

# Connecting sustainability and corporate strategy: What is the role of managing and developing HR?

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## **Abstract**

The academic debate on sustainability is pervasive, expanding its outreach across a wide array of social sciences. This study sets the scope of sustainability to embody not only environmental, but also social and economic aspects. Taking an exploratory approach, the underlying ethical social inquiry investigates the process by which sustainability is embedded in corporate strategy, viewing both phenomena in action and the role carried out by managing and developing human resources in linking these phenomena in an organizational context. Albeit only a carefully selected part of it is utilized for developing theoretical lens for answering three questions and doing context-based theorizing, the study draws on Bruno Latour's work on the task of tracing associations ingrained in his Actor-Network-Theory (Latour, 2007). These questions are; a) how the sustainability, as a business function, is organized and its role in embedding sustainability in corporate strategy?, b) what role human resource (or human resource development) function plays in fostering embedding sustainability in corporate strategy?, and c) how sustainability function is staffed, roles of its members, and competencies they are required to possess to connect sustainability and corporate strategy of the organization? The strategy chosen for this inquiry is case study. This is aligned with the researcher's adoption of interpretive *vis-à-vis* functionalist frame of reference (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, as cited in Hopper & Powell, 1985) in dealing with empirical material gathered at two manufacturing organizations (in apparel making and consumer brands manufacturing industries, respectively) in Sri Lanka. The methods of gathering empirical material comprised a combination of semi-structured interviews, non-active participant observation, and analysis of archival records and documents. Participants (or informants) represented management level in case organizations who play multiple roles in strategy making board, human resource function, and sustainability function.

**Keywords:** sustainability, corporate strategy, human resource management, human resource development, Actor-Network-Theory, Sri Lanka