Green HRM: Towards a research agenda

Abstract

This paper summarises the issues arising in the literature on environmental management and HRM, and discusses issues raised from it including a need to operationalize terms, challenges in path causality, contradictions arising, and worker willingness to participate in Green HRM. A research agenda in Green HRM is then detailed, with the paper concluding on the possible benefits to stakeholders that may arise from pursuing it.

Issues arising from the literature

After a decade of research into Green Marketing (Peattie, 1992), Green Accounting (Owen, 1992), and Green Management (McDonagh and Prothero, 1997), gaps still exist in the Human Resource Management (HRM) literature on the HR aspects of environmental management. A number of issues emerge from our review of the literature in environmental management and HRM. These include (1) the difficulty in trying to operationalize Green HRM, (2) establishing causality between HR practices and environmental outcomes, (3) the contradictions between people’s stated intentions and outcomes, (4) the relativism inherent in Green analysis, and (5) worker willingness to participate in Green HRM schemes.

Towards a research agenda

Establishing a research agenda in Green HRM can be achieved by extending and adapting existing studies, and adding new ideas and propositions forward for testing and analysis. For example, more work can be done on the role of supervisors in encouraging employees to create eco-initiatives (Ramus and Steger, 2000), the HR factors involved in environmental management (Fernandez, Junquera, and Ordiz, 20003), worker participation in environmental improvements (Rothenberg, 2003), environmental management in SME’s (Brio and Junquera, 2003), and behaviour-intention gaps in recycling schemes and CSR (Barr, 2004; Holbeche, 2004). Future research in Green HRM could also examine a whole host of new and different foci. These could include pilot projects in specific areas of agriculture; different levels of analysis including workplace, national, comparative and international studies; collaborative inter-disciplinary work; and examining the social, cultural, and organisational factors that form the context in which environmental management outcomes occur.

A number of research propositions can aid us in doing both quantitative and qualitative research studies in Green HRM. These include the following research propositions:

RPI: Employee capability and willingness to create and participate in pollution prevention measures is dependent upon employees receiving significant top management support, relevant training, no job displacement, and having a key role in designing, implementing and operating such schemes.
RP2: Managing agricultural production ineffectively via a non-Green HR approach may negatively affect agricultural farmers financial well-being.

RP3: The absence of labour-related regulations restricting the number and levels of imports of foreign fertilizer and pesticides may negatively affect farm workers health and safety, and physical well-being.

RP4: Carbon and GHG emissions may have a greater adverse effect on worker health in developing countries than in developed ones due to the absence of effective protocol regimes in developing countries.

RP5: Worker opinion is a significant moderating dependent variable in terms of the affects of adopting Green HRM practices on firm’s environmental performance.

Data could be gathered for RP1 by empirical interview and survey work on employee involvement and participation in the UK and overseas, and for RP2 and RP3 by case work in agricultural farms and water supplies worldwide. Data could be gathered for RP4 by secondary statistical analysis to trace links to produce hypothesis to be tested via a survey instrument, and for RP5 by primary empirical work to establish correlations.

Limitations

Establishing links between HRM practices and environmental management may be difficult, and this is a limitation in future research. Other limitations include a need to establish the dimensions of the regulatory regime that surround Green HRM in different countries, and the extent and nature of employer and employee take-up of Green HR practices.

Implications for HR practitioners

The main implications for HR practitioners lie in requesting that they have high levels of knowledge in, and competence of managing, environmental management issues. This may include knowledge of: the country or state regulatory regime that they work under; their firm’s policy on labour standards, and if it is enforced or not; technical knowledge of environmental management issues; training experience on environmental management issues; and facilitation skills in employee involvement and participation in eco-initiatives. A practical first step for HR practitioners here may be for them to audit their HR function on these items to see what the state of play is on them. Additionally, HR Directors may consider the establishment of informal groups of HR practitioners (perhaps linked to the HR profession) to exchange knowledge on firm experiences in managing the HR aspects of environmental management.

Conclusions

This paper has offered a research agenda forward in Green HRM. In conclusion, whilst research into Green HRM may need to acknowledge the issues already discussed (above), any future work in it may provide interesting results for all stakeholders in HRM. For employers and practitioners, these may be able to establish
links between employee involvement and participation in environmental management programmes and increased organisational performance. For unions and employees, findings may help them lobby employers to adopt Green HRM policies and practices that help safeguard worker health and well-being worldwide. For academics, results may reveal data to add an HRM element to the knowledge base on Green Management in general.

References