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# **Sustainable Human Resource Management Practices in the Malaysian Public Sector: An Exploratory Study**

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the sustainable human resource management practices in the public sector with Malaysia government as the setting. This research was carried out using method of interview among senior officers in the central agency and document analysis as supporting evidence. It was found that sustainable HRM is very critical in the public sector to ensure retention of employees and thus contribute towards sustainable development of the country. The activities involve work promotions, training and development, leadership and engagement with employees especially among the millennials. In order to ensure sustainability of an organization, non-monetary rewards such as flexible working arrangement should be enhanced in the public sector. Having the right employees is the way to ensure organizational success in a highly competitive market. The impact of this research will create interest among the management in public sector to think strategically on sustainable HRM which in turn, will lead to sustainability in Malaysian public sector.

**Keywords:** Human Resource Management, Talent, Sustainability, Retention

## **Introduction**

The competitive world drives everyone to value resources and currently the most valuable resources are human resources. Whether in the business world or even in the public sector, human resource or human capital is an asset that cannot be denied. There is even the competition of human talent – or the so-called ‘war for talent’ coined by the McKinsey consult (Cappelli & Keller, 2014).

It is interesting to note that the word sustainability means “longer”, “durable”. Sustainable development means “development that meets the need for the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This definition dictates at the societal level. Sustainability is defined as “entails the preservation, regeneration and development of the ecological, economic and social resources of a system” (Sena & Abraham, 2008).

In an organization, human resource (HR) plays an important role to serve as a partner in strategizing what is needed in designing values of the corporate side of an organization and the strategy of sustainability (Cohen, Taylor & Muller-Carmen, 2015). At the same time, HR must also ensure that the employees implement the strategies across the organization. Hence,

sustainable HRM is the use of instruments on employees that will have “the trust, values, skills and motivation to achieve a profitable triple bottom line” (Cohen et al., 2015). Examples of sustainable HRM practices include employees are encouraged to reduce the usage of hazardous chemicals in their products as well as employees’ emphasis on employment that will last a longer period to elude interruption for employees, their families and communities.

The research questions that need to be answered are (1) What are the sustainable HRM practices in the Malaysian government agencies? and (2) How can sustainable HRM lead to sustainable development in the public sector? The paper aims to explore the sustainable HRM practices in the Malaysian public sector. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the public sector itself which includes the management as well as the employees. Retention in an organization has been addressed in many publications yet little research has been conducted on the HRM practice and the degree of sustainability. The following section presents the literature review on sustainability and sustainable HRM, and then further explains the methodology used in the study. Thereafter, the article presents findings and discusses its results. The findings are then presented and discussed, before concluding with recommendations for further research.

### **Literature Review**

In recent years, several studies have focused on sustainability and HRM on individual analysis (Docherty, 2002) and HRM system analysis (Zaugg, Blum & Thom, 2001). There are also works on interdependencies between societal, corporate, HRM and individual level of analysis which are acknowledged by several scholars in sustainability (Docherty, 2002; Zaugg et al., 2001). According to Zaugg et al., (2001), there are three pillars of sustainability and HRM: (1) work life balance; (2) individual responsibility and (3) employability. Several instruments of measurement include “...recruitment, deployment, HR marketing, retention, deployment, disemployment (exit policy), management and leadership” (Zaugg et al., 2001).

Sustainable human resource management was then discussed by Ehnert (2008) that linked sustainability with the elements in Human Resource Management (HRM). Sustainable HRM can be defined as “the adoption of HRM strategies and practices that enable the achievement of financial, social and ecological goals, with an impact inside and outside of the organisation and over a long-term time horizon while controlling for unintended side effects and negative feedback” (Ehnert, 2009; Kramar, 2014).

In terms of theoretical foundation, Ehnert has listed several theories based on the German theory. According to her, these theories are important in order to understand the role of Human Resource Management practices in sustaining the employees from within the organization. It is known that by looking at the interpretation of sustainability simultaneously, more understanding can be generated on the critical place for HRM as an element to strengthen sustainability inside the organization. Human resources need to be treated in a special manner due to its critical situation to be developed, replicated and engaged to their needs, mobilization and wants (Ehnert, 2008).

To operationalize sustainable HRM , theoretical foundation had been proposed by several scholars i.e. paradox theory (Ehnert, 2009), theory of negative externalities and

stakeholder harm (Mariappanadar, 2012; 2013) and stakeholder theory (Guerci, 2011; Guerci & Pedrini, 2014). The paradox theory has been chosen by Ehnert to discuss sustainability and its link with HRM. The author recalls this theory as “sustainability, if it is defined as balancing consumed and reproduced resources, brings about paradoxical choices situations and tensions for actors in Sustainable HRM that need to be actively dealt with and that can be a source for innovation and change” (Ehnert & Harry, 2012). In the later research of sustainable HRM, Resource-based View theory has been used. The theory explains on how an organization must have their resources in order to gain profit and at the same time engage with their employees through giving rewards. In relation to this, many researches had been conducted in regards to HRM and organizational performance. As Brewster (2002) had mentioned in his writing that “the capabilities and knowledge incorporated in an organization’s human resources are the key to success”. Nonetheless, many work-related stress, conflicts, health issues or lack of employability are faced by good employees (Coventry University Blog Network, 2016)

In this article, Resource-based View theory had been used to discuss the importance of resources in order to gain profit and at the same time engage with employees by giving tangible rewards e.g. wages, benefits and intangible rewards e.g. work life balance and flexibility. Several instruments by Zaugg (2001) had been used in the interview e.g. training and development, leadership, retention and recruitment.

Resource-based View (RBV) theory suggests that to contribute towards competitive advantage, a firm’s resources criteria play an important role (Barney, 1991) on the assumption that human capital brings value to the firm, and by giving them training and competency upscaling, the performance of the firm can be increased. The possession of resources that are “rare, valuable, non-replaceable and difficult to imitate” allows an organization to move and grow ahead of its competitors (Barney, 1991). While we believe that plants, machineries and capital are the resources that create competitive advantage, human capital is also evidently an important resource (Priem & Butler, 2001). For example, advanced facilities and technology can create competitive benefit when competent workers make full use of them (Boxall, 1998).

## **Methodology**

The philosophical stance of a researcher can influence an inquiry, although research largely hides them (Creswell, 2003) by explaining why things are the way they are (Henning, Van Rensberg & Smit, 2004). An interpretive research philosophy, with its emphasis on experience and interpretation, is found suitable to this study. An interpretive research is concerned with meaning and tries to understand how people interpret social reality. For example, the researcher tries to understand sustainable HRM practices in the Malaysian public sector.

The interpretivist approach has been used in this study. The interpretive philosophy is consistent with the aim of this research because it explores Malaysian public sector employees’ perceptions on sustainable HRM. The experience of people and their interpretation according to social reality will bring richness to the data. In this research, the researcher also tries to understand the practices carried out by public servants in order to attain sustainable human resource management.

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews – an interview guide based on the literature framework – as well as the researcher’s thoughts, contained in the interview notes (Myers, 1997). The motivation for using qualitative research was that the data could be enriched by asking more questions and further probe answers as well as to match the exploratory nature of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

The research interview is one of the most crucial methods for qualitative research (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The process was explained during the interview and the interviewees were informed that the researcher would make notes and the interview would also be audio-recorded. The researcher used an interview guide containing eleven open-ended questions. The questionnaire was divided into 2 sections. The first dealt with sustainable HRM while the second on supplemented ideas e.g. work life balance, the challenges at work and their own perceptions of HRM in the public sector.

Sampling in qualitative research involves theoretical sampling. In this study, the researcher used snowball sampling. The researcher contacted a HR manager in the central agency and later conveyed a few names to be contacted and interviewed. The research participants were management and professional employees from central agencies, specifically those who had remained with the organisation between six months and five years. The length of service in the public sector should be at least ten years so that richness in data could be gained.

The research method enabled the development of a framework through an in-depth literature review. The framework also informed a set of questions that were asked during the semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview as a data collection tool was considered a good way of probing perceptions and the meaning that are attached to reality (Punch, 2005). Deeper insights on the context were gained in which participants gave responses and recognised the approaches to retention would be unique.

Six senior officers employed by the Federal Government of Malaysia based in Klang Valley were interviewed for this research. All of them are attached to the central agency of Malaysian public sector. Most of the interview questions had revolved around policies. Five of them were involved in the face-to-face and in-depth interviews. One of them submitted the answers through email. An email invitation was sent to the prospective participants. Each participant was contacted in which all of them preferred to be interviewed during office hours in their rooms. Prior to the interview, the researcher had asked the participants to sign a consent form. The interview was carried out using English and Malay as medium of communication while the findings were reported in English. The data was collected between October to November 2016 and verification as well as analysis was conducted in December 2016.

Another important method is through document analysis by using secondary sources. Document analysis is an organized procedure to review or evaluate documents in the form of printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Data is required to be examined and interpreted in order to gain meaning, understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Rapley, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The process involves searching journals,

annual reports, brochures, press statements, websites, social media and others. The purpose is to confirm the answer from the interviews and support the topic.

On the data analysis, thematic coding was conducted using software ATLAS.TI. The notes and transcription were analysed using content analysis. The analysis involved searching for phrases and themes, then comparing them with themes from literature on the Malaysian public sector. Common themes were identified and the importance of themes was established by identifying which themes were mentioned repeatedly by the interviewees. The data was analysed manually because the number of responses is small by linking the themes to retention factors in the literature. Data analysis involved working through data to discover meaningful themes, patterns and descriptions that answer the central research questions of the study (Yin, 2009).

An interpretivist approach was used to report the findings of the study. This meant that the interviewer was part of the meaning-making process. Furthermore, the realist approach as described by Fisher (2010) was adopted. According to the realist approach, concepts exist independently on how people perceive or experience reality and the concepts are accessible to those observing them. However, accessibility does not mean that knowledge is a perfect interpretation of reality but was only near to the objective. As such, people can know about the concepts relatively and objectively (Fisher, 2010).

### **Findings and Discussions**

The data collected were grouped into several themes shown in Table 1.

<b>No</b>	<b>Theme in Article</b>
1	Definition of sustainability and sustainable HRM
2	Retention
3	Leadership
4	Activities in Human Resource Management (HRM) practices
5	Challenges in sustainable HRM
6	Career growth
7	Training and development
8	Work culture

#### **Definition of Sustainability and Sustainable HRM**

Although sustainability has been mentioned many times in public policy, the understanding among respondents varied. Respondent 1 (R1) had mentioned sustainable as basically the endurance of some processes for example sustainable green environment and green procurement. In this case, sustainable HRM is:

“...more on a workable processes of HRM to achieve objective and sustain the competitive advantage of an organization” (R1)

An organization with a competitive advantage has many resources that can used to sustain itself in the volatile business environment. According to the respondent, workable meant the

strategies and HR processes implemented in the organization should work i.e. always on time at that given time and moment.

This is agreed by another respondent that workable processes should be consistent in order to retain good employees.

“Strategic HRM is very important in organization i.e. it should have legal framework, enough budget for evaluation and capacity to carry on the HRM. An attractive organization that can give attractive offer may retain as many talents as they want...” (R2)

The relation between sustainable HRM and retention is very intimate. To retain a talent, efforts must be done to create a holistic career pathway for a talent. One of the respondents mentioned the relation between sustainable HRM and talent retention.

“In order to sustain the talent, the public sector needs to increase the efforts to retain them. For example, at the moment they are less expert doctors in the health sector. This is due to low income and slow career development in the public sector. This made them move to greener pastures or join the private sector.” (R5)

### **Retention**

All respondents mentioned the relation between sustainable HRM and retention. In order to retain employees, activities of sustainable HRM must take place. There are promotions, employee engagement by the management, and clear career pathways for them. Employees must feel they are being appreciated and wanted in the organization. Example given is by R3.

“When there is a meeting, the young officers speak out their ideas and the management accepted wholeheartedly. When there is disagreement, the management must avoid the ‘shut up’ policy so that employees can be more creative, brave and innovative.” (R3)

The generational gap could create tension between the management and junior officers. While some of the junior officers might be vocal in their thoughts, some of them failed to feel a part of the organization. The case of ‘shut up’ policy had been mentioned by one of the respondent.

“The junior officer is quite vocal in conveying ideas and the management cannot accept it. After several times consulting with the HR officers, the junior officer felt if he stayed longer, he will be mentally retarded. So he decided to leave the public sector.” (R3)

This is a classic case of generational gap whereby which kills innovation and creativity as well as decrease the sustainability of an organization.

In the related sub-theme under retention is flexibility. It could be working hours, processes and workloads. Most of the respondents agree with job flexibility and welcomed work-life balance as a factor to increase retention. The issue involved the mind-set in the public sector.

“The working hours are tight from 8 to 5. Although flexible time started, I think it is only a trial. It is not continuous. We have to identify which type of services that



can be done through flexible hours where the employee can work at home. But we're not fully flexible yet..." (R2)

Many public offices have set up counters and this will diminish flexibility in work. For a start, there are three public offices involved in the pilot study in regards to flexibility of work. One of the respondents in contrast, questioned back whether work-life balance can actually work in the public sector. In her defence,

"...when a task is being given in a short period of time, it must be settled within the given time. This is in order to make the public sector a sustainable working place and able to serve the public efficiently". (R3)

In the Malaysian public sector, a pilot study regarding flexibility in working place had been conducted in early 2016 and would have been implemented in 2017 (Public Service Department of Malaysia, 2016a). It is interesting to note that Working from Home (WFH) denotes the highest preference compared to flexible working hours and compact hours. This shows that public sector employees open for flexibility and the management are working on this to ensure sustainable place in Malaysian public sector.

### **Leadership**

One of the factors of sustainable HRM is leadership.

"To be able to achieve vision 2020, the Malaysian public sector needs leaders that are innovative and creative. If a leader has both qualities, they can create a new environment that is sustainable."(R3)

"Our leaders must have vision and mission, our guidance that will make life easier for the employee. Most importantly is we're clear with our work. And one more thing, take care of our welfare so that we're happy to work there." (R4).

Both interviewees denote the qualities of a leader should be able to move organizations into excellence. Without creativity and innovation, the organization will stay static and could lead to high turnover. Leadership requires knowledge that will guide his/her employees to achieve the vision and mission of the organization. In return, it will create a happy working place and contribute towards sustainability in the organization.

According to this respondent, anyone can lead but an organization can only move forward by having a strong mission and vision.

"Anyone can do a strategic plan but to achieve it, a leader must have strong imaginary thinking. In order to be competitive especially in the international arena, a leader needs to have leadership skills, openness, innovation and creativity to move forward." (R3)

Leaders must be able to make decisions which are based on experience and knowledge. To serve the public efficiently and effectively, a leader must not only have to work hard but must also dedicated, think creatively and innovatively, be analytical, adaptable and sensitive towards their environment.

"For example, an ordinary employee knows how to do routine work as printed in the job scope folder. But when it comes to creating new ideas or new way to do a task, they hardly can think of one. Nowadays, expectations from the citizens to



the government are very high and keep on increasing. In order to fulfil the expectations, great leaders must be developed within the public sector..." (R3)

This is agreed by another respondent that:

"It is time our public sector should look out to especially in the volatile business world. What happens out there and how do we prepare for our generation to come..." (R5).

New leaders among the new generation need tacit knowledge from the leaders to carry them smoothly in the public sector.

### **Activities in Human Resource Management (HRM) practices**

When asked about activities for sustainable HRM practices, mostly mentioned training, development and career growth. Career growth covers four dimensions which are "meeting career goals, developing one's professional abilities, receiving promotions, and compensation commensurate with those abilities" (Weng & McElroy, 2012). One of the respondents mentioned:

"...without training and knowledge transfer from the seniors, an employee will be at the same level as he/she is when he/she entered the service." (R2)

The courses, whether on generic or functional dimension, must be fairly given to the employees as part of their career growth. In order to compete with others, competencies are crucial. One of the respondents mentioned:

"Some of the officers do not know what are the competencies needed to become a head department. So when it comes to making an important decision, they will say that they do not have the knowledge or simply delay the decision due to inadequate information." (R5)

In order to increase sustainability of an organization, talents are given opportunity to further their study in Masters and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). One of the respondents said:

"In JPBD we will choose. The department will choose and send to JPA. From there JPA will conduct the interviews and they will choose. Roughly in a year we can send around 4 to 5 candidates for Masters and PhD. It depends on our pool, because we have pool in our warrant" (R1)

The opportunity to receive government scholarships to further study is high yet the number of receivers will depend on annual government budget.

This also goes to promotion at work. To sustain in an organization, an employee needs motivation and rewards. A promotion is a tangible reward and recognition for hard work and service in the organization. In relation to this, succession planning is very important. According to one of the respondents,

"Succession planning is best worked in 'closed department'. A closed department consists of professionals and technical staffs who will be promoted within the organization due to their experts and specialities within that department." (R1)

In the Malaysian public sector, this includes engineers, chemists, town planners, lawyers, accountants and others (Public Service Department of Malaysia, 2016b). They represent the

professionals and leaders in their own fields. They can be transferred but not outside of their parent organization. But they can be an attaché overseas or on contract to other departments. For example, engineers belong to the Public Works Department but they can be placed anywhere as long as the post is there.

### **Challenges of sustainable HRM**

There are many challenges in sustainability in terms of HRM practices. One of the respondents mentioned about work-life balance.

“Although the WLB have started in other parts of the world, it is not so in Asian context. In the Asian context, monetary values still uphold the employees compared to WLB.” (R1)

It means that as long as the work pays you more, other matters such as family can be compromised. The summary of respondents denotes such matter:

“...when it comes to work, it must be done in due time.” (R2)

“WLB can be done however if you have control over your time and very disciplined about it.”(R5).

“I tried to work only from 8am to 5.30pm.” (R6)

Nonetheless, the millennials (new generation) appreciate intangible or non-monetary rewards such as WLB. As most of the baby-boomers are reaching the age of retirement, the future is in the hands of the generation of millennials. For them, preference would be balancing compensation and life. The respondent said:

“...It promotes a harmony life whereby an employee can balance between work and family. It is a matter of mobilization; if they cannot acquire high salary at one place and WLB, they will move to another organization or move out from the public sector to join the private sector.” (R5)

“Work-life balance is very important to enhance employee productivity in the organization.” (R6)

The plight of work culture in the public sector sometimes becomes a challenge in sustainable HRM. Just imagine an employee working for such a long time in an organization and being in ‘comfort zone’ is just perfect, especially when reaching retirement age. One of the respondents said:

“...it made the public sector unattractive although nowadays the salary in the Malaysian public sector is very high compared to the private sector.” (R5)

“It is quite difficult to change the mind-set of those who work for over 20 years in the public sector. They are reluctant to change and leaving the ‘comfort zone’.” (R5)

and

“...the imbalance top-down and bottom-up approach and too many bureaucratic layers are among the challenges nowadays.” (R6)

During the recruitment, says R3, the panels have chosen the right talent to work at a certain department.

“However, if the talent through the work culture in certain organization is successful, then we can call it as sustainable HRM. For an organization to operate smoothly, human capital must be taken care of by the whole department.” (R3)

The issue of succession planning involves talent management and development in an organization. In the 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan, the emphasis on talent management is very huge that every department under the Malaysian public sector should have their own succession planning. The planning includes not only competency in subject matters, but also attitude and integrity which will shape the direction of an organization. There are several cases whereby top leaders in the public sector were ‘caught by the act’ of being dishonest. This will encourage sustainability within the department and in the public sector. Thus, according to R5,

“...a succession planning holistically is needed to ensure the next in line to be the head of the department is able and eligible to lead the department.” (R5)

One of the respondents also mentioned on how public sector in other countries works on their succession planning and talent management such as in Singapore and Korea.

“They have already identified the successor from the first time the talent enter the service. The talent were then groomed and trained to be a CEO when the time comes.” (R5)

In the Malaysian public sector, the government through 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan gave a huge emphasize on talent management. For example the Ministry of Health has come up with a program on succession planning and talent management to enhance the professionals career growth and successor for the future professionals and experts in health sector (Institute of Health Management Malaysia, 2013).

## **Discussions**

This paper offers important contributions to the existing literature. The findings of the research suggest the importance of sustainable HRM in the context of Malaysian public sector.

With regards to the first theme on the definition of sustainable HRM and sustainability, this is in line with the work of Cohen et al., (2015) and World Commission On Environment And Development (1987). The second theme is on retention. The findings were in line with the concerns on generational gap on career growth. According to a report by Pricewaterhouse Coopers (2011), the millennials are not only concerned on the salary and perks but also opportunities for career progression and excellent training/development programs. In order to retain talent in the government, efforts must be done in a different way to tackle the generational gap and the millennial. This is agreed by Xavier (2013) that while efforts are made to attract talent, the public service must find ways and channels if it is to attract not only the brightest but those who actually have their passion for service. The young ones, especially those who are better qualified, tend to look for jobs with higher salary and perks. They would even take the risk of quitting the service after few years if they are not satisfied with the job. Thus, there is a need to study on how to attract and retain them in the service (Xavier, 2013). This will finally create sustainability in an organization.

Retention is the outcome of mutual satisfaction between the employee and the employer. The findings were in line with Kontoghiorghes & Frangou (2009) which reported that

the employer seeks to retain the satisfactory worker whose abilities serve the organization's needs. At the same time, the employee seeks to remain in the organization that fulfils his or her needs. Organizations must promote employee learning and development while maintaining stance to satisfy other employee needs to keep the workforce satisfied and at the same time contribute towards the advancement of organizational effectiveness (Kontoghiorghes & Frangou, 2009).

The third theme focuses on leadership. This is in line with the work of Zaugg et al. (2001) whereby sustainable HRM is associated with leadership and coaching. The fourth theme enumerates on activities in HRM practices. As highlighted by Zaugg et al. (2001), human capital development is very critical in an organization. The emphasis is on continuous professional education. In the empirical study by the said researcher, four fifth of the interviewed companies specifically support this instrument. A study by Cunningham (2007) found that there are four main reasons in relation to the aligning people with roles that are selection, recruitment, placement and promotion; learning and development; succession planning and career guidance. In regards to the theme on challenges of sustainable HRM, most of the respondents mentioned WLB. In terms of WLB, this is in line with the work of Zaugg et al. (2001) that sustainable HRM upholds the pillar of WLB.

### **Conclusion**

The notion of sustainable HRM had been discussed and through the recent data, more understanding towards this topic have broadened the author's view. Moreover, it had also broadened the perspective of senior officers in the Malaysian public sector on the topic of sustainable HRM. For an organization to increase its productivity, internal customer i.e. employees should be given opportunity to grow and develop the talent within. This will in turn create another leader in the organization. Hence, human resource should be part of the sustainable development. In order to achieve economic, social and environment goal, HRM of an organization should be sustainable enough to cater for a long term operation.

For future research, other methods such as focus group could be used to enrich data. During the research process, the author's perspective on this topic has broadened. The interviewees were passionate to cooperate and contribute to this topic because all this while, sustainability was always linked to profit only. One of the respondents even mentioned to further this research for practice and would be interested to know more. This topic could be a holistic way to define HRM in a sustainable way. Hence, it is very important for an organization to inculcate the sense of belonging, engage with the employees especially the young ones and to be able to listen to them. This will in turn increase the rate of retention and create a positive work culture in the working place.

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