



**Call for Papers for a Special Issue of  
*Human Resource Management***

**Setting a new table, not just sitting at the table: HRM leading the transformation  
towards sustainability**

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**Rationale and objectives:**

The grand societal challenges of our time, like those reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all, have gained increasing attention in the management literature as a critical dilemma that organizations face in the design of business models, management practices and employment relationships (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016). In an attempt to help address these challenges, HRM scholars have drawn attention to HRM systems, strategies and policies as a potential means towards the realization of organizations' sustainability objectives (Stahl, Brewster, Collings, & Hajro, 2019; Taylor, Osland, & Egri, 2012). In this literature, the call to integrate HRM and sustainability has made positive advancements in the past decade, encouraging the emergence and rapid development of so-called 'green HRM', specifically targeting environmental sustainability (Jackson, Renwick, Jabbour & Muller-Camen, 2011; Renwick, 2018; Ren, Tang & Jackson, 2018), with the debate more recently extending to sustainable HRM that contributes to the triple bottom line of social, environmental, and economic responsibility (i.e., people, planet, profits) (Ehnert, 2009; Ehnert, Matthews & Muller-Camen, 2019; Kramar, 2014).

The role of HRM has since been advocated to aid organizations' proactive attempts to address environmental issues and/or corporate social responsibility while working hard not to sacrifice profitability (De Stefano, Bagdadli, & Camuffo, 2018). This includes the study of specific, disparate HRM practices, for instance environmental training (Teixeira, Jabbour, & Jabbour, 2012) and pay incentives (Merriman & Sen, 2012), as well as bundles of some 'best practices' as an integrated set of strategically-targeted HRM systems (DuBois & Dubois, 2012; Zoogah, 2018). Implicit in these investigations is a strategic HRM-derived assumption that well designed HRM practices elicit employee ability, motivation and opportunities that contribute to organizations' strategic objectives, in this case, sustainability (Ren & Jackson, 2019).

However, the challenge associated with working towards a grand challenge like sustainability is that it requires transformation from the current market economic model to a new one in defining the purpose, value and legitimacy of organizational activities (Ehnert et al., 2014; Pfeffer, 2010). This transformation is essentially a process of institutional work where institutional logics, defined as organizing templates that guide the goals that organizations pursue and the means by which organizations pursue their goals (Reay & Hinings, 2009), are changed, established and institutionalized (Dahmann & Grosvold, 2017). However, to the

extent that the conventional strategic HRM paradigm evaluates business effectiveness using financial metrics primarily, the discussion of HRM's role that is built upon this paradigm is ineffective to achieve sustainability (Brewster, Gooderham, & Mayrhofer, 2016; Stahl et al., 2019).

As part of the complexities involved in transformation towards sustainability, the HRM literature also reveals the importance of configuring well-functioning top management teams (TMT) to implement strategic changes. In most organizations, the top leader takes the final responsibility for firm performance and interacts with the TMT when dealing with complex strategic decisions, and such an interaction is termed as leader-TMT dynamics (Su, Fan & Rao-Nicholson, 2019; Heyden, Reimer, & Van Doorn, 2017). With the boundary-spanning nature of HRM systems and practices, the HRM professionals have the capacity and opportunities to interact, negotiate and coordinate the leader-TMT dynamics so as to foster an environment conducive to institutional work for sustainability. In this sense, the HRM change role is expanded beyond the influence on front line employees and line managers, but also to the intricacies embedded in the leader-TMT dynamics. Such an expansive interaction may serve as a starting point to understand complex resource configurations in explaining and implementing organizational transformation towards addressing sustainability challenges. It also raises important issues pertaining to leader integrity (Pfeffer, 2016), executive compensation (e.g., Deckop, Merriman, & Gupta, 2006), human resource development (e.g., Pless, Maak, & Stahl, 2012), corporate governance (e.g., Filatotchev & Stahl, 2015), talent management (e.g., Collings, 2014), and how to develop responsible leaders (e.g., Mirvis, 2012) that all have distinct HRM implications.

### **Potential theoretical advancement and practical significance:**

In this direction, the HRM change role is needed to lead to institutional change towards articulating, designing and implementing a sustainability paradigm. For instance, Ren and Jackson (2019) draw from institutional theory and introduce the concept of HRM institutional entrepreneurship where HRM professionals act as individuals or as a group to leverage professional resources or HRM systems to change institutional logics. This change leadership role departs from the change agent role that is advocated by strategic HRM scholars. For the latter, positive development has been made to shift HRM from an administrative role to a business partner role that enables HRM to gain a seat in the strategic decision making table. However, the business partner role is the most difficult one out of a range of HRM roles that has been implemented (Lawler, 2011). Thus, instead of waiting to warm up the seat of the table built upon the market economic model, HRM should be proactive in 'building a new table and inviting a wide array of guests to join a new conversation' (Ren & Jackson, 2019). However, issues around how and under what conditions HRM enacts such a change leadership role remain to be explored.

This proposed special issue therefore has the potential to advance the theorization of HRM's role in leading the change towards addressing 'grand challenges', which puts into perspective the paradigm shifts in assessing business models. It will help to clarify the conceptualization and measurement issues around this role and further integrate the literatures of HRM, institutional theory and leadership, which have so far remained largely independent (Leroy, Segers, van Dierendonck, & den Hartog, 2018; Lewis, Cardy & Huang, 2019). In the meantime the enriched understanding of the nature, characteristics, and function of HRM change role in sustainability has practical implications for organizations to design the desired HRM systems, develop HRM professionals equipped with the right mix of skills for the role, and orchestrate a range of organizational resources in the change process.

In summary, HRM discussions have up until now focused on reacting to new challenges brought about by sustainability – such as whether green HRM influences firms’ environmental performance (Ren et al., 2018), how to incentivise managers towards the triple bottom line (Merriman & Sen, 2012), what tensions to solve among organizations’ stakeholders (Ehnert, 2009) – within the confines of the economic market model of organizations’ purposes for existence and action. This line of institutional logics emphasizes HRM’s contribution to the economic performance of organizations, not based on a triple bottom line paradigm (George et al., 2016). Due to this, we do not yet know enough about the efficacy, process, and scope of HRM-based change towards transforming organizations’ institutional context and HRM’s leadership role for institutional work towards sustainability.

### **Key themes/scope of focus:**

In this regard, the aim of this special issue is to bring together theoretical and empirical advancements in relation to HRM change leadership role in understanding and addressing sustainability challenges. We seek both theoretical and empirical papers, as well as literature reviews and meta-analyses, including interdisciplinary and intersectoral research that may address, but are not limited to, the following list of potential research questions across our major themes:

#### *Theme 1: Interacting with Institutions*

- How can HRM institutional entrepreneurship be measured? This includes scale development and nomological validity. How does HRM institutional entrepreneurship differ from the HRM change agent role?
- In light of the existence of competing institutional logics within organizations, what institutional work can HRM enact toward achieving sustainable development?
- Under what conditions can HRM enact a change leadership role in which organizations’ institutional logics are challenged and reformed to reflect the pursuit of sustainability?

#### *Theme 2: Strategic HRM*

- How do leaders utilize HRM policies and practices as a strategic tool to achieve sustainability-related strategic goals while balancing efficiency-orientated goals?
- To what extent does an HRM change leadership role really matter for organizations with different organizational size, structure and industry classifications?
- How do employees or teams perceive HRM related policies towards organizational sustainability? Does HR attribution play a role in the process? What are the performance consequences of the HR attribution process?

#### *Theme 3: Interacting with TMT, Middle-level and Line Managers*

- How do an organization’s HRM professionals inspire others to contribute efforts and resources with a sense of purpose in addressing sustainability?
- How can HRM facilitate the configuration of leader-TMT dynamics so as to form a well-functioning TMT that achieves sustainable development within the organization?
- What new theoretical perspectives can be introduced to explain the interaction between HRM professionals, TMT, middle-level and line managers? For example, how can systems theory, paradox theory, or institutional entrepreneurship add nuances to the knowledge base of the HRM literature?

#### *Theme 4: Employee Consequences*

- What skill requirements are needed for HR professionals to enact an HRM change leadership role? In addressing organizations' sustainability challenges, what new requirements are needed for HR professionals' skill sets, for instance, including personality and ideological imprinting? What do these new skill requirements mean for their career trajectories?
- How does employee voice affect the HRM change leadership role in addressing sustainability challenges?
- To what extent does the HRM change leadership role affect employee performance outcomes (i.e., intention to leave, job burnout, subjective well-being, etc) during the process of achieving organizational sustainability?

**Submission Deadline:** 31<sup>st</sup> July 2021

#### **Submission Process:**

Authors can submit their paper between July 1<sup>st</sup> -31<sup>st</sup> 2021 to HRM for review. Details on the manuscript submission process will be made available nearer to the submission period. Papers should be prepared and submitted according to the journal's guidelines: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/1099050x/homepage/forauthors.html>. All papers will be subject to the same double-blind peer review process as regular issues of *HRM*.

If you have questions about a potential submission, please contact:  
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