

Sustainable Human Resource Management as A Tool to Build Sustainability

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Abstract

This short article aims to prove that there is a need to study sustainable human resource management (HRM). We state that sustainable HRM is necessary to achieve sustainability at the global level. We also show that, despite the development of research on sustainable HRM, this concept is so complex and interdisciplinary that it still requires exploration.

Keywords: sustainable lifestyle, sustainable human resources management, sustainable development

Introduction: Genesis and the idea of sustainable development concept

In the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (1972) an effort to define so-called sustainable development (SD) in political, ecological, economic and social terms was made (*Stockholm Declaration...*). It has become a challenge for communities around the world to find solutions to environmental sustainability and improve the quality of life in relation to environmental pollution. To guide the efforts of international organizations and state authorities, the UN General Assembly established a special World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). This commission prepared a report, “Our Common Future” (1987). The report developed a definition of sustainable development that has since brought the concept into the global spotlight.

The real milestone on the road to building SD was the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Two key documents were signed at that time: (1) *Rio Declaration* (1992), a document describing the general concept of SD, (2) *Agenda 21* (1992). Agenda 21 is a special document. It does not only provide an action plan for the quality of human life in the present and future generations; it is also a roadmap for sustainable global development for the 21st century, with recommendations for states, governments, intergovernmental and international organisations and societies (*United Nations...*, 2000).

The next Rio Summit (Rio+20) created the document “The Future We Want”, which defined the goals and measures to be used to realize the concept of SD. Subsequently, the UN developed the detailed 2030 Agenda for SD (*Transforming...*, 2015), which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Agenda marks the beginning of a new era in national action and international cooperation, committing all countries to a range of development activities. Today, sustainable development is recognised as a multidimensional concept. That is why there are a lot of sustainable development definitions. According to Goodland and Ledec (1987) sustainable development is a process of economic transformation involving the optimization of current economic and social benefits without jeopardizing the possibility of success of such benefits in the future. The Brundtland Commission outlined that sustainable development is development that meets current needs without compromising the chances of meeting them in the future (*Agenda 21*, 1992). Therefore, social and economic interests are considered paramount, as it means economic development that not only meets current human needs, but also creates opportunities for future generations (Håk et al., 2016). Above all, sustainable development aims to achieve social progress, environmental sustainability and economic growth (Zhai & Chang, 2019).

Sustainable development holistically captures the various elements of civilization. It encompasses the management of natural, human and economic resources, the management of space, institutional solutions, the moral sphere, the education of consciousness and the choice of a particular lifestyle. In addition, it is assumed that the successful

achievement of sustainable development at the global level depends on actions at the micro level, i.e. the attitudes and behaviour of businesses (Bansal, 2005).

Sustainable human resource management

As Ehnert (et al., 2014, p. 10) points “while there is consensus about the crucial role of companies in sustainable development, the task to translating this idea into a meaningful concept at the business level is challenging”. The same statement can be applied to one of the sub-processes conducted by a sustainable organization, which is sustainable human resource management (SHRM). There is a major lacuna in SHRM research regarding the theoretical context of its adoption or implementation (Anlesinya et al., 2023). Moreover, there is little empirical evidence on SHRM practices (Lange, 2016; de Prins et al., 2020). While the idea of sustainability is evolving (Baum, 2018), there is no “consistent” literature on sustainable HRM (Ehnert & Harry, 2012), which is understood by researchers in different ways.

The first works on SHRM appeared in the late 1990s in Germany and Switzerland (Müller-Christ and Remer, 1999; Zaugg, et al. 2001). The German approach assumed that it was rational for business to invest in relations with the business environment, because environments are “sources of resources”. Müller-Christ and Remer (1999) defined SHRM as “what companies themselves must do in their environment to have constant access to skilled human resources” (p. 76). In its early stages of development, SHRM referred to *Socially Responsible HRM* activities. For example, Thom and Zaugg (2004) defined sustainable HRM as “the long-term oriented conceptual approaches and activities aimed at socially responsible and economically appropriate recruitment and selection, development, deployment, and release of employees” (p. 217). The purpose of implementing Socially Responsible HRM was to minimize negative impacts on business and to reduce business risks (Aust et al. 2020).

In recent years new ideas have appeared in the area of HRM. Green HRM, as one of them, emphasises the importance of the environmental dimension in HRM. Therefore, questions arise in scientific works how to integrate and implement environmental sustainability in existing HR functions (Renwick et al., 2013). Even more advanced is the Triple Bottom Line HRM model, which is characterised by “maximizing and balancing economic, environmental, and social organisational objectives” (Bush, 2019, p.2). HRM is seen here as a general approach to people management that focuses both on employee-centred practices (such as employee well-being or employee engagement) and takes into account the impact of HRM on its social and ecological environments (Ehnert, 2009; Andersson et al. 2013). A completely new way of thinking about sustainability HRM can be found in model Common Good HRM, which assumes that the fundamental duty of business is ‘effective contribution to solving the challenges related to sustainable development that we face together’ (Dyllick and Muff, 2016, p. 156) and that the long-term self-reliance of business organizations is in the interest of sustaining our collective livelihood (Ehnert, 2009). Instead of focusing on an economic goal, Common Good HRM's main goal is to support business leaders and employees to contribute to the world's ecological and social progress.

In addition to definition considerations, many publications in this area are devoted to the question of what HRM should look like to deserve the name “sustainable”. For example, Zaugg et al. (2001) argue that it is self-responsibility and employee participation in decision-making, Cohen et al. (2012) points to equality, well-being and employee development. One of the most complete approaches is the analysis distinguishing eleven characteristics of SHRM are: long-term orientation, care for employees, care for the environment, profitability, employee participation and social dialogue, employee development, external partnership, flexibility, compliance beyond labor law, employee cooperation, justice and equality (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018)

Sustainable HRM as the concept that needs to be explored

We agree with Ehnert (2012) that at the level of a changing organizational environment, the purpose of HRM is currently in transition. Multidimensional SHRM model is emerging that takes into account long-term influences such as climate change, biodiversity, urbanization, and workforce demographics rather than simply quarterly returns and market-driven, short-term financial issues (Aust et al. 2020). This is why we believe that research on sustainable HRM practices should be conducted. We intend to explore the role of HRM in shaping the sustainable lifestyle of employees. A sustainable lifestyle is expressed (among others) in sustainable consumption. Sustainable consumption and corporate sustainability (also within HRM) are necessary for sustainable development to take place at the global (mega-economic) level. We are convinced that exploring the sustainable activities at the micro level is not only cognitively interesting, but also (from the sustainable development point of view) necessary.

We realize that our research intentions are difficult to implement. Both the idea of sustainable HRM and the concept of sustainable lifestyle are multi-contexted and thus difficult to operationalize. Therefore filling the identified research gap will not only be a challenge for us and also a real intellectual adventure.

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