

## Human resource management – sustainable practices

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**Abstract:** In the modern knowledge economy, the human factor plays a key role in successful business development. At the same time, the turmoil in the global economy and the state of the planet make the idea of sustainable development increasingly prominent. In these conditions, the human factor plays a key role in the successful development of business. The current dynamic business environment requires new techniques for achieving competitive advantage. Human resources, one of the organizations' most valuable assets, must be managed to provide long-term economic benefits and increase employee satisfaction and engagement. Neglecting the human factor in the constant changes of the environment can lead to negative consequences for organizations, which requires sustainable human resource management (HRM) to become part of their overall management framework. The purpose of this article is to review the sustainable management of organizations and the role of the human factor, by presenting a specific combination of people management practices that contribute to improving sustainability, leading to improved long-term development of companies. Views on the significance and essence of sustainable human resource management are summarized.

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**Keywords:** *Human capital, Human resources, Management, Practices, Sustainability.*

### 1. Introduction

Human resources (HR) are identified as a key source of competitive advantage, and the market valuation of companies is closely linked to their intangible assets such as knowledge, key competencies, and organizational capabilities [1]. According to Paauw, "the importance of people management for achieving competitive advantage has already become a mantra for corporate management" [2]. Brewster emphasizes that "the capabilities and knowledge embodied in an organization's human resources are critical to its success" [3]. The strategic role of the human factor is emphasized. Along with the growing dependence on human capital, a talent crisis, an aging workforce in the Western world, and an intensification of global labor mobility are observed worldwide [4].

The significance of the concept of sustainable development for the quality of life of today's generation and the generations after us is also indisputable. However, the answer to the question "How to impose the concept in the practice of business organizations?" is controversial. We believe that in the conditions of today's post-industrial society, the knowledge carried by the human factor determines the direction of development of society as a whole and the economy in particular [5]. Therefore, our main thesis is that human capital can and should be considered as a key factor for the implementation of the concept of sustainable development. "It can be argued that knowledge, as an inexhaustible resource, is turning into a factor of sustainable development, into its basis" [3].

The dynamic business environment requires new techniques to achieve competitive advantage. Human resources, along with other resources, are among organizations' most valuable assets. They must be managed in a way that provides long-term economic benefits and leads to increased employee satisfaction and engagement. Neglecting the human factor in a constantly changing environment can lead to negative consequences for organizations, which requires sustainable human resource

management (HRM) to become part of their overall management framework. The concept underlying HRM is that in carrying out their activities, companies seek different outcomes, which may be economic, social, socially beneficial and environmental, and although some of them are more important to them, they often seek them simultaneously [6]. In general, HRM offers an alternative approach to managing people [7].

Human resource management and development as a component of organizational management is subject to continuous transformations in the context of business globalization and increasing workforce mobility. Modern trends in the main activities of human resource management and development in organizations are the focus of a number of studies with diverse research perspectives – increasing motivation and performance/representation of people in work teams; development of human capital at the micro and macro levels as a key factor of competitiveness and quality of life; corporate social responsibility and human capital; changes in work processes and industrial relations, etc. [8-12].

The workplace and employees have been a significant research interest that has led to the development of the human resource management (HRM) literature. Employees are considered strategic resources that lead to an organization's competitive advantage [13, 14]. The recent proliferation of HRM research shows that it has emerged as an area of interest for researchers, academics, and business practitioners [15]. The journey of HRM started in 1981 with just one conference paper on HRM training, but as of February 2020, a total of 1,802 papers have been published in the indexed Scopus database.

The concept of socially responsible human resource management (SRHRM) has been developed and defined as corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies and practices directed at employees, underpinning the successful implementation of CSR [16]. The SRHRM has stimulated much theoretical and empirical research and has been examined by various scholars. Several theoretical studies have focused on the foundation, concepts, and configuration of SRHRM. Some empirical studies have focused on examining its impact on organizational performance [17] firm competitiveness [18] and employee attitudes and behaviors Shen and Benson [16]; Hu and Jiang [19]. Zhao, et al. [20] argue that environmental issues have not been sufficiently addressed in SRHRM research. Rothenberg [21] notes that employees are the preeminent experts in integrating environmental dimensions into the most basic organizational activities. This is because employees, who dedicate a significant amount of their time, energy, and skills, typically lead environmental initiatives from the bottom up [22, 23].

Companies can no longer ignore ESG issues - the focus on ESG in the past two years has increased interest in the impact of companies on the environment and society. Factors such as climate change, social inequality, and the impact of COVID-19 have made ESG a widely discussed topic. ESG represents a general framework for considering a company's impact on the environment and society, as well as the quality of its corporate governance. To facilitate the integration of ESG elements into business operations, managers should first consider the three elements separately, together with the underlying themes that affect each element. The growing importance of integrating ESG and sustainability into organizational management is gaining prominence [24-26]. However, this process of implementing sustainable policies and practices is not without challenges and difficulties [26] especially with regard to the costs incurred by organizations during their adaptation and transformation phase [25] in developing economies [27].

The purpose of this study is to outline the main directions of HRM, to describe some of the sustainable human resource management practices and the long-term effects that can be achieved when implementing these HRM practices in organizations.

This paper answers the following research questions: What are the key research streams of HRM literature?, What are the main sustainable human resource management practices?, What are the potential areas for future studies?

### 1.1. Human Capital – A Look into the Future

In 2007, a team from Pricewaterhouse Coopers undertook the challenging task of “looking into the future” of human resource management [4]. The research revealed key trends: (1) business models are undergoing dramatic change; (2) human resource management is becoming a major challenge for businesses; (3) the role of the Human Resources Management (HRM) function is undergoing fundamental changes. In terms of changes in business models, there is an even greater impact of technology, globalization, and demographic factors on organizational structure and culture. By 2020, three alternative organizational models of business were expected: (1) large corporations transforming into mini-states and taking a leading role in the life of society; (2) networks of cooperation developing in the context of increasing specialization; (3) a fundamental change in business strategies under the pressure of environmental accents. As for the challenges related to the human factor, the expectations are related to: (1) “blurring” the line between professional and personal life after all the greater responsibility that companies will take for the social well-being of the work you do in them; (2) introduction of techniques for strict measurement of the human contribution to the company’s product; (3) increasing importance of social capital and social relationships for business success. The role of the HRM structural unit is often perceived as too passive and operationally oriented. In the future, however, this unit is expected to face a crossroads and a choice between three possible paths: (1) based on proactive thinking and direct commitment to the business strategy, to create an opportunity for a fuller use of human potential and thus to become the “heart of the organization”; (2) to become the main driver of the imposition of the concept of corporate social responsibility in the practice of business organizations; (3) to be almost entirely a node of an external contractor, i.e. a subject of outsourcing.

We do not share the opinion of analysts from Pricewaterhouse Coopers, who develop mutually exclusive alternatives, linking HRM activities with business strategy and increasing the creation of human potential on the one hand and turning the HRM unit into the main driver of corporate social responsibility on the other. On the contrary, we believe that these are two complementary paths on the path to the development of comprehensive HRM, precisely because of the growing importance of human potential for the implementation of social responsibility and sustainable development in business practice. Despite the undeniable importance of the human factor for the success of the company, HRM departments are often faced with the impossible choice of achieving, on the one hand, a short-term increase in financial results (e.g., through layoffs to reduce labor costs) and, on the other hand, the long-term effectiveness of the organization (through access to quality human resources) [28]. Research shows that training and development of human resources can lead to sustainable competitive advantage [29] and that neglecting human resources reduces the viability and competitiveness of the organization [28, 30].

### 1.2. The Human Factor and Sustainable Development

As is known, the concept of sustainable development is based on the understanding of “reconciling” the present and the future, of concern for the present without neglecting care for the future, and looking near and far (Our Common Future, 1987). In the context of HRM, sustainable development can be defined as “guaranteed improvement of current and future access to HR” [31]. The Boudreau and Ramstad manual examines the sustainability of this new paradigm in human resources and defines sustainable HRM as “achieving success today without neglecting future needs” [32]. Mariapanadar writes about a sustainable strategy in the field of human resources, which he defines as “HRM for the optimal realization of the current needs of the company and the community, without neglecting the ability to realize future needs”. He emphasizes that HRM does not operate in a “social vacuum”, but has a broad impact on the community in which the company operates [30]. According to Thom and Zaugg [33] sustainable HRM consists of “long-term oriented conceptual approaches and activities aimed at socially responsible and economically expedient recruitment, selection, development and layoff of workers” [33].

This definition combines the principle of social justice and the principle of the Czech economy of prosperity, with Thom and Zaugg [33] characterizing it with the statement that sustainable HRM leads to the formation of a sustainable competitive advantage and long-term success for the company.

Müller-Christ and Remer link sustainable HRM with active actions on the part of the company itself to ensure lasting and reliable access to qualified HR [34]. Therefore, the basis of sustainable HRM is the idea of the long-term viability of the company through the acquisition of human knowledge, skills, competencies, and talent.

Ehnert links sustainable HRM with strategic HRM, adopting the following definition: “Sustainable HRM is a set of planned and extraordinary HR strategies and practices aimed at supporting the realization of the organization’s goals and, at the same time, reproducing the human resource base in the long term and not the role of externalizing external effects on it” [30]. As Ehnert herself emphasizes, this definition unites two aspects that are of particular importance for understanding HRM from the standpoint of the concept of sustainable development. First, the internal contradiction of goal-setting in a business organization, related to the need for effective use of human resources on the one hand and the need for reliable access to human knowledge and talent. Second, the linking of sustainable development with strategy – sustainability can be both a planned strategy and an extraordinary one, formulated in critical situations. The strategic nature of sustainable HRM stems from its underlying idea of long-term company sustainability through human resource acquisition.

### *1.3. Stages in the Development of Human Resource Management*

Historically, the development of practices in the field of human resource management is characterized by key changes every few decades. The initial introduction of personnel management more than a century ago is associated with the possibility of ensuring the well-being of workers in factories, mines, and shipyards. Between the two world wars, efficiency was improved by applying scientific knowledge and principles of organizational design aimed at creating a deterministic hierarchical structure. Workforce planning, professional pensions, etc. entered. After World War II, the growth of professional associations was observed. The last key change occurred in the eighties of the last century when the concept of "personnel management" was transformed into "human resource management", which is an indicator of a transformation in the thinking of managers. In the following decades, practices related to the creation and implementation of human resource strategies, individualization of pay, and definition of competency frameworks were developed.

Trade unions are gradually losing their importance and influence, leaving the possibility of direct control by employees and the protection of their interests in the context of the work-life balance requirements imposed by legislation, and employers, in turn, are developing practices to promote equal opportunities, protect labor rights with the help of human resources managers. As a result, trends are observed related to the feminization of the workforce, the development of skills and competencies, flexible working conditions - temporary and part-time jobs, and remote work. Peripheral activities are being outsourced and the established lines of distinction that determine the completion of the duties of one group of employees to begin those of another are being removed.

Some researchers in the field of human resources support the thesis that a new stage in the evolution of management in this area is beginning, which is predetermined by the trends in business development in recent years related to: changes in the state of the labor market, changes in policies for regulating relations between employers and employees, changes in the nature of the activities performed, ethical norms and standards.

Modern human resource management practices are characterized by the introduction of innovations that differ greatly from the traditional approaches in this area that prevailed 20 or 30 years ago. Although practices in the field of HRM could not be considered outside their historical context, today they are mainly determined by the unbalanced and dynamic development of the business environment. “The situation at the beginning of the 21st century, if we compare it with the previous decades of the 20th century, is characterized by a number of important features. The first is that an unbalanced type of

social, economic, political and technological movement is taking place, characterized by nonlinear, non-equilibrium, turbulent dynamics. The second is that technological conditions have been created for humanity to enter a new productive, technological and socio-economic paradigm..." [9].

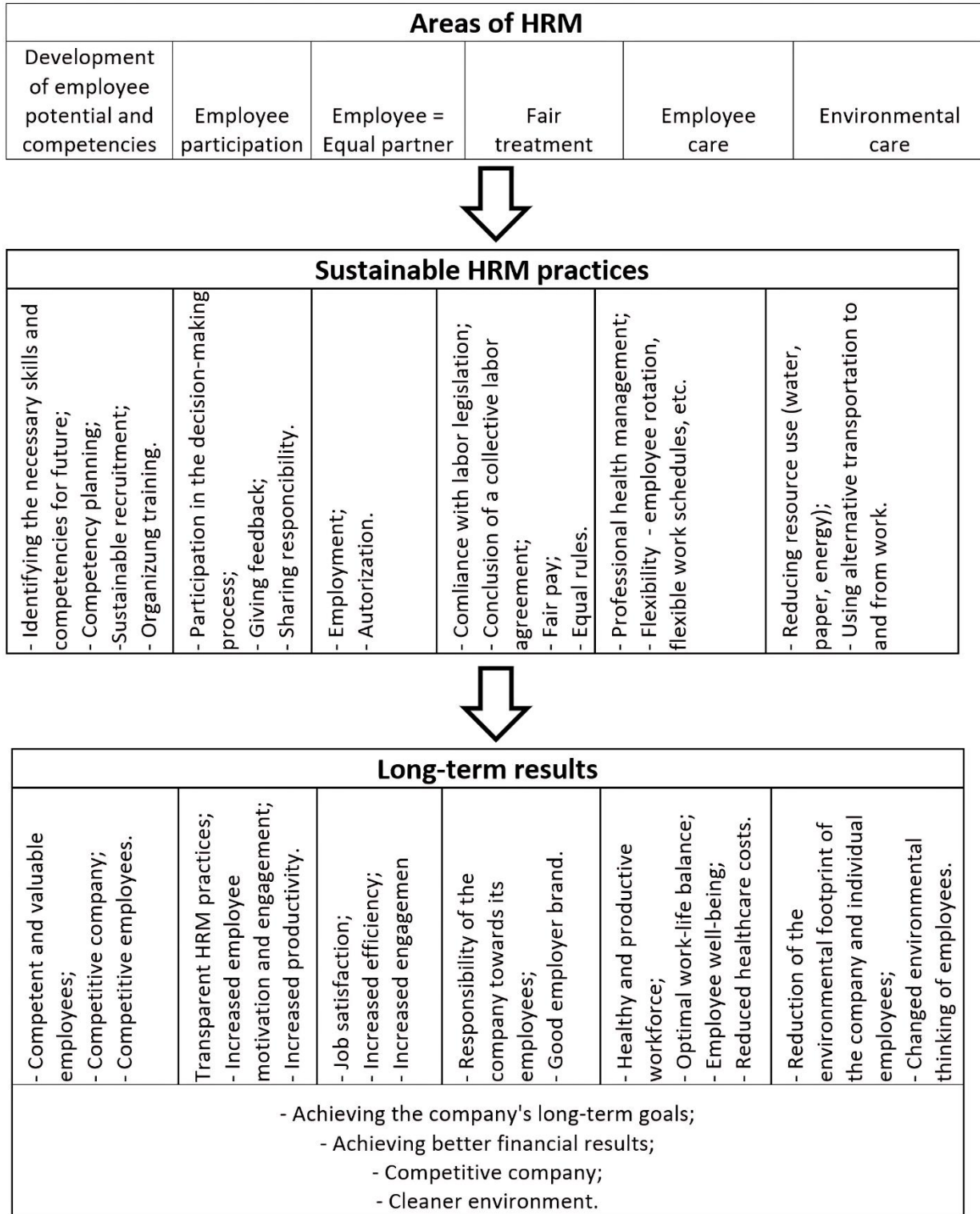
#### *1.4. Human Resource Management Practices in the Organizations*

On the one hand, modern human resource management is a result of the peculiarities of the global type of organizations, which increasingly predetermine hierarchical relationships in management and operate on a network principle, the so-called flat organization without a developed hierarchical structure. The role of human resource specialists in these organizations is in building a specific organizational culture. "This means a radical change in the direction of the vertical type of thinking and the introduction of network interactions, i.e. a partnership style of relationships, accompanied by delegation of authority and responsibility for key actions in the organization." [9]. Network organizations are characterized by the presence of a core of specialists with strategic importance, around whom multifunctional teams are created, which also determine the specifics of the implementation of the main tasks in these organizations – activities carried out on a project basis. With the inclusion of the project, business teams are transformed.

On the other hand, the processes of internationalization and globalization have an impact on human resource management practices, both through the unification of management models and through the development of intercultural processes and, accordingly, intercultural management. Modern organizations operate in conditions of increasing interaction that overcomes the boundaries of different cultures. Large corporate structures and companies with a transnational character are faced with the challenges associated with quality management in a multicultural environment. "Business contact no longer recognizes any boundaries, but in order to be successful, the qualities associated with intercultural sensitivity and competence are increasingly necessary for anyone working with this new type of organization" [35].

These and other phenomena are prerequisites for significant changes in human resource management practices. Approaches that were previously considered unimportant are now central to the activities of managers as a result of the changes and developments in the business environment. Emphasis is placed on topics related to work-life balance, ethics in the field of human resources, and the evaluation and measurement of the effectiveness of management practices. Ideas that emerged in the 1990s are currently central to human resource management strategies in organizations. These include employer branding, performance cards, the use of psychological contracts, the provision of flexible benefits, and activities that are included in the framework of electronic human resource management.

Traditional HR practices are being transformed to serve as adequate management tools in the modern business environment. An example in this regard is the workforce planning management approach, which has been transformed into talent while payroll administration has evolved into total compensation management, the equal opportunity approach has evolved into diversity management, and terms such as training, mentoring, competencies, and business partners have been established with specific definitions in the professional vocabulary [36]. Talent management is mainly associated with "...the behaviors that capable employees demonstrate in the workplace, through which they change the environment, the future of others, and look directly at the present and which successfully present themselves to the organization. It is on the competence, ability, and energy of people that the sustainable achievement of strategic results for the organization depends" (<https://mycompetence.bg>). Today, in the context of economic cooperation, talent management "...is directed "inward to the organization" to create an environment and culture that ensures the motivation of the commitment of the talents who are placed in positions that bring high added value to the company" (<https://mycompetence.bg>).



**Figure 1.** Sustainable human resource management practices.

### 1.5. Sustainable Human Resource Management and Practices

HRM is an innovative concept that is still being refined and reflects attempts to link sustainability with human resource management. The definition of sustainable human resource management is presented by [37] as “... adapting human resource management strategies and practices that enable the achievement of financial, social, and environmental objectives, with impacts inside and outside the organization in the long term, while controlling for unintended side effects and negative consequences”

Sustainable Human Resource Management Practices Sustainable HRM can be explained as the implementation of practices and strategies that enable organizations to achieve their financial, environmental and social goals in the long term, while controlling unwanted side effects on people. The use of such sustainable practices goes beyond the desire to achieve financial results [37] and manages to ensure a cleaner Earth in the future, healthy and satisfied employees, according to Ehnert, et al. [37] this can lead not only to attracting and retaining motivated and talented employees, but also to providing them with a healthy working environment and opportunities for development (see Fig. 1). In terms of employee competencies, sustainable practices that should be implemented should contribute to the development of employee potential and have a long-term orientation. Developing employee potential means identifying the necessary future skills and abilities that are not sufficiently developed in employees now. In order to achieve a long-term orientation of employee competencies, this should be reflected in human resource planning, in job descriptions, in the approach to attracting and recruiting human resources and in the organization of training. A key practice in this direction is the selection of human resources - when the employer selects the right people with the necessary competencies, knowledge, and qualifications for the relevant job, and this corresponds to the environment and culture of the organization, this selection can be defined as a sustainable practice. The implementation of a sustainable selection process in the organization shows not only a commitment to the planet, people and profits, but is also a competitive advantage in the labor market. If employees realize that increasing their competencies is also beneficial for themselves, this will improve their effectiveness, they will feel motivated to attend training if they expect that this will improve their knowledge and the result of their efforts will be rewarded. Employee participation from the perspective of HRM reflects the conditions that the organization creates for employees to provide suggestions for improving organizational activities, to receive information and to participate in the decision-making process. Joint responsibility for work tasks, participation and dialogue between employees and managers is an effective way to create and maintain transparency in all HRM practices and demonstrates a mindset of top management towards sustainability. Participation can help create an open system of communication in an organization and ensure sustainability in HRM. Employees should be

encouraged to give feedback. Involving and participating in work-related decision-making is a practice that is important for ensuring sustainability - when employees participate in the planning and development of their own jobs and are given freedom of action and responsibility, their motivation and commitment to the organization increase. A study Spreitzer [38] in three US automotive companies (Ford, Chrysler and General Motors) found a positive relationship between employee participation and productivity.

Important for achieving sustainable development in organizations are stakeholders who participate in the process and without whose support the organization ceases to exist [39]. Perceiving the employee as an equal partner is directly related to treating him as one of the main stakeholders. From the perspective of HRM, the practices that can be used are employee empowerment and empowerment. Employee empowerment means encouraging and motivating them to make decisions from a higher level of management. Empowerment is also an agreement to grant power, in which employees can make independent decisions and bear responsibility.

Various studies Geralis and Terziovski [40] show that the practice of empowerment has a positive effect on production, service quality and efficiency. Similarly, empowered teams are more active, productive and satisfied with their work. Organizational commitment is higher in employees with higher levels of empowerment [41]. Empowerment can be a sustainable practice for HRM because it

influences the behavior and attitudes of employees in terms of their effectiveness, adaptability, commitment and job satisfaction.

Achieving a win-win situation implies fair treatment and equality of employees. Achieving fairness and equality in HRM encompasses practices that relate to compliance with labor law and ethical values. Practice shows that institutional requirements and labor laws in European countries are relatively similar and are usually complied with by employers, i.e., simply complying with laws and regulations does not generate additional benefits for people. For this to be a sustainable HRM practice, the company needs to go beyond these legal requirements [42] for example by concluding a collective labor agreement. Proper management of labor relations is a signal of the responsibility that the company has towards its employees, and collective agreements are an important element of HRM. These agreements guarantee fair treatment of employees and that the rules, responsibilities and rights are the same for everyone in an organization. Elements of fairness and equality should be embedded in the organizational culture and applied in selection, performance appraisal systems, and compensation systems. Equal conditions and opportunities should also be applied in the organization of work, with changes in the status of employees not based on their socio-demographic characteristics. A key practice for achieving HRM is ensuring fair pay and receiving the same pay for the same work. The compensation system should be clear, transparent, and sustainable. Rewards should apply to all employees, not just management personnel.

Employee care, as part of HRM, is achieved through practices related to employee health and flexibility. According to Ehnert, et al. [37] the organization must guarantee that it will maintain a healthy and productive workforce. Sustainable HRM practices in this area lead to professional health management, work-life balance, stress reduction, and workload balance.

A number of studies [43] show that when HRM principles are clearly expressed in the practice of organizations, employees experience less work-related stress, and burnout situations are less common. Employee care focuses on employee well-being and is a response to criticisms that employees are too often viewed as resources to be exploited rather than as assets to be developed [44]. The dimension of employee well-being encompasses topics related to leadership style and caring for and supporting employees. Employee well-being can be achieved through practices related to health care, the physical and mental needs of staff, and creating good working relationships with management and colleagues.

Good performance and caring for people go hand in hand. At the individual level, taking care of health, reducing stress, and preventing burnout can be associated with lower medical costs and higher incomes. At the organizational level, the financial consequences associated with poor employee health are related to poor productivity, higher levels of absenteeism, and employee turnover (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2014). In such a situation, a "win-win" effect is possible when sustainable HRM practices are used that address the maintenance and recovery of human resources [7]), reducing harm to employees, which in turn will lead to increased profits for the organization.

Flexibility in an organization can be viewed in two aspects - functional and numerical flexibility. Functional flexibility is usually understood as the ability to respond to changes in a specific business situation with the help of the available highly skilled, adaptable, and internally mobile employees. Numerical flexibility is the ability of an organization to change the number of employees in response to changes and business needs.

From the perspective of HRM, flexibility is related to the nature of the organization of work. Practices that can be applied are employee rotation, employee replacement, and flexible work schedules, which allow the interests of the employer and employee to be matched. Flexibility and an individual approach can be applied to the categories of working hours, leave, rewards, remote work, vacations, and retirement. Companies that offer more flexibility in the long term can help their employees balance the demands of work and personal life, thereby achieving another competitive advantage. Taking care of people, related to protecting their health and ensuring flexibility, can affect the sustainability of HRM, as it can ensure a longer career for employees.



Caring for the environment, as part of the goals of organizations, is also reflected in HRM. Since sustainability integrates economic, social and environmental aspects, HRM should implement practices with an environmental dimension. For example, HRM can encompass practices that lead to a reduction in the use of resources (energy, paper, water), are related to the way of traveling to and from work and generally reduce the environmental footprint of the organization and each employee. HRM professionals can be agents of change in the organization and, together with management, promote sustainable behavior among employees in an environmental sense.

## 2. Conclusion

HRM principles are becoming part of the management framework of companies. In conclusion, it can be summarized that:

- The globalization and technological development that have occurred in recent years have caused dramatic changes for organizations, which significantly alters HRM strategies and practices. The principles of HRM have become part of the management framework of companies;
- Demographic change, internationalization, the lack of a quality workforce have aroused the interest of researchers and practitioners, who increasingly emphasize the need to introduce more sustainable HRM practices in organizations.
- The importance of sustainability in human resource management practices can be considered in two separate aspects: the importance of people management and the concept of sustainability;
- Sustainable HRM practices that are required are related to the recruitment and retention of top talent, development of key competencies and lifelong learning, motivation, incentives for exceptional results, care for employee health, safety, work-life balance, fairness and participation and, last but not least, care for the environment;
- Organizations need to allocate time and financial resources to manage the competencies of their employees and stimulate their development;
- Businesses must take care of employees by ensuring flexibility in HRM. Organizations are encouraged to treat employees as equal partners, to improve cooperation and management of practices related to fairness and equal opportunities.

The effect that can be achieved by implementing sustainable HRM practices in organizations is associated with the fact that HRM pays off, i.e. employee engagement increases, workplace stress decreases, work-life balance improves, people's motivation increases, profit for the organization is maximized, and negative impacts on workers and the environment are reduced.

### Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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