

# Making sustainability work: learning, interpreting and enacting sustainability in everyday HR practice in Swedish municipalities

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Despite growing interest in sustainable human resource management (HRM), limited attention has been given to how sustainability is enacted through everyday human resource (HR) practice. This study aims to examine how HR professionals define sustainability within HRM, interpret and position their role in sustainability work and engage in and reflect on learning related to sustainability in everyday practice.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This qualitative study draws on interviews with 13 municipal HR professionals in Sweden and workplace shadowing of eight. Using reflexive thematic analysis within a workplace learning perspective, this study explores how the meanings, roles and practices of sustainability unfolded in context.

**Findings** – HR professionals view sustainability primarily as a moral and relational responsibility, rather than a technical or policy-driven task. Through situated practices of trust-building, ethical reflection and value-driven dialogue, they translated abstract goals into locally meaningful concerns. Their connective work bridged tensions across competing demands, acting less as policy implementers and more as relational enablers. Learning related to sustainability emerged informally, through negotiation, role experimentation and everyday interactions that shaped professional identities and required strong social competence.

**Practical implications** – Organizations must recognize and support HR's connective work by legitimizing reflexive practices, enabling HR to mediate across stakeholder groups and embedding supportive infrastructures for everyday workplace learning.

**Originality/value** – This study advances sustainable HRM and workplace learning by shifting focus from formal strategies to HR's relational and connective practices. It emphasizes how sustainability is enacted through micropractices and how HR professionals' learning and identity work are integral to sustaining organizational change.

**Keywords** HRM, Human Resources, Sustainability, Sustainability learning, Workplace learning, Learning through practice, Public sector, Qualitative research

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Organizations today face increasing sustainability demands, and human resource (HR) professionals are increasingly expected to integrate these priorities into their daily work in



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response to societal, regulatory and ethical pressures (Aust *et al.*, 2024; Chams and García-Blandon, 2019; Kramar, 2022). Policy documents and organizational strategies often specify sustainability goals and responsibilities; however, translating these into operational practice remains a challenge (Kramar, 2014, 2022). With HR frequently positioned as a key translator, it shapes how sustainability is interpreted and enacted in organizational life (Brewster and Brookes, 2024).

While sustainable human resource management (HRM) research has highlighted structures and strategies, such as alignment with corporate goals, competency frameworks and stakeholder management (Cohen *et al.*, 2012; De Stefano *et al.*, 2018; Richards, 2023; Siddique and Naveed, 2025), such perspectives risk overlooking how sustainability actually becomes meaningful in practice. Neglecting the ways HR professionals make sense of and operationalize sustainability risks reducing their role to compliance or technical delivery, while obscuring the interpretive, relational and connective work through which sustainability is enacted (Liang *et al.*, 2024; Podgorodnichenko *et al.*, 2021; Westerman, 2021). Despite growing interest, relatively little is known about how HR professionals learn and enact sustainability in their everyday work (Podgorodnichenko *et al.*, 2021; Westerman, 2021).

Workplace learning research helps address this gap by conceptualizing learning not as the transfer of fixed knowledge, but as a socially embedded, situated and relational process that unfolds through practice, interaction and negotiation (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Fenwick, 2006; Gherardi, 2009; Wenger, 1998). From this perspective, learning related to sustainability learning is an ongoing, context-sensitive process of becoming and identity work, enacted through HR professionals' participation in organizational routines and their negotiation of meaning with others. Bridging this lens to sustainable HRM allows us to see how HR professionals' practices are not merely technical tasks, but sites of meaning-making where sustainability is interpreted and embedded.

Against this backdrop, this study examines how HR professionals in a Swedish municipal context engage in learning related to sustainability through their everyday practices. Drawing on interviews with 13 municipal HR professionals and workplace shadowing of eight of them, this study explores the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1. How do HR professionals define sustainability in the context of HRM?
- RQ2. In what ways do HR professionals interpret and position their role in sustainability work?
- RQ3. How do HR professionals engage in and reflect on learning related to sustainability in everyday practice?

By adopting a workplace learning perspective, this study contributes to sustainable HRM and workplace learning research by redirecting attention from formal strategies and predefined competencies to the situated, relational and reflective processes through which sustainability is enacted in practice. In doing so, it emphasizes that HR professionals are not merely implementers of sustainability agendas, but indeed active interpreters and relational enablers, whose connective work is central to the dynamics of workplace learning.

The paper is organized as follows. First, it provides the background on the role of HR professionals in sustainability efforts, drawing on sustainable HRM and workplace learning literature. Next, the research design and methodology are outlined, including the research setting, data collection methods, analytical approach and ethical considerations. The empirical findings are then presented, highlighting the two main themes and their respective subthemes. This is followed by a discussion that connects the empirical data with the

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theoretical framework and previous research, before concluding with limitations and recommendations for future research and practice.

## 2. Background: Framing sustainable human resource management

This section outlines sustainability as an organizational concern, then examines the HR function's role in organizational sustainability, and finally introduces a workplace learning perspective on sustainability in HR practice.

### 2.1 Sustainability as an organizational concern

Amid increasing pressure for sustainable development, a novel research area has emerged in recent decades. Sustainable HRM integrates various disciplines to demonstrate how HRM can provide benefits beyond just shareholder profits, addressing social responsibility, [United Nations' \(2015\)](#) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the common good (e.g. climate change) and the triple bottom line (i.e. people, planet and profit) (e.g. [Aust et al., 2020](#)).

While this study takes its point of departure in the three dimensions of sustainability: economic, ecological and social (see [Ehnert et al., 2016](#)), it particularly emphasizes social sustainability, which frequently emerged in HR professionals' accounts. Social sustainability in HRM is a contested and evolving concept, often described as a values-driven orientation ([Aust et al., 2024](#)). It involves refining organizational systems, practices and relationships that promote long-term positive human outcomes for employees and other stakeholders ([Kramar, 2014](#); [Stahl et al., 2020](#)). In practice, these outcomes may include well-being, equity, organizational justice, work-life balance, employee development, inclusion and participation and long-term employability. These outcomes can be applied both within the workplace and in broader society.

### 2.2 Positioning the human resource function in organizational sustainability

In sustainable HRM literature, HR professionals are often portrayed as well-positioned to influence not only internal workforce dynamics but also the broader societal impacts of organizational practices ([De Stefano et al., 2018](#); [Kramar, 2022](#); [Podgorodnichenko et al., 2020](#)). HR practices such as recruitment, leadership development, work environment management and inclusion initiatives create opportunities to embed sustainability. Therefore, scholars identify the HR function as a potential driver of organizational sustainability ([Aust et al., 2020](#); [Gruman and Budworth, 2022](#); [Kramar, 2022](#); [Ren et al., 2023](#)), especially regarding positive human and social outcomes ([Cooke et al., 2022](#); [Järlström et al., 2024](#)).

Yet empirical research also documents difficulties translating such responsibilities into a broader strategic role ([Brewster and Brookes, 2024](#); [Liang et al., 2024](#)). HR often remains supportive or instrumental, implementing top-down mandates without full strategic involvement ([Alfes et al., 2010](#); [De Stefano et al., 2018](#)). Such marginalization can occur in various organizational settings, but it is often reinforced when sustainability is framed as an external concern, for instance, housed in separate corporate social responsibility units, creating silos and role ambiguity ([Sarvaiya and Arrowsmith, 2023](#)). Structural constraints further inhibit HR's strategic engagement, including inadequate preparedness for complex issues ([Podgorodnichenko et al., 2021](#)), limited resources and managerial support and short-term performance pressures that may undermine employee well-being and sustainability objectives ([Järlström et al., 2018](#); [Liang et al., 2024](#)).

However, HR professionals' active involvement in sustainability is also shaped by their understanding of their role and their perception of their ability to make a difference ([Alfes et al., 2010](#); [Podgorodnichenko et al., 2021](#)). Whether HR professionals see themselves as

“survival strategists” (Ehnert and Harry, 2012) or merely “emergency responders” (Aust *et al.*, 2024), their practices will differ in a proactive or reactive stance. Westerman (2021) argues that HR’s strength may lie less in leading standalone sustainability initiatives and more in embedding sustainability principles into core HR practices such as recruitment, leadership development, or employee training. When sustainability objectives are shared and internalized across departments, HR can assume a more proactive and strategic role (Sarvaiya and Arrowsmith, 2023).

### 2.3 *A workplace-learning perspective on sustainability in human resource practice*

While sustainable HRM literature frequently highlights competencies such as strategic alignment and stakeholder management (Cohen *et al.*, 2012; De Stefano *et al.*, 2018; Kramar, 2022; Richards, 2023; Westerman, 2021), such framings risk reducing learning to the transfer of predefined skills. This study adopts a workplace learning perspective, which conceptualizes learning as socially embedded, situated and relational (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Fenwick, 2006; Gherardi, 2009; Wenger, 1998). From this perspective, learning related to sustainability is not the acquisition of fixed knowledge, but an ongoing process of becoming and identity work, enacted through participation and negotiation in everyday organizational practice.

These viewpoints converge in emphasizing that workplace learning unfolds informally in daily work, afforded and constrained by organizational contexts (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2004), shaped by power and legitimacy (Fenwick, 2006; Gherardi, 2009) and connected to identity construction through participation (Wenger, 1998). Under conditions that support inquiry and dialogue, such as psychological safety (Bailey, 2015; Edmondson, 1999, 2018), HR professionals can voice concerns, reflect collectively and experiment with new practices. This positions learning related to sustainability as a relational accomplishment, where professionals negotiate meaning, develop shared understandings and translate values into practice (Brandt *et al.*, 2022; Podgorodnichenko *et al.*, 2021).

While these scholars represent different strands of workplace learning theory, this study draws on a range of perspectives to capture the multi-dimensional nature of learning related to sustainability. By combining situated, relational and identity-focused insights, the study seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding than any single perspective alone. In this way, the diverse perspectives strengthen the theoretical foundation, reflecting the complexity of HR professionals’ sustainability work.

Anchored in this perspective, this study focuses analytically on the professional practice level, while acknowledging intersections with individual sensemaking and organizational dynamics. For HR, this means that sustainability is learned in and through everyday HR practices, as HR professionals interpret, embody and give meaning to values in interaction with others (Podgorodnichenko *et al.*, 2021; Westerman *et al.*, 2020). Through these microprocesses, sustainability is enacted in practice. The originality of this study lies in its linkage of sustainable HRM and workplace learning literatures, demonstrating how sustainability gains significance through everyday HR practices. In doing so, it advances sustainable HRM beyond mere structural and strategic approaches, while broadening workplace learning scholarship into the less-explored area of HR’s role in sustainability. A further contribution is the focus on HR professionals’ own learning, showing how their sensemaking and identity work constitute a vital yet often overlooked dimension of sustainable HRM. This emphasis on professional learning highlights not only what HR does for sustainability, but also how HR professionals themselves develop through these processes, thereby adding to the debates in workplace learning and sustainable HRM alike.

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In sum, adopting a workplace learning perspective enables the examination of how HR professionals define sustainability in HRM (RQ1), position their role (RQ2) and engage in learning (RQ3) as situated, relational practices in contemporary organizations.

### 3. Research design and methodology

To address the RQs, a qualitative, interpretive research design was employed, as it allows for studying complex, context-specific and value-laden phenomena such as sustainability in HR practices (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This design enabled the capture of HR professionals' personal experiences with sustainability and the practices through which they incorporated sustainability into their daily work.

This section covers data collection, analysis and ethical considerations. To contextualize the municipalities' stance on sustainability, a brief summary of their sustainable development strategies is included in subsection 3.1 to orient the reader.

#### 3.1 The research setting

This study gathered HR perspectives from three Swedish municipalities with 500–6,000 employees. This selection aimed to enrich the data, rather than facilitate comparisons, among these municipalities.

Governed by politicians, municipalities set goals to serve stakeholders and society (Knies *et al.*, 2024). Their sustainability strategies are central to this study, as all municipalities had adopted the 17 SDGs, focusing on economic, environmental and social sustainability, each tailoring its approach to local challenges.

Economic sustainability comprised one-third of objectives, focusing on a circular economy, quality of services, eco-friendly consumption and local growth in housing, business and tourism. In the largest municipality, over half of its objectives were linked to environmental issues. The two smaller municipalities had 10%–20% of goals addressing this dimension, which included sustainable transportation, renewable energy, reducing carbon emissions, increasing biodiversity and protecting ecosystems.

Social sustainability prioritized residents and employees. For residents, goals included a safe, attractive and healthy municipality with quality education, equal opportunities, support for continuous learning, community participation, belonging and a violence-free society. The municipalities allocated about 20% of their sustainability objectives to promote workplace social sustainability through long-term perspectives, shared goals, respectful interactions, cooperation, critical reflection and openness to new work methods.

Sustainable development objectives were set top-down, requiring alignment across the organization, including HR. However, no explicit roles were designated for sustainable development in official documents.

#### 3.2 Data collection

In 2024, data collection took place after HR managers approved interviews and observations, granting the first author organizational access. Thirteen HR professionals participated in interviews, receiving verbal and written information via an invitation letter that explained the study's purpose, ethics and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time.

All 13 HR professionals, 10 women and three men, had at least 2.5 years of municipal HR experience, with most having between five and 12 years. They held various roles, including project managers, HR specialists and HR generalists, while administrative roles such as payroll or pension administrators were excluded.

Nine interviews were conducted in person, and four via secure video link, according to HR professionals' preferences. The average interview lasted 85 min. A semistructured

interview guide was developed based on the RQs, ensuring focused discussions on the study's objectives while allowing for exploration (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). It included questions such as: What does sustainability mean to you, in relation to HR and your work (RQ1)? How do you perceive the HR function's overall role in supporting and driving sustainability work in the municipality (RQ2)? Can you describe internal or external collaborations that contribute to sustainability work (RQ3)? Which sustainability areas do you consider most significant in relation to HR, and why (RQ1 and RQ2)?

After completing the interviews, the first eight participants agreed to be observed at work for one or two days. A non-participant observation method, shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007, 2018), complemented the interviews, revealing the tacit, relational and contextual aspects of HR work. In total, the eight HR professionals from two municipalities were observed over 11 working days. An observation protocol was created to generate detailed field notes, focusing on the study's objectives and follow-up questions regarding earlier interviews and HR practices. The notes captured interactions, events, behaviors and the researcher's initial thoughts or interpretations. All field notes were expanded shortly after each shadowing session (Czarniawska, 2018).

Using interviews and shadowing together enabled the exploration of both narrated and enacted aspects of organizational life (Gill *et al.*, 2014). Interviews provided access to HR professionals' own accounts and interpretations of their work (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015), while shadowing offered insights into tacit and relational practices not easily captured in self-reports (Czarniawska, 2007, 2018). This combination also made it possible to observe how sustainability was integrated into or excluded from daily HR practices, and how HR professionals managed tensions in real-time. Shadowing, however, is inherently limited by temporal and contextual constraints, which makes interviews a necessary complement rather than a substitute (Gill *et al.*, 2014). Taken together, the dual approach enhanced the depth and credibility of the findings.

### 3.3 Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) is a qualitative approach for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across data. In this study, it was selected for its flexibility and creative potential in interpreting multiple data sources. In addition, this method was especially suitable for the study's exploratory aim, as it emphasizes meaning-making over frequency counts and supports examining participants' subjective experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis aligns with the study's focus on learning by highlighting the researcher's interpretive role and viewing theme development as an analytic storytelling process rather than objective categories (Braun and Clarke, 2021, 2022). This made reflexive thematic analysis particularly useful for exploring how sustainability was enacted and negotiated in context, while also accommodating the complexity of sustainability by identifying both shared and conflicting meanings within their organizational environment.

The authors of this study bring diverse experience from research and teaching in work and organizational psychology, HRM and development. The first author, who conducted the data collection, also has practical experience in municipal HR. This background provided an informed sensitivity to organizational language, dynamics and contextual challenges, which enriched both generation and analysis. At the same time, reflexive thematic analysis requires that such positionality is critically examined rather than taken for granted, ensuring that the researcher's knowledge contributes to a nuanced understanding without limiting alternative interpretations (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

The analytic process was inductive and interpretative, with themes developed through immersion, reflection and an iterative movement between parts and the whole of the empirical data, following the six phases of [Braun and Clarke \(2022\)](#):

The *familiarization* phase began with *verbatim* transcription of all interview audio files. Following each shadowing session, field notes were expanded and together with the interview transcripts, all material was read and reread to gain an initial understanding of the content and note early ideas. *Initial coding* was conducted inductively in NVivo 12, capturing meaningful units, both semantic and explicit, as well as latent and implicit, across transcripts and field notes. Data from shadowing was regarded not just as illustrative but as an active and equal contributor to the thematic development. *Codes were subsequently grouped into initial themes* across both data sets and interpreted in relation to broader patterns of meaning within the data set. This entailed comparing codes for similarity and difference, clustering them into provisional categories and then interrogating these categories against the entire data set to ensure that each theme captured a coherent, patterned meaning rather than a mere collection of codes. Themes were then refined, attending to both convergence and variation in participants' accounts. From this point onward, the analysis was primarily conducted using Word. NVivo was used as needed to facilitate the analytical process. Thereafter, *initial themes were reviewed* in relation to the full data set, outlining their boundaries with one another. At this stage, the relationship between what was said (in interviews) and practiced (shadowing) was further explored, allowing for cross-validation of emerging insights. Through reflexive discussions among all authors, themes were further refined. To capture the interpretive focus, inductive, conceptual *labels for themes were crafted* and subthemes were developed when layered patterns needed to be presented within broader constructs. At this point in the analysis, the first author met again with four participants from two different municipalities who had previously participated in both interviews and workplace shadowing. The purpose of the follow-up was to deepen the understanding of learning related to sustainability and the HR role. This data was treated as previously described (e.g. transcription, pseudonymization and storage). Subsequently, the *themes were written up*, incorporating selected extracts from both data sources, to highlight their interpretive significance for understanding sustainability-related workplace learning through everyday HR practices. Because all collected data was in Swedish, the translation to English was only done for the selected extracts, with careful attention to both tone and content.

### 3.4 Ethical considerations

This study was built on informed consent, following the ethical guidelines for Good Research Practice as outlined by the [Swedish Research Council \(2024\)](#) and was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Approval No.: 2023-06674-01). Interview recordings and original field notes were stored in secure digital archives, while all transcripts processed in NVivo 12 and Word were pseudonymized, omitting unnecessary personal details to comply with current laws and GDPR requirements.

Informed consent was obtained in all meetings where the researcher shadowed the HR professional, including interactions with colleagues, managers, local union representatives and external stakeholders (e.g. software developers and consultants). Depending on the situation, either the HR professional or the researcher explained the study's purpose, emphasizing that the focus was on the work of the HR professional. Written consent was collected in all scheduled HR meetings. If paperwork was deemed unsuitable, for instance, in brief, spontaneous encounters, verbal consent was documented. The researcher was denied

access to only one meeting, concerning an employee’s rehabilitation, but was allowed to accompany HR professionals in all other aspects of their work.

**4. Findings**

Through the reflexive thematic analysis, the authors generated two main themes. While the first theme, “Preparing the ground: making sustainability workable,” essentially involves tilling the soil, so to speak, to make sustainability actionable and context-specific, the second theme, “Rooting sustainability: making it live through practice,” concerns nurturing the relational practices and ethical routines of sustainability work. Each main theme includes subthemes that elaborate on the nuances (see [Table 1](#) for an overview).

*4.1 Preparing the ground: making sustainability workable*

The first theme examines how HR professionals interpret, negotiate and navigate sustainability expectations. It includes four subthemes, detailed below and in [Table 1](#).

*4.1.1 Grappling with abstract sustainability agendas.* This subtheme examines how HR professionals translate abstract frameworks into locally relevant and grounded practices.

**Table 1.** Main themes, subthemes and interpretive descriptions from the analysis

Main themes with description	Subthemes	What the subthemes explore:
Preparing the ground: Making sustainability workable  <i>Description:</i> This theme explores how HR professionals interpret, negotiate and navigate sustainability expectations in complex organizational context	Grappling with abstract sustainability agendas	How HR professionals interpret vague sustainability frameworks and translate them into concrete, locally relevant concerns
	Grounding sustainability in the human dimension of HR practices	How sustainability is intuitively understood through HR professionals’ everyday focus on inclusion, employee well-being and meaningful work
	Negotiating when to enable or lead in sustainability work	How HR professionals position themselves in relation to others when driving or supporting sustainability initiatives
Rooting sustainability: Making it live through practice  <i>Description:</i> This theme explores how HR professionals incorporate sustainability in HR practices through reflexive dialogue, peer learning and value-based professional conduct	Sensing societal ripple effects of HR practices	How HR professionals recognize their work as contributing to the broader common good, extending beyond organizational boundaries
	Creating space for collaborative reflection in HR practice	How HR professionals foster peer dialogue and ethical reflection, positioning learning as a central component of sustainability work, despite organizational constraints
	Embedding sustainability through cross-functional collaboration	How HR professionals advance sustainability efforts by navigating between silos, stakeholders and competing expectations to make sustainability actionable
	Carrying the torch: Embodying sustainability through everyday action	How HR professionals internalize and enact sustainability through everyday behaviors and personal responsibility, shaping an ethical workplace culture

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work

They described varied understandings of sustainability, shaped by how agendas like the SDGs, financial or environmental objectives were linked to HR work. For many, sustainability seemed ambiguous or external, more linked to abstract frameworks than daily HR work.

Responses to the SDGs varied widely. Some HR professionals considered them unrelated to HR concerns, complicating implementation: “It’s nothing I’ve ever been involved in or even thought about” (IP12). Others identified alignments, such as SDG 5 on gender equality via HR practices like salary reviews that address unjustified salary differences between genders. HR professionals linked work environment management and good working conditions to SDG 8, which addresses decent work and SDG 3, which focuses on health and well-being. Inclusion and diversity were often linked to SDG 10, which aims to reduce inequalities. Yet, despite making these explicit links during interviews, several HR professionals also noted “in everyday work, we never talk about it” (IP6). When framed as distant, abstract or imposed, sustainability risks being seen as peripheral to HR’s responsibilities, hindering integration and ownership.

Economic sustainability was often viewed as a combination of financial prudence and effective resource management. As one HR professional explained, “a bad hire is outrageously expensive; it burns through a hell of a lot of money, eats up tons of time and time IS money [...] One should not rush solutions” (IP13). Cost-efficiency was thus not only a managerial priority but also vital for HR sustainability, framing recruitment and employee retention as long-term investments. For others, economic sustainability was deeply connected to human and social sustainability. One HR professional expressed that economic sustainability “may not be a goal in itself, but rather a means to support all these other aspects. In other words, without it, one cannot deliver social sustainability over time” (IP11). This link between economic and social sustainability was seen as interdependent, with HR practices connected to economic effects, “whether we implement an initiative or not, or whether we are ill or not” (IP1), or how well the organization “retains already trained employees” (IP6).

Overall, economic sustainability emerged as a flexible, negotiated concept, shaped more by HR professionals balancing limited resources with human-centered values rather than fixed metrics. HR reframed economic goals to support social and human outcomes like stability and well-being, making sustainability achievable despite financial constraints.

Environmental sustainability appeared more distant. Many HR professionals struggled to define HR’s role in relation to climate objectives, which were generally regarded as outside the domain of HR. As one HR professional remarked, “Environmental issues aren’t really seen as HR matters. Another department handles it” (IP1). Nevertheless, HR professionals sought to implement eco-friendly behaviors among themselves that aligned more closely with overall organizational sustainability, rather than focusing on HR-specific initiatives. Examples include HR adhering to municipal travel policies, encouraging the use of public transportation, adopting digital meeting practices to reduce travel and promoting waste recycling, as observed during shadowing.

Across these dimensions, HR professionals understood sustainability in varied and sometimes uncertain ways. Rather than adhering to a single definition or agenda, they engaged in a continuous interpretative process, connecting sustainability to what resonated within their context, profession and responsibilities.

*4.1.2 Grounding sustainability in the human dimension of human resource practices.* This subtheme explores how HR professionals intuitively connect aspects of their work to sustainability, particularly inclusion, well-being and meaningful work, despite sustainability being rarely an explicit focus in municipal HR agendas.

Social sustainability was rarely discussed explicitly but often reframed as “what we do”. One HR professional reflected, “It was really only now, when you asked the question about sustainability, that I started reflecting: What does sustainability mean to me? What do I actually do in my role that contributes to sustainability?” (IP7).

This implicit familiarity led HR professionals to ground their understanding of sustainability in core HR concerns, including equity, inclusion, good working conditions and employee well-being. Rather than linking sustainability to performance metrics, HR professionals framed it around long-term contributions at work and human flourishing:

That they [employees] have meaningful work for a meaningful life and want to stay because they thrive, flourish, and develop, you know, all of that. And that’s a very, very significant aspect: we put a lot of time and focus into those perspectives. [...] Not just so they can perform at work, but also so they can feel good in life, and thereby want to, and be able to, continue contributing to the goals of our organization (IP11).

Performance was seldom mentioned directly. Instead, HR professionals emphasized employee health, thriving and meaningfulness, often in relation to “whom we serve,” i.e. the municipality’s customers, such as school pupils, residents or the elderly in care. Another recurring statement was sustainability as balance and well-being in life:

Work life and private life shouldn’t stand apart; they need to come together. And work life is getting bigger, longer, and it almost feels like we spend most of our time at work, so it’s really important that people feel good, that they enjoy themselves, that things are working. And that’s something we can help with, creating the right conditions here [at work] and thinking about what’s essential for feeling well and being able to do a good job (IP8).

Across interviews, HR professionals consistently returned to the idea of “creating the right conditions” for a sustainable working life, enabling managers and employees to balance work and well-being over time. Without such conditions, “it doesn’t matter how skilled and competent you are; it simply will not work out. [...] It might even result in someone either resigning or becoming ill” (IP10). Sustainability was interpreted not only as individual support but as organizational stability, maintained through policies, union agreements, legal compliance and transparent salary processes.

Together, these reflections anchor sustainability in municipal HRM primarily in the organization’s social infrastructure, rooted in well-being, inclusion and professional ownership.

*4.1.3 Negotiating when to enable or lead in sustainability work.* This subtheme shows how HR’s role in sustainability was fluid, shaped by ongoing negotiations over responsibility, legitimacy and timing. Sometimes, HR professionals functioned as enablers, supporting line managers in translating political directives into action or offering structural or emotional support. At other times, particularly in relation to social and human sustainability, HR assumed leadership, for instance, in well-being programs, LGBTQI certification, or values-based work.

While some HR professionals noted a lack of clear sustainability objectives from top management, others appreciated the flexibility, “We actually want these [political goals] to be as loosely defined as possible, so that we have the greatest possible freedom to carry out activities, to be able to adjust and experiment over the coming years” (IP9). These broader set political objectives granted HR professionals greater flexibility to pursue their chosen path, even if political leadership could shift every four years. Hence, HR’s role in sustainability was shaped not only by top-down directives but also by HR professionals’ own interpretations of their mandate. As one HR professional noted:

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In some organizations, it's more like they [managers across levels] just order services, you know. But that's not how it works with us. We're expected to take initiative and propose which areas we should actually be working on. What is it that we need? (IP11).

However, structural factors could limit HR's ability to lead sustainability initiatives. In all three municipalities, HR managers were part of the top management team, allowing them to influence strategic sustainability initiatives across their municipality's departments. However, shadowing revealed that one HR manager had long served as secretary during strategic meetings, raising concerns about being reduced to an administrative role. When this changed and the HR manager was acknowledged as an equal member, the shift was celebrated within the team.

At times, HR professionals also choose to support rather than lead. In the national initiative "The Full-Time Journey" (Swe: Heltidsresan), aimed at normalizing full-time employment in the welfare sector, one HR function deliberately opted out of project management. One HR professional explained that HR leading operational matters risked others to disengage:

'HR says this!', and then people sort of distance themselves, even those who are close to the issue and should be leading it. They step away from it. That means no one really takes ownership of the issue, and as a result, it will not benefit the organization (IP9).

In the Full-Time Journey initiative, the HR function chose not to lead but instead contributed by appointing an expert advisor on labor law to strategic meetings. This enabled others to lead while HR maintained its perspective, illustrating how enabling and leading are not fixed roles, but rather continuously negotiated.

This back-and-forth movement between enabling and leading in sustainability work reflected a deeper interpretive process. HR professionals assessed legitimacy, resources and room for action. As one HR professional noted during shadowing, generating laughter within the HR team, "On the other hand, every issue is an HR issue. When things get uncomfortable, it ends up with HR!" Hence, sustainability leadership is not simply assigned; it must be justified, claimed and negotiated in practice.

*4.1.4 Sensing societal ripple effects of human resource practices.* This subtheme illustrates how HR professionals connect their work to societal value beyond organizational borders. Although HR professionals mainly focused on internal sustainability, some viewed HR practices as benefiting societal well-being beyond the workplace. Inclusive recruitment, employment stability and well-being initiatives were viewed not only as internal responsibilities but also as pathways to support long-term inclusion and societal growth. One HR professional described municipal HR work as contributing to possibilities of "a social economic journey" (IP3), linking sustainability to long-term inclusion and growth. Others connected stable, attractive and meaningful workplaces to life-supporting structures: "The whole society is built on people going to work, you know. So, it's something we should want to do" (IP5).

Others emphasized HR's indirect but consequential societal influence: "I can influence how managers are doing, and what they in turn influence in the organization, which in turn affects everyone who lives and works in the municipality [...] to uphold democracy and truly safeguard all people" (IP2). Inclusive policies and collaboration were expressed to potentially "fully blossom for those we serve, in every part of the chain" (IP8), extending ripple effects to the municipality's residents, 'whom we serve', and employees' families.

Together, these reflections portray HR as a subtle but crucial actor in promoting social cohesion and well-being, often working behind the scenes, yet deeply involved in shaping sustainability through community-conscious decision-making.

#### 4.2 *Rooting sustainability: making it live through practice*

The second theme captures HR's continuous engagement with sustainability through reflective and collaborative practices, outlined in three subthemes below and in [Table 1](#).

4.2.1 *Creating space for collaborative reflection in human resource practice.* This subtheme illustrates how HR professionals enable peer dialogue and reflection. HR professionals often contacted counterparts in other municipal HR functions to share practices and ideas, reflecting a culture of openness and collaboration. Protecting competitive advantage was less of a concern, fostering mutual access to insights. As one HR professional put it:

In the municipal world in general, we're really good at sharing our successes. Like, "Hey, this worked great, go ahead and steal it!" Or, "Oh no, don't fall into this trap; don't do it this way!" There's sustainability in that culture of sharing. In not reinventing the wheel every time, you know? (IP8).

Among the two municipal HR functions shadowed, the smaller had created a forum for regular peer exchange meetings via video calls with HR functions of similar size. In the larger municipality, internal platforms such as weekly HR meetings and monthly forums for "sharing experiences" enabled collaborative learning.

These peer arenas were observed to promote the exchange of professional knowledge, broaden understanding and encourage participants to raise questions, reconsider assumptions and collectively evaluate cases. In interviews, HR professionals noted peer forums as safe spaces to share successes and mistakes and to "trial think," i.e. testing ideas without fear of judgment.

These settings allowed HR professionals to pause, ask critical questions and reframe cases through ethical reflection. During shadowing, one such instance involved a case of an employee's repeated tardiness. Initially perceived as misconduct, it was reinterpreted as a mental health concern: "The employee sought care, received treatment and is now like a new person" (IP3). Storytelling and joint reflection helped calibrate HR approaches and foster a sustainability ethos rooted in human-centered values. As one HR professional noted: "We want to step in where we believe the person has the potential to change" (IP3). This mindset was seen as integral to "being" HR. IP11 explained: "it's also a matter of professional identity. Our field, so to speak, tends to carry those values." The opportunity to reflect together and build shared understanding was described as essential.

Still, this commitment to reflection often clashed with operational realities. Participants described how time pressure and organizational pace constrained reflective practice. During shadowing in an HR morning meeting, one HR professional stated with frustration: "People have so damn much to do. How do we open things up so that it's clear learning happens in everyday work?" (IP5). Nevertheless, collaborative reflection was often contingent on conditions beyond HR's control. Still, it was not regarded as optional, but as foundational to HR work.

In addition, the interviews themselves became spaces for reflection. One HR professional initially questioned the study's relevance, remarking: "When I was asked to take part in the study, I thought: what? sustainability? That's hardly what my work is about" (IP12). However, by the end, they had shifted perspective, recognizing how sustainability was, in fact, embedded in their everyday practice: "Then really, those [sustainability efforts] are ongoing the entire time" (IP12). This shows how reflection can reveal implicit sustainability efforts that may otherwise go unnoticed.

4.2.2 *Embedding sustainability through cross-functional collaboration.* This subtheme addresses how HR professionals make sustainability actionable by bridging silos, stakeholders and competing demands. HR professionals acted as collaborative learners,

navigating complex settings together with others. Their access to multiple departments, managerial levels and working groups enabled them to reflect on how sustainability could be integrated into daily operations, even amid tensions and uncertainties.

In cross-functional spaces, learning unfolded through relationships and shared inquiry. One participant emphasized that HR's central position and earned credibility allowed them to contribute: "Normally, the different departments don't really talk to each other. And that's where we in HR could be that connecting link. We had more of a municipal perspective: a helicopter view" (IP10). During shadowing, HR mostly explored tensions and co-developed perspectives with others, aiming to discover possibilities and weigh alternatives, rather than delivering solutions. This was evident in both strategic and operational contexts, for example, Leadership Day planning and rehabilitation meetings.

Another notable example of cross-functional collaboration during shadowing was a three-day exploratory sprint initiated by HR to identify new approaches for teams with a high risk of absenteeism. Together with line managers, unions and an external facilitator, HR examined local practices. Sustainability was not predefined, but rather emerged through co-exploration, as stakeholders articulated their needs. The sprint provided an opportunity for critical dialogue, experimentation and reflection on sustainable practices.

Learning related to sustainability also emerged in the redesign of HR routines. One example was a digital onboarding tool, codeveloped by HR, IT and an external consultant. The tool aimed to support managers in welcoming new employees. An HR professional critically reflected: "Historically, this project has been very much about technology, permissions, roles, equipment and so on. There's still a lot of focus on lists and such, but what it really should be about is making people feel welcome!" (IP2).

Though technical, the tool development became a collaborative learning site. A reference group of ten individuals from various departments met regularly, with HR and IT facilitating the process. During shadowing, the HR professional guided the reference group's discussion: "Now, we shift the focus from equipment to how we can make the first day as great as possible for the new employee" (IP2). By shifting the technological discussion to emotional experience and first impressions, HR helped reframe the process. Another minor but symbolic adjustment in the digital tool directed managers to request refurbished furniture before ordering new items. This tweak reflected how sustainability was embedded into everyday routines, not policies, but via practical tool modifications.

These collaborative learning examples relied on others' willingness to engage, reflect and experiment. During shadowing, an HR meeting revealed that a close social sustainability ally had canceled their annual strategic collaboration meeting due to a reorganization. As one HR professional metaphorically expressed, "we can't dance if there's no one to dance with" (IP5). This underscored how learning related to sustainability relies on mutual responsiveness, where HR's ability to act is shaped by shared commitment and interaction.

*4.2.3 Carrying the torch: embodying sustainability through everyday action.* This subtheme illustrates how HR professionals embed sustainability into their daily actions, fostering an ethical culture. HR professionals often spoke as employer representatives, "we, as employers", implicitly positioning themselves as moral and cultural ambassadors for sustainability. This commitment reflected their internal ethical responsibility, grounded in values such as inclusion, care and dignity, guiding their actions even in the absence of formal mandates.

Rather than relying on strategy, HR professionals practiced sustainability through everyday examples. This included avoiding formal meetings during lunch hour or sending emails outside office hours, or as observed during shadowing, using the "Wellness staircase"

instead of the elevator and prioritizing spontaneous availability for managers despite tight schedules.

Such enactments were not incidental, but value-infused practices that signaled what HR stood for within the organization. As one HR professional noted: “You [HR professionals] take on more responsibility for helping others lift their gaze, so it really becomes a pretty big responsibility for us to be, well, I will say, role models” (IP8). In this sense, HR professionals embodied sustainability not only through their words or actions but also through their behavior, shaping organizational culture through small yet consistent acts that signaled care, attentiveness and ethical standards. In interactions with others, one HR professional described focusing on:

[...]stripping away prestige [...] I believe that contributes to long-term sustainability, based on the idea that we are learning beings in process. We can't go around maintaining this façade of 'I've got everything under control, I know it all' (IP5).

This approach focused on understanding others' needs, embracing vulnerability and accepting that not knowing is a natural aspect of learning and developing sustainable practices. Together, these micropractices became part of how sustainability was embedded in everyday routines.

In addition, HR professionals helped define and reinforce desirable behaviors, integrating core principles of inclusion, belonging and respect into appraisal and recognition programs. Whether through formal recognition, such as the annual “Ambassador of Inclusion” award, or as noted during shadowing, everyday greetings around the office, email tone or respectful phone etiquette, HR professionals contributed to a lived culture of sustainability that emphasized HR's core principles. As one HR professional expressed: “I would say that we in HR try to take a lot of responsibility for this as well by greeting everyone and ensuring that everyone feels included and is received warmly” (IP7).

Being a “role model” was more than visibility or influence. It became a way of enacting sustainability as a human and moral practice, performed in the small, continuous choices and interactions that shape organizational life from within.

## 5. Discussion

The three RQs organize this section and relate the findings to the study's conceptual foundations and previous research in sustainable HRM and workplace learning.

First, the findings reveal that HR professionals primarily define sustainability in HRM (RQ1) through social and ethical concerns, such as inclusion, care, meaningful work and well-being, rather than through formalized frameworks like the SDGs or organizational strategies. Sustainability is integrated into daily HR practices (e.g. recruitment, salary reviews and work environment initiatives) and often expressed tacitly as “what we do” rather than as sustainability-labeled initiatives. This aligns with [Kramar's \(2022\)](#) view of sustainable HRM as morally grounded and relational. At the same time, the findings highlight selectivity: social aspects were prioritized, while environmental concerns and to some extent economic aspects, were seen as outside HR's scope and therefore “owned” elsewhere. Nevertheless, economic considerations emerged as an important condition for enabling HR to pursue social sustainability agendas, as resource constraints shaped what could be acted upon.

Viewed through a workplace-learning perspective, these definitional practices constitute situated sensemaking and knowing-in-practice ([Gherardi, 2009](#); [Weick, 1995](#)), where understanding unfolds through daily interactions, case discussions and value talk, rather than being transferred from formal frameworks. This helps explain why global frameworks, such

as the SDGs, often appear distant in daily HR work (cf. [Brewster and Brookes, 2024](#)). For HR professionals, learning related to sustainability seems to matter most when it is context-specific and enacted locally.

Second, the findings indicate that HR professionals interpret and position their role in sustainability work (RQ2) as relational enablers rather than formal strategists. Rather than occupying a traditional, policy-focused role in sustainability work ([Alfes et al., 2010](#); [De Stefano et al., 2018](#)), HR professionals in this study acted as connective agents, navigating tensions, roles, agendas and hierarchies ([Brandi et al., 2022](#); [Podgorodnichenko et al., 2021](#)). They translated values into action, built trust across departments and with unions and enabled others to act, often without explicit mandate. Their influence stemmed from soft power and moral credibility rather than structural authority, thereby challenging dichotomies of HR as either strategic or peripheral (cf. [Cayrat and Boxall, 2023](#)).

This positioning was continuously negotiated in practice. In ambiguous governance landscapes and shifting political priorities, HR professionals engaged in relational negotiation of their role ([Fenwick, 2006](#); [Gherardi, 2009](#); [Wenger, 1998](#)), deciding when to enable and when to lead, when to claim ownership and when to support. Such relational sensemaking was effective in bridging gaps, yet remained vulnerable where fragmented ownership, resource constraints and performance-driven logics risked marginalizing HR's human-centric stance (e.g. [Liang et al., 2024](#); [Westerman, 2021](#)). In these situations, HR's learning related to sustainability risked becoming undervalued and invisible, as professional agency was often shaped by organizational affordances and constraints ([Billett, 2001](#)). This underscores that individual competence cannot fully compensate for institutional anchoring, making sustainability efforts require recognition, mandate and time ([Podgorodnichenko et al., 2021](#)).

From a workplace learning perspective, HR's role can thus be understood as an ongoing process of sensemaking-in-practice, where legitimacy is co-constructed while acting, reflecting and adjusting to evolving demands ([Weick, 1995](#)). This enactment simultaneously constitutes identity work, as HR professionals learn and relearn their role through everyday participation and negotiation, balancing organizational expectations with their ethical and moral stance ([Fenwick, 2006](#); [Gherardi, 2009](#); [Wenger, 1998](#)).

Third, the findings show that HR professionals engage in and reflect on learning related to sustainability in their everyday practice (RQ3) primarily informally and relationally, rather than through formal training. They learned through peer exchanges, cross-functional collaboration, shared case reflections and ethical deliberation. Conditions of psychological safety were essential in enabling open dialogue, experimentation and the reframing of existing practices ([Edmondson, 1999, 2018](#)). Learning was thus value-laden, grounded in care, inclusion and dignity rather than technical upskilling (cf. [Brandi et al., 2022](#); [Richards, 2023](#)). Importantly, participants connected this learning to their professional identity and everyday conduct, such as modeling respectful interactions or "stripping away prestige".

From a workplace learning perspective, these practices exemplify how learning related to sustainability unfolds as situated workplace learning ([Eraut, 2004](#)), enabled and constrained by organizational affordances ([Billett, 2001](#)). HR's relational and connective work shows how tensions, such as balancing short-term efficiency pressures with long-term sustainability objectives, can create opportunities for negotiation and reflection, where new practices and meanings are co-constructed ([Fenwick, 2006](#); [Gherardi, 2009](#)). The actions identified in the analysis, such as negotiating roles, balancing competing demands, or experimenting with new practices, should therefore not be seen as isolated events or merely organizational responses. Rather, they constitute learning processes in themselves, through which HR

professionals made sense of sustainability in practice and adapted their professional identities accordingly (Billett, 2001; Fenwick, 2006; Gherardi, 2009).

Taken together, this study demonstrates that HR's sustainability work is not primarily about implementing predefined tools or competencies, but about engaging in ongoing workplace learning. Such learning unfolds through negotiations under conditions of ambiguity and organizational tension, where meanings are co-constructed rather than transferred (Fenwick, 2006; Gherardi, 2009). In this way, HR professionals make ethical principles actionable, create relational spaces that bridge organizational silos and establish reflective arenas that sustain inquiry and dialogue (Brandt *et al.*, 2022; Edmondson, 2018).

### 5.1 *Limitations and future research*

This study has several limitations. First, it draws on a geographically and organizationally bounded sample of 13 HR professionals from three Swedish municipalities. While this offers rich contextual insight, the study does not aim to represent broader institutional variation or claim generalizability. The national and organizational context may also shape the observed emphasis on ethical and relational practice.

Second, the findings reflect the perspectives of HR professionals, complemented by the researcher's observations, but exclude views from other actors, such as line managers or senior management, who may shape or constrain HR's sustainability efforts (e.g. Liang *et al.*, 2024).

Third, the study does not trace the long-term outcomes of sustainability efforts, which limits understanding of whether enacted practices lead to lasting organizational change. As such, the findings represent a snapshot at a particular point in time.

Future studies should examine how learning related to sustainability unfolds as a relational and situated practice that requires high levels of social competence. Such competence is essential for navigating conflicting interests, aligning operational and human concerns and exercising trust-building in ethically complex settings. Investigating these capabilities would deepen the understanding of how individual and collective factors contribute to the enactment of sustainable HRM. Comparative studies across institutional and cultural settings (e.g. public/private sectors, organizational sizes and different countries) could clarify how conditions enable or constrain HR's connective agency. Including multiple stakeholders and adopting longitudinal designs would shed light on how micropractices accumulate, stall or transform over time. Finally, future research should explore organizational conditions such as recognition, time for reflection and psychological safety that sustain HR professionals' capacity to translate sustainability ideals into everyday practice and thereby advance workplace learning.

### 5.2 *Theoretical contributions to sustainable human resource management and workplace learning*

This study contributes to sustainable HRM research by empirically demonstrating how sustainability is enacted through everyday HR practices. Rather than introducing entirely new theoretical elements, the contribution lies in extending existing frameworks. First, it strengthens sustainable HRM scholarship by shifting attention from structural and competency-based accounts (e.g. Cohen *et al.*, 2012; De Stefano *et al.*, 2018; Richards, 2023; Siddique and Naveed, 2025) to the lived realities of HR professionals. Second, it integrates workplace learning perspectives into sustainable HRM debates, showing how learning, identity work and sensemaking are central to sustainability (Liang *et al.*, 2024; Podgorodnichenko *et al.*, 2021). Third, the study contributes to workplace learning research by situating HR professionals' own learning as a vital yet underexplored dimension of organizational sustainability. In this way, the findings add empirical depth and broaden theoretical conversations across both fields.

### 5.3 Practical implications

The findings carry several important implications for practice. For HR professionals, they underscore the importance of developing relational and social competencies, including trust-building, dialogue facilitation and ethical deliberation, that enable sustainability concerns to be integrated in everyday work. Rather than relying on formal training, these competencies are cultivated through situated collaboration, peer reflection and shared sensemaking.

For organizations, sustainable HRM requires more than strategic frameworks; it depends on structural support for everyday learning opportunities. This includes creating time and space for reflection, legitimizing HR's connective work and recognizing the value of psychological safety in cross-functional collaboration (Edmondson, 1999, 2018). In public sector contexts, municipalities can strengthen their sustainability efforts by positioning HR as a key actor that bridges organizational goals with employees' lived experiences. In private organizations, similar mechanisms can support the integration of sustainability into competitive strategies.

Taken together, these implications suggest that advancing sustainable HRM depends not only on strategic intent but on fostering relational infrastructures and learning conditions through which sustainability can take root in organizational life.

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