THE ROLES OF HUMAN RESOURCES IN CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY: FINDING A BALANCE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NEW ZEALAND

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Abstract

Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) refers to the application of sustainability concepts and practices in human resource management functions. It involves multi-dimensions and concepts, multi-stakeholder strategies and engagement, as well as resources required, for promoting sustainability practices within an organisation. S-HRM plays critical roles to support the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that New Zealand adopted in 2015 for implementation between 2020 and 2030. This research attempts to investigate how S-HRM practices may be influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and their implications for managing change and employee wellbeing in New Zealand organisations. To achieve the research objectives, relevant literature published between 2015 and 2021 in major databases were reviewed. Content analysis was employed to examine theoretical and empirical studies of S-HRM. Based on the findings, emerging themes are discussed in this study: 1) the nature and roles of S-HRM, 2) their implications for managing change and employee wellbeing under the COVID-19 Alert System in New Zealand, and 3) the challenges faced by the key stakeholders in implementing S-HRM during this "new normal". Suggestions for future practices and research are discussed, taking into consideration the needs to balance the roles of S-HRM in managing change and employee wellbeing while achieving the sustainable development goal(s) adopted by an organisation.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Employee Wellbeing, New Zealand, Organisational Change, Sustainable Human Resource Management.

1. Introduction

In view of increasing needs to embed corporate sustainability responsibility (CSR) within a range of management functions in an organisation (e.g., Stahl, Brewster, Collings, & Hajro, 2020; Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Herrera & Heras-Rosas, 2020; Zhao, Wu, Chen, & Zhou, 2020; Yong, et al., 2019; Kainzbauer & Rungruang, 2019), Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) pays a major role in applying sustainability concepts and practices in human resource management functions in the organisation (Randev & Jha, 2019). Due to increasing uncertainty in the business environment, such as in the era of COVID-19 pandemic, the practice of S-HRM may be put under test to balance the needs to managing change and employee wellbeing while achieving the sustainable development goal(s) adopted by the organisation in New Zealand.

2. Research problem

To understand how S-HRM practices may be influenced by COVID-19 pandemic and their implications for managing change and employee wellbeing in New Zealand organisations, this study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What is S-HRM? 2) how S-HRM practices may be affected by COVID-19 in New Zealand? and 3) what are the challenges of implementing S-HRM during this "new normal"?

3. Methods

To achieve the research objectives outlined above, a semi-systematic approach was employed to review relevant literature published between 2015 and 2021 in major databases. Key search words, such as "sustainable human resource management", "sustainable practices in human resource management", "sustainable human resource management and change management", "sustainable human resource management in COVID-19", were used. Based on pragmatism, functionalist and interpretive philosophies, content analysis and inductive reasoning were applied for analysing the data collected. Through the review of theoretical and empirical studies of S-HRM, emerging themes are discussed as follows.

4. Review of the Relevant Literature and Data Analysis

To promote sustainability practices in an organisation that operates in complex and uncertain business environment, such as COVID-19 pandemic, the emerging themes demonstrated the needs to examine: 1) the nature and roles of S-HRM, 2) their implications for managing change and employee wellbeing in organisations under the COVID-19 Alert System in New Zealand, and 3) the challenges faced by the key stakeholders to implement S-HRM during this "new normal".

4. 1 Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM)

S-HRM refers to the application of sustainability concepts and practises in human resource management functions (Randev & Jha, 2019). It involves multi-dimensions and concepts, multi-stakeholder strategies and engagement, as well as resources required, for promoting sustainability practices within an organisation (Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Zhao, Wu, Chen, & Zhou, 2020; Agnieszka, 2020; Randev & Jha, 2019; MDPI, 2019).

4. 1.1 The Nature of S-HRM

Since the introduction of the sustainability concept by The United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 (United Nations, 2021), S-HRM practises and research have gradually earned the place among research communities, managers, and HR professionals to the present. Based on the announcement presented by the United Nations General Assembly in the Transforming Our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development presented in 2015, 17 sustainable development goals were identified, leading to 169 targets that aimed to promote actions that are critical for humanity and the planet by 2030, namely, People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership (United Nations, 2021; United Nations, 2015).

The position of corporate social responsibility (CSR) that an organisation adopted may affect the organisational culture, human resource practices and workforce behaviours within the organisation (Jang & Ardichvili, 2020; Herrera & Heras-Rosas, 2020). For example, Carroll's pyramid of CSR proposes the levels of sustainable practices an organisation may subscribe to: Economic responsibilities (Level 1), legal responsibilities (Level 2), ethical responsibilities (Level 3), and philanthropic responsibilities (Level 4) (Carroll & Laasch, 2020; Herrera & Heras-Rosas, 2020). These levels of CSR influence the sustainability practices of the organisation, including embedding CSR vision in the corporate vision, missions, and goals that lead to S-HRM practices to support its organisational culture, especially if the organisation has adopted Level 4 of CSR (Herrera & Heras-Rosas, 2020).

Along this line, the Triple Bottom Line model proposes 3 aspects of sustainability: *Economic, social, and environmental sustainability* (Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Herrera & Heras-Rosas, 2020; Braccini & Margherita, 2019). These aspects of sustainability involve different dimensions and concepts, strategies, and engagement of key stakeholders, such as HR professionals, managers of all levels, and employees to promote sustainability practices within the organisation (Atiku & Fapohunda, 2021; Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Agnieszka, 2020; Jang & Ardichvili, 2020; Stahl, Brewster, Collings, & Hajro, 2020; Evans, et al., 2017). As a strategic partner and a change agent, HR professionals play crucial roles to embed sustainable HRM practices within the organisation (Atiku & Fapohunda, 2021; Jang & Ardichvili, 2020; Stahl, Brewster, Collings, & Hajro, 2020; Randev & Jha, 2019).

To illustrate, *economic sustainability* involves the position that an organisation holds in shaping its workforce to create value and to balance costs and revenues when producing and distributing goods and services to meet the needs of its targeted markets (Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Herrera & Heras-Rosas, 2020; Braccini & Margherita, 2019). Along this line, HR professionals play an important role to improve quality, efficiency, flexibility, innovation, and profits in the organisation (Agnieszka, 2020). For example, the improvement of work productivity through managers' leadership styles and high-performance work systems may lead to the return of investment on human capital (Yang & Lew, 2020; Riana, Suparna, Suwandana, Kot, & Rajiani, 2020).

For organisations that are subscribed to *environmental sustainability*, the use and renewal of resources in producing and distributing goods and services to its market are important (Braccini & Margherita, 2019; Chams & García-Blandón, 2019). Therefore, the roles of *green human resource management* (green HRM) are critical for facilitating these practices through their workforce, such as: 1) recruiting, selecting, and developing workforce with green awareness, 2) incorporating green practices in job design, performance management, and reward system, and 3) engaging workforce in green practices and activities, in and outside of an organisation (Atiku & Fapohunda, 2021; Amrutha & Geetha, 2020; Ari, Karatepe, Rezapouraghdam, & Avci, 2020; Yong, et al., 2019).

While the sustainability discussed above are important for some organisations, *social sustainability* in human resource management has attracted more attention in S-HRM in recent years as it is essential to develop human and social capital of the communities, in and outside of an organisation, to create values and to support the two aspects of sustainability discussed, above (Amrutha & Geetha, 2020; Stahl, Brewster, Collings, & Hajro, 2020). For example, practices and research on equity, health, wellness, and employee wellbeing, such as job satisfaction, work-life balance, engagement and social integration, equity, and justice in the distribution of resources among the workplace communities, appeared to attract more attention especially when implementing organisational change in the last two decades (Amrutha & Geetha, 2020; Yong, et al., 2019). At a macro level, this form of sustainability may lead to the satisfaction of external stakeholders (e.g., public, communities, customers) through promoting employment growth and social inclusion in a society (Agnieszka, 2020).

4.1.2 Integrating S-HRM Roles in an Organisation

From the aspect of strategic human resource management, three phases of integration are crucial for embedding sustainability practices in an organisation, namely the alignment of strategic organisational planning (SOP) and external business environment (Phase 1), fitness of HR strategy (Phase 2), and closing the gaps of SOP and HR planning (Phase 3) (e.g., Ungureanu, Bertolotti, & Pilati, 2020; Stahl, Brewster, Collings, & Hajro, 2020; Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Okolie, 2020; Armstrong & Taylor, 2020; Boon, Den Hartog, & Lepak, 2019).

During Phase 1, HR professionals conduct an environmental analysis to review and evaluate if strategic organisational planning (SOP) of the organisation addresses the challenges arise or will potentially arise in the business environment where the organisation operates (Ungureanu, Bertolotti, & Pilati, 2020; KPMG, 2020). For example, the adaptation of a level of Carroll's pyramid of CSR indicates the emphasis on the dimensions and degree of adaptation to economic, social, and/or environmental sustainability (Carroll & Laasch, 2020; Herrera & Heras-Rosas, 2020).

In Phase 2, HR professionals analyse the level of fitness of the HR strategy subscribed by the organisation. In other words, different forms of sustainability in strategic organisational planning (SOP) indicate the need to review and evaluate the vertical and horizontal alignment of human resource management practices within an organisation (Stahl, Brewster, Collings, & Hajro, 2020; Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). *Vertical fit* of human resource management involves alignment between human resource strategy (e.g., human resource vision, missions, and goals) with overall strategies of the organisation (e.g., corporate vision, missions, and goals) (Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Boon, Den Hartog, & Lepak, 2019). For example, how well the organisation integrates the 3 aspects of sustainability (e.g., economic, social, and environmental sustainability) in its vision, mission, and goals at the corporate level and human resource management level.

Equally important is the *horizontal fit* of human resource management practices that involve configuring major human resource management functions within the organisation to ensure that they are supporting the human resource strategy subscribed by the organisation (Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Armstrong & Taylor, 2020; Boon, Den Hartog, & Lepak, 2019). For example, how well the organisation integrates the 3 aspects of sustainability (e.g., economic, social, and environmental sustainability) in its human resource planning, job analysis and job design, recruitment and selection, learning and development, performance management, compensation and reward management, employment relations, health and safety, as well as human resource information system (Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Armstrong & Taylor, 2020; Boon, Den Hartog, & Lepak, 2019).

Upon evaluating, if SOP of the organisation addressed the challenges of the business environment in which the organisation operates, as well as vertical and horizontal fit of human resource strategy, HR professionals need to implement strategies to close the workforce gaps through internal and external labour demand and supply projection in Phase 3 (Okolie, 2020; Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). This may involve getting the right manpower and resources for implementing strategic, structural, technological, people related changes within the organisation to re-position and re-align sustainability practices within human resource management functions.

The review, above, indicates the complexity of S-HRM as it involves multi-dimensions and concepts, multi-stakeholder strategies and engagement, as well as resources required, for promoting sustainability practices within an organisation (Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Zhao, Wu, Chen, & Zhou, 2020; Agnieszka, 2020).

4.2 S-HRM and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Implications for Managing Change

and Employee Wellbeing in New Zealand Organisations

Along with 192 United Nations Member States, New Zealand has adopted the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (United Nations, 2021). The aim is to start in 2020 and achieve the goals by 2030 (United Nations, 2021; HRNZ, 2020). However, the journey to S-HRM has been challenged with the spread of COVID-19 pandemic globally since the announcement of WHO on 11 March 2020 (World Health Organisation, 2020), as discussed below.

4.2.1 The COVID-19 Alert System: The "new normal" in New Zealand

Following the first COVID-19 case reported on 28 February 2020 in New Zealand, the COVID-19 Alert System (https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-system/about-the-alert-system/) was introduced by the New Zealand Government in March 2020 to control the spread of the virus (New Zealand Government, 2020). This alert system provided the guidelines to restrict public movements of and to apply standard operations procedures in business operations at 4 Alert Levels (ALs): Prepare (AL1), reduce social activities (AL2), restrictions on trading activity (AL3), and lockdown of non-essential activity (AL4) (New Zealand Government, 2020). The following sections outlined some impacts on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and across industries.

4.2.2 The Influence of 'New Normal" on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Industries

As compared to the USA, India, Brazil, France, Russia, and Europe, New Zealand is relatively stable in its control of COVID-19 pandemic to date (Worldometer, 2020; New Zealand Government, 2020). New Zealand is ranked as 179 out of 222 countries and territories on the list of the highest global reported cases, as of 11 May 2021 (Worldometer, 2020).

Nevertheless, S-HRM remains a challenge for this nation that consists of about 530,000 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as well as micro businesses that employed fewer than 20 employees, representing 97% of all firms in 2020 (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2020). These businesses contributed to 28% of employment and over a quarter of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in New Zealand (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2020). Nevertheless, a study by Xero and AlphaBeta (2020) published in September 2020 reported a drop of 40% in small business revenues in New Zealand, while it was 27% in the United Kingdom and 11% in Australia. According to the report of Reserve Bank New Zealand in May 2020, the GDP reduced by 37% during AL4 under this "new normal", followed by 19% in AL3, 8.8% in AL2, and 3.8% in AL1 (Stannard, Steven, & McDonald, 2020).

Although the impacts of COVID-19 on overall New Zealand businesses appeared to be less severe than other countries (New Zealand Government, 2020; KPMG, 2020), the production in all industries has been affected in various degree compared to pre- COVID-19 (Stannard, Steven, & McDonald, 2020). Industries with a significant drop of GDP included construction, manufacturing, accommodation, food and beverage (Reserve Bank of New Zealand, 2020; Stannard, Steven, & McDonald, 2020).

4.2.3 Government Supports

To facilitate organisational transformation and changes during this difficult time, the Small Business Collective in the Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment (MBIE) works collaboratively with small businesses, relevant private sectors and government departments, such as Inland Revenue, Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), New Zealand Trade & Enterprise (NZTE), Customs, Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI), WorkSafe, NZ Transport Agency (NZTA) and the Treasury, to support local businesses (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2020).

To name a few, New Zealand Government provided a range of financial support schemes and stimuli, including the 2020 and 2021 wage subsidy schemes and tax relief, to businesses to overcome the challenges they faced (e.g., job cuts and cash flow) since the lockdown between March 2020 and March 2021, especially during AL3 and AL4 (New Zealand Government, 2020; New Zealand Government, 2021a; Employment New Zealand, 2021; KPMG, 2020). For example, the construction ($1.5bn) and the manufacturing ($1.13bn) sectors had received almost a quarter of the total paid out as of 15 May 2020, followed by: 1) accommodation and food services ($976m), 2) retail trade ($966m), and 3) professional, scientific and technical

services ($913m) (Strang, 2020). These schemes supported 71% of businesses and 1.64 million jobs in New Zealand (Strang, 2020).

The review above indicates the need to examine the challenges faced by the key stakeholders, such as HR professionals, managers, and employees, to balance the roles of S-HRM in managing change and employee wellbeing while achieving the sustainable development goal(s) adopted by an organisation under the "new normal".

4.3 Key Challenges of S-HRM: Managing Change and Employee Wellbeing

The complexity of managing change and employee wellbeing within an organisation appeared to be escalated by COVID-19 pandemic conditions in a country. In response to uncertain social, economic, and employment influences, downsizing, restructuring, reengineering, and redundancy become the "new normal" in all sizes of affected organisations across industries in New Zealand, especially in tourism and hospitality, food and beverage, international education, and construction sectors (Collins, 2020; Stannard, Steven, & McDonald, 2020; New Zealand Herald, 2020a; New Zealand Herald, 2020b; Walters, 2020).

The speed of recovery under the "new normal" appeared to be varied. For example, a recent global monthly report of February 2021 published by Xero Small Business Insights (2021) indicated a slow improvement in both revenue and jobs in New Zealand indicated early timing of the restrictions (i.e., the alert system) and severity of lockdown measures appeared to influence the pace of business recovery among the small businesses. However, compared to the manufacturing industry that experienced relatively less impacts during lockdowns, the tourism and hospitality industry in New Zealand experienced a drop of 14% revenues as per the report in February 2021 as the industry relies more on face-to-face contact and international tourists when providing their services (Xero Small Business Insights, 2021). Recent attempt to implement the Trans-Tasman travel bubble for quarantine-free travel between New Zealand and Australia, is among the recovery efforts introduced to stimulate the tourism and hospitality industry in both countries (New Zealand Government, 2021b). In addition to Air New Zealand (Anthony, 2020), The Warehouse (New Zealand Herald, 2020b), and Fletcher Building (Nadkarni, 2020) are among the New Zealand organisations that are continuously seeking for ways to managing change and employee wellbeing because of downsizing, restructuring, reengineering, and redundancy.

As organisations are finding ways to manage change (e.g., business models, digital, and structural transformations) to meet challenges caused by uncertainties (Xero Small Business Insights, 2021) and balancing sustainable practices in the era of COVID-19, so are employees and HR professionals across industries globally. Considering affected business operations and reducing profits under the "new normal", organisations may tend to prioritise *economic sustainability* over *environmental sustainability* and *social sustainability*.

Under such circumstances, HR professionals in SMEs and micro businesses may find it more challenging to embed all *economic, social, and environmental sustainability* dimensions in its operations as resources are required to support the S-HRM practices (Riana, et al., 2020). For example, an investment in human resources is required for an organisation to improve its organisational performance through business innovation (Riana, et al., 2020; Valdez-Juárez & Maldonado-Guzmán, 2016), or to employ eight indicators of *green HRM* (e.g., selective staffing, training, empowerment, rewards, career opportunities, teamwork, work-life balance, and participation in decision-making) to promote eco-friendly behaviours within the organisation (Ari, Karatepe, Rezapouraghdam, & Avci, 2020).

These uncertainties appeared to post challenges to the mental health and wellbeing of some employees because of reducing job security, job satisfaction, work-life balance, increasing stressors, and challenges of obtaining support due to social distancing (Scoop Media, 2020).

Although these challenges are not new to the *social sustainability* dimension of S-HRM, to experience them at such pace and intensity at a workplace is probably a unique experience for most. According to a press release by the Umbrella in New Zealand (2020), an increase of 108% new clients were seeking for their professional services and support after the lockdown in June 2020 as compared to the same time in 2019.

This indicates while HR professionals in an organisation that focuses on *economic sustainability* would look for ways to utilise its workforce to improve quality, efficiency, flexibility, innovation, and profits of the organisation while satisfying the needs of its targeted customers (Agnieszka, 2020; Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Herrera & Heras-Rosas, 2020), for organisations that subscribe to *social sustainability*, equity, health, wellness, and wellbeing of the staff, as well as employment growth and social inclusion in the society, are more crucial roles of HR professionals (Agnieszka, 2020; Amrutha & Geetha, 2020; Yong, et al., 2019). Likewise, for organisations with a focus on *environmental sustainability,* fostering organisational culture that emphasises on *green HRM practices*, such as the use of renewable resources in business operations through staffing, job design, performance management and reward system, is more important to encourage green practices (Atiku & Fapohunda, 2021; Amrutha & Geetha, 2020; Ari, Karatepe, Rezapouraghdam, & Avci, 2020; Yong, et al., 2019). This indicates the need for an organisation to re-think the balance among *economic, environmental, and social sustainability* the organisation would like to practice under the "new normal."

As organisational culture (e.g., organisational justice, organisational trust and organisational identification) may lead to organisational behaviours, such as the ways that an employee perceives and responds to CSR (Westerman, Rao, Vanka, & Gupta, 2020; Herrera & Heras-Rosas, 2020; Cugueró-Escofet, et al., 2019; Carbery & Cross, 2019), New Zealand organisations need to re-examine the pull and push factors (e.g., size of the organisation, resources available, dynamic of the internal and external business environment where the organisation operates, vertical and horizontal human resource fitness, dimensions of S-HRM adopted by the organisation) to re-position and re-align S-HRM practices within the organisations.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings, above, it can be concluded that S-HRM involves multi-dimensions and concepts (e.g., 4 levels of CSR, 3 aspects of sustainability, and HR alignment), multi-stakeholder strategies and engagement (e.g., HR professionals; top, middle, and line managers; and employees), as well as resources required, for promoting sustainability practices within an organisation.

Therefore, it is important to align HRM practices with the needs of an organisation from 3 aspects. Firstly, the strategic organisational planning (SOP) of an organisation should address the challenges in the external business environment where the organisation operates, such as COVID-19 pandemic that posted challenges to the health, political, economic, social, and environment conditions in most countries since February 2020 (Worldometer, 2020) and which levels of CSR the organisation adopted. Secondly, HR strategy should *align vertically* with the corporate strategy of the organisation, and *horizontally* among the major HRM functions to achieve sustainability goals in the organisation. Lastly, HR planning should identify the manpower gaps and the strategies to close the gaps relevant to *economic, environmental, and social sustainability* under the "new normal".

It is suggested for the management and HR professionals to re-examine their position of S-HRM in the era of COVID-19. This indicates the need to revisit the factors associated with S-HRM (e.g., size of the organisation, resources available, dynamic of business environment, fitness of

HR strategy, and prioritising dimensions of S-HRM) under the "new normal" for future practices and research.

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