

**ENVIRONMENTAL ORIENTATION AND CORPORATE  
STRATEGY: CO-RELATED OR CORRELATED ACADEMIC  
AND CORPORATE LITERATURE?"**

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# **ENVIRONMENTAL ORIENTATION AND CORPORATE STRATEGY: CO-RELATED OR CORRELATED ACADEMIC AND CORPORATE LITERATURE?"**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper traces the links between the fields of strategic management and environmentalism within academic and managerial literature. The framework established in the literature is presented in order to show both the historical development and current status of environmentalism, and to provide context for critical appraisal of documentation from the practice arena. Examples of corporate environmental statements published on the web by top UK companies are reviewed and critically appraised against the literature. This comparative appraisal is undertaken to determine if organizations at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century show evidence of conforming to the theoretical models that have been developed.

Our intent in submitting this paper was to address the relationship between environmentalism and strategy, without judgement of ethical or moral issues.

Keywords: environment, corporate strategy, management practice, society, business

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In this paper, we review and critically compare literature from the fields of academia and practice that relates to strategic management, organizational orientation and environmentalism. From within the academic literature we identify and discuss theoretical models for the evaluation of organizations' environmental orientation and strategies (e.g. Rugman and Verbeke, 1998; Porter and Van Der Linde, 1995; Aragon-Correa, 1998; Judge Jr. and Douglas, 1998). From the field of business, we have drawn upon corporate web-based documentation from the top 10 UK companies, as listed by market capitalization ([www.FT.com/](http://www.FT.com/), 2000), in order to make critical comparison between the status of environmental practice, as espoused in this documentation, and the literature.

Our aim at this stage of the research is to determine to what extent organizations at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century show public intent and evidence of conforming to the theoretical models that have been developed. From this, we will develop a program of more detailed primary research into the relationship between environmentalism, strategy and orientation within selected case organizations, in order to inform the development of the body of theory on environmental strategy orientation.

In developing this paper, we intended to address only the relationship between strategy, orientation and environmentalism, without comment on the ethical or moral issues *per se*. Having been allocated to the Ethics and Corporate Citizenship stream of the Conference, however, we have decided to comment upon the moral/ethical dimension from one particular standpoint in our conclusions.

## **2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL ORIENTATION IN PRACTICE**

Literature on business development up to the 1980's showed market forces and environmental interests as irreconcilable, and the views of the business community as placing environmentalism in the realms of being 'anti-business', 'anti-industrialization', and 'anti-civilization' (Menon and Menon, 1997). During the latter stages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, attitudes from business changed with growing recognition of the need to respond to the demands of customers. Jaworski and Kohli (1993) wrote that business development was now geared to respond to 'changing market place needs', that might be expected to include any customer expectation of demonstrable commitment to environmentalism. Studies from the 1990's (Forte and Lamont, 1998; Gifford Jr., 1997; Gillespie, 1992) showed that organizations that took proactive measures to implement environmental business practices produced higher levels of profitability and protected their stock value better than those that were reactive or inactive. Other work (Maxwell et al., 1997; Menon and Menon, 1997; Berry and Rondinelli, 1998) showed a move by major organizations towards placing emphasis on environmental orientation in development of strategy. However, whilst major organizations showed growing evidence of environmental orientation, Aragon-Correa (1998) wrote that, as most strategically proactive firms were inclined to employ both 'traditional corrective' and 'modern preventive' approaches to the natural environment, there was little evidence of, or support for development of proactive environmentalism in other organizations.

In order to examine the status of environmentalism in major UK organizations, we have searched publicly available documentation for evidence of environmental strategy. We have undertaken a review of publicly available, web-based documentation from the top 10 UK companies, by market capitalization ([www.FT.com/](http://www.FT.com/), 2000), and analyzed statements on environmental orientation within this in relation to the frameworks currently available in the academic literature. From this we draw conclusions on the degree of commonality, or difference, between the academic literature and corporate documentation.

## **3. CORPORATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC LITERATURE**

Whilst most managerial literature has now moved beyond the simplistic and naïve concept of ‘strategy’ as the “rendition of the CEO’s personal mission statement” (Hax, 1994, p.8), Aragon-Correa (1998) highlights that the role of the natural environment “has until recently received little attention in business literature. Organization theories concerning the need for firms to adapt to their contexts have consistently ignored the importance of the natural environment.” This, despite the wider view of strategy (Hax, 1994, p.11) as “the economic and *non-economic* contribution the firm intends to make to its *stakeholders*” (italics added). Stakeholders are not only those with direct financial and contractual links to the organization but include “communities, government, and others” (p.11). As Andrews (1994) states, strategic decision making is concerned not only with what an organization *might do, can do, or may want to do*. Here, “what a company *should do*...appears as a fourth element of the strategic decision” (p.43) (italics in original).

During the 1990’s, the academic literature included a number of works on environmentalism from a strategic perspective (eg: Maxwell et al, 1997, Hutchinson 1992, Aragon-Corea, 1998). At the same time, some of the managerial literature includes mention of environmental regulation and/or impact (eg: Minzberg and Quinn, 1996), or of product safety and environmental standards (Montgomery and Porter, 1991). Recent literature has been explicitly advocating the integration of environmental issues into business strategy and the strategic planning process (Hutchinson, 1992; Rugman and Verbeke, 1998; Aargon-Correa, 1998; Judge and Douglas, 1998). Hart (1997) states that “companies need to look beyond the greening effort ... to a more comprehensive strategy”, whilst Berry and Rondinelli (1998) suggest that progressive companies are already moving forward from simple compliance to proactive strategies and management of the environment. In the academic literature (Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995; Purser, Park, & Montuori, 1995; Shrivastava, 1994), however, it is highlighted that within the managerial literature on strategy, the term ‘environment’ appears generally to be taken to refer to the organization’s wider external operating environment (eg: De Wit and Meyer, 1994; Johnson and Scholes, 1999) rather than to the ‘natural’ environment.

In much of the literature that discusses environmentalism in relation to economics, we find a dichotomous, conflict-oriented approach to economic interest vs sustainability (e.g. Wheeler et al., 2000). Organizations are presented as viewing their environmental responsibilities as being “a balancing act between taking care of Mother Earth on the one hand and pleasing profit-hungry shareholders on the other” (Gifford, 1997: p.2). Porter and Van Der Linde (1995), however, propose an interesting and controversial approach to consideration of the environmental/economic paradigm. They propose that the environment vs. economic interest debate has been so far ‘framed’ incorrectly and that the alternative is a dynamic environment-economic paradigm based on innovation. They propose that environmental legislation, rather than constraining business, acts as a trigger for companies to realize their competitive advantage through innovation. This innovation not only results in superior products and processes but also reduces costs as operations become more efficient. They support the idea that this will be at no real cost to the companies.

However, Palmer et al (1995) think differently. They do not agree that companies systematically overlook opportunities, or that governmental action in legislating for environmental action will correct this 'failure'. Xepapadeas and Zeeuw (1999) support this view, stating that if opportunities do exist, companies do not need the 'incentive' of extra costs in order to recognize them. Further, Palmer et al (1995) express concern for the situation in which environmental regulation may cause some companies to fall into bankruptcy, indicating that the resulting 'innovation' is not a 'free meal' after all. In a situation where consumer pressure (Enviroics, 1999) and legislative frameworks are on the increase and companies are having to cope with these, the question is whether they take a proactive attitude or adopt strategies of revenue protection. The financial benefits of environmentally sound activities are propounded by some (Gifford, 1997) but the initial cost of achieving new environmental standards remains an area of debate (Porter and Van Der Linde, 1995; Palmer et al, 1995), and there is some concern at the resulting financial pressures facing smaller firms (Palmer et al, 1995).

Whilst there is evidence in much of the literature of a general agreement that environment should become core to businesses and that value lies in proactive strategies, there is still little evidence of widespread integration of environmental decisions and the business strategy process. In some of the literature there seems to be a consensus that environmentalism should be proactively pursued (eg: Aragon-Correa, 1998; Rugman and Verbeke, 1998; Judge and Douglas, 1998). Yet, some of the discussion (eg. Maxwell et al., 1997) of the need for corporate environmental strategies provides no explicit explanation as to how this contributes to the achievement of the overall strategic goals of the company. There seems to be a divide between 'business strategy' and 'environmental strategy', with the two existing within 'parallel systems' rather than within an integrated business model.

#### **4. METHOD**

This paper is based solely on desk-based study of academic and organizational literature. The organizational publications are drawn from publicly available annual reports of the top 10 companies in the UK, measured by market capitalization ([www.FT.com/](http://www.FT.com/), 2000) and was taken initially from organizational web sites. The company reports were accessed, along with any separately posted environmental reports and environmental policy statements. Where there was no evidence on the web site of either of the latter documents, inquiries were submitted by e-mail requesting information on any paper documents that might be available. From these documents, we sought to identify the extent to which environmental factors are embedded in the overall strategic framework of individual organizations, as espoused in these public domain reports. In addition, we sought to identify further detail of the organizations' commitment to, and implementation of environmental policies from any separately available environmental reports or policy documentation.

The search was conducted by reading the full text of all documents, rather than undertaking any electronic, keyword search that may have missed any environmental presentation not identified by the words selected. On this basis, the extent of environmental reference held to be present in the documents is based upon our own qualitative judgement of overall content, rather than upon objective search for predetermined words, phrases or subject headings.

Having examined the documentation firstly for extent of reference to environmentalism, we then addressed the following questions:-

- Is environmentalism presented as having economic impact upon the organization, whether positive, negative or neutral?
- Is the subject promoted in a proactive and voluntary basis, or is it seen as being reactive in response to external pressures of legislation, consumer pressure, etc?
- Is environmentalism presented as being in the long-term interest of the organization or society, or is there explicit or implied indication of a short-term, expedient approach?

Following study of the company documentation, the information, data and espoused intent from this was analyzed in comparison with the frameworks and models for environmental orientation contained in the academic literature.

At this stage in the research, we aim to identify the extent to which environmental factors are represented by organizations as being central to their strategic thinking and planning. The outcomes of this preliminary study are related to organizational image projection; the public manifestation of intent to action. Whilst actual implementation may not be in line with espoused intent, it is not our aim to deal with organizational action at this time.

## 5. ENVIRONMENTALISM IN CORPORATE LITERATURE

The initial findings on the extent of reference to environmental issues within the published information from the ten companies are summarized below (Fig. 1), according to a number of categories identified from within the documentation itself:-

Table 1: Summary of Company Environmental Characteristics from Organizational Web Sites Literature

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>No. of Co.'s</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Env. mention in annual report	7	
Discrete env. section in annual report	5	1 of which is a health, safety and environment (HSE) section
Specific reference to other env. documents in annual report	2	
Published env. report	6	2 within integrated HSE reports
Published env. policy statement	9	Only 2 are uniquely env.
ISO 14001 certification	3 + (3)	(3 currently in process) N.B. 1 additional intends to seek certification.

Env. mention in strategy statement	0	
Env. mention in value/objective/mission/principles statements	3	Another 4 mention general terms, corporate citizenship and responsibility.
Env. criterion in staff appraisal	1	Another 2 'recognize' env. achievement
Supplier/contractor env. compliance purchase requirements	3	
Support of external env. projects/debates/initiatives	6	1 supports 'community' projects, not specifically env. ones

From the above we start to identify possible trends and, by looking in greater detail at the content of the texts, seek to find additional evidence for and against environmentalism in action. Our starting point is to identify a lack of mention of environmental orientation in conjunction with business strategy across all of the companies in the sample. Further, only 3 espouse environmental orientation as part of their mission, principles or objectives, whilst another four hold corporate citizenship and responsibility among them.

Looking at the documentation in more detail, it can be seen that 7 of the companies have publicized that they have undertaken the initiative of ISO 14001 certification (no evidence was found for the remaining 3; HSBC, Lloyds TSB and Vodaphone). Achievement of this certification may be taken to indicate a certain level of commitment from the companies and their top management, as this certification is time consuming, costly, and inherently requires top management involvement and commitment. It can, however, be considered to be good for the company image.

In keeping with the ISO 14001 guidelines, we find that the majority of companies have published policy statements, although only two; BT and Vodaphone AirTouch; are specifically and uniquely environmental. The different levels of commitment and focus of the organizations manifest themselves in the structure and content of these statements. At one extreme we find the example of BT which has detailed environmental policy statements, clearly outlining their guiding principles and their commitment to the activities that will achieve these. At the other extreme we find Marconi, with a policy statement that is not published on their website but which was supplied in response to a request by email. This statement incorporates energy, and health and safety issues with the environment in three key objectives. These are fairly general in their wording and present little detail on how these objectives are going to be achieved. In between these two extremes, the remaining companies have a range of mainly integrated safety and environment (HSE) policy statements that vary in environmental content and focus.

9 of the companies publish discreet environmental policy statements, whilst 6 of them produce a separate report where environmental performance is described (no evidence of such reports was found for Vodaphone AirTouch, Marconi, HSBC and Lloyds TSB). However, only 7 mention environmental issues in their main annual report, usually in their chairman or CEO address, and of these, only 5 dedicate a section to report on their environmental activities in the main annual report.

In order to surface some of the anomalies between espoused intent and action, we examine the documents from one company, Glaxo Wellcome, in more detail. We find that it is in the process of achieving ISO 14001 certification, has an HSE policy statement, and publishes an HSE report. A message from the Chairman and the Chief Executive in the HSE report identifies the environment as a 'key business risk area' where the company seek to 'deliver continuous improvement' as this 'brings business benefits' ([www.glaxowellcome.co.uk/](http://www.glaxowellcome.co.uk/), 2000). Yet, Glaxo Wellcome does not mention the environment in its business strategy or in its mission/values/principles and we found no evidence of the application of environmental purchasing criteria. There is mention of 'corporate responsibility' as one of the company values within the annual report whilst, in the HSE report, a statement exists that points to the environment being 'an important component of corporate responsibility' ([www.glaxowellcome.co.uk/](http://www.glaxowellcome.co.uk/), 2000). To those reading the annual report without reference to the separate HSE report, however, the espoused commitment to environmentalism is not obvious. There is little if any mention of the environment in the main company report. Here, the Chairman and CEO bring no environmental issues into their message.

We now consider the example of SmithKline Beecham, as example of the companies that display limited evidence of environmental orientation. In a statement by the CEO in the 1999 Environment and Safety report, it is stated that systems have been installed to 'ensure environment and safety considerations are woven into the very fabric of our business' ([www.sb.com/](http://www.sb.com/), 2000). Looking at the annual report, however, we find that the CEO lists 3 strategic goals, all of which are profit focused, dealing with sales volumes, costs and revenues. Further, there is no mention of the environment in any part of the CEO's report, not even under the performance summary or the review summary. Glaxowellcome and Lloyds TSB display similar behavior ([www.glaxowellcome.co.uk/](http://www.glaxowellcome.co.uk/), 2000; [www.lloydstsbgroup.com/](http://www.lloydstsbgroup.com/), 2000), where their respective CEO's omit any mention the environment in their annual report statements, although both list social responsibility - although not environment specifically - among their guiding principles.

Looking at appraisal issues, only one company (Shell UK) appears to have incorporated environmental issues as part of its staff performance evaluation. Another two 'recognized' environmental achievement of their people through 'awards', but apparently not as part of their performance review. For Glaxo Wellcome. whereas their HSE report states that 'all employees should be encouraged to participate actively in, and accept individual responsibility for [HSE]' ([www.glaxowellcome.co.uk/](http://www.glaxowellcome.co.uk/), 2000), we find no evidence that they use environmental, or HSE, criteria in their performance evaluation of employees.

Finally, it is interesting to note that more than half the companies have undertaken environmental initiatives that are outside their core businesses. For example, Vodaphone Airtouch will be planting 25,000 trees to 'help recreate former woodland areas' ([www.vodaphone.com/](http://www.vodaphone.com/), 2000), HSBC supports 'environmental projects in different parts of the world' (<http://www.hsbc.com/>, 2000), and BT launched the



European Charter of Environmental Commitment for European Telecommunications Operators.

## 6. CORPORATE PRACTICE REVIEWED

Consumer research by Environics International has highlighted that consumers around the world are more and more considering “environmental responsibility as central to the purpose of businesses” (Wheeler; 2000: p.291). It is apparent from consideration of the public documentation that the top 10 UK companies are responding to this new customer orientation. These companies have, however, chosen to respond in different ways and to different degrees.

The responses range from the proactive to the reactive, but these responses are generally set within an exclusively environmental framework, and not within a wider framework of the companies’ core business and other areas of interest. It seems that many environmental initiatives are being undertaken and the environment is gaining increasing focus, but frequently in a way that is not indicative of integration into core business activities. For example, Vodafone Airtouch describe their environmental activities in terms of pollution and waste control, and the environmental performance of one of their buildings, but do not bring consideration of mobile telephony technology into their consideration of environmental factors. Rather, there is some presentation of the company’s interpretation of current research under separate heading of ‘health’ ([www.vodafone.com/](http://www.vodafone.com/), 2000). Similarly, BT, Astra-Zeneca, and Glaxo Wellcome describe their environmental efforts but none of their business strategies reflect this. The environment is not mentioned in their strategy, vision, policy, or value statements.

The apparent existence of two parallel systems supports the idea that there seems to be little, if any integration between environmental and business strategies. There is little evidence at this time of any move towards reduction or elimination of the tension between economic and environmental interests through innovation in line with Porter and Van Der Linde’s (1995) concept. BT’s documents illustrate the tension that may be seen to exist, in that they promote their environmentalism stating that “(they) wish to minimize the potentially harmful effects of such activity (day-to-day operations) *wherever and whenever possible* (italics added)” ([www.BT.com/](http://www.BT.com/), 2000). The tone of such statements indicates that there is a trade-off between financial interest, operational efficiency and environmental factors.

The majority of publications provided by the companies are written with an espoused proactive stance on environmental performance and attitude. Yet, there is an unmistakable ‘PR approach’ in many of the documents. Initial entry to SmithKline Beecham’s web site ([www.sb.com/](http://www.sb.com/), 2000) shows ‘environment and safety’ to the fore in the contents. The annual report pages, and the material on organizational performance does not, however, pick up on this theme, which is dealt with in parallel, seeming isolation. Within the BP Amoco documents ([www.BPAmoco.com](http://www.BPAmoco.com)), there is

a statement to the effect that the company “has a simply stated goal – to do *no damage* (italics added) to the environment”. How can this possibly be achievable when major parts of the business are based upon extraction and refining processes? BT take another PR-oriented course ([www.BT.com/](http://www.BT.com/), 2000), in detailing what *others* should do to become more environmentally friendly, whilst not detailing the extent to which the organization itself, and its employees follow such principles. Finally, Marconi documents are written from a ‘proactive’ prospective, yet they are discussing future intent in relation to issues that other companies have dealt with for the last decade. They appear to be still at the stage of being about to appoint a board member responsible for the environment, still going to implement an environmental management system, etc. Their policy statement details what they are *going* to do, yet is written in a way that indicates that these are very progressive initiatives.

Finally, it is interesting to note the language that the publicly available statements utilize. The companies talk a lot about their ‘commitment’, their ‘responsibility’ towards the environment and how it forms part of their ‘values’ and their ‘policies’. However, we have found little or no evidence that the environment does feature in the core values and business policies or organizations and, in addition, that the use of language in the environmental (or HSE) policy statements presents vague, or limited degrees of commitment to performance. There is use of terminology that limits action to preventative measures, as in “prevention of any adverse impact to the environment” ([www.sb.com/](http://www.sb.com/), 2000), that uses ‘get-out clauses’, as in “to minimise the potentially harmful effects of such activity wherever and whenever possible” ([www.BT.com/](http://www.BT.com/), 2000), or that indicates only the most general of intentions, as in to “take account of health, safety, environmental and loss prevention considerations” ([www.glaxowellcome.co.uk/](http://www.glaxowellcome.co.uk/), 2000).

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

In reviewing the published reports of the top 10 UK companies, we find that there is evidence of widespread interest in environmental matters across the organizations. This may be seen to be in response to societal pressures, as in the statement of Shell UK’s Chairman, Malcolm Brinded ([www.shell.co.uk/](http://www.shell.co.uk/), 2000), who states that “successful companies of the future will be those that adapt quickly to society’s changing expectations”. It may be seen as ‘compulsory’, as in the statement of BT Chairman, Sir Iain Valance ([www.BT.com/](http://www.BT.com/), 2000), that “the pursuit of sustainable development is not an option - it is nothing more or less than a necessity for our social and economic survival”. However, our desk analysis of corporate literature shows little visible sign of an integrated and dynamic environment-economic paradigm as suggested by Porter and Van Der Linde (1995).

The general separation of discussion of environmental factors from that of other fields, particularly economic factors, indicates that the surface manifestation of environmental interest may be underpinned by an organizational ‘balancing act’ of the dichotomous economic-environment drivers. Whilst this may not be as extreme as in

Gifford's (1997) model of conflict between societal interests and those of 'pleasing profit-hungry shareholders', at least in the public presentation, there is evidence that the conflict is unresolved. It must be considered that, where the organizational strategy statements lack any reference to environmental factors, and where business objectives relate firstly to core business and financial performance before any mention of environmental and societal factors, any conflict is likely to be resolved in favor of the 'traditional' priorities.

In relation to the 3 research questions set out in the method, we find that the environment/economic impact relationship appears to be neutral, in that the parallel systems are by and large detached from each other in the corporate literature. Yet there have been statements by HSBC, SmithKline Beecham and Shell to the effect that "economic growth and a healthy environment are linked" ([www.hsbc.com/](http://www.hsbc.com/), 2000) but little proof was presented in support of this. Whilst we see evidence of both proactive and reactive promotion of environmentalism, the proactive approach largely lacks quantifiable targets and is set out in general terms, whereas the reactive approach addresses specific legislation and standards for conformance. Finally, as to whether environmentalism has a long- or short-term orientation, we feel that the espoused long-termism in some documents is more about image protection than environment protection, and that it requires long-term study to see if it goes beyond mere short-term expediency in response to perceived public concern.

This paper has been based upon subjective judgement of espoused organizational intent, as expressed in the corporate literature presented through one medium; the World Wide Web. The findings and discussion are based upon our subjective analysis of this, without reference to any further sources at this time. Study of organizational action and implementation, over time, is an area that is worthy of continuing investigation.

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