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HR BUSINESS PARTNER' PERCEPTION OF EMPLOYEE ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Purpose: The article aims to identify and define how HR Business Partners perceive the employee aspects of sustainable development.
Design/methodology/approach: The study was conducted using a diagnostic survey based on a proprietary questionnaire. The CAWI technique was applied. The survey was carried out in late November and early December 2025 among 73 HR Business Partners. The group was selected purposefully, taking into account their job positions. Fifty-one respondents who declared knowledge of the employee-related aspects of sustainable development were selected for further analysis.
Findings: The survey results indicate that the level of knowledge regarding the employee-related aspects of sustainable development among HR Business Partners varies depending on the length of service as an HR Business Partner and the size of the organization. Most frequently respondents associate the employee-related aspects of sustainable development with employee equality, opportunities for professional development, and social initiatives, such as employee volunteering. Issues related to employee well-being, work-life balance, and closing the pay gap are mentioned less frequently. The study showed that HR Business Partners rely primarily on informal sources of knowledge, such as social media and networking. At the same time, they make limited use of academic literature and legal regulations.
Respondents identified organizational barriers, including excessive bureaucracy, a lack of management commitment, other business priorities, and limited time and resources. This may indicate that undertaking initiatives related to the employee aspects of sustainable development requires not only the commitment and competence of HR Business Partners, but also support from the organization, such as management commitment or financial resources.
Research limitations/implications: The limitations of the study include the deliberate selection of the research sample and the relatively small number of respondents. In future studies, it seems reasonable to use qualitative methods and expand the sample to include other occupational groups.
Originality/value: This article provides data on how HR Business Partners perceive the employee-related aspects of sustainable development. The research findings show how HR Business Partners understand these aspects, what actions they take, and what barriers they encounter. The presented data can serve as a basis for further research and support organizations in their daily practices.
Keywords: HR Business Partner, sustainable development, ESG.
Category of the paper: Diagnostic survey based on a proprietary questionnaire.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development remains a key area of interest for researchers and management practitioners (Lulewicz-Sas, Zubek, 2022, p. 13). The growing importance of the concept, regulatory pressure, and stakeholder expectations mean that sustainable development is increasingly viewed as a key factor in building competitive advantage (Sadowski, 2023, p. 155). In this context, the employee-related aspects of sustainable development take on particular significance, including working conditions, equal treatment, competency development, well-being, and fair compensation (Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2023, pp. 15-21).

At the same time, the role of the HR function in organizations is undergoing significant changes. The HR Business Partner model involves shifting the focus from administrative tasks to active participation in implementing the organization's strategy and supporting change processes (Winch, 2021, p. 31). As strategic partners and employee advocates (Winch, 2021, p. 32), HR Business Partners are therefore uniquely positioned to align strategic business goals with employee needs and the requirements of sustainable development. Thus, they can play a significant role in undertaking initiatives related to the employee-related aspects of sustainable development.

Despite the growing number of publications on the concept of the HR Business Partner and sustainable development, the literature lacks research on how HR Business Partners perceive the employee aspects of sustainable development.

In response to this identified research gap, the aim of this article is to identify and define how HR Business Partners perceive the employee-related aspects of sustainable development. The article is empirical in nature and is based on the results of a quantitative survey conducted among HR Business Partners.

2. The concept of HR Business Partner

The concept of the HR Business Partner was developed by Dave Ulrich in the mid-1990s in the United States (Popieluch, 2018, p. 11). According to D. Ulrich, the role of the HR Business Partner is that of a strategic partner, which means collaborating on defining the company's strategy and ensuring the alignment of HR strategy with the organization's strategy. Additionally, the role of a change agent involves leading the company's transformation. Another role identified by D. Ulrich is that of an employee advocate, which involves supporting research into employee needs and their feedback, as well as creating conditions for competency and organizational development; and the role of an administrative expert, which involves providing administrative support to employees, organizing departmental work, and positioning them within the organizational structure (Popieluch, 2018, p. 12).

In 2012, D. Ulrich and his research team expanded the model to include six roles of the HR Business Partner. These are *Strategic Positioner*, *Credible Activist*, *Capability Builder*, *Change Champion*, *HR Innovator and Integrator*, *and Technology Proponent* (Ulrich et al., 2012, pp. 7-25). The Strategic Positioner means that the HR Business Partner operates from the outside in, understands the business (including social, economic, and technological trends) and thereby helps shape the organization's strategy. The Credible Activist is based on building personal trust and credibility. Credibility stems from keeping promises, building relationships, and clear and consistent communication. The Capability Builder: this role combines employees' individual skills into organizational strengths. The HR Business Partner analyzes human capital potential to define the company's identity and build a work environment where employees find meaning and purpose.

The Change Champions as change agents, HR Business Partners ensure the sustainability of changes. They initiate them, build a case for their implementation, and engage stakeholders, then sustain them through appropriate structures, resources, and systematic communication.

The Human Resource Innovator and Integrator: this role involves integrating HR solutions with future business challenges. It is crucial that these practices are consistent and focused on business results, not just on trendy fads.

In their Technology Proponent role HR Business Partners use technology not only for efficient administration (e.g. payroll, benefits) but also for building relationships and communication. As advocates of technology, they promote the use of digital tools to manage the flow of information (Ulrich et al., 2012, pp. 61-202). According to the 2008 model developed by the Corporate Leadership Council, the core responsibilities of an HR Business Partner include:

- The role of an operational manager. This involves assessing employee attitudes, communicating applicable rules and procedures, instilling the company's organizational culture in employees, ensuring the alignment of HR activities with the organizational culture, and monitoring trends in employee attitudes.
- The role of rescuer, which includes preparing for crisis situations, responding quickly to complaints, responding quickly to questions from line managers, addressing employee needs, and addressing manager needs.
- The role of employee mediator includes, among other things, managing conflicting employee personalities, managing conflicts between employees, responding to organizational changes, and resolving social issues in the implementation of business plans.
- The role of strategic partner, which consists of adapting HR strategy to the changing needs of the organization and its environment, identifying critical HR indicators, identifying talent-related issues, understanding employees' professional needs, and redesigning structures that support the achievement of strategic goals (Popieluch, 2018, pp. 15-16).

Grzegorz Filipowicz adds one more role to the HR Business Partner's scope, that of a human capital development manager, emphasizing the importance of shaping human capital within the organization (Filipowicz, 2018, p. 145).

Based on D. Ulrich's classic 1997 role model, N. Derkowska proposes a list of competencies for each role (Derkowska, 2022, pp. 163-168). "For the strategic partner role, these include business acumen and strategic thinking, communication, and goal orientation, followed by *business acumen* and customer orientation. Knowledge of human resources management is also essential. Slightly less critical but still important are flexibility and openness to change, relationship building, influence, and negotiation skills. The least important for this role are knowledge of labour law, conflict resolution, analytical thinking, and emotional intelligence. For the role of change agent, the most important is communication, influence, and business acumen, as well as flexibility and openness to change. Next are emotional intelligence and conflict resolution, negotiation skills, relationship building, and *business acumen*. Less important are goal orientation, strategic thinking, customer orientation, and knowledge of human resources management. Analytical thinking and knowledge of labor law are of the least importance. The most essential components of competence in the role of employee advocate are communication and emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, knowledge of labor law, relationship building, and customer orientation. Negotiation skills, influence, and flexibility and openness to change are of lesser importance. Knowledge of human resources management, business orientation, goal orientation, *business acumen*, strategic thinking, and analytical thinking are of minor importance.

For the role of administrative expert, knowledge of labour law is the most critical for performing this role. Analytical thinking, communication, customer focus, and emotional intelligence are also highly important. Less important are knowledge of human resource management, goal orientation, flexibility and openness to change, relationship building, and conflict resolution. Competency components of negligible importance for this role include *business acumen*, influence, negotiation skills, strategic thinking, and business orientation" (Derkowska, 2022, pp. 163-168).

The rationale for the research group's selection is the Resource-Based View (RBV). According to this theory, organizational resources that are rare, valuable, and difficult to imitate can serve as a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). From this perspective, the HR Business Partner can be viewed as a unique organizational resource. According to D. Ulrich's (1997) basic model, the HR Business Partner combines four key roles: the strategic partner, change agent, employee advocate, and administrative role. By integrating these roles, the HR Business Partner goes beyond the traditional role of the HR function. This enables the company to implement strategies effectively and manage change in line with market needs. In this context, the HR Business Partner is a unique source of human and competency capital who, through the roles and competencies outlined in the theoretical section, can become a source of the company's competitive advantage. Therefore, this study focuses on HR Business Partners.

3. Sustainable development

3.1. The concept of sustainable development

The first definition of *sustainable development* comes from the 1975 Session of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme. According to this definition, sustainable development is "the course of inevitable and desirable economic development that does not significantly and irreversibly harm the human environment, does not lead to the degradation of the biosphere, and reconciles the laws of nature, economics, and culture" (Poskrobko, 1998, p. 75). Sustainable development is "a humanitarian concept of global development whose fundamental goal is to improve the quality of life and well-being of humanity under conditions of limited natural resources, taking into account the long-term effects of industrial development" (Adamczyk, 2009, p. 66). Conducting business activities focused on sustainable development requires the skillful use of natural resources, the introduction of environmentally-friendly technologies, and the implementation of measures aimed at development and improving the quality of work. Sustainable development of a business means improving the entity's financial and asset situation while simultaneously improving the working conditions and quality of life for its employees and ensuring higher standards of environmental protection (Misztal, 2018, pp. 27-40).

There are three pillars of sustainable development. The first one, the economic pillar, which consists of financial strength, productivity, and economic performance. The second pillar is the social pillar: sustainable development generates processes of social well-being related to the health, safety, and quality of life of the organization's members. The main challenges for organizations are finding a balance between personal and organizational needs. The third pillar is the environment: related to the protection of the environment and natural resources for future generations (Lulewicz-Sas, Zubek, 2022, pp. 13-38).

3.2. Employee aspects of sustainable development

Sustainable development in the workplace, as implemented in organizations, contributes to employee well-being and health by creating sustainable jobs characterized by a positive work environment, which is a key objective of sustainable development goals. Job loss, financial uncertainty, or loss of personal income broadens the perspective of sustainable development to include the employee's internal perspective. The employee-focused aspect of sustainable development includes, among other things: fair treatment, care for the development, well-being, and health of employees, employee development, promoting behaviours that support work-life balance, as well as undertaking environmentally-friendly actions (Wojtczuk-Turek, 2022, p. 7).

A key element of a sustainable approach to employees is attention to their multidimensional well-being and economic issues (fair compensation). Furthermore, these are practices supporting work-life balance, health protection, and safe working conditions, as well as organizational justice that goes beyond the current needs of the team, taking into account the interests of future generations and minority groups through the promotion of diversity (Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2023, pp. 18-19).

In line with sustainable development, organizations should implement innovative solutions that support the development of human capital in a responsible and ethical manner. This includes, among other things, creating a friendly work environment, ensuring pay equity, promoting diversity and inclusivity, and investing in the development of employees' competencies (Czaińska, 2020, pp. 11-20).

Sustainability issues are gaining increasing importance in the theoretical dimension as a significant area of management research, where the effective implementation of sustainability principles can become a source of competitive advantage and the building of lasting organizational value (Ismail, Abdelghani, 2024, pp. 1-15).

4. Research method

Despite growing interest in the concept of the HR Business Partner and the concept of sustainable development, including the employee context, a research gap has been identified. The study aims to identify and define how HR Business Partners perceive the employee aspects of sustainable development. The following research questions were formulated:

1) What is the level of HR Business Partners' knowledge of the employee aspects of sustainable development?
2) How do HR Business Partners understand the employee-related aspects of sustainable development?
3) From which sources do HR Business Partners obtain the knowledge about the employee-related aspects of sustainable development?
4) How do HR Business Partners assess their role in promoting initiatives related to the employee aspects of sustainable development?
5) What actions do HR Business Partners take regarding the employee-related aspects of sustainable development?
6) What are the barriers to HR Business Partners undertaking activities related to the employee aspects of sustainable development?

The study employed a diagnostic survey method using a proprietary questionnaire. The CAWI technique was utilized in the study. The survey was conducted in late November/early December 2025. Respondents were provided with a link to the survey questionnaire. Respondents could complete the questionnaire only once. The study group was purposively selected based on their job position. The number of respondents was 73. The dominant group participating in the study consisted of representatives from large enterprises (44%) and the manufacturing and industrial sector (42%). The largest percentage consisted of HR Business Partners with 1-3 years of experience (30%), followed closely by those with over 6 years of experience (29%).

The question regarding familiarity with the concept of sustainable development in an employee context was designed to filter out those who had not yet encountered the concept of sustainable development in an employee context. The group familiar with the concept consisted of 51 people. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the study group.

Table 1.
Characteristics of the research group

	Respondents familiar with the concept of sustainable development in the workplace context (51)	**Respondents unfamiliar with the concept of sustainable development in the workplace context (22)**	**Total (73)**
Length of service as an HR Business Partner	less than 1 year – 4% 1-3 years – 24% 4-6 years – 33% more than 6 years – 39%	less than 1 year – 50% 1-3 years – 45% 4-6 years – 0% over 6 years – 5%	less than 1 year – 18% 1-3 years – 30% 4-6 years – 23% over 6 years – 29%
Company size	small (up to 50 employees) – 2% medium-sized (51-250 employees) – 33% large (over 250 employees) – 65%	small (up to 50 employees) – 23% medium-sized (51-250 employees) – 68% large (over 250 employees) – 9%	small – 8% medium-sized – 44% large – 48%
Industry	manufacturing – 46% retail and e-commerce – 16% information technology – 12% financial services and banking – 8% construction and real estate – 6% transport and logistics – 6% healthcare – 6%	manufacturing– 26.5% retail and e-commerce – 18% construction and real estate – 13.5% transport and logistics – 13.5% Healthcare – 13.5% education – 5% media and communications – 5% financial services and banking – 5%	manufacturing – 42% retail and e-commerce – 17% construction and real estate – 8% information technology –8% transport and logistics – 8% healthcare – 8% financial services and banking – 7% media and communications – 1% education – 1%

Source: own elaboration based on the survey results.

5. Survey results

The answer to research question No. 1, "What is the level of HR Business Partners' knowledge of the employee-related aspects of sustainable development?" is presented in Figure 1. The largest group of respondents is somewhat familiar with the concept: 38%. Thirty percent are not familiar with the concept at all, and only 6% are very familiar with it. Thus, the responses to the question regarding the knowledge of the employee-related aspects of sustainable development are varied. It is surprising that nearly one-third of respondents state that they are not familiar with the concept at all.

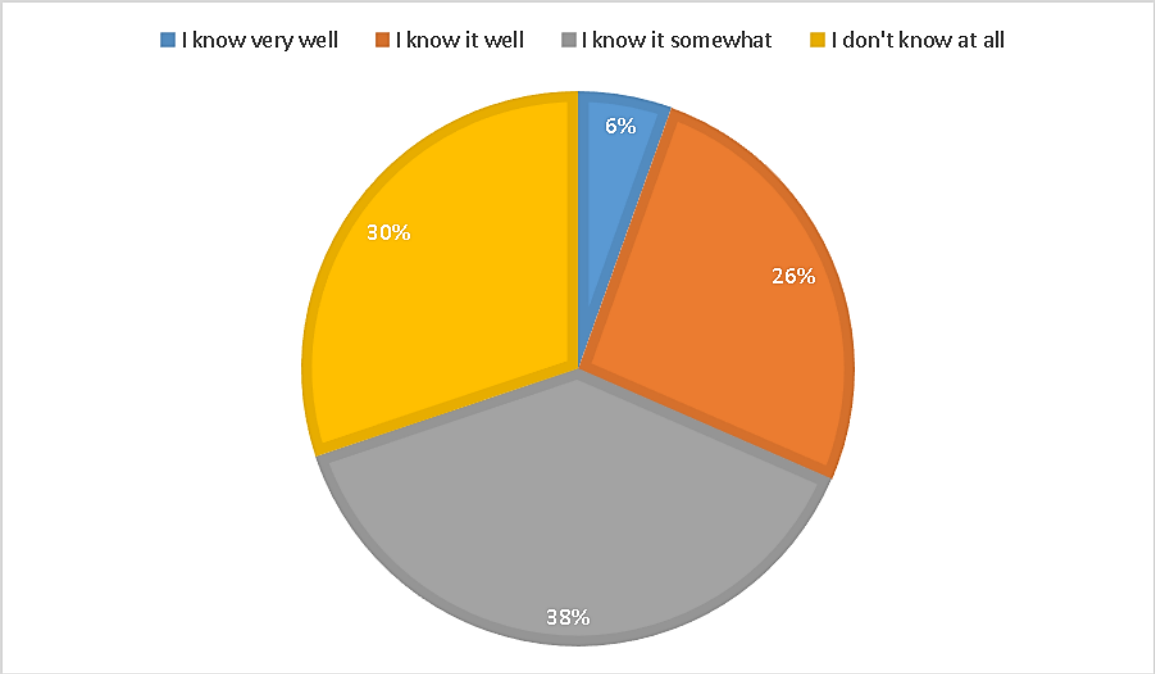


Figure 1. Level of familiarity with the employee aspects of sustainable development among HR Business Partners.

Source: own elaboration based on the survey results.

The answers to question 2, "How do HR Business Partners understand the employee aspects of sustainable development?" are presented in Figure 2. The answers can be divided into two categories. Firstly, those related to the "hard" areas of human capital management, including: employee rights, anti-bullying measures, safe and healthy working conditions, fair treatment, and closing the pay gap. Secondly, "soft" aspects related to human capital management, including opportunities for professional development, employee volunteering, employee well-being, and work-life balance. For the largest group of respondents (nearly 16%), the employee aspects of sustainable development are equal treatment; for just under 12%, they are employee volunteering and opportunities for professional development. Closing the pay gap ranked last (2%). The questionnaire included an open-ended question.

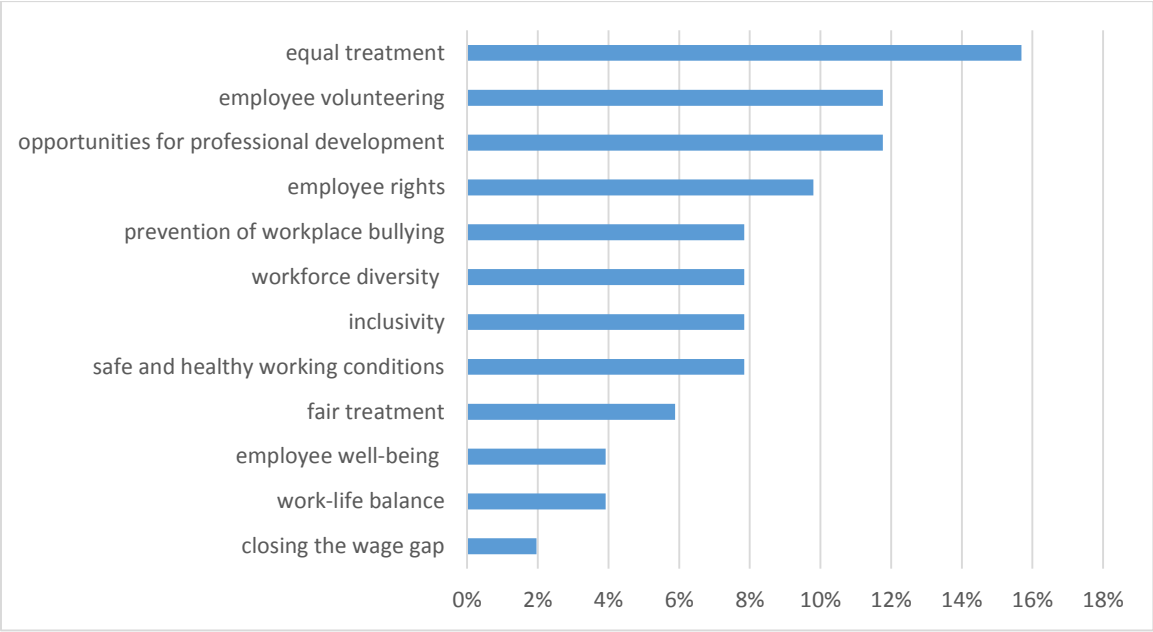


Figure 2. HR Business Partners' understanding of the employee-related aspects of sustainable development.

Source: own elaboration based on the survey results.

The answer to Question 3, "From which sources do HR Business Partners obtain the knowledge about the employee-related aspects of sustainable development?" is presented in Table 2. The most popular sources for obtaining information on the employee-related aspects of sustainable development are social media and networking. The least popular sources are legal acts, academic literature, and supervisors. The results show that a vast majority of respondents rely on informal sources of knowledge. Formal sources such as academic literature, legal acts, or popular science literature account for a significant minority of responses. The least popular source of data – supervisors – may indicate that the concept of employee-related aspects of sustainable development may not yet be sufficiently understood among HR Business Partner supervisors.

In the questionnaire, respondents could provide more than one answer to this question.

Table 2.
Sources of knowledge on the employee aspects of sustainable development for HR Business Partners

No.	Source	% of HR BPs obtaining knowledge from this source
No.	Social media	56.86%
2	Networking outside the company where I work	52.94%
3	Employee or team responsible for sustainability or ESG reporting	39.22%
4	Industry portals	25.49%
5	Internal company reports	25.49%
6	Training and workshops	23.53%
7	Popular science literature	19.61%
8	Legal documents	13.73%
9	Scientific literature	5.88%
10	Supervisor	1.96%

Source: own elaboration based on the survey results.

The response to question no. 4, "How do HR Business Partners assess their role in promoting activities related to the employee aspects of sustainable development?" is presented in Table 3.

Based on the presented data, it can be observed that most HR Business Partners perceive their role in promoting activities related to the employee aspects of sustainable development as quite significant, though not crucial. The largest group of respondents (35.29%) rated their role at level 4, indicating moderately high engagement in this area. A relatively large percentage of respondents also gave a rating of 5 (23.53%), which may indicate a growing awareness of the importance of sustainability initiatives in the HR field. At the same time, only 11.76% of respondents considered their role to be crucial. It is also worth noting that none of the respondents rated their role at level 1, indicating that HR Business Partners recognize at least some degree of their involvement in promoting sustainability initiatives.

Table 3.
Assessment of their role in promoting activities related to the employee-focused aspects of sustainable development by HR Business Partners (scale: 1 – no role, 6 – key role)

Assessment	%
6	11.76%
5	23.53%
4	35.29%
3	19.61%
2	9.80%
1	0%

Source: own elaboration based on the survey results.

Research question number 5 concerned the actions taken by HR Business Partners related to the employee aspects of sustainable development. Respondents could select more than one answer in the questionnaire. Table 4 presents the actions taken by HR Business Partners. The most common actions taken by HR Business Partners include organizing training and ensuring employee development, addressing the pay gap, and promoting diversity, equal opportunities, and inclusivity within the organization.

The most frequently implemented activity is organizing training and ensuring employee development: 86% of the surveyed HR Business Partners reported engaging in this activity. This result confirms that the development of employee competencies remains one of the key areas of HR Business Partners' activities in the context of the organization's sustainable development. The second most frequently cited activity is addressing the pay gap, which was reported by 60% of respondents. This indicates growing activity in the context of pay equity and transparency. In contrast, the least popular activities are engaging employees in social and environmental initiatives and collaborating with other departments to implement sustainable development strategies.

Table 4.
Actions taken by HR Business Partners related to the employee-focused aspects of sustainable development

No.	Action	% of HR BP taking this action
1	organizing training and ensuring employee development	86%
2	addressing the pay gap	60%
3	promoting diversity, equal opportunities, and inclusivity within the organization	47%
4	creating and implementing well-being initiatives	47%
5	developing and implementing mental health and work-life balance support programmes	37%
6	engaging employees in social and environmental initiatives	33%
7	collaboration with other departments in implementing the sustainability strategy	33%

Source: own elaboration based on the survey results.

Responses to research question No. 6, "What are the barriers to HR Business Partners undertaking activities related to the employee aspects of sustainable development?" are presented in Table 5. Respondents could select more than one answer in the questionnaire. The most frequently cited barrier was excessive bureaucracy, indicated by 35.62% of respondents. This may suggest that formal requirements can hinder the implementation of sustainability initiatives. Other significant obstacles include a lack of management commitment and the presence of other organizational priorities: both of these responses were cited by 30.14% of respondents. A lack of financial resources (28.77%) is also a significant barrier, which may limit the ability to implement initiatives. Complex procedures and a lack of time were cited at a similar level (27.40% each). The barriers cited least frequently were insufficient HR Business Partner competencies (6.85%) and difficulties in measuring results (5.48%).

Table 5.
Barriers to HR Business Partners undertaking activities related to the employee aspects of sustainable development

No.	Barrier	% of HR BPs encountering this barrier
1	excessive bureaucracy	35.62%
2	lack of management commitment	30.14%
3	other priorities	30, 14%
4	lack of funds	28.77%
5	complicated procedures	27.40%
6	lack of time	27, 40%
7	insufficient managerial competence	24.66%
8	insufficient HR team competencies	8, 22%
9	employee resistance	8, 22%
10	insufficient HR Business Partner competencies	6.85%
11	difficulties in measuring results	5.48%

Source: own elaboration based on the survey results.

6. Discussion

The research results provide insights into how HR Business Partners perceive the employee-related aspects of sustainable development. First and foremost, attention should be paid to the varying levels of familiarity with the concept of sustainable development in its employee-related dimension. The results indicate that only a small proportion of respondents report a very good understanding of this concept. This may suggest that despite the growing importance of sustainable development, its employee-related dimension is not fully implemented in practice yet.

The research findings are largely consistent with the assumptions of the literature on the employee aspects of sustainable development. The key elements of the employee dimension of sustainable development are fair treatment of employees, competency development, well-being, and the creation of a safe work environment. At the same time, the relatively infrequent mention of the elements such as employee well-being or work-life balance may suggest that, in organizational practice, not all employee-related aspects of sustainable development are emphasized equally strongly.

The findings can also be related to the concept of the HR Business Partner proposed by D. Ulrich, according to which those in this role serve as strategic partners, agents of change, and advocates for employees. The survey results indicate that HR Business Partners perceive their role in promoting sustainability-related activities as important, though not always crucial. This may mean that the potential of this role in supporting the implementation of sustainability strategies is not fully utilized within organizations yet.

Another interesting aspect of the research findings is the dominance of informal knowledge sources, such as social media and networking. This may indicate a certain gap between academic research and human capital management practice. This phenomenon may point to the need to strengthen knowledge transfer between the academic community and business practice.

From the perspective of its contribution to science, this study fills an existing research gap regarding HR Business Partners' perceptions of the employee-related aspects of sustainable development. Previous research has focused primarily on the role of HR in implementing sustainable development strategies or on the concept of sustainable human capital management. This study broadens this perspective by showing how representatives of one of the key roles within the HR function interpret this concept, what actions they take in practice, and what barriers they encounter. Thus, the results may serve as a starting point for further research on the role of HR Business Partners in the implementation of sustainable development strategies and on mechanisms supporting the integration of business objectives with the employee-related aspects of sustainable development.

7. Summary

The aim of the study was to identify how HR Business Partners perceive the employee-related aspects of sustainable development. The results indicate that the level of knowledge regarding these aspects varies. It depends on the professional experience of HR Business Partners and the size of the organization. Higher awareness is reported by those with a longer tenure as HR Business Partners and those employed in large organizations. This may stem from the non-financial ESG reporting obligations imposed on large organizations with over 500 employees.

HR Business Partners understand the employee-related aspects of sustainable development primarily through the lens of equal treatment of employees and opportunities for professional development. The most frequently cited responses concerned equal treatment, employee volunteering, and development opportunities. Addressing the pay gap, work-life balance, and employee well-being were mentioned less frequently. In this context, the responses to the question regarding actions taken are particularly interesting, where addressing the pay gap ranked second, whereas in terms of perception, it was in the last place. This may stem from obligations related to the entry into force of Directive (EU) 2023/970 of May 10, 2023, on strengthening the application of the principle of equal pay for men and women for the same work or work of equal value through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms. Therefore, this may intensify the efforts of HR Business Partners in the context of eliminating the pay gap within organizations. Interdepartmental collaboration is the least common among the actions taken. Most respondents assess their role in undertaking activities related to the employee aspects of sustainable development as significant.

The study revealed that HR Business Partners primarily rely on informal sources of knowledge, such as social media and networking. At the same time, they make limited use of academic literature and legal regulations. This may indicate a need to strengthen the transfer of theoretical knowledge into the practice of HR Business Partners.

A key finding of the research is the identification of organizational barriers, including excessive bureaucracy, a lack of management commitment, competing business priorities, and limited time and financial resources. This may indicate that undertaking actions related to the employee aspects of sustainable development requires not only the commitment and competence of HR Business Partners, but also support and commitment from the organization, such as management involvement or financial resources.

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