

# Guest editorial: Learning organization, human resource management and sustainability: leading the future of organizations

## Introduction

This special issue is devoted to the explorations of links among human resource management, learning organizations and sustainability. Our overall aim is to discuss the under-explored topics in human resource management and sustainability by offering diverse theoretical positions and methodological approaches. To achieve this aim, we have invited authors from Asia and Europe to explore the role of green human resource management practices (Jerónimo, Henriques, Lacerda, da Silva, & Vieira, 2020) and the ways other human resource management factors and practices can contribute to sustainability-oriented performance (Muñoz-Pascual, Galende, & Curado, 2020) in learning organizations.

In view of the need to respond to the demands posed by the environmental crisis that the planet is facing, the concern with sustainability has been gaining more and more importance among academics and business practitioners. This theme has become central to the business activities of organizations since they contribute the most to aggravating the crisis or to its mitigation. In this way, sustainability issues are central to the performance of organizations. However, the performance of organizations related to sustainability cannot be assumed as an abstract concept. Instead, it must be understood in a very concrete and specific manner. It is embodied in the performance and practices of the organization's employees. Hoffman (2010) presents this issue in a very clear way by implying that the solution for sustainability involves changes in organizational systems in the depth of individual beliefs. It is also related to the fundamental values that embraced by all members of the organization regarding the relationships established within and between organizations, that is, with the market or the environment. Such need derives from:

- The complexity of the questions that organizations face and;
- the dilemmas regarding choices that will influence the present and future values of the organization

The difficulty for achieving an equilibrium requires considering both issues simultaneously (Laverty, 1996; Wade-Benzoni, 2008).

Therefore, sustainability is no longer an option, but truly a foundation on which human activities must be built. Ensuring sustainability requires creativity for developing “new lenses” and “new” solutions. In this way, the complexity of analysis aimed at finding the necessary answers to the challenges faced by organizations increases significantly (Horman *et al.*, 2006). If we add to this notion the idea that organizational learning results from the acquisition and sharing of knowledge (Storey & Davis, 2018), we understand that organizational learning processes are fundamental to ensuring the sustainability of human endeavours. Learning organizations could be faster in promoting a “sustainability mindset” (Ehnert & Harry, 2014) and therefore contributing to address the sustainability challenges that humanity faces.



The link between knowledge management and productivity or innovation is widely accepted in academia and industry (Kianto, Shujahat, Hussain, Nawaz, & Ali, 2019). Organizational learning processes are widely recognized today as being among the elements that can help organizations remain competitive, innovative and sustainable. However, for this relationship to truly occur, having a “glue” is necessary. Such “glue” is without any doubt the human element, which is also the most volatile and complex element to manage in organizations. The concept of learning organization finds its roots in Michael (1973) with the idea of “planning to learn” and Senge (1990) who, refining it, proposes the concept of Learning Organization where he sought to emphasize the importance of alignment and continuous development of the ability of human resource teams to achieve results for the organization in a sustainable manner.

In any organization, academia and reality tell us that the main secret to achieve competitiveness is truly having a capable, motivated, committed, dynamic and integrated workforce. In this way, mastering the art of managing human resources is, par excellence, a good way to achieve a balanced and successful way of guaranteeing a good connection between organizational learning and sustainability of organizations.

Human resource management generates fundamental intangible assets (Rivera & Rivera, 2016) for an organization at a strategic level that strongly contribute to the creation and maintenance of a sustained competitive advantage (Andreeva & Kianto, 2011; Scurtu & Neamtu, 2015). The study of sustainability has become an important issue among the scholars of learning organization in recent years (Örtenblad, 2013, 2015, 2019; Hong & Mak, 2019; Mak & Hong, 2020). Those studies emphasize the need to use an eco-friendly and sustainable approach for developing learning organization in place of the hegemonic discursive practices of profit-making and corporate value maximization (Boje & Rosile, 2019). In this regard, human resource management can promote a “sustainability mindset” (Ehnert & Harry, 2014) and contribute to address the sustainability challenges in learning organization (Singh, Ologu, Musa, & Mahat, 2018; Jerónimo *et al.*, 2020; Muñoz-Pascual *et al.*, 2020).

### Overview of contributions in this special issue

In view of these recent developments on the potential contributions of Human Resource Management to enhance sustainability-related performance discussed above, this special issue on Human Resource Management, Learning Organization and Sustainability aims to further establish the link. After a rigorous peer review process, eight papers are accepted at the end. Drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, each contribution focuses on and reflects upon how the Human Resource Management practices can support organizations to reach the societal sustainability goals through the lenses of learning organization or organizational learning (Table 1).

Through a qualitative case study of a Chinese multinational corporation, Haier, Sun and Hong (2022) explores how their expatriates can develop a sustainability-driven learning organization by changing the employees’ mental models in their foreign subsidiaries located in emerging markets. The strategic and operational ambiguities underpinning sustainability issues can be resolved by adopting dissemination and reinforcement routines. While the former intends to consolidate the transfer of knowledge related to sustainability, the latter helps establish a supportive learning environment for achieving sustainable performance in subsidiaries.

There are two contributions by Subramanian and Suresh (2022a, 2022b). In part I, it aims to identify the key green human resource management practices and their contributions to organizational learning in a circular economy. After reviewing the literature and consulting

Authors	Methodology	Theoretical perspective(s)	Subject of study	Research question(s)	Key insights and contributions
Sun & Hong	Case study	Knowledge transfer	Emerging multinationals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do subsidiaries of Chinese multinational firms can develop into a sustainability-driven learning organization through expatriate knowledge transfer?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are strategic and operational ambiguities underpinning sustainability issues in foreign subsidiaries</li> <li>Chinese expatriates deploy both dissemination and reinforcement routines to change the mental models of subsidiaries employees</li> <li>While dissemination routines were adopted to consolidate and intensify the transfer of sustainable knowledge, reinforcement routines were used for focused interventions to achieve and validate sustainable outcomes</li> <li>Ten green human resource management practices including job analysis, recruitment, selection, training, performance management, compensation, employee empowerment, discipline management, safety management and separation are found to be significant in a circular economy</li> <li>A common theme underpinning these ten green human resource management practices is the concern for environment and sustainability</li> <li>Green separation and organizational learning culture appear as the two most important factors of the circular economy</li> <li>Green performance management and green health and safety management are observed to be highly dependent on the remaining factors</li> <li>In a circular economy, green human resource management can offer a variety of strategies</li> </ul>
Subramanian & Suresh (Part I)	Expert review	Resource-based view	Manufacturing small and medium enterprises (SMEs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the key green human resource management practices and their contributions to organizational learning in a circular economy?</li> </ul>	
Subramanian & Suresh (Part II)	Total interpretive structural method	Organizational learning	Manufacturing small and medium enterprises (SMEs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is the inter-relationship between organizational learning and green human resource management practices in a circular economy?</li> </ul>	

(continued)

**Table 1.**  
Summary of papers and their contributions

Table 1.

Authors	Methodology	Theoretical perspective(s)	Subject of study	Research question(s)	Key insights and contributions
Chen & Cuervo	Survey	Self-determination	Private enterprises in China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can transformational leadership influence work engagement as mediated by employees' motivation in the context of learning organization?</li> </ul>	<p>to assist employees in achieving five principles of a learning organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employees' perceptions of transformational leadership may influence employees' self-motivation toward work engagement</li> <li>Increased work engagement facilitates collaborative learning and knowledge sharing</li> <li>Customer incivility increases emotional exhaustion, which induces negative work behaviors, such as work withdrawals</li> <li>Having high job turnover due to work withdrawal undermines the potential for public organizations to become a learning organization</li> <li>Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment create job burnout</li> <li>Perceived organizational respect serves to alleviate the negative effects of job burnout and provide a supportive learning environment for employees to share their knowledge</li> <li>Social isolation and work overload reduce dedication, vigor and absorption</li> <li>Having less vigorous work requirements in telework decrease job satisfaction</li> <li>Incorporating multiple stakeholders to develop a multiparty learning entity for sustainability pursuit appears as a focal point for learning organization 2.0</li> <li>Being aware of the socially embedded contextual factors, forfeiting the mindset of managerial dominance and creating a shared commitment are important factors in implementing the concept of Learning organization 2.0</li> </ul>
Kuok <i>et al.</i>	Survey	Conservation of resources	Public organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the psychological effects of customer incivility and surface acting on frontline employees' behavior and related impacts on building a learning organization in public sector?</li> </ul>	
Chan <i>et al.</i>	Survey	Stimulus-organism-response	Post-production industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When and how does job burnout occur and related solutions for developing a learning organization?</li> </ul>	
Mosquera <i>et al.</i>	Survey	Job demands-resources	Banks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the factors affecting teleworkers' emotional wellbeing and learning behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> </ul>	
Frendy <i>et al.</i>	Case study	Organizational learning	Japanese multinational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is the application of Learning organization 2.0?</li> </ul>	

expert opinions, ten green human resource management practices with positive impacts on creating a sustainable environment are identified, namely job analysis, recruitment, selection, training, performance management, compensation, employee empowerment, discipline management, safety management and separation. In part II, a subsequent empirical analysis is conducted to identify the inter-relationship between organizational learning and green human resource management practices. It is found that green separation and organizational learning culture appear as the two most important factors for creating a sustainable organization in a circular economy.

By conducting a survey with employees working in the private enterprises located in China's Greater Bay Area, [Chen and Cuervo \(2022\)](#) intend to find out how transformational leadership can influence work engagement mediated by employees' motivation in the context of learning organization. As suggested in earlier literature ([Molodchik & Jardon, 2015](#); [Imran, Ilyas, Aslam, & Rahman, 2016](#)), employees' perceptions of transformational leadership influence their self-motivation toward work engagement, which in turn facilitate collaborative learning.

In a study of the frontline workers' performance in public sector ([Kuok, Chan, Kou, Kong, & Mac, 2022](#)), the psychological effects of customer incivility and surface acting and related impacts on building a learning organization are examined. The survey results indicate that customer incivility increases emotional exhaustion and induces work withdrawals, which undermine the learning potential of publication organizations.

As learning organization expects employees to strive for continuous improvement ([Hong, 2020](#)), they are under enormous pressures and may be subject to job burnout after a prolonged period. In view of such risks, [Chan, Chan, and Chan \(2022\)](#) aim to find out when and how job burnout occurs and related solutions for developing a learning organization. Their findings reveal job burnout is caused by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. In order to reduce job burnout, perceived organizational respect needs to be provided to the employees for their knowledge sharing under a supportive learning environment.

Since the occurrence of COVID-19, remote work has become increasingly popular among business enterprises. But the impact on organizational learning remains ambiguous. Drawing on the job demands-resources theory, [Mosquera, Soares, and Alvadia \(2022\)](#) conduct an empirical test of a conceptual model on the factors affecting teleworkers' emotional wellbeing and learning behaviours during COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicate that social isolation and work overload caused by telework reduce dedication, vigour and absorption, resulting in less commitment and opportunities for participating in team learning.

Echoing the need for developing the learning organization 2.0 ([Hong & Mak, 2019](#); [Mak & Hong, 2020](#)), [Frendy et al. \(2022\)](#) conduct a case study of Japanese multinational firm, Ricoh, on their external stakeholders engagement process in a local forest conservation project. Among various learning barriers, becoming aware of the social context embedded, forfeiting the mindset of managerial dominance and creating a shared commitment on the basis of social interaction among the participants are keys for developing the concept of learning organization 2.0.

## Conclusion

As a closing remark, we acknowledge that much more work remains to be done in the future. This special issue only serves as a prelude by giving a timely reflection on learning organization, human resource management and sustainability. Hopefully, this will stimulate further research. We would like to see future developments on traditional topics and other

research frontiers, including artificial intelligence, circular economy, conservation and workplace happiness, in order to understand and address the very pressing issues of global resignation, mental health and energy emergency.  
Let us join forces to create a better world!

**Jacky Hong**  
*Department of Management and Marketing, University of Macau, Macau SAR,  
China, and*  
**Carla Curado and Paulo Lopes Henriques**  
*ADVANCE/CSG, Department of Management, ISEG, Lisboa, Portugal*

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### Further reading

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