

Transcript of 'Who'd Be A Sustainability Manager?'

Season 2, Episode 7, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business here at Lancaster University Management School.

I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: In a previous life, Jan, did you ever think about becoming a sustainability officer?

Jan: Well, I have, I think about it from time to time in, in this life as well. Because it kind of feels like closer to the action. It feels like instead of writing papers about it, which somebody might read, or as I, you know, a student or as a professional and who then some years later might remember something of it, and might make, yeah, so, so you see how long this chain is. Uh, and so the thought of, um, sort of rolling up your sleeves and being involved and knowing a business really well, I think it's quite an exciting prospect.

Paul: It's, it's funny you said that, 'cause I've always thought that about academics, nothing you do ever matters. [Jan laughs] And you, you, you've just come out and said it as an academic, so it's fine, it's great.

I, I don't mean that. I'll get fired. I've spoken previously about worries of you getting fired, that's definitely gonna get me in trouble. But yeah, sustainability officers, sustainability managers. It seems to be a role that's expanding, a role that's going more and more common.

Jan: And also a role on which there's a lot more demands as well. So I think we ought to find out more about these sustainability manager roles.

Paul: Oh, if there's more work involved, I don't want to be one. That's fine. I'm, I'm crossing it off my own list of potential future careers when I am dismissed from my current position.

Yes, let's speak to someone who knows far more about sustainability managers than we do. Let's welcome Dr Katherine Ellsworth-Krebs, who I'm told you refer to fondly as KEK?

Jan: Yeah, well we met at a time when there were lots of Katherines and so, so instead of having to say Katherine Ellsworth-Krebs all the time, we just, it got changed to KEK.

And um, she tells me that on our, um, 'cause we've known each other before, which might say something about, um, most recently when we reunited at Lancaster and I called her KEK, she felt it was wonderful, and sort of a blast from the past.

Paul: Pure laziness, that's what it is, pure laziness. [Jan laughs] You decided you just couldn't say the full name and you've just gone for something so short.

Well, Katherine is a Strathclyde Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Strathclyde. And she's done lots of work on sustainability officers and managers. But also, I'd like to say this point, she did do some work with Carolynne Lord, who we spoke to not that long ago, um, about things such as sustainability fairytales. She was involved in that. A very wide range of work, it sounds like she does a lot.

Jan: Does indeed. And, and Katherine was a, um, a member of the Pentland Centre when she worked at Lancaster, so she's now one of our visiting members.

Paul: Katherine, welcome.

Katherine: Thanks so much for having me. And for what, what a wonderful introduction.

Paul: I, I will call you Katherine for this episode. Just...

Jan: ...I will as well...

Paul: You're on your, you're on your best behaviour

Jan: Yes.

Paul: To start us off, can you just give us a little bit of an idea about your career and how it all shapes around sustainability?

Katherine: Yeah. So, I feel like I've always been a bit obsessed with the question of like how to live a sustainable lifestyle. So you might be able to tell

from my accent, I'm not from Britain, I'm from Washington State, which is known as the Evergreen State.

And I think everyone there, or I thought everyone there, as a kid, I don't think it's true now, was just really into sustainability and the outdoors. And so that's what I always wanted to do growing up.

And I see the contradiction now, but I decided to go all the way to Scotland to study sustainable development and find out how to live sustainably. So that was back in 2008, an exciting year in the UK with the Climate Change Act coming in, and the UK government said they were gonna commit to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050, compared to 1990 levels.

So it was an exciting time to come over and I actually met Jan then, 'cause she taught on that degree programme at the time.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: Because where else would someone from Washington State and someone from New Zealand meet than in the mostly environs of Scotland?

Jan: Well actually you'd be, University of St Andrews is like that, it's a pretty international place.

Paul: I think most universities are when it comes to...

Jan: ...yeah, that's true...

Paul: ...members of research staff. There's people from here, there, and everywhere, so yeah...

Jan: ...yeah....

Paul: ...it's just how it works.

Jan: So, so one of the pleasures of, of having, uh, Katherine on the, on the podcast is how long we've known each other for one form or another. And indeed, I had the pleasure of being her, one of her examiners for her PhD.

So somebody's whose work I've known, um, as you know, when she was an undergraduate, when she was, you know, graduating with a PhD, but also I followed her work over time as well as she's headed out into the world of research.

Katherine: Yeah, so if I were to describe my career in a broad sense, if I can start by talking about it in my undergrad. At that time I was really obsessed with sustainable food. I think a lot of people start on sustainability in relation to food 'cause it's something so immediate to you.

And so I thought a lot about where does it come from? You know, is seasonal better than you know, things that are transported far? I was really interested in growing food and my involvement at that time was actually part of setting up a Transition Town initiative in, in the town of St Andrews. And Jan again actually was, it was very helpful with connecting us with that grant application and some of the success there.

And I think at that point in my career, if I can call it that as an undergrad, I was focused a lot on carbon footprinting and trying to understand what has the biggest impact. And so, being strategic about where should I, you know, focus my career and think about the best way to kind of intervene in sustainability.

And again, now I have a similar cynical point on what carbon footprinting is and where it's come from. There's a lot where, uh, kind of like recycling was pushed by Coca-Cola and Pepsi and other major beverage producers. We know that carbon footprint, that term, comes from petroleum or British Petroleum. Um, so you can be a bit cynical about, you know, how much that focuses you onto the individual and what they can do.

That was the first kind of motivation. I was really interested in carbon footprinting. And then in my PhD I kind of, I'd lost some interest in that, again, kinda going back to the flying example. Realising that you can care a lot about the environment, you can be really informed and you can still make choices that have a pretty big environmental impact.

So my PhD topic started by focusing on trying to find a really specific example of the techno-fix critique, which is really common in sustainability. Again, Jan would've probably taught us that a lot in terms of strong and weak sustainability. Don't know if we need to go there.

But, yeah, so the techno-fix that I became interested in, or what the techno-fix critique is, is it's this idea that, you know, we don't really need to change how societies are kind of structured. We don't need to change our everyday lives because we're gonna, you know, invent renewable energy or we're gonna come up with different technological solutions that will just sort of decarbonise

and deal with the problem. And that's really generally critiqued by anyone who works in this space.

But I wanted a really solid understanding of that. So my PhD was looking at energy use in homes and people who lived with low energy, or low carbon technologies. So solar thermal panels, and uh, someone even had a wind turbine, uh, heat pumps, that sort of thing.

And it was a question of whether they actually end up using less energy. And in a kind of short way, or an oversimplification, 'cause this isn't what we're here to talk about, I would say it kind of doesn't because there's so many other factors that go into why and how people use energy.

There's bigger demographic shifts, like we have smaller household sizes, so the amount of different appliances every individual needs. There's just so many factors outside of individuals' control as well, around how houses are developed, what they're built with.

So again, thinking about exciting regulations that were happening in the UK at the time, we had the Code for Sustainable Homes that was meant to come into force in 2016 that made all new homes zero carbon. And so that actually got scrapped and that's quite frustrating, but you can see how a policy like that, so looking actually at how governments can intervene, can, um, really mainstream and make everyday life more sustainable. And that has nothing to do with whether you decide to put some solar panels on your roof, for instance.

So that was a second phase of my research, I suppose. So the first one was like focusing on individuals, and then getting a bit bored with that, or cynical. And then the other one was focusing on government and what role they might end up needing to play because it's outside of individual control. But again, I've seen a lot of rollback on policies and I think I felt a bit disheartened by that.

And so my third phase, and I've skip, I'm gonna skip a phase, which relates to Carolynne Lord, who you're talking about. I, I've spent some time working on storytelling and how do we actually communicate about these issues? So I've taken creative writing classes, which has been really fun. And the paper with Carolynne was looking at how we use fairytale characters to communicate about sustainability issues and kind of bring some complexity in there.

But my third phase, what I would say is now is looking at organisations. So Transition has a, a phrase that really inspired me, the Transition Town movement, I said I set up in St. Andrews. And they say that what we're convinced of is if we wait for governments, it's too little too late. If we act as individuals, it'll be too little. But if we act as communities, it might just be enough just in time.

And I think that's really stuck with me. And so that's why I'm looking at what communities I can work with. And I think corporate social responsibility and sustainability managers are really key actors in that space.

Paul: Before we move on, Jan, I want to say there's a lot of cynicism there.

[Katherine laughs]

Jan: Yeah...

Paul: ...cynical about people, cynical about governments, cynical about organisations. I think if there's anything in the world that Katherine *isn't* cynical about, I don't think it was included in that particular discussion...

Jan: ...mmm, well I know...

Paul: ...one more thing...

Jan: ...yeah, mmm...?

Paul: ...I've not seen anyone as obsessed with regulation and excited by regulation and, uh, legislation since I met you.

Jan: Yeah. [laughs] Well, perhaps, uh, but also I think what's really helpful about um, well partly 'cause it warms your heart with someone else being cynical, but, but there's sort of like you know, you, all these three elements might act together, but none of them can go alone.

And I think that's, that's probably the real, you know, crux of it. But one thing I know, uh, Katherine isn't cynical about and that's growing stuff. [Paul laughs] 'Cause she arrived, dear listeners, at the start of this podcast with a nice big bag for both, one for Paul and one for me of, uh, excess cooking apples and excess onions.

So I am going to have onions tonight for tea. Not only onions, more things, but definitely going use those onions.

Paul: I have further to travel than you when it comes, so I won't have them in time tea tonight, but I also thought there were normal apples in there. 'Cause I was told that the cooking apples were the larger ones, but are there not normal apples in there as well?

Katherine: Yes, there's Cox apples as well.

Paul: See, I dunno and I describe them as normal as if, you know, cooking apples are abnormal, which in many ways they are. Uh, but yeah, there's, there's lots of food.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: Yes. So yeah, guests who bring food will always get positive reviews from us.

Jan: I, I think that's, uh, that's something that ought to catch on.

Paul: Future guests if you are listening, guests that bring food will always get positive reviews from us.

Jan: Excellent. But in some ways, that also brings you right round to the start of it that, you know, people, people eat, a lot of us grow food, uh, whether we had a, a really super episode in the last series that looked at soil and, and whatnot. So it's all, it's all coming together.

Paul: It is, everything ties together on this podcast in the end, whether we want it to or not, or whether we mean it to or not. Yeah. It's, it's a happy accident sometimes.

I want to talk though about sustainability managers. So, yeah, your researching experiences of sustainability managers, why?

Katherine: So a few reasons. Kind of like Jan was saying, it's, would be an exciting career path in some ways, 'cause you see these people have a real impact on society. So, uh, or on an organisation which translates into a societal level.

So I've kind of stolen a term from Jan who doesn't know this, 'cause we haven't talked about it, but I really liked your term keystone actors. So keystone actors, Jan talks about in the SeaBOS context and, um, within like fishing. [laughs]

She's like...

Paul: ...don't! Do not encourage her...

Katherine: ...she's like smiling and wriggling her over there...

Paul: ...she does not need the encouragement.

Jan: I was just doing a wee happy dance and nobody appreciated it. [laughs]

Katherine: I appreciate it. [laughs]

Paul: The audience doesn't have an option to appreciate a happy dance on a podcast that doesn't come with a video. Just so you're clear.

Jan: Anyway. Don't, don't distract the girl. She's talking sense.

Katherine: So in the context of that, Jan defined keystone actors as an organisation or group of organisations that have a significant impact on an ecological or social system.

And the premise is that if a keystone actor adopts a stewardship perspective, they might create response to sustainable issues that face society and industry. And I just really liked that term. I overheard it somehow in your, in your, uh, company and wanted to apply it actually to organisations.

I think that sustainability managers are keystone actors in an organisation. They're one person who has a big responsibility to mainstream, again, sustainability policies and have them put into place within an organisation.

So that's one side of it. And then coming back to my cynicism, I think that too often research and just people who are concerned about their social or environmental impact, get focused on what they can do in their own homes. And I'm not trying to say that that's not important, but I think that can lead to a lot of eco-anxiety, we're seeing that.

So if you kind of let go of that, then I think that's where often you end up looking at government and it's like, actually there's all these people in the middle who implement and create change. And I think that sustainability managers are really key group to try to support and enable to transform our society.

Jan: And is this a new group of people? Have they existed forever, or are they a relatively, you know, recent invention?

Katherine: So the term Chief Sustainability Officer is one of the fastest growing jobs in the UK right now, according to LinkedIn. So it's definitely an area that is,

is growing. And I know you've talked about the EU regulations that are coming in that are a big push in that.

So the Corporate Social Responsibility Directive makes a requirement of certain organisations to, so Corporate Social Responsibility Directive that's coming into force is a big driver of these jobs growing, but they have been around for quite a while.

So actually when I knew Jan back in 2000s at the University of St Andrews, you know, we worked with, uh, the environment and the energy manager at the University of St Andrews. So the, there kind of came under that title often, energy manager was often kind of the same thing that sustainability managers are doing now.

But it's definitely grown in the last five years. And if you look at the academic literature, I would say it's actually only about in the last 15 years that we've seen quite a bit of work on sustainability managers.

Paul: Do they tend to be concentrated in certain industries, certain types of businesses?

Katherine: Yes and no. So the work I have done, um, you know, leads to certain sampling, I suppose. So work I've done with sustainability managers includes people from education. I already mentioned working with sustainable professionals in, at universities.

Uh, we've had quite a bit from a food industry actually, again, that's another big one with farming. Um, but you can have someone in a bank, in a medical profession.

All sorts of companies are having to think about sustainability now, manufacturing, construction, building. Uh, so it is a common role.

Jan: And it's quite a specialist role. So are there like associations of sustainability managers out there that train and accredit and support people doing that job?

Paul: You didn't say benchmarking there. You said accreditation, but you didn't say benchmarking. I really thought that's where you were going...

Jan: ...aaah...

Paul: ...these people were ranked in a table...

Jan: ...no, no, no. Trained and accredited. So you, you're safe.

Paul: I'll let you off.

Jan: You're safe.

Katherine: Yes. There are more and more, which is part of the professionalisation process, which says something about how common it is now.

So, uh, one of the main groups that I work with is the Institute for Environmental Management and Assessment, IEMA. They actually represent 20,000 sustainability professionals, so that's bigger than sustainability managers. It's a little different. Uh, so that's anyone working on an environment and sustainability, it's very broad.

But you also have the International Society of Sustainability Professionals, the ISSP, and I think there's a Royal Chartered group as well. The Society for Environment got a Royal Charter status in 2004, as well.

Jan: And indeed, um, thinking back to the last season as well, Georgiana Allison from our own, uh, Lancaster University is a sustainability professional in this way.

Paul: And we talked to her about the growth in people just across the university who engage with her...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...and the amount of people there. And even if they've not got the job title of Chief Sustainability Officer, how there are people there who have more sustainability aspects to their roles.

Jan: And that kind of leads us really naturally on to the next question that we have for you. What kind of jobs do sustainability managers do?

And I know that you've been surveying and working with some, so, and I'm sure their work varies considerably, but what, what things are they involved with inside organisations?

Katherine: So a lot of what they do, and I think you made a joke about it at the beginning, is that their jobs are growing and a lot of it's reporting.

So a lot of it is collecting data and filling in particular forms, showing that they're meeting certain regulations, which is sort of good because actually I

think often, again, these changes in regulations give them, uh, more credentials to back up why they should, why the organisation should be making changes. So it's kind of coming in as that stick, but also that just often is putting more and more paperwork on them and they don't have as much time maybe to be as innovative or as engaged with other people who work within the organisation.

So a big part of it is reporting. Connected with that again, is the CSRD coming in from the EU where they're having to actually calculate and report on their scope one, two, and three emissions.

And for listeners who don't know, scope one emissions is kind of direct energy consumption. So it's heating onsite or the fuel that's burned in a car fleet, or if you're working in the medical space, which some of the people we worked with are, fugitive emissions, so like anaesthetic gases also is included in scope one, which I hadn't really known 'cause it hadn't come up before.

Scope two is indirect. So that's your electricity that's produced offsite, but it's still carbon emissions that like here at the University, to keep the lights on and all these different appliances running, uh, they're still responsible for those emissions.

And then scope three is everything else. And it's one of those areas that's not generally been accounted for before, because it's very difficult to account for the impact, again, of all of these appliances. Uh, that also includes business, travel, commuting, uh, waste disposal. What products are sold and what happens to them. Investments. It's a huge category, and that's a real minefield right now for them to try to calculate.

Jan: And I'd just like to come back to your sort of reporting driven thing 'cause this, this is something that, um, drives me quite crazy as a, an accountant as well.

And I mean, I research reporting, but, but when I sometimes speak to organisations, they're sort of like focused on the reporting, not on the action. And I guess ...

Paul: ...whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. [Jan laughs] Now hang on a minute...

Jan: [clears throat] ...I'm not finished...

Paul: ...no, no, no, no, no. When we had this exact discussion about, um, benchmarking in the past I made this exact point, and I'm pretty sure I was shot down and, uh, told...

Jan: ...no...

Paul: ...no, don't think about it like that. But now you're making the exact point for me.

Jan: Not quite. Um, uh, just give me a wee bit more space and we'll probably agree.

Paul: You keep digging. You keep digging, yeah.

Jan: [laughs] So, so if for, if people are feeling stressed the reporting is the, and because a lot of it's legally required, that's all they do, in which case that you do, you don't have the time to do the other things.

But when we thought about reporting in a regulatory sense, I think everyone thought it would be a natural outcome of activities that are already going on. And because there's, you know, some resource constraints for sustainability managers and, arguably, too many reporting demands, that what you end up with is the reporting becomes the end in itself.

When in the ideal world, and I think in the mind of the policy makers and the, and the legal folk, is that they saw that all, everything will be going on and they're just asking for the final bit. But that, if there's nothing going on, the final bit becomes quite hard. And so hence there's sort of this desire to use reporting to push action back into the organisation.

But if the person who's supposed to be doing all that is the only person who's doing it, then it really sort of crashes and crunches. And there's been quite a bit of stuff on LinkedIn and, and your other, other platforms of that sort, that's sort of saying, you know, there's too much work in a sustainability manager's life.

And then you ask, you know, you may be quite a large organisation, how many sustainability staff members do you have? And they go one and a half [laughs] and that, and so I think there's a resourcing issue there as well that might come to the fore.

So have I, have I got myself off my, off the hook I was wiggling on according to you?

Paul: No, I'm not having it. You're still essentially saying that sustainability people spend far too much time doing nothing but meeting regulation rankings requirements, and not necessarily anything else.

Jan: Ah. Yeah or...

Paul: ...that's, that's what I took from what you said.

Jan: Well, not necessarily the rankings, but the production of the information.

Paul: Yeah, reporting. So I, I, I should have said reporting. I said rankings because that's just stuck in my head forever, but yeah. Yeah, I just...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...just doesn't seem like a good setup. It seems like you need more people. I'm sure you'd agree. You'd love to see lots more. I'd love to see lots more. So would Jan.

Jan: Yeah. So is, does that sort of storyline that I'm hearing from the outside, are you hearing that in the lived experience of the people that you are speaking with?

Katherine: Yes, yes and no.

So I guess that's what you always get when you interview is uh, you get a spectrum. So some people said exactly what you did, where they're understaffed and it's one of them representing quite a significant nationally based institution. And they do spend a lot of their time reporting, but I think there was something there about resilience as well.

So you know, people might see themselves as like at the start of a journey with that company and they know that that's the groundwork they have to lay and eventually they might get to grow a team.

There was some groups we spoke to who, you know, often, and this is reflected in the academic literature, that if the CEO or the C-suite is very passionate about it, then they will have more of those resources. And we did speak to some organisations that were doing really amazing stuff and it felt like they weren't stressed, because they had that resourcing.

And then we had the participants who, you know, had the team slashed and you saw the, the burden that put on them individually and on their, their health uh, and wellbeing. So yeah, it's, I guess it's always a mixture, isn't it?

So the other things that they do beyond reporting is of course, trying to expand what sustainability might mean within the organisation and using that data to look at what might be the biggest opportunities.

So again, in the past when it was more of an energy manager, and still today, you often see people working on efficiency improvements or making sure that a building is built to, like, the best standards, again, for environmental design and energy consumption. Or getting renewable energy installed, or getting renewable, or sorry, getting electric car fleets.

So there's a lot that they might be doing that isn't just reporting. And then that comes back as well to taking the time to be able to, you know, sit on a C-suite and make the case for why we should be investing in that way.

And also, again, working with all the different people within the organisation. You, you said the sustainability manager here came on, and they were talking about all the different people, 'cause it's, well, it might be just them doing that job with that responsibility, they also can't do it all. And so a lot of their job is kind of cheerleading and trying to get other people convinced about the importance of taking these different initiatives.

And then I think the final major area is actually around marketing. And sometimes that would be to try to help improve a campaign and market around sustainability. And sometimes it would be to reign in and say, well, I don't know if we can say that, that might be greenwashing.

So the main thing I was working on in the past year was with, uh, Heather Lynch, who was a sustainability manager, I can say this, at Oddbox. Um, and she, she did leave, um, she was someone who, yeah found the job really, really difficult and wanted to look at how do we support sustainability managers more, uh, to thrive and not go through some of the struggles that she did.

And also with Shona Russell, who's, uh, at the University of St Andrews, and I'm lucky through, uh, Jan to have met her. [laughs] Um, so we did work over the last year and we interviewed 28 sustainability professionals. And we were focused on, sort of, what are the main challenges you face, what other support and training might you need?

And what we found from hearing those, actually biographical kind of career trajectory interviews, so it wasn't just about the job they were in now, it was about their whole career in this sector, was just that technical training on

sustainability is not enough to equip sustainability professionals to create change in organisation, and they need more support for developing skills and personal resilience and conflict negotiation.

And so this was quite interesting and I think that comes back to other themes I've heard on your podcast again about kind of evaluation. That they, I think this isn't a surprising finding that soft skills are really, really important and that communication component is really essential. But often most of the training and most of the job adverts are about technical skills, and qualifications.

And so yeah, this just stood out in terms of the amount of eco-anxiety that might be in this space for people. So, you know, if you were someone who hadn't known loads and loads about the climate crisis and the future we're headed towards and you have to do a carbon literacy course, that can be really confronting and really upsetting.

And then if you're someone who is really, really, really informed about, you know, climate refugees and potential collapse of our agricultural system, and you're pushing for something that your board, and it keeps getting knocked back again, that can be really disheartening.

So one of the key skills that people talked about is just having, this is a quote, "endless patience and not taking it too seriously". Because if you get too invested, if you think about what's really at stake, about your children when they're 30 years old and how awful it might be, you start to get upset and it doesn't help.

So we had a lot of people talking about how they dealt with that personal resilience, to eco-anxiety, how they process that, and I think it's a similar journey to what I described around kind of not putting so much pressure on just you as an individual, but not giving up and thinking it's someone else's responsibility. Finding somewhere in the middle like, oh, I can influence my organisation. Just being in my job has a big enough impact.

And then the other component of that was just that persuasion. So having, again, the ability to, so this is another quote someone said, "Being in a room with the established opinion that climate change is all lies. To have the confidence to be that voice for nature, knowing you're going to get a hostile response is a whole other level that I didn't think I could personally do."

And that was someone who was only in their first year in in these jobs. But you could kind of hear that transition, by like maybe about five years people might start to build that confidence to be that leader and have to keep being that voice. I think there's a tiredness that comes with always having to be the one who says, but what about climate change? What about aquifers being depleted? What about these other considerations that aren't just about the, the bottom line?

Paul: Do you find that the people who do this are optimistic? Do you find that they are pessimistic? Do you find that the longer they've done it, the more optimistic or pessimistic they get?

Katherine: Again, I think it depends. I think that's what, what you're always gonna hear. So some people I spoke to really got burnt out along the way, and that might be though because, maybe they had again, a really good CEO and everything was going well and you know, they felt great and then the CEO changed and they, like any of their projects just stopped, stopped going forward.

And when I say like things were going forward, generally people said they expected like a 10-30% success rate. Like they expect a lot of dead ends. They, these were people if they had stayed in the industry, were used to a lot of failure and learning from that and continuing.

So I think some people were at lows when we interviewed them, some people were really burnt out. But a lot of people were really, really hopeful and really passionate and really resilient and they were like, I can't see a better place for me to be right now. And, and that was really fun to be around.

Paul: Having spoken to all of these sustainability managers, I want to go back to a question I asked Jan right at the very start, but in another life imagining, you know, you took a different career path, would you have liked to have been a sustainability manager?

Katherine: Um. Yeah I think, like Jan said, I think even in this life, I still think about it at times 'cause it just feels like you'd have such a big impact. The reason I'm not right now is because there is something nice about being an academic and being able to sort of not be, uh, dependent on what the organisation wants.

So sometimes being able to step back and, you know, hopefully represent what people say in the best way, but also be a bit more independent. So I like the independence of an academic. I don't know. Uh, but I think on any given day, if you ask me this, I might say something different.

Jan: But it also strikes me that, um, and I, maybe I'm having PTSD, but sort of like that, that sort of eco-anxiety and actually if, if you do know as much as we might know, and many people who are listening to our podcast will know a great deal more about the shape and likely future nature of the world, if you think about that really seriously, you can absolutely, you know, stall yourself and be, you know, really go quite low about all of that, both first personally and professionally.

That level of, um, emotional investment and all of those sorts of things, even if you think, even if you've got techniques of saying, right, well, I'll work myself up to a positive space and then I can go on. Even that's exhausting some days, having to find the silver lining.

And I, I once was involved in a policy job and I, I sort of was trying to explain it to somebody, is that you think you've got a crack in the wall and you, yeah, you, you fight your way through the crack and then you find it's all closed and you can't spend the time banging your head against it, you go, right, let's look for another bit of the wall where there might be a crack.

And that's actually, that's a, that's a personal characteristic that, um, you know, is hard to foster. And yeah, quite sorry, I'm now sounding quite sad.

[sad voice] You'll have to be nice to me after this, Paul.

Paul: [joking] That seems unlikely. [laughs] Uh, yeah, I, I know what you're saying. Yeah, it can be...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...it can be quite overwhelming. And yeah, just thinking about the future, and generations to come and everything, and you know, wondering if action is actually going to be taken.

And this is why sometimes on the this, um, this podcast, we end up being quite cynical.

Jan: Mm-hmm.

Paul: And pessimistic.

Jan: Well that cynicism...

Paul: ...thank you Katherine, we were having a nice day and now...

[Jan laughs]

Katherine: ...I was thinking I was in good company! [laughs]

Jan: But also I think cynicism is actually a substitute for feeling despair as well. So in that respect, you know, you sometimes have to sort of, you know, embrace what it is that you're feeling rather than just sort of go, oh, it's all pointless anyway. 'Cause yeah, then next morning up and at it again perhaps.

Well, after that conversation, I think I better get Paul to ask the last question.

Paul: Yeah. So while we're all sitting here in our fugue state, it's like, ugh, yeah I don't really wanna be here anymore.

[bright voice] Let's be optimistic. Katherine, woo! What have you seen from this work with sustainability managers that is giving you cause for optimism?

Katherine: Yeah, like I was saying, I think actually the, the CSRD that's coming in from the EU is really changing things.

So just, I guess one anecdote would be someone I work with who's in Hawaii, one of the sustainability managers who works at a city there, you know, he was kind of never contacted and didn't really feel like he had much power in his role.

Until, you know, insurance companies started to say, well, we're not, like we're gonna increase your premiums unless you can show us what you're gonna be doing about sea level rise and climate change and you know, these more extreme weather events. And that guy's phone was ringing off the hook that day. And, you know, is someone who has a lot of power now.

And I think I just kept hearing that actually in a lot of the interviews we were doing is, there's more and more because of these regulations, people are seeing that there needs to be action taken. So again, whether organisations want to, I guess that big stick has finally come in.

When Jan lectured me, uh, on corporate social responsibility in 2010, I remember she was showing us how it was never going to be impactful until it was mandatory. We looked at what happens when it's voluntary and how it's just, there's very little transparency, there's very little reliability in the data.

And it was strange to lecture my first students on corporate social responsibility last year and say, this is coming in as mandatory...

Jan: ...yeah...

Katherine: ...and that, that gives me a lot of hope.

Paul: See, uh, initially when Katherine said, when Jan lectured me, I didn't necessarily think in the context of, in an actual lecture. I just thought Jan one day walked into a room and started lecturing you, which would be entirely in keeping with Jan's character.

Jan: [laughing] But it's also, this is a, this is the, the fantastic thing about having, you know, you know, long-graduated students back on, on the, on the podcast, is that I have no recollection of saying that. That sounds very wise. And I probably did say it 'cause you'd recall better than I.

But also that sort of, that really sort of long horizon because nobody used to do anything, then it was voluntary and then there was a bit of greenwashing and no one really did it. And so it becomes mandatory.

So maybe if guys had done a more serious and dedicated job at that time, we wouldn't be where we are, but we are where we are.

Paul: I think we are where we are, and where we are is at the end. [laughs]

It's been, I, I normally say a wonderful conversation, but I don't think that's an appropriate adjective.

Jan: Insightful.

Paul: Thank you. It's been an insightful conversation.

Katherine: Yeah. Thanks for having me. I don't feel like it was depressing, though. I don't feel depressed about this stuff! I really love talking about it. Why are you depressed?

Paul: I dunno, maybe it's nothing to do with this conversation. [everyone laughs] It's, at times it wasn't exactly optimistic, but at other times it was more optimistic.

Jan: Yeah...

Paul: ...yeah. No, I ...

Katherine: ...I guess though, I don't know if optimism is always, like, useful. 'Cause again, I think that can become greenwashing. Do you not think in your work?

Jan: Yeah.

Katherine: I, I think I'm just being honest that like certain policies have been rolled back, certain targets have not been met. I don't know if that's depressing. That's just where we are.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: Yeah. Well you've got to bear mind, me and Jan have been here for a long time today. [Katherine laughs] We're, we're both depressed.

Katherine: Yes, I know I got the graveyard shift.

Paul: Yes that's it. That's it.

[Theme music]

Paul: Well Jan, I know that we said that we were depressed, but I don't think we really are.

Jan: No, I think, not, we can't stay depressed with um, Katherine around as well 'cause she's a real force for good and, you know, energetic.

And it's also, I think really like what she sort of said at the end that actually you don't need to either be optimistic or depressed, you need to be sort of pragmatic and actually like crack on with it.

Paul: Yeah. And she brought us apples and onions. So, you know, it's hard to be depressed when someone brings apples and onions with them.

Jan: Well, I've got the added bonus that, um, we, we quite often get together for Thanksgiving, so, uh, so her husband and my husband get on like a house on fire. So we, I'll next, I'll next see her with lots of baked goods around us.

Paul: Dare I ask if the Thanksgiving conversation will be revolving entirely around sustainability managers and other sustainability issues?

Jan: Not entirely, but, um, my, my husband's doing a PhD in mountaineering literature and how it thinks about landscape, and her husband is a, um, a biologist and a surveyor for the, for Natural England. So we do end up here sooner or later. [laughs]

Paul: A few wines and then suddenly it's all to the sustainability arguments. Yes, I can, I can only imagine the fun that's had.

Jan: [laughs] But um, I thought it was really sobering to think about, you know, that job of sustainability manager. I suppose I'd like to be a director of sustainability with many sustainability managers.

Paul: Yeah, and, and that's, you'd like to be a Chief Sustainability Officer when there's more than one...

Jan: ...yes...

Paul: ...rather than they've given you a title when actually you are *the* sustainability officer. You are *the* sustainability manager. And that seems to be the big problem.

And hopefully, it's the question I asked, you know, there'll be a growing number of teams rather than just individuals involved.

Jan: And we talked about it briefly, sort of not in that context, but she did also mention that there are like professional associations of sustainability managers.

So I'm a, I'm a great fan of the professional association because it gives people company and support and capability to do their job well...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...so I think that's, that's something to remember as well.

Paul: Yeah, I know certainly in my role, which has nothing to do with sustainability, but my role around, marketing in theory, but my job is so specific in this University that I'm the only one.

The only way I come again, come across other people in similar roles is through organisations like that and actually accreditation bodies.

Which brings me nicely to who we have, uh, as our next guest. So next week we're gonna be talking to Rose White, who is in charge of accreditations and rankings here at Lancaster University Management School.

Jan: And there'll be some nice continuity between the two conversations, which I think will be really synergistic.

Paul: Yeah. Finding out how sustainability fits into the roles of people working in with the Management School.

We've spoken to Georgiana, as you mentioned, who takes an overarching view of sustainability within the University, but how does it fit into things when management schools are assessed and ranked?

[gloomy voice] Ranked, benchmarked, nooo!

[normal voice] I get the feeling there's gonna be a few of those conversations.

Jan: But there is gonna be accreditations, which will keep you much happier, I think.

Paul: We'll see. We'll see. Well, until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]