Role of Green HRM in Supporting Environmental Sustainability

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Abstract

In the present paper, green human resource management is defined and an attempt is made to explain how green HR supports environmental sustainability initiatives. The focus here is to understand why it is important for an organization to encourage HR practices that can support these initiatives. Present status of green HR is also discussed in the subsequent section. The review of the literature confirms that there is a positive association between Green HR and environmental sustainability.

Introduction

Environmental concerns and sustainable development have emerged recently as serious issues and several governmental schemes, policies and initiatives are being taken to address them. Non-governmental organizations are also highlighting the devastating impact of industry pollution and greenhouse gases (GHGs) emissions. Even some business corporations have also shown an increasing awareness and commitment towards sustainable environment practices and behaviour.

In general, it is perceived that business corporations are least concerned towards environmental damage. Rather these organizations are only bothered about higher profitability and are cause of many economic, environmental and social problems. Moreover, growing number of regulations indicate mistrust of governmental agencies towards these business corporations (Porter and Kramer, 2011). But, at the same time, there are some organizations, which are actively involved towards environmental sustainability actions and effectively execute them with their strategic business goals and seeing them

as a source of competitive advantage (Laszlo and Zhexembayeva, 2011; Porter and Kramer, 2011).

"Green management" refers to the integration of enterprise behaviour and environmental consciousness (Backer, 2002). For prevention of pollution, generated in the process of production, some organizations take concrete actions (Taylor *et al.,* 2012). Some of the organizations show willingness for inclusion of environmental considerations in every entrepreneurial process, including product development activities and strategic planning (Barbieri, 2004). It is found in some studies that organizations that are concerned for environment take active actions towards environmental sustainability and perceive positive outcomes such as higher profitability, better brand image, improved financial performance and higher stock price (Flammer, 2012).

To have an effective environment management (EM), support of human resource (HR) is very important, as the role of HR is crucial in generating sustainable competitive advantage, especially with rapidly changing economic environment. Renwick

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et al. (2008), advocated the integration of corporate environmental management into Human Resource Management (HRM) and popularized it as Green Human Resource Management (GHRM). In their study later in 2013, Renwick *et al.* introduced various HRM practices. They observed a positive relationship between green HRM and firm environmental performance.

GHRM concept is relatively new and emerging. Research in this area is diverse and piecemeal. In general, the role of HR towards environmental sustainability is not very clear. It is alleged that there is hardly any linkage between the environmental sustainability (ES) actions taken by organizations and HR.

Literature Review

Drive for Sustainability

Sustainable development, as defined by Brundtland Commission(1987) report, 'involves meeting our current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'. At business level, this definition can be applied as "3P's" (Profit, Planet, People), "Triple E's" (Economics, Environment, Equity), "Triple Bottom Line" (Economic, Environmental, Social) to indicate a broader purpose for the sustainable firm—to optimize economic, environmental and social inputs, throughputs and outputs over the long term (Savitz and Weber, 2006; Swallow, 2009). There is an emerging focus and awareness worldwide towards ES. As per Laszlo and Zhexembayeva (2011), there are three distinct but interrelated trends. First is resources, in general, are declining to organizations and people. There is a shortage of supply against the demand for clean water, energy and nutritious food. Biodiversity is declining

rapidly, resulting in variety of vexing problems around the globe. These problems are aggravated by population growth, poverty and increasing income disparity. These continuous debates are educating the consumers, employees, investors, regulators, communities, and other stakeholders, who have now increasing expectations from businesses and society at large to produce healthy.

Commencement of GHRM

In an organization's context in general, critical goal of HR is seen in terms of development of 'competencies, collaborative strategies along with organisational capabilities, required for supporting organisation's sustainability journey'(Wirtenberg *et al.,* 2007).Green HRM refers to utilizing every employee's interface for promoting sustainable practices and increasing employee awareness and commitment. Hence, the boundaries of strategic HRM should be stretched to include sustainability or green issues (Osland and Osland, 2007).

HR's contribution to the environmental priorities can be seen in the form of influencing employees' attitude and behaviour towards the greening of organizations. It involves taking up pro-environment HR initiatives, which aim at reducing employee carbon footprints in the form of electronic filing, car-sharing, job-sharing, teleconferencing and virtual interviews, recycling, telecommuting, online training and energy efficient office spaces (Gill, 2012). As per Renwick et al. (2008), some of the examples of green HR practices are increased usage of public transport, shared company vehicle, energy efficient office spaces, flexi–work, e-filing, disposal of staff ID card and job sharing[1]. Some more are telecommuting, video conferencing and interviews, online training, educating employees

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[1]Sharing of full - time job between two employees

about carbon footprint via less printing of paper, etc. For example, the study of Aragao (2017) on Brazilian public universities mentioned that alignment was observed among the levels of sustainable procurement and environmental training adoption. Teixeira *et al.* (2012) on the study of Brazilian hotels found that green management practices had positive impacts and a positive relationship with environmental training provided by companies.

Some of the important HR practices followed are hiring employees with specific environmental competencies and general sensitivity towards the environment, green training for enhancing sustainability awareness and involvement (i.e. developing environmental competencies alongwith skills and engaging employees in green behaviours) and assessing employees' performance by considering performance and stimulating environmentally conscious behaviours (De Prins *et al.,* 2014).

HR Systems supporting green organizations

A study by Jabbour *et al.* (2010) established that organizations that are having an environmental certification were more inclined to hire employees who have environmental knowledge and motivation. Studies had shown that environmental strategy of ISO 14001 organizations in general are closely linked with organization's HRM practices (Jabbour *et al.,* 2012; Harvey *et al.,* 2013). Specific Green HRM practices are found to be associated with environmental performance of organizations. Some of the HR practices that constitute High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) were found to be a part of environment management (Wee and Quazi, 2005).Environmental targets generally constitute non-financial determinant (Berrone and

Gomez-Mejia, 2009), and employees are recognized for their ideas for improving environment management (Lulfs and Hahn, 2013). It is seen that multinational companies are encouraging GHRM practices for promoting their employer branding and for improving their brand image.

Status of GHRM

Green HRM has been classified into reactive, preventive and proactive, based on the level at which an organization incorporates environmental issues into management practice (Haddock- Millar *et al.,* 2016). It is important to understand the role of the HR manager in this regard, as the HR manager's decision and behaviour affects EM practices and policies (Sharma *et al.,* 1999). A managers' orientation towards EM/ES is affected by his/her beliefs, attitudes, goals, and values (Tinsley and Pillai, 2006) and ultimately determines the seriousness towards environmental initiatives. HR manager's green signatures can be oriented towards promotion or prevention. Behaviour that promotes EM/ES applies HR practices to promote EM and preventive behaviour prevents negative environmental outcomes. HR managers are responsible for making integrative decisions and hence their signatures are important to comprehend the success of Green HRM in the organization. Regrettably, there is dearth of insights in the existing literature that captures the experience of employee in the field of GHRM. The linkage between EM/ES and GHRM and also the role of employees towards green management, green workplace behaviour has not yet received much scholarly attention.

Some of the significant research studies on Green HRM practices in the last few years are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Green HRM Practices:
Findings based on Select Studies**

Recruitment

- A study in France showed that professionals were concerned about the environmental stance of the companies they work for (Grolleau *et al.,* 2012)
- U.S. based studies revealed that job seekers were most attracted to, likely to seek and accept jobs from companies that have strong social and environmentally responsible values and have reported that students get attracted to work for organizations that have a pro-environmental image (Behrend *et al.,* 2009; Backhaus, 2002)
- It is believed that recruitment practices can support effective environment management by ensuring that new recruits understand an organization's environmental culture and share its environmental values (Wehrmeyer, 1996)
- British firms are beginning to recognize that gaining a reputation as a Green employer is an effective way to attract new talent (Phillips, 2007)

Training

- Green training or awareness campaigns, induction and training to enhance environmental competencies, involvement in green initiatives in the form of bi-directional communication flows are also important in enhancing environmental consciousness (Jabbour, 2013, Daily *et al.,* 2012)
- Studies have shown that imparting environmental knowledge and skills positively influence environmental performance (Longoni *et al.,* 2014; Harvey *et al,* 2013).
- Eco-literacy and environmental expertise of employees help them initiate environmental conservation practices (Roy and Therin, 2008)

Employee Involvement and Participation

- Organizations can promote eco - entrepreneurs by showcasing their works in high profile organizational events
- Organizations can encourage employee involvement and participation (EI&P) in green suggestion schemes & problem solving circles
- Introduction of green workplace agreements, training of union representatives in EM, consultation and joint working with union environmental representatives can be means of involving trade unions in the organizations' environmental causes
- Organizations may introduce practices such as incorporating green elements into the health and safety process, implementing wellness programmes to foster employees' proper nutrition, green pay/reward system, tailoring packages to reward green skills acquisition, use of monetary – based EM rewards (bonuses, cash, premiums). There can be use of non-monetary based EM rewards (sabbaticals, leave, gifts), use of recognition- based EM rewards (awards, dinners, publicity, external roles, daily praise) to reinforce positive green behaviours among employees
- Organizations may encourage employees to use green forms of transport, promote use of web or teleconferencing to reduce travel,

promote the reduction of paper use, set -up low carbon Chiefs (including CEO and Board) to increase action in EM. There can also be introduction of green whistle-blowing help-lines, discipline and/or dismissal for EM breaches
· Employees may be encouraged to volunteer to support environmental charities and projects e.g. a few paid hours per month
Grievance and Discipline
· Organizations can encourage internal "whistle-blowing" regarding environmental breaches and permit employees to raise grievances in high risk operations (for their safety record)
· Another useful practice can be attaching disciplinary procedures to environmental rules and duties wherever noncompliance occurs in organizations
Exit
· Organizations can go for staff de-briefings in EM in cases of dismissal to explain flouting of environmental norms may lead to dismissal of employees
· Organizations can check whether green issues are reasons for resignations i.e. whether employees are choosing a Greener employer
· Exit interviews may be used to gauge perceptions of firm, providing safety to employees who report flouting of environmental norms and regulations and providing legal protection for green whistle – blowers

(Compiled from Jackson et al., 2011; Cherian and Jacob, 2012 and Opatha and Arulrajah, 2014)

Discussion and Conclusion

Although the influence of HR practices has been established in the previous section, further analysis of past studies shows a very conflicting picture. Apparently, neither any one HR practice nor a set of HRM practices were seen to impact organizational outcomes in the same way. Masri and Jaaron's study in 2017 found that green recruitment and selection practice was the most important and green training and development was the least important among HR practices in Palestinian manufacturing organizations. Green training and development was not found to be significant in Daily's (2012) study of 220 Mexican manufacturing firms. One of the reasons could be firms were reluctant to invest much in training and development function dedicated to green management related initiatives. Hence the investments were never enough to improve employees' green behaviour. It is seen that once the investments reach an optimal level that is a critical mass of employees is involved in training, results can be seen in terms of better awareness and changes in pro-environmental behaviour culminating into better economic results for the firm. Hence organizations need to invest enough in environmental training to see any tangible results.

Another important consideration is the role of HR managers in the implementation of Green HR practices. A study by Harris and Tregidga (2012) on HR managers in New Zealand found that managers were not active in driving environmental sustainability in their organizations. HR managers were espousing environmental values but not applying them in their personal and professional lives. Although environmental issues were considered strategic in the organizations, HR chose to concentrate on other core HR issues rather than supporting environmental sustainability. If HR

continues to play a passive role in supporting environment management, it would be relegated to an insignificant position in future. Research has already established that Green HRM will have to play a role in driving environmental performance in organizations. Research has shown that there is a connection between Green HRM and EMS. It has been observed that organizations that have robust HR practices find it easier to implement Environment Management Systems (Jabbour *et al.,* 2012) and organizations that can integrate EMS with green HRM tend to see better economic outcomes. Hence it is time organizations realize the importance of going green and formally incorporating the green mandate in their HRM practices and this is true for Indian organizations as well.

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