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Growing Greener: Creating a New Values-based Environmental Engagement Toolkit for SME Intermediaries

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Abstract. This paper explores a radically different way of facilitating energy and environmental initiatives in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In terms of energy policy, smaller firms in Europe are exempted from most of the major fiscal and regulatory mechanisms that are applied to larger organisations. Policies to reduce energy demand and associated carbon emissions in SMEs are largely based on providing incentives, such as face-to-face support and grants for energy efficiency in buildings. Energy advisors are therefore key intermediaries, providing advice and encouraging the uptake of low carbon technologies and practices by SMEs.

Previous studies have found that advisors often find it difficult to engage effectively with SME owners and managers, and that traditional ‘win-win’ messaging can have limited impact, resulting in implementation problems such as under-investment in energy-saving technologies, reluctance to adopt new environmental practices, and a tendency to revert to previous ways of operating once the incentive is removed. Recent research also suggests that SME owners’ and managers’ personal values play an important mediating role in their response to environmental issues, acting in combination with more established factors such as educational background, access to resources and the views of customers and suppliers. The implication is that policy interventions in this area could be delivered in more cost-effective ways if accompanied by a more nuanced, values-based approach to engagement.

This paper reports findings from ‘Growing Greener’ a UK multi-disciplinary project that aims to equip advisors and other types of intermediary with the skills, knowledge and understanding they need in order to incorporate a values-based approach into their existing interactions with SMEs. It opens with an overview of the policy context and a brief overview of the relevant research literature.

The main section explains how the research team co-produced a values-based engagement toolkit in conjunction with a group of energy advisors and external specialists. The design process included a series of facilitated ‘narrative workshops’, where advisors shared their experiences and experimented with early versions of the engagement tools. This is followed by an outline of the completed engagement ‘toolkit’, which includes free-to-access online course, a communication guide and an interactive engagement tool. These three inter-related components are designed to help advisors to engage SMEs beyond a narrow, cost-benefit framework, and in turn help SME owners and managers to connect low carbon choices with the personal and business values that are important to them as individuals.

Our findings indicate the potential for more effective, longer-lasting interventions beyond the low hanging fruit of building efficiency measures.



1. Introduction

There are over 5.7 million small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the UK, including a wide variety of organisations, ranging from multi-sited manufacturing companies to small firms, social enterprises and micro-businesses. In the UK, they collectively use over 50% of energy in the commercial and industrial sectors [1].

A government report found evidence from local energy efficiency support programmes that suggested the average SME could save up to 25 per cent of its energy use through relatively simple, low cost measures, like upgrading lighting or installing occupancy sensors. However, take up of these opportunities is systematically low. In the UK, the ‘missed opportunity’ of energy savings for SMEs is estimated to equate to between £1.26 bn and £2.63 bn per year [2].

The need for government intervention in this market failure is widely recognised [3]. In the UK, this has conventionally included financial incentives such as grants and loans [4], alongside the provision of expert advice for SMEs, to help them select the most appropriate energy efficiency measures for their buildings. Given the scale of SME energy use, and the potential for savings, the energy advisors that deliver such advice are critical actors in the transition to a lower carbon economy. However, they have been the subject of little research, and while they are funded, sometimes generously, by the taxpayer, they are given little other support as a community of practitioners [5].

This paper reports on a 12-month project aiming to address this deficiency. Growing Greener was a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council’s Impact Acceleration Account. A collaboration between Oxford University, Open University Business School and Climate Outreach, the project held a series of 5 workshops around England (Birmingham, Manchester, Oxford and two in London) with energy and sustainability advisors. The workshops gathered views from these practitioners on the topic of ‘greening’ the SME population, identifying insights into the practice of engaging with SMEs on the topic of the environment. Drawing on evidence collected in these workshops, and from interviews with selected advisors, Growing Greener went on to produce a ‘toolkit’ for supporting these important intermediaries to increase their potential for influence amongst SMEs. This paper is the first academic report from the project. The rest of this article is structured into four sections. The next section presents a brief review of literature on SMEs, energy and the environment, and the role of intermediaries in promoting energy efficiency and pro-environmental action. Section three then describes the design and content of the five workshops put on as part of the project. Section four summarises the content of the Growing Greener ‘toolkit’; and the final section discusses the broader implications of this work.

2. Literature review

Academic literature on SMEs, energy and environmental impact is large, but somewhat fragmented. For example, there is a significant literature from the business studies tradition which has sought to develop and implement environmental management tools [6]; whilst contributions from outside of Business Schools have been made from geographers [7,8] and public policy scholars [9,10]. Perhaps the most influential body of research has focused on identifying and evaluating the barriers to the uptake of energy efficiency measures by SMEs [11–13]. As well as being popular amongst academic researchers, this approach has dominated the approach of policy-focused ‘grey’ literature, which includes research sponsored by the UK and Australian Governments [14,15], and the European Commission [16]. Many contributions from this tradition, having summarised the key barriers to action, highlight the importance of intermediaries in helping SMEs to navigate a complex array of energy-saving options.

However, there has been significantly less research conducted on the practices and experiences of these business advisors themselves. Katy Janda and colleagues have sought to place intermediaries in the centre of their research focus and highlight their role as more than simply go-betweens, operating between policy makers and SMEs [17–19]. In doing so, they use the term ‘middle-actors’ to differentiate their approach from literature which insufficiently addresses the agency and capacity of intermediaries such as builders [20,21], landlords [18] and data providers [19].

Contributing to this small and emerging ‘middle actor’ literature within energy research, Hampton’s [5] auto-ethnographic study of low carbon SME advisors shed light on their everyday practice. It

highlighted the dominance of the economic growth narrative within business support networks, and the associated prevalence of financial arguments used by advisors when seeking to engage with and ‘sell’ energy efficiency technologies and other pro-environmental measures to SMEs. Hampton argues that such approaches are insufficient to address the multiple market failures, which already lead SMEs to miss opportunities for compelling cost savings. Interviews with UK based advisors reveal that this professional community typically hold strong environmental values, but tend to suppress these when talking to SMEs; making a set of assumptions about the values and motivations of business owner-managers, including that they have little consideration for environmental impact.

Hampton points to research on SME owner-managers values including work from researchers at the Open University Business School [22–25], who have worked extensively to apply Schwartz’ Theory of Basic Human Values [26]. Schwartz’s framework, also known as the Schwartz Values System (SVS), categorises basic values into ten different types, and four broad groupings: Self-Transcendence; Conservation; Self-Enhancement; and Openness to Change (see Figure 1). In a recent contribution, Schaefer et al. [23] develop a typography of SME managers based on their personal and professional values. Challenging the assumption that business leaders are motivated primarily by profit, they identify a range of values based on in-depth interviews. These include power values, where motivations include wealth and influence, to achievement values, where managers strive for positive, visible markers such as accreditation and peer-recognition, and universalism, where concern for social equality or climate change are primary motivators. The Growing Greener project leads directly from this work on SMEs, middle-actors and values.

3. Workshops with SME advisors

The Growing Greener project (2017-2018) follows on from an ESRC funded ‘kick-starter’ impact project called Growing Green in 2016. With similar aims of exploring how basic human values come into play for SME owner managers with respect to their environmental impact, this project convened two workshops in Oxford. Co-hosted with Oxfordshire Business Support, the workshops were heavily promoted through existing SME networks, but nonetheless struggled to attract significant attendances. Participating SMEs were largely made up of those already working in the environmental sector, including charities and non-profits. It was felt by the project team that the values-based discussion was skewed towards universalism and benevolence as a result [27].

Learning from the limitations of the kick-start project, Growing Greener instead turned its attention to energy and sustainability advisors. A series of five workshops were conducted in Autumn 2018, in Birmingham, Manchester, Oxford and two in London. Recruitment of participants was aided by the involvement of Sam Hampton, who holds a part-time role with Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, and had established contacts through his previous research [4,5].

The workshops were led by project partner Climate Outreach, who are a charity specialising in climate change communications. They have unique experience of engaging with conventionally ‘hard to reach’ audiences on climate change, such as centre-right voters [28], and faith groups [29], and have developed a methodology of ‘narrative workshops’ [30]. Following this methodology, the workshops were broadly structured into two parts. They began with an introduction to the Theory of Basic Human Values, and a discussion about how values come into play in our personal and professional lives. Participants were asked to consider which of the values they most strongly identified with, and to plot well-known brands such as Lloyds Bank, Facebook and Ben & Jerrys against the diagram (Figure 1). Advisors were invited to share stories of how they had encountered values at play in their work with SMEs.

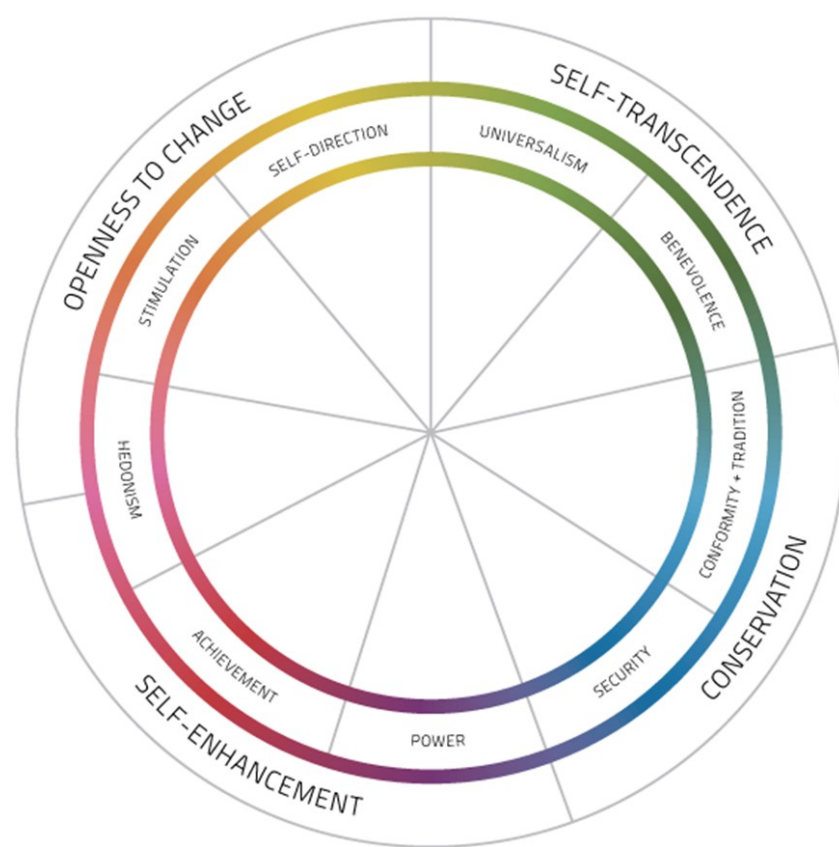


Figure 1: Diagram of the Theory of Basic Human Values [26]

Having explored the theory behind values-based engagements, in the second part of the workshop, participants applied these ideas in a series of role-playing exercises. In pairs, one participant would play the role of an SME owner-manager with a strong set of guiding values, and the other, an advisor, who would attempt to discover the key values at play, and to select the most salient language and arguments for their client. The workshops concluded with a plenary discussion of the challenges and opportunities associated with values-based engagements with SMEs.

4. A toolkit for energy and sustainability advisors

The Growing Greener toolkit consists of three resources. Firstly, Climate Outreach have produced a ‘communications guide’ for a broad audience of organisations and individuals wishing to communicate environmental messages to SMEs [31]. This 10-page publication includes six principles for effective communication; summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Six principles for effective communication with SMEs

People do not just define themselves by who they are –they also define themselves by who they are not.	Show your clients that taking effective action on climate change is something ‘we’ do, and isn’t just something ‘those’ environmentalists worry about. Sharing case studies that can tell a story about why and how people like themselves have cut their carbon footprint will help your audience identify with your message.
Communicate from the ‘values up’, not the numbers down’.	People make sense of the world on the basis of their values; when it comes to issues such as climate change, people’s world view is more important than facts and targets. Use stories that connect the business case with the values of

	the person you are speaking to, and their concerns as a human being. The vision of clean and affordable energy, for example, is an idea with wider appeal than the need to meet targets set for the year 2050.
Connect climate change with other environmental concerns, and the desire for a less wasteful society.	When talking about energy efficiency, use the idea of our common wish to avoid being wasteful. Research has demonstrated that the desire to use resources carefully is widely held, and provides a strong rationale for reducing our energy use.
Highlight how action on climate change is an issue of security.	Security matters. Businesses want a sense of security, just as we want to feel secure on a personal level. Climate change is itself a driver of a more uncertain future for us and our families. Using home grown renewable energy sources offers the potential for greater energy security.
Highlight continuity with what is familiar and trusted.	A sense of tradition and continuity with the past are values that sit side-by-side with business leaders' desire to have a certain and knowable future. Talk about renewables in terms of the nation making best use of its natural resources. Show how new technologies speak to the best of British ingenuity and resourcefulness.
Stress the inevitability of a low carbon future.	Momentum for the switch to a low carbon energy system is growing amongst the public and within the business sector. Ambitious targets are locked into energy policy. When businesses feel this is the normal thing to do they will have less reason for postponing action.

The second resource is an 'Open Educational Resource' (OER), 'Promoting sustainability in business: a values-based toolkit', which is hosted on the Open University's 'OpenLearn Create platform' (www.open.edu/openlearncreate). This online course is designed for SME advisors, intermediaries and people working within organisations to effect pro-environmental change. Taking approximately five hours to complete, it first introduces the key theoretical ideas behind values-based engagement with business, including the Schwartz Theory of Basic Human Values, and some of the literature cited above. We have incorporated six videos into the course, which provide insights from business advisors who attended the consultative workshops and from members of the Growing Greener team. The video content provides the basis for several learning activities. There are also interactive exercises based on key concepts, and a series of 'thinking points' and short end-of-session quizzes that encourage learners to reflect on their own practice, and how they have encountered personal, professional and organisation values in their careers to date.

For example, in one of the interactive exercises, learners are asked to 'drag and drop' a set of key words on to a diagram that summarises the Schwartz Theory of Basic Human Values, the aim being to identify which of the values they consider them to be most salient. Having completed the task, the authoring team's version is displayed (Figure 2), along with a short commentary.



Figure 2: Key words relating to environmental responsibility which are likely to resonate with SMEs holding different values-sets

In another exercise learners are asked to consider how sets of values can be derived from different sources, such as those embedded in organisational cultures and norms; those demanded by particular job roles; and those brought into the SME by individual staff members (Figure 3). The resulting complexity was one of the issues raised at the consultative workshops, and we have designed the learning activity to prompt similar reflections amongst those completing the online course.

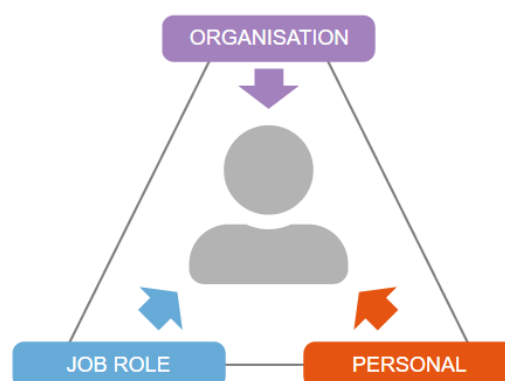


Figure 3: Diagram illustrating the different sources of values which may influence an individual working within an SME.

The final part of the Growing Greener toolkit is a short ‘step-by-step engagement guide’. This 3-page document is designed as a series of prompts for advisors when preparing to meet an SME client. Structured into *before*, *during*, and *after* sections, it suggests ways to anticipate the kinds of values that are likely to be at play when meeting an SME owner-manager; offers tips for asking questions and steering conversations; and gives ideas for how to maximise impact by following up after an initial meeting. This resource is both included as part of the online course and available as a printable document.

5. Discussion

The toolkit brings together insights from academic literature; professional experience as advisors; climate outreach’s previous work on climate narratives; and the series of workshops conducted as part of the Growing Greener project. Whilst the workshops provided an opportunity for the academic team to test out a series of ideas and approaches, these were refined and adapted as we received feedback and input from low carbon advisors who meet with SMEs on a daily basis to talk about energy and environmental impact.

One key contribution from workshop attendees was to emphasise that *all* segments of Schwartz’s Value System are represented in SME owner-managers. By instinct, the advisers are already highly adaptive. Meeting a wide variety of businesses in their day-to-day roles, they tailor the language they use and the advice they provide. They might find themselves talking about the efficiency of an industrial kiln with one SME in the morning, and giving advice about crowdfunding to an environmental charity in the afternoon. They valued the framework as a way to articulate and visualise what was already familiar to them. However workshops also revealed how advisors might commonly avoid talking about questions of environmental ethics and responsibility if they gleaned that their client had self-enhancing values. The Growing Greener toolkit therefore aims to celebrate and enhance good practice, but has also been developed to support advisors to develop the language, concepts and approaches which might help them avoid steering clear of these crucial topics.

Our primary research focuses on environmental messaging and has found that understanding and appealing to the full range of Basic Human Values can help to engage a wider set of people. Some businesses, for example long established family firms, may be mainly concerned with maintaining tradition and continuity and minimising risks (conservation values). For these businesses, we have found that common approaches used to discuss climate change fail to motivate them. They are likely to respond better to messages on climate change which make links to risk, responsibility and family [28].

Conversely, some SMEs consider themselves to be drivers of innovation and disruption. Leaders of these businesses are more likely to identify with sets of values in the upper-left quadrant of Schwartz’s framework. They are motivated by newness and change, and respond positively to environmental messaging that focuses on new business opportunities, innovative technologies and the potential to disrupt incumbent corporations.

Schwartz tells us that it is impossible to change anybody’s basic values. But, rather than focus on certain types of SMEs, or individual business leaders with particular values, the Theory of Basic Human Values allows the advisers to adapt their language, messages and approaches so that they can work most effectively with all types of organisation. All value-sets have merit and a successful transition into a low carbon economy will not only require engaging businesses with all types of values, but will also benefit from the range of different skillsets associated with each.

6. Conclusion

The Growing Greener project is part of broader movement seeking to reduce the energy consumption and environmental impact from the SME population. Too long a neglected sector of the economy, the urgency of the need to cut carbon emissions across the world means that they can no longer be neglected by policy makers.

Energy and sustainability advisors are already playing a crucial role in supporting SMEs to mitigate their impacts, but they are limited by a set of assumptions about SME motivations which is underpinned

by an impoverished appreciation of the multiple values at play in smaller organisations. Largely assuming that SME owner-managers hold power and achievement values-sets, advisors' practice is dominated by economic narratives. This leads them to pursue engagements with SMEs with a narrow focus on investment-payback periods and the promise of increased brand reputation.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of social enterprises and community interest companies being established in the UK [32], as well as ethical accreditation schemes such as B-Corps [33]. The idea of 'start-up culture' has entered public discourse, conjuring images of modern workplaces with indoor putting-greens and swings [34], and associated with explicitly stated, extrinsically focused values [35]. These trends indicate that values are coming to play a more significant role in how business is conducted, and that the assumptions made by advisors and policy makers about what motivates and drives SMEs must be updated accordingly. Correcting assumptions alone is not enough however. Learning to communicate effectively using values-based techniques is not easy, as the participants in our workshop role-plays would attest.

The Growing Greener toolkit provides a set of resources for helping energy and sustainability advisors become equipped with the skills and knowledge to be able to use values in their working practice, however this is just a start. It is too early to evaluate the take-up of the toolkit by advisors, although several indicated that the workshops alone had inspired them to adapt their practice.

Policy makers must begin to recognise the strategic importance of this community of practitioners with more comprehensive forms of professional support and development. There are some signs of promise in this regard. The Growing Greener team has been invited to present the toolkit to civil servants in both the UK and Ireland, and to brief senior figures in a leading political party. Given the universal nature of the SVS, and the shared challenges faced by policy-makers in including SMEs in sustainability transitions, the toolkit has potential for global reach.

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