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Drowning in a sea of sustainability. Can sharing sustainability information with entrepreneurs lead to less sustainable entrepreneurship?

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Picture this: you're flooded with information about sustainability - reports, articles, advice galore. But instead of feeling empowered, you're drowning in overload. Our research reveals that the more sustainability information entrepreneurs receive, the more overwhelmed they become. And here's the kicker: this overload isn't just stressful, it's sabotaging their ability to drive sustainable change.

Unlocking the shared value

Today's society presents us with a multitude of socio-environmental challenges. The good news is that entrepreneurs hold a powerful key to help solving these issues through sustainable business practices. Not only can sustainability benefit the environment and society, but it can also fuel the success of the firm itself.

Following the Porter model, strategic sustainable behavior is the name of the game. It's about more than just checking a sustainability box, it's about carefully aligning sustainability efforts with your business' overarching strategy for maximum shared value. Take, for instance, an IT company aiming to expand but struggling to find skilled workers. By investing in IT education for underprivileged individuals, they not only bridge the skills gap but also contribute to a more inclusive society—all while fostering their own growth. However, not all sustainability efforts are created equal. While reactive actions, like donating to charities, have merit, it's the proactive, strategic moves that truly drive shared value for society and the firm alike.

TMI: too much information?

Entrepreneurs perceive a lack of relevant knowledge as a barrier to sustainable entrepreneurship. To overcome this knowledge barrier, policy makers, consultants, and the media flood entrepreneurs with well-meaning advice and information. However, there's a catch: while knowledge is power, an overload of sustainability information can be a stumbling block rather than a stepping stone. When you're bombarded with facts, figures, and recommendations about sustainability practices, you struggle to make sense of it and end up feeling confused, frustrated, and unsure of what to do next. Information overload doesn't just lead to decision paralysis; it can also breed apathy towards sustainability. When there's too much to process, it's tempting to stick with the status quo rather than navigate through the chaos. In essence, information overload is the enemy of sustainable entrepreneurship. It clouds judgment, hinders progress, and keeps businesses stuck in old patterns.

To explore the impact of sustainability information on entrepreneurs' strategic sustainable behavior, we surveyed 1053 entrepreneurs of Belgian SMEs over different industries. Our research points out that the more sustainability info entrepreneurs receive, the more information overload they experience. When overwhelmed, entrepreneurs often stick to the status quo or reluctantly embrace sustainability under external pressures. When the info is complex, ambiguous or new, it only adds to the confusion. More isn't always better. In fact, it can hinder smart decision-making on sustainability.

How to prevent information overload?

So, what's the takeaway? Simply bombarding entrepreneurs with sustainability facts won't cut it.
To drive real, strategic sustainable change, entrepreneurs need information that meets their specific needs, not an overwhelming flood of data. Here's how entrepreneurs and their stakeholders can navigate information overload:

Filter the noise. To avoid getting overwhelmed, entrepreneurs can assign team members skilled in processing information to filter and summarize information before it reaches them. Similarly, artificial intelligence has a great potential to help reducing overload by boiling down a large amount of information to only what's useful for the entrepreneur.

Make time. Rushing through a big pile of information causes overwhelm. Scheduling dedicated time slots to go through information in order to make a strategic sustainable decision can help. Make sure to not get interrupted or distracted, as this increases the chances of overload,

Embrace 'good enough'. Sometimes, waiting for that perfect piece of information can delay crucial decisions. Entrepreneurs should understand that sustainable business decisions are complex and involve uncertainty, just like any other business decision. Be prepared to act on the best information you have, a strategy known as 'satisficing'.

Adjusted information. Stakeholders, like governments and consultants, need to tailor their information for entrepreneurs. Keep it simple and avoid conflicting messages. Clear, relevant, and straightforward information reduces the risk of overload and empowers entrepreneurs to act effectively.

So, next time you risk getting flooded by yet another wave of sustainability information, try using these strategies to surf it. By avoiding information overload, entrepreneurs are empowered to make impactful, sustainable business decisions.

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