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Identifying barriers to and proposing recommendations for pro-environmental behaviours among corporate employees by using psychological theories

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Abstract

Climate change is a phenomenon that mainly describes earth's climate change due to some human activities and natural influences (United Nations Environment Programme, 2003). Carbon dioxide emission on the atmosphere is one of the greatest contributors towards climate change. Carbon dioxide is released in the air through various means including the burning of fossil fuels by many human activities that include transportation (UNEP, 2003). Transportation is one mode of emitting carbon dioxide, is taking the majority of human involvement. Almost every human being takes part in to this mode of carbon emission through transportation and that entitles almost all of us to have a personal accountability to take action in doing our part to reduce carbon emission. However, due to human beings' heavy dependency on automobiles, it is hard to change people's behaviour in driving less and taking alternative measure to driving less with the sole purpose of reducing carbon dioxide emission. This calls for a variation in people's lifestyle, which in many cases is uncomfortable for people to do. By successfully reducing personal carbon dioxide emission through transportation, an increased amount of carbon emission can be saved from adding up to the atmosphere. However, in doing individual's part to reduce carbon dioxide emission, there are certain barriers that most of us face. Therefore, this research asks- what are the barriers faced by a group of people in choosing environmentally friendly actions, specifically, reducing carbon dioxide emission through less driving by taking the public transit, carpooling and biking or walking at least once a week?

A small group of people in an office setting environment of a branch of one of the corporate banking institutions located in Toronto. The branch has 19 people working in it with everyone owning a car. The demographic include nine young adults aged twenty-one to twenty-four years old, and ten adults aged from thirty to thirty-eight years old. The number of females and males are evenly distributed among the two subsets of age groups. These individuals from the above age groups were interviewed regarding their opinions about climate change in general and the role of carbon emission on climate change. After asking about the climate change everyone considered it an issue. When asked about the impact of driving in general and its alternatives, most of them did not provide sufficient alternatives to driving and expressed their heavy dependency on driving cars in daily life. The target behaviours contributing to carbon dioxide emission included driving automobiles on a daily basis, not utilizing the public transit at all, not carpooling, and not biking as a means of transportation. However, there are substantial common barriers to be overcome prior to bring about changes to these behaviours and included inconvenience, lack of motivation and knowledge, and forgetting to adapt to these behaviours as it is not a social norm. More specifically, contacting people and scheduling for carpooling is deemed as inconvenience to most of the people. Less awareness about the severity of climate change problems contributes to lack of motivation

towards changing these behaviours. On the other hand, biking in formal clothing is not viewed as a social norm to some people, which keeps them away from biking often. In addition, a long-existing habit of driving makes most of them forget about taking the public transit or carpooling once in a while.

In overcoming barriers to change people's behaviours can be best implemented by utilizing tools from Community Based Social Marketing (CBSM) (McKenzie-Mohr, n.d.) and persuasion techniques from psychological theories of motivation that have been proved successful in persuading people. CBSM discusses about importance of incentive measures and communications and prompts as effective tools for encouraging pro-social behaviours (McKenzie-Mohr, n.d.). In regards to changing people's behaviour through motivation, it is essential that it is done by having someone committed to the act. Once committed, a person will feel motivated to comply with the committed act (Cialdini, 1993). Furthermore, Dr. McKenzie-Mohr mentioned the importance of making commitment public as it is proved effective in many occasions (McKenzie-Mohr, n.d.). In terms of social proof, Cialdini describes effect of uncertainty. He claims that when we are confused, we are likely to do the same things as other people are doing (Cialdini, 1993). Also, one of CBSM's strategies to communicate messages effectively to people to persuade them, messages should be delivered by a credible source and delivered in a manner that carefully mix the threatening aspects of the problem with specific suggestions to eliminate the threat (McKenzie-Mohr, n.d.).

Above discussions about the interviewees' perceptions call for solutions that will motivate them in changing their behaviours in reducing carbon dioxide emission. Such solutions include providing incentives like granting ten-minute grace period for the person taking public transit to come to work to make them feel more motivated; a structural change, for example, utilization of an online message board to communicate carpooling schedule to make carpooling more convenient mode of transportation; designating individual "Public Transportation Day" for employees so that it will serve as a prompt for them to remember taking the public transit; posting useful links about reducing carbon emission on the company website/newsletter will subsequently increase people's knowledge about the issue of climate change and more aware of personal accountability; exposure to worldwide movement against climate change and celebrities' endorsement on this issue will serve as a social norm and social proof to act in environmental-friendly ways.