
GREEN HRM: TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Environmental management is recognized as one of the most appropriate tools used to manage environmental degradation issues. Organizations around the world have begun to implement changes in their organizational culture and structure to put the sustainable development concept in the forefront and include environmentally friendly practices as an essential part of their business. The aim of this paper is to attempt to ascertain, summarize and explain the specificities of sustainable development, the characteristics of its environmental, economic and social dimension for organizations, the benefits of implementing the concept of sustainability in organizations worldwide, as well as the importance and advantages of embedding sustainability in human resource management (HRM) practices in order to reach a new concept worldwide - green human resource management. Even though green HRM is still in the initial stage of development many organizations are already accepting green initiatives in all areas of HRM. Having in mind that HRM should serve as a foundation of every business, green human resource management should include all policies and procedures that will transform the roles of employees so they may contribute in different ways to the achievement of environmental sustainability. The conclusion of this paper is that HRM has an opportunity to play a vital role in driving the organizations to implement green practices and become more sustainable. The significant contribution of green HRM should be in terms of raising environmental awareness among employees and their readiness to perform green activities, while environmental behaviour learned at work may be easily transformed into employees' lifestyle.

Keywords

Green human resource management, sustainability, environmental sustainability, human resource management, environment, sustainable development

JEL Classification

M50, Q50

Introduction

Continuous environmental degradation mainly caused by the human factor has created the need for putting more emphasis on sustainable development. Industrial and economic development increased further devastation of the environment which led to the state where preservation of the environment and natural resources have become tasks of vital importance for the whole society. Climate change, regulatory pressures and societal demands continuously emphasize the need for greater environmental and social

responsibility. As achieving sustainability becomes a key focus, more organizations have realized that they need to change the way they are doing business to reach this goal. Organizations around the world have started to implement changes in their organizational structure and organizational culture in order to put the sustainable development concept in the forefront.

Environmental management is recognized as one of the most appropriate tools used to manage environmental degradation issues. It refers to a set of practices implemented by a specific group in order to preserve the natural environment. Sustainable companies need to consider environmental impacts in the process of making business decisions. Environmentally friendly activities have become equally important as other business activities and have grown into an essential part of every business policy. Today organizations are facing uncertainty regarding the ways to implement efficiently the principles of green management and improve the sustainability of business (Boselie et al., 2001). There is a wide range of variables which influence the adoption of environmental strategies by an organization, including financial indicators, pressure of stakeholders and the image of the company (Gonzalez-Benito, 2006).

However, the implementation of environmentally friendly programs is not possible without the contribution of human factor. Therefore, human resource management function has a critical role in achieving success in sustainability-oriented organizations. It is claimed that greater power of green HRM policy leads to higher intensity of adoption of environment management system within an organization (Bohdanovicz et al., 2011). Having in mind that human resources are an essential part of the actual implementation of environmentally friendly policies and practices (Renwick, 2012), in order to reach environmental sustainability goals organizations need to include human resource management processes to influence their employees toward a green way of thinking.

The aim of this paper is to explain the meaning of environmental, economic and social dimension of sustainable development for organizations, the benefits of implementing the concept of sustainability in organizations worldwide, as well as the importance of embedding sustainability in HRM practices in order to reach a new concept - green human resource management function.

Dimensions of Sustainable Development

More and more organizations around the world implement principles of sustainable development in their operations (Kim, 2018). The most widely used concept of sustainable development was presented by United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987. Today this concept is supported by various institutions, companies and governments around the world (Almada & Borges, 2018). According to WCED sustainable development is defined as the ability to fulfil the needs of the present generation without threatening the potential of future generations to content their own needs (WCED, 1987).

The aim of sustainable development is to improve the standard of living while preserving the environment, natural resources and ecosystems resources for future generations (Zoogah, 2011; Seliger, 2007). Implemented in the appropriate way sustainability bring numerous benefits to the organization, such as competitive advantage, improved efficiency and increased value of the company (Kim, 2018). It may also increase employees' satisfaction, improve their growth and enable introduction of innovations in the organization (Fairfield et al., 2011).

Sustainable development consists of three mutually supported and dependent dimensions: economic, social and environmental. Even though the liaison among these three dimensions of sustainable development is important, they are often seen in a different way by different groups (Gollagher, 2013), which makes the implementation of the concept of sustainable

development difficult since it is focused on the overall sustainability of the business while at the same time it needs to respond to the interests of various stakeholders.

In order to be economically sustainable organizations need to maintain a continuous production of goods and services, to enable effective use of workforce and resources, to be responsible to the regulations set by the government, to keep external debt on a reasonable level and to avoid severe disproportions in the sector that could have a negative impact on agricultural and industrial production. Social sustainable development focuses on improving living conditions and overall human safety, while socially sustainable organization is expected to focus on health, education, gender equity, adequate provision of social services, political responsibility and involvement.

The concept of environmental sustainability (including preserving and more efficient use of natural resources and energy) has become recognized in the contemporary business world and research has shown that it may be successfully implemented. Environmental sustainability stands for “meeting the resource and services needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them” (WCED, 1987). Environmentally sustainable organizations are focused on the preservation of the natural environment and resources, i.e. protection of biodiversity, atmospheric stability and other ecosystem functions. They are characterized by stable foundation of resources, avoiding overutilization of renewable resources and exhaustion of non-renewable ones to a certain degree. Environmental sustainability requires acquiring new knowledge which will enable further development of advantages of the environment.

Greening the Business

Simultaneously with the concept of sustainable development, the green business concept started to develop. Increased environmental awareness over the last two decades influenced the implementation of green practices in organizations worldwide. First green initiatives were implemented in the business world in 1980s.

Any green activity related to the operations of an organization can be considered as business greening (Buyyise & Verbeke, 2003). Hence, the organization which has incorporated green practices in its operations is being referred to as “green business” (Peattie, 2001). Green business refers to an institution which produces green output (Brown & Ratledge, 2011) and enables the achievement of a positive financial turnover utilizing the opportunities provided by the nature without damaging the environment. According to Cooney (2008) green business is a business with a long-lasting commitment to environmental principles placed in its business operations.

Green business provides many benefits for the organization, including enabling access to new markets, cost reduction, increased productivity and a healthier environment. Sustainable organizational practices should be accompanied with social responsibility since green business is being environmentally responsible, while at the same time tends to be accountable for the activities that involve managing human resources.

Nowadays terms such as “green jobs” and “green employees” are used more and more often. Organizations are increasingly expected and required to support environmental strategy development in order to improve sustainability performance.

Embedding Sustainability in HRM Practices

An organization that wishes to implement the green concept should determine the importance of sustainability for the business, define a sustainable development plan, and review the capabilities and resources available for successful implementation of the green strategy. Sustainable human resource management supports the “greening” of an organization (Cohen et al., 2010). Therefore, the inclusion of environmental practices into HRM enables the achievement of sustainability of an organization. Sustainable human

resource management refers to “the utilization of HR tools to help embed a sustainability strategy in the organization and the creation of an HRM system that contributes to the sustainable performance of the firm” (Cohen et al., 2010).

Managing green human capital plays an important role in developing ecological practices within an organization (Jabbour et al., 2010). Since environmentally friendly actions of an organization are encouraged by human factor, employees need to be involved in this process. Environmentally-oriented approach may be implemented only by employees who have a positive attitude and respect towards the environment (Jabbour et al., 2010). Thus, organizations need motivated and committed employees to help the company achieve its environmental objectives.

If an organization is considered environmentally friendly, it may inspire employees to accept these environmental values. The best way to incorporate environmental values into an organization is to change the organizational culture. Organizational culture is considered a good indicator showing whether environmental management has been implemented successfully within a company (Brio et al., 2007). A sustainable HRM will make a sustainable corporate culture which will eventually lead to achieving sustainable business (Ogbechie et al. 2016).

Each employee (both those working in managerial and non-managerial positions) is contributing to the progress towards achieving sustainability. Employees may play the following roles in the process of greening the organization: preservationist, conservationist, non-polluter and maker (Opatha, 2014). Preservationists are responsible for the protection of the natural environment from hazard and changes that can harm the environment; conservationists are concerned for the environment in the way that they minimize correspondence with the environment to increase its durability; non-polluters implement various practices that should prevent or minimize further pollution of air, water and soil; and makers are responsible for the creation of a greater number of quality green surfaces and work on their expansion.

Performing HRM sustainably refers to creating and delivering core HRM processes founded on the principles of sustainability (Cohen et al., 2010). The role of HR department in an organization oriented towards achieving sustainable development is to perform implementation, development and improvement of the system based on the sustainability. In such an organization employees are becoming drivers of organizational change focused on environment preservation. The achievement of environmental objectives largely depends on motivation and readiness of management and employees to accept environmental values. The commitment of management of the company influences the eagerness to change the organization towards achieving the desired environmental goals. Employee’s motivation is of crucial importance in this process since it influences the course of changes and the amount of employee’s commitment to environmental issues (Meyers, 2009).

Green Human Resource Management

A global concern for the preservation of environment influenced the organizations to integrate the green concept into already existing fields of management. This created a tendency to implement green ideas also in the field of human resource management, thus introducing a new concept - Green human resource management (Green HRM). Green human resource management links human resource management with the environmentally friendly actions of an organization and is considered one of essential aspects of sustainability of an organization. In order to incorporate the green concept into human resource management successfully, HRM policies and processes need to be associated with tree main aspects of sustainability - economic, environmental and social (Yusliza et al., 2015). However, this concept is still not commonly recognized among researchers and academics around the world.

One of the main goals of green HRM is to “green” the employees and the whole organization. Green HRM may be defined as the utilization of human resource management policies and practices with a goal to encourage sustainable use of resources and raise environmental awareness of an organization (Zoogah, 2011). It refers to approaches, frameworks and activities used to position employees within the green movement bringing various benefits both for the organization and the environment (Opatha, 2014). Green human resource management includes all environmentally friendly practices contributing to the preservation of the environment, and these green HRM practices need to be in harmony with the objectives of sustainable development.

Human resource management should serve as a foundation of every business aiming to successfully implement environmentally friendly practices and policies due to the fact that it is accountable for the implementation of green policies and activities. It has been widely accepted that HRM is primarily responsible for planning, recruitment, selection, training development of employees, performance appraisal, reward and compensation. Having this in mind, green human resource management should include all policies and procedures that will transform the roles of employees and in that way gain benefits on the business and individual level as well as on social and economic level. Environmentally friendly practices and concepts are being introduced to all areas of human resource management. Therefore, organizations have started to implement green recruiting and selection, green training and development, green performance management, green employee relations etc.

HRM has an essential role in establishing sustainable strategies. It needs to integrate the sustainability into HRM functions of an organization. The implementation of environmental elements into human resource management should be performed systematically so that employees can control environmental management (Jabbour, 2011). To achieve this both employees and employer need to share the same values.

Many organizations become green to promote themselves as desired employers. More and more job candidates are looking for employment in conscious organizations which nurture specific values (Hanna et al., 2000). It is thought that maintaining a corporate image of a green organization will attract highly-qualified and motivated staff (Greening & Turban, 2000) and improve employee satisfaction.

Sustainable organizations are looking for employees who are not concerned only on financial benefits, but also on the environment. In order to achieve and maintain the green concept, an organization should recruit those individuals who are interested in environmental issues (Haddock-Millar et al., 2015). Therefore HRM should adapt the staffing process to ensure that environmentally friendly policies and practices are being implementing in recruitment and selection strategies as well as retaining top talent (Ogbechie et al., 2016).

Even though expectations of their employees may be defined in company’s environmental policy, it is not enough to enable their effective implementation. Engagement of each employee is required to achieve the environmental goals of a company. HRM should create and implement the strategies that would foster employees’ engagement in environment and involve them as drivers of sustainability. It may introduce employee training and development programs that raise employee awareness of sustainability issues, while in terms of performance appraisal HRM should be responsible for developing and implementing measurable sustainability metrics to assess employees’ performance (Ogbechie et al., 2016). Additionally, employees should be encouraged to propose and perform sustainability initiatives and ideas and participate in sustainability projects and they should be rewarded for adhering to sustainable business practices (Ogbechie et al., 2016).

Employees may contribute in different ways to achievement of environmental sustainability of a company, e.g. through reducing energy and water consumption, increasing recycling, or limiting carbon emissions, reducing air-conditioning temperatures, unplugging electrical

devices and shutting down computers when not in use, switching off lights in unused offices and meeting rooms, reducing the amount of printing, or organizing virtual meetings to reduce travelling (Cohen et al., 2010).

Green HRM provides various benefits not only at the business level but also on the individual level of every employee since knowledge and experience gained within the organization could be easily transferred into the employee's lifestyle. Thus, environmental behaviour and environmentally friendly attitudes learned within the company could be easily adopted in the personal lives of employees. If an employee values environmental behaviour at work, most likely he/she will imply the same values in his/her private life which indicates that environmental awareness and attitudes may originate both from personal and work life. An organization can use one of the two approaches to encourage environmentally friendly behavior - it may promote environmental practices from a workplace to employees' private life or vice versa (Muster & Schrader, 2011). Both approaches will result in achieving a broader range of accepted environmentally friendly practices among employees.

Conclusions

Environmental management plays one of the essential roles in achieving sustainable development (Barrow, 2006). Green human resource management has been recognized as a HRM strategy that supports environmental management in organizations with a potential to become a crucial part of environmental management. Advantages that emerge from the incorporation of green human resource management are a result of the increased awareness about environmental issues as well as increased commitment to the concept of sustainability.

Many organizations are already accepting green initiatives in human resource management. HRM has an opportunity to play a vital role in driving the organizations to implement green practices and become more sustainable. HRM should also contribute in terms of employing environmentally aware employees and raising awareness and readiness to perform green activities among existing employees. In order to achieve this HRM should work together with the company's management and other departments to develop practices and policies that align with the sustainability standards.

However, green HRM is still in the pioneering stage and it is yet to take a leading role in driving sustainability issues. Green human resource management has a lot of potential for development in the future. Even though there is a considerable amount of research in this field, there is still a lack of empirical research in the academic sphere in the context of green HRM. Further research is needed to provide a deeper understanding of how HRM practices may help in the process of greening the organization and improve the connection with the environmental management.

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