Michael: Welcome to another MIT Sloan Podcast, I’m Michael Perrone. I’m with my co-host Michele Choate. And we’re talking today to Jason Jay, PhD student here at MIT Sloan. Jason recently received the Switzer Fellowship, welcome Jason.

Jason: Thank you very much.

Michael: Would you maybe start by explaining what the Switzer Fellowship is?

Jason: Yeah sure. This is a fellowship that’s awarded by the Switzer family foundation. And it’s focused on sort of environmental research and leadership. So they pick, you know, about, I think it’s about 20 or so fellows each year from a bunch of different schools. The geographic scope is New England and California. And then they sort of bring you together to be kind of an interdisciplinary community around environmental issues and then a, you know, fellowship award that’s designed to support your research.

Michelle: Can you talk specifically about the research that you’re engaged in right now?

Jason: Yeah, sure. I’m in the organization studies group at Sloan. So I’m interested in organizational dimensions of sustainability, which when I first came to Sloan, my intention was to look at companies and sort of corporate sustainability efforts. So, you know, how do companies manage their environmental performance, how and why do they undertake sustainability initiatives. What I started to learn is that some of the really exciting things that are evolving and happening are actually companies working in collaboration with NGOs and government agencies and trying to solve these problems which have, you know, sort of a mix of public and private interest. So I started looking at this phenomenon of cross-sectoral collaboration, cross-sectoral meaning public private NGO or non-profit collaboration on sustainability issues. And, you know, what are the types of collaborations that exist, what are the challenges that arise, and so I’ve done a couple of different projects in that area.

Michelle: Have you found that the partnership between the corporations and the NGOs is a desirable model for say companies to follow that might otherwise not know how to wrap themselves around things that are not profit oriented?

Jason: Yeah I think so, you know, there’s really a couple of different reasons that you see companies and NGOs ending up working together. One is, as you say, if they don’t
know what to do, they’re entering into a sphere that they’re just not experts in. So, if you look at for example, the partnership between Coca-Cola and the World Wildlife Fund, the WWF, they, you know, Coke got, had a big, had a reputational slam on the water issues in India a number of years back, where they were, they had a bottling facility that was in an area of water stress and they were sort of beat up by activists saying, you know, you guys have a responsibility to this community, you have access to water supplies that they don’t, you should be helping them out. And Coke sort of realized that there was a whole domain of expertise around watershed management that was not part of their, you know domain. I mean they knew how to be efficient in managing water within their own plants. But having that broader system boundary, really they’ve sort of benefitted from this partnership with World Wildlife, which has enabled them to both say oh okay, actually our water use is not just within the bottling plants, it’s over the course of the whole value chain. So you know, the sugar in the coke is actually a much bigger water user, than the water itself in the bottle. In fact there’s about 200 liters of water embodied in one liter of Coke. World Wildlife sort of helped them to see that. They also are working now on collaborative research on the integrity of the watersheds and the water systems, in which they operate in order to, you know, figure out more progressive ways of water shed management. So that’s sort of an area where there’s some, there’s a systems prospective, there’s a perspective on ecosystems and water systems that Coke doesn’t have partnering with World Wildlife that allows them to do that. But the other reason besides the expertise is the sort of PR and legitimacy of it, which is, you know, I mean ultimately this goes back to Coke having suffered a PR hit around water, working with World Wildlife, which is a, you know, the biggest environmental NGO in the world, allows them to kind of say, you know, we’re doing the right thing, we’re working with people who are an independent voice, this isn’t just a consulting firm, these people can push back on us. And so, it rightly so provides some legitimacy to their efforts.

Michelle: So what’s the next step for you in terms of where you are with your dissertation and looking to do with your research and your degree.

Jason: So, that’s a great question, I, so being in a doctoral program at MIT, we’re a very research-oriented institution. And the idea, the training that we go through as doctorate students is how do you do really rigorous, high-quality research that can get published in the top journals? So that you can prepare yourself for a career as a scholar and, you know, academic. So going into being a professor at a management school is the sort of default path and one that I’m very excited to do. I will say that for me, you know, partly because of my interest in sustainability, this is an area where its, like, impact is really important to me. Because it’s, these are, I mean these are issues that we don’t have, we actually don’t have very much time on carbon and water and some of these other really critical issues. So I need my work to be having an impact. Part of that I can do through teaching and through teaching in the MIT style, which I really like, which is this kind of action learning. But, you know I’d like to be able to do research that’s very close to practice that’s very engaged in, what I think of is engaged scholarship. That’s a term by Andrew Van De Ven that I really like, which is that the questions and the problems that are being co-designed between the academics and the practitioners. And I think MIT also excels in that kind of stuff so this has been a re-
ally good training ground for me.

Michael: When did sustainability pique your interest?

Jason: Well, so I was born and grew up in Boulder, Colorado. And you can’t grow up in Boulder without a sense of the beauty of the Earth and, you know our, the value of sustaining it. You know, particularly because you’re so close to Denver. And I just grew up going on hikes in Chautauqua above Boulder with my dad and looking out over sort of the brown cloud and into Denver where there was a lot of metal and oil refining going on and as well as a lot of car commuting. And you could just see sort of okay here’s the environment and there’s industry and there’s like, there’s a conflict here. But then I also grew up, you know my parents are entrepreneurs, are successful business people, and they had a very you know, proactive, pragmatic approach to solving problems, making the world better through good products, they work in the wheelchair seating industry. And so the idea that you could innovate your way out of some of these conflicts between environment and business is something that has always been, you know on my mind. And I had specifically come to Sloan to be able to take the work I’d done earlier in my career around organizational change and leadership and specifically applied to the sustainability questions.

Michelle: It’s sounds like a lot of careful thought and a lot of your previous work and school experiences have lead you to get here and you know taking the doctoral route. Do you have any advice or insights for someone that’s say going through the same thought process, prospective students?

Jason: You know there are a few things that made me want to cross that threshold and it’s not a decision that I advise anybody to take lightly because it’s a big undertaking and it can be quite painful. One is that I really wanted to sort of find my own voice. I wanted to have a sphere in which I was establishing some expertise, in which I was writing, in which I could say, you know I know a lot about x. You know, which is turning out to be, you know, this domain of cross-sectoral collaboration. And so if I go out in the world and people are trying to set up collaborations like this or they’re trying to solve these complicated problems with a lot of different parties involved, they might come to me for help. The other thing was I just love the University context. I love being in a place that is such a nexus of, you know people, and ideas, and people coming, particularly sort of the educational aspect of it, and people coming in for a key developmental elements in their lives to learn something new and to be able to define themselves and being part of that process I think is a real honor and a real gift. So you know the PhD is kind of a real critical step in that path.

Michelle: Now have you seen, since you’ve been at this for a number of years, a difference in the commitment to sustainability or, with some of the research that you’ve done, the companies, since the economic downturn or is it more important than ever do you think to folks out there?

Jason: That’s a great question. I think, you know some economists who think, who feel that recessions are really healthy for the economy because they sort of shake
out all the dross and some of the firms that aren’t supposed to be succeeding kind of don’t. You know I think the same thing, I guess, so if I look on the bright side of this, you know so on the one hand it’s trouble because in a lot of companies having a longer term view, having a broader systems view of their stakeholders and their social environmental impacts is nice to have, and in a tough economic time it might be some of the things that they cut in an effort to kind of make the short term numbers work and to keep their people in staff, just some of their most important stakeholders. That said, you know, I kind of look on the bright side of it, which is that I’m seeing the downturn force companies to really figure out what matters to them and to focus on things that are really strategic. So, you know, sustainability is not the same thing, so I draw a distinction between kind of corporate social responsibility and sustainability. Corporate social responsibility is, I mean I like that term because it’s about thinking beyond your walls, but that label has come to describe a lot of things that could be called philanthropy, that are basically, you know, companies giving money to good causes with their profits, which I think are really important because you’re building on the wealth of the society to build your own wealth. And contributing something back it think is, I actually do think it’s when incumbent upon companies to do that. But in a downturn, them cutting back on some of those things, I can understand. Sustainability to me is a more comprehensive concept that includes the economic viability and sustainability of the business itself. So, you know and it’s the same thing with, you know climate change it’s like, the way the policies are moving, being able to reduce your carbon footprint is a really critical strategic thing. Not to mention companies that have real vulnerabilities around climate change itself. They need to be medicating it. So you know, I think companies that are really serious about because they do understand that strategic importance, are cutting back as much in the downturn.

Michelle: Well this has been really interesting and informative and we wish you the best of luck in the rest of your research and your teaching duties and hopefully you can find that impact that you’re looking for.

Jason: Thank you.