

## Chapter -9

### Human Resources and Workplace Sustainability Strategy

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#### Abstract

Businesses today are facing a big change. Taking care of the planet and people is no longer just good PR—it's essential for staying in business. This shift makes the Human Resources (HR) department more important than ever. This chapter shows how Human Resources Management is the key to building Workplace Sustainability, moving from theory to everyday practice.

#### Workplace sustainability rests on three pillars:

being environmentally responsible, socially fair, and economically healthy for the long term. It's about thriving without harming the planet or people. HR is perfectly placed to lead this because it manages the company's most important asset: its people. HR's job is to make sustainability real for every employee. The chapter provides a clear playbook for HR professionals. It explains how to hire for green skills and values, train teams for the future, and tie performance goals to sustainability targets. It covers creating a purpose-driven culture where employees feel engaged, and developing policies that support true employee well-being and inclusion. It also tackles how to measure success, not just in profit, but through ESG (environmental, social, governance) metrics that matter to everyone. We also look at real challenges, like getting leadership buy-in, managing costs, and ensuring a fair Just Transition for workers as industries change. The future will demand Strategic HR leaders who can build regenerative businesses that are ready for what's next. In short, this chapter is a guide for turning HR into the architect of a company that doesn't just do well, but does good—creating a resilient, fair, and sustainable workplace from the inside out.

**Keywords:** Human Resources Management, Workplace Sustainability, ESG, Green Skills, Purpose-Driven Culture, Employee Well-being, Strategic HR, Just Transition, Regenerative Business, Triple Bottom Line.

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#### Introduction

Organizations around the world are undergoing a profound transformation. Sustainability—once treated as a compliance mandate or a branding tool—has now become a strategic core for long-term organizational survival and competitiveness. As businesses face increasing pressures from climate change, evolving workforce expectations, regulatory reforms, and stakeholder activism, the integration of

sustainability principles into workplace systems is no longer optional. Human Resources (HR) plays a pivotal role in this shift. Beyond traditional responsibilities like recruitment, performance management, training, and employee relations, the HR function now stands as a strategic architect in embedding sustainability into organizational culture, workforce practices, and operational processes. HR is uniquely positioned to influence people, shape behaviors, foster values, and ensure that sustainability principles are internalized across the organization. Workplace sustainability refers to the creation of a work environment that balances environmental stewardship, social equity, and economic viability—commonly known as the Triple Bottom Line. It ensures that organizational growth does not come at the cost of people's well-being, resource depletion, or societal imbalance. This chapter discusses how HR can drive workplace sustainability through strategic interventions, policies, and culture-building mechanisms. It outlines the key dimensions, tools, and frameworks that HR practitioners must leverage to build a sustainable workplace that is future-ready, resilient, and human-centered.

## **Concept of Workplace Sustainability**

### **1 Meaning**

Workplace sustainability is a holistic business approach that integrates three core pillars into daily operations and long-term strategy: **Environmental, Social, and Economic responsibility**. It moves beyond philanthropy to embed responsible practices into the organizational DNA, ensuring that success is not achieved at the expense of the planet, people, or ethical principles.

- **Environmental Responsibility:** This involves minimizing the organization's negative impact on the natural environment.
  - *Example:* A tech company powers its data centers with 100% renewable energy, implements a zero-waste-to-landfill program by composting and recycling, and designs products for easy disassembly and repair to extend their lifespan.
- **Social Responsibility:** This focuses on creating a positive impact on people—employees, supply chain workers, and the community.
  - *Example:* A retail company ensures living wages for all employees and factory workers in its supply chain, offers comprehensive parental leave and mental health support, and runs a foundation that funds local education initiatives.
- **Economic Responsibility:** This ensures the business is financially viable, ethical, and contributes to long-term economic health.
  - *Example:* A manufacturing firm invests in energy-efficient machinery that reduces long-term operational costs, avoids corrupt practices in all markets, and creates stable, high-quality jobs in its communities, supporting local economic resilience.

### **2 Need for Workplace Sustainability**

The drive for sustainability is not just ethical; it's a strategic imperative for modern business survival and growth.

- **Build Resilience:** In a world of climate change and scarce resources, sustainable companies are better prepared.

- *Example:* A food and beverage company that sources ingredients sustainably and has reduced water usage by 40% is less vulnerable to droughts and supply chain shocks than a competitor relying on water-intensive, single-source suppliers.
- **Meet Regulatory Requirements:** Governments worldwide are enacting stricter environmental and social regulations (e.g., EU's CSRD, mandatory climate reporting).
- *Example:* A multinational corporation must comply with new laws requiring detailed public reporting on its carbon emissions and diversity metrics, making a robust sustainability strategy essential to avoid fines and reputational damage.
- **Enhance Employer Brand:** A strong sustainability ethos attracts and retains top talent, particularly Millennials and Gen Z.
- *Example:* A consulting firm known for its pro-bono work for environmental NGOs and its inclusive culture finds it easier to recruit sought-after graduates who prioritize purpose in their careers.
- **Improve Productivity:** Healthy, engaged, and fairly treated employees are more productive.
- *Example:* A company that introduces ergonomic workstations, flexible hours, and mindfulness sessions sees a measurable decrease in absenteeism and an increase in employee output and innovation.
- **Strengthen Economic Performance:** Sustainable practices often lead to cost savings and open new markets.
- *Example:* An automotive company's massive investment in electric vehicle technology positions it to capture market share as consumer preference and regulations shift away from fossil fuels, securing its long-term profitability.

### **Role of Human Resources in Driving Workplace Sustainability**

HR transitions from an administrative function to the **architect and engine** of the company's sustainability culture, embedding it into every people-related process.

#### **1. Talent Acquisition and Onboarding**

HR shapes the workforce to value and advance sustainability goals from day one.

- *Example:* **Patagonia** actively recruits ambassadors for its environmental mission. Their job descriptions emphasize activism, and their onboarding includes watching documentaries on environmental issues, immediately immersing new hires in the company's core purpose.

#### **2. Learning & Development (L&D)**

HR builds organizational capability for sustainability.

- *Example:* **Siemens** offers extensive training programs on topics like circular economy principles and ethical AI. Managers undergo specific leadership training on how to integrate ESG goals into their team's daily work and decision-making.

#### **3. Performance Management**

HR aligns individual goals with organizational sustainability objectives.

- *Example:* At **Unilever**, a portion of executive bonuses is tied to achieving ambitious targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and plastic waste, making sustainability performance a direct factor in compensation.

## 4. Employee Engagement

HR channels employee passion into action, fostering ownership and community.

- *Example:* **Google** runs "Google Green" teams—employee-led groups that initiate local office sustainability projects, from bee-hiving on rooftops to e-waste drives. The company supports these with grants and recognition.

## 5. Policy Development

HR codifies sustainability into the rules of the workplace.

- *Example:* HR at **Sales force** has developed policies for a "1-1-1 model" of philanthropy (1% equity, 1% product, 1% employee time), a robust flexible/remote work policy to reduce commuting emissions, and stringent DEI hiring and promotion guidelines.

## Key Components of a Workplace Sustainability Strategy

### 1. Environmental Sustainability

Focuses on reducing the organization's physical footprint.

- *Example:* **Bank of America's** "paperless" initiative for internal processes, its LEED-certified headquarters with smart lighting and water recycling, and a procurement policy that prioritizes suppliers with strong environmental records.

### 2. Social Sustainability

Focuses on the human capital and community impact.

- *Example:* **Starbucks** provides comprehensive healthcare (including mental health) to part-time partners, offers full tuition coverage through its College Achievement Plan, and has public diversity and inclusion goals to ensure equitable representation.

### 3. Economic Sustainability

Focuses on long-term viability and ethical growth.

- *Example:* **Interface** (carpet manufacturer) invested heavily in developing recycled and bio-based materials. While costly upfront, this innovation reduced dependency on volatile petroleum prices, cut waste disposal costs, and created a unique, premium product line, driving long-term profitability.

## Human Resource Strategies Supporting Workplace Sustainability

### 1. Green HRM Practices

Applying sustainability principles directly to HR functions.

- *Example:* Using digital platforms like **Workday** for all HR processes (payroll, reviews, onboarding), eliminating paper. Recognizing employees who carpool or cycle with extra vacation days or bonuses.

### 2. Sustainable Workforce Planning

Anticipating the skills needed for a sustainable future.

- *Example:* An energy company like **Ørsted** (which transformed from fossil fuels to renewables) proactively retrained its oil and gas engineers in wind turbine technology and hired data scientists for energy grid optimization, planning for its green transition a decade in advance.

### 3. Sustainable Leadership Development

Cultivating leaders who embody the triple bottom line.

- *Example: IKEA's* leadership programs include modules on "Democratic Design" (form, function, sustainability, quality, low price) and responsible sourcing, ensuring future leaders can make decisions that balance all three pillars.

#### 4. Health, Well-being, and Safety

Viewing employee wellness as a sustainability issue.

- *Example:\*\* Johnson & Johnson's* long-standing wellness programs have included on-site health screenings, stress management workshops, and ergonomic assessments, leading to significant healthcare cost savings and higher productivity.

#### 5. Workplace Culture Transformation

Shifting mindsets and behaviors organization-wide.

- *Example: Adobe* uses gamification in its offices—displaying real-time energy consumption dashboards and creating friendly competition between floors to reduce usage. Leaders consistently communicate the link between these actions and the company's climate commitments.

#### HR Metrics and Evaluation

What gets measured gets managed. HR must quantify the impact of sustainability initiatives.

- *Example Metrics:*
  - **Engagement:** % of employees participating in volunteer/eco programs.
  - **Environmental:** kWh of energy saved per employee, recycling rate (%).
  - **Social:** eNPS (Employee Net Promoter Score), mental health benefit utilization rates, diversity in leadership pipelines.
  - **Talent:** Retention rate of high-performers in "green" roles, number of training hours per employee on sustainability topics.
  - **Economic:** Cost savings from reduced energy/paper use, ROI on wellness programs (reduced sick days).

#### Challenges in Implementation

- **Resistance to Change:** *Example:* Long-tenured employees may see new recycling rules or digital workflows as inconvenient "extra work," requiring persistent change management.
- **Budget Constraints:** *Example:* A small business wants solar panels but faces high upfront costs, struggling to justify the investment against short-term financial pressures.
- **Measuring ROI:** *Example:* It's difficult to put a precise dollar value on the improved brand reputation from a DEI initiative, making it hard to compete for funding against a marketing campaign with clear sales projections.
- **Lack of Leadership Commitment:** *Example:* If the CEO views the sustainability report as a "PR exercise" rather than a strategic tool, mid-level managers will not prioritize related goals, dooming initiatives to failure.

#### The Future of HR and Workplace Sustainability

HR's role will evolve into that of a **Chief Sustainability & People Officer**.

- **AI-Driven HR:** AI will optimize shift patterns to reduce energy use in offices and analyze skills data to identify future green skill gaps.

- **Hybrid as Standard:** Reduced office footprints and commuting will become a primary lever for cutting corporate carbon emissions.
- **Skills Revolution:** Demand will soar for **green skills** (carbon accounting, sustainable design) and **human skills** (ethics, systems thinking) that AI cannot replicate.
- **Purpose-Led Workforce:** Employees will choose employers based on demonstrable climate action and social equity, making authenticity in sustainability non-negotiable.
- **HR as Sustainability Champion:** HR will be the key function ensuring that the workplace of the future is not just productive and profitable, but also **regenerative, equitable, and human-centric.**

### Conclusion

A Workplace Sustainability Strategy is no longer optional—it is essential for survival. HR’s leadership in sustainability can reshape organizational culture, reduce environmental impact, improve employee well-being, and enhance long-term performance. By integrating sustainability into every HR process—hiring, training, performance management, engagement, and policy—the organization builds a future-ready workforce aligned with environmental and social responsible.

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