 30 seconds to report on the contents of a call before being available to take more calls and who was currently available.

Such a metronomic and present-oriented temporal structure partly explains why one aspect of sustainability (difference) for Customer Services is understanding the bank as different from others in its goals, but not in its operations. The focus on their immediate tasks, driven by the time pressure in fulfilling them, made Customer Services members less likely to see the difference in what they and other banks were doing: “People struggle to see the values in their day-to-day work...” (Kelly, field notes). This is despite the fact that without Customer Services the bank’s operations, and its sustainability mission with it, would simply unravel. The present orientation led Customer Services to being “all focused on trying to be a really good commercial business” (Judith, interview) in their work, with little leeway for

perceiving the sustainability (if any) of such work. “We’ve got a folder for email responses for generic stuff that comes up quite a lot” (Molly, interview). While Customer Services employees acknowledged the value of “helping sustainable businesses grow” (Sarah, field notes), they were also keenly aware of present limitations: “you need a lot more behind you than what Sustainabank have got before you are able to influence other people” (Molly, interview). This was linked particularly to growth and its challenges, notably in terms of dealing with increasing customer requests: “the idea is to service A LOT more customers with very little increase in manpower...” (Olivia, interview).

*Marketing & Personal Banking.* We treat the two departments together because they rely on similar (although slightly differing) temporal structures. These similarities are due to several factors. For instance, Marketing relied mostly on products developed by Personal Banking, therefore interacting often. Both departments also had similar project-based activities. We allude to differences when they are significant.

Both departments’ work was characterized by projects, a dearth of strict schedules, deadlines dictated by various projects of varying lengths, and thus an overall irregular rhythm. Personal Banking engaged in more monitoring and competitive intelligence work which was slightly more structured than Marketing, but not significantly. Both departments had a relatively large temporal depth, regarding the organization’s past, present and future, as they looked several years back and ahead. Marketing, for example, would constantly focus on the bank’s past as being distinct and different to other “mainstream” financial institutions and also develop marketing campaigns that would run for two to three years. Personal Banking had slightly narrower time frames, as they had clear strategic plans from the top, usually ranging in the mid- to long-term (usually a year), although they engaged in longer-term projects occasionally. Both departments were similarly future-oriented. Personal Banking were particularly focused on the possibility of launching new products, such as a green savings account or a current account for private customers, Marketing marketed those new products.

These temporal structures shaped how the two departments perceived sustainability at the bank. As detailed before, both departments were mostly adhering to management’s views of sustainability: Sustainabank having to act as a “change agent” (Katy, Personal Banking, interview)—second-order theme societal impact—and a future “reference point for those other organizations” (Malcom, Marketing, interview)—second-order theme pioneering role. These perceptions are reflected in the temporal structures of work at Personal Banking and Marketing, especially when it comes to new products that aimed to shape new directions and markets for Sustainabank. For example, the work of Marketing in these instances was to carry the unique Sustainabank

brand forward: “we [Sustainabank], in time, act as a stepping stone for another organization, further down, to take that a step further” (Malcom, Marketing, interview).

Both departments echoed senior management’s views of the future for the organization. Sustainabank needed to grow out of its “niche” by becoming “more credible” and thus being able to reach more customers year after year, “enabling [them] to make an impact” in the future (Katy, Personal Banking, interview). Indeed, “if we only talk to our current customers, how will we grow the brand?” (Martin, Marketing, field notes). This is aligned with their efforts to attract new customers, for instance with marketing campaigns or new products like a current account.

Like the other departments, Marketing and Personal Banking’s perception of the difference of the bank was also rooted, in part, in their temporal structures. They were less concerned by operations being similar to other banks like Customer Services: “I have seen over ten years how much more commercially focused we have become, but not in bad way” (Rupert, Marketing, interview). The future-oriented temporal structures of Marketing and Personal Banking help explain this: “I don’t think we are going to get huge. But what I think we realistically can do [...] is provide another model. [...] I think we provide a model that could work, potentially, in time.” (Rupert, Marketing, interview).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The first section of our findings outlines the potential variety of perceptions of sustainability within an organization. Through our analysis, we found that several dimensions of sustainability were perceived similarly between some departments at Sustainabank, such as the bank’s societal impact or its pioneering role in bringing about sustainable development in its field. Yet, we also found points of divergence between the departments, where, for instance, one department (Business Banking) saw a sense of community as core to the sustainability of the bank, whereas the other departments did not. Furthermore, while some of these perceptions aligned with those of management, others differed. Altogether, these findings offer a more fine-grained and variegated picture of perceptions of sustainability than the literature has often acknowledged, such as conceptions of top-down sustainability, where upper echelons shape how sustainability is perceived throughout the firm (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014; Maxwell et al., 1997; Strand, 2014).

Nevertheless, some advances highlight variation in how organizational members can perceive sustainability in a firm, driven by tensions (Hahn et al., 2015), institutional logics (Kok et al., 2019) or identities (Wright et al., 2012). Adding to these explanations, our findings further highlight the role of temporal structures of work practices in explaining

variations in perceptions of sustainability in the lower echelons of an organization. Starting with an analysis of the sequential structure, duration, temporal location and rate of recurrence of work practices (Zerubavel, 1981) alongside temporal orientation and depth, we developed an in-depth understanding of separate departments’ temporal structures. Systematically comparing the departments’ temporal structures and perceptions of sustainability, our analysis culminated in finding that different departments tend to hold certain perspectives on sustainability that were informed by the temporal structures of their work practices.

In some cases, this was straightforward. For example, Business Banking, with arrhythmic working patterns providing autonomy and a focus on long-standing clients, held a “traditional” view of the bank. This “old fashioned” view challenged the idea that sustainability required growth, articulated by management, and instead saw sustainability as being more about a sense of community, linking notions of sustainability with ideas of what banking used to be in the past. In other instances, variations in perceptions of sustainability were less clearly shaped by temporal structures. For instance, Customer Services, Marketing, and Personal Banking all held relatively similar views of sustainability at Sustainabank, despite different temporal structures for Customer Services. Yet, here, temporal structures provide the opportunity to see more minute differences between departments and their employees. Our analysis of perceptions highlights that there is agreement in principle regarding the ends of the organization (e.g., sustainable change achieved, in part, through difference). Yet, there is considerable disagreement regarding the means and processes by which the organization aims to achieve these ideals, where Customer Services saw the functioning of Sustainabank as similar to other, high street banks and therefore not different in this sense. This more subtle difference in perception can be explained, in part, by a focus on temporal structures. The present-oriented temporal structure of Customer Services stemmed from their work practices and made them more likely to focus on the mainstream means rather than the alternative ends of sustainability at Sustainabank. To the contrary, Marketing and Personal Banking work on less structured tasks with longer term deadlines (if there were deadlines) and thus they were more likely to project to the future, connecting the means with the ends of Sustainability and how both were different from other banks.

These findings make two important contributions to the literature on temporality and sustainability. Firstly, we contribute directly to the literature on temporality in corporate sustainability. One of the key insights in this literature is that the more future and long-term oriented a company, the more sustainable its activities (e.g., Choi et al., 2023; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015). However, this literature often proposes a monolithic understanding of temporal orientations

or time horizons—particularly focusing on organizations as singular entities, or equating the leaders' orientation with that of the organizations (e.g., Ortiz-de-Mandojana et al., 2019; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015). In contrast, we show how the temporal structures in the day-to-day work of different departments and employees create heterogeneous perceptions of sustainability within organizations, because these temporal structures are not necessarily aligned with that of the company or its management in the first place. Perhaps more importantly, extant literature has emphasized how organizational leaders can leverage interpretations of past, present, and future within an organization to, for instance, shape the identity, strategy or responsibility of the company (e.g., Basque & Langley, 2018; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Mena et al., 2016). Our findings suggest that such temporal work is likely more constrained than previously thought of because of temporality's structuring effect (e.g., Bluedorn, 2002; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002) on internal perceptions of sustainability (or otherwise) lower down in the organization.

We detail such effects by unveiling how temporal structures of work shape organizational members' old and renewed interpretations of the past, present and future of the organization and its sustainability. While the organization we study tends to organize employees with similar work practices in departments (i.e., functional organization), our study indicates that, more generally, the fault lines in perceptions of sustainability should rather be understood in terms of the nature of work practices and their temporal structures rather than departmental organization. For instance, our findings suggest that organizational members that are subject to low complexity, highly repetitive and scripted tasks (such as Customer Services employees in our case) have a limited outlook to both past and future and are mostly engaged with the present, in an habitual, unreflexive manner (Flaherty, 1999). This means that organizational members "regulated" (Zerubavel, 1981: xii) by such a present-focused temporal structure will likely anchor their understanding of corporate sustainability in the present and what it might mean for them in the here and now, not the distant future. We would suggest that administrative or customer service activities that are scripted and routinized, or for example other jobs involving repetitive and prescribed work like production line workers in a factory or fast-food workers, would have a similar outcome. Connecting the values, future mission and legacy of an organization to employees doing this kind of work, will always be a difficult task despite the indispensable nature of these activities for any mission-driven organization.

In contrast, organizational members whose work is more autonomous, for example because they have professional jurisdiction (Anteby et al., 2016) or perform tasks for which management exerts less control (Bechky & Chung, 2018), can be more detached from the present (Flaherty, 1999). Yet, this autonomy does not necessarily lead

to similar sustainability perceptions as a result. Employees that tend to work along broad, long-agreed guidelines, policies or historical elements of an organization, as well as long-standing relationships with key stakeholders (such as customers or suppliers) will likely perceive sustainability in a different way than employees whose work practices are more future-oriented, such as R&D or product development. In our case, this is reflected in the difference between Business Banking, on the one hand, and Personal Banking and Marketing, on the other hand. Business Banking's focus on past lending guidelines, existing clients and relationships influenced their perceptions of sustainability and what the bank was trying to achieve, i.e., doing traditional banking.

Further to the nature of work and its temporal structure, this suggests that older employees and employees who have been at an organization for a long period of time will potentially also tend to see sustainability differently. Relatedly, this suggests as well that people from a similar occupation or profession will tend to have similar perceptions of sustainability. This aligns with extant literature on occupational communities, their identities and how they affect key organizational outcomes and processes, such as strategy or organizational change (Anteby et al., 2016; Bechky, 2011). Even more specifically, this extends the burgeoning literature on temporality and occupations, that underlines the role of temporality for how different occupational communities coordinate their work (Kremser & Blagoev, 2021; Oborn & Barrett, 2021). Here, we contribute an understanding that temporal structures may not only affect how occupational communities coordinate their work, but also how they may engage with each other on other organizational aspects, like sustainability. Future research will have to assess whether occupational communities within (and across) organizations tend to perceive sustainability in the same way, perhaps even independently from their temporal structures of their work.

Secondly, we contribute to the sustainability literature that theorizes the tensions and conflict often caused by sustainability within organizations (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Hahn et al., 2015). We move beyond current explanations of variety building on, for instance, the differing or contrasting institutional logics present in an organization (Dahlmann & Grosvold, 2017; Kok et al., 2019) or the different identities individuals may adopt at work concerning sustainability and environmental matters (Wright et al., 2012) in two main ways. The first is that we show that, contrary to anti-theistic identities (such as 'rational manager' vs 'committed activist', or 'believers' vs 'cynics', see Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Wright et al., 2012), there is substantial overlap in how organizational members perceive sustainability and this is often developed alongside, within and against what is articulated by management. In particular, we provide a more fine-grained understanding of variation in perceptions,



and possibly, attitudes and behaviors, toward sustainability in a firm.

We contribute to this literature in a second way, since it tends to explain heterogeneity of perceptions of sustainability without consideration for temporality and the nature of work undertaken. Instead, we highlight the structuring effect of work practices and their inherent temporal structures in driving the variety of perspectives regarding sustainability within Sustainabank. Certain identities—that relate to certain views of sustainability in an organization—may have been adopted and discarded by members of the different departments within Sustainabank (Wright et al., 2012). In line with this, we observed different stances to different sustainability programs or actions by employees. However, we also show that the work employees do is temporally structured. This provides a way to understand how perceptions of sustainability can form and how the identities and attitudes with regard to sustainability in previous research may have been selected in the first place.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that these identities are not so readily adopted and dropped—but rather that they are underpinned by potent temporal structures that offer significant boundary conditions for organizational members and their perceptions of sustainability. For example, a member from Marketing, who focuses on maintaining the difference of the bank in the future and has various long-term and open-ended projects, would be unlikely to take a nostalgic or traditional view on banking and associated ideas on what sustainable banking may be. This is not purely due to the organizational member not having the correct audience for such a performance of identity (see Wright et al., 2012), but—our findings suggest—is partly due to the temporal structures underpinning the experiences and practices of a member from Marketing.

Our research also talks to the ways in which sustainability tensions are accommodated by employees and within the organization (Joseph et al., 2020). Temporality scholars often point to the importance of entraining members of an organization to the dominant rhythm of the organization (Ancona & Chong, 1996; Shipp & Richardson, 2021) or how work has to be coordinated between different occupational communities (Barley, 1988; Oborn & Barrett, 2021). Yet, in our case, members were entrained to the overarching temporal structure of the organization (Shipp & Richardson, 2021) and work was coordinated. We did not observe a substantial lack of coordination or misalignment in deadlines, for instance. Yet, Customer Services still need to answer the phone, while Marketing works on long-term communication campaigns. Since these work practices and their temporal structures shape perceptions of sustainability but cannot be more entrained or coordinated, our findings suggest an explanation for the continuation of tensions in perceptions—because they are rooted in hardly changeable work practices

that are already entrained with each other. This provides an additional explanation than current literature provide on why tensions on corporate sustainability remain in organizations (Hahn et al., 2015).

However, it does suggest that changing working practices and the temporal structuring of employee's work is one avenue to explore if you are aiming to meaningfully influence perceptions of sustainability. For example, pushing present-oriented employees to engage in more future-oriented tasks might engender a different view of sustainability. Or, encouraging future-oriented employees to engage more meaningfully with the past of the organization may allow them to, firstly, temporally align more with some of their colleagues, but also may see the organization (and thus its future) differently.

There are some limitations to our enquiry that could be researched further. In particular, how the equilibrium of varied perceptions of sustainability we depict potentially evolves or is disrupted is a particular important avenue for future research in our opinion. This could help provide a more complete picture of variation in organizations regarding sustainability, explained for instance by institutional logics (Dahlmann & Grosvold, 2017). Would perceptions of sustainability change if institutional logics shifted in prominence? And what about temporal structures?

The organization we studied is at the forefront of corporate sustainability efforts. This means that employees self-select and there was little variation in values, politics and ideologies among the employees. Could an organization that is less advanced in sustainability present more or less, variations in perceptions of sustainability, and what would be the role of temporal structures for sustainability in such organizations? Future research on perceptions of corporate sustainability and the role of temporal structures should examine more traditional and established organizations that attempt at becoming more sustainable. What would also be interesting in this regard is whether perceptions of sustainability in such organizations could be, for example, more cynical (Costas & Kärreman, 2013) than what we observe at Sustainabank.

Our findings should be generalizable to other types of organizations, as there will be occupational communities, departments and business units characterized by different tasks and practices, and therefore potentially different temporal structures that will affect how these departments engage. Our setting is characterized by relatively heterogeneous organizational departments in terms of their work practices, future research could examine more homogenous organizations, where departments resemble each other more closely in terms of their activities and associated temporal structures. For instance, matrix organizations or project-based teams are likely to display similar work practices and hence temporal structures. Whether the extent and scope of perceptions of sustainability are as important in a



homogenous organization as much as they are in a heterogeneous one would be an interesting avenue for future research on sustainability and temporality. In particular, this would

help to determine when past, present and future constraints and re-interpretations are more or less important to members' view of sustainability.

## Appendix

Observable temporal parameters of work practices.

Department	Main work practices and tasks	Sequential structure (in which order)	Duration (how long)	Temporal location (what time in the day)	Rate of recurrence (how often)
Business Banking	Relationship managers (RMs) meeting with established and prospective clients	RMs meet with new clients having first either been contacted by the client, handed a lead or through their own research and contacts Meeting with established contacts is usually determined by the credit committee or if requested by the client	Developing relationships with clients can take many years. Some clients join the bank very quickly, others take much longer Meetings usually take between 1–3 h. Sometimes longer	Meetings are scheduled throughout the year but are often linked to increases of fees from other banks and the need for RMs to gather information from clients in preparation for a credit committee meeting	Depending on the client, some RMs meet problem clients or special clients monthly. In most cases face-to-face meetings are yearly (unless needed)
	Discussing and developing lending policies	Lending policies were introduced as the bank became a larger organization. They have since been worked upon, discussed and developed via working papers and workshops. They are not worked on in a sequential way	Varying lengths of time and the development of policies is an ongoing exercise	Sporadically, but caused by new potential clients that may not fit, or contradict, the lending policies During observation, we witnessed two distinct attempts to amend the policies and one workshop directly looking at the lending documents	Yearly reviews. But continual negotiation, querying and questioning within distinct groups (only elevated up to head of Business Banking on significant occasions)
	Drawing on these lending policies to substantiate proposed loans, overdrafts and financial services to clients that are decided upon in the credit committee meeting	Groundwork with clients Draw up proposal with client based on lending policies This would then be in the system before a given Friday Friday, information packs were drawn up detailing the past history of the clients/businesses and distributed to those attending on Monday morning for approval or not	From 1–4 days preparation time for the RMs and the client. (In some cases, much longer) The credit committee meeting would last between 2–4 h	Preparation by RMs can be throughout the day Credit committee meeting happens every Monday, this is where decisions would be made	Varies from RM to RM
	Credit committee monitoring of clients and problem cases	RMs will be notified if one of their clients is up for review (chosen at random by the system) RMs will be notified if problem clients have entered into a “monitoring” phase Called into the meeting on Monday morning	Depending on the severity of the case an RM could be working all week with a client on an issue or may only spend 1–2 h in preparation time Credit committee meeting would last between 2 and 4 h	- All clients will be reviewed at some point in the year - Problem cases will be reviewed once a week (also fortnightly or monthly depending on severity of problem)	At least monthly for each RM Weekly for the credit committee team

Department	Main work practices and tasks	Sequential structure (in which order)	Duration (how long)	Temporal location (what time in the day)	Rate of recurrence (how often)
Customer Services	Actioning overdrafts, loans and financing	Receive communication from Business Banking Using bespoke software, make the required overdraft or financing changes	This could take between 10 min to an hour if it was a particular tricky case	Throughout the day	Every day
	Opening accounts. (ID checks, address clarifications, system updating)	Requests for bank accounts (for savers, not business clients) arrive from a Customer Services colleague and/or the Sustainabank webpage Identity check the person applying for the account Address check and if there are still any queries the customer is contacted	10 min to an hour if it is a particularly tricky task	Throughout the day	Every day
	Dealing with and communicating complaints, account requests and information seekers	A person would ring Sustainabank's phone number, this would then be put through to an electronic switchboard Any individuals not on a call or not writing up a call would then have this call routed to their phone They would have 3 rings to answer this call before this was logged as a "late pickup" The employee would collect the relevant information regarding complaints, information and account requests and are helped by a partial script -These complaints and requests are then sorted and passed on to the relevant departments	Calls would last between 5 to 30 min depending on the issue	Throughout the day	Every day
Marketing	Writing and finding pieces to be included in the Sustainabank magazine	Start with finding leads, creating ideas and planning the magazine before conducting, inviting guest writers and pulling together the magazine to be sent out	Fluid, various lengths of time decided by employees	Various times in the day	Quarterly
	Market research surveys, working with external market research companies	Conducting surveys or responses to Marketing projects, products or the bank's brand. These are then analyzed before being fed back to the senior management team	Fluid, various lengths of time	Various times in the day	Intermittent deadlines
	Marketing particular products: - in the media - Via brochures/prints - Via presence at events	Using market research data, groups were set up to create Marketing materials based on an overall Marketing strategy	Fluid, various lengths of time	Various times in the day	Intermittent deadlines
	Supporting/Sharing information with Personal Banking	This would often be an ongoing task that different members of the team would take responsibility for	3–4 h a week	Various times in the day	Monthly deadlines around the senior management team meeting

Department	Main work practices and tasks	Sequential structure (in which order)	Duration (how long)	Temporal location (what time in the day)	Rate of recurrence (how often)
Personal Banking	Collation of management information regarding ISA rates, customer numbers and account applications	Customer numbers and account applications are checked first and then ISA rates are monitored	Each task can take between 1–3 h (sometimes longer depending on particular times of the year)	Customer numbers and account applications are the first actions of the day ISA rates can vary	Daily monitoring of customer numbers ISA rates checked every week
	Occasional work on ongoing projects to develop processes and to create better customer experience	Largely unstructured	1–2 h meetings and preparation work beforehand Projects can last 3–4 months or can take years to complete	Largely unstructured	Meetings happen at various intervals. 3–4 projects are delivered a year
	Creating new financial products (current account and Green ISA)	Ideas formulated within the department, these are then turned into project groups involving project managers and members from other groups/teams involved	Various 1–2 h meetings and preparation beforehand Financial projects can take multiple years to complete	Meetings scheduled throughout the year at various times	Meetings happen at various intervals. New products are typically brought out once every 1–3 years

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**Ethical approval** Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of Warwick Business School. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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