

## SUSTAINABLE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT –AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY FROM A PARADOXICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

When it comes to the adoption of HRM strategies and practises to simultaneously achieve financial, social, environmental, and HR regeneration goals, as well as to satisfy the competing demands of diverse stakeholders and increasingly the national legislative requirements of sustainability performance reporting, sustainable human resource management (HRM) is perceived as challenging the dominant models of strategic HRM. The analysis of sustainable HRM centres on tensions since the demands of different stakeholders are contradictory when viewed separately but connected when considered as a component of a larger, integrated whole. This interpretive study explores SHRM from a paradoxical perspective, recognizing the inherent tensions between economic goals and social and environmental responsibilities. In-depth interviews, focus groups, and document analysis are among the qualitative research techniques used in this study to investigate the viewpoints and experiences of HR managers, employees, and professionals working in a variety of organisations. The study employs qualitative research techniques, such as document analysis, focus groups, and in-depth interviews, to investigate the viewpoints and experiences of managers, employees, and HR professionals across a range of organisations. The goal of the research is to comprehend the dynamic interaction between seemingly incompatible influences, such as local community development versus global competitiveness, individual employee well-being versus organisational efficiency, and short-term profitability versus long-term social and environmental repercussions. The interpretive analysis reveals how HRM practises are integrated and modified to improve organisational resilience, encourage sustainable business practises, and increase employee engagement. Additionally, this study explores how HR policy, organisational culture, and leadership contribute to the alignment of the contradictory aspects of SHRM.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Human Resource Management, Interpretive Study, paradoxical perspective, organisational stakeholders.

### Introduction

The idea of sustainability has emerged as another catchphrase for the twenty-first century, in addition to the significance of managing people. This paper makes the case that while sustainability is a concept that should be included in HRM practise, its full potential has not yet been investigated. (Dyllick and Hockerts (2002), p.130) Sustainability was employed as a concept in business practise to promote discussions on environmental issues and the challenge of creating organisational change procedures connected to Sustainable Business Development (Rainey 2006). Depending on how the term is used, sustainability is defined as the availability of social or financial resources as well as corporate social responsibility (e.g., Dyllick and Hockerts 2002). HRM as a professional and academic discipline is based on the achievements of psychology and economics, among other fields, and it utilizes numerous theories such as leadership (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2020), motivation (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002), or stakeholder theory (Ferrary, 2009).

### Statement of the Problem

In the realm of contemporary business practices, the integration of sustainable principles within Human Resource Management (HRM) has gained substantial attention. However, this integration often faces paradoxical challenges. On one hand, organizations strive to adopt sustainable HRM practices to align with environmental and social responsibility goals. On the other hand, they encounter tensions and contradictions in balancing economic demands, employee expectations, and environmental stewardship. This study aims to explore these paradoxes in Sustainable Human Resource Management, examining the intricate interplay of sustainability objectives and HRM practices within organizational contexts. (pp241-271)

### **Objectives of the study:**

1. To investigate sustainable practises in human resource management from a paradoxical standpoint.
2. To offer sophisticated perspectives on the difficulties entities encounter.
3. To reveal the underlying conflicts, suggest viable solutions, and advance knowledge of how businesses might resolve the paradoxes in sustainable human resource management through qualitative analysis and interpretive techniques.

### **Research Questions:**

1. Which are the main paradoxes that organisations run into when trying to implement HRM practises that are sustainable?
2. What perceptions and interpretations of these paradoxes do organisational stakeholders have in relation to HRM?
3. What tactics do businesses use to resolve conflicts between HRM procedures and sustainable goals?
4. What effect do these paradoxes have on the culture of the company, employee engagement, and overall performance of the business?

### **Scope and Limitations of the study:**

Data collection will involve employees, HR managers, and organizational leaders to capture diverse perspectives. The study's findings may be context-specific and may not be universally applicable across all industries or organizational sizes. The qualitative nature of the research may limit the generalizability of the results. Time and resource constraints may limit the depth of the study in exploring all aspects of Sustainable HRM paradox.

### **Literature Review**

Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) is a strategic strategy that integrates environmental, social, and economic sustainability goals into the management of human resources within organisations. According to researchers like Jackson and Rudolph (2019), SHRM practises stress how critical it is to match HRM tactics with sustainable development in order to encourage and engage staff members in support of the company's overall sustainability goals.

In the view of Renwick, Redman, and Maguire (2013), green hiring, staff participation in environmental projects, and incorporating sustainability standards into performance reviews are examples of sustainable HRM practises.

These procedures represent a paradigm change that forces businesses to strike a balance between their social and environmental obligations and their financial goals. Smith and Lewis (2011) define paradoxes as apparent contradictions that exist simultaneously. In the context of HRM, the integration of sustainable practices often leads to paradoxical situations.

For instance, the tension between short-term financial goals and long-term sustainability objectives represents a classic paradox (Bansal, 2005). Paradox theory, as explained by Lewis (2000), suggests that effective management of these contradictions can lead to innovative solutions and organizational growth. Examining SHRM through a paradoxical lens allows for a deeper understanding of the tensions and contradictions inherent in the adoption of sustainable HRM practices.

Research by Pratt and Ashforth (2003) demonstrates the significance of interpretive approaches in unraveling the paradoxes faced by organizations, highlighting the importance of context-specific understanding and the subjective interpretations of HRM practices.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

While existing literature provides valuable insights into SHRM, paradox theory, and interpretive studies in HRM, there is a notable gap in understanding how organizations interpret and manage paradoxes within sustainable HRM. This study aims to fill this gap by conducting an in-depth interpretive analysis, unraveling the underlying tensions, and offering practical solutions for businesses striving to balance sustainability goals with HRM practices.

## **Theoretical Framework**

**Paradox Theory in Human Resource Management:** The application of paradox theory to HRM indicates that HR practitioners frequently handle competing expectations and aims. For instance, HR managers might have to strike a compromise between the requirement to uphold organisational control and the need for employee empowerment. They might need to strike a compromise between encouraging individual inventiveness and following set organisational protocols. These are instances of HRM paradoxes, which are circumstances in which two seemingly incompatible or opposed elements must be handled concurrently. There are several consequences for HRM when paradox theory is comprehended and applied.

**Recognising Contradictions:** HR specialists are able to recognise contradictions in their organisations, realising that some HR procedures or guidelines could run counter to one another. HR managers should try to figure out how to strike a balance between competing HR objectives. This could entail creating creative HR tactics that handle paradoxes from both angles without taking a stance in favour of one.

**Encouraging Adaptability:** HRM practises that embrace paradoxes are more likely to be flexible. HR managers that are flexible in their methods will be able to adapt to the demands of their organisations and the outside world. **Improving Problem-Solving:** Applying paradox theory to HR concerns can improve problem-solving abilities. HR specialists are capable of coming up with original solutions to counterbalance problems, which will promote an inventive corporate culture. **Employee Engagement:** Recognizing and managing paradoxes can improve employee engagement. When HR policies are designed to balance conflicting needs, employees may perceive the organization as fairer and more considerate, leading to higher levels of engagement and satisfaction. (Anne Keegan & Julia Brandl & Ina Aust, 2019).

### **Theoretical Foundations of Sustainable HRM:**

#### **Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory:**

The Resource-Based View theory posits that sustainable competitive advantage stems from valuable, rare, and non-substitutable resources within an organization (Barney, 1991). In the context of SHRM, sustainability practices become strategic resources. Firms that effectively integrate sustainability into HRM gain a competitive edge through a workforce that is motivated, engaged, and aligned with the organization's sustainable objectives (Jackson, Renwick, Jabbour, & Muller-Camen, 2011). This theory underscores the significance of sustainable HRM practices as valuable organizational assets.

#### **2. Institutional Theory:**

Institutional theory suggests that organizations conform to societal norms and expectations to gain legitimacy and acceptance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the context of SHRM, organizations adopt sustainable HRM practices not only to enhance their environmental and social reputation but also to align with institutional pressures from stakeholders, including customers, investors, and regulatory bodies (Renwick, Redman, & Maguire, 2013). Sustainable HRM practices, therefore, become a response to institutional demands, shaping organizational behavior in a paradoxical environment.

#### **3. Organizational Paradox Theory:**

Organizational Paradox Theory explores the tensions and contradictions inherent in organizational life (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Sustainable HRM introduces paradoxes as organizations balance economic objectives with environmental and social responsibilities. This theory provides a framework for understanding how organizations manage these paradoxes by embracing contradictions, finding creative solutions, and leveraging the tension between opposing elements (Lewis, 2000). The paradoxical perspective allows for an in-depth exploration of how organizations interpret and resolve tensions within the context of sustainable HRM.

#### **4. Stakeholder Theory:**

Stakeholder Theory posits that organizations should consider the interests of various stakeholders, including employees, in decision-making processes (Freeman, 1984). In the context of SHRM, stakeholders' interests extend beyond financial gains to encompass environmental and social concerns.

Sustainable HRM practices, such as employee involvement in sustainability initiatives and green training programs, align with the broader interests of stakeholders. Understanding and balancing these diverse stakeholder interests become essential in managing the paradoxes within sustainable HRM (Jackson & Rudolph, 2019).

### **5. Dynamic Capabilities Theory:**

Dynamic Capabilities Theory emphasizes an organization's ability to adapt, integrate, and reconfigure internal and external competencies in response to a rapidly changing environment (Tece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). In the context of sustainable HRM, dynamic capabilities enable organizations to innovate, develop green HRM practices, and align human resources with sustainability objectives. This theory highlights the importance of adaptive and flexible HRM strategies to manage paradoxes effectively.

**Integration of Paradox Theory and Sustainable HRM:** Integrating Paradox Theory into Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) offers a profound perspective on the inherent contradictions within sustainable practices. Paradox Theory recognizes these tensions not as problems to solve but as dilemmas to manage creatively. In the context of SHRM, organizations can leverage these paradoxes to innovate and develop HR policies that balance seemingly conflicting objectives, such as economic efficiency and environmental responsibility. By embracing these contradictions, organizations can foster a more holistic approach to sustainability, aligning HR practices with environmental and social goals while navigating the complexities of the modern business landscape.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Interviews:**

In the pursuit of understanding Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) from a paradoxical perspective, qualitative data collection methods play a pivotal role. In this research, in-depth interviews serve as a primary tool. Conducted with HR professionals, employees, and organizational leaders, these interviews are semi-structured, allowing for flexibility while ensuring key topics related to SHRM paradoxes are explored. The participants are purposively selected to ensure a diverse representation, encompassing various industries and organizational sizes. This intentional sampling strategy ensures a comprehensive exploration of paradoxes and the strategies employed by different organizations to manage them.

During the interviews, open-ended questions are employed to encourage participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of SHRM paradoxes. Questions are designed to delve into specific areas such as organizational policies, employee engagement initiatives, and sustainability practices. Follow-up questions are utilized to probe deeper into emerging themes, allowing for a richer understanding of the paradoxical challenges faced by organizations.

#### **Data Analysis Techniques (Thematic Analysis):**

Upon data collection, the focus shifts to data analysis, employing thematic analysis as the chosen methodology. Thematic analysis is a flexible, systematic, and rigorous qualitative method widely used for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Secondary data collection for this research involves gathering existing data from internet, academic journals, books and reports

#### **Limitations of the study**

There are a few drawbacks to the methodology used in this interpretive study on Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) from a paradoxical standpoint. First, the qualitative style of the study may incorporate subjectivity into the data interpretation. Data analysis by several researchers may differ, which could affect the consistency of the study. Second, even with careful selection, the sample size and variety may not accurately reflect the wide range of organisational circumstances. Cautiously extrapolating results beyond the examined samples is advised. Thirdly, response and information bias may be introduced if interviews and document analysis are the primary methods used. Respondents may give answers that are socially acceptable, which could compromise the validity of the data. Furthermore, the interpretive character of the research may restrict objectivity; the analysis may be influenced by the researchers' prior beliefs and views.

Lastly, the study's temporal scope could be a limitation; organizational practices and approaches to SHRM evolve over time. Conducting a longitudinal study might offer a more dynamic understanding. Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for understanding the study's boundaries and ensuring the findings are interpreted within the context of these constraints, enhancing the research's credibility and applicability.

### **Findings and Suggestions:**

The study reveals a number of sustainable HRM practises, highlighting the efforts' contradictory nature. It lists procedures including eco-friendly hiring, sustainability training for staff, and environmentally friendly workplace regulations. When sustainable HRM practises and conventional HR norms collide, such when performance evaluation standards and sustainability goals clash, paradoxes are seen. The research offers sophisticated perspectives on the challenges that companies encounter in incorporating sustainable practises. It draws attention to difficulties such as handling employee resistance to change, striking a balance between short-term economic goals and long-term sustainability objectives, and resolving conflicts between profitability and environmental/social responsibility. These nuanced viewpoints illuminate the complexity of the problems that entities confront.

Subtle contradictions within sustainable HRM are revealed by the research using qualitative analysis and interpretive methodologies. These conflicts could be between employees' job happiness and sustainability goals or between cost-effectiveness and eco-friendly activities. The report makes workable recommendations for remedies, including creative training initiatives, open lines of communication, and adaptable HR regulations. Through knowledge advancement, the research offers a framework that helps organisations efficiently resolve paradoxes and nurture sustainable HRM practises without sacrificing organisational goals.

**Contributions to the Field:** This study enriches Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) literature by integrating Paradox Theory, offering a nuanced understanding of balancing sustainability objectives within HRM practices. It advances theoretical frameworks, providing practical solutions for organizations, enhancing the effectiveness of sustainable initiatives.

**Suggestions for Future Research:** Future studies can delve into cross-industry comparative analyses, exploring sector-specific paradoxes. Longitudinal research can track SHRM evolution, assessing sustainability strategy effectiveness over time. Exploring diverse stakeholder perspectives, incorporating digital technology, and examining global and cultural contexts can further enrich our understanding of SHRM paradoxes, guiding organizations towards more sustainable practices.

### **Discussion**

#### **Implications of Paradoxical Perspectives in SHRM:**

The paradoxical perspective in Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) challenges traditional HR models, emphasizing the simultaneous pursuit of economic, social, and environmental goals. This study, inspired by Smith and Lewis's (2011) Organizational Paradox Theory, illuminates that tensions within SHRM are not problems to solve but paradoxes to manage. Embracing these contradictions can lead to innovative solutions, fostering sustainable practices without compromising efficiency. Transparency and open communication (Jackson & Rudolph, 2019), stakeholder engagement, and HR policies' flexibility (Renwick, Redman, & Maguire, 2013) are vital.

This research highlights that organizations must navigate these paradoxes creatively, leveraging them as opportunities for growth and adaptation (Lewis, 2000). Understanding these implications is essential for businesses and HR professionals striving for sustainable practices. By embracing the tensions within SHRM, organizations can foster a culture of innovation and resilience, aligning their HR strategies with broader sustainability goals. This study's findings offer valuable insights for practical implementation, guiding organizations towards more effective and balanced sustainable HRM practices.

## Conclusion

This interpretive study reveals the challenges of incorporating sustainability into HRM practises through a paradoxical lens on Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM). The lens of paradox theory helped to clarify the fine balance that needs to be struck between social and environmental responsibilities and economic objectives. The results demonstrated that paradoxes in SHRM are challenges to be creatively solved rather than barriers to be surmounted. Businesses need to welcome these tensions and use creative HR tactics that balance goals that at first glance appear incompatible. Empirical answers surfaced, highlighting open communication, stakeholder involvement, and adaptable regulations as essential instruments for effectively navigating paradoxes.

This study adds to the body of knowledge regarding SHRM theory, provides practical advice for HR practitioners, and enhances the standard operating procedure for interpretive research in HRM. The study's conclusions can help businesses all across the world successfully match HR procedures with sustainability goals. Future studies must, however, focus on particular business situations and examine the interaction of cultural elements in greater detail in order to provide a more thorough explanation of SHRM paradoxes. In a world where environmental consciousness is paramount, firms seeking sustainable growth must embrace and comprehend these paradoxes.

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