

# Fostering Social Sustainability Through Adaptive HR Strategies: A Path Forward

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## ABSTRACT:

Companies are now focused on improving the lives of their workers, the communities they operate in, and the environment rather than maximising profits. There is an increasing need to embed social sustainability within strategic HRM frameworks. It incorporates the importance of social sustainability, achieving organisational goals and contributing to the sustainable future. This paper aims to discuss the strategies for embedding social sustainability into strategic HRM, developing employee-centric policies, fostering a culture of social responsibility, investigating the impact of social sustainability on employee retention, and encouraging public-private partnerships. This research analyzes the role of HR strategies in promoting social sustainability in global and Indian corporate settings.

**Keywords:** Social sustainability, Strategies, HR Strategies, Sustainability, Adaptive strategies

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has become the cornerstone of business growth and innovation, as company around the worldwide aim to balance profitability with environmental responsibility. The plan of social sustainability in the workplace goes far just by following labour laws or corporate social responsibility initiatives. It includes a complete approach to employee well-being fairness, community involvement, and long-term workforce growth. Social sustainability mainly focuses on creating equality, fair; inclusive that helps to promote both personal growth and progress for the group.

According to Ehnert et al (2016) strategic human resource management is crucial for incorporating these principles into the company policy and practices. This proves that sustainability is not just a separate goal but it is a key part of the business strategy. One major challenge is overcoming the old way of HR practices. Without a clear strategy, organization risk continuing inequalities, disengagement and distrust which can hurt their sustainability efforts. Strategies HRM can help to bridge the gap by creating the politicise that promote

fairness, work life balance, employee involvement and ongoing learning so that fostering a culture of responsibility and share value creation. “Strategic human resource management means formulating and executing human resource policies and practices that produce the employee competencies and behaviours that the company needs to achieve its strategic aims.”- Gary Dessler

Bringing social sustainability into HRM practices is important for the organization. That helps to connect HR policies with social sustainability. These practices enhance the company’s reputation and contribute to the overall wellbeing of society. The real-world example and theoretical insights presented in this paper show how strategic HRM can drive social sustainability tackling systemic barriers. By integrating sustainability into HR strategies organizations can unlock their workforce potential and ensures both lasting success and a fairer society.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Social sustainability is the ability of a society to create and maintain healthy, equitable, and liveable communities for both current and future generations. It is a process for creating sustainable successful places that promote wellbeing, by understanding what people need from the places they live and work. Social sustainability combines design of the physical realm with design of the social world – infrastructure to support social and cultural life, social amenities, systems for citizen engagement, and space for people and places to evolve.

Social equity, diversity, social quality of life and integrated governance including corporate sustainability and hybrid business models are newly added sectors to the social dimension of sustainability.

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) is an approach that aligns HR practices with an organization's overall business strategy. It involves HR professionals actively participating in the development and execution of business strategies to achieve organizational goals. Strategic HRM focuses on attracting, developing, and retaining talent, as well as creating a positive workplace culture that supports the strategic objectives of the company. It's about using HR practices strategically to enhance an organization's competitiveness and long-term success

Strategic human resource management provides a framework linking people management and development practices to long-term business goals and outcomes. It focuses on longer-term resourcing issues and other HR strategies, such as reward or performance, determining how they are integrated into the overall business strategy. Re-engineering and strategic human resource management’s core features of approach to organisational design and management, including a ‘flattened’ hierarchy, decentralized decision-making to line managers or work teams, ‘enabling’ information technology, ‘strong’ leadership and a set of HR practices that make workers’ behaviour more consistent with the organisation’s culture and goals (Champy, 1996; Hammer, 1997; Hammer & Champy, 1993).

## 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nogueira et al., (2024) examined the relationship between labour practices, social sustainability, and organizational performance from the perspective of employees. A quantitative approach was used, with data collected from 574 Portuguese employees and analyzed using partial least squares. Labour practices (employee development, participation, and equal opportunity) positively influence social sustainability, which in turn enhances organizational performance. Social sustainability acts as a mediator between labour practices and organizational performance, highlighting its crucial role in decision-making. Companies should

prioritize employee perceptions and integrate social sustainability into HR policies to maximize organizational performance and mutual benefits.

Son, I. S., & Krolkowski, C. (2025) explored the impact of residents' event attendance and involvement on their sense of place from a social sustainability perspective. A quantitative approach was used, surveying residents about their frequency of visits to and involvement in local events. Frequent event attendance significantly influences sense of place (attachment, identity, and dependence), while event involvement only contributes to place identity. Events play a crucial role in enhancing social sustainability in communities, and stakeholders should recognize their value beyond economic benefits. The study highlights the importance of understanding the complex relationships between events, places, and communities to promote social sustainability.

Eshete, S. K., & Birbirssa, Z. A. (2024) conducted a systematic review that examined how Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) fosters inclusive workplaces within organizations. A review of 78 articles published between 2010 and 2023 from reputable journals was conducted to identify effective HR practices. The study explored HR practitioners can impact employee knowledge, motivation, and opportunities through various HR practices, while line managers play a crucial role in implementing these practices. SHRM can be a powerful tool for creating inclusive workplaces, but it requires a holistic approach involving diversity commitment, leadership involvement, and efforts to dismantle biases.

Amrutha and Geetha, (2019) highlighted that green human resource management (GHRM) practices contribute to the sustainability requirements of social equity, health, wellness and well-being of organisation and its employees in addition to the achievement of economic stability and environmental balance.

Ehnert et al., (2016) stated that the adoption of HRM strategies and practices that enable the achievement of financial, social and ecological goals, with an impact inside and outside of the organisation and over a long-term time horizon.

Paille.et al., (2014) referred that the recent development has provided evidence and support to the idea that specific GHRM practices are significantly correlated with the environmental performance of organizations. Environmental performance is the commitment expected by organizations to guard the environment.

Elkington, (1994), Elkington, (1998) also stated the most common conceptualization of sustainable HRM involves an emphasis on the “triple bottom line”. Scholars have suggested that a triple bottom line approach to HRM should provide “win-win-win” strategies for organizations, benefitting not only the organization but also employees, consumers, and the external environment.

## **4. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: INDIAN AND INTERNATIONAL CONTRIBUTION OF COMPANIES**

### **4.1 International Companies' contribution**

#### **4.1.1 Hindustan Unilever Limited**

Unilever's “**Sustainable Living Plan**” is more than a slogan; it's reflected in everyday HR practices. They hire people from all walks of life, help women and minorities grow, offer mental health support, and set gold standards for safety at work. They don't just hope these efforts work, they track how many lives they touch, and the results speak for themselves: happier, more loyal teams and a stellar reputation.

### **4.1.2 Schneider Electric**

Schneider Electric is widely recognized as a global leader in integrating social sustainability into its business and human resource management practices. Social sustainability isn't just a popular term; it's baked into performance reviews and pay checks. Employees know their efforts toward gender equality, inclusive leadership, and community service matter. The company backs this up with family-friendly benefits, international training, and clear sustainability goals everyone can rally behind.

### **4.1.3 Google**

Google's approach is laser-focused on creating a psychologically safe workplace. The tech giant invests big in well-being, anti-discrimination, and learning opportunities, especially for disadvantaged groups. By making these values visible, Google helps people thrive and communities grow.

### **4.1.4 PWC**

Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC), for instance, sends teams of high-potential managers to developing countries for several months at a time. The managers work with a local partner on a sustainability issue, such as strengthening coordination in the battle against HIV/AIDS infections in Uganda, in order to build deeper understanding of global sustainable development challenges and the role of business in solving them. PwC offers services that enable organisations to enhance their social sustainability performance and capitalise on value creation opportunities driven by regulatory and reporting requirements related to social sustainability.

## **4.2 Indian Companies' contribution**

### **4.2.1 Tata Steels**

Before the word ESG was emerged, Tata Steels focused on safety, gender diversity, and wellness. Their HR team reaches beyond office walls, supporting skill-building and education for those who need it most, and has set real benchmarks for inclusion and transparency.

### **4.2.2 ITC**

ITC brings social sustainability into daily business through rural employment programs, women's entrepreneurship, and upskilling initiatives. They've championed green HR embracing digital, paperless work and building sustainability skills, not just for employees but across their entire supply chain. ITC's real strength lies in collaborating with local communities to create lasting change.

### **4.2.3 WIPRO**

WIPRO driven by their core values and deep commitment to people, the planet, and communities, Wipro's internal sustainability efforts have garnered numerous recognitions over the years such as, founding member of Transform to Net Zero, members of the Open Footprint Forum and member of the Terra Carta initiative by the Prince of Wales. They also improved access to quality healthcare services in rural and semi-urban areas. They support primary healthcare facilities in remote regions, offering free medical consultations, medicines, and diagnostic services. Programs focusing on maternal health and child nutrition address critical gaps in healthcare delivery for vulnerable groups. And also they supported in digital education during the COVID-19 pandemic ensured continuity in education for underserved communities.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This comparative analysis of national and international companies' contributions underscores the significance of social sustainability as a key pillar of strategic HRM across diverse contexts. Global companies such as Unilever, Schneider Electric, Google, PwC highlights implanting sustainability within organisation culture, leadership evaluation, and international collaboration. Indian companies like Tata Steel, ITC, Wipro emphasize a strong community-oriented approach, focusing on safety, inclusivity, rural development, and healthcare access.

This comparative analysis shows that the social sustainability in HRM is not one-size-fits-all model but is shaped by social, cultural, economic contexts. Global firms tend to align sustainability closely with performance metrics and innovation, whereas Indian firms integrate it deeply with socio-economic upliftment and community welfare. Both approaches focus on the growing recognition that HRM can drive employee well-being, organizational performance and long-term societal progress. Eventually, the comparison supports that socially sustainable HRM practices; whether global or Indian, both are most effective when they combine employee well-being, inclusivity, and community impact with organizational goals.

The organization can implement certain strategies to embed social sustainability in strategic human resource management. Such as;

- (i) **Incorporate social sustainability into HR strategy:** Organization should incorporate social sustainability into their overall HR strategy by conducting a social sustainability audit, improving social sustainability policy, providing training and development, encouraging employee's participation and engagement. Thus, this helps to enhance brand and reputation, increase employee engagement and retention, and increased innovation and competitiveness.
- (ii) **Develop Employee-Centric Policies:** Organizations should be encouraged to develop employee-centric policies that prioritize employee well-being, diversity, and inclusion by including flexible work arrangements, DEI initiatives employee wellness programs, recognition and rewards, employee feedback mechanisms.
- (iii) **Green HRM Practices:** Indian companies are adopting green recruitment, green performance management and green retention strategies to promote environmental sustainability. Such attempts should be encouraged.
- (iv) **Organizational Sustainability:** Indian organizations are shifting towards holistic approaches that consider economic, social and environmental dimensions, ensuring long-term well-being and sustainability.
- (v) **AI-Supported Green HRM:** Some Indian companies are leveraging artificial intelligence to support green HRM practices, promoting socially responsible and environmentally sustainable initiatives.

## 6. CONCLUSION

According to the UN Global Compact, social sustainability should be a critical part of any business because it affects the quality of a business' relationships with stakeholders. Social sustainability is a proactive way of managing and identifying business impacts on employees, workers in the value chain, customers, and local communities. Companies that raise the importance of social sustainability recognize the significance of their relationships with people, communities and society. Though social impact, or social sustainability, issues are not easily quantifiable or measurable, they are easier to identify. Although measuring social impact can present unique challenges, best practices such as engaging a variety of stakeholders and mapping impact pathways can help companies more accurately assess their social performance. The strategies for embedding social sustainability into strategic HRM, developing employee-centric policies, green HRM practices, organizational sustainability, and AI-supported green HRM. Therefore, organizations should prioritize social sustainability in their HRM practices to achieve long-term success and contribute to a sustainable future.

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