

DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

A great deal of contemporary attention, including the scholarly, is focused upon issues of sustainability and while much of this is specifically directed to environmental matters, the literature demonstrates a considerable and growing interest in human resource sustainability. Indeed, it would seem that concerns with human resource sustainability lie at the heart of much of the traditional as well as more recent employment relations research. It might be argued that all employment relations issues are at some level concerned with issues of sustainability. Such a broad approach to understanding the field does not facilitate focused research and limits empirical analysis. This paper aims to develop a coherent theoretical framework for examining HRM and sustainability. In this paper, the meaning of sustainability within the context of the employment relationship is examined and an analytical framework is suggested. It is argued that the key distinguishing variables which define sustainability in the employment relationship lie in the human resource management (HRM) domain and the task domain of the employment relationship. Extant literature on HRM and sustainability pays little attention to the impact of both of these domains on the individual worker rather focusing on organisational sustainability. This paper attempts to fill this gap by including the individual worker into a proposed framework for future research into HRM and sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

It is obvious to even the most casual observer of contemporary political and social events that environmental sustainability is a matter of significant debate, if not universal concern. The Kyoto Protocol and current Australian government deliberations concerning an emissions tax provide evidence of the importance of environmental concerns in the contemporary political agenda. The nature of contemporary life is such that business and work dominate the social landscape and must inevitably be a focus of major concern in addressing environmental issues. The focus of concern regarding environmental issues is for most, but not all, upon human sustainability; for some, it may be more about animal survival or other goals. Yet it is clear from the literature that concerns with sustainability focus attention upon the role of business organisations and assign a role to human resource management (HRM). What people do at work clearly has environmental consequences. To the extent, however, that sustainability concerns are associated with a desire for sustainability of humans, the nature of the work that people

undertake must also be a concern. Thus, 'people concerns' in the work context might be seen to have both direct and indirect environmental implications. At the extreme, a direct implication might be death on the job whilst an indirect implication might be an environmental catastrophe.

Work is a central aspect of modern existence. Business organisations and their operations have significant implications for human and environmental sustainability. The role and importance of human resource management (HRM) in the quest for sustainability is evident in a considerable body of literature. An analysis of this literature, however, reveals a lack of precision in definitions and an absence of a coherent theoretical framework which not only hinders research but which more importantly limits both empirical analysis and application in practice. Current discussions of HRM and sustainability do not properly differentiate between the HRM and task domains of the employment relationship. The HRM domain of the employment relationship concerns recruitment, selection, remuneration, employment conditions, training and development and other aspects of the HRM processes. The task domain is concerned with what people do in their jobs. Both domains have important implications for sustainability but they are different in concept and in practice. It is only within the HRM domain of the employment relationship that the issue of HRM sustainability can be clearly differentiated from other and more general matters concerned with work and sustainability.

The aim of this paper is to advance discussion of the employment relationship and sustainability by proposing a theoretical framework for examining sustainability in the context of HRM. This paper begins with an overview of some general themes in the sustainability literature before examining scholarship focusing on HRM and sustainability. Gaps in this literature are then identified and a tentative conceptual framework for examining HRM and sustainability is suggested. Finally, an approach to future research is proposed to more clearly identify issue of sustainability in the employment relationship in both the HRM and task domains. The importance of this research is that it provides a solid conceptual and practical foundation for assessing the contribution of HRM to sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this paper is to develop a coherent theoretical framework for examining sustainability in the context of HRM. A review of the literature concerning this topic reveals a need for such development but also provides the bases for such development. The literature reveals confusion and lack of precision in terminology about the meaning of 'HRM and sustainability' and this limits empirical research. However, despite the lack of a coherent definition, the literature concerning HRM and sustainability does provide insights into what might be meaningfully and usefully included or excluded from such a definition. In this

section, the literature concerning sustainability will be briefly discussed, followed by a consideration of the literature concerning aspects of HRM and sustainability. A theoretical framework for examining HRM and sustainability issues will then be advanced.

Sustainability

Despite sustainability attracting increasing amounts of public and scholarly interest, there is still ambiguity around the term. This vagueness might in part be attributable to the broad umbrella term of 'sustainability' encompassing at least two distinct parts described by Benn, Dunphy and Griffiths (2006) as 'human sustainability (the development and fulfilment of human needs) and ecological sustainability (the protection and renewal of the biosphere) (p156). At its most elevated, these constituent elements of 'sustainability' can be understood as 'the transformation of human consciousness that human beings and the ecosystem are interconnected (Dunphy quoted in Russell, 2010, p10). In the business arena, the expression sustainability is more often thought about not in two, but in three distinct parts the 'triple bottom line' (TBL). TBL (popularized by Elkington 1997) is an accounting and reporting system incorporating economic, social and environmental outcomes. Sridhar (2011) argues that the most notable achievement of the TBL approach is at a conceptual level as it has facilitated the comprehension of social and environmental achievements in a form that is understood and 'easily acceptable to the business mind' (p55). This acceptance has resulted in global companies developing management systems for sustainability built on and reporting against the triple bottom line. For example by 2010, 507 organisations from 55 countries participated in the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) initiated in 1997 as a disclosure framework for sustainability (GRI 2010; Kramar & Jones, 2010).

While the TBL approach has gained currency in the business world it has been criticised for lack of clarity, particularly around the social or 'people' dimension (Miller, Buys & Summerville, 2007, p 225). Kramar and Jones (2010) argue that the utility of the TBL approach to sustainability is limited in "identifying the nature of HRM sustainability issues... [as] it focuses on external impacts, without looking inwards to the internal dynamics that contributes to those impacts" (p86). This preoccupation with external impacts on the physical environment and 'the effort to conserve natural resources and avoid waste in operations' is echoed in much of the business literature (Pfeffer, 2010, p3). This reflects an implicit ideological preference prioritizing sustainability as a means to reduce costs and increase revenue (Goleman, 2010). That is, the primary focus is often on organisational sustainability rather than the sustainability of the individuals who comprise the organisation. The 'people' aspect of TBL's 'people, planet, profit' is often used at a meso-level (concerning general HRM policies) or macro-level (the broader community) rather than the micro-level of the job content of employees.

In addition to TBL, the term corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been used to illustrate an organisation's commitment to the environment, society and the economy. However, in the absence of commonly agreed definition of terms such as 'sustainability' or 'CSR', the concepts are of little use. Consequently it has been claimed that the notion of 'corporate social responsibility' does not provide a useful framework for organisational action (Henderson, 2001 in Kramar & Jones, 2010, p90). A further complication in the sustainability debate is that despite its place in the modern business lexicon 'sustainability', whether implemented through TBL or CSR or any other mechanism, is a normative concept and as such is subject to organisational politics and may conflict with other normative views of management and business (Colbert & Kurucz, 2006; Kramar & Jones, 2010).

Whilst it is impossible to speak about sustainability without speaking about human beings there is a difference between focusing specifically on the impact of HR practices on the organisation's sustainability and a focus on the human resources themselves. The following section explores this difference with specific reference to the literature on HRM and sustainability.

HRM and Sustainability

A review of the literature demonstrates that a great many writers have addressed aspects of HRM and sustainability but that their focus has been mainly concerned with the implications of HRM for organisational sustainability or the part which HRM can play in developing the role of staff in environmental sustainability. Wirtenberg et al (2007) and Harmon et al (2010) have focused on the big picture issues of how HRM can contribute to sustainability management and have identified aspects of HRM which may contribute to the sustainability of organisations. A critical goal for the human resources field is seen to be the development of 'competencies, collaborative strategies and organisational capabilities required to support the organisation's sustainability journey' (Wirtenberg, Harmon, Russell & Fairfield, 2007, p7). Human resource executives are assessed on the basis of how well they contribute to the sustainability strategy within their organisation (Harmon, Fairfield & Wirtenberg, 2010). Rimanoczy and Pearson (2010, p3) also address the role of HRM in the context of sustainability through a lens focused on how HRM might contribute to the development of a sustainable corporation 'that achieves economic profit, maintains environmental quality and contributes to increased social equity'.

Many writers have addressed the subject matter of HRM and sustainability in terms of how HR practices can be utilized to assist the organisation in becoming more sustainable and/or contribute to environmental sustainability generally (Glade, 2008; Jabbour, Santos & Nagano, 2008; Jabbour & Santos, 2008a; Jabbour & Santos, 2008b; Wirtenburg et al, 2007). Indeed, Spector (2003) cites HRM as the unindicted co-conspirator in the Enron case! Such focus on the macro role of HRM

ignores the worker as a core element of concern and denies the importance of the sustainability of individual workers. It also results in a general obscuring of the meaning and content of HRM and sustainability. HRM is viewed as a tool for delivering sustainability for the organisation and the actual meaning or content of HRM and sustainability, as an activity separate from other functional areas of the business/organisation, is not properly examined.

Wilkinson, Hill and Gollan (2001) also focus on the importance of human resources for achieving corporate and environmental sustainability and argue for the importance of the sustainability of human resources themselves. They assert that 'there are internal organisational pressures associated with the sustainability of human resources in an environment of increasing staff turnover, declining firm loyalty, increasing work hours and stress levels, and declining satisfaction levels' (2001, p1494). They draw on the work of Dunphy and Griffiths (1998) and Dunphy, Beneveniste, Griffiths and Sutton (2000) to view human and ecological sustainability as sharing important commonalities and as impacting upon each other. It is argued that organisations need to build their human capacities by ensuring that 'human resource management moves away from short-term "slash and burn" strategies to the development of skills for the long term' (Wilkinson et al 2001, p1494).

Some of the writers addressing HRM and sustainability issues provide detailed analysis of how HRM functions and strategies might assist in developing a workforce better equipped to address and progress issues of sustainability. Wirtenburg et al (2007), for example, provide a detailed account of how various HRM functions might be utilized to achieve more sustainable organisations. None of the literature identified actually tackles the issue of how HRM might address or improve the sustainability of their own human resources within the context of their organisation.

There are a few instances of literature identified which address the role of HRM in enhancing the sustainability of the worker. Pfeffer (2010) provides some insights to the core concerns and subject matter of HRM and sustainability by focusing on human sustainability in a workplace context. 'The health status of the workforce is a particularly relevant indicator of human sustainability' and 'long work hours increase the likelihood that people will face a conflict between work and family responsibilities' (Pfeffer, 2010, p36, p38). Malik, McKie, Beattie and Hogg (2008) also draw attention to work life balance (WLB) issues as matters of concern within an HRM and sustainability context. Both WLB and occupational health and safety (OH&S) matters are core concerns of HRM with a significant sustainability focus which receive a good deal of scholarly attention. Indeed, much of the literature dealing with WLB and/or OH&S are focused on important core aspects of the role of HRM and sustainability. Few issues go more to the heart of human resource

sustainability than those concerned with the life and death and the physical, mental and emotional well-being or harm of the worker. Yet this literature is rarely identified overtly as being concerned with HRM and sustainability.

Some other writers have dealt less directly with the emotional well-being of the worker as an HRM sustainability issue when focusing upon volunteer environmental sustainability programs as a tool for employee engagement. Lucey (2009) argues that sustainability needs to be linked with the concept of employee engagement and instituting employee volunteer programs is viewed as a vehicle for achieving this. Brenner (2010) also identifies the employee engagement and morale boosting benefits of corporate sponsored volunteering programs and goes on to further identify a range of associated skill enhancement and economic benefits. Within this approach, the worker is again seen as a vehicle for achieving either organisational or environmental sustainability rather than the focus of sustainability efforts.

It is understandable that HRM as a functional area of the organisation is focused upon the achievement of the organisation's goals and that this might be mirrored in the literature dealing with HRM and sustainability. If organisational sustainability and the organisation's contribution to environmental sustainability are viewed as organisational goals, it follows that HRM will be considered in the context of how it can contribute to the achievement of these aims. However, if the primary role of HRM is the management of the employment relationship of the individual performing work, whether as an employee or a contractor, then it would seem reasonable to assume that the primary focus of HRM in the context of sustainability issues would be the sustainability of the workers themselves. It is therefore surprising that very little literature presented under the theme of HRM and sustainability actually addresses the sustainability of individuals engaged in work. It would of course be even more disturbing if research identified that the literature mirrored reality and that the focus of HRM in organisations ignored the sustainability of the workers themselves, rather viewing them as tools for the achievement of sustainability in some other forms.

A review of the literature dealing with sustainability generally and HRM and sustainability more specifically has revealed very few instances in which the sustainability of the individual worker is a focus of attention but has rather indicated that the worker is viewed as a tool manipulated by HRM for the purpose of achieving organisational or environmental sustainability. Presumably, the worker benefits from the achievement of sustainability in these forums if still employed and alive, although this correlation is not clear.

It is obvious, however, that there is a good deal of literature which deals with issues germane to sustainability and the worker although not labelled as such. The

great body of literature concerned with such issues as occupational health and safety (OH&S) and work life balance (WLB) are directly concerned with HRM and sustainability issues, even though they may not have been labelled as such. Indeed, all aspects of the HRM processes and stages have direct implications for the sustainability of individual workers and the literature addressing these must be seen to be relevant and even core to any analysis of HRM and sustainability.

In conclusion, it appears that the literature purporting to address HRM and sustainability has been primarily focused on achieving organisational goals. Strangely, the sustainability of workers themselves has been neglected in the literature focused upon HRM and sustainability. From the literature review, a focus upon the use of HRM as a technique for developing both organisational and environmental sustainability has been identified. A conceptual framework which might better include the core concerns of HRM, the organisations' own workers and their sustainability will be proposed in the following section.

A Conceptual Framework: HRM & Sustainability

A review of the literature illustrates the interest in HRM and sustainability and identifies three spheres of activity for HRM in the context of sustainability: engagement with staff to insure the sustainability of the organisation; engagement with staff to insure the sustainability of the broader environment; and, to a lesser extent, engagement with staff to insure the sustainability of the organisation's human resources

Activity in each of these spheres has implications for the individual worker but the nature of these differs and this is overlooked in the literature. Literature purporting to focus on HRM sustainability tends to focus upon the activities of HRM aimed at improving the role of an organisation's human resources to effect organisational or environmental sustainability. The sustainability of workers themselves is a somewhat neglected area of research within the HRM and sustainability literature. Indeed, there is little evidence of a conceptual recognition that the sustainability of workers themselves is or should be a core focus of HRM activities which might be related to broader sustainability concerns but is a separate and surely core focus of HRM. Human resources might be utilized to generate organisational and/or environmental sustainability but such engagement does not necessarily contribute to or address the core determinants of the worker's sustainability. This lack of conceptual clarity limits empirical research as it blurs the divide between various theoretical concerns.

Despite the obvious arguments concerning organisational sustainability being core to the worker's sustainability in a job and environmental sustainability being core to the survival of the human race, HRM must be concerned with the sustainability of workers for reasons not necessarily directly related to either organisational or

environmental sustainability. Workers' deaths on the job may not immediately impact upon organisational or environmental sustainability but certainly impacts upon the fate of the worker concerned and upon success. At times, the sustainability of the worker may be in conflict with the sustainability of the organisation and even the environment; consider the case of forestry workers and environmental sustainability or the case of workers exposed to asbestos working in an organisation dependent upon maintaining or dealing with such chemicals. If HRM and sustainability is to be the subject of serious academic enquiry, it is essential that a solid conceptual differentiation occurs between the use of human resources as a medium to produce sustainability outcomes and the focus upon human resources or workers as the object of sustainability concerns.

Workers, or human resources, are of course widely viewed in the academic literature as objects of sustainability efforts, although rarely labelled in such terms. At what might be seen to be the softer end of this literature are concerns with job retention and worker satisfaction whilst at the arguably harder end is that concerning the life of the worker including that addressing occupational health and safety. Such research has a long tradition but has not been properly located within the field of HRM and sustainability research and literature but has rather been left in large hunks to lie dormant and to the periphery of modern concerns with sustainability, in a now unfashionable basket of research and literature known as industrial relations. Much of the concerns of industrial relations literature require a rebadging as 'HRM and sustainability' concerns.

In developing a conceptual framework for examining HRM and sustainability, it is necessary not only to include the worker as a focus of sustainability efforts, but it is also useful to distinguish between the task and HRM domains of the worker's experiences (Haidar & Pullin, 2001; Spooner & Haidar, 2008). In the task domain, the worker is subject to control by a superordinate as to what, and often how, a job is performed. How this is performed can be seen to have implications for both the worker's own sustainability as well as the sustainability of the organisation, the environment and other factors. In the HRM domain, the worker is subject to control through the whole of the HRM practices and processes including remuneration, performance management and employee development. If this notion appears remote to core issues of HRM and sustainability, consider the fate of the worker compelled to work untenable hours or the person working for years in a job with no access to skills upgrading.

It is argued that a conceptual framework for examining HRM and sustainability must include at its core a consideration of the sustainability of the worker. This approach includes elements which recognize the distinction between the jobs which people do, viewed within the task domain and the implications for workers of activity within their HRM domain. Adopting this core focus of HRM and

sustainability, the worker, the implications of activities in the task and HRM domains for organisational and environmental sustainability become clearer and more subject to empirical analysis. It is argued that in terms of broader sustainability concerns neither the HRM nor the task domain is more important than the other. However, it is hypothesized that the task domain has a more direct and significant impact upon the sustainability of the worker than the HRM domain. It is only in the task domain that a worker can be killed although the HRM domain may construct a job which leads to the possibility of such an outcome. The sustainability of human resources both within the HRM and the task domains of the employment relationship are both relevant to a study of HRM and sustainability but they need to be differentiated for both conceptual and practical purposes. Human resource managers are concerned with activities within both domains although their direct control and influence is predominantly focused upon the HRM domain; within the task domain, line managers exert immediate control.

By establishing a conceptual framework for examining HRM and sustainability which differentiates not only between the sustainability of workers themselves and the impact of workers upon other forms of sustainability but, moreover, distinguishes between the HRM and task domains of the worker's employment, the implications of the worker's activities also become easier to identify and analyse. Activities of workers in the task domain have different implications for both organisational and environmental sustainability. As an extreme example, if workers produce toxic gases in their task domain, the implications for worker, organisational and environmental sustainability might be grim. If the same worker performs the same deed under a performance management contract, the implications for the worker, at least in the short term, might be very different - even positive, if that activity is consistent with specified performance outcomes. Alternatively, consider a context in which the worker is provided with no training or development culminating in the worker's redundancy which is surely not a sustainable outcome for that human resource yet the organisation and its environment continue unabashed.

A coherent conceptual framework for the examination of HRM and sustainability must surely have at its core the sustainability of the worker. The implications and use of the worker as a vehicle or tool for organisational and/or environmental sustainability is a secondary consideration or consequence. Hence, a conceptual framework for examining HRM and sustainability should be comprised of the following elements, each dealing with the implications of HRM activities upon: the sustainability of the organisation's human resources differentiated according to task and HRM domains; the sustainability of the organisation; and the sustainability of the broader environment

The analytical approach outlined above has not been previously applied to the issue of HRM and sustainability. This area of academic enquiry has previously been confused, the meaning attached to terms has been ill-defined and no conceptual model has been developed for the systematic empirical analysis of the issues.

CONCLUSION

There has been a great deal of academic attention directed to the issue of sustainability. Much of this has focused on natural resources such as minerals, timbers and of course the water and air. Indeed, concerns with environmental factors such as water and air, the most critical elements required for human life, are dominant amongst the concerns of academics, political groups and others. Naturally, these concerns spread to transportation, manufacturing and the use of technology, as the use of these is seen to have a direct impact upon the more primary areas of concern - the air, the water and the food required to support humanity. The sustainability of humans on earth is thus a core primary concern of those focused on the sustainability issue.

The use of human beings in a work context, the now termed 'human resources' of contemporary capitalism, are also both primary and secondary factors in any analysis of sustainability. Yet the literature has not explicitly recognized this. Workers are of course the resources through which HRM might work to ensure organisational and/or environmental sustainability, but the sustainability of people at work must be a core element in any consideration of primary sustainability factors. If sustainability is concerned with human survival, the death of people on the job as well as other less radical examples of workers' sustainability must also be recognized. The psychological and physical well-being of workers, as well as their ability through employment development to be sustainable in employment, must logically be recognized as primary HRM sustainability concerns.

The broad conceptual approach outlined in this paper provides a starting point for further analysis. It places the worker at the centre of the conceptual framework and differentiates between the HRM and task domains through which power over the worker is exercised. It recognizes the potential implications of HRM activities focused upon the worker for the worker's own sustainability and for that of the organisation and for the environment. Clearly, this paper has presented a conceptual framework which invites further contributions. In particular, the proposed conceptual framework requires further deliberation concerning what elements comprise the HRM sustainability concerns within both the task and HRM elements of the worker's employment and how these might impact upon the sustainability of the worker, the organisation and/or the environment in terms of sustainability.

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