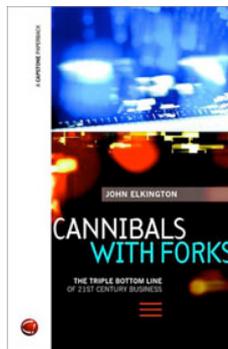


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FICHE DE LECTURE

Cannibals with forks
**The triple bottom line of 21st century
business**

John Elkington
1997



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Cannibals with forks – The triple bottom line of 21st century business

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Résumé : Cette fiche de lecture a comme objectif de résumer l'ouvrage visionnaire de John Elkington. *Cannibals with forks -The triple bottom line of the 21th century* s'attache à promouvoir une nouvelle approche responsable au sein des grandes entreprises, qui tiendra compte des trois dimensions du développement durable : environnemental, social et économique. Présenté au travers de sept révolutions, Elkington démontre quels nouveaux enjeux les entreprises doivent affronter dans le siècle prochain.

Mots-clés : stratégie de développement durable, responsabilité sociale des entreprises, parties prenantes

Cannibals with forks – The triple bottom line of 21st century business

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Abstract: The objective of this review is to resume John Elkington's visionary book. *Cannibals with forks -The triple bottom line of the 21th century* promotes a new, responsible approach to businesses that should take into consideration environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. Presented through seven revolutions, Elkington reveals new stakes that companies will have to take into consideration in the next century.

Key words: triple bottom line, sustainable strategy, stakeholder, people planet profit, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

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I. 1. The Author and His Work

A. 1.1 A Brief Biography of the Author

John Brett Elkington is said to be one of the “deans of the corporate responsibility movement”¹. In 2008, *The Evening Standard* described him as "a true green business guru," and as "an evangelist for corporate social and environmental responsibility long before it was fashionable."

Since 1972 he has been engaged in environmental and social aspects of the modern capitalistic structure. One of his first initiatives was the foundation of the Environmental Data Services (ENDS), which now includes a rich portfolio of websites specialized in collecting and structuring information on key issues such as carbon trading or the evolution of European legislation. Later on, he gave birth to SustainAbility, the London-based think-tank and consultancy on sustainable development issues, and recently became the director of Volan Ventures, a consultancy firm focusing on the business of social innovation.

Through his experience, John Elkington has become one of the most important personalities promoting sustainable values. Since the early 1980s, he has worked on what sustainable development might mean for business. He published several books, papers and articles, participated as a speaker at conferences worldwide, and was involved in efforts to bring together leading companies, the public sector and non-governmental organizations in the aim of a collective reflection on the pursuit of economic, social and environmental sustainability.

After putting down his thoughts on the Bhopal disaster in *The Green Capitalists*, he had the idea to turn towards everyday people. With his colleague, Julia Hailes, he published in 1988 *The Green Consumer Guide*, a book which served as a catalyzer in creating a new wave of international consumer pressure on business. Always thinking in terms of global tendencies, his recent book, *The Power of Unreasonable People* (2008) focuses on questions related to the power and the opportunity of social entrepreneurs.

¹ Business Week 2004 release

B. 1.2 The Significance of the Book

Elkington's ideas have always been influenced and developed by numerous encounters he had with thinkers such as Max Nicholson, James Lovelock, or Rachel Carson. The fruit of these discussions and intellectual exchanges is a rather practical synthesis with the symbolic title, **Cannibals with forks**.

Cannibals with forks is a milestone in the evolution of not only John Elkington's reflection on sustainability issues. Published before the turn of the millennium, Elkington gave birth to an essential principle, the Triple Bottom Line (TBL). This 'visionary' publication of the famous 'People, Planet, Profit' triangle tends to resume Seven Revolutions of the 21st century, which are to be taken into consideration by all businesses. Based on examples, the author tries to give concrete tools for companies who have committed themselves to sustainable development values. Above all, he even makes it as an imperative for every business to take into consideration the TBL principle.

Even if the three aspects of sustainability– environmental, social and economic – existed already, his approach towards transparency and the stakeholder principle played a crucial role in shaping initiatives such as GRI (Global Reporting Initiative) or the Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes.

II. 2. Summary of the Book

A. 2.1 General outline of the Book

In *Cannibals with forks*, John Elkington is interested in emerging forms of capitalism and especially in how companies implement sustainability principles in their businesses. Based on concrete examples, he shows the seven dimensions of this revolution intending to harmonize the traditional financial bottom line with environmental quality and social justice.

The structure of the four hundred page book is outlined below:

Foreword vii

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1 *Executive Summary: Adapting to a 7-D World*

Part I Sustaining Capitalism

In this part, Elkington questions the sustainability of capitalism in its actual form. He reviews the progress of greening capitalism movement in its early ages and examines the three waves of environmentalism from 1970 until 1997. At the end of this section, he explains the idea of shared zones between economic, environmental and social aspects before getting to a definition of the Triple Bottom line Principle.

2 *Introduction: Is Capitalism Sustainable?*

3 *The Third Wave: Storming the Boardroom*

4 *The Triple Bottom Line: Sustainability's Accountants*

Part II Seven Revolutions

For each of these seven revolutions (markets, values, transparency, life-cycle technology, partnership, time and corporate governance) Elkington covers a series of questions and tries to find an appropriate answer to them:

1. Why worry? - Why the trend in question is important, why invest in it?
2. What's new, gurus? - New ideas, different views of managers

3. Boardroom views – The implication of the director class
4. Bubbling under – Pioneers' experiences
5. Winners, losers – If the trend continues, which industries or regions will prosper
6. Keys to the 21st century – Three keys of business success for the next century.

5 Markets: Going for the Triple Win

6 Values: Ghost in the System

7 Transparency: No Hiding Place

8 Life-cycle Technology: Conception to Resurrection

9 Partnership: After the Honeymoon

10 Time: Nanoseconds To Go

11 Corporate Governance: Stakes in the Future

Part III Transition

In this part, Elkington focuses on sustainable companies by resuming in 39 steps the actions to take if a business wants to catch up with the latest trends. After, he gives his opinion about how to create an efficient regulation system, and then he lists some of the market changes needed for the transition.

12 Sustainable Corporations: Spirit of Zero

13 Mainstreaming: Market Makers

Part IV Toolbox

In the last chapter, the writer focuses on ways of measuring progress. Based on the changes he previews in stakeholder strategies, he underlines the fact that sustainability auditing will become essential for making his business transparent.

14 Sustainability Auditing: How Are We Doing?

15 Coda: Closing the Gap

Appendix: Notes for a Sustainable Business

Phrase-book

Index

B. 2.2 Main points of reasoning and principal conclusions

The structure of *Cannibals with forks* reflects well the logic underlying the author's reasoning.

Part I Sustaining capitalism

*"There is no longer a debate about economic theory. The fundamentals are not contested anymore."*¹

The roots of Elkington's discussion go back to the fundamentals of capitalism. Based on Lester Thurow's work, *The Future of Capitalism*, he makes it clear that the debate is no longer about whether to establish a capitalistic system or not. He insists on a shift towards a debate on the limits and weaknesses of market mechanisms. The key question for him is to explore how individual needs are sustainable in a global political, economical, ecological and social context. For Elkington, there is an important change in governance: international institutions acquire more and more power while governments see their role becoming relatively less influential. As a consequence, businesses get a more central position and so they have to become responsible for their actions. He comes to the conclusion that because of this shift of influence, in addition to global demographical and ecological changes, capitalism will have to restructure itself in a sustainable way. In order to confirm his statement, the author reveals the trend of 'the three waves' of environmentalism, showing the peaks and the ebbs of the movement since 1970. He questions himself about the future of the third, the sustainable wave, which was to begin at the turn of the millennium. Elkington explains what radical changes will be required from the part of leading companies by introducing the Triple Bottom Line Principle.

Part II Seven Revolutions

Upcoming changes and trends in the 21st century are listed as revolutions. In order to make the shift between the old and the new paradigm even more visible, Elkington bases his reflection on some keywords.

Markets – From Compliance to Competition

¹ Rodric Braitwaite, p. 25

Elkington makes reference to his statement on the growing influence of companies. He explains that sustainable development will increasingly be delivered by business through markets. He insists on the fact that the growing number of businesses and the liberalization of markets will generate even more competition where the attitude towards 'zero impact' will have to be replaced by innovative strategies which enable to make a positive impact. Companies have to develop sustainable competitive advantages without forgetting about the Triple Bottom Line criteria.

Values – From Hard to Soft

Cannibals with forks suggests that we are already seeing the emergence of a renewed set of values. It is no longer a question about hard, predetermined rigid values. We are tending towards 'world citizen' values where quality replaces quantity and a long-term reflection becomes an obligation. Companies have to take into consideration that they have responsibilities towards their stakeholders. New values are global but companies should not forget about the great cultural diversity.

Transparency – From Closed to Open

Elkington focuses on emerging stakeholder pressure with the result that companies can no longer count on their ability to keep secrets. Thanks to the development of information technology, businesses' actions become increasingly visible. Sustainability reporting becomes an important tool to give a clear image of a company and also to make it comparable with others. It has to be based on an active dialogue with different stakeholders, as well as an external verification, global operating standards are to be developed.

Life-cycle Technology – From Product to Function

The fourth revolution is being driven by past experiences when new technologies introduced in industrial production caused unintended side effects. Events like Chernobyl, or Rachel Carlson's *Silent Spring* caused a shift, so that companies have to focus on the acceptability of the procedure of production and not only on their cradle to grave performance. The result of the growing concern about external impacts is an X-ray environment making companies responsible for the entire life-cycle of their products.

Partnerships – From Subversion to Symbiosis

Elkington insists on the fact that for the implementation of the Triple Bottom Line Principle, it is obligatory to cooperate and to develop partnerships. The role of complementarities (co-opetition) is increasing and the government-industry-NGO symbiosis gaining importance. Building trust is becoming crucial in economic relationships, but earning this loyalty is a great challenge for businesses.

Time – From Wider to Longer

The Author evokes two dimensions of time becoming crucial for sustainability. On one hand companies have to act as quickly as possible while the transmission of information becomes immediate. On the other hand, the long-term view requires greater attention as foresight is an essential indicator of sustainability. In order to overcome the complexity of the future, Elkington -referring to Shell - recommends the use of scenario-based tools.

Corporate governance – From Exclusive to Inclusive

In *Cannibals with forks*, John Elkington focuses on the aspect of corporate governance, saying that a growing proportion of corporate issues revolve not just around process or product design but also around the business ecosystem. The integration of the three bottom lines is to be done by developing more inclusive ways of stakeholder capitalism. The author also insists on the importance of diversity on decision-making levels.

Part III Transition

Elkington's book includes several case studies about pioneers and examples to follow. *Cannibals with forks* is designed to serve as a handbook, showing managers how they can take into practice the Triple Bottom Line Principle. To make a summary for them, Elkington lists thirty-nine steps which can lead businesses to a sustainable way of functioning. Besides companies and the initiatives of the private sector, Elkington also pays attention to 'market makers'. He criticizes politicians' shortsighted visions and promotes international initiatives whose clear objective is the development of a prospective vision. He declares that legislation has a crucial role in helping companies respond to the 'People, Planet, Profit' triangle. He insists that taxation should be developed in a way that reflects true prices: the economic, the environmental and the social truth.

Part IV Toolbox

As was mentioned before, *Cannibals with forks* is partially designated for managers. The fourth chapter is especially written for those willing to learn practical tools. Focusing on

sustainability auditing, the author asks reminder questions related to the seven revolutions described above, in order to help managers rethink their reasoning about sustainability.

As a last chapter, Elkington creates a list of useful expressions related to the Triple Bottom Line Principle, which he organizes in the form of a Phrase-book – Notes for a Sustainable Business.

3. Review of the Book

“Elkington fancies metaphor, rhetoric and symbolism. He wants to persuade his audience, rather than engage in discussions with academic peers.”²

As Ronald Jeurissen describes, Elkington’s objective is to make a strong impression on the reader by combining a rich literature research with his professional experience as a consultant in sustainable development.

The choice of title perfectly represents this motivation:

John Elkington refers to capitalist businesses when applying the expression: cannibals. According to this idiom, companies’ natural behavior is to devour their competitors and live by their instincts without taking into consideration the impacts they have on their environment. Even if he assumes the unfavorable starting point, by stating that these ‘cannibals’ are to use forks, he symbolizes a new stage of progress towards a civilized and sustainable operation above all.

“The greatest merit of this book lies in the complexity of the problem constellation addressed, and the way in which the author presents problems, analyzes them and points to directions where solutions might be found.”³

Referring to the so-called share-zones, Elkington would like to raise attention concerning the interdependencies between social, environmental and economical aspects and tries to convey a system view on the complex problem of sustainability. By showing concrete examples of value driven companies, he succeeds in convincing the reader about the principal message that “it can be done”. Having the visibility on the evolution of example companies’ strategy during the last ten years, a question on Elkington’s critical regard on these firms emerges. Especially, we would like to refer to the debate around Monsanto. According to Elkington, we should not blame Monsanto about not being able to predict the future. Rather, we should stress that at the time, best practice examples existed in a restricted number and applying a critical approach towards them did not appear to be needed.

² Ronald Jeurissen, *Cannibals With Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business Journal of Business Ethics*; Jan 2000; 23, 2; pg. 229

³ Ronald Jeurissen, *Cannibals With Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business Journal of Business Ethics*; Jan 2000; 23, 2; pg. 229

Ronald Jeurissen calls for a more careful approach when trying to motivate everyday or even business people. In his point of view, “the impact of the book could have benefited from a more systematic dealing with reform, rather than revolution”.

Even if most of the critics on Elkington’s Book call it a ‘visionary’ work, going beyond his age, less optimistic reviews were also published about *Cannibals with forks*. Joe Toscano, in the *Anarchist Age Weekly Review* is one of the opponents. He expresses his skeptical approach towards the capitalistic system described as a win-win situation.

Refusing to agree with his opinion is reasonable. But on the other hand we have to admit, that the Triple Bottom Line principle has become an influential approach all over the world.

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