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Embracing the tension: managing short-term horizons in long-term transitions

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ABSTRACT: The future of hospitality management necessitates achieving economic, environmental and social sustainability simultaneously, leading to inherent tensions in sustainability. Guided by paradox theory, this article explores how accommodation providers can embrace intertemporal tensions to fulfil short-term operational demands while advancing long-term sustainable transitions. The conceptual model presented in this article highlights the iterative and non-linear nature of sustainable transitions, outlining five key steps for implementation: measuring and reporting sustainability metrics; embedding sustainable practices within the firm; collaborating with partners; advocating for industry and social change; and re-evaluating progress. This article refines these steps using five in-depth case studies on accommodation providers in New Zealand. The data, consisting of semi-structured interviews and observations, is then analysed using applied thematic analysis, revealing actionable strategies for managing the intertemporal tensions that arise during sustainable transitions. This study highlights the centrality of intertemporal tensions in sustainable transitions and provides practical guidance to help managers to embrace intertemporal tensions while implementing sustainable transitions. By implementing these strategies, accommodation providers can embrace intertemporal tensions, effectively balancing immediate objectives with long-term commitments, driving meaningful change towards a more sustainable future in hospitality management.

KEYWORDS: intertemporal tensions, paradox theory, sustainable transitions, tensions in sustainability

Introduction

The future of hospitality management will emphasise balancing economic, social and environmental sustainability, requiring accommodation providers to develop capabilities that address short-term business needs while pursuing long-term social and environmental goals. This shift, referred to as a sustainable transition, is defined by Geels (2002) as a long-term process that unfolds over time, gradually re-orienting business practices to meet sustainability goals.

A business's engagement with sustainable transitions is often externally driven by regulatory requirements, stakeholder expectations and evolving market demands for responsible business practices (Bocken et al., 2014). Rising consumer interest in eco-friendly travel has led many accommodation providers to adopt green certification (Bogensperger, 2023), while non-compliance with sustainability and climate change agendas is increasingly seen as a long-term industry risk (Deloitte UK, 2024). However, making these changes is not easy — accommodation providers must juggle their short-term business targets with long-term social goals, leading to tensions in sustainability.

These tensions arise from the inherent complexity of sustainability, which requires addressing a broad array of stakeholder demands while meeting short-term financial and long-term social and environmental objectives (Hahn et al., 2018). For example, a 2022 report by Greenview and the World Travel & Tourism Council reveals that while many hotels worldwide have made sustainability commitments, they often struggle to follow through because of financial and staffing constraints. This tension in sustainability, between ambitious goals and practical resource limitations, illustrates the tough choices firms face when implementing sustainable transitions.

A significant stream of research has demonstrated the positive impacts of sustainability on hospitality firms' competitiveness (Boley & Uysal, 2013), and identified customer and competitive pressure as important drivers of green transitions in hospitality firms (Sun & Nasrullah, 2024). Thus, while existing research has explored why companies pursue sustainability and what motivates them, more attention is needed on the implementation process within firms.

Addressing how sustainable transitions are implemented requires a deeper examination of temporal challenges, given the inherent long-term nature of sustainable transitions. Although previous studies offer valuable insights into how sustainable transitions unfold (e.g. Warren et al., 2018), the role of tensions

in sustainability, and specifically intertemporal tensions, has only recently gained focus.

Intertemporal tensions in sustainability arise when "the demands of today differ from the needs for tomorrow" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 389), making it difficult for businesses to balance their short-term profitability and survival with long-term social and environmental goals. This conflict, between immediate business demands and long-term sustainability goals, often leaves managers uncertain about how to meet short-term targets while implementing sustainable transitions.

This research adopts paradox theory, which is commonly used to study how decision-makers manage tensions in sustainability (Schad et al., 2016; Hahn et al., 2018). Paradox theory frames tensions as ongoing challenges that arise from competing demands, requiring careful management. Hahn et al. (2015) propose acceptance and resolutions strategies, while Wu et al. (2017) offer a balanced Yin yang approach to managing short- and long-term sustainability practices.

However, Slawinski and Bansal's (2015) study on intertemporal tensions in business sustainability highlights the need for more generalisable research offering practical guidance for managers to meet their immediate business demands while implementing sustainable transitions. This study aims to address this gap by providing practical strategies to help accommodation providers achieve their short-term goals while implementing long-term sustainable transitions.

Literature review

Sustainable transitions

Sustainable transitions are long-term processes facilitated by the adoption of more sustainable business practices over time (Geels, 2002). Adopting sustainable business practices requires firms to balance economic growth and the creation of environmental and social value for a wide range of stakeholders (Elkington, 1994; Gorissen et al., 2016). Elkington's (1994) *triple bottom line* identified the three dimensions of sustainability that firms must consider in their operations, while Geels' (2002) *multi-level* perspective analyses how sustainable transitions unfold across levels, from niche (individual) practices to regime (organisational) and landscape (societal) shifts

While these frameworks, and the streams of research they have generated, provide valuable insights into the dimensions and levels of sustainable transitions, they offer limited guidance on the implementation of sustainable transitions within companies. Understanding the specific steps, decision-making processes and tensions accommodation providers face is essential for developing actionable strategies that support long-term sustainability goals while addressing immediate operational needs. This highlights the need to examine how sustainable transitions unfold at the organisational level, where balancing economic, environmental and social goals can create complex dynamics over time.

Tensions in sustainability

Tensions in sustainability result from differences "between individual, firm and societal levels and with varying temporal and spatial horizons" (Hahn et al., 2014, p. 300). Chapardar (2016) categorises tension as non-temporal — such as conflicts between the sustainability dimensions and organisational levels — and temporal, which include conflicts between short- and long-term perspectives, future needs (real or perceived) and other time-related variables.

Early research on sustainable transitions often disregarded or minimised these tensions by promoting win-win narratives, suggesting that firms could achieve all three sustainability dimensions equally and without conflict (Chapardar, 2016). Later, the "business case of sustainability" framed tensions in sustainability as trade-offs, where one dimension, such as economic performance, is prioritised over the others (Carmine & De Marchi, 2022). More recently, the "paradox perspective" has emerged, which embraces tensions in sustainability "by addressing and managing the opposing poles simultaneously" (Carmine & De Marchi, 2023, p. 142).

Given the long-term nature of sustainable transitions, time plays a critical role in their implementation. Intertemporal tensions, which emerge from conflicts between short-term priorities and long-term sustainability goals, are central to understanding how firms navigate these transitions (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015).

Intertemporal tensions

Intertemporal tensions in sustainability arise when "the demands of today differ from the needs for tomorrow" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 389), which make it difficult for firms to balance their profitability and survival with long-term social and environmental goals. Timing and future expectations significant influence organisations' adoption of sustainable business practices (Wu et al., 2017), as conflicts often emerge when addressing current demands and planning for future needs (Chapardar, 2016).

This juxtaposition of present and future priorities highlights the critical role of time in implementing sustainable transitions. Understanding how intertemporal tensions shape decision-making is important, as accommodation providers frequently face choices that force them to navigate competing priorities. Exploring how these tensions are managed can offer insights into the implementation process of sustainable transitions, providing managers with actionable strategies to achieve long-term environmental and social goals while meeting short-term economic demands.

Building on the paradox perspective, Hahn et al. (2015) and Wu et al. (2017) propose strategies for managing tensions in sustainability. The paradox perspective is particularly useful for understanding how firms manage intertemporal tensions, where balancing short-term priorities with long-term sustainability goals becomes a central challenge.

Paradox theory

Paradox theory embraces tensions in sustainability by "managing the opposing poles simultaneously" (Carmine & De Marchi, 2023, p. 142). Paradoxes are "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). This integrative perspective encourages firms to pursue all three sustainability dimensions simultaneously, without prioritising one aspect over another, moving beyond the trade-off (contradictory) and win-win (interrelated) dichotomy (Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015).

Hahn et al. (2015) and Wu et al. (2017) adopt the integrative perspective. Hahn et al.'s (2015) systematic framework focused on four tensions across levels, in a temporal and spatial context. In their paper, firms can use acceptance strategies, integrate short- and long-term goals or resolution strategies to either

separate short- and long-term objectives, or adopt flexible goals that synthesise intertemporal tensions.

In contrast, Wu et al.'s (2017) systematic review of the literature highlights the need for a dynamic but balanced approach. Wu et al. (2017) propose a yin-yang representation of short- and long-term sustainability, highlighting their fluid and interdependent nature, where each continually "changes to the form of the other" (Wu et al., 2017, p. 26). However, Wu et al. (2017, pp. 27–28) note that, in general, the temporal dimension is often overlooked in the literature, and this lack of consideration "may result in wrong decisions by firms on how to balance" short- and long-term sustainability strategies.

Drawing on these insights, and the integrative perspective, this article proposes a conceptual model that theorise how sustainable transitions unfold for accommodation providers, explicitly incorporating intertemporal tensions into each step.

Implementing sustainable transitions

In Figure 1, the non-linear nature of implementing sustainable transitions is illustrated through nested circles, beginning with *Measure & Report* at the centre and spiralling outward as implementation progresses. Steps can occur simultaneously, as indicated by radial shading: for instance, *Measure & Report* spans the entire process, while *Embedding* begins only after planning, while *Advocacy* emerges in later stages.

The model's shape and shading echo the yin-yang approach (Wu et al., 2017), emphasising interconnectedness between steps. However, in a departure from the yin-yang approach, boundaries between steps are retained to illustrate that multiple temporal frames may be used concurrently in different steps, without transforming or shifting from one form to the other.

The model theorises that businesses can implement multiple cycles of sustainable transition simultaneously, addressing various sustainability goals in parallel. The model focuses on the implementation of long-term sustainable transitions, which

FIGURE 1: Sustainable transition implementation cycle

inherently creates intertemporal tensions within each step, demonstrating their centrality in implementing sustainable transitions.

Accommodation providers begin implementing sustainable transitions in *Measure & Report*, by establishing a plan with metrics that can be monitored throughout the process. After establishing a plan of action, firms need to *Embed* sustainable practices into their operations, which may require *Collaboration* to address sustainability goals beyond their own capabilities and resources. As accommodation providers progress through the implementation cycle, they may also *Advocate* for broader industry and societal change. Finally, accommodation providers must regularly *Re-evaluate* their progress and adjust their strategies before repeating the cycle.

Implementing sustainable transitions requires accommodation providers to regularly make decisions that bring short- and long-term priorities into conflict. At each stage of the process, decisions about sustainable practices and resource allocation force companies to balance immediate operational demands with broader sustainability objectives. Examining how accommodation providers navigate these intertemporal tensions can provides valuable insights into the practicalities of implementing sustainable transitions.

The remainder of this article investigates these dynamics empirically, using qualitative case studies to explore the conceptual model in real-world contexts. This approach bridges the theoretical insights of the model with practical observations, offering a deeper understanding of how sustainable transitions unfold within businesses.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative, multiple case study design (Gustafsson, 2017), combining semi-structured interviews and observations to explore how accommodation providers implement sustainable transitions and navigate the intertemporal tensions involved. Five in-depth case studies were conducted across various accommodation providers, including luxury lodges and holiday parks, allowing for analysis within and across cases.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to explore both intended and emerging topics in depth (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Extended site visits were used as an instrument to collect observations, enabling us to validate participants' statements about their organisation's sustainability practices. Furthermore, this approach allowed us to observe how accommodation providers navigate intertemporal tensions in action, adding rich context to the data.

The accommodation providers' social media and websites were screened to ensure they were actively engaged in sustainable transitions and had been operating for at least five years to ensure that they had experience navigating intertemporal tensions. Participants (Table 1) were purposively selected based on their involvement in decision-making and implementation of sustainable practices, to provide deep insights into how these businesses simultaneously pursue their short-term horizons and long-term sustainability goals.

A total of 13 interviews were conducted across the five organisations, yielding 23.5 hours of audio data. The number of interviewees varied according to the size of each business, allowing for diverse perspectives and data triangulation within each case (Flick, 2004).

TABLE 1: Participant overview

Case code	Interviews	Participants	Titles	Hours of audio	Days on site
A	3	3	Manager Assistant manager Housekeeper	8	2
B	1	2	Owner Manager	5	1.5
C	2	2	Manager Housekeeper	2.5	2
D	3	4	Owner Manager Assistant manager Front desk attendant	4.5	1
E	4	5	Manager Manager Sustainability lead Housekeeping manager Groundskeeper	3.5	2

The interview transcripts were iteratively coded using applied thematic analysis, a methodologically rigorous approach suited to addressing practical research questions (Guest et al., 2014). The codes were then grouped into themes which were abductively refined using the proposed conceptual model. The insights and actionable steps identified are discussed in the next section.

Findings and discussion

Throughout the interview process, participants emphasised the need to manage conflicting priorities. Embracing tensions (rather than avoiding them) emerged as the overall strategy managers used to meet their short-term goals while implementing sustainable transitions. By embracing intertemporal tensions, managers actively pursue both short- and long-term goals simultaneously, without trying to resolve the tension between their competing objectives. The process of "embracing intertemporal tensions" has been broken down into five stages that managers can use to drive meaningful change while fulfilling their short-term goals (Figure 2).

Establishing a baseline: Measure and reporting key initiatives

Embracing intertemporal tensions requires managers to understand short-term usage patterns while improving long-term resource management. This process involves establishing baseline measurements by systematically tracking firm activity and impact. In this step, accommodation providers must embrace the intertemporal tensions that arise from measuring and reporting, often on a weekly or monthly basis, with the indeterminate time necessary to achieve broader sustainability objectives.

Managers can embrace these tensions and begin implementing sustainable transitions by tracking simple data points, such as resource usage (e.g. water, energy) based on utility bills. Using basic tools like Excel to log this information can help identify patterns and pinpoint areas for improvement based on expected returns.

For instance, Company B, a rural retreat, installed solar panels after tracking its energy usage. Kathy, the owner, explained that while the solar panels resulted in immediate savings on energy bills, the decision was also guided by both medium- and long-term perspectives. She looked at "*anything that is going to increase your sustainability costs more, or at least there's some big set-up costs. It takes years to recoup that*".

In addition to the immediate savings, Kathy pointed to the break-even point as a decisive factor when considering how much to invest in different sustainability initiatives, estimating that it took six years for the solar panels to be "paid off". She further emphasised the added value that installing solar panels will bring when she retires and sells the firm.

This framing of intertemporal tensions seems to be a variation of Wu et al.'s balanced approach. While the yin-yang approach emphasises the fluidity between short- and long-term sustainability goals, it does not capture this situation where Kathy used multiple temporal horizons to make a single decision. This indicates that a more complex understanding of temporal dimensions may be needed when implementing sustainable transitions.

Making changes last: Embedding sustainable practices into core operations

After making a plan, firms must integrate their long-term sustainability goals into their daily operations, shifting the temporal focus by placing future aspirations at the centre of current practices. The intertemporal tension here arises from aligning operational activities, which prioritise efficiency and immediacy, with long-term objectives that can span years. Unlike the first step, where current operational practices inform future goals, the tension is inverted with long-term goals reshaping daily operations.

Managers can embed sustainable practices within firms by codifying them into employee roles, making sustainable practices part of job descriptions and performance evaluations. Multiple firms emphasised the hands-on nature of implementing sustainability initiatives and the important role staff play in carrying out sustainable practices in their daily operations. Over time, these tasks may evolve into individual roles, which is what happened at Company E.

Victoria, the housekeeping manager, at Company E (a luxury lodge) explained how they now employ multiple employees

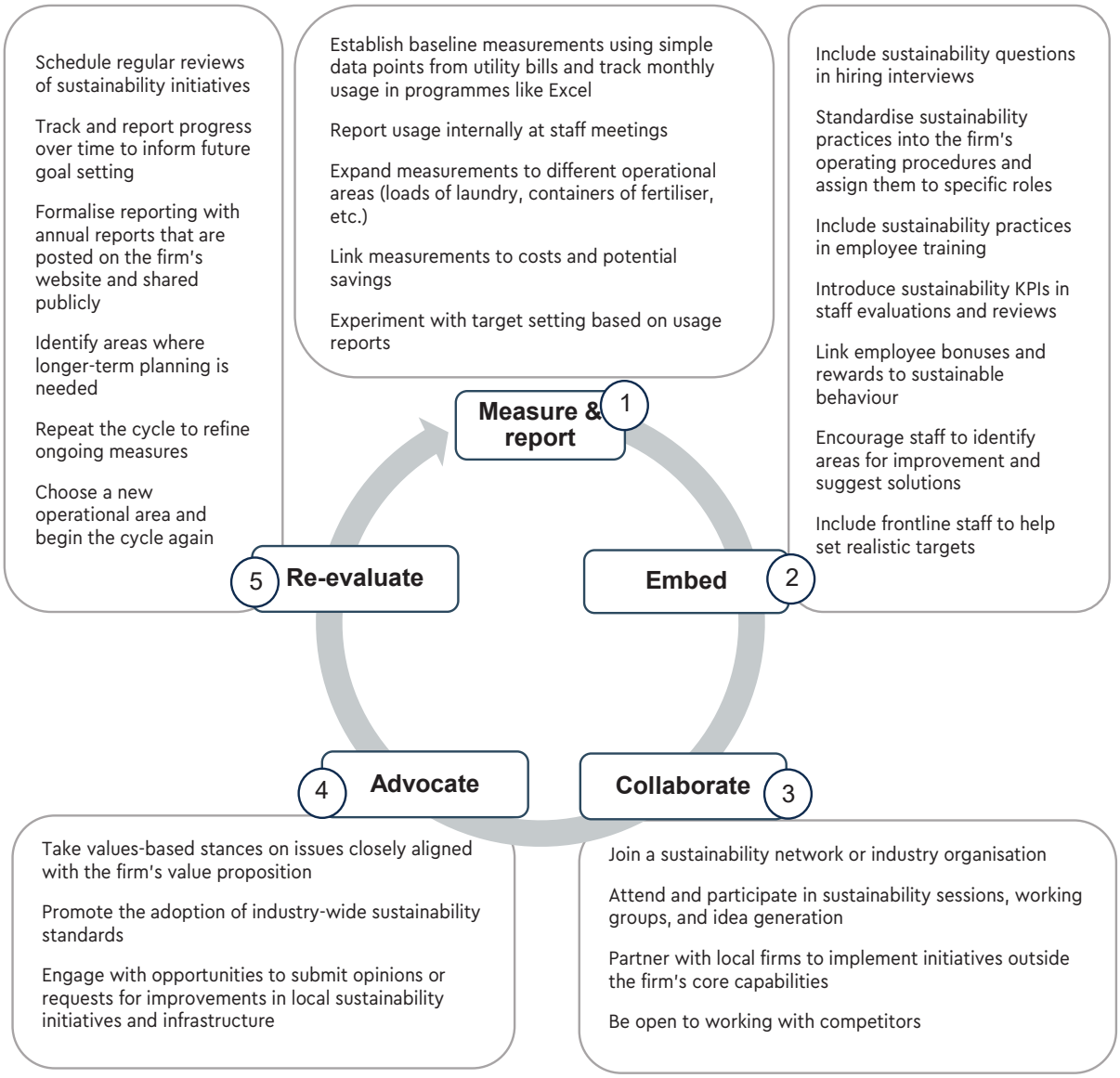

FIGURE 2: Practical guidance for embracing intertemporal tensions

whose roles focus on implementing their sustainability initiatives, like manually sorting the rubbish and recycling:

> *We have somebody standing here all day…It's very labour-intensive. So, the person that does this job every day, he will go through and pick out* [sort] *these kind of things* [rubbish] *and put them in the truck. And two of my team drive the truck all week. It's our sustainability truck and they just deal with taking down the rubbish and the recycling, feeding the compost and spreading the coffee grounds around.*

This example illustrates how Company E embraces intertemporal tensions by combining Hahn et al.'s (2015) acceptance and separation strategies. By allocating resources (time and labour) to fulfil long-term sustainability goals, Company E accepts intertemporal tensions. However, at the same time, Company E separates its long-term sustainability strategy and its short-term implementation among staff. Decisions around long-term sustainability goals and selection of sustainable practices fall under the responsibility of the sustainability lead and management team, while daily implementation is assigned to general staff members.

This hybrid approach to managing intertemporal tensions demonstrates significant creativity. The combined use of acceptance and separation strategies indicates that firms can embrace intertemporal tensions by using multiple temporal frames simultaneously, without completely transforming long-term goals into short-term objectives due to the separation between levels.

Power in numbers: The importance of collaboration

For many accommodation providers, embracing intertemporal tensions requires them to partner with other organisations, such as industry peers, suppliers and community groups, to pursue sustainability goals outside their core capabilities. While

collaboration has some potential for systemic change, its primary purpose is to help firms achieve internal long-term sustainability goals. Collaborations often focus on sustainability goals where the firm has struggled to make progress independently. Insights gained from collaboration may feedback into other steps of the cycle, refining sustainable practices and long-term goals.

Joining sustainability networks or industry organisations can offer valuable insights into best practices and emerging trends, while creating opportunities for shared initiatives. Collaborative efforts also allow accommodation providers to share the costs and benefits of sustainability initiatives, reducing the cost of participation while increasing accountability.

Local partnerships can be particularly beneficial. By collaborating with nearby businesses and community organisations, firms can pool resources and knowledge to tackle sustainability challenges together. For example, Company A, a traditional holiday park, has an endangered bird species that nests on its property. Protecting these birds requires the park, which uses its beachfront location as a key selling point, to restrict guest access to the beach during the breeding season, which coincides with its peak operational months.

Company A embraced these tensions by adopting the bird as a "mascot" and partnering with the Department of Conservation (DoC) to educate the public about the birds and protect their nesting grounds. Company A provides subsidised housing for the DoC rangers who monitor the birds throughout their nesting season. The manager, Ruth, described this process:

> *And they* [the DoC rangers] *go onto the beach every single day looking for eggs. They will fence off any eggs they find on the beach and put signs up there, so people don't walk on them. And this area* [of the beach] *was fenced off most of last summer because the birds were laying eggs all through here.*

When discussing these tensions, Ruth highlighted how the rangers often provided educational talks and viewing opportunities through telescopes and binoculars, generating new forms of value for their guests. This framing of intertemporal tensions utilises Hahn et al.'s (2015) resolution strategy, which separates short- and long-term goals by leveraging distinct roles within the partnership.

While the DoC rangers focus on conservation efforts, Company A addresses immediate guest satisfaction, ensuring that both short- and long-term objectives are pursued simultaneously. In this example, Company A benefits from collaborating with the DoC, which provides them with access to the skills and capabilities necessary to achieve their long-term conservation goals, while allowing them to focus on their immediate business needs. This example highlights the importance of collaboration in addressing sustainability challenges that are beyond the scope of individual firms, enabling them to leverage external expertise and resources.

Driving change forward: The role of advocacy

With advocacy, accommodation providers leverage their sustainability achievements and prior collaborations to drive systemic change. Intertemporal tensions arise from allocating current resources– financial, human and reputational — towards advocacy efforts with uncertain, long-term outcomes. In this step, firms build on earlier stages, relying on robust reporting systems to demonstrate progress, and embedded practices to ensure credibility.

Company A, for example, is leveraging its work in conservation to reposition its firm from a "beach-front property" to a "birder's paradise". Their advocacy is helping them reach a new target market and broaden their role within the community, as they now serve as a drop point for injured birds and community education.

Company A's approach embraces intertemporal tensions by building on existing progress towards their short- and long-term goals, meeting their immediate business needs by expanding into new target markets, while further contributing to their long-term conservation goals. This strategy aligns with Wu et al.'s (2017) yin-yang approach to managing intertemporal tensions.

In this situation, Company A shifts away from the separation strategy employed in their collaboration with DoC. By positioning itself as a "birder's paradise", the short-term outcome of engaging birdwatchers also strengthens its long-term goal of wildlife preservation through increased public awareness and community involvement. Thus, the two objectives are mutually reinforcing, but not fully integrated (they are not synthesised), nor fully separated (do not exist in isolation).

Instead, the boundaries between these objectives are porous, and exist in a state of continual motion, shaping and reinforcing each other through an ongoing cycle of implementation and adaptation. The firm's conservation activities strengthen its reputation as a sustainable accommodation provider, while its growing market of birdwatchers increases resources and public support for long-term ecological initiatives.

Rinse and repeat: Re-evaluate and reiterate

In the final step, accommodation providers must assess their progress and plan the next steps, creating a feedback loop for the next iteration. The intertemporal tension arises from looking backwards to analyse past performance, while allocating current resources towards future goals. This step feeds directly into *Measure & Report* and *Embed*, as re-evaluation often necessitates adjustments to long-term strategies, baseline metrics and implementation strategies.

Managers can embrace intertemporal tensions by focusing on one operational area or goal at a time, and regularly scheduling reviews allows managers to monitor progress more effectively and avoid becoming overwhelmed by too many initiatives at once. Reviewing ongoing progress and setting future goals help accommodation providers stay agile and responsive to new challenges and opportunities in sustainability.

Victoria at Company E explained, "*we're always looking for ways to improve, but also looking for ways that we may have got it wrong*". For example, a couple of years ago, Company E switched to "compostable" brochures. Victoria describes how they realised the paper was not actually compostable:

> *Sometimes we do a little bit of a test down at the compost. Like the other day, I had one of the boys go and dig through a two-year-old compost and tell me what hasn't been composted down there. So, it* [brochure] *hadn't. So now we know they're not compostable.*

This discovery has brought Company E back to the drawing board, and they are now considering possible alternatives, such as having only digital brochures. This example demonstrates how the implementation of a seemingly simple sustainability initiative can take years of testing and refining to get right. The first iteration did not work, so now Company E is refining their

goal from achieving a more sustainable version to removing the physical brochure altogether.

This example aligns with Hahn et al.'s (2015) acceptance strategy, by recognising and addressing tensions through iterative refinement. Company E embraces the intertemporal tensions by integrating their short-term goals (improving operational sustainability by reducing waste) and long-term goals (removing non-compostable materials entirely). This iterative refinement ensures both goals are pursued concurrently, while the insights gained from this step help accommodation providers prepare for the next iteration of the cycle.

Conclusion

The future of hospitality management emphasises balancing economic, social and environmental sustainability, requiring accommodation providers to engage in sustainable transitions. The conceptual model presented in this study theorises how sustainable transitions unfold within accommodation providers, highlighting the non-linear and iterative nature of the process, as well as the role of intertemporal tensions in implementing sustainable transitions.

Managers should adopt a phased approach to implementing sustainable transitions and focus on one operational area at a time. The general steps outlined in the conceptual model, and refined through examining empirical case studies, provide a structured framework that managers can use to address intertemporal tensions.

These steps — measuring and reporting, embedding sustainability practices, collaboration, advocacy and re-evaluation — are not only theoretical stages, but have been translated into actionable strategies based on real-world insights from accommodation providers. Engaging in iterative cycles of these steps allows firms to systematically implement sustainable transitions while managing the intertemporal tensions that arise.

Intertemporal tensions are central to the conceptual model, reflecting the interplay between short-term business demands and long-term environmental and social objectives during sustainable transition implementation. Findings from the case studies reveal numerous strategies accommodation providers use to embrace the intertemporal tensions. While many examples could be loosely linked to management strategies as presented in the literature, there were many variations that are not captured in the current literature. This indicates that embracing intertemporal tensions may go beyond acceptance and may represent a more creative approach to managing intertemporal tensions.

Future research is needed to explore these strategies further, which can include expanding the sample size and types of accommodation providers included in the research. Analysing differences in firm's decision-making structures (e.g. hierarchical versus decentralised), resources and capabilities may also provide insights into why firm's choose different strategies for managing intertemporal tensions.

Limitations

This research reports on an initial study conducted using qualitative methods with a small sample. These factors necessarily limit the generalisability of the findings. This research was based in New Zealand, which has a distinct regulatory and cultural environment. Some specific findings may not apply to other geographies.

Nonetheless, the accommodation industry has many similarities across the globe, and it is likely that the broad issues that this research surfaced will generalise to other locales. It is also likely that idiosyncratic factors (e.g. resource availability, level of competition, regulation, workforce expertise and other geographic factors) will affect different providers in different ways. Future research will provide better insight into which issues are broadly applicable, and which are more firm- or geography-specific.

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