The soft side of environmentally-sustainable organizations

Charbel Jose Chiapetta Jabbour[a,*] and
Douglas William Scott Renwick[b]

[a]*Montpellier Business School, Paris, France, and*
[b]*Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to present a discussion on the "soft and human" side of building environmentally sustainable organizations, a flourishing management subfield called "green human resource management" (GHRM), which concerns alignment of people and environmental management objectives of organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors reviewed some of the most relevant research results in GHRM.

Findings – In this paper, the authors define GHRM, its workplace-based practices and some recent developments' evidence on the positive impact of it on firms' ecological objectives. The authors conclude by detailing a new research agenda in GHRM.

Originality/value – The authors conclude by detailing a new and contemporary research agenda in GHRM.

Keywords Sustainability, Sustainable development, People management,
Sustainable human resources, Green human resource management

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The human side of organizations (McGregor, 1966), known as the soft side of organizations, is a topic that has attracted significant levels of attention both from academia and from practitioners, which became more popular during the total quality management wave that began decades ago (Fotopoulos and Psomas, 2009). It is anchored on arguments in favour of the positive impact of human aspects on operations management (Boudreau *et al.*, 2003) and the necessity of aligning human resource management and firms' strategic orientation (Schuler and Jackson, 1987) (Figure 1).

Consequently, the human side of organizations is equally important when managing organizations towards achieving eventual organizational and external societal environmental sustainability, an emerging body of knowledge called "green human resource management" (HRM) (Renwick *et al.*, 2013; Renwick, 2018; Renwick *et al.*, 2016). Green HRM is not considered

Figure 1.
Soft side of
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as a pioneering key subject across a number of management disciplines such as green management (Jabbour and Santos, 2008), operations management (Daily *et al.*, 2012) and human resources (Jackson *et al.*, 2011) and thus at the cutting-edge of HRM scholarship globally.

In this context, the research question driving this paper is: What are the future research opportunities in green HRM? As such, the main objectives of this work are therefore to:

- provide a conceptualization of green HRM;
- address workplace-based green HRM practices;
- shed light on recent research results on the soft human side of environmentally sustainable organizations; and
- suggest a new, focussed research agenda to inspire future research in green HRM.

Section 2 considers the first three aforementioned research objectives, while the last one is detailed in Section 3.

2. The soft side of environmentally sustainable organizations

A sustainable organization contributes to sustainable development by simultaneously delivering economic, social and environmental performance, frequently mentioned as the "triple bottom line" (people, planet and profit) of firms (Hart and Milstein, 2003). In this context, environmentally sustainable initiatives are those oriented towards mitigating external ecological degradation. Here, while the "hard and technological" side of organizations is progressing, with the emergence of clean technologies, the "soft and human" side of organizations still remains as the main challenge for implementing organizational environmental sustainability initiatives (Wehrmeyer, 1996).

The role of human resources in supporting strategic organizational goals and the impact of human resource practices on organizational performance has been well established

(Huselid, 1995; Jiang *et al.*, 2012). In this respect, green human resources – the soft and human side of achieving more environmentally sustainable organizations – concerns the alignment of human resources practices, systems and strategic foci such as organizational culture and employee empowerment with key organizational ecological and environmental goals (Renwick *et al.*, 2013; Renwick, 2018). Green human resource practices are vital for:

- promoting the development of greener products (Govindarajulu and Daily, 2004);
- supporting corporate responses to climate change (Hoffman, 2005);
- helping organizations in implementing and maintaining environmental management systems (Daily and Huang, 2001);
- motivating green leaders to inspire employees to develop and achieve new sustainability and eco-innovations (Ramus and Steger, 2000); and
- improving firms' environmental performance (Daily *et al.*, 2012).

Beyond company limits, links between green HRM and sustainability in supply chains have also been established (Nejati *et al.*, 2017; Jabbour and Jabbour, 2016).

3. Final remarks and research agenda
The "soft and human" side of organizational change and transformation has been a hot subject across a wide range of disciplines, including, for example, total quality management. However, the discussion on the relationship of the "soft and human" side of environmentally sustainable organizational transformation is still in its infancy.

The flourishing new body of knowledge called "'green HRM" consists of the alignment of human management practices (such as recruitment, training, appraisal and rewards) and human dimensions (such as organizational culture, teamwork and empowerment), with the environmental mission and goals of organizations (Renwick *et al.*, 2013; Renwick, 2018).

Looking ahead, a research agenda for future studies on green HRM may consider the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the role of green HRM in staff adopting green practices in firms?

RQ2. What is the role of green HRM in motivating employees to achieve environmental excellence?

RQ3. Which particular factors drive forward leader and employee green behaviour?

RQ4. To what extent do institutional, systems, process stakeholder, resource-based view, ability–motivation–opportunity, organizational citizenship behaviour, reasoned action, planned behaviour, value–belief–norm, social identity and evolutionary theory help explain organizational and staff behaviour in green HRM?

RQ5. Which other theoretical frameworks might best explain green HRM stakeholder behaviours globally and why?

RQ6. How do moderator variables such as commitment to ethics, equity sensitivity and staff discretion apply in green HRM?

RQ7. Is green HRM moral? Are target-setting, green appraisals and environmental performance-related pay ethical organizational HRM initiatives?

RQ8. Do organizational green targets pressure non- and/or anti-green staff to "go green"?

RQ9. How do agricultural workers adapt to potential and/or actual job loss arising from flooding and deforestation brought on by climate change? Can such workers re-train and work elsewhere?

RQ10. What job migration patterns emerge from the displacement and movement of agricultural workers globally?

RQ11. Does the health of crop and vineyard workers suffer from using pesticides and/or working on pesticide-contaminated land?

RQ12. Does factory worker's life expectancy decrease from inhaling potentially toxic leaks and related smog emissions? If so, how and to what extent?

RQ13. What are the experiences of staff employed in the carbon "polluter industries"? What are their stories?

RQ14. Do numbers of "green jobs" eclipse those in the "pro-fossil fuel" sector? If so, how many, where, when and why? If not, why not?

RQ15. What new forms of green employment are emerging globally? Are they truly green or a form of organizational "greenwash"?

RQ16. What impacts do existing and new political regulatory environments have on green HRM practices, work, jobs and employment worldwide?

RQ17. What is new in terms of green HRM systems (Jabbour *et al.*, 2017), strategic green HRM (Renwick *et al.*, 2016) and voluntary workplace staff's green behaviour globally (Kim *et al.*, 2017; Norton *et al.*, 2015)?

RQ18. What is the role of green HRM in leading green innovation efforts in organizations?

RQ19. Can green HRM play a significant role in emerging phenomena such as the "circular economy"?

RQ20. How can the soft, human side of organizations positively support the development of innovative low-carbon organizational strategies, products and productive processes?

The proposed research agenda aforementioned can be explored through a myriad of methodological approaches including literature reviews, conceptual pieces, theory development papers, action research, staff interviews, designing new survey measurement instruments, case studies, survey questionnaires, staff ethnographies and organizational histories (among others).

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Further reading

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*Corresponding author
Charbel Jose Chiapetta Jabbour can be contacted at: c.chiappetta-jabbour@montpellier-bs.com