

Green HRM in Pursuit of Environmentally Sustainable Business

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Abstract Environmental sustainability is generating increased concern among business executives, governments, consumers, and management scholars. Amidst the stakeholders' struggle and the challenges and opportunities from environmental concerns, HRM function joins the ongoing discussions and debates. The business domain sees the genesis of Green HRM with the expanding role of the HRM function in pursuit of environmentally sustainable business. Are HRM (or simply, HR) policies and practices getting transformed to incorporate a new way of work for people? The 'green' way? In view of this, the paper intends to explain the concept of Green Human Resource Management, the companies' approach towards green HRM, its advantages, policies and practices. The paper discusses the current trends of green HRM practices in companies based on findings from a few studies, survey reports and secondary data from companies' web resources. It also brings out the role of HRM function towards creating a 'green' culture in companies.

Keywords Green HRM, Environmental Management, Sustainability, Green HRM Policies and Practices

1. Introduction

The stark realization of the impact of our day-to-day activities on the environment and the depleting natural resources has triggered, not just, individuals to go green but also organizations. The situation is grave. The globally growing concern for environment compels businesses to move towards sustainable operations and formulate green policies. The international standards for environment protection and preservation call for businesses to devise environment-friendly strategies. With everyone, from customers to employees to investors becoming more and more environment-conscious, 'Green Human Resource Management (referred as green HRM or GHRM)' is emerging as a significant area in management.

The overlapping of sustainable development,

environmental concern and HRM practices is on the social radar and being recognized as a new area for the development of society. It is also developing at a fast pace. With the growing need for corporates to adapt to environment-friendly behaviour, the 'HR function' (HRM function) becomes the potential contributor in bringing about the requisite organizational change. Therefore, this emerging area is pivoted on HRM.

Moreover, for organizations to embrace sustainability, it is not just about the technical and scientific factors but as much about the human element too. The human resource plays a key role in the success or failure of an organization's efforts towards going green. It is the 'HR function' (HRM function) that enables to align the policies of the organization to the green goals and drives green practices to be ingrained in the organization's culture.

Although there have been many definitions of Green HRM, as stated in subsequent paragraphs, however, the precise definition of 'Green HRM' for the purpose of this paper, may be taken as given by Prasad [1], i.e. "the contribution of HRM policies and practices towards the broader corporate environmental agenda of protection and preservation of natural resources".

1.1. Objective

The objective of this paper is to explain the concept and importance of Green Human Resource Management policies and practices, and explain how the HRM function, by its policies and practices, can contribute to environmentally sustainable business and the relevant practices could be followed.

1.2. Defining Green HRM

Green HRM is the use of HRM policies, philosophies, and practices to promote sustainable use of resources and prevent harm arising from environmental concerns within business organizations [2]. According to Mandip [3], Green HRM is the use of Human Resource Management policies to promote the sustainable use of resources within business

organizations and promote the cause of environmental sustainability.

For the purpose of this paper, Green HRM is referred to all the activities involved in development, implementation and on-going maintenance of a system that aims at making employees of an organization green i.e. environment-friendly. It is the side of HRM that is concerned with transforming normal employees into green i.e. environment-friendly employees so as to achieve environmental goals of the organization and finally to make a significant contribution to environmental sustainability. It refers to the policies, practices and systems that make employees of the organization green for the benefit of the individual, society, natural environment, and the business [4].

2. Significance of Green HRM

In the last decade, sustainability has become an increasingly integral part of doing business in any industry. Sustainability seeks to balance and simultaneously optimize environmental, social and financial concerns [5]. For companies to balance their financial, social and environmental risks, obligations and opportunities, 'sustainability' must move from being an add-on to 'the way things are done'.

It has been recognized that organizational culture plays a fundamental part in the shift toward sustainability [6]. Organizational culture is considered a key determinant and indicator of the success or failure of environmental management programs at companies [7]. An organization's culture embodies the main assumptions, values, symbols and activities within an organization that reflect what the employees and top management think about environmental sustainability issues [8]. There has been recognition of the strategic link between HRM practices and policies in helping to create, reinforce and change organizational cultures; to act as the messenger or change agent [9].

HRM plays a critical role in embedding sustainability strategy of the organization for creating the skills, motivation, values and trust to achieve a triple bottom line. It ensures long term health and sustainability of both the organization's internal and external stakeholders. Thus there is a growing need for the integration of environmental sustainability into human resource management (HRM) – Green HRM [10].

2.1. Advantages of Green HRM

Many employers now recognize that green programs at the workplace can promote social responsibility among workers and help retain top talent. Many green companies boast low employee turnover rates compared to their non-sustainable counterparts. This has also been found empirically in the

results of various surveys¹, which state the several advantages of green workforce such as:

- **Environment-friendly business decisions:** Having employees who understand the importance of sustainability, enables to make business decisions with a broader perspective that helps bring innovative solutions to pressing and/or emerging environment-related problems.
- **Desirability as an employer:** Green employers become the most preferred choice of green talent pool, i.e. potential employees who not just understand sustainability but have also put it in practice in business previously. Green workforce gives the company a competitive edge.
- **Employee retention:** Green companies are known to have lower turnover rates compared to their non-sustainable counterparts as found out from the SHRM Green Workplace Survey². 61% of respondents working for an environment-savvy company said they were "likely" or "very likely" to stay at the business because of the practices.
- **Improved sales:** According to the findings of the 2013 Cone Communications³ Green Gap Trend Tracker Survey⁴, 71 % of Americans consider the environment when they shop [11]. The findings of this survey restate that good environment management practices followed by companies go a long way; it can improve sales and reduce costs.

2.2. Economics of Green HRM

A stream of literature shows how the greening of organizational culture can have economic as well as environmental benefits, looking at it from the resource-based perspective on competitive advantage as well as the strategic-fit perspective. According to Russo and Fouts [12], the incorporation of environmental concerns into the culture of the firm may deliver environmental capabilities that competitors would find hard to imitate which would facilitate a competitive advantage. Proponents of the strategic-fit perspective contend that in order to deliver to the expectations of the green stakeholders (which include customers, civil society organizations, voluntary sector, regulators and more), organizations must embrace sustainability [13]. This implies that lack of accountability

1 For more details of the surveys such as sample size, year of study etc., see the relevant link given in the respective footnotes.

2 In September 2007, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) conducted the SHRM Green Workplace Survey to examine environmentally responsible practices from the perspective of HR professionals and employees

<http://www.shrm.org/Research/SurveyFindings/Articles/Documents/SHRM%20Green%20Workplace%20Survey%20Brief.pdf>

3 Cone Communications is a public relations and marketing agency and maintains memberships and relationships with leading trade and social responsibility organizations.

4 The 2013 Cone Communications Green Gap Trend Tracker presents the findings of an online survey conducted March 7-10, 2013 by ORC International among a demographically representative sample of 1,068 adults, comprising 552 men and 516 women 18 years of age and older.

could lead to undesirable performance outcomes [14].

3. Green HRM Practices

Many companies are adopting green practices which help them in reducing carbon footprint through less printing of paper, video conferencing and interviews, etc. Businesses are sustainable because of their operations and culture, but it's the employees who craft and execute eco-friendly policies and create green corporate culture. Without developing personnel and implementing sustainable strategies, it's rather difficult to go green successfully. That's why human resource practices are the key component of sustainable business development [15]. According to the 2007 poll on green employment conducted by MonsterTRAK.com⁵, 80% of young professionals were interested in working at a job that contributed positively to the environment and 92% of students and entry-level applicants showed preference to work for a sustainable firm [16]. Another survey by the Carbon Trust⁶ also emphasizes the importance of green policies of a company as an important criterion for prospective employees. The survey findings show that over 75% of 1018 respondents considered active policies of the company to reduce carbon emissions as an important factor while choosing a job [17]. The survey conducted by the U.K. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development⁷ (CIPD) reiterates with 49% of respondents taking into account the environmental credentials of the company while deciding to take a job [18]. In fact, the findings of CIPD/KPMG⁸ survey of 1000 respondents show that 47% of HR professionals feel that strong green approach of firms will make employees prefer working for them and also 46% stated that having a green approach would help attract potential employees [19].

The HR professionals are enabling companies to make green business in ways like encouraging employees to switch off lights when not in use, turn off the computer monitors when not being used, keeping only minimal lights during non-working hours for safety, online sharing of training material use 'print this e-mail only if necessary' in their official e-mail signature and more. Green HRM strategies like replacing the use of non-green activities where possible, for an example, minimize travel by use of teleconferencing, emailing and scanning instead of letters and fax. The HR encourages use of compostable cups and plates thereby reducing use of paper cups, deploy recycled paper, make

duplex printing default etc. In cases of large factory premises, use of electric vehicles for internal travel in place of the petrol/diesel counterparts.

Some of the HR initiated green programs being implemented in organizations include:

- (1) adopt video-conferencing or internet based applications for meetings and reduce business travel;
- (2) making internal company documentation (including plans etc.) online;
- (3) reducing paper usage and promote ways for the same;
- (4) offering work-from-home options to employees and opportunities for "telework";
- (5) car-pooling programs, etc.

Some of the areas where companies can incorporate more environmental conscious practices include teleconferencing, online policy and manual documents, electronic storage of paperwork, providing recycling trash bins around the office and in the cafeteria. The companies are focusing on telecommuting/work from home programs. Car pool programs are also successful for greening of business. As companies begin recycling, upgrade to energy-efficient heating/air conditioning systems and seek production efficiencies that save energy or reduce carbon emissions, it's natural to consider green benefits. Specific actions like offering incentives to staff for buying a hybrid car, use of public transport and bikes are seen in practice. Organizations often launch carbon credit cards where employees receive points for taking public transport or walking to work, or video conferencing rather than taking a flight. Employees with most points are then rewarded.

4. Green HRM Implementation

HR policies are continuing guidelines on how people should be managed in the organization. They define the philosophies and values of the organization on how people should be treated. An HR policy provides generalized guidance on how HR issues should be dealt with [20].

Environmental management is a process in which organizations apply mechanisms to develop and implement a set of cost-effective priority actions on the basis of well-articulated societal preferences and goals for: the maintenance or improvement of ambient environmental quality; the provision of environmentally derived or related services; and/or the conservation, maintenance and enhancement of natural resources and ecosystems [21].

The enforcement of measures towards the protection of the environment (including air, water, soil ecosystems) in general terms is termed as environmental performance. Environmental performance is becoming essential for organizations and it is considered important at national level too.

Top management's role in achieving a greater level of environmental performance is evidenced, among other

⁵ MonsterTRAK is an arm of online employment finder Monster Worldwide, geared toward recent graduates and other entry-level positions

⁶ The Carbon Trust was set up by the British government in 2001 to help businesses and public-sector organizations cut carbon emissions and save energy

⁷ CIPD conducts periodic surveys on topical HR issues as well as general people management and development themes and the reports are available on <http://www.cipd.co.uk/>

⁸ Labour Market Outlook is the quarterly survey that aims to offer an early indication of future changes to the labour market around recruitment, redundancy and pay intentions.

aspects, by giving autonomy to the personnel to come up with creative solutions to the problems posed, to develop environmental awareness, and to implement their knowledge in this field [22]. That is, environmental performance requires individual and group involvement [23]. Likewise, Barney and Wright [24] highlight the fact that a sustainable competitive advantage emerges more from teams than from individuals, so that the importance of employee involvement is basically manifested through the empowerment and teamwork [25]. Environmental issues cannot (usually) be resolved by designating an individual as the company environmental representative and bringing him/her out whenever the regulators arrive. Thus, dedication and teamwork are paramount for improving environmental performance [26].

Empowerment among employees and their willingness to make suggestions are critical factors for successful continuous environmental impact and effective Environment Management System. In order to promote employee involvement management's conscious effort where employees feel free to make suggestions and are encouraged to improve themselves. Management's conscious efforts can help increase employee participation in decision making. Management should play a supporting and guiding role for employees' own initiatives [27]. Supervisory encouragement for employee participation in environmental capacity building activities is important [28]. The motivation for significant environmental efforts must come from senior management. Management behaviour will ultimately serve as a model for the rest of the organization. Merit systems must reflect the significance of integration of environmental excellence into marketing, design, operations and service, and signify that all employees have significant responsibility for environmental quality. This can help create an instinctive environmental orientation in the organization [29]. It can be seen from the table below that the green policies of Nokia have had a significant impact on the environment [30]:

Table 1. Impact of Green Policies on the Environment at Nokia

Policies	Impact
Shifting from air to ocean transport	80% reduction in CO ₂
Take-back and recycling	CO ₂ reduction by 30,000 tonnes
Awareness campaign, Videoconferencing	54% reduction in CO ₂
Waste treatment to waste reduction	Reduction in waste by 30%
Green operations and facilities	Reduction in Volatile Organic Compound by 40%
Introduced energy-efficient chargers (AC-20 & AC-50)	Reduction in no load consumption by 73%
Product Lifecycle Assessment	Reduction in greenhouse gas footprint of phones by 50%

Source: Nokia People and Planet Report 2013

The establishment of internal communication channels to put the strategic vision across to workers has been pointed out as a basic factor in successfully involving all personnel [31], particularly in environmental activities [32]. In more

advanced environmental approaches this communication, or information transfer, is a two-way process instead of the traditional downward spiral of communication. Suggestion-boxes and open meetings that are held on a regular basis have proven their usefulness in achieving this [33]. Nevertheless, upward and downward communication is not incompatible with inter-functional communication. Kitazawa and Sarkis [27] have shown that environmental preventive practices require inter-functional integration through improved communication mechanisms throughout the organization.

One way to be greener in people practices is to attract and retain talent efficiently and effectively. Talent in any organization is chaotic, and the biggest challenge is to compete in a complex, competitive environment. Dave Ulrich refers to the quality of talent and leadership as the “hole in the boat” [34]. This will govern the way we approach a new thinking of greening HR and talent practices. Although this is important, a green approach to people practices is the core of good green governance and will contribute to valuing people for their contributions and innovation [35].

Environmental issues offer a good opportunity to gain support for reform. Staff are often more ready to accept changes which improve environmental performance than changes to improve product quality, cut costs or raise competitiveness [36].

Based on the study of Fayyazi et. al. [37], it was found out that the most important barrier to the implementation of green HRM was the lack of a comprehensive plan to implement green HRM. Also, staff resistance was known to be the least of a barrier among the other factors. According to Jackson and Seo [38], designing and evaluating effective green HRM requires an understanding of the green consequences associated with an organization’s operations, supply chain, distribution processes, customer behaviors, product life cycles, etc. which makes the implementation complex.

5. The Role of HR Function towards ‘Green’ Culture

Lado and Wilson [39] defined the HRM system as “a set of distinct but interrelated activities, functions, and process that are directed at attracting, developing, and maintaining (or disposing of) a firm’s human resources.”

In order to implement an effective green corporate culture, it is important to promote a great deal of technical and management skills among all employees of the organization [40]. It would be ideal to have effective human resource management practices including stringent recruitment strategies [41], appraisal and reward systems which include environmental awareness and implementation in their evaluation process [42] and training and empowerment programs [43], which will enable the development of relevant set of skills and competencies amongst the

employees of “pro green” firms [40].

Green HR can adopt various green processes and practices in different HR functions like acquisition of human capital, their induction, training, performance management and reward management which will have a bearing on the overall carbon footprint of a company [1].

5.1. Recruitment & Selection

The recruitment and selection process should consider the long term competency requirements of the company. The corporate environmental culture of a company should be integrated with the recruitment process. In this regards, Wehrmeyer [44] recommends the following:

- The job descriptions should specify the environmental reporting role, health and safety tasks and other environmental impact related roles.
- The interview should be tailored to gauge the potential compatibility of the candidate with the company’s green goals.
- The induction programme should be designed to provide new recruits with information about sustainable development policies and commitments, EMS and green goals of the company.

In this way, new recruits are able to inculcate and get familiarized with the culture of the organization, right from the beginning.

As mentioned before the CIPD/KPMG survey results⁹ show how prospective employees take into account the environmental credentials of the company while deciding to take a job and help attract potential employees. Employees also prefer working for green companies. The findings thereby establish the significance of green employers and how it helps increase employee motivation and engagement.

5.2. Performance Management System

Measuring the environmental performance of people in an organization is challenging. A Performance management system to supplement green HR practices is therefore, required to develop environmental performance standards and indicators. This can be initiated by linking performance evaluation to green goals and tasks specified in the job description.

For example, Infosys has moved to performance-based contracts, effectively forcing project teams to practice integrated design by withholding fees if performance goals¹⁰ are not met. If the work is not done as required by the contract, they lose 25% of their fee. Green goals of Infosys include 100% of its energy from renewable sources by 2017, 50% reduced energy consumption, carbon neutrality and net-negative water consumption by 2018 [45].

5.3. Training and Development

Training and development programmes developed for employees at all levels should touch upon social and environmental aspects. The induction training for new joiners should include green orientation program which enables the employees to understand the green policies and practices of the company and also align to the green goals of the company. Such a training program can inform them of the green initiatives undertaken by the company like minimizing the emission of greenhouse gases etc. Zoogah [2] suggests training new employees for systems and processes in place to enable waste reduction and energy conservation. Moreover, training modules to educate them in environmental management should be designed and imparted. At the Body Shop¹¹ in the UK, environmental awareness is part of induction/orientation training, especially for new employees.

Furthermore, to promote awareness in environmental management, “green teams” can be established in each department. Training need analysis by assessing the environmental knowledge and skills can help identify the training required in environmental management and thereby devise focused training modules.

5.4. Employee Involvement and Participation

Employee Involvement is defined as “creating an environment in which people have an impact on decisions and actions that affect their jobs” [46]. The involvement of employees at the level of formulating environmental strategy, would equip them better to market green products. Employee involvement contributes to optimize work processes by better co-ordination. It also helps manage the health and safety concerns of workers better. As Phillips [19] writes, “The use of employee participation in green HR has been noted to help prevent pollution from workplaces.”

Employees who pursue programmes like ‘car-pooling’ should be encouraged by offering benefits. Such green commuting habits should be lauded so that more and more employees engage themselves in green commuting behavior. Allowing for flexible work weeks would also constitute green commuting habits. In some organizations, the revised HR policies towards Green HRM allow for ‘e-working’, a system whereby employees can work from being linked to the employer via telecommunication link and subsequently reducing commute. Such forms of green ideas should be invited and implemented as feasible.

5.5. Compensation: Pay and Reward System

Compensation mechanism can be leveraged to drive employees to change their behavior towards green

⁹ Refer first paragraph of section 3

¹⁰ As mentioned by Mr. Rohan Parikh, head of green initiatives at Bangalore-based Infosys

¹¹ The Body Shop is a chain of franchise stores across many countries offering a range of cosmetic and make-up products. Fair trade and no-animal testing is the core philosophy of the company.

performance. A benefit package and variable pay element can be added to the compensation system for rewarding employees who portray green and environment-friendly behavior linked to work performance. For example, DuPont has an Environmental Respect Awards program which recognizes employee environmental achievements [47]. 3M's annual Energy Recognition Program established in 2003 promotes employee participation in the company's energy efficiency efforts. The program has enabled 3M to implement more than 1,900 employee-inspired projects from 2005 to 2009. These projects have realized a 22 per cent improvement in energy efficiency and yielded \$100 million in energy savings over the period [48]. Organizations need reward systems that enable to produce desirable green behaviour by means of incentives as well as disincentives. Positive feedback over e-mail or verbal appraisal from supervisors and other such incentives which motivate employees to be conscious of green behavior should be offered. Disincentives – which would discourage faltering in green behavior – in form of warning, criticism or suspension may also be employed.

6. Conclusions

Green ideas and concepts are beginning to gather pace within the HR space, often complementing existing sustainability-based initiatives. Increasingly they are delivering tangible benefits to the business, rather than simply adding a gloss to brand and reputation. These new processes, policies, products and tools are actually helping to ensure compliance and improve productivity too. In this regard, the paper, thus brings out how the HRM function, by its policies and practices, can contribute to environmentally sustainable business.

And with legislation now in place to effectively formalize the need for a new corporate approach to the environment, it is time for HRM to embrace the green agenda. Adopting environmental practices help companies save money, find new sources of business and avoid trouble. Green companies believe that it is more economical to go green than it is to continue endangering the environment in general. Going green also helps companies enhance their public relations and image which also impacts profits.

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