Sustainable purchasing role in the development of business

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Abstract. *A general preoccupation of many local companies is to design and implement sustainable strategies. In this context, managers are seeking to identify the potential of different factors to facilitate the effective integration of sustainability into their business practices. In the present paper, we clarify the sustainable purchasing concept and we analyse this activity run within several corporations from the local banking field, IT&C and pharma. The literature review served as a basis for an empirical investigation among local large organizations. The methods used were in-depth bibliographic documentation, companies' analysis and semi-structured interviews performed with purchasing heads. The result of the research confirms the important role of the purchasing activity and shows us how this field can contribute to a sustainable development of business. Despite the general interest and the motivation to use sustainable principles, effective incorporation of sustainable purchasing principles into business practices may encounter some obstacles, raising the need for more research.*

Keywords: sustainable purchasing, responsible purchasing, sustainable development.

Introduction

The purchasing plays an increasingly important role in the company's activity. The development of a business relies, among other factors, on the way that the products and services supplied for the company bring the best quality downwards, to the company's customers. The best quality is not considered in the sense of amazingly well constructed goods and services, but it could refer to the ones including social, environmental and economic impact.

Therefore, the business strategy tends to include the triple bottom line concept, the sustainable development being revealed under three dimensions: environmental, economic and social (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002).

The purchasing function is a legitimate contributor to the company's general strategy. We intend to mention few explanations for which we should act considering the sustainable purchasing within the development of the business, even when there might be barriers to doing this. Managers might have their own ethical and moral aspirations in running their companies. Apart from this, there are potential tangible motivations to use sustainability approaches in developing their business.

Sustainable companies ensure their successful development on a long term. Apart from the firm's solvability, more and more, potential investors and also other third parties (i.e. suppliers, clients, government institutions, local or international public regulators) are interested in the

existence of a clear vision and some sustainable values embedded in the company (i.e. responsible purchasing rules and consumption policies, recycling flows envisaged for the waste resulted from the firm's activity, human resources policies, diversity of the Board members, CO2 impact on their activity, equity promoted within the company, etc.).

The aim of becoming a sustainable company increases in the conditions in which the natural resources represent serious challenges for the business development. At the same time, through the products and services offered in downstream, some companies could be vulnerable in front of different questions coming from their clients, referring to their own activity's sustainability.

A healthy basis to obtain this could be secured in upstream by doing responsible purchasing. In the case of upstream, for instance, "for a company, to reach high standards in dealing with its customers, it is vital to reach high standards in controlling the relationship with its suppliers" (Saunders, 1994).

In business life, in some cases, we might encounter business sustainability to a noble and beautiful extent, being visible on the companies' sites, eventually part of the vision and mission presentations; we hear about it throughout managers' statement or in marketing campaigns, with a bolded intention to be communicated to people. There might be also a particular extent, really pointing to the business' driving forces to care about the concrete sourcing side of the activity, which does mean that the companies care if their suppliers care, in their turn, about the sources of their products and services; and this continues to be applied to the whole supply chain. The first approach does not exclude the second, the only issue arising when there is no concrete implementation plan to actually perform in line with our declared aspirations and we just talk the talk, but do not walk the walk.

There are businesses not involving the sustainability matter in their activity, most likely as, either they were not decided to analyze this, either the balance between sustainability measures applied and potential costs envisaged lead them to put some concrete actions on hold for the moment.

To solve this, supplementary awareness might be welcomed on the local market. The appropriate sponsorship seems well needed, as, both for small and medium enterprises or larger organizations, the top management is fundamentally deciding the path to be followed. This could be determined also following urgent regulators' demands; thus, after that moment, the decision to create policies or processes is speed up in this regard and new ways to become more responsible are found. Once the idea of sustainability of the activity is accepted, it could be the right time to define and implement strategic purchasing, leveraging on the sustainable sourcing.

We intend to figure out the purchasing departments 'outcomes that managed to implement sustainable practices within their companies.

Once the company is committed to the quality of the products & services, then the business requirements, including the needed volumes and the requested quality of the products and services will fit to their commercial objectives; however this will be done in line with the intended sustainability purpose.

To achieve sustainable objectives, there is defined a formalized purchasing system that documents when entering the relationship with the supplier, ranking him based on sustainability classes, then using sustainable criteria during the bid offers evaluations and using CSR contractual clauses.

Literature review

Purchasing means the process of procuring “the proper requirement, at the time needed, for the lowest possible costs from a reliable source” (Winthrop.edu, 2020). In practice, there is about buying goods or services from an external source, most often through a tender where there are multiple suppliers.

Purchasing represents an important activity inside a company, as it is in charge with commercial exchanges between two or multiple organisations. Analised as a department, purchasing is considered a “support function that contributes to obtaining competitive advantage in a business”. (Porter, 1985).

At its beginnings, the purchasing was perceived more like administrative related, but over the past few years, it has began to be perceived as a key contributor to the company’s performance. In this regard, the organizations assumed the purchasing division transformation from pure transactional to strategical side, contributing to the company’s sustainability.

Apart from the potential savings that could impact a company’s activity, the purchasers’ role becomes linked to aspects bringing long term impact on the business development (i.e. respect for ethics in business, respect for the social, environmental and economic responsibility, respect for the legal requirements (i.e. GDPR, fight against corruption, sanctions and embargos, etc.).

Based on the company’s set of consumption policies, the buyers might evaluate and mitigate the associated risks respecting the sustainability standards aligned with the global objectives, i.e. UN Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030 (UN, 2015).

The focus of the buyers is not exclusively built on obtaining savings, but on the possibility to facilitate sustainable value creation within organization, influencing not only the business environment, but the entire community.

Among the first definitions for sustainability, there is the one presented in the Bruntland World Commission report (1987), the term being defined as “the development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

Shrivastava (1995) described sustainability as offering the potential for reducing the longterm risks associated with resource depletion, fluctuations in energy costs, product liabilities, pollution and waste management.

Bourdreau and Ramstand (2005) see sustainability as “achieving success today without compromising the needs of the future”.

Sustainability was also explained as “the possibility that human and other forms of life on Earth will flourish forever” (Ehrenfeld, 2008). The author identified cultural issues such as the unending consumption that characterizes modern life and outlined practical steps to develop sustainability as a mindset.

There was not a single established definition for sustainability (Berns et al., 2009); however, it was concluded that the sustainability would be a driving force that will need to be addressed.

The sustainable development of business has come to represent an important dimension of corporate strategy, within an increasing number of organizations trying to define, implement and improve the economic, environmental and social impacts of their operations.

Sustainability in business has been among the most important themes raised at the global level in the last decade, being a strategical goal for managers. A sustainable organization practically contributes to sustainability by obtaining economic, social and environmental benefits simultaneously, i.e., achieving the triple bottom line (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002; Elkington, 1998).

Schein (2015) emphasizes that sustainability comprehension ranges from business-as-usual short-term economics to new long-term ecological and restorative business models. The author points that humans are part of a global ecosystem, not separate from it, nature has intrinsic value and, in order to minimize our impact on natural systems, we need to think systemically and long-term.

It is important to note that the economic side is not limited to short run results as the yearly net revenue, but also refers to elements that contribute to long run business development, such as a firm's reputation and long-terms partnerships. Thus, managing sustainability means setting a goal in well balancing short term and long-term business objectives.

The purchasing function is considered an important driver of change among other corporate functions, representing an opportunity of integrating environmental aspects into all departments of a business (Zsidisin and Hendrick, 1998; Preuss, 2001).

It was explained that environmental sustainability could contribute to the economic profitability (Wald, 2006; Sharma et al., 2010) or to obtaining a competitive advantage for a company (Carter et al., 2000; Porter and van der Linde, 1995).

Sustainability in the purchasing activity was addressed as green supply chain (Bowen et al., 2006), socially responsible purchasing (Carter and Jennings, 2002) or green purchasing (Large and Thomsen, 2011). The environmental or green purchasing was defined by Large and Thomsen, (2011) as an integration of environmental considerations into purchasing policies and actions.

Sustainable purchasing is aligned with “the principles of sustainable development, such as ensuring a strong, healthy and just society, living within environmental limits, and promoting good governance” (Walker and Brammer, 2009).

According to UN Global Marketplace (2021), sustainable purchasing integrates requirements, specifications and criteria targeting the protection of the environment, of social progress and in support of economic development, namely by “seeking resource efficiency, and improving the quality of products and services and ultimately optimizing costs.”

HEC/ EcoVadis Sustainable Procurement Barometer (Briel et al., 2017) emphasizes that the most important business drivers for the sustainable purchasing are avoiding the risk of brand reputation, risk mitigation, compliance to regulations and the cost savings.

Integrating sustainable principles in already existing purchasing flows may contribute to enhancing sustainability at all company's teams' level.

In this regard, the purchasing function must ensure that there are created internally, approved and known the appropriate purchasing responsible rules, including a code of conduct known by the suppliers. Aiming to have business development based on sustainable relationships with the company's partners, the suppliers could be a priori evaluated and included in a preferred list of suppliers, if the sustainability is a priority for the business. However, ranking the suppliers in terms of sustainable principles is necessary, contributing to a healthy future relationship. A potential monitoring of the status of the company could be also envisaged.

Before launching a request for proposal, as agreed with internal customer as beneficiary of the purchasing, the business specifications must include sustainability requirements. The agreed selection grid must always contain sustainable weighted criteria, which should be measurable and auditable.

The refusal of the sustainability contractual clauses could be an eliminatory criterion for the suppliers that are in that situation.

In addition, medium or long term measures could be adopted based on the site visits and inspections performed at the suppliers' premises. The operational evaluations and the common

appraisals of the suppliers, following the discussions held with the internal customers could lead to panel of suppliers agreed for certain category of purchasing taking into account sustainability principles.

A significant body of researches were identified in the literature emphasizing various motivations behind sustainable purchasing. Legislation and public policy are found to be important motivators in driving sustainable efforts (Carter and Dresner, 2001; Min and Galle, 2001; Walton et al., 1998).

The motivation to implement sustainable purchasing is linked to various stakeholders, like the following, but not limited to: institutional players (i.e. regulations and compliance, regional development), consumers (i.e. quality, security), shareholders and top management (i.e. brand awareness, profitability, control over risks), civilian society (i.e. ethical concerns, resources' preservation), suppliers (i.e. partnering and creating competitive advantage), according to some researches (Banerjee et al., 2003; Bansal and Roth, 2000; Lawrence and Morell, 1995; Vredenburg and Westley, 1993; Winn, 1995).

The difficulty to concretely implement sustainability may be linked to organizational inertia, as it may involve complex decision-making strategy (Matos and Hall, 2007) and there might be not aligned internal objectives. In real life, when it comes to the sustainable purchasing, we may witness to lack of management' commitment or support leading to lack of internal resources.

An important barrier to implementing sustainable purchasing could mirror even the main driver to implement the sustainable purchasing, meaning, concerns around cost. Being determined to act as sustainable purchasers, it means sometimes to buy at higher costs, as there are many green materials that may be more expensive, influencing the overall costs products (Koplin et al., 2007). There might also intervene the idea that some additional processes are more costly or time consuming, thus, not worth analyzing them.

Facing a sustainable development of a company presenting strong requirements related to economic, social and environmental responsibility, some suppliers may encounter the lack of sustainable assets or the absence of suppliers, throughout their supply chain; consequently, the resistance to change or the lack of responsiveness in the case of some suppliers may also influence the implementation of sustainable purchasing.

Methodology

The objective of our empirical research was to explore the adopting of some sustainable purchasing functioned in the development of the business and how this impacted the overall business development within eleven private organizations.

The majority of the studies within the specialized literature upon the sustainable purchasing, focus on large organizations. We also choose these kinds of corporations acting in some intensively regulated fields of activity, within banking, IT&C and pharmaceutical sectors. Except for two organizations, all of them are owned by multinational companies.

In our research, the sample used includes experts in the field of purchasing with whom we conducted semi-structured interviews between August and December 2020. The interviewees, heads of purchasing from locally established companies, were selected based on their in-depth knowledge of the firm's sustainability processes and purchasing practices and the unique perspective they could provide.

The participants were seven women and four men, all of them having more than five years in the field of purchasing and at least ten years of senior management positions, using

strategical thinking when assessing the sustainability of their organizations. They were ensured anonymity to encourage transparency of their purchasing practices.

Within the interviews performed, the main theme presented to the participants was that we aimed to investigate the role of the purchasing process in the sustainable development of the business. The interaction with the participants was conceived in order to analyze:

- *Company's organizational chart, object of activity, yearly turnover, number of employees, shareholders structure, purchasing divisions' main responsibilities within the organization;*
- *Participants' general comprehension upon the sustainability principles;*
- *Answers to open questions concerning sustainable purchasing focusing on significant elements of the participants' experience and the operational model used in this regard.*

The questions contained statements related to the importance of the sustainable purchasing. From their answers, a particular interest was in figuring out how important it is perceived to be the sustainable practice in their current or future activity. The participants were addressed the following main questions, encouraging them to enlarge their answers to any related information that might contribute to deepening the comprehension of the subject:

- (i). To what extent does your purchasing team use sustainable practices in your organizations? Please provide relevant examples from the current activity. Please rank the maturity of the function in this regard on a scale from 1 to 3 (i.e. 1 = rare purchasing projects applying ad hoc sustainable principles; 2 = define and pursue clear roadmap dedicated to the sustainable purchasing implementation; 3 = continuous improving in sustainable purchasing).
- (ii). What difficulties are encountered by the purchasing function in implementing sustainable purchasing within the organization and how to mitigate them?
- (iii). What improvements are necessary within the purchasing activity to create sustainable development for the business?
- (iv). How do you see the future of the purchasing function as a potential contributor to a sustainable business?

The participants to the research were asked the above information via emails in a structured communication, followed by on line discussions to develop the theme. Due to the health crisis we faced and the busy agenda of the managers, the on line communication was preferred by all the interviews, instead of physical meetings.

Secondary data were also collected (i.e. mission & vision statements, codes of conduct, organization corporate and social responsibility policy, company's implication in public sustainable projects, etc.) from the official company's sites or directly from the participants. In their answers to the main questions of the interview, they referred to this kind of information. Consequently, the consistency of the information provided through the interviews was analyzed, linking their statements' content with the secondary data provided.

Results and discussions

In order to interpret the results, we performed qualitative analysis of the information collected. By analyzing the answers, we notice that sustainable purchasing is increasingly present on the agenda of the managers, looking forward to including environment, social and commercial responsibility perspective in their activity.

Related to the first aspect discussed, the existence of the sustainable practices within their companies, as somehow expected due to the field of activity and the size of the analyzed corporations, all the participants confirmed that they apply sustainable practices within their

organizations. The answers for the point (i) contained the following similar statements among the participants:

- We made sure to approve internal purchasing normative considering sustainability principles.
- We have created the necessary awareness internally, towards the internal clients and externally, towards the suppliers, about the principles of responsible purchasing.
- Our organization is committed to integrating sustainability into the purchasing flows, targeting sustainable practices for the years to come.

When developing their answers, more than half of the participants mentioned, as an important driver of implementing sustainable practices within their organization, the need to align local general purchasing rules with their group's sustainability policies.

However, the highest maturity level considered by the participants was the second level and it was provided by 71% of them, the rest barely considering the first level of maturity.

The discussions with the participants reveal that the adoption of the sustainable purchasing differs to a great extent among the organizations analyzed, taking into account the direct management involvement and sponsorship together with strategic initiatives in this regard that might also be linked to the international network of their organizations.

However, 57% of the participants confirmed that there are sustainable purchasing procedures locally approved. The rest of the participants mentioned the awareness within their organization related to the ethical purchasing to be adopted, so that the good renown and image of the company should be respected.

To sum up, among the drivers that positively influence the development of sustainable purchasing, the following answers were provided:

- Reputation and ethical motivation;
- Regulator's demand;
- Top management leadership or headquarters vision;
- Potential savings;
- Avoid contractual risks;
- Competitive advantage;
- Mitigate suppliers risks.

Among the good practices within their organizations, the purchasing heads coming from the banks clearly mentioned that purchasing teams perform their activity taking into account knowing your supplier procedures, checking the potential suppliers' economic dependency and also sanctions and embargos matter or searching if there are reputational, legal, environmental or economic constraints related to the respective company.

The banks' participants stated also that, for some particular category of purchasing considered as highly risky from sustainability point of view (i.e. real estate refurbishments), they apply weighted corporate and social responsibility criteria when evaluating the suppliers' offers, in line with the business requirements drafted by their internal clients as beneficiary of the goods and services purchased. This practice proved to contribute to risks mitigation (i.e. operational and reputational), respect of internal compliance rules and even cost savings in some logistics purchasing.

All the participants confirmed the existence of sustainability contractual clauses with their suppliers, mentioning this measure as being implemented in the last two years, following the overall strategy adopted by the organization.

With one exception, all the participants had waste electrical and electronic equipment policy in place in their organization, included or not in their group of companies' policies.

As a conclusion for this point, there are no identical sustainable purchasing standards known and adopted throughout all the local corporations analyzed. The major influence in setting the local standards comes from the parent company, being harmonized with the local regulations and implemented within the local business context. The presence of different motivations factors that contribute to sustainable purchasing practices within the organizations is hereby revealed:

Figure 1. Motivations to implement

Source: Authors' own research results.

As for the difficulties (ii) encountered to consistently apply sustainable purchasing, it was stated that they are not always linked to some organizational inertia, as there is created the appropriate awareness and there is a general commitment to pursuing sustainability. There might be, however, due to the economical side, particularly during turmoil times, when it is revealed that sometimes the cost of the product or services might be apparently higher if there is chosen a sustainable approach. It is worth mentioning, from practice, when the total cost of ownership method is applied, looking at potential gains on medium and long run, there are ways to mitigate this, if the patience and the time of internal stakeholders are accordingly. An important point is still challenging the internal customer to insert sustainability specifications within the business requirements, in line with the communicated internal strategy, as there are cases when this is forgotten and the former operational framework is preferred, hoping to end up quickly the purchasing process, due to urgent operational needs. Difficulty of monitoring suppliers' performance related to sustainability area might be due to neither internal lack of human resources nor the necessary tools. Sustainability audits and inspections are important and they could be performed when there are the appropriate resources within the purchasing team; they might aim to convince the suppliers about long-term commitments to set sustainability rules, not just one, when entering the relationship or just ticking a list with initial eligible conditions. In the same time, the market suppliers could be also educated to increase sustainability efforts, when they do not miss the resources, but the necessary knowledge. To conclude on this point, as presented in Fig.2, the answers pointed that most difficulties are rather internal than external to organizations and could be mitigated if there is a long term strategic will in this respect. Small improvements done gradually

could be a proper solution in this regard, if some sustainability regulations from institutional authorities are not deemed to be enforced immediately.

Figure 2. Difficulties encountered

Source: Authors' own research results .

About the improvement actions (iii) in adopting sustainable purchasing, the unanimous opinion was linked to the top management implication in empowering the purchasing function. One participant's proposal was to eventually subordinate corporate and social responsibility team into the purchasing head coordination, so that integrated strategy could be built from the scratch taking into account a holistic sustainable purchasing approach. Other participant suggested that they already established one sustainability champion within their company, animating transversal teams in the spirit of sustainable purchasing and quarterly reporting to the Board innovative ideas of employees from different departments related to what it should be different so that new sustainability initiatives are put into practice. Once the organizational commitment to sustainability is facilitated when top management embraces the concept, then, lower organizational levels engage in sustainability, i.e. purchasing category managers act like agents of change. From the interview held it was revealed that best agents of change promoting sustainability concerns should be internal, like the purchasing division, or external, such as investors, suppliers, regulatory agencies, and even customers. To increase the purchasing team involvement in sustainability cause, a proper way should be to include sustainability targets in their activity, after doing the appropriate trainings. Long-term sustainability goals for most suppliers is also revealed from the topics discussed, so that long-term partnership could be built having sustainability as its basis. Incentivizing suppliers to be more sustainable could be realized if there is clear evidence that sustainability criteria are a key factor in purchasing decisions when purchasing contracts are renewed or when they are included in a preferred panel of suppliers. Improvements envisaged are presented in Fig. 3.

Figure 3. Improvement proposed

Source: Authors' own research results.

The future is optimistic, according to the last point (iv) proposed to be analyzed, as the purchasing function is expected to contribute to the increase of the company's competitiveness and at the same time managing the upstream risks related to the suppliers' operational, economic, social, environmental risks, legal and ethical risks, etc.

The sustainable purchasing could impact the business development by both avoiding potential negative effects (i.e. reputation, financial costs, operational issues), but mostly through positive achievements focusing on creative solutions and long term commitment to complying with expectations (i.e. regulators, top management or shareholders' vision, customers new habits and expectations).

Implementing purchasing sustainability and managing its associated barriers will continue to be preoccupations and part of evolving company's strategy. Improving purchasing sustainability could be a great contribution to secure the business' sustainable growth.

Establishing clear objectives and measuring them inside the purchasing activity may ensure the framework contributing to a sustainable value creation.

Among the potential key performance indicators regarding the sustainable purchasing activity, there were mentioned the following:

- Weight of total purchases coming from local small and medium enterprises;
- Total volumes coming from solidarity purchasing (i.e. disabled workers);
- Weight of purchases of 'green' energy;
- Total buyers having sustainable purchasing objectives;
- Weight of requests for proposal including sustainable requirements and measurable sustainability criteria;
- Number of sustainability audits performed;
- Number of suppliers having sustainable norms implemented in their own activity.

Supplementary to the buyers' training related to sustainability matters, a clear communication plan regarding the evolution of sustainable purchasing's ratios is needed. The organizations we investigated used different mechanisms for communication: employees acting as disseminators of sustainable purchasing principles; campaigns to promote socially responsible actions, such as implementation of waste recycling in the company and reduction of the use of paper or disposable materials; new partnerships concluded with external stakeholders in order to promote sustainability campaigns, all the organization employees attending this kind of information within their internal newspaper, etc.

Sustainable purchasing might help building an equilibrium between the pure economic financial needs of the company and the inclusion of some social, economic and environmental responsibility principles. If the companies adopt sustainable purchasing and identify benefits in the development of their business, they will strive for extensive adoption of this strategy. Blome et al. (2013) also suggest that the improved market performance of a company leads to the adoption of sustainable purchasing.

Integrating sustainable principles in already existing purchasing flows may contribute to enhancing sustainability at all company's teams' level. This could be better than launching new flows enhancing sustainability, as this could be rejected based on potential time consuming and reluctant attitude towards change management.

As resulted from the interviews, the research found consistent presence of sustainable purchasing practices that lead to development of their business within their organizations. However, they are confronted with inertia in considering continuous sustainable improvement,

particularly within economic uncertainty. Industry background and regulations influence sustainable practices, which may imply that, for other fields of activity, the sustainable purchasing practices might lack substance or they appear when it comes to avoiding negative effects, not like vivid initiatives.

Conclusions

The research performed allows to us to draw useful conclusions, as our findings suggest that within all the examined business there were implemented sustainable purchasing practices, influencing their companies' development.

Assuming sustainability principles and making the necessary awareness inside organizations appear to be a constant preoccupation. In line with this, there is a necessity to allow the purchasing function to have the opportunity to contribute to the creation of sustainable values in the organizations, having proper key performance indicators and purchasing policy aligned with the general sustainability approach of the company. The specialization inside the purchasing team, sustainability training and the necessary resources might help contributing to the development of the business. A barrier to the sustainable purchasing implementation could be the purchasing team missing the combination of technology, people, and approach to an effective program.

In the quest of reaching sustainable purchasing, collective and individual actions could be encouraged by the acknowledgement of some concrete initiatives such as setting goals aligned with the triple bottom-line for purchasing sustainable products and services, with a special bonus.

Within the sample that we have chosen, there were representatives from intensively regulated and very competitive corporations and the sustainable purchasing practices have proven to contribute to their organizations. Considering their feed-back related to several barriers in constantly implementing sustainable principles, we may foresee that there is not easy to perform change management within other companies, aiming to reinforce the sustainability importance within the entire purchasing activity, particularly if there is a short run approach.

For the future, there will be a challenge for the companies to find ways of collaborating between the suppliers and the buyers, understanding that it is in their common interest to join their forces, some not considering only the profit margins, the others not looking only after potential negotiation savings.

In line with the global economic, social and environmental evolution we are witnessing, we may foresee that there is an encouraging way towards more responsible purchasing. This remains an evolving subject, sometimes linked to changing individual behaviours, but always linked to aligning purchasing action plans with company's long-term objectives.

Also, aiming to attire the top management willingness, having a number of sustainable purchasing standards agreed to follow and periodically analyzed may contribute to enforcing the purchasing function contribution to the development of the business.

We may see more leaders and purchasing heads increasing courage to manage the business transformation in the sustainable principles respect. Anyhow, the purchasing heads must be at the decision table to contribute to the strategic sustainability decisions making. The purchasing function can contribute to the sustainable development of the business on both strategic and operational sides.

Purchasing is an inspired function for the business development to act using sustainability principles, looking forward to dealing with more sustainable products and services. Learning and relearning together with business partners (including the suppliers) how to better be sustainability focused in the perpetual target of the client-centred preoccupation might be the future. Together,

as a joint effort between purchasers and suppliers, there is a need to determine and select the appropriate environmental measures to reach better development of business with the economic, social and environmental responsibility, particularly when it comes to tougher times and economic turmoil.

However, the methods and procedure to achieve sustainable business will vary from a company to another, the early adopters being beneficiaries of competitive advantage on a long run. For other companies, some best practices from those that already adopted sustainable purchasing could be followed as an example and a simple way could be learning from competitors within the same field of activity.

This working paper reports on on-going research into the role of sustainable purchasing in developing business. Our research is limited due to the small number of interviewed people and by the eventual lack of transparency when enlarging upon the potential barriers to implement sustainable purchasing within their organizations. The industry background and related degree of the sustainability regulations apparently influence sustainability practices and the impact in the business development. The main area to be further developed are the method and some concrete measures of purchasing sustainability at various levels of analysis (i.e. the purchasing positioning in the corporate governance, the measurement indicators related to supply chain risks, further purchasing operational practices and ratios, etc.).

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