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# Green Human Resource Management and Sustainable Development: Insights from Bulgarian Organisations

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## Abstract

Motivation and its relatedness to the high performance of organisations is of undeniable interest to management at all levels. This is perhaps the “perpetuum mobile” or the “holy grail” for every manager. In the changing environmental conditions of recent years and in line with the changing climate and its impact on every human being, decisions related to environmental protection, to green policies in all areas are increasingly relevant.

This paper aims to present basic ideas related to the concept of Green Human resource management (GHRM) and to highlight some key features in rethinking the applicability of this concept in the practice of modern organisations. It focuses on the current state of GHRM practices in Bulgaria, which is expanding in importance and is a leading theme in which good practices and ideas can be brought forward.

**Keywords:** green human resource management, motivation, best practices, organisational development

**JEL Classification Codes:** Q01, Q56, Z18

## Introduction

The overall development of the concept of Human Resource Management (HRM) has been identified in the literature as a key success factor for organisations. It can positively influence employee performance through focused, effective, and transparent people management policies. On the other hand, values have been reevaluated, and businesses reassessed their missions and purpose in this light. Therefore, the research trends regarding Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG), sustainability, social entrepreneurship, and digitalisation have been growing. Digital transformation, in conjunction with sustainable development goals, emerging changes in consumption patterns, and consumer behaviour in the New Normal, is reflected in the direction of CSR (Gigauri and Vasilev, 2023).

Conceptually, in view of the ongoing public debate on climate change, sustainability is becoming an important criterion for organisations. Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) is a modern derivative of HRM and combines human resource management with environmental management. GHRM is applied by organisations to implement corporate green strategies by providing opportunities and motivating employees to participate in environmental activities. There is currently a real boom in interest in GHRM practices (Wijaya and Qamari, 2024).

Supported by the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) model, GHRM is expected to influence employees' organisational behaviour (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). The extent to which employee perceptions of an organisation's GHRM policies influence employee behaviour and social and psychological processes in the workplace has not been sufficiently or thoroughly empirically examined. As an emerging concept, green HRM has been conceptualised to elucidate how it influences employee behaviour in the workplace. HRM is limited to one effect that indirectly affects employee green behaviour at work through the mediation of psychological green climate. Individual green values mitigate the effects of psychological green climate on green worker behaviour outside of the role, but not the effects of HRM or psychological green climate on behaviour (Crifo, 2023). These findings suggest that GHRM influences employees' in-role and out-of-role behaviours in the workplace, but this manifests in different individual social and psychological processes. This focus is undeniably correlated with employee motivation in organisations (Icheva and Vasilev, 2021).

The chosen methodology is relevant to the research topic, focusing on the identification of key theoretical achievements through a literature review. Additionally, it describes good practices and ideas from organisations in Bulgaria in the field of Green Human Resources Management (GHRM) which support the scientific objective of development – the importance of GHRM for modern organisations.

## Statement

Over the past decade, there has been a growing recognition of the need to integrate human resource management (HRM) with environmental management (ENM). Since the 1990s, researchers have investigated the role HRM can play in improving corporate environmental performance. In the early 1970s, business began to pay more attention to climate protection and introduced environmental management in response to local air pollution, the first oil crisis, and the first Club of Rome report. For example, in German academia the term “green HRM” is used to describe environmentally sustainable HRM (Renwick et al., 2008). This term was only adopted in 2008. In a special edition of the *Zeitschrift für Personal Forschung* (German Journal of Human Resource Management) in 2011, “green HRM” was defined as “all aspects and practices of HRM that pursue the goal of environmental sustainability (Ilieva and Vasilev, 2022).

The results showed that motivation and leadership had a significant and positive influence on employees’ green behaviour. Motivation also has a significant positive influence on employees’ green behaviour through mediating organisational culture. (Susanto, 2023).

The following key factors in GHRM can be identified:

- **Environmental knowledge:** Awareness of the need to protect the environment increases the likelihood of environmentally friendly behaviour;
- **Environmental psychological climate:** Such a climate signals that the organisation supports environmentally friendly behaviour’s and attitudes, which is conducive to environmentally friendly behaviour by employees who adapt their workplace behaviour to the perceived company culture.
- **Emotional intelligence:** This is becoming an increasingly important indicator of leadership and effective management.

Research and publications in Bulgaria in recent years have increasingly addressed components of these ideas, particularly in the areas of corporate social responsibility and the role of motivation in the human resource management process (Stefanova et al., 2023). In this context, this research paper aims to continue research efforts in this direction to address the existing research gap in Bulgarian theory. Current

dynamics and crises are closely linked to organisational growth and change management in a contemporary setting. Evolutionarily speaking, the focus on innovation in management processes has shifted towards re-innovative organisational practices that build on and strengthen tried-and-true methods.

Despite their worldwide expansion, human development pillars are not yet widely understood as the ultimate objective of national economy competitiveness. At the same time, socially-oriented business calls for some specific activities to attract social investors who are willing to support primary social goals, even at the expense of their own short-term profit for long-term gains (Dyba and Gernego, 2022).

Of course, these and similar policies and practices should be implemented at the organisational level through HR practitioners (Rafiq et al., 2024). To achieve green goals and environmental initiatives, organisations should:

- promote a green image and develop recruitment processes that attract capable and motivated employees who share common values and principles (i.e., green ideals) with those of the organisation (Zihan et al., 2024);
- initiate processes and activities that motivate, engage, and encourage employees to participate in green initiatives and improve employees' green skills, in the context of motivational processes;
- ensure that corporate values related to achieving green goals are clearly communicated to employees;
- ensure that employee green performance is monitored, recorded, and evaluated appropriately;
- link employee contributions to green technology to internal promotions and visibly promote financial and non-financial rewards.

### “Green motivation” in an organisational context

In this context, sustainable development plays an increasingly important role in the development of organisations and specifically in the management of human. Increasingly, young job seekers are particularly concerned about the organisation's positioning in terms of green and other ethical standards. Therefore, HR managers should pay attention to green management (Ilieva and Vasilev, 2022). Here we can mention the following examples:

**Green reward system:** A system of rewards for contribution to environmental protection can encourage and reinforce desired behaviour (Jiang, Jackson, Shim, Budhwar, 2022). Despite criticisms of financial incentives, a combination of monetary (e.g., additional payment for a public transport ticket) and non-monetary rewards is commonly recommended (Renwick et al., 2013). Non-monetary rewards can

include paid leave, certificates, or public praise, which instils pride in the awardees and positively reinforces their environmentally friendly behaviour.

**Green motivation:** The active involvement of employees in environmental protection can lead to long-term success for the organisation (Bag and Gupta, 2020). In this context, green motivation includes a clear green vision in the organisation, a green learning climate where employees monitor each other, various communication channels for optimal internal exchange on environmental protection, opportunities for input (e.g., in green working groups), and encouragement of active participation in the implementation of green goals.

These challenges form the shape of a complex equation involving numerous unknowns and solutions marked by uncertainty and difficulty. For this reason, and in view of the results of the research, conducted in Bulgaria in 2022, one of the newest modern model, tailored to technological progress and the needs of employees, managers, and the organisation as a whole, is called “**Motivation 4.0**” (**M.4.0**). The model’s primary components are emotional intelligence, benchmarking, social responsibility, and green HRM. (Vasilev and Icheva, 2023). Until now, the **M.4.0** model has been successfully implemented in the work of nine municipal administrations and has won national awards in competitions for good practices in public administration in Bulgaria.

In summary, it should be emphasised that the presented theoretical characteristics of Green HRM provide a basis for continue academic and practical research. This information can be used in the preparation of strategic documents and as a source of useful information in making decisions about key policies in the field of human resource management.

## Good practices and ideas from Bulgaria

In this part of our research, we present some good practices and ideas that can serve as foundations for developing organisational practices in addressing various management challenges.

The principle of sustainability is gaining popularity in many Bulgarian organisations. While the issue of ‘sustainability’ has not been covered in HRM in the past, it has become a major aspect of green HRM in the last decade.

In Bulgaria, it is increasingly assumed that HRM has clear aspirations to be sustainable, in the sense of fit for the future. It is worth examining the relevant understanding of sustainability used in practice and research, as rationalities or value orientations underpin the rationale for sustainable action.

These tendencies have been proven in a number of scientific publications in recent years, with a particularly sensitive element being the strategic approach in communication processes (Vasilev and Stefanova, 2021). Additionally, the topic of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is becoming increasingly important for organisations in Bulgaria.

One of the most popular and largest campaigns in Bulgaria in recent years is **“Caps for the Future”**, which aims to collect plastic caps and use the money to buy baby incubators. Many localities are joining the initiative, showing their social commitment and responsibility. Besides the good cause for which the plastic caps are used, it should also be noted that this is an effective way of recycling this type of product.

**“European Green Office”** is an NGO that develops and offers a Green Office Handbook, which has quickly become a desktop read for many organisations looking for Green HRM solutions. It presents, in a systematic approach, the main components of an organisation’s policy towards becoming green.

The **“Embrace Nature” initiative** is an art installation in Burgas. The aim is to show the disapproval and raise awareness about the so-called “fast fashion”. Many of the trees in the Sea Garden are “dressed” in old and unwearable clothes. The main idea is to highlight the harm of “fast fashion”, and the “hugs” for the trees carry environmental and social messages. There are signs placed next to the art installation giving information about the concept of “fast fashion”. This term represents the cheap clothes that big brands sell, with their everyday production posing significant environmental dangers.

In recent years, good practices have emerged in Bulgaria for working with students to develop their skills and talents through common causes and collaborative efforts. One notable example is the **“Reporters Workshop”**, a project by EspressoNews.bg that has been successfully implemented since 2017. This initiative focuses on training students in the field of journalism, with patriotism and a deep appreciation for Bulgaria as leading motives. In 2022, the book “Tell About Your Bulgaria” was published, compiling some of the contributions from participants over the years. The impact of this initiative is truly unique, bringing together talented children and teaching them the most important value for every citizen: the love of their roots and homeland (Good Example Foundation, 2022).

Small municipalities in Bulgaria have their own specific characteristics. In small towns, everyone knows everyone, which can be both an advantage and a serious obstacle. Convinced of the positive idea that various initiatives can bring both administration and citizens together, the management of the Municipality of Muglitzh aims to gradually implement and to provoke such ideas and initiatives through “green practices”. In this regard, the following phases have been implemented: firstly,

ideas for activities in which the administration can also be an active participant are precisely selected each year. In this way, the municipality has achieved the effect of “administration with a human face”. Numerous ideas and initiatives have been implemented, contributed to the creation of a different image of the municipality and the high motivation of the employees. Among these initiatives are the National Ethnic Festival “Equal in Difference”, Municipal Festival of Fairy Tale Heroes “The Golden Key”, National Folklore Festival “Friend, Come and See, the Choirs Are Howling Around Muglzh” and many others.

The Institute of Public Administration has a rich tradition in identifying and promoting best practices in green governance and organises a competition every year in different fields (IPA: Konkursi za dobri praktiki, w.d.). The featured practices are also published in specialised annual publications, thus expanding the visibility.

These examples illustrate the possibilities of applying flexible and innovative practices related to highlighting the relation between “green human resource management” and employee motivation.

## Conclusion

According to Israeli writer Yuval Noah Harari, by 2050, automation and robotisation will lead to the emergence of a new social class that will not just be unemployed, but will be deprived of the opportunity to start an affordable job. This is one of the key challenges that HRD is facing and for which it will seek sustainable solutions.

In summary, effective GHRM should be focused on identification with sustainable development. Last but not least, with small steps towards a greener mindset, every single person can help to protect the environment (Pangarso et al., 2024).

We started this elaboration by comparing employee motivation to the “perpetuum mobile” or “holy grail” in the field of management. Perhaps motivation is indeed as valuable an asset as employees are to any organisation. However, there is no perfect solution to this equation. There is a constant struggle to improve, to seek and try out new and sustainable solutions, and to share best practices.

We live in this world prepared for us by our parents, and we are preparing it for our children. What we leave behind depends entirely on us.

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A Bulgarian professional who spent her formative years in Germany, where she completed her secondary education. In 2019, she decided to return to her homeland, Bulgaria, to pursue a degree in Business Administration at the Higher School of Security and Economics in Plovdiv. In 2023, she successfully defended her master's thesis on “Sustainable Human Resource Management” in the same field.

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