

## SUSTAINABLE CAREERS. IMPLICATIONS FOR HRM

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**Purpose:** This article aims to identify the relationship between a sustainable career pursued by individuals and human resource management as a structured set of functions and tasks that support organizations in achieving their goals. The considerations are theoretical and are assumed to be debatable.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The author analyses the subject literature and - in the next part – tries to point out the relationship between theory and practice (utilizing some empirical results). Finally – formulate some practical suggestions for HRM activities.

**Findings:** Success in creating sustainable careers of employees in an organization is only possible if there is two-way transmission of crucial information – closely characterized in article – as a basis for partnership in development.

**Originality/value:** The results of the review can be based on strategic decision made by HR-managers in the field of individual development influencing the retention index.

**Keywords:** sustainable careers, development, human resource management.

**Category of the paper:** General review and viewpoint.

### 1. Introduction

Career theory and career studies have evolved. B. Lawrence (2015) identifies three periods, specific enough to evidently show the trajectory of change. He distinguishes between the period 1950-1970, where the focus of career description was on an individual, on an organization, or on a profession, the years 1970-1989, where an individual's career was viewed through the lens of an organization or a profession, and finally, the 1990s to the present day where the career view focuses on an individual within an organization, outside an organization, and across organizations/professions. One can also encounter suggestions to distinguish the fourth phase pointing precisely to sustainable careers, where the emphasis is on "becoming oneself" in the developed career, achieving individuation in terms of Jungian terminology, realizing oneself, and using one's full potential in the social and organizational environment. Visible in this

periodization is the move towards individual career responsibility, decisions taken autonomously, development strategies chosen, and the effects of this development experienced. Organizations, social environments, and professions become a "bundle of opportunities", from which an individual autonomously chooses the appropriate opportunities at a particular moment in his or her life.

Defining sustainability in the context of an individual as "his or her ability to continuously self-realize - by creating or finding a job that allows the optimal use of one's own competences", one should emphasize the self-efficacy and initiative of individuals to develop, to self-determine (job crafting) (Van der Heijde, Van der Heijden, 2006, p. 403). A sustainable career in this context can be understood as "a sequence of career-related experiences of an individual, continuing over time with diverse patterns, covering different social spaces, with a significant subjective meaning for the individual" (de Vos, Gielens, 2014).

The aim of this article is to identify the relationship between a sustainable career pursued by individuals and human resource management as a structured set of functions and tasks that support organizations in achieving their goals. The considerations are theoretical and are intended to be debatable.

## **2. Sustainable career – from an individual perspective**

When attempting to operationalize the definition of a sustainable career from an individual perspective, it should be emphasized that it is a dynamic construct. The individual design of a career is based on the characteristics of an individual and the factors of the environment in which the individual functions. What constitutes sustainability to varying degrees applies to both elements. The issues of career sustainability can already be interpreted from the boundaryless career concept whose authors consider a career to be a fact/phenomenon that transcends a single location (De Filippi, Arthur, 1994, p. 307). The configuration of these locations is a fluid consequence of the intertwining of individuals' subjective experiences and values. In the Protean career concept (Hall, 2002), the emphasis is on understanding and individual agency in a career. The two theories present the opposing understandings of a career in terms of balancing it: the first is dynamic, emphasizing independence from organizational structures. The other one sees its basis in an individual, his or her characteristics, and experiences.

Latzke describes a sustainable career in 3 categories: renewability, flexibility, and integrativeness, emphasizing its long-term perspective. He also draws attention to its fundamentals, giving them a holistic character, constrained by the behavior of other partners/organizations in an individual's environment. A sustainable career is sustainable over time and it is characterized by both the development, safeguarding, and renewal of an

individual's career-relevant resources (e.g., human and social capital) and certain individual characteristics (e.g., proactivity, resilience) that support the shaping of one's career (Parker et al., 2010). Career sustainability implies protecting and nurturing an individual's development with a focus on balance and renewal. Managing such a career requires an increase in the individual's awareness of career capital accumulation and mobilization of one's own resources leading to benefits obtained at work and in future careers.

The life-span/life-space concept by D. Super may also be helpful in explaining sustainable careers. Despite some problems raised in the realization of careers at specific stages of life, it is accepted that a sustainable career means a development path tailored to the changing needs of an individual in his or her life cycle, corresponding to his or her aspirations and at the same time discounting opportunities and taking into account social and organizational constraints (Gautun, Hagen, 2010). This trend also includes the proposal of Greenhaus and Kossek (2014) to define a sustainable career as "...a career in which employees remain healthy, productive, happy and useful over their life cycle and fit into the wider life context". Following this definition, they point out the key characteristics of a sustainable career:

- a. it is successfully integrated into personal and family life taking into account core and career-related life values,
- b. it provides security for employees in meeting economic needs and achieving well-being,
- c. it includes flexibility and adaptability to the changing needs of an individual and his or her interests,
- d. it is characterized by its capacity for renewal so that an individual has the opportunity to start again and be reborn.

Both the aforementioned ones and numerous other theoretical explanations of sustainable careers allow for some reflections. Clearly (and increasingly clearly), one can see the tendency to increase individualism and individual agency in the field of careers understood as sustainable. In addition, there is a growing awareness of organizational influences and contexts, namely the broader life context of an individual and the social context in achieving (and enhancing) career sustainability. Thus, despite the clear individual agency in constructing a sustainable career, the participation of other actors and their roles seem important. Hence the suggestion of an integrated approach, considering not only individuals/employees but also employers, organizations, and other stakeholders. An organization is therefore an accomplice in a sustainably shaped career of an individual.

### 3. Sustainable careers – in an organizational perspective

The labor market has been undergoing changes in recent decades, characterized by rapidity and unpredictability. This affects both employees and organizations. The latter are experiencing fluctuations and shortages of employees in certain qualification groups, resulting in employment contracts that are increasingly sensitive to the conditions of employees, but at the same time limited in time. On an individual scale, this leads to a lack of job security and a clear career path with an employer. This is because temporary employment lacks systematic development activities, career-oriented programmes, positions worth applying for, and a long-term perspective. Instead, there is an externalization of groups of workers to contractual labor agreements, which do not guarantee employment stability and social security; they secure the needs of financial security on an ad hoc basis.

The above observation quite clearly confirms what Cappelli and Keller (2014) note: organizations' chances of attracting valuable and talented employees are decreasing, as the latter in particular require support, investment, and employment prospects. Searching for talents outside an organization increases costs while reducing the chances of an accurate selection. Talent understood situationally is not only safer for organizations but also, in practice, it is understood as learned and developed in specific organizational contexts (Pocztowski, 2016).

The origins of the reciprocity between organizations and employees in career development can be found in E. Schein's (1978) proposal referred to as the "matching model" in careers. This is because Schein took the position of mutuality and equality of interest in meeting the needs of both organizations and individuals achieved by aligning development activities with the needs of organizations and the expectations of employees. From here, it is not difficult to take the next step, which requires the construction of appropriate diagnostic and implementation procedures. The sustainable career model from an organizational perspective has 4 pillars at its core.

Pillar one assumes maximum return on the value of human capital. This is achieved when organizational practices are focused on making full use of employee characteristics. Research shows that matching work to an individual's interests, values and strengths leads to a company gaining greater returns on its human capital (Rich et al., 2010). Gallup research has shown that employees who engage their strengths at work on a daily basis gain increases in productivity, are more loyal, and are less likely to have the intention to leave (Gallup, 2013).

Pillar two is the continuous updating of organizational and individual competences. The growth of an organization's core competences through the development of employees' knowledge, skills, and capabilities strengthens the organization's competitive potential and coping with market challenges.

Pillar three implies achieving employment stability through adaptation processes, implemented on a continuous basis, making use as far as possible of the entire spectrum of employee qualifications being developed. Learning and acquiring new competences lead to the promotion of an individual's employability and, through transfer to everyday practice, they strengthen his or her individual effectiveness. Furthermore, they facilitate individual and organizational adaptation to change (Dyer, Schafer, 2003).

Pillar four assumes that employee engagement and retention are achieved through the flexibility of their career goals and objectives (Casper, Harris, 2008). A sustainable career is flexible, with changing dynamics. It allows an individual to continually adapt to changing needs outside of work and those associated with his or her career. The result is an increasing level of individual satisfaction and engagement as a result of minimizing the stress associated with the imbalance in meeting work and non-work needs. The above-mentioned Casper and Harris (2008) show empirically that work/career flexibility is associated with higher levels of organizational commitment and retention.

#### **4. HRM and sustainable careers; implications for practice**

The diversity of employees in an organization makes the key issues in building sustainable careers a real challenge. Sustainability means a partnership between the two entities by virtue of a common, shared interest. It is the existence on the market – in a competitive environment – giving employees a guarantee of the durability of employment, and an organization – a human resource leading to the said goal. Organizational actions towards staff, therefore, need to be flexible, individualized, and dynamic.

In practice, this means identifying the strengths, interests, and motives of employees in order to build/develop their resources with a view to utilizing them within an organization. This requires the creation of transmission channels and articulation of individual needs and career goals, as they have both individual significance and value for the company.

Thus, HR policies should be highly flexible in terms of management practices with the aim of maximizing the involvement of each employee. This leads to a shift in the importance of HR activity from being ancillary to actively supporting the implementation of the organization's strategy.

Individualization means moving away from a one-size-fits-all solution for the development/career of all workers and taking on a multidimensional solution, which is the consequence of an agreement between an organization and an employee. It will take into account the needs of the changing phases in the individual's life cycle, their individual drama (upward - downward) leading to individualized working time solutions, flexibility in the forms

of work provision, also changes in the scope and content of work, places of work, forms of employment and remuneration, or roles within an organization.

The role of an organization is to identify opportunities that, from its point of view, can be agreed upon, fitting in with its objectives and needs. Employees, on the other hand, will shape their careers by choosing from existing opportunities, trying to best align their current development goals with the organization's goal expressed in terms of opportunities.

The dynamics of solutions, on the other hand, stems from the perceived discontinuity of individual development, determined by changing needs over the life cycle. The role of organizations is to support employees in defining their personal needs and goals in order to decompose the existing state into the currently necessary one. The decomposition here is twofold: it concerns the individual development path of an employee and the structure of the human resources available to an organization. It, therefore, implies responding dynamically to the reported needs.

Cantrell and Smith (2010) propose four steps for implementing sustainable career strategies. The first one is when an organization forms development patterns/processes for certain groups of employees (segmentation) with similar characteristics or life cycle stages. The second step is when the organization constructs development opportunities for employees by encapsulating them into modules offered to employees, from which they choose the most suitable ones. The third step towards a sustainable career strategy is to offer individuals defined roles, within which they can act autonomously to achieve the organization's goals. The fourth step of this strategy boils down to supporting and accepting the development practices and objectives defined by employees.

What seems to be necessary to achieve success in shaping sustainable careers is clear information about the business goals of a company as well as about its current performance and practices. This provides an incentive for employees to continuously learn as a consequence of an increasing understanding of the organization and its needs/goals. Also important is the role and competence of managers in communicating with employees about changes and emerging development needs. It is also necessary to support work-life alignment by creating developmental scenarios in terms of job description and content, and building alternative career paths that consider changing time opportunities and the pace of ongoing developmental events that reconfigure chosen career trajectories and their advancement. What seems desirable is keeping in touch with employees who have left the organization and allowing them to return when if they were perceived as valuable.

## 5. Summary

Sustainable careers constitute a challenge for organizations. This is because their implementation requires significant consideration of the needs and capabilities of employees, as they are not just based on the suitability of their competences for an organization. Organizations form partnerships with employees, which requires flexibility, individualization, and dynamism in organizational activities. This equivalence of an individual and an organization is central and yet unique to explaining the concept of a sustainable career. On the organizational side, it is critical to define strategic goals and formulate them clearly and comprehensibly for employees so that they are able to perceive and identify ways of their own development that support their organization. It is also important for supervisors to know and be able to recognize (through interpersonal communication processes) and take into account the needs, capabilities, and interests of employees when shaping development paths in a dynamic way. On the employees' side, it is important for them to have insight into their own work and non-work needs in order to clearly verbalize changes, new opportunities, and emerging constraints. It is also necessary to know and understand the goals of an organization - allowing expectations to be formulated rationally.

Success in creating sustainable careers is only possible if there is a two-way transmission of the aforementioned information - as a basis for partnership in development.

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