

# Changing processes, changing agents

Assessing the roles within the corporate sustainability implementation

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## Introduction

Corporate Sustainability (CS)<sup>1</sup> is a frequently used topic in the research and business world, with change agents often in charge of the process it takes to implement CS. Corporate sustainability originated around the time the WCED (1987) and focuses on the ecological side of sustainability (Starik & Rands, 1995). The involvement on CS matters is displayed in the academic field (Epstein & Widener, 2010), the business environment (e.g. Moura-Leite & Padgett, 2011; Vilanova, Lozano & Arenas, 2009) and political agenda's (United Nations, n.d.). Implementing CS practices is not a one day job as it takes organizational change and adaptation on multiple levels within the organization (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010) and takes corporate commitment (Hahn & Scheermesser, 2006) to benefit from the possible outcomes that CS practices can have (e.g. Raub & Blunschi, 2013; Brammer, Millington & Rayton, 2007; Wigley, 2008; Homburg, Stierl & Bornemann, 2012).

For the implementation of CS, a lot of choices are to be made (e.g. Ros, Nagelshout & Montfoort, 2009). Therefore, the moment companies implement CS could vary due to factors like for example managers mindset (Klettner, Clare & Boersma, 2013) or drivers for implementation of CS (Lozano, 2015). The nonsense of a change hype (Sorge & Witteloostuijn, 2004), combined with the fact that CS practices implementation is complex (Van Marrewijk & Hardjono, 2003), therefore suggests that a Punctuated equilibrium model (Uotilla, 2017) as being a logical way of looking at CS as a changing process within companies. There exist multiple studies that propose ways for implementing CS practices on company level (e.g. Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Higgs, 2006; Maignan, Ferrell & Ferrell, 2005; Kakabadse, Kakabadse & Lee-Davies, 2009).

A way of implementing CS is by change agents since change agents play an important role for implementing CS within a company (van den Berg, Zijp, Vermeulen & Witjes, 2019). Interestingly, often companies do not comprehend the importance that these change agents may have (Arrata, Despierre & Kumra, 2007). In their research, Visser & Crane (2010) distinguish four types of CS change agents, while Lunenberg (2010) provides three roles that general change agents play. The punctuated equilibrium model by Uotilla (2017) lead to scattered periods in time where changes are implemented, for example by change agents. Since change

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<sup>1</sup> The WCED (1987) defined sustainable development as being “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (pp. 6). In literature both the concepts of corporate social responsibility CSR as corporate sustainability are used, however these concepts are often used to address the same issues (Dewangga, Goldsmith & Pegram, 2008; Schwartz & Carrol, 2007) and are therefore both used as being CS in this research.

agents being responsible for implementing as well as strategically designing changes (Engert, Rauter & Baumgartner, 2016), the choices to be made and changes in processes that a change agent may encounter could be more predominate at the start, rather than later on in the process of implementation of CS. Hence, the workload during the process changes. With this difference in workload over time, along with stages that changes are implemented (e.g. Hayes, 2018), also the roles that these agents have to perform during the process could vary over time. Summarizing, literature provides ways of implementing CS within an organization with change agents functioning as instruments. Although literature highlights the difference in dominant roles based on a company's logic (Osagie, Wesselink, Runhaar, & Mulder, 2017), there is no literature available on whether the CS change agents' roles change over time.

This research aims to answer the question: Do change agents in corporate sustainability change roles over time? Thereby contributing to existing literature on change agents who are responsible for the implementation of corporate sustainability as the need for empirical research is needed in this field (Engert & Baumgartner, 2016). This research question will be answered by assessing if the roles of CS change agents have changed between 2018 and 2020. Also, drivers for change in roles for this group of change agents will be analyzed. This will be done by assessing which roles CS change agents perceive as important for their company, as well as which roles are perceived by this group to be important for themselves as CS change agent. Next, this paper will discuss the factors that influence a company's moment of implementing change. Furthermore, the differences between a general change agent and a change agent implementing CS will be discussed to gain a deeper understanding in the characteristics of the group of corporate sustainability change agents. The method section elaborates on the usage of multiple surveys (conducted between 2018 and 2020) to be able to assess if there seems to be a change in roles for the CS change agents. Thereafter, the results will be presented, followed by the discussion section upon which conclusions will be drawn. Lastly, the paper will discuss the limitations of the research and elaborate on suggestions for future research.

## Changing the setting

### The time component of the process of organizational change and CS embedment

Organizations find themselves in an environment of constant changes and have their own way of acting on it, as so for integrating corporate sustainability practices. There are multiple factors that make the process of change somewhat permanent. The permanent change is caused by the constant changes in economy (Schumpeter, 1942), due to industry life cycles (Johnson, Whittington & Scholes, 2012; Angwin & Regner, 2015), shocks in technological change (Levinthal, 1998), cultural change (Inglehard, Ponarin & Inglehart, 2017), and labor force change (Feldstead, 2012). These factors cause variation with respect to the moment in time a company initiates the implementation of organizational changes. Therefore, the perceived urgency for, and speed of change within a company may also vary, as the choice for either rapid change or slow change may result in different outcomes on firm growth (Shirokova, Berezinets & Shatolov, 2014), and can vary per industry due to social networks, collective assumptions, and feedback mechanisms (Nadkarni & Narayanan, 2007).

Regarding corporate sustainability, the moment of implementation of processes that contribute to CS can vary as well. The reason why companies implement CS may come from the general switch in managers mindset that shifted (Klettner, Clarke & Boersma, 2013). This switch in perception could cause companies to change perspective with respect to the drivers that exist for implementation of CS. These drivers can exist externally, internally or serve as connectors (Lozano, 2015). Acting on these drivers, possibly triggered by changes, could lead to evolving through the stages towards a more sustainable position (Dunphy, Griffiths & Benn, 2003). These stages by Dunphy, Griffiths & Benn (2003) span from rejection of the importance of sustainability, to being a sustainable corporation, with a clear interrelation between human and ecological sustainability. Companies may leapfrog through the stages (Dunphy, Griffiths & Benn, 2003) as companies can have a vision on CS integration independent of their current stage (Witjes, Vermeulen & Cramer, 2017) or size (Gallo & Christensen, 2011; Baumann-Pauly, Wickert, Spence & Scherer, 2013). Although the same authors provide what is needed to evolve to the next phase of their model (Benn, Dunphy & Griffiths, 2006), this is mainly focusing on the understanding of sustainability in business operations (Chowdury & Hossain, 2015) while companies that claim “to be truly sustainable, must demonstrate skills, abilities and capacities in a wide range of business areas” (Paraschiv, Nemoianu, Langă & Szabó, 2012, pp. 406). An alternative model proposed by Epstein and

Buhovac (2010) could serve as a clear roadmap companies may follow in order to enhance achievement of superior sustainability, hence evolving towards further stages of CS implementation. This model poses management commitment and recognition of advantages of CS by the management as core to the process as also noted by others (e.g. Lozano, 2015). The model starts with assessment of all relevant inputs a company uses (including for example governmental regulations) and suggests appropriate processes to improve (being: sustainability strategy, systems, programs and actions). Since (Eco-)innovation serves as an essential component for reaching CS goals and objectives (Paraschiv, Nemoianu, Langă & Szabó, 2012), and there exist multiple success factors that could help bridging the gap between formulation and implementation of CS strategy (Engert & Baumgartner, 2016), the model by Epstein and Buhovac (2010) could be extended in some aspects. Still, the model seems to give a clear overview on how companies can achieve superior sustainability performance. Interestingly, the model seems to hint towards a process with an “intensive start”, due to the necessity for top-management to reassess all relevant inputs and choosing an appropriate intervention. On the other hand, the model shows a possible “less intensive ending”, being incorporating feedback generated along the process. However, the time span for implementing CS might differ among companies since implementing CS within a firm can take quite long (Beckmann, Hielscher & Pies, 2014). Although this seems to be true for the whole company, in practice CS is often not implemented in every department (Windolph, Harms & Schaltegger, 2014) and willingness to embed CS could focus on different strategic areas, depending on firm size (Perrini, Russo & Tencati, 2007).

Next to these stages of implementing CS, the size of the firm also influences the level of embedment that companies may find themselves in. Firm size has a positive correlation with behavior towards sustainability (Gallo & Christensen, 2011), and bigger firms are expected earlier than smaller firms to have non-financial reporting like CS (Krechovska & Procházková, 2014). This effect makes sense since larger firms face more positive effects from implementing CS than smaller firms do (Song, Feng, Jiang, 2017). On the other hand, small and medium enterprises (SME's) can be more successful in implementation of corporate sustainability than large firms (Witjes, Vermeulen & Cramer, 2017). It is not (yet) clear which sizes of firms actually further in their level of embedding CS, as most research on CS focusses on large corporation (Witjes, Vermeulen & Cramer, 2017), although SME's are not necessarily less advanced (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013).

With respect to the sector a certain company may belong to, the trend seems to be a transition from sustainability-oriented companies towards more conventional companies

(Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014) Furthermore, there exist a difference between how a company wants to contribute to sustainability. If a company want to implement changes towards a circular economy, being a more narrowed way of addressing sustainability (Geissdoerfer, Morioka, de Carvalho & Evans, 2018; Bocken et al., 2013), more specific capabilities are needed (De los Rios & Charnley, 2017). It is not clear from literature if also different roles are needed to be played by change agents for addressing CS in general, or more specific, for a circular economy.

Summarizing, general changes tend to be punctuated (Khavul, Chavez & Bruton, 2013). The implementation of complex changes with a lot of environmental turbulence, what CS integration by a lot of organizations all together might cause, could result in a dynamic type of ambidexterity (Uotila, 2017). Therefore, companies change over time in a diverse intensity in which they implement their changes. Factors like drivers for CS implementation, firm size, type of industry and choice of addressing sustainability are indicators that could explain the variable phases a company is in its implementation of CS.

## The professional in the process of organizational change and CS embedment

Corporate sustainability change agents differ from general change agents. A general change agent finds itself in the agency theory in which the change agent gains some decision-making authority on behalf of the principal (Hill & Jones, 1992).

A general change agent is mostly interpreted as being a single person that operates in the interest of a company, but sometimes also systems are seen as change agents (e.g. Stephens, Hernandez, Román, Graham & Scholz, 2008; Oliver, 2002). These individuals may operate alone or in groups and are responsible for implementing processes while acting as role model during these changes, are responsible for training employees and are spread across the organization (Arrata, Despierre & Kumra, 2007). Change agents may be either internal or external (Dunphy, Griffiths & Benn, 2003). A change agent may vary in type, each with having its own set of motivations (Lunenburg, 2010; Visser & Crane, 2010; Tang, Robinson & Harvey, 2011). Furthermore, there are multiple roles that these agents may express along the process of change, each having its own characteristics (Lunenburg, 2010; Arrata, Despierre & Kumra, 2007).

Corporate sustainability change agents differ on several aspects from these general change agents. More and more companies are hiring change agents<sup>i</sup> that are responsible for leading CS implementation (Visser & Crane, 2010; Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014; Wijdoogen, 2016) as these change agents' actions are considered to be important for implementing sustainability (van der Heijden, Driessen, & Cramer, 2010; van den Berg et al., 2019). Although implementing sustainability practices can happen by individuals from all power and authority levels (Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014), mainly, CS agents are seen as operating individually (e.g. Visser & Crane, 2010; Argento, Culasso & Truant, 2019) although a board can still be held accountable for implementation of CS (Eccles, Ioannou & Serafeim, 2014). What distinguishes this group of agents from general change agents is the fact that they face tensions (i.e. conflicts) between creating social value and profit generation (Wesselink & Osagie, 2020). The years of experience for these individuals does not seem to be an indicator of power in decision making they may have, since seniority does not play a role (Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014).

Furthermore, the CS agent must possess a large set of different competencies and intrinsic engagement (Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014) and being surrounded by multiple other actors with useful levels of power and authority (Argento, Culasso & Truant, 2019). Digging deeper in these competencies, there is no unambiguously set of capabilities that are specific to the sustainability change agents. Still, literature suggests a change manager who is

involved in implementing CS should possess, next to its generally learned capabilities learned in higher education, as key competencies: system thinking, anticipatory thinking, critical thinking and being able to include affective outcomes and interpersonal skills (Rieckmann, 2012; Wiek, Withycombe & Redman, 2011; Shephard, 2008; Thomas, Barth & Day, 2013) although these requirements may vary per world continent (Rieckmann, 2012). Even for practical scenarios, subjective specific, methodological, social and personal competencies are split to make full use of the diverse set of competencies these change agent ought to possess (Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014). While having multiple competencies, next to hard and soft skills (Willard et al., 2010), CS change agents can also perform multiple roles (Wijdoogen, 2016). These roles are depicted in *Table 1*.

1.	The networker	Engage and grow the network
2.	Strategist	Lead for strategy
3.	Coordinator-and-initiator	Support implementation (organizational level)
4.	Stimulator-and-connector and connector	Challenge to inspire and connect (organizational level)
5.	Mentor	Empower others for success (individual level)
6.	Innovator	Innovate for continuous renewal
7.	Monitor	Learn from reporting

**Table 1**, Roles of CS change agents, edited from Wijdoogen (2016)

Although in literature exist different labels and number of roles for these CS change agents (e.g. Carollo & Guerci, 2017, Knight & Paterson, 2018) these labels for roles seem to be quite similar (Osagie et al., 2017). The roles of the CS change agent therefore seem to be somewhat more specific than for general change agent role (e.g. Lunenburg, 2010) and add the roles of networker and strategists, that do not fall under the general change agent roles. The dominant roles these change agents perform depends on the companies logic and continuum (Wesselink & Osagie 2020). In general, the roles of coordinator, strategist and monitor are associated more with a profit creation logic, while the stimulating role is associated with a social value creation logic. The dominant roles of mentor and networker could be present in both logics (Wesselink & Osagie, 2020) Furthermore, with respect to knowledge sharing, the monitor role impedes the process while the mentor and innovator stimulate the knowledge sharing (Yang, 2007). Knowledge sharing contributes to company's performance and innovation (Wang & Wang,

2012). The level of education is considered to have a positive impact on the CS implementation (Perry, 2012). Although research suggests companies should hire the CS change agent externally, having positive implications on investments in CS, and should be hired for the short term (Nordin & Belal, 2017; Hoppmann, Sakhel & Richert, 2018), a lot of companies have their internal staff that focus on the corporate sustainability within the company (Osagie et al., 2017). The involvement of internal employees and managers is needed to ensure embedment of CS within the company (Osagie et al., 2017).

There exist five core activities for implementing general changes within a company that general change managers could use (Hayes, 2018). These activities consist out of recognizing need for change, diagnosing what needs to be changed and formulate a vision, planning, implementing and reviewing, and lastly, sustaining the change. Next to these five activities learning, leading and managing the people issues are activities that are following no sequence but should be performed parallel to the other activities. Although the author remarks that the boundaries of these activities are not always clear-cut, the model a clear sequence or hierarchical sequence. The critique made by Sorge & Witteloostuijn (2004) on the overdosing of changes made by companies, along with change models that perceive change as a finite activity (e.g. Bullcok & Batten, 1985; Bamford & Forrester, 2003), suggests a shift in activities and duties over time for change agents implementing general changes, therefore the roles these agents may play. But is there a different process of activities for CS change agents compared to general change agents? Change models for implementing CS seem to show similar patterns in activities as for general changes (e.g: Maon, Lindgreen & Swaen, 2009). Still, since the implementation of CS takes generally long due to its complexity (Van Marrewijk & Hardjono, 2003; Beckmann, Hielscher & Pies, 2014), a potential shift in roles for the change agents implementing corporate sustainability could be spread over a longer period of time.

Both general change agents and CS change agents are apparent in the development and designing phase of the changes (Taylor, Cocklin, Brown & Wilson-Evered, 2011; Engert & Baumgartner, 2016). However, a change agent for corporate sustainability starts at the center of the organization, while at a later point in time shares this central role (Argento, Culasso & Truant, 2019).

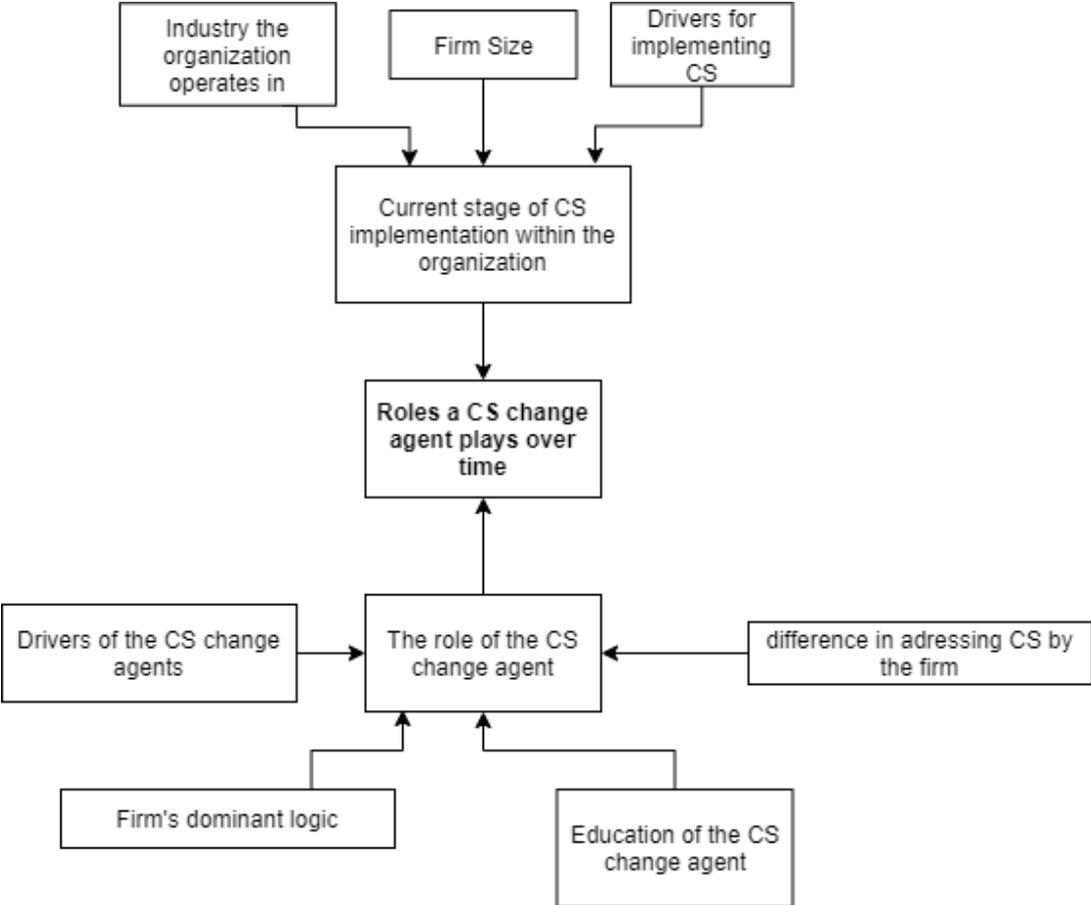
Summarizing, corporate sustainability change agents differ from general change agents, in possessing extended capabilities as well as different roles to be performed.

## The time-line of the corporate sustainability professional

As argued above, there seems to be a different moment in time when companies implement CS within their company, resulting in a phase of the process. Change agents seem to serve as an instrument to make this implementation happen. Argued is that the role these CS change agents play, might shift over time as they evolve in their process of implementing CS within their organization. Interestingly, evolving through stages as a company with respect to implementation of CS, the CS change agent gains more organizational authority but becomes less central as the sustainability may be separated from the board (Miller & Serafeim, 2014). This could imply that a CS change agent may become a solo manager and therefore its roles and activities may change as the company may become more committed to CS. Miller & Serafeim (2014) argue this could stem from the need by the CS change agent to stay close to the people who assess compliance and risk for the company, which will become less needed as CS will produce value for the company. While this might be a general trend amongst the group of CS change agents, the drivers for implementing CS vary per change agent with the change agent motivations being labeled as expert, facilitator, catalyst or activist (Visser & Crane, 2010). Nevertheless, the job of CS change agent is considered to still be at its infancy (Wijdoogen, 2016) with many of these professionals being recruited and selected from within the company (Osagie et al., 2017). In their research, Wesselink & Osagie (2020) argue the level of CS embedment could serve as an indicator for the role the CS change agent may play. Once a company uses CS as a way to serve profit creation, a coordinator, strategist or monitor should be the dominant role, while when a company is in a further stage of CS embedment, a stimulating role is to be expected as dominant role. In times of transitions, roles of the networker and mentor should be prevalent. Still, for every stage a CS change agent must try to balance the CS orientation with the company's dominant logic (Wright, Nyberg & Grant, 2012). Although the group of CS change agents may be more dominant in companies that were sustainable oriented, the trend seems to shift towards more conventional companies which could have its implication on the roles and capacities the CS change agents have to play or possess (Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014). Interestingly the CS change agents might consider themselves being change agents, while they steer more towards continuity within their company due to the focus on profit creation (Carollo & Guerci, 2017). This consistency may even lead to better outcomes financially (Tang, Hyll & Rothenberg, 2012).

In general, it is difficult to determine what a potential general endpoint of the implementation of CS may be, if any exists at all. The model of Epstein and Buhovac (2010) take Long-term

corporate financial performance with potential feedback as endpoint, while Lozano (2015) uses a novo status quo as endpoint in the CS implementation process. The duration towards these end-stages and whether the roles of the CS change agent at this end-stage deviate from the roles these persons perform in earlier stages, are relevant questions in order to determine the future of the people who are responsible for implementing CS within their company. **Figure 1** gives an overview on how the on how the elements of the literature review relate to each other. It shows factors that influence the current stage a company is in its embedment of CS and shows the factors that determine the role of a CS change agent. These two elements can potentially influence the roles a CS change agent plays over time.



**Figure 1:** The conceptual model for roles of the CS change agent over time

## Methods

### *Literature review*

The bibliographic sources were found using three different search engines (being: web of science, google scholar and RUQUEST (a search engine from Radboud University)). The search engines were used to search for articles and books from a broad range of scientific disciplines in order to get a broad view on the research done about the subject, as in line with Winchester & Salji (2016).

The search terms for the literature review that focused on corporate sustainability were based on Montiel (2008), and were used as a Boolean query and consisted out of social responsibility, corporate social performance (CSP), sustainability, sustainable development, environmental management, and ecological. The terms corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility were added since Montiel (2008) did exclude them for his research purpose, but these terms are suitable for the purpose of this research. As for the bibliographic research on change agents, this consisted out of the search terms “change agents” as also “change leaders”. These concepts are different, mainly in the responsibilities these groups have. The change leaders are responsible for creating vision of change, while the change agents are responsible for the translation of vision into agendas and actions (Caldwell, 2003). Since the change agents can move towards a position which is decoupled from the board, being responsible for the whole process of CS (Miller & Serafeim, 2014), both search terms are used. The search terms for corporate sustainability and change agents or leaders were combined for the literature review. After these broad concepts have been used, the keywords are expanded in order to connect them with different subheadings that are more in line with the questions posed in the survey, as proposed by Winchester & Salji (2016). For this research, balancing between applying a filter for studies conducted from the year 2010 and onwards, to no filter, is used in order to keep the literature review up to date and include (potentially older) major researches in the field as suggested by Pautasso (2013). The timeframe of ten years is chosen as it serves as rule of thumb for selecting recent published studies.

### *Survey*

In cooperation with the Stichting Sustainability University, a platform for sustainability professionals, a survey has been sent in order to, among other purposes, answer questions related to this paper. Stichting Sustainability University has sent comparable surveys in the years 2018 and 2019. The advantage of using this platform is the direct access to people from

the target-population. The surveys were sent by email between mid-April and ran until the end of same year it was sent and were written in English. The respondents consisted out of all corporate sustainability managers that are connected to Stichting Sustainability University.

The surveys make it possible to generalize the outcomes of the samples to the population, being the corporate sustainability change agents, with respect to changes for this group as well as their attitudes, as in line with Babbie (1990). Advantages of web-surveys are the effectiveness, time, and cost efficiency (Wright, 2005; Heiervang & Goodman, 2011). The questionnaire is used to gather data about person's profile with respect to age, education, years working in the CS sector among other questions. The surveys were sent to sustainability professionals all holding residence in the Netherlands and working for companies holding (an) office within the Netherlands. Furthermore, questions were asked on the companies profile including questions like firm size, time spend performing roles, distance to CEO reporting and stage of implementation of CS within the company. There was no option in this research to send a pre-test of the questionnaire in order to receive feedback about factors like terminology and clarity, since these surveys were already constructed by the Stichting Sustainability University. The surveys changed over the years in categories and questions, mainly due to new insights and feedback received from earlier years. While the surveys differ from each other with regard to questions posed, alterations will be made in order to increase the comparability of the surveys over the years. The questions can be found in the Appendix (A). A consequence of the time-limit that this research operates in, is a required earlier extraction of the data of the survey from the running year (2020) in order to include the survey in the research. This may lead to a smaller sample size, although earlier filings of the survey were answered soon after the survey was sent, as will be expected for this year again. However, the non-respondents may cause a response bias which could alter the overall result (Fowler, 2013). There is no option to track the respondents over the three years to check a within-respondent change since the dataset was anonymized. However, the surveys were conducted every year within the same group, therefore assumed is the group of respondents to be the same group over the years and can be used to observe possible changes.

The analysis will be done by splitting the data in groups based on the seven roles by Wijdoogen (2016). The distinctions in roles are for large part in line with other researches (e.g. Quinn, 1988). In their research Osagie, Wesselink, Blok & Mulder (2019) started with using eight roles but found insufficient numbers of data on two roles, being producing and innovating, resulting in leaving these two roles out of their analysis. Since the researchers state the producing role is task-oriented and focusses on completion, the role has a lot of overlap with the monitoring role

in which the professional collects and distributes information for evaluation and reporting. Therefore, it makes sense to merge these two roles into one role, being labeled as monitor role. This results in the seven roles as distinguished by Wijdoogen (2016). During the process of the research, close contact was held with two experts from the field of corporate sustainability, each having experience and conducted researches on the group of CS change agents. These two persons were part of the Stichting Sustainability University and provided the data analyses with comments on how this data reflected the bigger picture of the group of CS change agents they obtained by their years of work in the field of sustainability.

#### *Research ethics*

The surveys as they are intended, are not expected to result in a harmful outcome. The researcher will ask for consent for processing data obtained during the time of research. Although survey is conducted by a third party, anonymity and confidentiality performed by this party is assumed by the researcher since it has been guaranteed by the third party. At all time, this third party or the respondents from the survey may withdraw being part of the research.

## Results

### *Surveys over the years*

The survey of 2018, 2019 and 2020 contained 112, 88 and 43 respondents respectively of which 54, 88 and 54 gave answers on the question of ‘spend most time on’ which was deemed crucial for the analysis. An inquiry for the total population of the research group at a Dutch organization who are awarding prizes to the best CS managers of the year, resulted in a total of 725 people within their database. The database from this organization was excluding professionals that are externally hired, which were included in the surveys of 2018, 2019 and 2020. With the multiply-method as earlier explained, the number of respondents was 420, 526 and 324 for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 respectively.

After discriminating the questions with respect to the roles the respondents spend most time on, the results were measured. The questions were posed for example on firm size of the respondent, years the professional works in current role and about the role the professional wants to develop him or herself in (for the full list see [Appendix A](#)).

Some questions in the surveys were not filled in by participants, but these respondents are not excluded from further analysis since this would limit the possibility to answer the research question. However, the answers that these respondents did give, were considered to still be relevant. Only the respondents that did not fill in the questions on how much time they spent on a role were removed since labeling these respondents for a role was impossible, with labelling being considered crucial for this research.

In line with the research by (Osagie, Wesselink, Blok, & Mulder, 2019) the top three roles that the respondents spend most time on were ranked according to this respondent. These roles were given a factor three weight for the most time spend on, a factor two for the second most time spend on and a factor one for the third most time spend on. This way the answers these respondents gave are measured relative to the time spend on these three roles. For the 2018 survey, the participants were asked to divide the total time they spent on work over the seven roles by Wijdoogen (2016). Therefore, it occurred that participants evenly ranked roles as being the number 1 they spend most time on. This results in respondents being placed multiple times in the category where their answers receive the weight of factor 3. The same holds for respondents that answered with multiple roles being their second or third most time spend on category. One important benefit that the survey of 2018 gives is that the top three roles that the respondents spend most time on are now to be seen relative to each other (e.g. 80% on the Strategist role, 10% on the Mentor role, 5% on the Monitor role) which gives an option to

exclude roles that respondents spend a certain percentage of their time on. Therefore, roles that respondents marked with a 15% or less time spend on, were excluded from labeling. This excluding is based on the reasoning that a respondent who spends 15% or below of the time on a certain role on a role is spending 1/7 or less on this role which is considered to be too low for the respondent to be labeled as being that exact role. The implications of this exclusion were checked and the division between the respondents being labeled as having a certain role is about the same as the surveys from 2019 and 2020. This could make sense since there could be expected that for one year the respondents work more or less in the same roles.

Moreover, the comparability between the three surveys was highly valued. Therefore, questions that were split in more categories in one year, bringing potentially more nuance to the answers of the respondents, were restored to the broader categories that other surveys had.

Between the surveys, the Likert scale for the question about the future career of the respondent was not the same. Since the 2018 and 2019 surveys had a Likert scale of five, the 2020 survey had a Likert scale of three. This was corrected by recalculating the values for each five point scale to a three point scale. Since these new values fall precisely between the other categories, they were merged into another category. The answers of ‘between neutral and outside CSR’ were labeled ‘outside CSR’ and the answers of ‘between neutral and inside CSR’ were labeled ‘inside CSR’. The surveys were compared using the answers of the relative percentages, which means the number of answers in a certain category was corrected for, by dividing the number by its group total. This made it possible to compare the surveys by correcting for different group sizes along the years.

### *Group Results<sup>2</sup>*

The level of education for the group of CS change agents consist mainly out of people who attained a Higher Professional Education (HBO in Dutch)/Bachelor diploma or a Masters diploma (88% or above). In 2018 78% of the respondents reported to have a Master diploma as highest level of education. The majority of the group of respondents reports to be less than two years in their current role in 2018 (49% or higher). This is even more true in the years 2019 and 2020 with percentages of 72 and 66 respectively. The majority of the respondents report to possess experience within CS, with years of experience ranging from 1-10 (60% or above) while there is an increase in CS change agents possessing five or less years of experience in CS (28% in 2018 to 41% in 2020). The group of respondents work in all kinds of sizes of companies

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<sup>2</sup> Not all results are depicted in figures or tables. For the full results, a request to the researcher must be made.

(see *Table 2*) in 2018, while there is a shift in 2019 and 2020 visible showing the change agents work more often in larger companies (above 65%) and at a decreasing rate in medium sized companies (from 31% to 4%). The division of roles within a certain size of firm does change per year of surveying, although not consistently per firm size. For large multinationals with worldwide coverage for example, the coordinator-and-initiator is becoming less present over the years of surveys (from 28% in 2018 to 13% in 2020), while the stimulator-and-connector increases in presence (from 21% in 2018 to 35% in 2020). However, there is no consistent pattern found for decrease a presence of a role that is replaced by a specific other role.

<b>Company size the respondent works in</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Large multinational worldwide coverage	28%	31%	23%
Large national company	16%	48%	45%
Medium national company < 250	31%	12%	4%
Small national company < 50	12%	7%	16%
Self employed/ZZP'er	13%	2%	5%

*Table 2*, division of respondents per year with respect to per company size, shown in percentages

<b>Level of CS integration</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
CSR is fully integrated	23%	34%	21%
We are well on our way	37%	12%	48%
We have begun to implement CSR	11%	39%	21%
Basics of CSR in place	30%	15%	9%

*Table 3*, division of respondents per year with respect to level of CS integration of the company the respondents work in, shown in percentages.

The group of respondents answers differently each year on the state of their company’s CS integration (see *Table 3*). The trend however seems that the companies of the respondents seem to go beyond the basics of CS integration (from 30% to 9%). The division of roles between different levels of CS embedment is for each level almost the same. Meaning, mainly the coordinator-and-stimulator, networker, stimulator-and-connector and role of strategist are present. There is a difference in presence of roles between sectors that companies operate in and these roles change over the years of surveying. In almost all sectors (except from utilities, financial and insurance, education and consumer goods), the innovators and mentors are absent. With respect to trends over the years 2018-2020, the coordinator-and-initiator sometimes shows a decrease in presence (for example in agriculture with 38% in 2018 to 0% in 2020), while the strategist shows an increase in presence (in agriculture, from 10% in 2018 to 40% in 2020). However, the same possible trend applies to only a few other sectors. Importantly, the survey

of 2020 provided respondents with more options for sectors to choose from. To be able to compare the surveys, the extra sectors from the 2020 survey were added to the category labeled ‘other’. The category labeled ‘other’ was increasingly higher in 2020.

The group of respondents marks the role of strategist as a role they would like to spend more time on (with 28% in 2018, 46% in 2019 and 43% in 2020, see **Table 4**), where mentor and monitor being the roles only a small part of the respondents would like to spend more time on (4% or less in all years). The preference to spend more time on the role of strategist increases, which happens at the cost of all other roles except from the Stimulator-and-connector.

<b>Preference to spend more time on role</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Coordinator-and-initiator	21%	12%	15%
Innovator	11%	10%	13%
Mentor	4%	3%	4%
Monitor	4%	1%	0%
Networker	13%	9%	9%
Stimulator-and-connector	18%	19%	17%
Strategist	28%	46%	43%

**Table 4** Preference of the respondents to spend more time on a particular role.

<b>Preference of spending less time on role</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Coordinator and initiator	12%	11%
Innovator	5%	4%
Mentor	14%	15%
Monitor	37%	55%
Networker	13%	9%
Stimulator-and-connector	6%	4%
Strategist	6%	2%

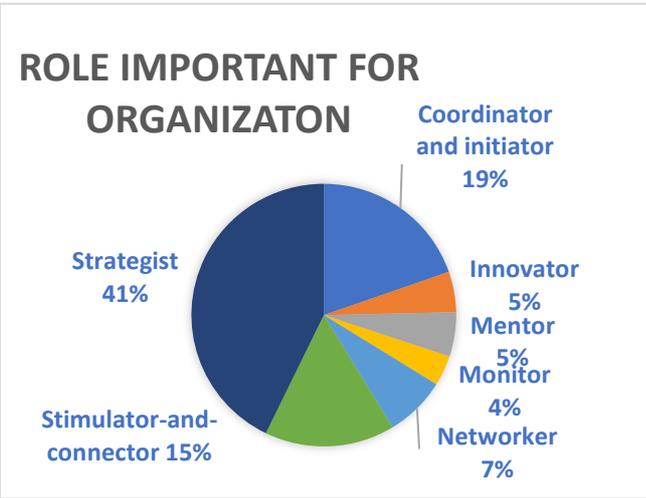
**Table 5** Preference of the respondents to spend less time on a particular role

The group of respondents marks the role of monitor as a role they would like to spend less time on, and innovator, Stimulator-and-connector and strategist being the roles only a small part of the respondents would like to spend less time on (see **Table 5**). Only the years 2019 and 2020 were used since these years included the question within the surveys. The group of respondents marks the roles of strategist and innovator as roles they would like themselves to develop further in (about 20% for the innovator role and 44% or higher for the role of strategist), while the role of monitor is being marked as the role only a small percentage of the respondents (about 3%) would like to develop further in (see **Table 6**).

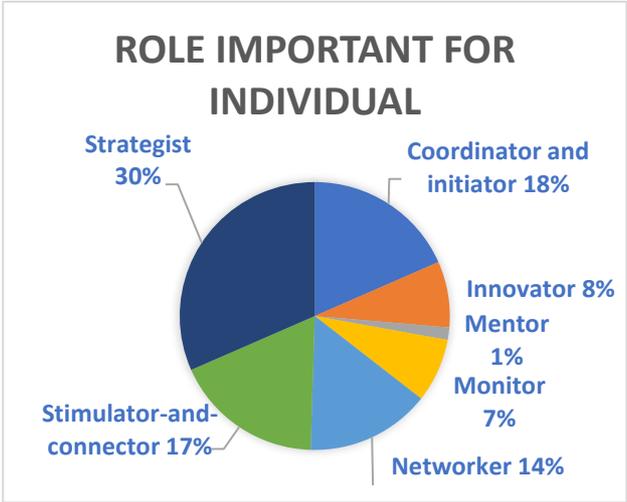
<b>Prefer to develop further in role</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Coordinator and initiator	6%	5%	7%
Innovator	22%	16%	20%
Mentor	2%	5%	13%
Monitor	4%	2%	2%
Networker	7%	14%	9%
Stimulator	12%	5%	4%
Strategist	47%	52%	44%

**Table 6** indicating the role the total group of respondents would like to develop themselves further in per year.

The respondents see themselves work within CS in the future, with a percentage that is even rising from 70 in 2018 to 87 percent in 2020. The strategist is the main role that is marked as important for an organization (41%), followed by the coordinator-and-initiator role (19%) and the Stimulator-and-connector role (15%) (see *Figure 2*).

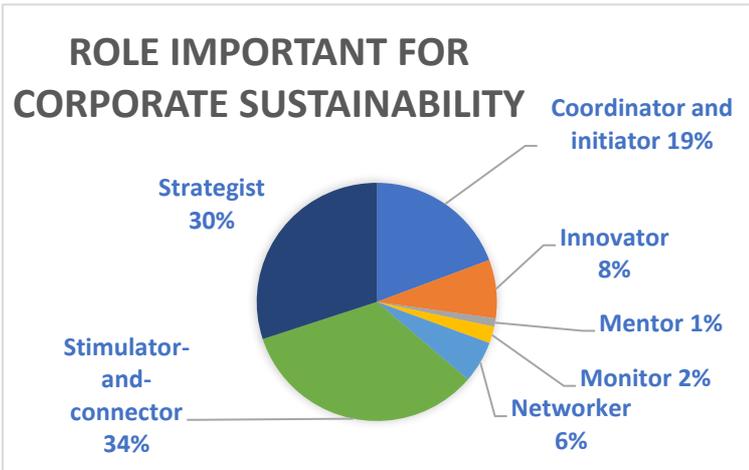


*Figure 2:* Roles marked by the respondents as important for their organization

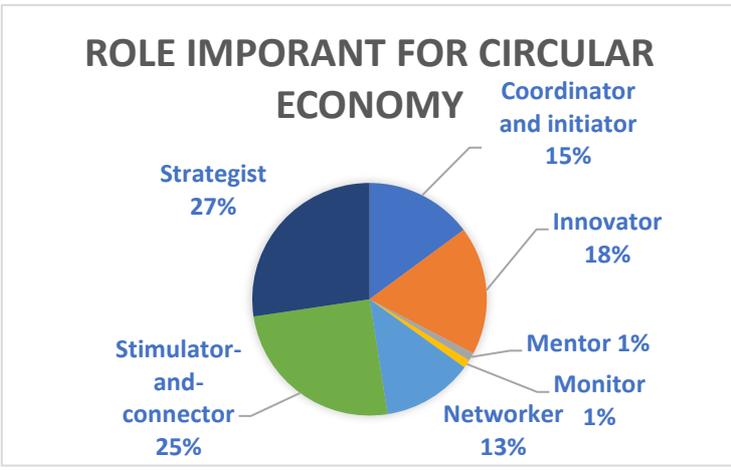


*Figure 3:* Roles marked by the respondents as important for themselves as individuals

The strategist is the main role that is marked most important for an individual (30%), followed by the coordinator-and-initiator role (18%), the Stimulator-and-connector (17%) and networker (14%) (see *Figure 3*).



*Figure 4:* roles marked by the respondents to be important for implementing corporate sustainability



*Figure 5:* roles marked by the respondents to be important for implementing circular economy

The roles that are considered to be important for the implementation of corporate sustainability are Stimulator-and-connector (34%), strategist (30%) and the coordinator-and-initiator role (19%) (see *Figure 4*). The roles that are considered to be important for the implementation of a circular economy for the firm are strategist (27%), Stimulator-and-connector (25%), coordinator-and-initiator (15%) and networker (13%) (see *Figure 5*).

## Analysis per role

### *The Coordinator-and-initiator*

#### What changed for this group?

About a quarter of the respondents were assigned to the role of coordinator-and-initiator as being the role they spend most time on at their job. The respondents reported about the same percentage of previous jobs being inside or outside CS. The group reported the highest level of education to be a master or HBO/bachelor level (between 80 and 100%). The years of experience in CS of this group was mainly ranging between 1-10 years (around 60%) with an increasing percentage of respondents reporting less than 5 years of experience within CS (32% to 49%). The years the respondents were in their current role was reported to be mainly less than 2 years (between 60-70%) but remained somewhat evenly divided amongst the years of survey.

The coordinator-and-initiator reported to be present in almost every sector. In general, the group reports to work in almost all company sizes, with an exception of the group self-employed, where percentages were 7%, 17% and 7% for the years of 2018, 2019 and 2020 respectively which is different from the general group of respondents. The respondents seem to be almost evenly divided over companies that are at different stages of CS embedment (around 20-25 percent) with a small deviation in presence in companies that are considered to have fully integrated CS.

#### What are the ambitions of this group?

The group of coordinators and initiators would like to spend more time on the roles of coordinator-and-initiator, Stimulator-and-connector and strategist (20% or above), and less time on the monitor role (around 50% of the coordinators and initiators). This division of preference seems to be about the same as the preference of the total of respondents from the surveys. The coordinators and initiators mainly like to develop themselves further in the role of

strategist (around 50%). Also, for this question the division parallels the total group of respondents. The future of these people is expected to lay within the field of CS with a rising percentage (from 71% to 90%).

### *The innovator*

#### What changed for this group?

Only about 5% of the respondents were assigned to the role of innovator as being the role they spend most time on at their job. Interestingly, the respondents reported in the 2018 survey, their previous job being outside CS (64%) while this was reversed for the 2019 and 2020 surveys reporting their previous job being 78% and 88 percent respectively inside CS. The group of innovators seem to deviate a bit from the total of respondents in their level of education, paralleling the total of respondents in the 2018 survey, while reporting a more spread level of education in the 2019 and 2020 surveys. The years of experience in CS of this group were changing towards a more experienced group, since the percentages of innovators that have less than five years of experience within CS decreased (43% to 24%) with a rise of more experienced respondents possessing 16 or even more than 20 years of experience. The years the innovators are in their current role does not follows the same trend as the total group of respondents, remaining either below two years or above five. The innovator is not present in every sector. The sectors without innovators are the retail sector and the financial and insurance sector. This may be caused by the small sample size that innovators account for in the surveys. However there seems to be a trend from only presence in a few sectors in 2018, towards almost all sectors covert in 2019 and 2020. The innovator worked in 2018 in the medium to large sized companies, but seem to moved out of the medium sized companies (from 43% to 4%) towards either large (around 60%) or small companies (from 0% to 27%). In general, the group of innovators reported to work in companies that are ranged between the beginnings of CS towards full embedment in 2018 (100%). However, the companies from these innovators have transitioned from being well on their way or even having fully implemented CS (90% in 2020).

#### What are the ambitions of this group?

The group of innovators would like to spend more time on the roles of innovator, networker and strategist and less time on the coordinator-and-initiator and monitor role (20% or above). There are however deviations between the years, probably again due to the small sample size

of innovators. The deviations from the total group of respondents lays in the preference to spend more time on the innovator role (i.e. on their own role) and a decrease in preference to spend more time on the strategist role. The innovators reported a bit larger preference to develop themselves further in the role of strategist (around 50%) as so for the innovator role (around 20%) compared to the total group of respondents. The future of these people is expected to lay within the field of CS with a rising percentage (around 55% to 90%).

#### *The Mentor*

##### What changed for this group?

Only about 4% of the respondents were assigned to the role of mentor as being the role they spend most time on at their job. The mentors reported a non-consistent division of previous jobs being either inside or outside CS, with a somewhat even balance in the 2018 survey, strongly inside CS in 2019 and strongly outside CS in the 2020 survey. The group of mentors reported to have under ten years of experience (around 65% to 90 %). The level of education varies amongst the years with 100% of the mentors received a master degree as highest level of education, 60% a PHD in 2019 and 73% a master degree in 2020. The years of experience within CS for this group was largely under two years or above five years. While the survey of 2018 shows an absence of mentors in the sectors agriculture, industry, logistics and mobility, education and healthcare, the 2019 and 2020 surveys show presence in all of the sectors. The mentors reported to work in different sizes of companies, varying over the years. The same holds for the level of CS embedment the companies the mentors work are at.

##### What are the ambitions of this group?

The group of mentors reported in every survey that they would like to spend more time on the roles of coordinator and strategist and less time on the monitor role (with even 90% in 2020). The deviation from the total group of respondents is a decrease in preference to spend more time on the strategist role. The mentors reported to prefer to develop themselves further in the role of coordinator (every survey around 20%) as in the strategist role (in 2019 and 2020 around 20%). The future of these people is expected to lay within the field of CS, with even 100% reporting to foresee a future within CS in 2020.

#### *The Monitor*

##### What changed for this group?

The respondents that were assigned to the role of monitor as being the role they spend most time on at their job decreased over the years from about 11% to 6% of the total respondents. The monitors reported an even division of previous jobs being either inside or outside CS. The group of monitors reported to have under five years of experience (around 50% in 2019 and 2020) with almost the same trends as the total group of respondents.

The highest level of education is mainly between Bachelor and a master degree for this group (about 90% in all years) with the survey of 2018 reporting 82% having obtained a master degree as highest level of education. The years of experience within CS for this group was largely under two years (50-70 percent). The monitors seem to be present at all sectors during all surveys. The monitors reported to work in all company sizes in 2018, but shifted in the 2019 and 2020 survey towards larger companies, having almost no respondents in the small companies. The monitors work at all levels of CS embedment although, relatively to the group of monitors, being somewhat more present in companies that at the level where the basics of CS are implemented.

#### What are the ambitions of this group?

The group of monitors reported clearly, they would like to spend more time on the strategist role, being a rising percentage (from 33% to 67%), next to smaller percentages (about 15%) for the roles of coordinator-and-initiator and Stimulator-and-connector. Monitors would like to spend less time on the role of mentor and monitor (both 20% or above). The preference for developing in a certain role for this group lays clearly in the role of strategist (more than 50% and increasing), while the ambition to develop further into a networking role also seems to increase (from 2% to 22%). The future of the monitor group is expected to lay within the field of CS, the percentages reflecting the probability of working within CS in the future increasing from 58 to 94 percent.

#### *The Networker*

#### What changed for this group?

About 17% of the respondents were assigned to the role of networker as being the role they spend most time on at their job. The respondents reported about the same trend with respect to the total group of respondents who had their previous job inside CS. The same holds for the years of experience within CS that seems consistent with the total group of respondents. The

highest level of education was mainly bachelor or master level. The number of years a networker works in its current role were about the same for all categories (<2 years, 3-5 years and >5 years) while there is a trend towards more networkers working less than two years in their current role. The networker is present in every sector during the years of surveying. The networkers work mainly in medium to large companies with a trend of working more often in large companies. The networker works in companies embedding CS at all levels of embedment.

#### What are the ambitions of this group?

The group of networkers would like to spend more time on the roles of strategist (around 40%) and Stimulator-and-connector (around 20%) and less time on the monitor role (around 50%). The preference to develop themselves further lays in the roles of strategist (around 40%) and innovator (around 20%).

The future of this group is expected to lay within the field of CS with a rising percentage (from 67% to 81%).

#### *The Stimulator-and-connector*

#### What changed for this group?

About 23% of the respondents were assigned to the role of Stimulator-and-connector as being the role they spend most time on at their job. The respondents reported about the same trend as the total group of respondents who had their previous job inside CS as the total group of respondents. The same holds for the years of experience within CS. The highest level of education for the group of Stimulator-and-connectors was mainly bachelor or master level (84% or higher). The number of years a Stimulator-and-connector works in its current role is mainly less than two years. The Stimulator-and-connector works in companies that are represented in all industries. These companies are for most part medium to large sized in 2018, while in 2019 and 2020 the Stimulator-and-connector is mostly working at large sized companies. In line with the total group of respondents, the Stimulator-and-connector seems to be present at companies that are getting beyond the basics of CS embedment within their organization.

### What are the ambitions of this group?

The group of Stimulator-and-connectors would like to spend more time on the roles of strategist (around 35%), Stimulator-and-connector (around 20%) and coordinator-and-initiator (around 20%) and less time on the monitor role (from 32% in 2019 to 58% in 2020) and the mentor role (around 20%). The preference to develop themselves further lays in the roles of strategist (around 40%).

The future of this group is expected to lay within the field of CS with a rising percentage (from 74% in 2018 to 92% in 2020).

### *The Strategist*

### What changed for this group?

About 18% of the respondents were assigned to the role of strategist as being the role they spend most time on at their job. The respondents reported in 2018 to have been working at their previous in either CS or outside, however the trend shows an increase in the previous jobs of these strategist that were inside CS (from 49% to 63%). The years of experience within CS is consistent with the total group of respondents. The highest level of education for the group of Stimulator-and-connectors was mainly bachelor or master level (above 90%). Generally, the number of years a strategist works in its current role is less than two years (only 2018 reported mainly above 5 years). The strategist works in companies that are represented in all industries in 2019 and 2020, however in 2018, no strategists reported to work in the sectors of government agencies, education and healthcare. The strategist mainly works at large companies, both with locations in foreign countries. More than half of the strategists work in companies where the CS embedment is claimed to be either 'well on our way' or being 'fully integrated/game changer'.

### What are the ambitions of this group?

The group of strategists would like to spend more time on their own role of strategist (around 50%), and less time on the monitor role (about 40%) and the mentor role (slightly less than 20%). The preference to develop themselves further lays in the roles of strategist (mainly above 40%) and innovator (about 20%)

The future of this group is expected to lay within the field of CS with about 75% reporting wanting to work within CS in the future.

## Discussion:

- The majority of respondents report to work less than two years in their current role, foresee a future career within CS for themselves and have a level of education on bachelor degree or higher
- The respondents are working in larger companies at an increasing rate and report their companies to progress in the level of CS embedment
- The respondents report to prefer spending more time on the role of strategist, while spending less time on the monitor role
- There are differences in roles important for the CS change agents' companies compared to roles important for the CS change agents themselves
- There are differences in importance of roles a CS change agent plays between implementing CS or circular economy within the organization.
- There is a difference in presence of roles between sectors

This research addresses several components that are providing an insight on the future of the profession of CS change agents.

First, the respondents strongly report to prefer to spend more time and develop further in the role of strategist. This preference seems to fall somewhat in line with the research by Miller & Serafeim (2014), who observed CS change agents can become loosened from the board as they become a different department within the company. The strategist is mainly considered as having more power and authority (Wijdoogen, 2016) which could hint towards this decoupled position from the board of a company in the future. Furthermore, the preference of spending less time on the monitor role combined with the preference to spend time on roles like strategist or Stimulator-and-connector, could shape future discussion with respect to new hiring by companies. Since both strategist and monitor find themselves at the opposite sides of the spectrum of preference, the company's dominant logic (Osagie & Wesselink, 2020) does not seem to be an indicator for motivation, since these roles are both associated with profit driven logics. Interestingly, the group of CS change agents report increasingly wanting to work within CS in the future. Assuming the group of people deliver sufficient work and are pursuing their preferences, the strategist becomes a role that most people in the group play. While this does not seem to be feasible in theory, since balancing between roles is suggested (Engert & Baumgartner, 2016), it could give a small insight in the career path this group of professional may wish to pursue.

Second, the respondents reported to be present in every sector. This implies that although sectors may vary in point of integrating changes (Nadkarni & Narayanan, 2007), all sectors have started to embed CS within their organizations. However, the expected transition from companies solely focusing on CS towards more conventional companies (Hasselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014) is not demonstrated with the data from the surveys, since the surveys did not make a distinction between these companies solely focusing on CS and more conventional companies. The possible trend of a decreasing presence in coordinators and initiators in the period 2018-2020, while the strategist seems to increase in presence in the same period, is not consistently shown to be able to draw any conclusions.

Third, the years of experience within CS and the years the respondents are in their current role are both decreasing, while the experience within CS in general seems to increase. However, the number of CS change agents is rising (Visser & Crane, 2010; Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014; Wijdoogen, 2016). This could confirm the profession is still in its infancy, as in line with Wijdoogen (2016). Also, the respondents seem to be mainly less than two years in their current role, which hints towards a shift in roles over the years. However, it is not clear what kind of shift in roles these respondents made since the surveys gave not give insight on this matter. The respondents could in theory have shifted relatively often between roles but the division of respondents over the seven roles stayed somewhat the same between the years of surveying.

Fourth, the level of CS integration as indicator for the role the professionals possess as dominant role, as shown in research by Wesselink & Osagie (2020), is not confirmed with the data for this research. The companies that differ in level of CS embedment seem to possess the same division in roles between each level. Although some roles are more present than others, this seems to be caused by the difference in respondents that received a certain role as label. For example, the group of coordinator-and-initiators is larger than the group of innovators, hence there is a higher chance of being present in a level of CS integration. The general level of education was more or less the same for all roles. This does neither confirm or reject the research done by Perry (2012), showing education has a positive impact on the level of CS embedment.

Fifth, adding to existing research arguing (more) specific capabilities needed (De los Rios & Charnley, 2017), the findings suggest that the difference between companies that chooses its path towards addressing sustainability also require different kinds of roles to be performed. Namely, there is an increasing importance for innovators and networkers when a company opts for circular economy focus, while the Stimulator-and-connector role is more

important for implementing corporate sustainability. The same holds for the development of the individuals themselves. The networker role seems to gain importance when it comes to individual development, while the strategist seems to be even more important for an organization.

Sixth, although the respondents are split in roles, these roles do not seem to cause deviations in preferences of the individuals or company traits between these roles. The innovator role was the only role that had some deviations from the total group of respondents. Reported for these innovators are a somewhat more evenly spread level of education, more years of experience in CS, being longer present in their current role, work in companies which are further in their embedment of CS (as a trend from 2018 to 2020) and want to spend clearly more time on the innovator (i.e. their own) role. However, this could be caused by the small sample size of the innovators, hence the group is more likely to deviate from the total group of respondents.

Lastly, the larger firms are expected to show a positive relationship with behavior towards sustainability (Gallo & Christensen, 2011). However, although more respondents report to work at larger firms, the data does not show larger firms being in a further stage of CS embedment. This could mean the data from the surveys confirms the statement by Baumann-Pauly et al, (2013) than SME's are not necessarily less advanced in their level of CS embedment. Since all firms sizes show presences at all levels of CS embedment, also the possible advantage that SME's may have of implementing CS (Witjes, Vermeulen & Cramer, 2017) seems not to be confirmed by the research data.

## Conclusion:

Although the surveys do not provide sufficient data to make full claims about the future the corporate sustainability change agents may face, they give an indication of trends and ambitions that apply for this group. This may serve as a basis for posing hypotheses about the group of CS change agents with respect to the possible change in roles over time. The results show no change in roles the CS change agent plays with respect to firm size, level of CS embedment or sector the company of the CS change agent operates in. Still, concerning the drivers of the CS change agents, the results show clearly the preference this group has regarding the roles and show a difference between which roles are important for the interests of a company or for the individual change agent. The roles that are important also change with respect to the way a company addresses sustainability.

### *Limitations and future research*

Although there is a need for empirical data in the field of research on CS (Engert & Baumgartner, 2016) there are some limitations this research has.

Conducting a survey may cause threats to internal, as well as external validity (Creswell, 2009). External validity may lay in the interaction with selection, setting and history. Internal threats to validity for this survey may lay in history, maturation, selection, mortality, diffusion of treatment, testing and instrumentation (Creswell, 2009). Due to time constraints, only having a survey as data-source result in missing out on the pro's that qualitative data, like conducting interviews, may give. This mixed methods approach could have been helpful to use the strengths of either qualitative and quantitative research, which addresses the complex problems addressed by social sciences better than choosing only one of these techniques (Creswell, 2009). The respondents of the 2018, 2019 and 2020 surveys consisting out of 106, 88 and 54 respectively, were divided into seven groups. These individual group sizes however were sometimes quite small, with some groups that received a weight of factor three, to consist out of one respondent. This makes the comparability between the groups from different years of survey somewhat biased since small deviations in small groups can cause a change in conclusion more easily then in large groups. This also caused that programs like SPSS are not useable for analyzing the results since larger level of group sizes are required. It would however be useful to compare groups by usage of programs like SPSS in order to test for significance in

changes between and inside groups of respondents. With the usage of surveys from only three consecutive years it is difficult to determine a trend as implementing CS is done with a long-term orientation (Hielscher & Pies, 2014).

The survey treats respondents that answer to spend most time they work on a certain role as being labeled that role. However, this may cause three limitations. Although in the research of Wesselink & Osagie (2020) six out of the seven roles were identified sufficiently, the respondents may hold a different definition from each role than a researcher holds. The survey did however, provide a short explanation of these roles. A second limitation is that the survey only asked persons to rank the time spend on a role, as this research takes the roles spend most time on as prevalent for choosing a label for these groups. If the respondents would know they would receive a label on basis of that question, these answers could be different from what the respondent originally answered. A third shortcoming is that the surveys of 2019 and 2020 asked the respondents to prioritize the top three of time spend on roles. This however does not give insight on the relative time spend on each role, which the 2018 survey did give. It could therefore be that a person spends most time on a role which should be valued higher than the same role another respondent spends most time on.

The literature study exposed multiple factors that may influence a potential shift in roles for CS change agent over time. However, factors ‘activities for CS change agents’ and ‘the difference in company’s logic’ were not used since the dataset could not provide an answer to what extent these factors play a role in answering the research question. Still, they could influence the potential shift in roles over time which could be interesting to explore in further research.

This research could be extended in some ways to include more dimensions that influence the group of CS change agents have and show their motivations.

First, it would be interesting how the respondents would answer the research question itself, as they now mainly were asked for their preferences for the future. They could add comments on the scenario that they find realistic to happen, considering these respondents are experts in the field. Therefore, conducting interviews with this group could give insight in the speed that roles may shift, next to the reasons why these shifts may take place.

Secondly, there is a lot of research about the competencies the CS change agents ought to possess (e.g. Rieckmann, 2012; Wiek, Withycombe & Redman, 2011; Shephard, 2008; Thomas, Barth & Day, 2013), but it is not yet clear if these capabilities differ per role a CS change agent can play. Clear communication on competencies in CS can help improve the clarity on job profiles (Mandip, 2012). If these capabilities might differ per role, the profile of

a CS change agent could be clearer, which in turn could lead to a better fit in the process of job applications.

Third, the difference in roles being present in different sizes of firms, different levels of CS embedment or different sectors is not clear from the data of this research. However, it could be interesting to research if the roles a CS change agent played have changed while companies grow or decrease in size, the company progresses or regresses in the level of CS embedment or within different sectors.

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## Appendix A

### Questions used from the 2020 survey

1. Your previous job was
  - within CSR/sustainability
  - outside CSR/ sustainability
2. How many years of work experience do you have with CSR/sustainability?
  - None
  - 5 years and under
  - 6-10 years
  - 11-15 years
  - More than 20 years
3. What is the highest level of education you have completed ?
  - No formal education
  - High school (middelbaar onderwijs)
  - Bachelor degree/HBO
  - Maters Degree/Docterandus
  - Docterate/ PHD
4. How long have you been in your current role?
  - 0-2 years
  - 3-5 years
  - 6-8 years
  - 9-10 years
  - >10 years
5. Indicate how you would like to see your career develop futher:
  - I foresee a career for myself within CSR/sustainability
  - I foresee a career for myself outside CSR/sustainability
6. What sector does your organization primarily belong to?
  - I Don't know
  - Agriculture
  - Industry
  - Utilities (energy, water waste)
  - Infrastructure and Building
  - Information and communication
  - Retail and Wholesale
  - Logistics and Mobility
  - Hospitality and Facilities
  - Financial and Insurances
  - Consultancy, Research, Interim
  - Government Agencies
  - Non Government Organizations (NGO)
  - Education
  - Health Care
  - Consumer Goods (including food)
  - Culture and Sport
  - Other (please specify)
7. What would best describe the organization you are currently working in? (pertaining to the size of your organization)
  - Large multinational, worldwide coverage
  - Large national company
  - Medium national company (Less than 250)
  - Small national company (less than 50)
  - Micro Company (less than 10)
  - Self Employed

Based on scientific research, 7 roles of the CSR manager were identified to be successful in embedding CSR in his/her organization.

1. The networker – Engage and grow the network
2. Strategist – Lead for strategy
3. Coordinator-and-initiator – Support implementation using the organizational structure (governance)
4. Stimulator-and-connector – Challenge to inspire and connect without formal influence (cultural elements)
5. Mentor – Empower others for success on an individual functional level (daily workplace)
6. Innovator – Innovate for continuous renewal
7. Monitor – Learn from reporting
8. Please rank the three roles you spend the LARGEST portions of your time on
  - Networker
  - Strategist
  - Coordinator and initiator
  - Stimulator-and-connector
  - Mentor
  - Innovator
  - Monitor
9. Please rank the three roles you spend the LEAST portions of your time on:
  - Networker
  - Strategist
  - Coordinator and initiator

- Stimulator-and-connector
  - Mentor
  - Innovator
  - Monitor
10. Please rank the three roles you would PREFER to spend the LARGEST portions of your time on:
- Networker
  - Strategist
  - Coordinator and initiator
  - Stimulator-and-connector
  - Mentor
  - Innovator
  - Monitor
11. Please rank the three roles you WOULD LIKE to spend the LEAST amount of your time on:
- Networker
  - Strategist
  - Coordinator and initiator
  - Stimulator-and-connector
  - Mentor
  - Innovator
  - Monitor
12. Of these 7 roles, the top three I would like to DEVELOP myself further in are:
- Networker
  - Strategist
  - Coordinator and initiator
  - Stimulator-and-connector
  - Mentor
  - Innovator
  - Monitor
13. How would you say CSR/sustainability is integrated within YOUR ORGANIZATION?
- CSR is fully integrated within the organization (10/10)
  - We are well on our way towards fully integrating CSR/sustainability (7/10)
  - We have begun to integrate CSR/sustainability (5/10)
  - Basics of CSR/sustainability program is in place (3/10)
  - CSR/sustainability is on a project basis (1/10)
- 5 years and under
  - 6-10 years
  - 11-15 years
  - More than 20 years
3. What is the highest level of education you have completed ?
- No formal education
  - High school
  - Technical/Trade School (HBO)
  - Bachelor Degree
  - Maters Degree
  - Docterate/ PHD
4. How long have you been in your current role?
- 0-2 years
  - 3-5 years
  - 6-8 years
  - 8-10 years
  - >10 years
5. What sector does your organization primarily belong to?
- Agriculture
  - Industry
  - Utilities
  - Infrastructure and Development
  - Retail
  - Logistics and Mobility
  - Hospitality
  - Financial and Insurances
  - Government Agencies
  - Education
  - Health Care
  - Consumer Goods (including food)
  - Other
6. What would best describe the organization you are currently working in? (pertaining to the size of your organization)
- Large multinational, worldwide coverage
  - Large national company
  - Medium national company (Less than 250)
  - Small national company (less than 50)
  - Micro Company (less than 10)
  - Self Employed
7. How would you say CSR/sustainability is integrated within your organization?
- We are an industry game changer through CSR/sustainability
  - CSR is fully embedded within the organization
  - We are well on our way towards fully embedding CSR/sustainability
  - We have begun to embed CSR/sustainability

### Questions from the 2019 survey

1. Your previous job was
  - within CSR/sustainability
  - outside CSR/ sustainability
2. How many years of work experience do you have with CSR/sustainability?
  - None

- Basics of CSR/sustainability program is in place
  - CSR/sustainability is on a project basis
  - We do not work on CSR/Sustainability
8. In general, which **roles** would you deem as most important for you to be effective in the fields of **Climate and energy transition** (indicate and prioritize your top 3)
  9. In general, which **roles** would you deem as most important for you to be effective in the fields of **Circular Economy** (indicate and prioritize your top 3)

#### The 7 roles of a CSO

Based on scientific research, 7 roles of the CSR/Sustainability manager were identified that can take on within their organization.

1. The networker – Engage and grow the network
2. Strategist – Lead for strategy
3. Coordinator-and-initiator – Support implementation using the organizational structure (governance)
4. Stimulator-and-connector – Challenge to inspire and connect without formal influence (cultural elements)
5. Mentor – Empower others for success on an individual functional level (daily workplace)
6. Innovator – Innovate for continuous renewal
7. Monitor – Learn from reporting

10. Please rank the three roles you spend the **largest** portions of your time on

- Networker
- Strategist
- Coordinator and initiator
- Stimulator-and-connector
- Mentor
- Innovator
- Monitor

11. Please rank the three roles you spend the **least** portions of your time on:

- Networker
- Strategist

- Coordinator and initiator
- Stimulator-and-connector
- Mentor
- Innovator
- Monitor

12. Please rank the three roles you would **prefer to spend the largest** portions of your time on:

- Networker
- Strategist
- Coordinator and initiator
- Stimulator-and-connector
- Mentor
- Innovator
- Monitor

13. Please rank the three roles you would **prefer to spend the least** portions of your time on:

- Networker
- Strategist
- Coordinator and initiator
- Stimulator-and-connector
- Mentor
- Innovator
- Monitor

14. Of these 7 roles, the top three I would like to DEVELOP myself further in are:

- Networker
- Strategist
- Coordinator and initiator
- Stimulator-and-connector
- Mentor
- Innovator
- Monitor

15. Indicate how you would like to see your career develop further:

- I foresee a career for myself within CSR/sustainability
- (between I foresee a career for myself within CSR and Neutral)
- Neutral
- (between I foresee a career for myself outside CSR and Neutral)
- I foresee a career for myself outside CSR/sustainability

## Questions from the 2018 survey

1. Your previous job was
  - within CSR/sustainability
  - outside CSR/ sustainability
  - Other (please specify)
2. How many years of work experience do you have with CSR/sustainability?
  - None
  - 5 years and under
  - 6-10 years
  - 11-15 years
  - 16-20 years
  - More than 20 years
  - None
3. What is the highest level of education you have completed ?
  - No formal education
  - High school
  - Bachelor Degree
  - Drs/Doctorandus
  - Maters Degree
  - Docterate/ PHD
  - Other (please specify)
4. How long have you been in your current role?
  - <1 year
  - 1-2 years
5. What sector does your organization primarily belong to?
  - 3-5 years
  - >5 years
  - Agriculture
  - Industry
  - Utilities
  - Infrastructure and Development
  - Retail
  - Logistics and Mobility
  - Hospitality
  - Financial and Insurances
  - Government Agencies
  - Education
  - Health Care
  - Consumer Goods (including food)
  - Other (please specify)
6. What would best describe the organization you are currently working in? (pertaining to the size of your organization)
  - Large multinational, worldwide coverage
  - Large company with multiple locations in several countries
  - Large national company
  - Medium national company
  - Small national company
  - Other (please specify)
7. How would you say CSR/ is integrated within your organization?
  - We are well on our way towards fully embedding CSR (embedded in our product/service portfolio/ major driver for innovation and sales/and embedded in the supply chain)
  - We have embedded CSR in our own process and started to embed CSR in the supply chain.
  - Basics of CSR/sustainability program is in place, we are now
  - We are an industry game changer through CSR/sustainability
  - CSR is fully embedded within the organization: own processes and value & supply chain (embedded in our strategy, business development, value creation for stakeholders)

moving towards embedding CSR in our own processes.

- There is no CSR program, CSR consists of several projects
- Other (please specify)

In our research, we have found 7 roles a CSR/Sustainability manager can take on within their organization.

1. The networker – Engage and grow the network
2. Strategist – Lead for strategy
3. Coordinator-and-initiator – Support implementation using the organizational structure (governance)
4. Stimulator-and-connector – Challenge to inspire and connect without formal influence (cultural elements)
  
9. In general, which role would you deem as most important for yourself as an individual? (prioritize from 1 as most important to 7 as least important).
  - Networker
  - Strategist
  - Coordinator and initiator
  - Stimulator-and-connector
  - Mentor
  - Innovator
  - Monitor
10. Indicate the percentage of your time spend on each role \*please note the total must add up to 100.
  - Networker
  - Strategist
  - Coordinator and initiator
  - Stimulator-and-connector
  - Mentor
  - Innovator
  - Monitor
  
11. Indicate the percentage of your time you would prefer to spend on each role
  - Networker
  - Strategist
  - Coordinator and initiator
  - Stimulator-and-connector

5. Mentor – Empower others for success on an individual functional level (daily workplace)
6. Innovator – Innovate for continuous renewal
7. Monitor – Learn from reporting
  
8. In general, which role would you deem as most important for your organization? (prioritize from 1 as most important to 7 as least important)
  - Networker
  - Strategist
  - Coordinator and initiator
  - Stimulator-and-connector
  - Mentor
  - Innovator
  - Monitor
  
- Mentor
- Innovator
- Monitor
  
12. Of these 7 roles, the top three I would like to develop myself further in are:
  - Networker
  - Strategist
  - Coordinator and initiator
  - Stimulator-and-connector
  - Mentor
  - Innovator
  - Monitor
13. Indicate how you would like to see your career develop further:
  - I foresee a career for myself within CSR/sustainability
  - (between I foresee a career for myself within CSR and Neutral)
  - (in the middle of within or outside CSR)
  - (between I foresee a career for myself outside CSR and Neutral)
  - I foresee a career for myself outside CSR/sustainability

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