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EMPLOYEE COMPETENCIES IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Purpose: The aim of the study was to identify employees' training needs, training and development formats, thematic areas, factors motivating employees to learn, and barriers to participation in educational activities aimed at achieving sustainable development goals.
Design/methodology/approach: Interviews were conducted with HR department managers and sustainable development specialists from seven different service-sector companies. The interview data were categorised.
Findings: The findings indicate that enterprises display a positive attitude towards employee competency development and fund a range of training and development opportunities, although educational programmes give too little attention to sustainable development.
Research limitations/implications: The small sample does not allow for generalisation of the findings.
Originality/value: The empirical material reported here has not been published elsewhere. The article offers practical recommendations for business practitioners: how and why Sustainable Development Goal 4 should be implemented.
Keywords: sustainable human resource management, competencies, sustainable development, employee lifelong learning.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Sustainable human resource management (SHRM) is part of the broader concept of sustainable development, the aim of which is to ensure economic growth while simultaneously guaranteeing social and environmental balance. The effectiveness of SHRM depends in practice on the extent to which sustainable employee behaviours are reinforced. It is widely recognised that only employees who understand and apply the principles of sustainable development in their work enable enterprises to transform into so-called sustainable organisations –

ones capable of maintaining financial, human, social and environmental resources in the long term (Walczyna, Mazur, Wilczewska, 2023, p. 183).

Growing interest in sustainable HRM is reflected in bibliometric studies, an example of which is the analysis of publications included in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. A review of 505 articles published between 2000 and 2021 in 201 journals was carried out. The results show that interest in sustainable HRM is growing, particularly with regard to: *green HRM* and *socially responsible HRM* (Tutar, Nam, Güler, 2023, p. 119). A review of scientific publications from the WoS, Scopus, EBSCO and BazEkon databases on sustainable HRM, conducted by M. Fryczyńska, H. Kinowska and A. Lulewicz-Sas (2022, pp. 30-31), showed that the following approaches within sustainable HRM have been analysed over the last decade: *triple bottom line HRM* (addressing economic, ecological and social HRM goals) and *common good HRM* (embedding common good values in HRM policies, structures and procedures). There is a lack of publications presenting practices of Polish companies regarding the development of employee competencies in the area of sustainable development, and one of the main pillars of HRM is personnel development. It is employees who understand and apply sustainability principles in their daily work who ultimately determine whether, when, and to what degree enterprises will engage in sustainable development. Employee development programmes in the area of SHRM "will fulfil their role if employees: acquire appropriate knowledge and skills in this area, apply that knowledge and those skills in their positions, and also change their attitudes and behaviours, becoming more sensitive to socio-ecological problems" (Pabian, 2015, p. 12).

The aim of the article is to present research on the diagnosis of employees' training needs, forms of education, thematic areas, motivating factors for learning, and barriers to employee participation in education aimed at achieving sustainable development goals. To this end, a study was conducted using an interview technique. Interviews were conducted with HR department managers and sustainable development specialists from seven different service-sector companies.

2. The essence of sustainable human resource management

SHRM is defined as the adoption of human resource strategies and practices that enable the achievement of economic, social and environmental goals, affect the organisation's internal and external environment, and improve the quality of life of present and future generations. According to A. Pabian (2015, p. 10), SHRM involves planning for and recruiting employees who combine professional competence in a given area of business with environmental and social awareness reflected in concrete actions, as well as shaping them through training and development, motivation and evaluation so that they can pursue economic, environmental and

social goals within the organisation, thus helping to balance intergenerational needs. A. Pocztowski (2016, p. 303), drawing on the idea of sustainable development, identified the main features constituting SHRM as taking economic, social and environmental aspects into account in the processes of creating value for stakeholders within the personnel function.

Implementing the SHRM concept in management practice requires people who can significantly shape an organisation's capacity to implement sustainable development programmes. These include managers and non-managerial employees oriented towards sustainable development. They tend to display the following characteristics (Cohen, 2011, pp. 132-156):

1. they want to be responsible for the health of the Earth,
2. they act for the benefit of future generations, so that these are able not only to survive but also to develop,
3. they focus on the future (including the very distant future),
4. they pursue economic, ecological and social goals,
5. sustainability (in production, consumption, sales) is more important to them than growth,
6. they monitor the impact of their organisations on people and the environment,
7. they minimise the negative impact of their organisations on the planet,
8. they develop products, services and technologies in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.

SHRM practices concern the shaping of the personnel function, working conditions, forms of employment and the organisation's culture. Appropriate leadership is also of considerable importance for the implementation of SHRM. Sustainable human resource management means giving equal weight to practices at every stage of management related to employee selection, retention within the organisation and competence development, while ensuring an appropriate organisational climate, adequate physical working conditions and employee well-being. It also means developing competencies needed by future generations (Aust et al., 2019). Employees are regarded as among the organisation's most important stakeholders, playing a key role in its success or failure (Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2023, p. 13). Sustainable development at the organisational level cannot be achieved without employee participation.

3. Research objectives

The research was conducted within the framework of the research project "Sustainable Development Goals in the Practice of Human Resource Management in Polish Companies", financed from funds granted to Maria Grzegorzewska University (Academy of Special Education) from the subsidy allocated to APS in 2025 (project number UPB 24/25).

The scientific aim of the project was to analyse the significance of actions undertaken by enterprises in pursuit of sustainable development goals related to: good health and quality of life (Goal 3), ensuring quality education and promoting lifelong learning for all (Goal 4), gender equality (Goal 5), and reducing income and social inequalities (Goal 10). In this article – given the scope of the work – a part of the research results relating to the implementation of Goal 4 is presented: ensuring quality education and promoting lifelong learning for all. Goal 4 on ensuring quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning has a social component, but also an economic and environmental one. The tasks assigned to this goal concern social policy promoting equal opportunities for professional development and educational activity for all social groups regardless of age, gender, ethnic origin or disability.

This article examines the determinants of employee competency development in the context of sustainable human resource management.

The aim of the study was to identify how employee training needs are diagnosed, what forms of education are offered, which thematic areas are covered, what motivates employees to learn, and what barriers they face in participating in educational activities aimed at achieving sustainable development goals.

The main research question was: How can Goal 4 of sustainable development be implemented in companies, and what does current practice in this area look like - namely, ensuring quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning?

The following specific questions were posed:

1. How are employee training needs diagnosed?
2. What forms of competency development do companies offer their employees, and which forms of education are preferred?
3. What thematic areas related to sustainable development are included in educational programmes implemented in companies?
4. What factors motivate employees to participate in education?
5. What are the barriers associated with employee participation in various forms of professional development?

4. Research approach and procedure

These research questions called for a qualitative, descriptive-exploratory design focused on the possibilities and practice of employee learning and professional development, as well as on understanding and applying sustainable development in economic practice.

A qualitative method was used in the study, with interviews as the research technique. These were individual, overt, structured interviews with open-ended questions, based on an interview schedule developed by the researchers. The study was conducted from October to

December 2025 via Microsoft Teams. Respondents were selected based on their familiarity with sustainable human resource management in practice. Interviews were conducted with seven individuals – HR managers, HR specialists and sustainable development specialists from service-sector companies – with one respondent from each company. Participants were recruited through the researchers' professional networks, using purposive sampling consistent with the adopted inclusion criteria. Inclusion in the study required at least two years of managerial experience. The respondents represented medium-sized and large companies. Micro and small enterprises were excluded because such organisations often provide little training due to financial and time costs, the limited availability of practical training offers, concern about losing trained employees after training, and insufficient awareness of the need to invest in development. The study was anonymised. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and categorised. MAXQDA 2024 software was used for the qualitative analysis of the research material. The paragraph served as the unit of analysis. The analysis made it possible to answer the research questions.

The findings are not intended to support universal claims, but are rather treated as indications of broader trends and real-world conditions.

5. Research results and discussion

Diagnosis of employee training needs

Diagnosing training needs is the process of identifying differences between employees' current and desired competencies so that training can be aligned with the goals of a company committed to sustainable development. In the category of training-needs diagnosis, six excerpts were coded. Three approaches to identifying training needs can be distinguished in the statements.

According to the first approach, an employee's competence gap is identified by their supervisor or the company director (2 utterance excerpts): *I meet with the director and establish whether there are any development gaps, whether there are topics that need to be covered in a given group or across the whole company. If we find a common area relating to sales management, leadership or negotiations, then the director decides who should be trained and in what scope* [R2]; *the manager decides in 90% of cases whether and how those programmes are implemented* [R1].

The second approach is based on input from HR departments responsible for training and employee development (2 utterance excerpts): *HR departments conduct training needs assessments in the company and based on this assessment decide which topics should be covered and in which teams. Then they look for companies on the market to deliver those topics* [R2]; *our HR team saw the need and ran training sessions on psychological safety* [R1].

The third approach relates to employee self-assessment (2 utterance excerpts). Self-assessment is crucial for employees to analyse their own resources and diagnose competency gaps: *employees themselves, through self-diagnosis, identify what they need; we provide the tool and encourage and inform them* [R3]; *interviews are conducted with individual employees about which topics particular individuals would like to cover. Either a collective training session is arranged for those individuals or they have individual development paths and within some kind of development package they can choose a training session that interests them, or they are directed to a specific training session* [R2].

None of the statements contained any reference to the diagnosis of employee training needs in relation to a list of key competencies in a given company oriented towards achieving sustainable development goals, competency assessment criteria, or an employee competency assessment system.

Forms of education in the workplace

Interviewees discussed the forms of employee competence development used in their organisations. Their statements yielded 33 coded segments, the largest number recorded for any category related to employee education. Based on the respondents' statements, a catalogue of workplace training and development formats was developed - aligned both with employees' needs and with the needs and capacities of the enterprise. The respondents mentioned:

1. participation in training programmes (14 utterance excerpts). The responses mentioned: internal training, delivered by internal trainers: *we are required to introduce internal training sessions* [R7], *the training was done by us internally, our HR team ran it* [R1], *we deliver a lot of training internally through employees, for example satisfaction surveys* [R4]; and external training, delivered by external experts when the subject matter required it: *we have our various trainers, but external people are also invited. It all depends on what the topic is. We had training related to diversity where we invited external experts* [R5], *trainers are hired, external people who deliver training on commission for specific topics* [R4]. Respondents also referred to both closed and open training: *closed, meaning dedicated to people from a given company, and open, where we say today we have training on negotiations, if anyone wants to participate please sign up* [R2];
2. remote learning using specialist e-learning platforms (6 utterance excerpts): *we have our own platform based on Moodle, an internal one for delivering online training, for self-directed learning* [R4], *development courses are offered at the company available on the MultiLife platform* [R3];
3. mentoring (4 utterance excerpts): *working in business myself I had a mentor who was preparing me for the role of internal trainer* [R2], *in my opinion this works brilliantly, but you cannot designate a mentor – the mentor has to appear on their own, there has to be a bit of chemistry between the mentee and the mentor* [R3];

4. coaching (2 utterance excerpts): *that kind of coach support is for managers – if they report a problem, that they are struggling with something, they have support, they can talk internally and find a solution to a specific problem* [R5], *I am a coach for the managers operating in the company* [R2];
5. postgraduate studies (1 utterance excerpt): *we have a budget for postgraduate studies; the intranet clearly describes the conditions under which one can apply for postgraduate studies. Anyone who has the need and 9 months of tenure at the company can study. Participation is free for the employee* [R3];
6. seminars in both in-person and online format (2 utterance excerpts).

None of the interviews referred to internships or work placements. This may suggest that these forms are not used, possibly because they are not regarded as effective.

In some cases, respondents discussed training formats and teaching methods together. Respondents referred to active, practice-oriented methods that create conditions for the engagement and active participation of the learner in classes, for learning through practice (4 utterance excerpts): *we often weave into our training sessions various examples, situations or slides to raise awareness among people* [R7], *a lot of training is delivered in workshop format, it teaches practical skills, that certainly works* [R4].

Thematic areas of employee competency development

Respondents spoke readily about the content of the educational programmes offered to employees. In the category of thematic areas, 24 utterance excerpts were coded. The subject matter of these programmes can be considered in two dimensions: the first concerns introducing new employees (novices) to work in a given company; the second concerns training and developing employees who already have some tenure within the company. Statements relating to the second dimension can, in turn, be divided into two categories: care for employee well-being and education related to social and environmental goals.

For the first dimension of this category, 3 utterance excerpts were coded. Study participants indicated the implementation of onboarding in their companies, so that new employees quickly become fully integrated members of the team: *already at the recruitment stage I was given information about what benefits I was entitled to, and during onboarding I received that information – a half-hour module where we discussed the benefits available to us* [R3]; *onboarding is carried out, meaning people are well prepared for their role, they get to know the company even before their actual employment, they learn the procedures and the approach, and it is clear that these kinds of activities translate into better performance by those people at the start* [R2].

Respondents pointed to the importance of employees' mental and physical health for the effectiveness of their work (6 utterance excerpts): *I see the enormous work done for employee well-being. We show how physical activity, caring for physical and mental well-being, affects*

employees, and we encourage employers to understand that a healthier employee means better productivity. It is better to take a long-term view and invest in that employee in order to have an adequate return on investment [R3]; *we have a lot of anti-mobbing topics* [R5]; *there is a culture of safety and training on how to deal with various stressful situations at work* [R7]; *if I am frustrated, stressed, I will not be as effective at work as I could be. It seems to me that companies do not notice this, because very few companies notice this relationship* [R2].

In the context of employee training and development, respondents mentioned developing foreign language communication competencies as a required ability for effective information transmission and reception in a global and multicultural working environment (2 utterance excerpts): *we provide English language teaching. You can apply to participate in group lessons or use the e-Tutor platform, and I have already completed the entire Business English course at B2 level and moved on to C1 level* [R3]; *administrative staff generally need support increasingly often in the area of English language learning* [R4].

Interview respondents pointed to different subject matter offered to managers and operational employees (4 utterance excerpts): *if you are a manager you have a different package of available knowledge* [R1]; *our branches have training dedicated to managers, a Leadership Academy, and there is training focused on managerial skills as well as hard skills* [R3]; *top management and management have mandatory training related to diversity and how to manage and support diversity in teams, while employees can participate in various other types of training* [R5]; *there are special support training sessions specifically for department heads* [R4]. This is the correct approach, since managers and operational employees are two distinct professional groups, differing in scope of responsibilities, requirements placed upon them, and the professionalisation of management.

Given the study aims, it is striking how rarely respondents mentioned the inclusion in educational programmes of subject matter typically associated with the implementation of the socio-ecological goals of the enterprise in the area of sustainable development. Respondents only incidentally addressed examples of sustainable development in practice. And if employees do not acquire appropriate knowledge and skills in the area of sustainable development, they will not change their attitudes and behaviours to become more sensitive to socio-ecological problems.

Motivation

In the category of learning motivation, 13 utterance excerpts were coded. Statements contained references to onboarding as a motivating factor (2 utterance excerpts): *the effectiveness of onboarding affects employee motivation and retention in the company; it lasts from a few days to even several months* [R1].

Respondents indicated that the organisational culture of the company, the style of human resource management, and relationships can motivate employees to develop (4 utterance excerpts): *when a team is well managed, has a good manager, people know which direction to go, the management process is at the right level, then employees are more willing to participate in training and feel more motivated to develop* [R2]; *when employees have periodic training they show greater interest* [R7]; *those who choose the topics to be covered themselves, those who want to learn, are more interested* [R1]. A motivating factor for employees is recognition of their needs and emotions (2 utterance excerpts): *I feel looked after as an employee, people are kind. For me that kind of work culture is something important* [R3]; *there are three groups: the first are the star pupils – they come and say great, I'll learn something new, I'll try it, I'll see; the second are the tourists – they come to the training and immediately ask what time lunch is and whether we will finish early; the third are the exiles – they come and challenge everything, they participate because they have to, but they do so reluctantly* [R2].

Competency-based pay, rewards for acquiring new skills, and development opportunities serve as motivators (5 utterance excerpts): *the key problem in the motivational system is remuneration – I have the impression that employees value financial rewards above all* [R4]; *there is the possibility of internal promotion and support for employee education, co-financing of studies, training, etc. For example, it is very difficult to recruit drivers, so we financed ecodriving – that is, learning fuel-efficient driving techniques aimed at minimising fuel consumption and reducing exhaust emissions – and HGV licences, so that someone would want to work with us* [R1].

During the interviews, respondents most often linked employee motivation to participate in education with the principle that employees respond to rewards and penalties in their environment, rather than with the idea that employees strive for excellence through learning, creating and improving the world. Motivating employees is an extremely difficult task. The statements did not address the diversification of motivating factors or the possibility of increasing employee engagement in education through other incentives.

Barriers to participation in education

In the category of barriers to participation in education, six utterance excerpts were coded. Respondents drew attention to communication barriers and to the need for transparent communication and broader information about training opportunities: *there are meetings, information sent by email or passed on verbally in the corridor, but that is not enough* [R2]. Respondents also pointed to insufficiently engaging actions on the part of HR department staff: *people from the HR department are mainly responsible for this; they create their own model of operation, and there is no such model that functions on the market* [R7].

Respondents also indicated that strategic assumptions on paper are not always reflected in practice: *I have a clear picture that on paper it all looks good, but in reality not entirely. There are individual initiatives, it seems to me, but a properly implemented strategy I have not heard of* [R2]. A barrier to participation is the one-off nature of these initiatives and the lack of perspective for further development plans: *employees approach this with great distrust, because they know that after 3 months everyone will have forgotten, or it will come down to a single campaign, a one-off training session whose purpose was to show that we are doing something like this* [R6]. Respondents also pointed to technological barriers, including limited access to digital tools and gaps in digital competencies.

Although respondents were asked about barriers to employee participation in education imposed by the employer, they spoke only rarely. Respondents only incidentally addressed employer-imposed barriers, which confirms that competency development matters both to the employee and to the employer.

Figure 1 illustrates the code categories identified in the study.



Figure 1. Code categories in the area of the employee education variable.
Source: authors' own elaboration.

6. Summary

Quality education and lifelong learning are key social goals not only from the perspective of sustainable development; but, above all, achieving them affects companies' competitiveness and the stable functioning of markets, especially in the face of dynamic changes in the contemporary world. Systematic and consistent procedures make it possible to align human resource development in a planned way with the needs and changes occurring in the working environment and in companies' broader context.

A detailed analysis of the findings showed clearly the wide range of forms and thematic areas represented in the educational programmes implemented by enterprises. It should be emphasised that the study participants were representatives of large organisations that had budgeted funds for education and for employee competence development.

The wide range of thematic areas reflects the diversity of positions within organisations. However, it should be emphasised that every respondent referred to thematic areas related to employee well-being in the workplace. This suggests that organisations are increasingly recognising the growing problem of mental health in the workplace. In this respect, the sustainable development goal related to quality education and lifelong learning is linked to the goal concerning quality of life and health. The findings also indicated that organisations take employees' diverse needs into account when selecting training topics - for example, by considering employee age. An employee's career stage directly affects their professional development needs.

Another point worth emphasising is the diversity of educational forms and methods used in these programmes: from in-person formats in the workplace, through off-site training, to a range of technology-based forms. Employers encourage employees to undertake education, which is also reflected in financing or co-financing participation in learning. Education for sustainable development is present in organisational practice.

The findings may serve as a basis for identifying further avenues for research into the relationships between employee competency development and the achievement of economic, environmental and social goals, particularly in relation to the idea of corporate social responsibility.

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