

ROTTERDAM SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT, ERASMUS UNIVERSITY

▶ **Sustainability as a team sport**

Lesa Sawahata interviews Gail Whiteman

▶ **Boosting revenues in the self-storage warehouse industry**

by René de Koster

▶ **How to manage consumers' packaging perceptions**

by Nailya Ordabayeva

▶ **Do bank bailouts have a silver lining?**

by Lars Norden, Peter Roosenboom and Teng Wang

▶ **How performance appraisals can encourage ethical behaviour**

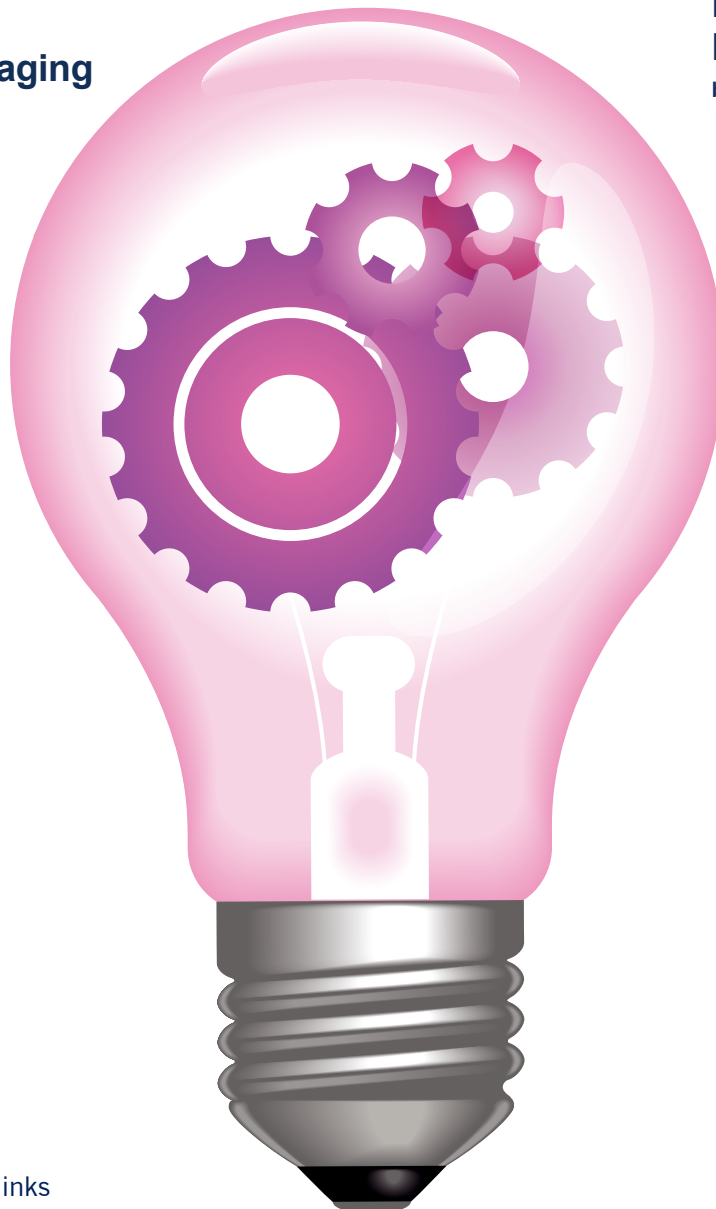
by Gabriele Jacobs

▶ **Change for change's sake? Internal responses to external challenges**

by Henk W. Volberda

▶ **Why mortgage lenders need better-educated borrowers**

by Ruben Cox



The business school that thinks and lives in the future

# Sustainability as a team sport

Lesah Sawahata interviews Gail Whiteman

**Making sense of climate change and understanding the impact that changing earth systems will have on business globally is one of the aims of the Centre for Eco-Transformation. Finding credible management solutions to these immense challenges is another.**



The ERIM Centre for Eco-Transformation is a dynamic web of sustainability-focused research, teaching and initiatives with a particular focus on impacting business. From the centre's website: 'Specifically, we aim to connect scientists, students and business practitioners worldwide in an effort to further our understanding of planetary limits and the implications for organisations and society.'

How is the Centre for Eco-Transformation fulfilling its purpose? 'This centre is unique,' says its Founder and Scientific Director, Professor Gail Whiteman. Unlike other sustainability research centres that focus on ecological issues as distinct from management, 'we are very much taking a multidisciplinary approach to transforming the role of business and its leaders in mitigating issues such as climate change,' she says. 'For that we need multiple perspectives and expertise,' she continues. 'Lots of strong research is needed, but also deep engagement with companies and with NGOs. Sustainability is a team sport.'

## Broader perspectives for business

Professor Whiteman's own specific area of research expertise – climate change and its effects upon the earth and business – was the initial trigger for the centre's launch in 2010, under the name the Sustainability and

Climate Research Centre. But with the ecological cost and economical scale of climate change gaining momentum daily, the centre's scope has grown.

'We want to have a diverse collection of top researchers or connectors who can help trigger change, or report on transformation happening in a number of key areas,' says Whiteman. The centre has grown to encompass a large team working across seven research themes:

**Theme A:** Systems Thinking and Corporate Sustainability

**Theme B:** Sustainable Innovation

**Theme C:** Ecosystems & Biodiversity

**Theme D:** Urbanisation

**Theme E:** Social Movements and Climate/Sustainability

**Theme F:** Chinese MNEs and Corporate Social Performance in the Telecoms Industry in Africa

**Theme G:** Ecological Sensemaking and Organisational Vulnerability

## Significant research themes for business

Prof. Whiteman is particularly active in the areas of systems thinking, sustainable innovation, and ecological 'sensemaking' within organisations. 'At the broader systems level, I connect earth systems science such as the nine Planetary Boundaries, proposed by Johan Rockström ▶

## Sustainability as a team sport (continued)

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and international colleagues, into management,' she says.

On the theme of Innovation, the centre is carrying out a large research project on sustainable innovation, examining "front running firms" such as DSM, InterfaceFLOR, Eastman Chemicals and others, and just how they became – and remain – front runners. 'I have a research team in conjunction with RSM's Professor Jan van den Ende,' she explains, 'and we're looking at how to enable and trigger the change to sustainable innovation – what is the "wake up call" that puts this in motion, and what do we understand about really breakthrough sustainable solutions and innovations in business?'

A study on the theme of Urbanisation is in the launch phase with the new coalition of Leiden University, Delft University of Technology and Erasmus University Rotterdam; and PhD researchers Romy Kraemer and Ona Akemu are working on, respectively, the themes of Social Movements and Sustainability and Chinese MNEs and Corporate Social Performance in the Telecoms Industry in Africa.

### Ecology meets economy

For the question of biodiversity loss and its enormous implications for people and business, the centre has appointed Willem Ferwerda as Executive Fellow Business and

Ecosystems. 'Eva Rood, Co-Director of our centre, was instrumental in getting Willem on board to work on the business role in land restoration and the biodiversity problem,' she says. Ferwerda, the former Director of the Dutch branch of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), brings deep knowledge of ecology and land restoration to the centre.

'Willem's dream is to ensure that the two billion hectares of degraded land in the world will be restored by a consortium of local farmers, NGO's and governmental organisations,' says Rood. 'What he wants to do is bridge ecological and economic knowledge, and is using the centre's research to make the business case for land restoration. In return, we get his network and knowledge from the world of nature organisations,' she says. Ferwerda will publish a book of land restoration case studies for business in 2015.

### Going viral with the Arctic

Professor Whiteman is an atypical academic. Her background includes several years spent in the private sector as a marketer. Perhaps this is what makes her a scientist who can speak directly to the human heart of business management – a voice a broader audience can hear. This accessibility is a quality that complements her

academic rigour; while Whiteman's relentless schedule of publications includes scholarly articles in peer review journals such as the *Journal of Management Studies* and *The Academy of Management Journal*, she seems to effortlessly bridge science and business.

Notably, the article *Climate Science: vast costs of arctic change*, co-written with Chris Hope of Judge Business School and Peter Wadhams, a professor of ocean physics at Cambridge, and published in the scientific weekly *Nature* in July 2013, resulted in a tsunami of high-profile media coverage including CNN, BBC, CNBC, Bloomberg, FT.com, *The Guardian* and *The Huffington Post*. The message, that the rapidly melting Arctic ice cap is an 'economic time bomb' likely to cost the world at least US\$60trillion, has clear implications for business and specific industry sectors like agriculture and insurance.

'This ties into the centre's research theme: how do we make sense of ecological change, and learn from nature? The science is there, but how do you get the Arctic into the boardroom and onto the radar of world leaders?' she says. 'With that piece in *Nature*, we went absolutely viral. Now, all eyes are on the Arctic, and from the economic perspective, not just the perspective of the polar bear, and that is exciting.'



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## Accelerating change

This is, however, no time to rest on the laurels of media virality. Momentum and acceleration are the order of the day and is one reason the centre recently appointed Marcello Palazzi, another impressive frontrunner in the fields of entrepreneurship, innovation and CSR, as executive fellow Enterprise Acceleration.

Whiteman has in academia: he has held top positions in the UN's World Food Programme and War Child, and in the International Integrated Reporting Council.

Upon Professor Whiteman's appointment, Bakker said: 'We need to accelerate the pace of change toward sustainability... Gail will bring access to a wide ranging network of

Using research from the Centre for Eco-Transformation to contribute to the WBCSD Action 2020 Plan is that concrete use of science to reinvent business. 'The action plan will clearly outline the responsibility of business; the CEOs in attendance will consider how they can be part of the social movement that is a new paradigm of business, and how to join with some of the best business leaders,' says Whiteman.

She mentions DSM and AkzoNobel, and leaders like Unilever CEO Paul Polman and Bakker, lauding them for being part of a 'coalition of the willing' in driving the case for sustainable business development from the leadership level. In business and in business schools such as RSM leaders 'aren't pushing the sustainability agenda sufficiently – we've got to scale up,' she says, adding that 'we can't keep waiting for our customers to demand it.'

And that is the key purpose of the Centre for Eco-Transformation, she says – to present the proof and make the connections for leaders in every part of business and society. 'Look at the science and the need for sustainability becomes very clear.' ■

More information about the centre, it's goals and research themes can be found at [WEB www.irim.eur.nl/ecotrans](http://www.irim.eur.nl/ecotrans)

*“...we are very much taking a multidisciplinary approach to transforming the role of business and its leaders in mitigating issues such as climate change.”*

*Prof. Gail Whiteman, Scientific Director, Centre for Eco-Transformation.*

At time of writing, Professor Whiteman is on her way to Istanbul to take part in a meeting of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), for which she is the first Professor-in-Residence; an honour conferred upon Professor Whiteman by WBCSD President Peter Bakker in April 2012. An alumnus of Erasmus University Rotterdam and the former CEO of TNT, Bakker has the same “networkability”, boldness and broad reach in the world of business and corporate governance as Gail

academic perspectives and will play a key role in bringing about this change.' In response, Professor Whiteman said: 'Corporate sustainability faces a paradox: on the one hand companies have begun to integrate sustainability in all decision making. On the other, data indicates a worsening, and in some cases, alarming state of affairs for our planet. Why this disconnect? Part of the problem may be that we are not harnessing the power of science to help us reinvent the system.'