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**Scientific Review Article**

## **SUSTAINABLE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND DIGITALIZATION IN ORGANIZATIONS: KEY CHALLENGES AND STRATEGY ALIGNMENT**

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**Abstract:** Sustainable human resource management (HRM), digitalization, and strategic alignment have become increasingly critical aspects for organizational resilience and competitiveness. The core demands of today's environment in managing organizations and Human Resources, such as implementing emerging technology, particularly artificial intelligence, sustainability and green practices, thus managing a productive work environment, diversity and inclusion, hybrid teams and data security, require an effective response and an adequate strategy. These are the very complex processes that are accompanied by many challenges. This article analyses and explores the implementation and interconnections of sustainability and digital technologies in organizational HR practices through the literature review, emphasizing its importance as a critical aspect in achieving efficient operations and business success,

which have to be supported by an adequate strategy and key challenges for its integration into HR operations and alignment with organizational strategy.

**Keywords:** *Sustainable human resource, digitalization, organization, strategy, challenges.*

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) represents a critical evolution in the management of people within organizations, aligning HR practices with broader goals of environmental, social, and economic sustainability (Baykal et al, 2022). Sustainable HR practices have emerged as a vital component of corporate sustainability initiatives, aiming not only to reduce environmental impact but also to enhance social responsibility and long-term employee well-being (Chomać-Pierzecka et al., 2024). Simultaneously, digitalization is transforming traditional HR functions through data analytics, automation, and AI-driven decision-making (Đurić et al., 2025b). Sustainable and digital HR practices help organizations to increase efficiency through automation, improve employee experience, and strengthen alignment with ethical and environmental goals. Digital tools can streamline HR processes, support remote work, and enhance data-driven decision-making, while sustainability-focused HR promotes long-term employee well-being and social responsibility (Shouraki et al., 2024; George et al, 2019).

These are a very complex process that necessitate a holistic integrated strategy approach, i.e., implementation of effective HR strategy aligned with organizational strategy (Paroli, 2024). In the face of rapid global and technological change, environmental concerns, and shifting societal expectations, organizations are forced to rethink their human resource (HR) strategies by integrating sustainability and digitalization as a holistic strategic process and recognizing it is a critical factor for managing a successful business today. However, its implementation into HR practices is accompanied by many challenges, such as aligning digital transformation with sustainability goals, managing the impact of AI on jobs, addressing digital burnout, ensuring data privacy and bridging skill gaps (Dabić et al., 2023; Leicht-Deobald et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2018).

On the other hand, failing to address these requirements and overcome challenges can lead to misalignment with long-term goals, employee disengagement, skill shortages and security risks, causing many issues and problems in organizational functioning and performance (Fadhil et al., 2023). Organizations have to take many initiatives and actions to align HR strategies with both technological advances and sustainability objectives, and should invest in continuous employee training, promote a culture of well-being and inclusivity, and adopt ethical and secure digital tools. A proactive, people-centered approach ensures that digital innovation supports both business performance and social responsibility (Tambe et al., 2019; Colbert et al., 2016).

Therefore, understanding the importance of the synergies and strategic implications of sustainable and digital HR practices, and overcoming challenges in implementing these processes is essential for organizations to build resilience, agility, and sustainable competitive advantage, thus successful business and long-term prosperity (Mariappanadar, 2019; Bersin, 2019).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Human Resources (HR) function and as a department in organizations, traditionally has been primarily focused on hiring, payroll, employee training, and general administration processes (Torrington et al., 2018). In recent decades, HR is undergoing rapid transformation, as organizations navigate an increasingly dynamic global environment, shaped by rapid technological progress, shifting sustainable and societal demands, and global challenges. With increasing global attention on sustainability, today all organizations must adapt and integrate sustainable HRM practice as a vital part of their business in achieving competitive advantage and business success (Đurić et al., 2025b).

Sustainable HRM refers to the adoption of HR policies and practices that foster environmental stewardship, social equity, and economic viability. It emphasizes long-term human capital development, ethical labor standards, equity, diversity and inclusion, employee well-being, and green practices focusing on positive impacts on both internal stakeholders (e.g., employees) and external environments (e.g., communities, ecosystems) (Chomać-Pierzecka et al., 2024; Di Fabio, 2017).

Sustainable HRM apparently goes beyond traditional HR practices. Its main characteristics include (Vanka et al., 2020):

- **Long-Term Orientation:** Emphasizes sustainable development of human capital, such as continuous learning, employee longevity, and career development planning.
- **Human-Centric Focus:** Prioritizes employee well-being, empowerment, and meaningful work over purely performance-based metrics.
- **Stakeholder Inclusivity:** Considers the impact of HR practices not just on employees but also on other stakeholders, communities, future generations, and ecosystems.
- **Integration with CSR and ESG:** Aligns HR practices with corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) metrics.
- **Ethical and Legal Compliance:** Adheres to international labor standards, diversity and inclusion principles, and ethical recruitment practices.
- **Green HRM Practices:** Includes eco-friendly workplace initiatives, digitalization of HR processes to reduce waste, and promoting sustainability in employee behavior (e.g., commuting, remote work, recycling).
- **Resilience and Agility:** Encourages adaptability and proactive change management to prepare for economic, environmental, and social disruptions.

Accordingly, the core sustainable HRM principles encompass: engaging in ethical labor and environmental practices, promoting a positive work environment and employee well-being, fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion and supporting continuous learning and employability. However, today the main focus of corporate sustainable HRM is on (Baykal et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023):

- **Green HRM:** Focuses on promoting and aligning HR practices with environmental objectives and incorporating them in practice. This includes green recruitment, environmental training, and performance appraisal systems that reward eco-friendly behavior. Green HRM has been linked to enhanced corporate environmental performance and employee engagement.
- **Employee Well-being and Inclusion:** Ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); promoting work-life balance; and supporting mental health.
- **Employee Engagement and Retention:** Contributing to higher job satisfaction, trust, and organizational commitment. Employees are more likely to stay with organizations that demonstrate ethical leadership and a strong sustainability agenda.
- **Ethical Leadership and Governance:** Encouraging transparency, integrity, and accountability in organizational leadership and culture.

These practices contribute to sustainable organizational development by enhancing employee motivation, reducing turnover, and improving corporate reputation (Sabokro et al., 2021).

Further, digitalization is revolutionizing HRM through the integration of digital tools and platforms that enhance efficiency, data-driven decision-making, and employee experience (Pekovic et al., 2023). Digitalization in HR refers to the use of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), cloud computing, people analytics, and automation to optimize HR functions. These tools enhance recruitment, performance management, training, and employee engagement (George et al., 2019; Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020; Tambe et al., 2019).

Consistently, the digital HR ecosystem encompasses (Bersin, 2019):

- **HR Analytics and Decision-Making:** Leveraging big data and predictive analytics to inform talent acquisition, performance evaluation, and workforce planning. It enables evidence-based decision-making, allowing HR leaders to identify trends, predict workforce needs, and assess the impact of sustainability initiatives
- **Automation and AI:** Using AI-powered tools for recruitment, onboarding, learning management, and administrative tasks.
- **Digital Platforms and Remote Work Technologies:** Digital tools have enabled and expanded flexible work models and arrangements, remote (virtual) collaboration, and hybrid work structures.

Digital HR not only improves operational efficiency but also provides strategic insights into workforce trends and employee behavior, supporting agile and responsive HR strategies and sustainability practice (Newman et al., 2020; Colbert et al., 2016). This refers to the fact that sustainable HRM and digitalization are deeply interconnected processes that cannot be isolated as separately observed functions in integrating them into HR practice.

Sustainable Human Resource Management (HRM) and digitalization share a mutually reinforcing beneficial interrelationship. Digital technologies enhance sustainable HRM by offering solutions that support long-term employee growth, ethical behavior, and a healthy work-life balance. In turn, sustainable HRM ensures that digital tools are implemented responsibly and ethically. This collaboration enables organizations to pursue economic growth, social fairness, and environmental sustainability by modernizing HR practices to meet the demands of the digital age while fostering employee well-being and creating high-quality work environments (Shouraki et al., 2024; Fadhil et al., 2023). On the other side, these processes pose both opportunities and challenges for sustainable HRM, especially regarding inclusion, digital wellness, and equitable access to technology, which entails a strategic focus to streamline operations. Therefore, to achieve all benefits and overcome challenges, organizations have to create and implement a prompt HR strategy aligned with organizational strategy (Paroli, 2024). A holistic and integrated approach of sustainable and digital HR strategy is a core element for all organizations in managing business efficiently, thus achieving organizational goals, corporate sustainability and responsible resource management, which today in a highly demanding and ever-changing environment is a vital aspect to gain competitive advantage and facilitate prosperous long-term development (Boselie et al., 2024).

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

This study utilized a qualitative research method, drawing on up-to-date and relevant academic sources for both data collection and analysis. It involved a comprehensive review of the literature to examine how the concepts of sustainable and digital Human Resources have evolved within organizations, with particular attention to the integration and alignment of strategy in today's dynamic environment. The research focused on exploring the core elements, strategic frameworks, potential advantages, and challenges associated with implementing sustainable and digital HR practices in organizational settings.

Qualitative methods were deemed more suitable for this research, as they offer deeper insight and contextual understanding of the complex processes and business practices linked to sustainable Human Resource Management and digital transformation – insights that cannot be fully captured through quantitative data alone (Petticrew et al., 2008). This approach enabled the study to present a comprehensive

overview of existing theoretical frameworks and to highlight the importance of implementing sustainable and digital HR practices within organizations globally, along with their potential impact and practical implications for organizational performance.

Through the observation and analysis of collected data, this research integrates existing theories on sustainable Human Resources, technological advancements, and the digitalization of HR functions, including related networks and practices with the purpose of identifying and defining key characteristics, patterns, relationships, and trends in the implementation of sustainable and digital HR practices. Additionally, the study applied descriptive and comparative analysis techniques to examine current research findings and definitions within this field. An analytical-synthetic approach was also used to classify and interpret the results, allowing for a structured understanding of the topic.

## **SUSTAINABILITY AND DIGITAL HR STRATEGY**

Strategic planning is crucial for any organization aiming for long-term growth and sustainability (Zbiljić et al., 2025). Without a clear strategy, organizations may struggle to keep up with the evolving business landscape, increasing the risk of losing direction, misusing resources, and missing out on important opportunities (Torrington et al., 2018). A strategy acts as a guiding framework that supports informed decision-making, ensures resources are aligned with key goals, and outlines a clear path for progress and success. Also, it boosts an organization's ability to adapt to changes (Đurić et al., 2025b).

Human resource strategy is becoming increasingly important for organizations as they face growing market pressures to enhance their competitive edge. By embedding HR planning and development into the organization's broader long-term strategy, companies can foster greater innovation and work toward ambitious growth objectives. In today's dynamic landscape, organizations have to develop these strategies through a holistic and integrated approach that considers both internal capabilities and the external environment. It must focus on identifying strengths and weaknesses, as well as recognizing opportunities and potential risks (Boselie et al., 2024).

Employees – and the continuous development and effective use of their talents – are key drivers of business success. When HR is managed strategically, it contributes to better outcomes by enhancing leadership, boosting employee performance and loyalty, increasing innovation, and shaping a dynamic workplace culture where creativity and new ideas fuel progress (Manuti et al., 2019).

Furthermore, a well-created and comprehensive strategic plan that incorporates human resources, sustainability, and digital transformation helps align the organization's goals across different teams, departments, and functions, contributing to long-term success. This integrated approach encourages clearer communication (Perović et al., 2023), stronger coordination, and more effective collaboration, while also su-

Supporting employee well-being and ensuring that everyone is working toward shared goals (Đurić et al, 2025a; Di Fabio, 2017). It strengthens organizational resilience by balancing financial performance with social and environmental responsibilities. In addition to enhancing operational efficiency, such a strategy also increases employee motivation and engagement (Paroli, 2024).

It should be underlined that key aspects of such a holistic integrated strategy development are (Mariappanadar, 2019; Boselie et al., 2024):

- **Alignment of Objectives:** HR strategies must align with business goals and sustainability objectives. Green HR practices, such as eco-friendly recruitment and training, align employee behaviors with organizational sustainability goals, including individual motivations with collective objectives, which can enhance employee commitment to sustainability initiatives.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Integrated strategies require collaboration among stakeholders, including employees, managers, and external partners. Sustainable HR management involves engaging stakeholders to co-create value, participatory decision-making, ensuring that sustainability is a shared responsibility.
- **Cultural Transformation:** Embedding sustainability into organizational culture is a core aspect. HR plays a pivotal role in shaping a culture that embraces paradoxes, such as balancing profitability with social responsibility, thus supporting cultural transformation by addressing resistance to change and fostering adaptive mindsets.
- **Measurement and Evaluation:** Effective integration requires metrics to assess progress, including performance indicators that measure the impact of green HR practices on both employee engagement and environmental outcomes. Diverse assessments, such as employee satisfaction surveys, provide insights into the effectiveness of integrated strategies.

Further, holistic and integrated HR strategies should also include the following processes (Vanka et al., 2020):

- **HR Practices on:**
  - ♦ **Recruitment and Selection:** Incorporate sustainability criteria into job descriptions and selection processes to attract candidates aligned with organizational values.
  - ♦ **Training and Development:** Offer training programs that integrate sustainability principles and digitalization processes.
  - ♦ **Performance Management:** Align performance appraisals with sustainability metrics, rewarding employees for contributions to environmental and social objectives.
- **Interventions/Tools:**
  - ♦ **Motivational Strategies** to enhance employee motivation and goal-setting for sustainability initiatives

- ♦ Change Management to manage resistance and drive the adoption of integrated strategies
- ♦ Well-being Programs: Implement programs that promote employee well-being, which, as noted, enhances productivity and commitment to organizational goals.
- Sustainability Integration:
  - ♦ Policy Development: Embed sustainability into HR policies, such as flexible work arrangements to reduce carbon footprints and others.
  - ♦ Employee Engagement: Foster green employee behaviors and engagement through campaigns and incentives.
  - ♦ Reporting and Transparency: Adopt sustainability reporting frameworks, such as the Global Reporting Initiative and ESG, to communicate progress and build trust.
- Digital integration
  - ♦ Digital technologies and tools: Incorporating digital tools and technologies into HR processes to improve efficiency, boost productivity, and enhance the employee experience, such as cloud-based software, AI, and data analytics to automate tasks, like payroll and performance tracking.
  - ♦ Transformation of employee lifecycle: Streamlines the entire employee lifecycle from hiring and onboarding to engagement and development to build a more connected and responsive organization.

Sustainable and digital HR practices help organizations remain agile, socially responsible, and innovation-driven. HR's strategic role is evolving from transactional tasks to value creation through digital transformation and ethical leadership. Digital platforms enable organizations to communicate their sustainability commitments, improving their employer brand. Also, digital tools facilitate continuous learning and upskilling, which are essential for building a sustainable and adaptable workforce. Strategic HRM ensures that employees are prepared for evolving roles and technological disruptions (Dabić et al., 2023). Therefore, the integration of sustainability and digitalization into HR strategy requires (Bera et al., 2023):

- Strategic Foresight: Anticipating future challenges such as climate risk, technological disruption, and demographic shifts.
- Cross-functional Collaboration: Bridging HR with IT, sustainability, and strategic planning departments.
- Change Management and Leadership: Guiding organizational change through visionary leadership, stakeholder engagement, and capacity building.

Aligning HR strategy with organizational strategy is highly important for any organization. Strategic alignment, as a process, ensures that an organization's objectives, resources, and activities are all consistently focused on supporting its overarching strategy, while strategic integration brings together various parts of the organization (departments, teams, initiatives and systems) to operate together toward the same

goals. In other words, alignment offers a unified vision and common purpose, while integration ensures that all parts of the organization collaborate smoothly, enabling efficient and effective progress toward the future (Mariappanadar, 2019).

Therefore, it is important to highlight once again that in today's rapidly changing and unpredictable environment, organizations must incorporate sustainability and digital transformation as key components of their HR strategy and align with organizational strategy. Sustainable and digital HR strategy goes beyond being a simple management tool, it is a vital process that helps organizations enhance operational efficiency, building resilience and enabling quick adaptation to change – factors that are essential for maintaining sustainable and green practices and achieving competitive advantage and long-term success (Fadhil et al., 2023; Vanka et al., 2020).

## **KEY CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Many organizations fail to embed sustainability and digitalization into the strategic core of HRM, thus practices. Often, sustainability is treated as a peripheral initiative led by other departments rather than as an integrated, organization-wide approach. HR leaders may lack a clear mandate or the influence needed to drive sustainability at the executive level. This can lead to the lack of alignment between sustainability goals and HR strategies and fragmented efforts, including in digitalization processes (Dabić et al., 2023; Đurić et al., 2025a).

On the other side, integrating sustainability and new technology into core HR functions – like recruitment, performance management, compensation, and career development – is a highly complex process. A critical challenge is the conflict between short-term financial performance and long-term sustainability investments. Organizations often prioritize quarterly results over long-term employee development or environmental initiatives, making it difficult for HR to secure resources for sustainability programs integrated with digitalization (Fadhil et al., 2023).

The lack of clear and consistent regulations around sustainability, labor and IT standards in different countries and sectors creates many issues. Multinational companies, in particular, face the challenge of navigating diverse legal expectations across jurisdictions while maintaining a coherent sustainable HR strategy. Thus, navigating the complex landscape of environmental and social regulations can be daunting for organizations. Compliance with diverse and evolving legal requirements necessitates continuous monitoring and adaptation of HR practices (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2018).

Also, there is no universal framework to measure the impact of sustainable HRM, i.e., standardized metrics, which is a significant barrier to Sustainable HRM. Unlike financial performance, sustainability outcomes such as employee well-being, car-

bon-neutral workforce operations, or inclusive culture are harder to quantify and compare, leading to inconsistent implementation. Quantifying the outcomes of Sustainable HRM in general is challenging due to the intangible nature of many sustainability goals. Developing appropriate metrics to assess the impact of HR practices on sustainability is essential for demonstrating value and securing ongoing support (Wang et al., 2023; Sabokro et al., 2021).

Implementing sustainability and new technologies in HR practices requires a high investment. There is often a lack of resources – financial, human, and technical. Many organizations, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, may face financial and resource limitations that impede the adoption of these practices. These organizations may struggle to recruit sustainability-trained HR professionals with good IT skills or to invest in green technologies (George et al., 2019).

Employees and managers often resist changes that challenge established routines, particularly if sustainability is perceived as adding complexity or workload without a clear personal or organizational benefit. Also, there is a present fear of losing jobs because of digitalization, particularly the use of artificial intelligence (AI). Organizational culture plays a crucial role in the adoption of new practices. Resistance to change, entrenched behaviors, and lack of awareness can hinder the acceptance of sustainable HR initiatives and digitalization. Overcoming cultural inertia requires effective change management strategies and leadership commitment. It should be added that change management is a key hurdle in sustainable and digital HRM (Duric et al., 2025; Bera et al., 2023).

Insufficient training is also present in many organizations. Employees and HR professionals often lack adequate knowledge of sustainability principles and IT. Without proper training and development, sustainability goals may remain abstract and fail to translate into actionable HR practices (Manuti et al., 2019).

On the other side, digital transformation can exacerbate inequality if not managed inclusively. Organizations must ensure digital literacy and access for all employees, particularly in global or multi-generational workforces. Digital tools, especially those for monitoring performance or remote work, raise ethical concerns about privacy, autonomy, bias and trust (Newman et al., 2020; Leicht-Deobald et al., 2019).

Balancing efficiency with ethical responsibility, handling properly the effects of automation, especially artificial intelligence and managing effectively intricate issues related to data handling and cybersecurity, is crucial for any organization (Tambe et al., 2019). Therefore, organizations have to take many initiatives and actions to overcome all challenges and barriers and mitigate them. This should include (Bera et al., 2023):

- Embed sustainability and digitalization in HR strategy with executive backing and cross-departmental alignment.
- Develop training programs that raise awareness and build skills related to sustainable and digital practices.

- Create sustainability performance metrics linked to HR dashboards and balanced scorecards.
- Foster an inclusive culture that values ethical leadership and long-term impact.
- Utilize technology and data analytics to track progress and increase transparency.
- Partner with external institutions (e.g., NGOs, universities) for sustainability benchmarking and knowledge sharing, including IT.

It should be underlined that overcoming challenges requires leadership commitment, investment in infrastructure and training, and a continuous learning culture. In this way, organizations can successfully respond to market demands and achieve more efficient operations and a better position in the market, thus improving overall performance and financial results. (Bersin, 2019; Shouraki et al., 2024; Di Fabio, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Human capital, as the cornerstone of organizational functioning and performance, is key to the success of any organization today. This shifts that effective human resource management is essential for supporting the efficiency of overall business operations. As sustainability has become a crucial and central element for ensuring long-term business continuity, the role of HR has expanded beyond traditional administrative duties. It has transformed into Sustainable Human Resource Management – a strategic, value-based function that actively supports and advances the environmental, social, and sustainability goals of organizations. Further, rapid technological development has brought the digitalization process in organizations as an essential requirement in managing business today, including the HR department. In such a landscape, HR's strategic role is evolving from transactional tasks to value creation through digital transformation and ethical leadership. These complex processes must be managed responsibly to ensure ethical integrity, inclusivity, and long-term impact.

Sustainability and digitalization in HRM are actually shaping a new strategic paradigm for organizations, as a critical aspect for a thriving business. Sustainable HR practices – amplified by digital technologies – enable businesses to address environmental, social, and governance goals while fostering innovation and agility. They are synergistic forces that, when strategically aligned, can drive organizational success.

While Sustainable and Digital Human Resource Management offers significant value for organizations seeking long-term viability and ethical credibility, its implementation is fraught with many challenges. The key ones range from internal resistance and cultural barriers to external policy gaps, resource constraints, ethical concerns and data privacy and security. Addressing these challenges requires a strategic, systemic, and participatory approach – empowering HR professionals to serve not only as

administrators but as change agents for sustainability. As expectations from stakeholders rise, overcoming these barriers is not just beneficial – it is essential.

It can be concluded that by embedding sustainability and digital innovation into HR functions as a strategic priority aligned with organizational strategy, organizations can attain socially and ethically responsible workplaces and green practices, a resilient and agile business with adaptive innovation-driven systems, thus a competitive advantage and ultimately long-term success and prosperity.

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