

Making the (Entire) World a Better Place? Aligning Theory and Practice towards a more Sustainable & Inclusive HRM

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General critical remarks on a gap between theory and practice are not new, and frequently made (Carr, 1980). This is also the case within the field of Human Resource Management (HRM) (Cheng & Hackett, 2021). Especially in the young and applied field of sustainable and inclusive HRM there is a need to further develop theory and close the research-practice gap in the global context. To do this a multi-focused perspective is needed that includes relevant actors in different parts of the world. Current knowledge in HRM is heavily influenced by western perspectives. O’Leary-Kelly et al. (2014) for example noted that the samples used in HRM studies are typically people working in professional and white-collar jobs in Europe or the USA. There is an underrepresentation of sectors, countries and continents in the HRM literature. This is illustrated by Richards (2019) in a systematic review of 64 sustainable HRM-related research articles. Of these articles, 52 (81%) were performed in Western countries, and only six (9%) had international approaches – without detail of the countries involved – five not stating the locality (8%), leaving a single article from a developing country (2%). HRM practices, as well as the changing context in which they occur, are not the same around the world. The reality for an organization operating in Sub-Saharan African countries can be drastically different from an organization operating in Australia, Europe, or Northern America.

In addition, many stakeholders appear to be ignored (e.g., Bal & Brookes, 2022; Griep, Bankins, et al., 2023), which stands in contrast to the sustainable employment claims that more and more organizations make in communicating to the outside world. The current precarity and insecurity for an

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increasing group of employed workers is increasingly brought to attention (e.g., Bal & de Jong, 2017; Griep, Kraak, & Beekman, 2023; International Labor Organization 2011; Searle & McWha-Hermann, 2023). However, empirical research and theory development appears to be lagging behind in sustainable HRM research. Therefore, the focus of this special issue in *Group & Organization Management* (GOM) is on how theory development and novel research methods can help to better face new and upcoming issues in practice, specifically targeting sustainability and inclusion in a global approach. The aim is also to try to align theory with the challenges practitioners around the world are facing. The special issue contains different types of contributions. Besides regular research papers, we also have a GOM Musing, a GOM Now, as well as conceptual articles. With a title stating that we want to make the entire world a better place, we hoped to be able to include contributions from different parts of the world. This aim was achieved, although the European contributions are in the majority. In addition to contributions from South America, Asia/Australia, and two papers from Africa/US/Europe, five articles have European-based authors.

The papers in this special issue focus on different aspects of sustainability in the workplace and were chosen because of their contributions to the field of sustainable and inclusive HRM. The main topics are sustainable employment; diversity and inclusive management; sustainable interactions and psychological contracts; and leadership behaviors to foster sustainability. Some papers were based on a small group meeting at Kedge Business School in Bordeaux or the HRIC International HRM conference in South Africa, both of which took place in 2023. Some papers were submitted to GOM, following the call for papers. Other papers were submitted as regular papers to GOM and selected for the special issue because of their relevance for the topic. We believe that every paper in this special issue contributes in our shared quest for creating better workplaces.

Sustainable Employability

We start the special issue with two papers focusing on sustainable employability. First, we present a thought-provoking article by [Adiasto \(2024\)](#). His paper explores the possible implications of the rise of generative AI systems for sustainable employability. Adiasto highlights how generative AI systems are reshaping productivity. The introduction of generative AI systems has led to questions about which skills and competences employees will need to develop to stay employable in the future. Adiasto's insights into digital literacy and the evolving role of human contributions in the workplace provide an essential foundation for understanding the broader challenges of

sustainable employability. Second, [Beekman \(2023\)](#) investigates ways to increase sustainable employability through improved return-to-work practices. These practices concern employees who have been on sick leave. Beekman underscores the need for structural and long-term solutions that support both employee recovery and operational organizational. Her work includes a range of international examples to illustrate how return-to-work processes can be improved. The paper also proposes a more holistic approach that identifies the context of those who want to return to work, allowing sufficient time to recover.

Interactions and Relationships in the Workplace

Turning to interactions in the workplace, the paper by [Ohana and Fortin \(2023\)](#) examines how dispositional optimism—the natural tendency to expect positive outcomes—affects the relationship between interpersonal justice and employee well-being. The authors focus on how perceptions of fairness in workplace interactions can influence employees' emotional and mental health. Their results show that employees who are generally more optimistic tend to handle unfair treatment better, maintaining a higher sense of well-being despite negative experiences. However, those employees who exhibit lower levels of optimism are more likely to see a decline in their well-being when experiencing perceived injustices. This research expands our understanding of organizational justice by showing how personal characteristics can play a role in how employees perceive and cope with fairness in the workplace.

The next two papers focus on relationships in the workplace through the lens of psychological contract (PC) research. The first paper by [Laulié and Pavez \(2024\)](#) explores how tensions between sustainable HRM practices, aimed at nurturing employment relationships (i.e., social goals), conflict with the other two triple bottom line goals (i.e., environmental and financial) of the organization. After reviewing these tensions, the authors suggest several avenues for future PC research that could contribute to developing long-term, high-quality employment relationships. Academics should move on from treating the PC as an isolated exchange relationship and consider the employment relationship as a multi-level phenomenon. In line with early PC writings, they should also consider research questions that target “relationships” and relational dynamics. Finally, PC researchers should embrace methodological complexity, which will allow for a better fit between PC theory and the complex reality of the workplace. The second paper involves a collective work by PC and Sustainability scholars, presented by [Kraak et al. \(2024\)](#) that explores the potential of PC research to drive positive change in the workplace by focusing on its impact for theory, organizations and society,

as well as students. The authors emphasize two key themes that significantly enrich the PC literature: (1) a focus on the PC context, and (2) the development of sustainable exchange relationships. This paper contributes to research on sustainable PCs by proposing a tangible definition that includes elements from ethics of care: “an adaptive cognitive schema representing one’s perceptions of obligations regarding a high-quality exchange relationship that is characterized by attentive, responsible, and responsive parties as well as mutually beneficial economic, social, human, and environmental goals. The sustainable PC emphasizes long-term viability and resilience in the face of changing organizational and societal dynamics.”

Diversity and Inclusive Management

We then turn to three papers that focus on different ways of improving the workplace through the lens of diversity and inclusive management. The paper by [Jaeck et al., \(2023\)](#) investigates the challenges that organizations face in managing diversity. More specifically, they investigate the tension between ethical commitments and economic goals. The authors examine how different stakeholders (i.e., employees, managers, and external partners) perceive diversity initiatives. Their results show that the opinions of the different stakeholders can vary widely. While diversity is often seen as both a moral responsibility and a business asset, these two perspectives can sometimes come into conflict. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding these differing viewpoints and offers suggestions on how organizations can balance the need for inclusivity with the realities of economic pressures.

Second, the paper by [Chenigle and colleagues \(2023\)](#) explores how employees make decisions about identity management in the context of hijab disclosure to their managers. The study focuses on the factors influencing whether and how women who wear hijabs choose to disclose or discuss their religious identity in the workplace. The authors highlight the complexities involved in balancing personal identity with workplace expectations, and they examine how disclosure decisions can affect relationships with managers and overall workplace dynamics. By exploring these nuanced identity management processes, the paper expands on the broader challenges of inclusivity and diversity in organizations, offering insights for managers on how to create supportive environments that respect personal identities.

Next, [Tassabehji et al. \(2024\)](#) examine problematic workplace behaviors commonly seen in the software development industry. The authors use transactional analysis to investigate the root causes of outcomes such as burnout, stress, and interpersonal conflicts that frequently occur in high-pressure work environments. The novel analysis, using theory and AI-

generated vignette stories, reveals how communication breakdowns and underlying psychological patterns contribute to these issues. The paper provides practical recommendations for addressing problematic workplace behaviors, emphasizing the importance of improving communication and fostering a healthier, more collaborative work environment. The findings offer practical recommendations for leaders and managers in the software development field on how to mitigate the negative effects of stress and improve overall team dynamics.

Leadership

The final theme consists of two papers that explore the role of leadership in creating more sustainable workplaces. First [Knol et al. \(2024\)](#) study how leaders can use political skills to drive effective organizational change. The authors focus on the interpersonal abilities that help leaders influence others, build trust, and navigate complex organizational dynamics. Knol and colleagues argue that leaders who are politically skilled are better equipped to manage resistance, align stakeholders, and guide their organizations through transitions. The study shows how important these skills are in the creation of successful change initiatives and maintaining organizational stability. By examining the role of political competence in leadership, the authors provide valuable insights into how leaders can foster adaptability and long-term success within their teams and organizations. Second, [Sun et al. \(2023\)](#) examine how leader influence tactics impact organizational citizenship behavior. The authors investigate various leadership strategies, such as persuasion and inspirational appeals, and explore how these tactics can encourage employees to engage in organizational citizenship behavior. They also delve into the conditions under which these influence tactics are most effective, highlighting the importance of situational factors like employee trust and team dynamics. The study contributes to a better understanding of how leaders can foster a culture of collaboration and initiative, which helps create a more productive and engaged workforce.

Conclusion

We believe that this special issue contributes to closing the gap between theory and practice, which is particularly relevant in the field of sustainable HRM. Each contribution explores a specific aspect of sustainable employability; interactions and relationships in the workplace; diversity and inclusive management; and leadership. This collection of papers offers new insights and provides a more solid basis for future research by providing academics and practitioners with frameworks, definitions, and a wide variety of relevant

recommendations. We are thrilled by the variety in topics and design of the papers and hope that the mix of qualitative, quantitative, and theoretical papers from different parts of the world will motivate other authors to submit their work on sustainability in the workplace to continue this important discussion.

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