

Article

Designing Sustainable HRM: The Core Characteristics of Emerging Field

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Abstract: The common agreement in human resource management (HRM) literature suggests that organizations willing to attract and retain human resources for running business in the future must change the prevailing situation where human resources are rather consumed than developed. In doing this, sustainable HRM has been introduced recently as a response to changes on societal level, labor market, and employment relations. Sustainable HRM is seen as an extension of strategic HRM and presents a new approach to people management with the focus on long-term human resource development, regeneration, and renewal. However, the attributes of sustainable HRM, as compared to mainstream HRM, are not clear. The paper aims at closing this gap by proposing and revealing the characteristics of sustainable HRM, namely: Long-term orientation, care of employees, care of environment, profitability, employee participation and social dialogue, employee development, external partnership, flexibility, compliance beyond labour regulations, employee cooperation, fairness, and equality. This is a theoretical paper.

Keywords: sustainable human resource management; characteristics of sustainable human resource management; sustainability

1. Introduction

Beginning in the 1980s, theory and research on HRM has started developing rapidly [1–4]. Typically, the impact of HRM on performance has become the prevailing research issue in the field [5,6]. The mainstream literature has generally focused on the plea of Guest [7] trying to provide answers to the following three questions: What is HRM? What is performance? How are they are linked? The findings have sounded optimistic and encouraging, while at that date, the empirical research has largely supported the idea and provided evidence that HRM is positively related to performance [6,8]. Thus, the leading message was that HRM contributes to business success and has the ability to translate strategic rhetoric into workplace reality [1]. However, several issues need to be taken into consideration for further fruitful discussion of that paper. First, despite the multidimensional nature of organizational outcomes [9], a huge number of studies have mainly defined the organizational performance outcomes in terms of economic measures, neglecting employee well-being [3,4]. Second, analyzing the pathways through which HRM affect organizational performance, employee well-being is mainly treated as a mediator between HRM and performance [10]. Thus, generally speaking, the common feature of mainstreaming writing in HRM was the fact that employees are viewed as a means rather than an end [4].

The mentioned two aspects allow concluding that, to date, employee concerns were very much of secondary consideration in the HRM field [4]. Meanwhile the neglect of employee well-being is particularly troubling because the statistical data and findings of a number of recent studies have indicated non-gratifying challenges in the labor market as well in employment relationships.

For instance, according to the sixth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), 21% of workers are too exhausted after work to carry out the necessary home tasks, whereas 12% of workers think that their job prevents them from giving the desired amount of time to their family. Moreover, about 15% of workers in EU28 usually work long hours and 26% agree that their health is negatively affected by the work in Reference [11].

Thus, nowadays, employee burnout, stress at work, health problems, or difficulties in balancing work duties and private life are extremely relevant challenges. Such situation leads to rethinking HRM if companies are willing to have the employees for running the business in future. Among various propositions, some scholars argue that sustainable HRM could serve as a possible solution bringing humanity back into HRM [12], while sustainability refers to resource regeneration, development, and renewal [13]. From the sustainability point of view, it is a survival strategy for organizations to deal with people in such way that the current and potential employees would have (a) the wish to work for a particular organization; (b) the ability to perform duties in a manner appropriate for business; and (c) the possibilities to work in terms of health, stress, or work-life balance [13].

The idea of sustainability has been known for a long time and it goes back to the time of Aristotle [14]. However, the concept gained its popularity since Brundtland Commission (1987) defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [15] (p. 43). From societal level sustainability, it was transposed to business level arguing that corporate sustainability requires organizations to address interconnected and interdependent economic, environmental, and social concerns at different levels [16,17]. Corporate sustainability places the emphasis on “broader concept of outcome”, addressing multiple bottom lines by including more outcomes than just financial, and thus changes the understanding of business success [18].

Not denying other antecedents of growing business commitment to sustainability, it seems that in the past, sustainability was a choice mainly in the situations of a serious crisis or resource shortage [19,20]. While mainstream HRM literature is crowded with proclamations that human resources are an asset of critical importance to the organization [21], businesses seem being wasteful with human resources [20]. Referring to the abovementioned convincing examples of negative effect on employees, sustainability is increasingly considered as a design option for employment relationships and people management [13].

The research on sustainability in HRM covers numerous related topics such as Sustainable HRM [19,22–26], green HRM [27–29], socially responsible HRM [30–34], and ethical HRM [35–37] depending on the key focus of the approach. The presented paper focuses on sustainable HRM following a definition recently provided by Ehnert et al. [38] considering sustainable HRM

“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.”

(p. 90)

Referring to the short history of sustainable HRM, the construct is still at the pioneering if not emerging phase [20]. While the number of publications in the field of sustainable HRM has recently been growing [12,39,40], scholars still struggle with the attempt at answering what characterizes sustainable HRM. Despite significant contribution to the field of sustainable HRM per se, the area of characteristics of sustainable HRM remains underdeveloped, relatively diverse, and piecemeal. The paper seeks to close this gap by revealing the main characteristics of sustainable HRM.

The purpose of this paper is to deepen current analysis in the field of sustainable HRM by identifying the main characteristics of the construct. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following: Why is linking sustainability and HRM so relevant for contemporary business? How could sustainable HRM be described and defined? What approaches dominate as a theoretical background for justifying

sustainable HRM? What are the main characteristics of sustainable HRM? How do these characteristics manifest in terms of their content?

The paper contributes to the sustainable HRM literature in several ways. Firstly, the paper introduces the characteristics of sustainable HRM and contributes to the answer what HRM should look like in order to deserve the sustainability attribute. Drawing on the models of sustainable HRM, provided by Ehnert [19], Zaugg [41], Kramar [22], and from the overall literature on sustainable HRM, the characteristics of sustainable HRM are formulated. They reflect Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development stating that “Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature” [42] (p. 1), and are in line with the concept of corporate sustainability. Secondly, it is well established in the current literature that sustainable HRM has a double role: (a) To contribute to implementing sustainability in organizations; and (b) to make HRM systems themselves sustainable [43]. The paper contributes to the last research stream addressing the key features of sustainable HRM. Thirdly, the paper responds to Pfeffer’s [44] call to treat the social dimension of corporate sustainability seriously, instead of overlooking, and in particular from the HRM perspective, as sustainability has received comparatively little attention from HR researchers [45]. In doing this, the paper contributes to theory enrichment, not only in the field of sustainable HRM, but also in the field of corporate sustainability.

The paper commences with a brief outline of the rationale for linking sustainability and HRM and then presents the construct of sustainable HRM. Next, the paper proceeds by identifying the main characteristics of HRM and revealing their contents. Last, the paper offers some general conclusions before indicating some future research avenues.

2. Rationale for Linking Sustainability to HRM

This section focuses briefly on the repetitive call in the scientific literature to revise HRM as it seems that HRM is moving in the opposite direction from its roots having the primary goal to promote employee well-being [3,4]. Certainly, from the perspective of developments, significant progress has been made in the HRM field [2]. Over the last 30 years, the research presented more than adequate empirical evidence that human resources and their management add value to organizational performance [6]. However here, the question arises as regards the understanding of performance in terms of outcomes. While Dyer and Reeve [9] introduced several types of outcomes (human resource-related outcomes represent one of the types), outcomes in empirical research were mainly defined in terms of financial outcomes, neglecting those related to employees. Naturally, human resource-related outcomes were a part of a number of researches; however, mainly they served as a key mediator between HRM and financial results of an organization [8]. Thus, human resources were viewed as a means rather than an end and the search for the link between HRM and performance has been pursued at the expense of employee well-being [4]. Ironically, such neglect of employee concerns made the discipline of HRM successful [3].

Recently, the changes in society and labor market have promoted the organizations to search for new ways to manage human resources in order to have these resources in the future [13,46]. Traditionally employment relations, defined as the connection between employer and employee through which people sell their labor, followed the economic imperative [13]. In this sense, human resources can be exploited as much as possible for gaining better financial results. However, treating people as resources means that the rules of resource scarcity, shortage, damage, or extinction apply for people too. While mainstream HRM treats employees as a critically important asset to the organization, HRM nonetheless does not give priority to employee concerns [4]. On the contrary, following the conflicting outcomes perspective, HRM is not beneficial or could even be harmful for employees [47]. Thus, people can feel a negative effect caused by HRM. Meanwhile, even nowadays, HRM exists not for the purpose of serving employees per se [21].

However, the situation is changing as scholars and practitioners are trying to respond to the call of Pfeffer [44]: “Why are < ... > milk jugs more important than people?” (p. 2010).

Dealing with the external pressure of society and issues in the labor market as well as tackling internal issues in employment relations, businesses need to rethink their responsibility and business models. Aging society, shortage of skilled labor force, and employee health issues are convincing examples impelling the organizations to revise HRM. As sustainability refers to maintaining, reviewing, or restoring a resource [48], some scholars advice using the potential of sustainability for HRM [19].

In general, corporate sustainability refers to organizational activities “demonstrating the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with stakeholders” [49]. Corporate sustainability debates shift the attention to success factors going beyond financial outcomes, applying a multiple bottom line approach. In this vein, the “value of human resources is recognised as being more than immediate financial usefulness” [50] (p. 423). The previous literature confirms that more organizations commit to sustainability [51]. Turning to rationale why business should want (or need) to apply sustainability for HRM, there is both the economic and ethical argument of sustainability linkage with HRM [13]. Harry [52] argues that to ignore sustainability means to ignore opportunities and concludes that “there is certainly profit to be made from sustainability and losses may occur if sustainability is overlooked” (p. 405).

As it was mentioned before, the research linking sustainability and HRM emerged under different labels. The paper focuses on sustainable HRM, following the attitude that sustainable HRM is an umbrella term covering multiple levels of analysis and multiple dimensions [20]. Sustainable HRM is seen as a design option for employment relations [13]. Wikhamn [40] argues that:

“Sustainable HRM evolves around soft issues such as demonstrating sincerity towards the employees, including providing a decent work environment and conditions, providing development opportunities and being attentive to employees’ physical and psychosocial well-being at work”

(p. 103)

In general, sustainable HRM forms the next stage in the tradition of HRM thinking.

3. The Emergence and Scope of Sustainable HRM

This section focuses on sustainable HRM as the emerging research area addressing the genesis of construct, different streams under the label of sustainable HRM, and what different scholars mean by sustainable HRM.

The term ‘sustainable HRM’ is relatively new. While recently the field has rapidly evolved [39,53–59], it is nonetheless recognized that there is no “consistent” literature on sustainable HRM [20] and sustainable HRM can be understood in terms of a number of complimentary frameworks [22]. Despite the plurality of approaches, Ehnert and Harry [20] managed to assign all publications in the field of sustainable HRM to the first, second or third “waves” of research. The main criteria is the added value to sustainable HRM. More recently, Kramar [22] categorized the literature on sustainable HRM based on the writings’ outcomes into three groups: Capacity reproduction, promoting social and environmental health, and connections. As the comprehensive analysis of all publications in the field of sustainable HRM is beyond the scope this paper, only aspects that are relevant for the main purpose of the paper, namely the disclosure of the characteristics of sustainable HRM, are further underlined.

The initial writings on sustainable HRM appeared at the end of 1990s in Germany [60], Switzerland [41,61], and Australia [62]. The German approach was developed in the context of sustainable resource management referring to organizations as open systems, resource-dependent systems that “depend on a constant stream of resources to stay alive, fulfil their ends, and reach their goals” [14] (p. 54). This approach relies on an economically rational interpretation of sustainability arguing that it is economically rational for business to balance the consumption and reproduction of human resources by investing in the relations with business environments, as environments are “sources of resources”. Not surprisingly, based on this understanding, Müller-Christ and Remer [60]

defined sustainable HRM as “what companies themselves have to do in their environments to have durable access to skilled human resources” (p. 76).

In the meantime, the Swiss approach relies more on normative understanding of sustainability as a moral, ethical value building in line with Brundtland Commission’s definition. Considering that human resources are more “consumed” than “developed” as a starting point, sustainability in HRM is characterized by increasing employability, promoting individual responsibility, and ensuring a harmonious work–life balance. The Swiss approach conceptualizes sustainability as a mutual benefit referring to employers and employees as equal partners: Satisfaction of individual needs and maintaining of competitiveness of an organization is supported by sustainable HRM. Accordingly, sustainable HRM is defined as “the long-term socially and economically efficient recruitment, development, retainment, and disemployment of employees” [61] (p. II). It is important to underline, that the Swiss approach was developed as a synthesis of theoretical and empirical insights, revealing the heterogeneous understanding of sustainable HRM in organizations.

By linking sustainability and HRM more systematically and conceptualizing sustainable HRM, works by Ehnert [19,63], Mariappanadar [64–66], Kramar [22], De Prins et al. [12], Guerri, Shani, and Solari [67] can be mentioned.

The colossal contribution in fostering and making the field of sustainable HRM more mature was brought by Ehnert [19,50,63,68–70]. Referring to previous works in literature linking sustainability and HRM, Ehnert [19] provided a broader understanding of sustainable HRM at the same time rooting it in the strategic HRM literature and extending the Wright and McMahan’s [71] strategic HRM framework. More recently, sustainable HRM definition provided by Ehnert et al. [38] (see Section 1) underlined two components. Firstly, multiple, potentially contradictory, economic, ecological, and social goals are recognized [19,70]. Certainly, the multiple bottom line orientation allows expanding the success of the organization and serves as a basis for long-term organizational viability in terms of skilled workforce attraction and maintaining of healthy employees. However, at the same time implication of sustainability in daily HRM practices raises the issues of dilemmas and tensions [19], as organizations may find themselves faces with conflicting needs, for instance of employee being available 24 h and employee work-life balance. Secondly, complex interrelations between the HRM systems and their environments (internal and external) with particular emphasis on relationships, which control externalities [23] and allow the long-term reproduction of resources [19], are recognized. Through the lenses of sustainable HRM, organization is viewed as an open system that “needs to develop and regenerate its HRs at least as fast as it ‘consumes’ them” [22] (p. 1777). Hence, the relevance of HRM impact in terms of externalities for different stakeholders within and outside the organization is well established (externality theory is well explained in works by Mariappanadar [23,72]; therefore; externalities are described later in analyzing his approach).

Ehnert [19,70] contributed significantly to the field of sustainable HRM by applying the paradox theory as an underlying approach for sustainable HRM. Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, and Figge [73] emphasize that sustainability creates situations when organizations need to simultaneously address multiple desirable, but conflicting economic, environmental, and social outcomes at company, and societal levels. Transferred to the HRM context, this means that sustainable HRM also produces some tensions and paradoxes. Consequently, Ehnert [19,70] used paradox as a lens for theorizing upon sustainable HRM. Following the understanding that paradoxes can be understood as two or more contradictions, which operate simultaneously, Ehnert [19] identified three key paradoxes of sustainable HRM: Tensions between deploying human resources efficiently and maintaining their capabilities; tensions between economic rationality and relational rationality (here, the main aim is to maintain social legitimacy by acting in a responsible way); and tensions between short and long-term effects.

Going further, Mariappanadar’s [23,64–66,72,74] writings on sustainable HRM could be categorized under the label “promoting social and environmental health” [22]. Mariappanadar [23,72] applies negative externality and stakeholder harm theory as an underlying approach for sustainable HRM. Negative externality refers to “something that costs the organisation less for their actions or

business practices than they save" [23] (p. 184). However, someone has to absorb and cover these costs and, it is not surprising; however, following the social cost theory, the costs are imposed on the weaker members of society, such as employees and their family members [72]. This implies that organizations harm the employees by extracting maximum skills, abilities, and motivations, and preventing them from achieving positive work-related well-being outcomes [75]. Commonly, negative externalities harm the employee families and the living standard of society as a whole. As a solution, at the institutional level, sustainable HRM has been suggested for reducing harm on employees, highlighting the synthesis effect [74]. That is, organizations can apply "both/and" approach and use the HRM practices to maximize their profits, and in addition to reduce the harm of HRM practices on the stakeholders because "these two polarities are not mutually exclusive but are rather mutually reinforcing" [72] (p. 314). It ensues that sustainable HRM is defined as "those HR systems or bundles that enhance both profit maximisation for the organisation and also 'reduce the harm' on employees, their families and communities" [72] (p. 313). Following negative externality and stakeholder harm theory, more recently, the health harm of work scale was developed [74] and the harm side of overwork is revealed [76].

The revision of mainstream HRM literature by focusing on stakeholder, institutional, ethical HRM, and critical HRM theories allowed De Prins et al. [12] to introduce the ROC model. The model encompasses three blocks, namely: Respect, Openness, and Continuity. Respect is expressed by a renewed focus on respect for employees as internal stakeholders in the organizations; Openness refers to environmental awareness and outside-in perspective on HRM; meanwhile, continuity reflects a long-term approach both in terms of economic and societal sustainability [12].

Guerci et al. [67] supplemented the field of sustainable HRM by exploring sustainable HRM from the stakeholder perspective. A stakeholder is "any individual or group who can affect or is affected by actions, decisions, policies, practices or goals of an organisation" [77] (p. 25). The present definition supposes that an organization has the duty to take care of all stakeholders and this discords with the classic approach (sometimes called the shareholder value theory) where an organization takes care exclusively of its owners [36].

Limited resources and rationality lead organizations not only to identify the stakeholders, but also to prioritize them [78]. Based on the stakeholders' attributes, such as power, legitimacy, and urgency [79], diverse matrixes of key stakeholders are proposed. In the stakeholder matrix of Zaugg [41], employees are identified as the stakeholders of the utmost importance according to two dimensions: Importance for sustainable human resource management (high, medium, low) and affinity to an organization (internal, internal and external, external). Not going in deep, the mega-message given by HRM literature is that employees are crucial stakeholders [80]. However, sustainable HRM is aimed at satisfying the expectations of all key stakeholders [81]. According to Guerci et al. [67], the success of an organization depends on its capability to integrate the interests of different stakeholders, and given the fact that integration is realized through the human resource management function, the sustainability dimension analysis in human resource management while focusing on the stakeholders is an important component of organizational activities.

Kramar [22] further developed the model of sustainable HRM proposed by Ehnert [19] taking into account the literature on sustainable work systems [82] and negative externalities [23]. In doing this, the recognition of positive and negative impact of HRM on various stakeholders is explicitly expressed. On the contrary to Ehnert's [19] model, ecological outcomes are explicitly treated as kinds of HRM outcomes. Moreover, Kramar [22] acknowledges the critical role of a manager for the strength of sustainable HRM system [83].

More recently, the topic of sustainable HRM has been gaining increased importance and getting more attention from researchers and practitioners. Such conclusion is based on two facts. First, the number of publications in sustainable HRM is growing by tackling various aspects: Wikhamn [40] explores the ways sustainable HRM impacts the innovation-customer satisfaction relationship; Baum [39] focuses on sustainable HRM in tourism industry; Vihari and Rao [84] analyse antecedents and consequences of sustainable HRM; Järlström, Saru and Vanhala [85] explore the ways

top managers construct sustainable HRM, etc. Second, several special issues in sustainable HRM were prepared, such as Special issues in *International Journal of Manpower* (2016) or *Asia-Pacific Journal of Business Administration* (2014) or *Management Review* (2012).

In summary, the scholars understand sustainable HRM in slightly different ways. The paper shares the attitude that sustainable HRM forms the next, complementary, stage in the tradition of HRM thinking [12,19,22]. It reframes and revises the mainstream principles of strategic HRM; however, sustainable HRM does not refute the aspects of strategic HRM. Just as strategic HRM includes the operational activities of personnel management, sustainable HRM can likewise include aspects of strategic HRM [22]. Sustainable HRM is seen as an extension of strategic HRM, because it includes multiple bottom line outcomes and moves from short-term to long-term perspective [67]. Thus, the main difference between strategic and sustainable HRM concerns broader purposes of HRM. In case of strategic HRM, focus is clearly placed on organizational performance, primarily in terms of economic outcomes. Meanwhile, sustainable HRM acknowledges a variety of outcomes, including social, human, environmental, and financial ones [22]. Moreover, sustainable HRM explicitly identifies the negative effect of HRM not only on employees, but also on other stakeholders [23]. However, as it was mentioned before, the aspects of strategic HRM are an integral part of sustainable HRM, just the emphasis is on resource regeneration, development, and renewal when managing people.

As it was mentioned before, there is a plurality of competing approaches linking sustainability and HRM. Gladwin, Kennelly, and Krause [86] treat such definitional diversity as a matter-of-course thing. The paper shares the attitude of Gladwin et al. [86], inviting scholars to define clear lines around each construct and to be able to distinguish one construct from another. In keeping with this goal, this explicitly indicated characteristics of sustainable HRM that become of high importance.

4. Characteristics of Sustainable HRM

This section focuses on characteristics of sustainable HRM revealing their contents. One of the central questions when presenting a new approach is how to distinguish it from other similar ones. The same concern applies for sustainable HRM not leaving out of consideration that “many of HR colleagues seem to remain critical of the concept” [20] (p. 223) and that there is a danger of “old wine in new bottles” [87]. Generally, despite progress towards the features of sustainable HRM [70,85], the issue of the characteristics still remains underdeveloped.

The characteristics of sustainable HRM explain how sustainability can be used for HRM. The characteristics describe what HRM should look like in order to deserve the attribute ‘sustainable’. Literature review allows stating that researchers choose different ways and forms to present the characteristics of the construct. Some of them appear to provide characteristics by describing the construct per se. For instance, Zaugg et al. [61] argue that employees’ self-responsibility and participation in decisions, while HRM operates as a “guardian” of human resources with the objective to support the employees, are the underlying aspects of construct. Thus, these aspects serve as characteristics of sustainable HRM. Further, Cohen, et al. [43] argue that in designing sustainable HRM, three dimensions, namely, equity, well-being, and employee development should be included. Again, the mentioned dimensions can play the role of characteristics.

Other writers focus on the features that differentiate sustainable HRM from mainstream HRM, including strategic HRM, and in that vein, disclose the characteristics. Therefore, treating organizational outcomes in a broader sense rather than just financial outcomes [22] and acknowledging the negative effects of HRM on different stakeholders [23,72] are the characteristics of sustainable HRM. Finally, besides the implicitly expressed characteristics of the construct, some researchers do it explicitly. Zaugg [41] even incorporates the following characteristics in his sustainable HRM: Flexibility, employee participation, value orientation, strategy orientation, competency and knowledge orientation, stakeholder orientation, and building mutually trustful employee-employer relationships. Ehnert [68] introduced some other characteristics: Exploring short-term as well as long-term effects as well as side and feedback effects; extending the notion of success by considering economic, social, and ecological

objectives; considering moral, ethical positions, as well as economic arguments; fostering the ability of HRM to develop and sustain the HR base and environments from within; and balancing paradoxes, dualities, dilemmas, and tensions. Several years later, Ehnert [70] compiled a short list of characteristics in terms of their titles including: Long-term oriented; impact-control oriented; substance and self-sustaining oriented; partnership-oriented; multiple-bottom lines-oriented; and paradox-oriented. More recently, based on qualitative study Järlström et al. [85] introduced four dimensions as sustainable HRM characteristics, namely justice and equality, transparent human resource practices, profitability, and employee well-being.

In summary, characteristics of sustainable HRM have been proposed for addressing the scarcity of knowledge about how to make the construct more explicit and distinguish it from others. Drawing on the previous literature, the paper proposes separating two things: underlying approaches and characteristics of sustainable HRM. In that vein, underlying approaches serve as keynotes, as a “roof” for characteristics arguing that the characteristics should be aligned with approaches. The paper takes the three approaches that are already well established in the literature and applied for sustainable HRM: Paradox theory [19,70], theory of negative externality and stakeholder harm [23], and stakeholder theory [67]. Drawing on literature from a range of works linking sustainability and HRM and following the essence of corporate sustainability, the paper proposes 11 characteristics of sustainable HRM, namely: Long-term orientation, care of employees, care of environmental, profitability, employee participation and social dialogue, employee development, external partnership, flexibility, compliance beyond labor regulations, employee cooperation, fairness, and equality.

As the description of the approaches was provided previously, here, only the necessity to interconnect the approaches with characteristics is highlighted, treating the approaches as a “red line” for characteristics. Further, a review of these characteristics and how they contribute to the understanding of sustainable HRM are addressed. In Table 1, the summary of characteristics and some of their core aspects are provided.

Table 1. Characteristics of sustainable human resource management and their core aspects.

| Characteristic of Sustainable HRM | The Core Aspects |
|--|---|
| long-term orientation | Identification of the availability of human resources in the future; identification of the needs of the future employees; elimination of the “hire and fire” approach |
| care of employees | Health and safety management; work-life balance |
| care of environment | Evaluating the employee performance according to environment-related criteria; fostering “eco-career”; employee rewarding according to environment-related criteria |
| profitability | Share programmes |
| employee participation and social dialogue | Different types and forms of participation |
| employee development | Job rotation; different training forms and methods; the transfer of experience; focus on future skills and employability |
| external partnership | Cooperation with education system; partnership with all external stakeholders |
| flexibility | Flexible working arrangements; job rotation |
| compliance beyond labour regulations | involves employee representatives in many decision-making processes beyond those for which worker participation is a statutory requirement; financial and non-financial support |
| employee cooperation | Teamwork; good relationships of managers and employees |
| fairness and equality | Fostering diversity; respectful relationships; fairness as regards as remuneration, career |

Long-term orientation. As noted by Lumpkin and Brigham [88], time considerations enter into many of the decisions organizations make, while short-term and long-term orientations are used as opposite dimensions of time. The discourse about sustainability is based on long-term orientation defining it as “the tendency to prioritise the long-range implications and impact of decisions and actions that come to fruition after an extended time period” [89] (p. 241). Three dimensions of long-term orientation are identified: futurity (it reflects a concern for the future); continuity (it highlights bridging from the past to the future), and perseverance (it underlines how decisions and actions in the present affect the future) [88]. Ironically, but “in many crucial decisions, the course of action that is most desirable over the long run is not the best course of action in the short term” [90]. Thus, the issue of balancing long-term and short-term decisions becomes of high importance.

The relevance of long-term orientation as a characteristic of sustainable HRM is well recognized. For instance, Zaugg et al. [61] argue that future orientation is a keystone of sustainable HRM. In a similar manner, Ehnert [19,70] calls to “integrate future in the present” while nowadays the requirement to use human resources efficiently and effectively are balanced with the tomorrow’s requirements to maintain, nourish and develop people. De Prins et al. [12] approach long-term orientation through the lens of continuity by offering insights on sustainable career.

Generally speaking, long-term orientation is relevant for people management considering various HRM practices, from employee planning till dismissal. The challenges organizations are facing, like demographical changes, free movement of people or the mismatch between the current skills of employees and those needed for future, serve as drivers for long-term orientation, addressing employee attraction, and retention. Typically, the assessment of past, present and future allows organizations to identify the availability of human resources in the future. Forecasting and labor market research could enhance sustainability in HRM, as the more specific labor market information is available, the easier is to recruit the “best” ones [61]. From sustainability perspective, being the “best” candidate means matching the organization’s needs throughout a long period at a cost, which the organization can afford [52]. Moreover, “hire and fire” or “fire and forget” are approaches, which contradict the sustainable HRM, as being sustainable requires more efforts in “selecting the candidates who will contribute over the long term and during changing circumstances” [52] (p. 412).

Long-term orientation should be included by attracting employees who are committed to a sustainability culture and share the same sustainability values. Anticipation of preferences of future employees is of equal importance. Studies carried out in the UK and USA revealed that graduates and other individuals searching for a job that pays are mindful of the environmental sustainability dimension of an organization and use this information when making the decisions concerning employment [91].

Care of employees. As it was mentioned before, human beings are in center of concerns of sustainable development [92]. Accordingly, from sustainability perspective, each organization is in charge of ensuring that it “retains a healthy and productive workforce over time” [19]. Certainly, it is challenging to define what is meant by “care of employees”, while the majority of practices treating employee as “an end in itself” could be classed under the label “care of employees”. However, drawing mainly on the work of Guest and Pedrini [93], in the present paper care of employees is perceived in terms of health and safety, work-life balance, remuneration, and workload.

Care of employees is clearly reflected in health and safety management. It seems that employee health covering various topics like diseases, mortality, ergonomic work conditions, or stress, is a relevant research field addressing the necessity to rethink people management [44,82,92]. Based on the website content analysis, Ehnert [19] concluded that among internal drivers, organizations link sustainability to HRM and there is also the maintaining of a healthy and productive workforce. In doing this, one of banks implemented a “new” health management system, aimed at designing work in a way that preserves the health of employees and fostering health promoting behavior [94]. Obviously, that system, which covers, inter alia, occupational safety, occupational medicine, and social counselling, reflects the proposition of Hirsig, Rogovsky, and Elkin [95] that safe work environment

“not only meets a basic human requirement, but is also conducive to productive and quality work” (p. 144). Huge achievements in the field of employee health are demonstrated by well-known company Nissan Motor Corporation [96], as employee health is a top priority for that company. For instance, workplaces are designed with employee safety and health in mind; proprietary safety management diagnostic methods are employed; the company has put together a specialized team led by a mental health professional to care for the mental well-being of employees.

Work-life balance represents another example of care of employees, as dual-career families, high work demands and long working hours have become the norm [97]. Zaugg et al. [61] treat a harmonious work-life balance as one of the underlying objectives of sustainable HRM. Accordingly, Rowan [35] argues that there is no reason for thinking that work life must be opposed to personal life. This is based on the idea of personal autonomy importance and the general idea that organizations should take care of the people they affect.

Definitely, it is not easy to combine work and private life, while challenges relate to a variety of aspects, such as disabilities, care of children, or employee age. However, experience of Germany suggests that organizations that handle the challenges successfully may achieve a certificate of a family-friendly company, yielding dual benefits to them: It helps retaining the employees and is a component of employer value proposition [94]. Time-related, informational, financial, and direct support for employees enable people to achieve work-life balance [94]. The key is that these family-friendly practices should meet the needs of staff while meeting the needs of organizations [95].

Nissan Motor Corporation [96] creates an environment conducive to work-life balance by supporting employee performance (for instance, internal social networking site “Work-Life Balance Park”); by supporting managers who have employees in the nurturing stage (for instance, management seminars); by creating company infrastructure—systems (for instance, work at home programme or super-flextime without core time) and creating company infrastructure—facilities and equipment (for instance, in-house childcare center).

Care of employees is also related to workload [44,65,66,82], which should be taken into account if healthy and productive workforce is to be had. Not less important is fair pay as an outcome of care of employees, arguing that justification for the minimum wage should be clear [35]. Work activities are supposed to ensure a certain minimum standard of living and to protect employees from stress, arising when considering the possibilities for “survival”. Consequently, maximization of shareholder profit is insufficient justification for using employees as a mere tool for profit and for paying minimum wages [35]. Moreover, the double game offering low wages and overtime payments is in contradiction with sustainable HRM. In general, organizations mapping tensions should provide to employees such remuneration, which is sufficient for them to satisfy their needs, but also does not put financial viability of the organization in danger [95].

Care of environment. Although care of environment is a major concern of green HRM [27], ecological outcomes of sustainable HRM have been already recognized in theory [22]. Unfortunately, empirical data contradict the theoretical insights, as Järnlström et al. [85] found out that environmental HRM did not relate to people management in the minds of top managers from Finland and that managers viewed care of environment as being separate from the other two dimensions—people and profit—of sustainability. Such findings encourage focusing more precisely on environmental issues from the people management perspective, if sustainable HRM fully represents the idea of sustainability.

Care of environment is strongly reflected in employee recruitment and selection, particularly targeting an increasingly environmentally aware younger generation or highly skilled employees (for a detailed review see Reference [27]). Competing for these employees, an environmentally responsible employer branding serves as a feature of employer attractiveness. Following the signaling theory, candidates use the environmental image and reputation of the organization to make inferences about its future intentions [27]. Alongside branding, there is a wide range of other actions to care of environment in terms of recruiting and selecting people, namely, use of technology, including

environmental criteria in the recruitment messages, and selecting applicants who are sufficiently aware of environmental issues to fill the job vacancies [51,98,99].

Care of environment could be embodied in employee training and development. This is mostly related to the increase of the level of “eco-literacy” [100], emphasizing the dual nature of the organization’s actions: From one side, to impart the right knowledge and skills about environmental issues to each employee, and from another side, to analyze the training needs to identify the real training needs of employees [99]. Actually, Renwick et al. [27] raise the issues of employee cynicism regarding the relevance of such training, as sometimes training is delivered in a “politically correct way”.

Care of environment is expressed in employee performance management and appraisal by evaluating the employee job performance according to environment-related criteria and providing a feedback on progress [99]. It is interesting that in practice some negative reinforcements are implemented to get the employees to make environmental improvements. For instance, Chan and Hawkins [101] found out that hotel workers were “repeatedly reminded” in cases where they did not fully implement the hotel’s environmental practices.

Rewarding can also include care of environment applying financial and non-financial measures for environmentally correct behavior. Moreover, the link between the environmental performance and executive compensation is well established in literature [102].

More generally, sustainable care for the environment in everyday activities could manifest in justified consumption of electricity; reasonable printing of documents; moving of paper processes to the electronic space; and sorting of waste and options for arriving to work [22,103].

Profitability. Profit-seeking has dominated organizational activities for a long time. However, as organizations increasingly commit themselves to sustainability [104], financial indicators such as profits or return on investments are no longer the only criteria to measure success. This in no way negates the nature of a business organization, seeing that the economic component of sustainability preserves its importance; rather, a logical partnership of three components is emphasized. A long-term survival of an organization depends on its financial strength and competitiveness in the environment. Economic effectiveness is linked with the majority of business decisions, if not all [48]. This implies that the capacities of the economic component of sustainability generate the financial funds necessary for the realization of each classic human resource management function.

In summary, it could be stated that striving for economic effectiveness is a natural goal of every business organisation and it is not negated by the sustainability dimension. When recognising the necessity for the funds for human resource management, it is important not to justify the consumption of human resources and negative impact on employees, society as a whole, and environment by the striving for economic effectiveness.

From sustainability perspective, share programmes are worth mentioning. Since 2001, well-known company Henkel [105] has offered an employee share programme assuming that it is important for employees to share in the financial success of business. For each euro invested in 2017 by an employee (limited to 4 percent of salary up to a maximum of 4992 euros per year), Henkel added 33 eurocents. The added value of such programme lies in improved employee motivation and identification with the organization.

Employee participation and social dialogue. The added value of employee participation in terms of win-win for both sides, employer and employee, is well established in literature. The management approach views participation as an instrument to enhance the employees’ attachment and loyalty to a particular organization, meanwhile the humanistic approach treats participation as beneficial to human growth and satisfaction of social needs [106]. While participation is not a new construct in management, debates about it are still continuing [106]. Glew, O’Leary-Kelly, Griffin and Van Fleet [107] define participation as conscious and intentional effort of individuals on the higher level in organization to provide an obvious role or expansion of opportunities for individuals or groups on the lower level in organization to provide larger voice in one or more areas of fulfilment of organizational

goals. Meantime, Wilpert [108] perceives participation as a multidimensional construct, arguing that participations encompass various forms by which individuals or groups secure their interests or contribute to the choice process. Multidimensional nature implies that intensity of participation, form of participation, and issues to be solved are highly important [108]. Intensity of participation refers to the varying degree of influence, expressing the extent to which the appropriate interests can be safeguarded. The form of participation refers to whether the employees act as individuals or groups. Further, employee participation may apply to decisions about very different issues acknowledging two types of issues: work-related (or “proximal issues”) and organizational issues (“distal issues”). “Proximal issues” are related to employees’ immediate conditions for performing the job. Organizing work tasks or working time are examples of such issues. In the meantime, “distal issues” are related to employees’ distal organizational environment, such as decisions on organizational strategy or financial decisions [106].

Employee participation creates the conditions for a fruitful social dialogue between employer, employees, and trade unions or other collective bodies.

It seems that employee participation has been already implicitly or explicitly mentioned when describing sustainable HRM [41,68,70,85]. Zaugg [41] treats participation as an underlying objective of sustainable HRM, seeing that participation makes the transformation in treating employees not as object but as subject possible. This notwithstanding, participation is conditional on the existence of decision-making freedom that is tied to responsibility. Furthermore, Zaugg [41] emphasizes that participation is not merely a bipartite relationship between the employees and those in charge of the human resource management: In the narrow sense, a tripartite relationship is analyzed (employees, management, and human resource experts), whereas in the broad sense, a multipartite relationship should be examined (peers, external advisors, relatives, budget organizations, etc.).

Järllström et al. [85] conclude, based on empirical study results, that employee participation refers to a sustainable HRM in the minds of top managers. Research revealed that open, two-way communication is seen as an integral part of sustainable HRM. Moreover, employee participation in work-related decision-making is another element fostering sustainability in HRM.

Summing up, intensity, form and type of participation, as well as issues to be solved in the context of sustainable human resource management are all important objects of analysis. Enabling the employees to participate is a prerequisite in an organization that alone is nonetheless not sufficient; it is essential that the participation of employees in human resource management be intense, that the forms of participation are aligned with the types of participation, whereas the participation itself is realized in solving both “distant” and “immediate” problems.

Employee development. Development of employees in the light of sustainability means that the focus should be placed not only on the development of any current skills and capacities, but rather on skill-sets and capacities the employees will need in the future. Thus, development of employees is related to long-term orientation, considering employees both as main assets and agents of change [95]. Moreover, investment in future skills adds a challenge to the overall corporate sustainability debate as business environment is constantly changing and requires an urgent and concerted effort for adjustment also in terms of employee skills. This is supported by the World Economic Forum [109] announcing in The Future of Jobs report that on average, by 2020, more than a third of the desired core skill-sets of most occupations will be comprised of skills that are not yet considered crucial to the job today. Such foresight calls for the need to integrate employee development in the overall business strategy. Before starting, each organization should address the question of how it treats employees, as “zero inventory” or “time-phased investment” [30]. While “just in time” concept has been proposed for HRM, treating employees as “change agents” rather than “repositories of knowledge” determines that employees should be approached as investment, not as costs [30]. In supporting this, Hirsig et al. [95] argue that “if resources allow it, it is equally or more important for the enterprise to invest in continuous training and education for the workforce than in infrastructure and equipment” (p. 144). In general, development of employee skills is beneficial

for employees (future employability and career opportunities) or employer (profitability and success) creating a win-win effect. Accordingly, the experience of business indicates that cutting on training and development even during economic crises creates longer-term problems for both parties [52]. Actually, employee development as a characteristic of sustainable HRM can be analyzed from various angles and several of them are described below.

Following the paradox theory, organizations surely focus on the tensions in the field of employee attraction. Mainly two options are available—either to buy talents on the market or to create flexibility through postponement [30]. Buying seems attractive because organizations can target specific skills they currently need. However, buying has been criticized for being expensive and exceeding the financial limits organizations can afford. Moreover, employees taken from the outside might give rise to disappointment in internal career mechanism and contribute to frustration of the existing employees. Flexibility through postponement relies on the idea that employees are given the chance to develop their full potential over the long term and across different positions, for instance in the form of job rotation [30]. Essentially, the above options seem appropriate from the HRM perspective. Mainstream HRM would prefer buying, seeing that experienced people rapidly generate economic value for the business. Meanwhile, sustainability in HRM is expressed through employee development appreciating on-the-job training and performing diverse tasks. According to Hirsig et al. [95], on-the-job training represents a cost-saving approach within the organization, whereas performing diverse tasks allows the employees to understand the processes, operations, and goals of organizations better, which in turn can lead to higher job motivation and innovations. Taking examples from business, well-known company Honda [110] can serve as a perfect one. Honda's approach to personnel education is built around on-the-job training as the company aims at building specialized skills and professional capabilities through direct experience. However, supplementary off-the-job training is also offered and is designed to provide the associates with an opportunity to enhance their careers by developing new specialized skills or management capabilities.

It seems that in the literature the debate regarding training intensity and cost covering is still going, given the importance of economic usefulness of employee development. The fear of employee turnover might result in the organization's minimization of employee training and development. However, an empirical research by Hansson [111] reveals that intensity of the investment in trainings is one of the key factors affecting profits. Economic outcome of operations—economic benefit of trainings outweighs the costs of employee turnover. Suggesting that employees should cover the costs of their trainings presumes that employees are the sole recipients of training benefits [112], and this is out of line with the idea of sustainability. This also contradicts the empirical findings of Järlström et al. [85] where managers acknowledged the meaning of development both for the individuals and the organization. Such recognition strongly supports the idea of life-long learning. Henkel supports the life-long learning idea seeing it as a central factor in further employee development. The idea is implemented through learning as part of everyday work and through handling a varied range of tasks. The company encourages this, especially by taking advantage of new roles both locally and in other countries.

In the light of sustainability, training forms and methods are relevant. Saving the costs, seeking to standardise the training materials as well as dealing with the geographical distance issues, some of the organisations have replaced direct contact training by online training. However, a negative consequence of technological advance becomes obvious: Employees are deprived of the interaction with experienced colleagues and of the possibility to get to know the organisational culture. Sustainability comes to the fore when an aligned approach is applied, encompassing both online and direct interaction sessions [31]. The case of Henkel [105] seems to be following the mentioned advice. By greater use of digital communication channels, Henkel supports internal knowledge transfer. However, knowledge transfer is also encouraged by face-to-face learning from supervisors, team members, and other colleagues.

When examining the transfer of experience in an organisation, mentoring and creation of the conditions for enabling it are to be emphasised. Moreover, it is expedient to reward the employees

for their efforts to transfer the experience and it is, therefore, likely that they will be more open about sharing the specialist knowledge with the new employees [31].

It is important not to forget the indirect value of employee development, seeing as it is the key element in attracting new employees and also offers more opportunities for the employees who wish to terminate the employment to search for jobs successfully [113]. Thus, the employability of the people is enhanced; however, it should be pointed out that trainings and development send to the employees a message that the organisation is interested in retaining them in the long term.

Incidentally, it is important for the organizations to also develop such abilities of employees that are aimed at enhancing corporate sustainability. In 2012, Henkel [105] launched the Sustainability Ambassador Programme to anchor sustainability in all employees. The aim of the programme is to communicate the company's motivation, strategy, and commitment to sustainability to its employees. By the end of 2017, more than 50,000 employees were already trained to become Sustainability Ambassadors.

External partnership. This characteristic mainly relies on the stakeholder theory [67] and sustainable resource management [14] considering the opportunities of the organization to provide the resources needed for doing business in the long run. From the sustainability perspective, an organization does not only have to ensure that it attracts and retains workforce today, but also that it sustains access to the desired groups of people, the so-called "source of resources" [19]. External partnership is strongly reflected in Ehnert's [19] sustainable HRM model, which lies on the "substance-oriented" meaning of sustainability arguing for the balance between the "consumption" and "reproduction" of human resources by fostering their regeneration and investing into the environments the human resources come from [19]. Emphasizing close cooperation with the "sources of resources", the relations with labor market, educational institutions, non-governmental institutions, and even employee families are seen as adding value on the road to sustainable HRM [70]. The examples of relationships mutually beneficial for employers and employees are the following: Coverage of training expenses, grants, support for lifelong learning, cooperation with universities, and other educational bodies by attending courses or getting possible solutions to business problems.

External partnership contributes to becoming an employer of choice, as job fairs or other forms of cooperation with educational institutions can be used to attract the right employees to the organization. Business has the right to hire globally or to use the local labor force, however, if skills of candidates are on the same level, sustainability always stands for local employees, and as such, decisions that also foster local communities [31].

Going further, inter-organisational relationships are also important in the context of partnership with the external environment. As seen from the sustainability perspective, organisations have to support each other in developing the human resources. Nonetheless, an opposite trend is observed that could be illustrated by a rhetorical question—"Why should we develop people when our competitors are willing to do it for us" [112] (p. 76). Thus, non-sharing of training expenses between organisations should be approached as anti-sustainability.

Recently, Ulrich and Dulebohn [2] proposed that future HRM will need to adopt an outside/inside approach where stakeholders and external environment influence what HRM does inside the organization. External partnership partly corresponds to the idea of outside/inside approach stating that HRM creates value by making sure "that services HR offers inside the company align to expectations outside the company" [2] (p. 191).

Flexibility. The concept of flexibility is well recognized and established in strategic HRM literature [114–116]. Functional and numerical flexibility tend to be viewed as alternative types of flexibility, both underlying distinct approaches to people management. Functional flexibility relies on long-term mutual investment in employment relationships and is usually seen as the ability to respond to changes in business "needs by having multi-skilled, adaptable and internally mobile employees" [113]. In other words, functional flexibility "concerns the ability to perform various and heterogeneous tasks as well as the practice of moving workers from one task to another to maintain

their efficiency” [117]. Numerical flexibility, on the other hand, refers to cost minimization and is, on the other hand, the ability of the organization to vary the quantity of workers employed to match the changes in the business needs [113].

Considering that numeral flexibility presents a cost-cutting approach and is associated with the short-term perspective, it is supposed that the numeral flexibility is hardly in line with the sustainability idea. Certainly, in some situations as temporary employment of students or people with disabilities or other persons helping them to integrate into labor market and to increase the chances of future employability, numeral flexibility is justified from the sustainability point of view. On the contrary, the added value of functional flexibility is much higher. Generally, functional flexibility becomes possible as a result of work rotation and employee substitution. In rotation, flexibility is beneficial to both parties—employer and employee, seeing that the determination of the match between the individual and job is postponed. Furthermore, job rotation allows the managers to understand the essential value-creating processes of other units, and makes it possible for the employees to enhance their employability. Furthermore, it should be emphasised that functional flexibility requires committed and skilled employees, whereas this could be achieved by investing in trainings and long-term employment relationships.

Flexibility, as a characteristic of sustainable HRM, is mainly reflected in terms of employee needs. The need for flexibility in such issues like work hours, leave, remote work, vacations, rewards, and retirements was recognized by managers in Finnish companies [85]. In 2012, Henkel [105] signed the global Work-Life Flexibility Charter. Nowadays, based on a culture of trust, flexible working hours, part-time work, new workplace concepts and mobile working represent a natural part of work at Henkel. It is relevant from the sustainability point of view that managers are instructed on how to put flexible working arrangements into practice and to support them actively. In general, Henkel acknowledges the added value of flexible working due to the improved work-life balance and employee motivation.

However, flexibility should be treated carefully with caution due to several reasons. First, flexibility requires taking into consideration the special needs of employees emerging due to individual or family concerns, while at the same time meeting the needs of the organization [95]. Usually, reality is undoubtedly challenging as it is not easy to reconcile the need for flexibility and human resource planning, although they should ideally be integrated [85]. Secondly, empirical findings are not homogenous and some of them do not support theoretical insights and empirical conclusions that flexibility has a positive effect on employee well-being. For instance, Mariappanadar and Kramar [75] found out that tele-working and compressed working week both increased employee harm (increased absenteeism and sick leaves). However, in the same research flexi-time and home-based work did not have the mentioned effect.

Compliance beyond labor regulations. Running business according to law is a compulsory precondition for each organization. Cohen et al. [43] argue that compliance with labor regulations is an essential starting-point for sustainable HRM. The existing well known and mostly prevailing sustainability frameworks, such as Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) framework or the United Nations Global Compact, also include information if the organizations’ actions, namely labor practices and practices in the field of human rights, are in accordance with the legal requirements.

However, for being sustainable in people management, it is not enough just to obey the laws and regulations. In order to employ sustainability in HRM and to reap the benefits, a broader approach that reaches beyond the labor regulations is needed, as “obeying institutional requirements does not necessarily signal that a particular organization is sustainable” [85] (p. 7). In Germany, Henkel involves employee representatives in many decision-making processes beyond those for which worker participation is a statutory requirement. The company sees the value of such choice in several areas, for instance, improved work-life balance or accident prevention.

Employee cooperation. Brown and Shields [118] argue that according to tournament theory competing employees have strong intentions to undermine their co-workers’ activities. In doing

this, the employees can improve their own performance and be rewarded. However, workplace cooperation is much more beneficial than competition in terms of economic and social outcomes. For instance, Hirsig et al. [95] underline that cooperation fosters improved quality and productivity, reduces absenteeism, lowers the risk of labor disputes, and increases overall job satisfaction. Information sharing, trust and respect within an organization or open and proactive communication can be applied for creating and enhancing employee cooperation.

Fairness and equality. This characteristic corresponds to Greenwood's [36] conclusion that question "is this right or wrong" appears to be long overlooked in HRM. Järlström et al. [85] underline that fair treatment of employees means that "rules, responsibilities, and rights are intended to be the same for everyone throughout an organization" (p. 7).

Diversity literature mostly defines diversity by referring to employee socio-demographic traits, such as age, gender, ethnicity, etc. [119]. Harrison, Price and Bell [120] proposed two distinct dimensions of diversity, i.e., surface-level diversity and deep-level diversity. Surface-level diversity refers to differences among people in overt, biological characteristics that are typically reflected in physical features, which are visible and easily perceived by individuals (examples: Age or gender). Deep-level diversity, on the contrary, relies on more subtle attributes that cannot necessarily be immediately and directly observed. Such attributes refer to employees' attitudes, beliefs and values [121]. Incidentally, diversity management and non-discrimination do not mean the same in terms of pursuing sustainability. Sustainable HRM requires not only ensuring non-discrimination, but also going one step forward and encouraging diversity within workforce [95]. In general, fairness and equality could be reflected throughout the entire HRM addressing selection, performance evaluation, rewarding, etc.

Turning to business practice, Starbucks [122] can serve as an excellent example. On its website, Starbucks declares it strives to create a culture that values and respects diversity and inclusion and this not a mere declaration. When the police were called to arrest two black men waiting for a colleague at a Philadelphia Starbucks in April, 2018, Starbucks' CEO Kenneth Johnson responded swiftly to the event, and among other measures, a day of anti-bias training for employees in over 8000 Starbucks stores was scheduled. Starbucks stores and corporate offices were closed for trainings of 175,000 employees, this being just a part of a longer, comprehensive effort to make Starbucks even more diverse and equitable.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Over the last 30 years, people and performance linkage have been approached in HRM literature more as a means rather than an end in itself. Moreover, no effect or negative effect of HRM on human resources has been also largely neglected. To be honest, the situation when human resources were more consumed than developed became more or less prevailing. Such treatment has resulted in employee health issues, difficulties to reconcile work and private life or other forms of harm on employees, their family members and society as a whole making it more difficult for business to have skilled and healthy labor force. Alongside internal issues in employment relationships, external factors, such as demographical changes or increased external pressure of various stakeholders also require a paradigm shift in HRM if organizations are to attract and retain human resources for running business in the future. The paper fully shares the idea of Ehnert and Harry [20] that there is no time to postpone choices and actions to sometime in "the future" and supports the idea for choosing sustainable HRM as a new approach for people management. Taking into consideration the young age of the construct, different understandings of sustainable HRM are presented. Drawing on insights by Ehnert [70], Kramar [22], and Mariappanadar [23,72], the paper underlines several components of sustainable HRM, for example: Sustainable HRM acknowledges organizational performance outcomes, which are broader than financial outcomes, thus including environmental and social outcomes; sustainable HRM assumes that multiple goals can be contradictory; the temporal perspective of evaluating the mentioned outcomes moves from short-term to long-term perspectives; sustainable HRM recognizes complex

interrelations between HRM and internal and external environments with the purpose to have access to resources and to control negative externalities. Thus, sustainable HRM is dedicated to human resource development, regeneration, and renewal.

Further, the paper argues that the first premise how to translate sustainable HRM into practice [38] is being aware what it means to manage people in a sustainable way. Trying to fill the gap in the literature for answers to Ehnert's [70] question: "What would an HRM system look like which deserves the attribute 'sustainable'?" (p. 257), the characteristics of sustainable HRM are introduced. Drawing from the previous writings in the field of sustainable HRM and being in line with the concept of corporate sustainability, the 11 characteristics of sustainable HRM are the following: long-term orientation, care of employees, care of environmental, profitability, employee participation and social dialogue, employee development, external partnership, flexibility, compliance beyond labor regulations, employee cooperation, fairness, and equality. In fact, the paper proposes separating two things: Underlying approaches and characteristics of sustainable HRM. In this sense, underlying approaches serve as keynotes, as a "roof" for characteristics arguing that the characteristics should correspond to the approaches. The paradox theory [19,70], theory of negative externality and stakeholder harm [23], and stakeholder theory [67] were suggested as approaches described coherently in sustainable HRM literature.

The paper elaborated on each characteristic of sustainable HRM by presenting the theoretical explanations and some examples from world-leading companies on how these characteristics could be translated "into shared meanings or into measurable processes and outcomes" [13] (p. 17). Overall, by revealing the features of sustainable HRM, the paper supports the idea of Cleveland et al. [21] that HRM must be strong advocates of employees. Surely, profitability goals of businesses cannot be denied, and having this in mind, it becomes essential to align and adjust the employer and employee needs. The dialogue between two parties could rely on the harmonious co-existence of employees, corporations, and society or pursuing the "win-win" situation.

As it was mentioned before, the paper introduces some examples from business on the expression of characteristics. Thus, it is shown that characteristics can acquire different forms across different organizations. Such attitude corresponds to the insights suggested 20 years ago by Porter and Kramer [123]. They argued that the pressure for organizations to think of corporate social responsibility in generic ways instead of in the way most appropriate to each company's strategy serves as an obstacle to higher achievements improving social and environmental outcomes of their activities. Hence, presuming diversity in the expression of characteristics, the paper supports the view of Mariappanadar [23] that sustainable HRM is a self-regulation system at the institutional level. However, having this in mind, it is no less important that sustainable HRM should have clear daily practices rather than reflect a "good catalog of intention". For instance, talking about the care of employee practices that are related to healthy employees, employee-friendly physical workspace, work-life balance, constructive stress management, attention to employees, or adequate workload could be implemented [25]. Moreover, challenges related to digital age and new emerging technologies need to be included when talking about sustainability in HRM.

The paper has several limitations, namely in terms of not including aspects of cultures or religions when analysing sustainable HRM or not proposing how to measure the level of sustainability in HRM. However, these limitations could be overcome by further research.

With regard to future research opportunities, different cultures and even religions could be included while analyzing the meaning of sustainability for societies and business worldwide. Sustainability debates address the values and these values are not shared universally. Moreover, sustainability and characteristics of sustainable HRM can be interpreted differently across different cultures [20]. This leads to the proposition that characteristics of sustainable HRM cannot be generalized worldwide and there is a need to expand research in mentioned field. Actually, some efforts have already been made and the paper on implications of Confucian thinking for sustainable HRM serves as an excellent starting example [56]. Further, for sustainable HRM to be useful and fruitful for practitioners, it is

necessary to propose how to measure that construct in terms of characteristics. Several attempts at providing validated scales for measuring have already been made, for instance by Wikhamn [40]; however, sustainable HRM measuring still remains a challenging field. Next, as Industry 4.0 with the emerging technologies affects the work design and job processes, the impact of these technologies on people management by taking sustainability perspective could also be addressed in further research. Finally, sustainability does not mean stability; it is a dynamic process [124]. Referring to people management, this means that sustainability in HRM is constantly changing and further research is needed to discover the characteristics of sustainable HRM emerging during that journey.

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