

Panel symposium: “Managing for the Distant Future: A Research Agenda for the Fight Against Climate Change (session 973)”

Organizer: Majken Schultz.

Panelists: Tima Bansal, Tor Hernes, Juliane Reinecke, Klaus Weber, Christopher Wright.

Climate change is one of the most consequential challenges facing the world. Companies are beginning to realize the importance of taking a leadership role in the fight against climate change (and other grand societal issues) with many companies working toward carbon neutrality. However, managers still face significant pressure to meet short-term performance goals, so it is important to study how managers might achieve these goals without compromising their ability to effectively address societal challenges such as climate change in the long-term. This panel symposium brought together experienced climate change and business sustainability scholars to debate how management researchers might “study and conceptualize the challenges that confront managers” with respect to climate change and other distant concerns. In this submission I review the most interesting insights from the panel symposium for SIM researchers, as I perceived them.

There are two takeaways from the panel symposium that stood out to me in particular. First, studying how companies might influence and be influenced by grand global challenges such as climate change comes with a significant obstacle. Tima Bansal observed that science is inherently based on historical data and relies on the past to predict and prescribe the future; but what if the future is no longer dependent on the past? In the context of climate change, climate scientists are beginning to argue we have moved beyond certain tipping points, meaning the past fundamentally differs from the present and the future. Managers face fundamentally different challenges and must consider different goals. This extends well beyond climate change-related decisions to the entire interface between companies and external environments. The past year indicates we have reached other major tipping points, for example with respect to social justice. The murder of George Floyd sparked global movements in the fight for racial justice that have drawn attention to society’s, including companies’, treatment of people of color. Companies thus operate in a world that views their past behaviors in a very different light today than when the behaviors occurred. As the panel observed, our historical data is becoming less relevant, which puts pressure on us to think more critically about temporality.

Second, understanding societal issues requires a multilevel and temporal point of view. That is to say, societal issues exist at the individual, organizational, institutional, and natural environment levels of analysis, with cross-level influences over time. For instance, climate change influences the natural environment, institutions, companies, and individuals, who in turn influence each other’s perception of and response to climate change. Social justice cannot be abstracted to only one level either because institutions influence the experiences of individuals and the requirements for companies, while individuals and companies influence institutions and each other with respect to their experiences of and approach to social justice. Reducing the way we think about grand challenges to only one level masks important cross-level relationships. Accordingly, the panel observed that it would be useful for researchers interested in societal issues to adopt systems theorizing that explores how change unfolds within each level and how this change influences change across other levels.

The panelists provided many other interesting insights. I am grateful to them for their time and to Majken Schultz for organizing this symposium. The challenges are great, but to my fellow SIMians this is probably not news; it is why we do what we do.

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