

The Ways HR Professionals are Making Their Contributions in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Abstract

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, was adopted by United Nations Member States in 2015 to ensure peace, prosperity, and sustainability worldwide. Researchers from almost all the fields have been conducting SDGs related studies to contribute to this journey of the globe. For any nation, it is not possible to achieve these goals without its stakeholders' participation like policymakers, researchers, educationists, universities, government agencies, professionals, citizens, civil societies, political leaders, and so on. In this study, HR professionals have been identified as one of the stakeholders of SDGs. This study aims to explore how HR professionals are making their meaningful contributions to achieving SDGs. Secondary data from different sources have been used in this study. Through thematic and comparative analysis among the pillars of SDGs and concern areas of human resource management, this study concludes that HR professionals are making significant contributions for achieving different goals of SDGs like Good Health and Wellbeing, Quality Education, Gender Equality, Clean Water and Sanitation, Decent Work, and so on.

Keywords: HR Professionals, Human Resource Management, Sustainability, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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1. Introduction

With the adoption of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations, sustainability has become one of the major concern areas of the researchers of multiple fields. Since achieving the SDGs is related to a good, sustained, and balanced development at all nation sectors, everyone's participation is a must (Kates et al. 2005). As the Department of Economic and Social Affairs referred, United Nations (2021) partnership is necessary for SDGs. Apart from these, sustainable development itself is a holistic, multidimensional, and aggregated concept that needs the attention of the whole (Kaimuri & Kosimbei 2017). Therefore, the functioning of all bodies of a nation is necessary. The stakeholders, especially policymakers, researchers, educationists, universities, government agencies, professionals, civil societies, political leaders, and so on, must play their respective roles in achieving these development agendas. In this study, the HR professionals have been identified as key stakeholders who are expected to perform their roles in different pillars of SDGs (Biobebe 2014).

2. Sustainable Development Goals

The term 'sustainable development' can be defined in many ways, and even it may give different sense to the people of different professions. However, it can be defined as an intelligent way of development that ensures an optimum amount of present economic growth without hampering the planet's future (Biobebe 2014).

Though sustainable development is not a new term, it has got much attention due to the adoption of SDGs by the United Nations. SDGs refers to 17 broad goals set by United Nations in 2015 to create a sustainable world, ensuring peace and prosperity for both people and the planet in the present and the future. The seventeen goals under SDGs are namely- 1. No poverty; 2. Zero hunger; 3. Good health and well-being; 4. Quality education; 5. Gender equality; 6. Clean water and sanitation; 7. Affordable and clean energy; 8. Decent work and economic growth; 9. Industry-innovation & infrastructure; 10. Reduced inequalities; 11. Sustainable cities and communities; 12. Responsible consumption and production; 13. Climate action; 14. Life below water; 15. Life on land; 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions; and 17. Partnerships for the goals. Moreover, there are 169 targets under these 17 goals of SDGs (THE 17 GOALS 2021).

3. HRM and HR Professionals

Human resource management is a branch of management aiming at properly managing an organization's people. Almost all the organization's human-related issues, including HR planning, recruitment & selection, training & development, compensation & benefits, performance management, employee relations, social compliance, and so on, are major concerning areas of human resource management (Goswami 2018). In today's organization, HRM is considered one of the critical departments playing a strategic role in functioning the organizations (Amin et al. 2019). Human resource professionals are also known as HR practitioners or HRM practitioners, as

termed in the works of researchers like Stahl et al. (2020), Podgorodnichenko et al. (2020) and Aust et al. (2020). Professionals working in the human resources department for performing the functions of human resource management are commonly known as HR professionals. An HR professional is an expert in the field of human resource management (Beaven 2019). However, in the modern era, an HR professional can be either a generalist or a specialist in a specific function(s) of human resource management. However, human resource management as a multi-disciplinary management branch drives HR professionals to have multitasking knowledge and skills.

4. Study Method

The study is qualitative in nature. To explore the scenario, a content analysis technique has been used. Themes of sustainable development goals (SDGs) have been compared and aligned with those of human resource management to explain the role of human resource professionals in achieving sustainable development goals.

5. Contributions of HR Professionals in achieving SDGs

Stahl et al. (2020) argue that the human resource profession could play a vital role in contributing to a firm's corporate sustainability, corporate social responsibility strategies, and world agenda for sustainable development. They also argue that human resource management (HRM) had a potentially vital role in contributing to a firm's CS/CSR efforts though unexpectedly, the HR profession is not considered a key partner in corporate sustainability. However, they also investigated the reason behind HR practitioners' failure to take a more strategic role in corporate sustainability.

Poon & Law (2020) state that sustainable HRM is concerned about adopting HRM strategies and practices achieving financial, social, environmental, and other goals to satisfy the demands of diverse stakeholders of the organization. However, Aust et al. (2020) propose a new paradigm-shifting of sustainable HRM to Common Good HRM. Lopez-Cabrales & Valle-Cabrera (2020) show how strategic human resources management (SHRM) contributes to firm sustainability and competitiveness. They proposed that the vertical and horizontal fit between sustainability and HRM is essential to establish sustainability. Along with this, strategies taken for ensuring sustainability must be translated into the human resource management systems (HRMS).

Human resource management claims its contribution by ensuring sustainable human resource management practices (Aust et al. 2020). In this qualitative research, through thematic analysis, six common themes have been generated by comparing the themes of SDGs with those of human resource management. The themes have been discussed using the researchers' judgment, which has been supported by proper literature. Human resource management plays a wide variety of roles in today's organizations, making it relevant to the scopes of sustainable development (Fita 2017). The following are how the human resource professionals worldwide are making their contributions in the journey of reaching sustainable development goals.

5.1 Ensuring Good Health and Wellbeing in the Workplace (Related to goal-03 of SDGs)

Modern HRM is very much concerned about employees' health-related issues like primary health care, first aid, maternity service, workplace hazards, safety, security, vaccination, occupational disease management, and so on. Having a medical centre is one of the human resource compliance requirements. To keep employees engaged, committed, and motivated, organizations need to ensure good health and well-being, which are vital to organizational success (CIPD 2021). An employee spends the most productive and active period of his/her life in the workplace. Negligence of occupational health and safety issues may ruin employee lives, which may have substantial negative consequences on a nation (Egbut 2019). That is why without ensuring good health and wellbeing in the workplace, achieving SDGs is not possible. So, in this regard, the role of HR professionals is very much significant since they are responsible for managing employee wellbeing, health, safety, security, and environment-related issues of human capital in the organizations.

5.2 Quality Education/Training for the Workforce (Related to goal-04 of SDGs)

As referred by the United Nations' SDGs, ensuring quality education is one of the pillars of sustainable development related to the development of human capital to make them capable of making the world sustainable. Moreover, human capital development has a significant impact on sustainable development (Mitike 2019). However, it is well known that, through training and development initiatives, human resource professionals contribute to the human capital development of any nation since preparing people or making people workable is one of the major responsibilities of HR professionals. Moreover, HR professionals' knowledge and skill development initiatives for their employees are more practical and life-oriented than those of formal education. Apart from these, nowadays, HR professionals are engaged in an industry-academia relationship where they are seen to contribute to curriculum/syllabus development as per the demand of the labour market or industry (Kapadia 2021). So, it can be concluded that HR professionals worldwide are ensuring quality education and training.

5.3 Establishing Gender Equality in the Workplace (Related to goal-05 of SDGs)

To ensure adequate compliance requirements of different international bodies and due to pressure from national laws and human rights organizations, HR professionals must ensure equal employment opportunity in the workplace in case of recruitment, training facility, promotion, compensation and so on (Weatherspoon 2020). Establishing gender equality in the workplace contributes to establishing overall gender equality in a nation. So, the contribution of HR professionals is notable. Successful implementation of gender equality policy in the workplace by HR professionals can help achieve one of the SDGs goals in this way.

5.4 Ensuring Clean Water and Sanitation for Employees (Related to goal-06 of SDGs)

Employees have to spend very fruitful time in their workplace where they cannot think of their survival without clean and pure drinking water. Moreover, water to be used other than drinking purposes must also be free from hazardous objects. For a healthy life, it is necessary to have adequate sanitation (Joan et al. 2021). HR professionals must be careful about this issue since it is one of the hygiene factors and legal issues regarding the workplace. So, by establishing and maintaining proper sanitation and ensuring clean water for employees in the workplace, HR professionals are making their meaningful contribution to the sustainability of a nation.

5.5 Ensuring Decent Work for All (Related to goal-08 of SDGs)

Decent work is a dream for everyone where there will be no violence, force, child labour, inequity, injustice, risks, and hazards in the workplace (Aktar et al. 2020). International Labor Organization has been working for a long time to establish decent work in every corner of the world through multidimensional programs (ILO 2021; DIFE 2021). Further, HR and compliance professionals are responsible for dealing with these issues related to ensuring decent work for all. So, in this regard, the vital role of HR professionals cannot be ignored.

5.6 Creating Awareness Towards Sustainability and Contribution in Achieving the Other Goals and Targets of SDGs

HR professionals have remarkable influence over the lifestyle, thinking, philosophy, and mindset of their employees. They impact the employees' attitudes since they execute different types of behavioural modelling training. HR professionals can work as change agents in the workplace that can drive sustainable behaviour of the employees. They can initiate different kinds of environment-friendly green practices through building positive awareness towards sustainable behaviours in the workplace and beyond.

Human resource management professionals can play a strategic role in other segments of sustainable development goals which have not been discussed here, as Aust et al. (2020) state that organizations create awareness, train employees to develop human capital, improve working conditions, reduce poverty ensuring fair pay, ensure equal employment opportunity and so on. Human resource professionals are closely linked with the activities mentioned here; thus, their role is vital.

6. Conclusions

Achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) is not the act of a single organ of a nation. Even government alone cannot achieve this milestone without the participation of all stakeholders like policymakers, strategists, researchers, academics, journalists, economists, social workers, politicians, professionals, common people, and so on. Instead, a collective effort is a must for achieving the SDGs. In this study, the role of HR professionals has been discussed based on literature review and thematic analysis. However, it is to be noted that the role of HR professionals in achieving SDGs are not limited to the points discussed in this paper. It can be concluded that through proper execution of worldwide best practices, domestic laws, international standards, code of conduct (COC), and compliance requirements, HR professionals are supposed to make very strong and notable contribution in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs).

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