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A N N A L E S  
UNIVERSITATIS MARIAE CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA  
LUBLIN – POLONIA

VOL. LV, 2

SECTIO H

2021

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*The Practice of Green HRM in Poland – with the Focus on  
Elements of the HR Function*

**Keywords:** sustainable human resource development; sustainable HR function; green practices; pro-ecological practices

**JEL:** M12; M52; M53

**How to quote this paper:** Piwowar-Sulej, K. (2021). The Practice of Green HRM in Poland – with the Focus on Elements of the HR Function. *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, sectio H – Oeconomia*, Vol. 55, No. 2.

**Abstract**

**Theoretical background:** Employees' behavior plays a crucial role in the organizational environmental performance. There are many factors which influence pro-ecological behavior among employees, however, this paper focuses on the practices related to green human resources management (HRM) and – in particular – to the HR function.

**Purpose of the article:** The purpose of this paper is to answer the following research questions: 1) What is the scope of using the practices related to the green HR function? 2) Which elements of the green HR function require further improvement?

**Research methods:** For the purpose of the article, literature studies and empirical research based on a survey method have been used. In her analyses, the author has included additional variables such as the origin of capital and company size.

**Main findings:** The organizations under study are in the preliminary stages as far as the implementation of green HRM practices is concerned. Both variables (the company size and the origin of capital) play a role in the implementation of the analyzed practices.

## Introduction

The unique asset of each company and its capital is represented by people, as they cannot be imitated by the competitors. Achieving any business goals is impossible if its human resources are either unqualified or demotivated. Thus, appropriate management of people in organizations has been addressed since the 1980s. Appropriate management is understood as taking actions focused on meeting the organization's objectives along with following its personnel needs – as the definition of human resource management provides (Armstrong, 2006; Boon, Eckardt, Lepak, & Boselie, 2018).

The HR function has evolved from a purely administrative role to a strategic one (Lundy, 1994) and has to support the organization in dealing with external and internal changes. These changes are, i.a., reflected in the need for introducing the concept of corporate sustainable development which means “meeting the needs of a firm's direct and indirect stakeholders (such as shareholders, employees, clients, pressure groups, communities, etc.), without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well” (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002). Within this concept a special attention is directed towards environmental sustainability. According to the United Nations (UN) World Commission on Environment and Development, environmental sustainability is about acting in a way that ensures future generations have the natural resources available to live an equal, if not better, way of life as current generations (United Nations, 2020).

Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) is a type of Sustainable Human Resource Management that is focused on environmental issues. Green HRM is based on a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses theories and methods from psychology, sociology, management and economics, due to a wide array of correlated questions and issues (Ren, Tang, & Jackson, 2018). Although a clear definition of this term has not been developed as yet (Shahriari, Hassanpoor, Navehebrahim, & Jafarinia, 2019), the contribution of green HRM policies and practices refers to supporting sustainable practices and increasing employee awareness and commitment concerning the issue of sustainability. The role of green HRM in the light of the AMO (ability, motivation, opportunity) theory (Pham, Tučková, & Phan, 2019) is to identify and develop employees' competencies, design a system of HR performance appraisal and compensation, and create participation-oriented culture.

A thesis can be formulated that the fundament of introducing a broader set of practices aimed at shaping employees' pro-environmental attitudes is, first of all, an appropriate HR function which consists of such elements as recruitment and selection, HR performance appraisal, HR training, remuneration and HR flow (Piwower-Sulej, 2021). These elements accompany the life cycle of an employee in an organization. Therefore, this article aims at presenting how the practices related to the green HR function should be shaped in order to support organizational transition towards environmental sustainability and how often they are used in Poland. In particular, this study intends to answer two research questions:

- 1) What is the scope of the use of practices related to the green HR function?
- 2) Which elements of the green HR function require further improvement?

For the purpose of this article, both literature studies and empirical research in the form of a survey were used. The survey covered 199 companies and was carried out in Poland in 2020.

Although the research on green HRM was conducted in Poland before, it focused mostly on medium-sized companies and did not analyze the variable in the form of company size and the origin of company capital. Therefore, this article will compare new findings with previous studies and, additionally, fills the identified gap through presenting differences between companies taking into account their size and the origin of their capital.

Literature review

Before the presentation of the practices used within the framework of the green HR function (Table 1), it is worth mentioning that researchers in their studies also consider other green HRM-related practices such as green participation and empowerment (Govindarajulu & Daily, 2004; Tariq, Jan, & Ahmad, 2016; Markey, McIvor, & Wright, 2016) and shaping green organizational culture (Piwowar-Sulej, 2020; Tepe Küçükoğlu & Pinar, 2015). The other emphasize the role of managers in the green HRM system (Afsar, Maqsoom, Shahjehan, Afridi, Nawaz, & Fazliani, 2020). In turn, Zoogah (2011) created a meta-theory and presented green HRM as a function of a cognitive/social HR information processing system.

Table 1. Practices associated with the green HR function

Element of the green HR function	Examples of practices related to individual elements of green HRM
Recruitment and selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– communication of employer’s commitment to ecology during recruitment</li><li>– exposure of environmental values in job vacancy advertising</li><li>– verification of candidate’s ecological competencies during the recruitment process</li><li>– giving preference to candidates with professional experience in environmental projects</li><li>– introducing e-recruitment</li></ul>
HR appraisal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– inclusion of environmental criteria in performance appraisals (use of environmental responsibilities, environmental incidents, and also the communication of environmental policy and concerns)</li><li>– establishment of goals and responsibilities (individual, team-related) concerning the ecological initiative implementation</li><li>– conducting environmental audits</li><li>– providing regular feedback to employees on their progress in attaining ecological goals or improvement of their environmental effectiveness</li></ul>
Remuneration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– development of a rewards system for the completion of ecological projects (awards, subsidies to wages), pro-environmental initiatives (ideas)</li><li>– incentives for workers to develop green competencies</li></ul>

Element of the green HR function	Examples of practices related to individual elements of green HRM
HR training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– analysis and identification of employees’ needs with regard to ecological training</li><li>– provision of ecological training for employees and managers to develop ecological skills and knowledge</li><li>– introducing e-learning</li></ul>
HR flow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– taking into account employees’ green performance in the decisions related to promotions</li><li>– realization of a green career in a company</li></ul>

Source: Author’s own study with the use of (Bombiak, 2019; Renwick, Redman, & Maguire, 2013; Tang, Chen Jiang, Paillé, & Jia, 2018; Yusliza, Othman, Fernando, Amran, Surienty, & Ramahah, 2015).

Taking into account the above-presented elements of HR function, one can state that many authors proved their effectiveness – mostly in shaping pro-environmental employees’ behaviors and, thus, increasing environmental performance. For example, Masri and Jaaron (2017) found the highest correlation between green recruitment and selection and environmental performance. In turn, Dumont, Shen and Deng (2017) proved that HR appraisal and remuneration system influences both employees’ in-role green behavior (routine, officially appraised and rewarded) and employees’ extra-role behaviors (not officially appraised and rewarded). Zibarras and Coan (2015) found that the most effective driver of employees’ pro-environmental behavior is appropriate green training.

As far as HR remuneration is concerned, interesting research results were presented by Young, Davis, McNeill, Malhotra, Russell, Unsworth, and Clegg (2015). It was proved that introducing incentive payments for employees who do not drive to work and for waste reduction helped to achieve higher than average levels of behavioral change.

In the publication by De Prins, Van Beirendonck, De Vos and Segers (2014), it was mentioned that such terms as “green careers”, “green employees”, and “green jobs” are becoming increasingly common. The number of green jobs is increasing (Sulich, Rutkowska, & Popławski, 2020). Since hiring specialists in environment protection is not enough, green tasks should be included into the existing positions (Zibarras & Coan, 2015).

The previous two studies on the implementation of green HRM in Poland included not only practices related to the green HR function. They were conducted in 2018 and focused respectively on (a) small and medium enterprises (with the prevalence of medium-sized companies) (Bombiak, 2019), (b) young Polish companies (Bombiak & Marciniuk-Kluska, 2018). Their results concerning the elements of the green HR function are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Results of the previous research projects on the implementation of green HRM in Poland

Element of the green HR function	% of companies; Study (a), N = 300	% of companies; Study (b), N = 150
R&S	between 20.7 and 33.3% of companies used different practices related to this element	between 20.67 and 32.67% of companies used different practices related to this element
HR training	between 19 and 26.3% of companies used different practices related to this element	between 19.33 and 25.33% of companies used different practices related to this element
HR performance appraisal	between 13.7 and 21% of companies used different practices related to this element	between 14 and 18.67% of companies used different practices related to this element
Remuneration	17.7% of companies implemented a reward system for the completion of ecological projects related to this element	20% of companies implemented a reward system for the completion of ecological projects related to this element

Source: Author’s own study based on (Bombiak, 2019; Bombiak & Marciniuk-Kluska, 2018).

As Table 2 shows, both previous research projects did not include the issue of HR flow. The next conclusion is that the practices related to the remaining elements of the green HR function are rarely used in the companies located in Poland.

**Research methods**

Empirical research was carried out remotely in the period from March to May 2020. Within the research process, a survey instrument authored by Zibarras and Coan (2015) was used. This instrument included many different organizational practices related to both green HRM and environmental management. This article presents only the relevant results, taking into account the purpose and the research questions.

One hundred and ninety-nine companies from different industries participated in the survey as a result of snowball sampling. Extramural students of the Wrocław University of Economics and Business helped in the process of data collection during the hard time of COVID-19. Since the industry is not the subject of discussion, Table 3 presents the information about the research sample focusing on such variables as company size and the origin of capital. The respondents were medium-level managers and employees (one respondent from each company).

As far as analyses are concerned, descriptive statistics, Kendall’s Tau-b coefficient and Chi-square test were used in this study. The first test is a nonparametric measure of the strength and direction of association which exists between two variables measured on at least an ordinal scale, whereas the Chi-square statistic is used for testing relationships between categorical variables.

Table 3. Characteristics of the research sample

Criterion	Item	Number of representatives in the research sample (N = 199)	% of the research sample
Company size	Very large (more than 5,000 employees)	41	21%
	Large (251–5,000 employees)	82	41%
	Medium-sized (51–249 employees)	34	17%
	Small (up to 50 employees)	42	21%
Origin of the company capital	Polish	88	44%
	Foreign	111	56%

Source: Author’s own study.

Results and discussion

The respondents were asked how often the individual practices related to individual elements of HR function are used. The results are shown in Figure 1.

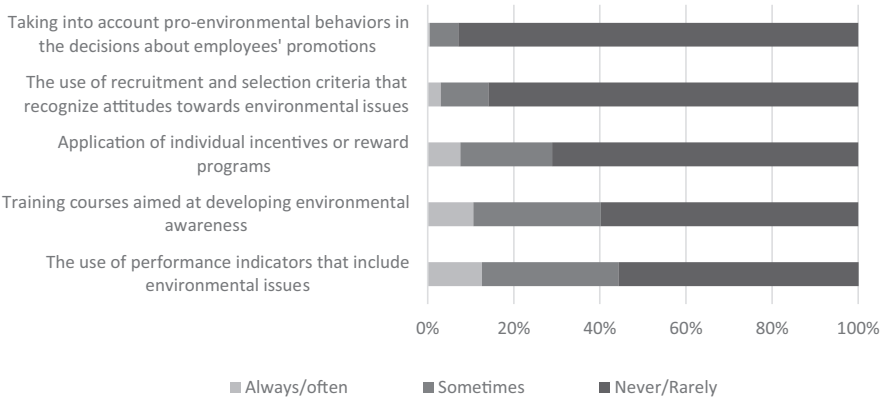


Figure 1. Frequency of use of practices related to the green HR function – research results

Source: Author’s own study.

The majority of practices are never or rarely used in most of the surveyed companies, which is in line with the results of previous studies conducted in Poland. The most neglected area is HR flow which was not covered in previous research. In order to identify the differences between companies which represent different size and origin of capital, Kendall’s Tau-b coefficient and Chi-square test were used. Table 4 presents the results of these calculations.

**Table 4.** Results of statistical tests aimed at finding/identifying differences between companies

Practices within the elements of HR function	Results related to company size		Results related to the origin of capital	
	$\tau_b$	p	$\chi^2$	V
The use of recruitment and selection criteria that recognize attitudes towards environmental issues	0.229	<0.001	6.82**	0.19
Training courses aimed at developing environmental awareness	0.272	<0.001	17.18**	0.29
The use of performance indicators that include environmental issues	0.369	<0.001	29.57**	0.39
Application of individual incentives or reward programs	0.240	<0.001	17.15**	0.30
Taking into account pro-environmental behaviors in the decisions about employees' promotions	0.206	0.002	3.23*	0.13

$\tau_b$  – Kendall's Tau-b coefficient,  $\chi^2$  – Chi-square test result; V – Cramer's V coefficient, \* –  $p > 0.05$ , \*\* –  $p < 0.01$

Source: Author's own study.

The research revealed that there is a statistically significant difference between the companies different in size in the frequency of using all HRM practices ( $p < 0.05$  in all cases). The larger the company, the more often the surveyed practices are used. For example, 24% of very large companies and 0% of small companies always/often use performance indicators that include environmental issues. Pro-environmental behaviors are taken in the decisions about employees' promotions only in medium, large and very large companies. Similar calculations have not been conducted in Poland before, however, their results are in line with the research conducted, for example, in Germany (Wagner, 2011) which revealed that training is more often used in larger than smaller companies.

A similar result was obtained in the context of the origin of company capital. Foreign-owned companies more often use green HRM practices than Polish-owned companies. This is in particular visible in the area of HR appraisal ( $V = 0.39$ ). Only 7% of local companies always/often use performance indicators that include environmental issues, whereas 17% of foreign-owned firms practice green HR appraisal rules. Foreign capital means higher frequency in using the majority of studied practices. Only in the case of taking into account pro-environmental behaviors in the decisions about employees' promotions, the difference between companies is not statistically significant.

**Conclusions and implications**

As presented in this study, the green HR function contributes to behavioral changes and increase company environmental performance. Therefore, employers should pay attention to practices related to this function. In contrast, the research shows that these practices are rarely used in the companies located in Poland, which

is in line with previous studies conducted in this country. However, the findings from this study contribute to the knowledge development in the area of green HRM in Polish settings. As presented research showed, green HRM practices are more often applied in larger companies and foreign-owned businesses.

The above indicates that there is much to be done in the analyzed area. Changes in companies' policies and practices seem to be inevitable because of the need to protect the natural environment and pressure from different stakeholders (e.g. customers and local community). The green practices have impact on the quality of the lives of individuals, including their employees (Taylor & Lawrence, 2012). Therefore, an increase of the awareness of management boards and HR departments working in companies located in Poland (especially in smaller and Polish-owned companies) is needed in terms of the use of practices within the green HR function. These practices, as different research showed, directly contribute to organizational environmental sustainability.

As far as the indicated differences between companies are concerned, one can state that joint effect of ownership type (foreign) and knowledge transfer to subsidiaries in terms of green HRM may guarantee the success of change towards sustainability. Although interfirm collaborative programs between not only foreign and local but also large and small companies could help in the effective transfer of knowledge, educational institutions and training companies should be the first to introduce appropriate education programs in the area of green HRM.

Considering the directions for future research, it is worth mentioning that employers – through their pro-environmental HR practices – can shape appropriate behaviors which can be transferred from the workplace to households spreading the knowledge on how to protect the natural resources among families and friends. The issue of sharing the practices which were taught in the workplace and in private life – taking into account the role of individual green HRM practices – would constitute an interesting research topic.

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