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Future prospects of sustainability

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Abstract

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Since the United Nation's World Commission on Environment and Development published its report in 1987, the notions of sustainability and sustainable development have attracted increasing interest in the field of business and management and recently also of human resource management (HRM). Thus, the aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it endeavours to deconstruct the concept of social sustainability and to explore its evolutionary meaning, highlighting the shift from the analysis of traditional 'hard' social policy areas towards emerging 'softer' research and policy-making themes. It is important to clarify that this paper does not seek to provide operational definitions of, or normative prescriptions for, social sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, HRM, Strategies, Global

Introduction

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

- The concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs."

Human Resource Management, sustainability, Sustainable HRM

Since the United Nation's World Commission on Environment and Development published its report in 1987, the notions of sustainability and sustainable development have attracted increasing interest in the field of business and management and recently also of human resource management (HRM). The objective was to develop an agenda for global change and a common future for mankind and has been concerned with the question of how to advance societal and economic development without endangering natural living conditions for the majority of humanity.

Today, the political and societal sustainability debate focuses more than ever around the challenges arising from, the natural, social and financial resources of the world being insufficient for a third of the current population of human beings, to have the material standards of living of the richest people who, possibly, make up barely 10% of the overall numbers. Second, the debate also relates to resource-intensive lifestyle of industrialized countries and our contribution to resource depletion.

Third, the sustainability debate at the corporate and HRM level deals with practices and strategies that produce significant impact on an organization's natural and social resources and environments which then influences the organization's and HRM's future management conditions and business environment. Businesses being wasteful with resources (natural and human among others) might have made sense when there appeared to be a limitless supply.

The consequences of such consumption without balancing renewal or reproduction had widespread implications for current and future generations especially in Europe and the USA. HRM contributed to the bubble through rewards given for short term illusions of performance which turned out to not reflect the reality of value creation and for plundering pension resources of current and former employees so that the remainder is insufficient to meet the pension commitments.

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But now that we have more clarity of the global limits and restrictions businesses seem to be more willing to look at sustainability. The recent interest in integrating the idea of sustainability into mainstream economic thinking is therefore not surprising although, in the past, actors seem to become aware of the relevance of sustainability thinking in particular or, perhaps only, in situations of a serious crisis or resource shortages. Situations of crisis or resource shortages, however, are no guarantee for sustainable business behavior.

On the contrary we also observe that in times of crisis and focus upon immediate survival then sustainability is discarded which means that current generations of decision-makers in organizations endure at the cost of overusing resources thus depriving those who follow after. In spite of the increasing interest in practice and in scholarship of how to make organizations not only economically but also ecologically, socially etc. sustainable, research on sustainability and HRM has, until recently, remained surprisingly. It is only in the past decade that we observe an increase in publications on sustainability and HRM and many HR colleagues seem to remain critical of the concept. Why, however, is sustainability relevant for the HR function and how can this concept be fruitfully defined and applied? There are two major lines of arguments to support the importance of a sustainability perspective on HRM. The first line of argument refers to the relationship of the organization to its economic and social environments and is mainly linked to the societal and ecological sustainability debate (macro level). The key argument here is that the HRM field can (or should) no longer neglect the societal discourse on sustainability and corporate sustainability because this is dealt with in practice and that HRM could make important contributions to corporate sustainable development. The second line of arguments addresses the internal elements and relationships of an HRM system and is linked to the individual and HRM level debate (meso and micro levels).

This debate is linked to the observation of scarce human resources, of aging workforces and of increasing work-related health problems and the argument is that fostering the sustainability of the HRM system itself becomes a 'survival strategy' for organizations dependent on high quality employees. The objective of this special issue is to provide contributions to both streams as an introduction into research on Sustainable HRM and to encourage future research and debates on this issue. This editorial is structured to guide the reader through the key issues. As the academic debate on Sustainable HRM is a relatively recent one, we start by introducing briefly in the difficulties of defining sustainability and in the literatures on sustainability and HRM. Next, we present short summaries of the contributing articles in this Special Issue. Finally, we propose how future research could develop from existing studies of sustainability and HRM.

Future directions for Sustainable

In this Special Issue we highlight the view that Sustainable HRM has the potential to become a new field for HRM research. In practice, there are many problems which have not been solved such as how organizations can become more sustainable, can make their HRM (and other sub-systems) sustainable, can co-exist within their social and ecological environments instead of overexploiting them and

how HRM practices and strategies can become a core function in this changing set of circumstances. Recognizing that many authors now use the term Sustainable HRM in practice, teaching and research, we believe that this is an important emerging area of inquiry. Certainly, the topic does not yet have the clear lines and directions of more mature areas of study but academics, practitioners and especially, students see that the subject is of substantial importance. We are aware that there is no 'consistent' literature on Sustainable HRM. We also see different approaches to both sustainability and HRM with their origin in diverse contexts and disciplines and we do not think that there will soon be a consistency within the emergence of this area but instead we predict a plurality of competing approaches. In the same way as there is no longer one unchallenged way of measuring organizational effectiveness we consider it an advantage that there be a diversity of ways of examining this topic. Applications in practice and in future research will show which conceptualizations are more helpful to solve practical problems, to guide critical reflection on HR and whether Sustainable HRM indeed becomes a more widely accepted, applied and meaningful concept or whether there are compelling barriers in practice and in research which prevent the further development of a dedicated topic rather than subsume within other areas of research and practice. In the context of this Special Issue, we point out possible routes for research on the role of HRM in initiating or implementing sustainability strategies in organizations and on the role of HRM in developing functional systems which are sustainable- areas which we believe would be especially fruitful for future conceptual and empirical research.

Research on the role of HRM in initiating or implementing sustainability strategies

Prior research on the role of HRM in implementing or even initiating sustainability strategies is relatively rare. However, several authors have argued that both sustainability and CSR initiatives in organizations do have direct relevance for the HRM field and therefore need to be considered both in HRM practice and in research. This, however, is not the only reason for dealing with this subject. The topic is also important in the context of maintaining and fostering the HRM function's strategic role in the organization. Ecological, social and economic sustainability seems as if it will be one of the most important challenges for organizations in the 21st century and people in organizations are those who need to initiate, implement and welcome new and viable strategies and practices. Therefore, people management and HRM can play a key role in guiding these transformations and change processes while not leaving this to CSR and environmental sustainability functions. Research on the role of HRM in initiating and implementing sustainability strategies and practices is complex as we, and the contributors to this edition, have shown. This research involves multiple dimensions of sustainability, multiple levels of analysis, while needing to consider both local and global scopes with short- and long-term effects whilst knowledge of multiple disciplines is essential for advancing the field of study.

Multiple dimensions of sustainability

We understand that since the Brundtland Commission's report, many actors link the idea of sustainability to at least three dimensions (economic, social and ecological

sustainability). Nevertheless some authors have emphasized the importance of a fourth dimension- human sustainability. Prior research on Sustainable HRM has often looked at two or three rather than all four sustainability dimensions (e.g., either the economic and ecological or the economic and social dimensions). Although, we have argued, a variety of ways of considering and defining sustainability is useful at this stage in the development of study we do believe that there needs to be more effort to produce sound and clear definition(s) of the term 'sustainability' even if a series of sub-definitions results under a broad banner. Without such efforts to define the term it can be used and abused as a means of 'green-washing' organizational objectives and actions so become devalued and ignored. This would be a sad consequence of the absence of agreement on characterizing a concept which is definitely of great importance. In addition, if sustainability and holistic thinking (in terms of economic, ecological, social and human sustainability) are to be taken seriously, there needs to be more HRM research looking at multiple dimensions simultaneously because it is likely that complex, non-linear interdependencies between different sustainability dimensions require to be considered (Ehnert *et al.*, forthcoming). For example, organizations need a much better understanding around whether implementing Sustainable HRM can foster or perhaps even inhibit 'greening' activities in the organization (or vice versa – whether 'greening' of the organization can impact on the way that people are managed).

Other examples include how Sustainable HRM can contribute to developing a 'sustainability mindset' in the organization, about the interrelations between human and ecological sustainability etc. For future HRM research, it is important to explore the role of the function in commencing, measuring, assessing and guiding sustainability initiatives in multiple dimensions.

Sustainability in the global context

Internationalization and globalization play a major and increasing role in management and HRM practice and research. International HRM and comparative HRM have emerged as strong areas of research with high practical relevance. It is particularly necessary that those with a grounding in research and practice in developed economies consider the role of sustainability within emerging (and not yet emerging) economies where, for very many people, day to day survival is more important than thinking of future benefit. For people in the UK, for example, whose ancestors destroyed native forests to build warships or create pasture for sheep farming to tell those in the tropics to not cut down rain forest because this action will harm humanity and the environment can be seen as hypocritical. Instead reasons for more sustainable approaches have to be considered and justified in terms which are relevant to the local, as well as global, context so attention can be drawn to the serious consequences for the future generations of overexploitation of resources or examples of poor practices such as those in the UK can be admitted and in future avoided. We must also not fall into the trap of believing that every society or economy will develop in the same way as those of the European Union or North America (see Ehnert *et al.*, forthcoming). As we see in the papers within this edition even exploring the topic of sustainability and HRM is very difficult within national boundaries (where single sets of

laws and limited ranges of practices occur) so we can understand that when we deal with sustainability across borders, especially between rich and poor, the challenges are multiplied and complexity increased. It is therefore not surprising, that scholars also advocate including an international dimension into research on Sustainable HRM. We strongly support this call for additional research considering the international dimension of HRM for three reasons. First, especially multinational, organizations face increasing pressures from investors and other stakeholders to report on their environmental and social performance in addition to their economic performance. As a consequence, ecological and social performance indicators such as those from GRI (Global Reporting Initiative) play an increasingly important role and also affect core HRM issues. Second, the overall debate on sustainability and CSR is characterized by values and assumptions that might not be shared in the same way everywhere in the world. For example, the notion of 'long-term' that is constitutive for research about sustainability can be interpreted differently across different cultures. Also, the sustainability debate addresses values in the relationship of human beings to their environment -e.g. to live in harmony with or dominate the environment. These values are not shared everywhere, especially when the need for more economically and socially sustainable business behavior is abused or is not widely accepted. Third, it is likely that MNEs increasingly face paradoxes, dilemmas and tensions in their supply chains with regard to managing human resources in a sustainable way. For example, one of the questions frequently asked is 'should organizations implement Sustainable HRM for home country employees only or also for the 'cheaper' workforce in developing countries? Questions to be addressed in future research could include 'what is the role of HRM in sharing resources across borders and across generations?' which sustainability indicators are relevant from an HRM perspective and how could these be integrated in HRM practices.

Sustainability and multiple levels of analysis

Following our understanding of Sustainable HRM, multiple levels of analysis are relevant for future research. At a macro level of analysis, sustainability refers to a sustainable societal development and is relevant for business organizations when considering the viability of systems which deliver critical resources on which the organization and HRM depend is concerned, when organizational legitimacy is at risk and HRM is made responsible for this potential and when certain HRM practices and strategies foster unsustainable and irresponsible behavior of people in the organization. Future research could address questions on the impact of specific HRM practices and strategies on the ecological, social, human and economic sustainability with interrelations to society and potentially include questions of intra- and intergenerational justice and resource allocations. At a meso level of analysis, sustainability refers to the development of sustainable organizations, work and HRM systems. Research could tackle the hypothesis that in order to realize economically, socially and ecological sustainable organizations, sustainability also needs to be realized in organizational sub-systems such as HRM. One potential line of enquiry would be whether all HRM sub-functions need to be both efficient and sustainable or if organizations can be sustainable if some entities or sub functions follow the logic of efficiency and others follow the logic of sustainability.

Finally, sustainability at the individual level of analysis generally refers to human sustainability which could be defined as the capacity to regenerate and develop discrete human resources. Future research may usefully address questions such as how sustainability at the individual level affects overall HRM and organizational sustainability.

Conclusion

We believe that separating the needs of the present from the needs of those who will come after us is a sensible way to analyze scenarios and assess the impact of policies, because it clarifies the choices

that need to be made. We propose to call the former well-being and the latter sustainability. This prevents sustainability from becoming an empty phrase indistinguishable from 'goodness'. Well-being mostly corresponds with the social and economic dimensions of the 'triple bottom line', sustainability with the environmental dimension. When assessing the impact of a policy on well-being, the distinction between social and economic dimensions is not helpful and often impossible to make in practice. It is better to use sociological insights to assign values to the different aspects of well-being, and economics to combine those values into an overall assessment. In arriving at actual measurements (inevitable for comparing different possible outcomes), some important but imponderable costs and benefits may have to be left out because they cannot be expressed in quantitative terms. However, they should be left out only from the measurement, not from the assessment. In this way, decision-makers can at least see how much an unmeasured benefit will cost, or what has to be sacrificed for a certain increase in measured well-being. The concept of welfare may be useful as a subset of well-being—namely, that part of well-being that can be quantified and valued in money terms.

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