

## SUSTAINABLE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: A CATALYST FOR EMPLOYER BRAND TRANSFORMATION

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**Abstract:** *The current challenges in the labor market create intense competition between employers in terms of recruiting the most competent employees. As a result, these markets are transforming from sellers' to buyers' marketplaces, providing workers the exclusive power to choose and thereby demanding businesses to adapt accordingly. To face this challenge, organizations require a competitive advantage that can provide them with a distinct identity and set them apart from their competitors. This is where the notion of "employer branding" becomes relevant. Moreover, today's customers have also started to look beyond their needs and prefer buying products from companies whose employees are involved in sustainable activities. Hence, incorporating sustainable practices into human resource management (HRM) is an adequate solution for creating a desirable employer brand. In this context, the primary objective of the present paper is to emphasize that employer branding, when combined with a sustainable HRM approach, contributes to the creation of a sustainable competitive advantage. Using a literature review methodology, the paper concludes that for the effective implementation of employer branding, sustainable HRM plays a critical role in aligning the organizational values to those of the employees, which ultimately leads to attracting employees with green behavior and retaining them for a longer period.*

**Keywords:** *employer branding, sustainable human resource management, green behavior, sustainability, brand image.*

### INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive environment, it is essential for companies to also put themselves at the forefront of non-traditional fields such as human resources to gain a competitive advantage. One example of this would be employer branding, which, unlike the traditional "branding" concept, doesn't only focus on customers for promoting their products and services but also relies on the organization's professionals. Satisfying employees by implementing employer branding has several advantages, such as higher productivity, increased competitiveness, as well as work satisfaction. All these benefits motivated researchers to further study this subject, and as per their findings, it is proven that employer branding not only improves workplace relations but also grows organizational commitment among employees. Business owners started to realize the significance of employer branding only after the millennium, when the business industries changed. In recent times, organizations have become more dependent on services offered by humans, manpower, and knowledge. This resulted in the realization that to get access to the best talented professionals present in the job market, companies must not miss any opportunity to create a desirable brand image as employers.

Firstly, the primary objective of the prior studies was to research the characteristics of employer branding and this impact on jobseekers' intentions. However, recently, the focus shifted to employer branding's effect on the overall performance of the company [5]. This made organizations focus more on the implementation of establishing an employer brand. Secondly, while the business owners were getting used to the concept of employer branding, sustainability issues also started to emerge. In fact, in the past decade, they have been a huge concern for people and have largely affected customer behavior. As per previous studies, the buying decisions of customers generally also depend heavily on what the trading company does for social welfare [1]. Lastly, the managers realized that an

effective integration of sustainability goals into a company’s objectives requires serious efforts from all departments as well as organizational members. The traditional HRM systems did not properly integrate sustainability into HRM. In response, sustainable HRM emerged, which looked beyond the financial performance of the company.

Based on the above three standpoints, previous literature showed that “employer branding” as well as “sustainable HRM” individually represent competitive advantage for a firm. However, few researchers went ahead with this and proposed to combine both concepts for getting heightened benefits and a “sustained competitive advantage”. Nevertheless, there is limited literature on the role of sustainable HRM in employer branding. Therefore, in this context, there is a gap in the literature that must be filled. Therefore, the primary scope of the present paper is to objectively review the existing literature regarding “employer branding”, “sustainable HRM” as well as the associated advantages derived from combining them. Hence, this research addresses the research questions below using the literature review methodology:

- How has employer branding emerged and acted as a competitive advantage?
- How has sustainable HRM emerged and acted as a competitive advantage?
- How can sustainable HRM act as a catalyst for employer brands?

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this paper a literature review methodology was used. For conducting the research, relevant searches such as “employer branding”, “sustainable HRM”, and “role of employer branding in HRM” were used. The publications used were primarily review papers and research papers written between 2020 and 2024. The motivation behind selecting this timeframe was to maintain the recency of the publications. This helped us to focus on more recent studies, thereby understanding the concepts from the viewpoint of present scenarios. Besides the keywords mentioned, two additional searches were made to fill in specific gaps in the paper. The motivation behind searching for these words is to find all the relevant literature evidence regarding these subjects.

Table 1 mentions the relevant details regarding keywords searched, search engines/text databases, years of publication range, as well as the number of studies used for this paper. All the materials used for research purposes represent research papers and review articles published by trustworthy sources, thereby ensuring the credibility of the paper. All the sources of materials used are mentioned in the references.

**Table 1.**

**Details regarding study materials used for the paper**

Keywords searched	Search Engine /Text database	Years of publication range	No. of studies used in the article
Employer Branding	Google Scholar	2020-2024	7
Sustainable HRM	ScienceDirect	2020-2024	2
Role of Employer Branding in sustainable HRM	Google Scholar	2020-2024	2
Corporate Social Responsibility	Institute of Financial Studies	2023	1
Opinion polls of young people on sustainability	Statista	2020	1

Source: Authors’ work

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### *1.1. Employer Branding*

In the present-day business context, one may observe a shifting pattern in labor market. More precisely, this market is transforming from sellers' to buyers' marketplace. This is primarily due to the increase in the number of educated and highly skilled people and their easier availability, which is causing striking competition among employers that are looking for the most talented professionals [5].

Prior researcher explains this phenomenon by highlighting that the selection process for candidates has been reversed. Earlier, organizations used to choose who to hire. However, due to intensive competition in the labor market and increasing work opportunities, today, it is the candidates who have the privilege to choose their employers as per their preferences. This resulted in organizations competing against each other to attract and retain the best professionals. Moreover, with the expansion and development of the service sector, professionals have become one of the most valuable resources for organizations. In other words, companies started to realize the importance of HR (human resources) and currently perceive talented, well-qualified professionals as an asset [3]. Consequently, researchers believe that for organizations to survive, they desperately require a competitive advantage that can distinguish them from other employers present in the market.

Another study agrees with this statement, claiming that it has become essential for companies to present themselves through social media channels and create their own unique identity [5]. This can help businesses attract their target audience (in this context, potential employees), whose values are aligned with those of the company. The above idea gave rise to the concept of "employer branding" [3]. Employer branding is a classic example of one such distinguisher, which not only boosts the interest of potential (future) employees but also helps in retaining the already-existing ones, thereby lowering their turnover rate and providing cost-efficiency [13]. As per the results of a survey, effective employer branding strategies have resulted in a 28% decrease in turnover, a 50% depletion of cost per hire, as well as 50% more competent applicants. Such financial benefits in the domain of HR management lead to the growing interest of researchers and decision-makers in employer branding. However, one must remember that it is not a simple, one-time task. Rather, it is a process that necessitates continuous efforts to understand the labor market requirements and monitor the attitudes, values, and behaviors of potential applicants as well as existing employees [13].

The significance of employer branding has risen. According to prior scholars employer branding is treating existing workers as internal clients and taking care of them so that they remain committed to the company's goals for the long term. This eventually results in higher satisfaction among employees, which in turn results in improved work efficiency [14]. Another researcher explains employer branding as the sum of all the efforts put in by a company to identify, attract, and retain potential employees in the existing competitive labor marketplace [10]. Some studies also define it as a marketing-based strategy that focuses on promoting an employer's distinctive and appealing qualities both inside and outside the organization to effectively attract, recruit, and retain talented professionals in the context of a fiercely competitive job market. Hence, one may say that it is the defensive response of organizations to overcome this challenge [9].

Employer branding is a multidisciplinary concept that has evolved a lot in the past 25 years. The researchers share different opinions regarding the relationship between employer branding and organizational productivity. While some studies claim that it is a major way to hunt supreme-quality employees, others suggest that, as of now, there is not

sufficient literature that can prove the effectiveness of employer branding in an organization in terms of a better HRM performance [9]. However, the majority of researchers support the idea that employer branding has a strong positive influence on employee satisfaction as well as employees' loyalty, which ultimately results in better work efficiency and organizational performance [10]. Hence, till date, there has been no consensus among researchers regarding this subject. Nevertheless, if one considers the more recent studies, the majority of them are in favor of implementing employer branding while promoting this strategy for bringing additional value to companies.

Employer branding primarily focuses on the organization's core values and workplace conditions and has three main target groups, which are as follows:

- employees that are currently working within the organization and their efficient management;
- future potential employees;
- other people connected to the organization with business-related interests.

Employer branding helps in cultivating and developing a particular company image by creating a brand's reputation as a desirable employer [5]. Previous studies show that the positive viewpoints of potential employees regarding a company's reputation impact their desire to work for that company. Reputation can be described as the public perception of a company in comparison to other firms in the same sector. Since companies with a better image and reputation usually attract a huge number of potential candidates, they have the added advantage of selecting the most talented and well-skilled professionals [9].

According to prior scholars building a company's brand image as a good employer requires three steps, which are as follows:

- First step: the organization must define its unique values that it plans to integrate into the workspace to create a safe and secure working environment.
- Second step: the organization must clearly communicate and circulate its core values while also motivating the existing workers to adopt them for the purpose of attracting potential employees.
- Third step: incorporating the values within the internal culture of the company to reshape its business environment [5].

Although, in essence, every employer branding strategy follows the same steps as mentioned above, there are several methods that can be followed to achieve the desired results. In other words, there are many ways in which a company can develop and enhance its employer brand name, such as by improving its reputation, respecting employees' work-life balance, investing in employee well-being programs, etc.

It is also important to highlight that the work priorities and values of potential employees may differ based on the age group they belong to and the business sector they work in. Therefore, it becomes essential for the employer to also understand the behavior and lifestyle patterns of the target group. For example, as per research conducted among IT, business, and engineering sector students, the most common work-related priority is high remuneration, followed by a favorable work environment [13]. It is possible that students from other fields prioritize other workplace qualities, such as flexibility and support from co-workers. Therefore, it is recommended that employers study their target audience before communicating their values [14].

Moreover, it is also interesting to note that people who had work experience ranked certain work-related aspects as more important in comparison to those who had never been employed. For instance, salary and other monetary compensation are considered more valuable among people without any prior work experience, while maintaining a healthy work-life balance is the top priority for those who have already worked a few years.

Therefore, employers must consider all these factors while offering benefits and compensation to their employees [13].

### **1.2. Sustainable HRM**

When creating a brand image, it is essential to influence the perceptions of the target audience (in this context, both potential as well as existing employees). This is because customer behavior has become complex in a way that makes people look beyond the utility, price, and quality of products. The buying decisions of customers also depend heavily on their perception of the company's image and what they are doing for social welfare. As a result, businesses are adopting this "new pattern" of consumer behavior by integrating sustainability goals into their organizational strategies [1].

Business sustainability has gained attention in the last decade because of several environmental issues, the most common of which is climate change [6]. According to more recent studies, there are two biggest challenges that HR managers are facing today:

- Employee engagement, which refers to the level of psychological involvement of an employee in his work; sometimes, it is also associated with employee morale.
- Sustainability strategies, which refer to a type of business strategy that promotes sustainable practices that aim to bring long-term advantages to the company.

Companies are attempting to improve in the above areas because of the associated benefits. More precisely, employee engagement is a work-related trait that largely contributes to the retention of employees [4]. This results in lower cost-per-hire and lower turnover rates, thereby impacting the financial situation of the company in a positive manner. Firstly, to increase employee participation within an organization, business owners are transforming the traditional HR framework, which was strictly based on talent and skill sets possessed by the employees, to a modern version, which also prioritizes long-term meaningful relations [4].

Prior study found that the level of employee engagement depends primarily on two distinct characteristics, namely personal traits and the workplace environment [1]. People with certain personal traits tend to be more active at work, contributing to a healthier work environment. Therefore, to improve the participation of organizational members at the workplace, it is essential that recruiters look for attributes such as green behavior, proactivity, and enthusiasm among the potential candidates while hiring them. This is because employees with such positive traits are more likely to remain motivated and improve the work culture. There are various techniques and methods to promote employee engagement. Previous literature proves that employee feedback is an effective and, at the same time, most common instrument to easily gather employees' opinions and pinpoint areas that require more improvement. If the managers observe consistent negative feedback in a particular area regarding certain aspects of their work, such problems should be immediately addressed and resolved. This may improve employee turnover, which ultimately leads to employee retention [14].

Secondly, it is crucial to highlight that, along with the continuously changing business environment, the concept of sustainability is also evolving. Business sustainability, which was earlier considered something optional, has become a crucial factor for firms to gain the trust of their existing stakeholders through the means of reflecting accountability and transparency [6]. In recent years, researchers have started to recognize the importance of HR in promoting sustainability-related practices within the environment.

However, there is an urgent need to redefine this role for an efficient and successful integration of sustainability in business. Out of the three dimensions of organizational sustainability, namely - economic, environmental, and social, the companies usually focus only on the first two, ignoring the third aspect completely. Nevertheless, one must not

forget that sustainability is not limited to the financial and economic performance of a company. Since sustainability also has a social component, it can influence employees' values, attitudes, behaviors, and relationships [4]. It is a well-known fact that organizational members have a strong impact on the success and effectiveness of a firm's sustainability objectives. Nevertheless, we have limited knowledge of how companies can exactly help attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) [2].

Therefore, there is a gap in the literature regarding the implication of the HR department in promoting sustainable development in society. Fortunately, with time, some businesses have slowly started realizing the importance of sustainability issues and are following the path of HR movements and employee well-being models. As a result, a soft HRM model emerged. This newer HR system recognizes the importance of flexibility, commitment, and employee engagement in improving the overall performance of a company. Even though this model is two-dimensional and cares about employee well-being, the primary objective is maximizing profit in relation to HR outcomes (work efficiency, work performance, and work commitment). Therefore, one may conclude that global societal and environmental demands have not yet been met [10].

Based on the above arguments, there was a growing requirement to transform the traditional HRM systems, which did not properly integrate sustainability into HRM. In response, modern HRM models emerged that looked beyond the financial performance of the company. Therefore, sustainable HRM is a discipline that aims to adopt HRM practices that enable the company to accomplish financial, environmental, as well as social long-term objectives. The primary reason why HRM came into existence is the realization that employees not only contribute to performing various physical activities within the company but also play a central role in conditioning the setting of firm goals [4]. Thus, the main scope of HRM should be coherent enough to both execute sustainable HRM systems as resolve present societal issues, such as the SDG proposed by the United Nations.

The researchers have started to emphasize how essential a sustainable HRM model is, which also includes multistakeholder perspectives. Contrary to earlier models, the more evolved approach considered multiple roles in HRM. Literature on sustainable HRM clearly indicates that there is a need to further understand the purpose of HRM for achieving efficient implementation of sustainable HRM models and for addressing and resolving present-day sustainability issues, including SDG. This is required so that companies can recognize the main objectives of HRM in a business context [2].

### ***1.3. The role of sustainable HRM in employer branding***

Previous studies show that in the current scenario, sustainable HRM is a relevant notion for companies but is not implemented effectively. To combat this problem, it is possible for the company to combine both the competitive advantages mentioned in this paper, namely, employer branding as well as sustainable HRM.

Recruiting employees who care about environmental and social issues may create working conditions that are suitable for implementing the sustainable goals of the company. Since selection and recruitment fall under the responsibility of HR team members, it is a vital step for managers to keep this as a selection criterion when hiring a new professional. In fact, previous studies believe that inculcating and fostering environmental sustainability values in the recruitment process tends to result in the alignment of the company's values with those of the organizational members. However, to hire and retain professionals who possess green behaviors, it is also necessary for the companies to present the relevant values to the targeted audience. Here comes the role of employer branding [1].

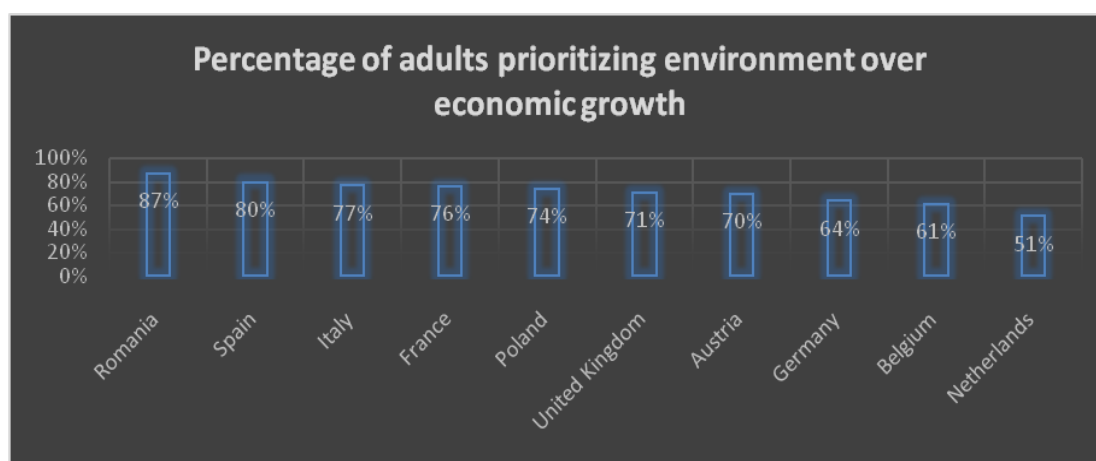
The idea that employer branding can support and even act as a catalyst for sustainable HRM has been supported by some researchers in the past. Nevertheless, its

implementation in the real world is still not widespread. Moreover, the literature regarding this specific area is also limited.

Since sustainable HRM has a positive effect on how companies treat their staff, some researchers also claim that it can impact a firm's attractiveness and image as an employer in a way that permits sustainable HRM to act as a sustained competitive advantage.

Another study claims that sustainable HRM can assist firms in establishing an employer brand that adds additional value to their company, thereby creating a competitive advantage for them. The reason why it will be proven to have a sustained competitive advantage is because the concept not only helps in differentiating the company from its competitors but is also hard to copy [9]. In other words, it is comparatively easier to replicate a business model that involves simple processes. However, value-enhancing strategies such as sustainable HRM are mostly context-dependent and may not work for other organizations. Several researchers have claimed that employees possess the capability to act as a sustained competitive advantage. However, it is also important to highlight that to take advantage of this opportunity, companies must have professionals that are extremely skilled in what they do and, at the same time, should feel a sense of motivation while working for the company [10].

Moreover, after humanitarian crisis, such as COVID-19 pandemic and Russia-Ukraine conflict, there could be seen a shift in labor market as well as employee's work-related priorities [7,8]. In 2020, Statista published the results of a survey that was conducted among 500 adults from 13 different countries during the pandemic. As per the findings, almost three of every four participants expressed that environmental protection should be prioritized over economic growth. Surprisingly, this opinion was most shared among Romanians, where 87% of all the participants conveyed this view [14].



**Figure 1. Percentage of adults prioritizing environment over economic growth**

Source: Statista, 2020

The above results show that people care for sustainability-related issues in general. But in the business context, a lot of work is still required from managers' part to attain favorable outcomes. For instance, it is true that many companies have already begun to implement sustainability into their future goals. However, researchers believe that to get full benefits from this process, companies must not ignore HR, as this can be a strong competitive advantage for them. Unfortunately, even though employees are an integral part of any business (especially companies in the service sector), social employee sustainability is a topic that has not yet gained enough attention from researchers [4].

An ideal HR strategy can satisfy both employees' as well as customers' interests. In this context, employees' interest represents working for a desirable brand with a good name, as this provides them with a sense of identity. Organizational identification can be described as "a sentiment of oneness with the organization." Previous research shows that there is a strong link between employee identification and employer branding, as it offers employees an opportunity to integrate their own identities with those of the organization.

To develop a team of professionals that remain loyal to the company, employers should focus on providing them with better recognition. Moreover, studies believe that organization identification also offers a motive for workers to stay loyal to their company and create an environment that motivates professionals to stay longer. Therefore, one may conclude that employee loyalty also results in employee retention [12].

As per the findings of another study conducted among people from generation Z, creating an employer brand based on sustainable development is extremely crucial. This generation is the youngest to enter the workforce market and thus represents the future of the labor market all over the world. Therefore, it is recommended for employers to understand their needs and invest in their well-being. This can be done by considering the values of generation Z members while building an employer brand [11].

Furthermore, according to prior studies, young individuals are more active on social networking websites. Therefore, as a principle of marketing, employers must utilize the best channel for promoting their brand image as an employer. Studies show that social media channels are proven to be a very efficient and practical way of communicating, as information is easily transferred to millions of users in one go. This is why social media acts as a forum for creating employer branding. One classic example of this would be LinkedIn, which has gained a lot of popularity for job-seeking purposes. However, as per previous research, one must not underestimate the significance of videos as a means of attracting the attention of young people. In present times, employment campaigns are run on social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and various other sites, and they gain immense popularity, especially among young generations [5].

## CONCLUSIONS

Attracting and retaining employees can be challenging for companies, especially when they do not stand out in the eyes of their potential employees. Sustainable HRM plays a major role in providing a distinctive identity to such organizations by establishing a unique brand image as an employer. Firstly, recruiting proactive and enthusiastic employees with green behavior promotes employee engagement. This also increases the probability of successful implementation of sustainability goals in the company and ultimately affects the company's reputation positively. As a result, HR managers should preferably hire individuals who have a positive attitude toward sustainability. Because at the end, their active participation in the company and social welfare activities will attract potential employees and establish a great employer brand. Secondly, generation Z is the new age group entering the workforce. Hence, it is vital for firms to understand their work-related priorities.

Previous studies have clearly indicated that younger generations recognize the significance of sustainability in a business context and prefer brands that invest in social welfare. This idea can be utilized by businesses through the means of creating a good reputation, with the purpose of influencing their buying decisions. Furthermore, the integration of sustainability represents only the first step, as the communication of values is also necessary for attracting young, talented people to the company. Social media channels such as LinkedIn and Facebook are proven effective when the target audience is generation

Z. This is because they spend more time on these social platforms. Lastly, combining both, employer branding and sustainable HRM provides the company a sustained competitive advantage as it is harder for competitors to replicate value-enhanced strategies. To summarize, sustainable HRM practices can assist companies in attracting and retaining high-quality employees. By incorporating such practices into a business, a great employer brand can be built. To become a desirable employer, any employer branding strategy must be inclusive of sustainable HRM practices for long-term success.

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