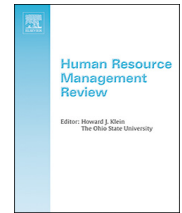




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# Sustainable HRM strategies and employment relationships as drivers of the triple bottom line<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to develop a conceptual framework capable of analysing the contributions made by strategic human resources management (SHRM) to firm sustainability and competitiveness. Specifically, we identify different sustainable corporate strategies and the way in which they are supported by coherent sustainable HRM strategies. We propose different sustainable employment relationships considering two dimensions: inducements offered by an organisation and expected employee behaviours in order to comply with sustainable HRM strategies. All the above also necessitates a system of HRM practices (content of the employment relationship) that should be well defined and oriented towards sustainability. Accordingly, we suggest associations of specific systems of HRM practices, depending on the type of employment relationship and sustainable HRM strategy, in order to promote the expected 'Triple Bottom Line', and which also improve firm competitiveness.

## 1. Introduction

The importance of incorporating sustainability into the management of organisations is a phenomenon that is increasingly drawing attention as a consequence of the effects of institutional and stakeholder pressures, forcing substantial changes in the commitment shown by organisations to this issue as part of their drive for social approval (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The pressure of governments through regulations, for example, has been the subject of controversy, since these bring costs for organisations in their short-term adaptation process, which can affect their competitiveness (Wilkinson, Hill, & Gollan, 2001).

The term sustainability has received different labels depending on the sphere or perspective from which it has been studied. Hence, the Resource Based View (RBV) incorporates the term into the strategic analysis of business, making reference to the maintenance of competitive position (Barney, 1991) in economic and market terms and, from an ecological perspective, referring to the environmental impacts of the activities of different institutions (Ehnert, 2009). However, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) provides a definition of sustainability that is coherent with the concept as it is used in this paper, referring to the action and development of organisations so that, when meeting the needs of the present, they do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. More specifically, Elkington (1998) indicates three principles on which sustainable development is based: environmental integrity, social equity and economic prosperity, referred to as the Triple Bottom Line. Environmental integrity makes reference to an ecosystem's limited regeneration capacity; social equity is linked to the right of all stakeholders to access resources, building transparent relationships that highlight the distribution of value creation; and economic prosperity pertains to the quality of life achieved through the productive capacity of organisations.

The consideration that the financial aspect is insufficient when it comes to explaining the long-term success of organisations means that company managers and directors view the management of sustainability not only as crucial to the survival of their company, but also as an orientation that leads to the achievement of positive results, creating value for the company's stakeholders

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(Laszlo, 2003; Laszlo & Zhexembayeva, 2011). However, one of the weaknesses in the analysis and approach to sustainability is the conceptual explanation given regarding the way in which it is linked to an organisation's human resources, and more specifically, to its strategic human resource management (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005; Ehnert, 2009).

The majority of research that has analysed sustainability from the perspective of human resource management (HRM) has focused on studying lists of 'best practices' for the economic sustainability of the company (financial perspective). Originally, the first studies on High Performance Work Systems (HPWS), High Commitment Systems, systems linked to innovation, or to flexibility, among others, stressed the contribution they make to the financial performance of the organisation (Huselid, 1995; Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012); although HPWS, for example, later included some concerns related to employee well-being and satisfaction (Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, Andrade, & Drake, 2009; Macky & Boxall, 2008). Secondly, some studies have also examined how HRM systems should improve social sustainability, contributing to the wellbeing and health of employees through Sustainable Work Systems (Fineman, 2006; Mariappanadar, 2003), and others yet have even turned to more recent concepts such as happiness at work (Atkinson & Hall, 2011; Fisher, 2010). Finally, HRM systems that favour environmental results have generated an important body of research around Green HRM (Ren & Jackson, 2018; Tang, Chen, Jiang, Paillé, & Jia, 2018). However, the greatest limitation and gap observed in such works is that they offer a partial approach to the study of HRM in the sustainability of organisations. They have not identified strategic human resources management models or HRM systems geared towards sustainability.

In order to fill this gap, this paper raises the need to construct an analytical framework that explains how the sustainable strategic management of human resources could truly be integrated into business sustainability (Dubois & Dubois, 2012) by adjusting it in line with sustainable corporate strategy. We define a sustainable HRM strategy as one that seeks to achieve financial, social and ecological goals while simultaneously reproducing the HR bases over the long term (Kramar, 2014). We also propose that such a sustainable HRM strategy is supported by a model of employment relationships that, through the offer made by means of HRM practices, incentivises the sustainable behaviours sought by the organisation. The overall idea is to show the horizontal and vertical fit (Delery & Roumpi, 2017; Kepes & Delery, 2007; Schuler & Jackson, 1987; Wright & Ulrich, 2017) achieved in relationships between sustainability and human resources management. According to Wright and McMahan (1992), vertical fit refers to the need to design actions and processes in the organisation with a view to fostering specific behaviours that are coherent – have a good fit – with the firm's characteristics and strategy. Horizontal fit, on the other hand, is concerned with the coherency and complementarity of actions planned in the firm – HRM practices – so that the synergies between them lead to the expected results. In essence, both types of fit highlight the need to adopt an analytical framework based on the contingent approach (vertical fit) and the configurational approach (horizontal fit) (Martin-Alcazar, Romero-Fernandez, & Sanchez-Gardey, 2005). In this paper, vertical fit pertains to the different Employment Relationships proposed for different sustainable corporate and HRM strategies, whereas horizontal fit pertains to the proposed internal coherency of HRM practices within each sustainable Employment model. The need to achieve both types of fit is supported by The Resource Based View, which states that the combination and complementarity of resources and capabilities help to obtain a competitive advantage; in our case, the long-term sustainability of an organisation (Delery & Roumpi, 2017; Kepes & Delery, 2007). The joint consideration of vertical and horizontal fits has led us to propose our integrative model.

This paper seeks to contribute to the literature on the sustainable management of human resources in several ways. Firstly, by incorporating into its analysis the corporate sustainability approach, proposing "ideal types" of sustainable strategies within the sphere of human resources. When we use the concept of "ideal type" we are referring to Weber, who used it as a methodological tool to understand and analyse a social reality. Therefore, ideal types are constructs or concepts used as methodological devices useful for the examination and systemic characterisation of social realities (Cahnman, 1965; Shils & Finch, 1949). Secondly, by highlighting the need for each of the sustainable HRM strategies to incorporate in their development a specific employment relationships marked by the offers and demands made of employees. And, finally, by proposing configurations of HRM practices that define the different models of employment relationships.

This paper is structured through the following sections. Following on from this introduction, the second section develops conceptually the relationships between sustainable corporate strategies and HRM strategies. Section three then reflects on the links between sustainable HRM strategy, employment relationships, and the HRM practices required. Finally, section four sets out the conclusions of this paper.

## 2. Sustainable corporate strategy and sustainable human resource management strategies

Corporate sustainability has mainly focused on production areas, environmental effects and the economic performance of organisations (Aragón-Correa & Rubio-Lopez, 2007). Nonetheless, there is increasing concern to integrate environmental, social and economic issues, as the report from McKinsey (2013) states. The drive to reduce pollution and to make savings in natural resources such as water or energy generates improvements in employees' health and safety, working conditions and wellbeing, and social development.

There are few studies about the impact of environmental programmes on social performance, the way in which new technologies may affect employees' motivation and satisfaction, or how firms that are engaged in environmental issues are able to attract and retain the best talent, to name just a few examples (Turban & Greening, 1997).

In this section, we aim to justify how sustainability strategies and the search for the Triple Bottom Line lead to changes in organisational structures and processes, and require new capabilities and competencies, such as the incorporation of new approaches to managing human resources (Aragón-Correa & Sharma, 2003).

The guiding principles behind sustainable development indicate that organisations should focus on designing strategies that take into consideration and incorporate the ecological (environmental), social and economic effects of their activities, integration of the

long and short term, as well as the consumption of income and not capital (Dyllick & Hockerst, 2002; Ehnert, 2009). A review of the literature about sustainable corporate strategy design highlights that, not only are the proposals made very scarce, but also that these proposals originate in the environmental dimension, identifying two types of strategies, known as Compliance and Proactive/Innovative (Adams, Jeanrenaud, Bessant, Denyer, & Overy, 2016; Aragon-Correa, 1998; Aragon-Correa & Sharma, 2003; Roome, 1992). In our proposal, we seek to enrich this typology by adding two additional strategic approaches, Reactors and Analysers (Miles & Snow, 1984; Miles, Snow, Meyer, & Coleman, 1978). We propose these four different ideal types of strategic positioning in terms of sustainability, although firms can move from one type to another if they decide to change their sustainable corporate strategy.

Firstly, companies that pursue a reactive behaviour are characterised by the lack of a competitive strategy. Instead, companies try to respond – in accordance with their limited capacities – to the changes that occur in the market in order to maintain their position. They are firms that have no planned activities either in the economic or the social dimension (human resources area) (Miles et al., 1978; Miles & Snow, 1984). Taking into account these characteristics from these types of reactive organisations, it is also reasonable to expect an absence of environmental and other sustainability concerns. These firms do not consider any standards or regulations in terms of environmental or social sustainability, and they are placed in a stage that Dunphy, Griffiths, and Benn (2007) refer to as “rejection and non-responsiveness” with regard to sustainability. Therefore, on the basis of all the above reasons, we have labelled them as firms with an unsustainable behaviour.

Secondly, and broadening the literature about environmental strategies out towards sustainability, it could be argued that, in terms of sustainability, a compliance sustainability strategy would be one in which the organisation is concerned solely with meeting the legal requirements established with regard to the three spheres of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. Put another way, organisations situated within this type of sustainable strategy may well accept the need to comply with legislation and regulations regarding environmental, social and economic aspects (environmental, labour and fiscal legislation), but they continue to seek maximum returns for their shareholders as the prevalent factor (Aragon-Correa, 1998). The minimisation of costs incurred through compliance with environmental regulations and the generation of wealth for shareholders are two of the key goals in this approach. Impact on the community and the generation of wealth for other stakeholders are kept in the background. Price and low costs are the dominant variables in this strategic approach to sustainability, which presents a clear imbalance with regard to the approach and attention paid to the dimensions of sustainability (Russo & Fouts, 1997). This imbalance exists because these companies seek to achieve maximum impact on sustainability whilst incurring minimum costs. However, we believe this is not a real imbalance, because these firms are looking to achieve the bare minimum in terms of sustainability (solely compliance) by investing minimal resources. This strategy would have the lowest impact on the Triple Bottom Line, with an absence of interest regarding the social impact on stakeholders, concern to comply with minimum legal requirements in terms of environmental impact purely in order to avoid fines, and a focus on short term profits and day to day performance (Aragon-Correa & Sharma, 2003).

Following the philosophy of the classic strategic proposal developed by Miles and Snow (Miles et al., 1978; Miles & Snow, 1984), a third type could be described as follows: firms in which it is not legal compliance but rather the actions of competitors in aspects related to sustainability that determine the behaviours of such organisations, not seeking to put themselves in a market-leadership position (DeSarbo, Di Benedetto, Song, & Sinha, 2005). The aim is to respond to competitors, always acting through imitation, developing an ‘analyser’ behaviour. (Miles & Snow, 1984; Perez-Luño, Valle-Cabrera, & Wiklund, 2007). In these cases, it is possible to go beyond the requirements established by legislation (compliance strategy) if pressure from different stakeholders, including competitors or the community, drives decisions that require an organisation to react so as not to lose its position in the market. These are firms that combine compliance and prospective strategies, mixing exploratory and exploitative learning (Sollosy, Parboteeah, & Guidice, 2015). For example, these organisations might decide to incorporate improvements in some of the spheres linked to sustainability since failure to do so might impact negatively on their reputation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This type of strategy, termed analyser sustainability strategy, does not imply or require the concept of sustainability to be assimilated, but rather to be understood as a necessary response resulting from pressure from external forces, competitors, customers, the community, etc... (DeSarbo et al., 2005). We presume that this strategy will be positioned in between compliance and proactive strategies in terms of impact on the Triple Bottom Line: these companies are seeking to optimise their effects on the environment, society and profits, by striking a balance in terms of the investments they make in these areas as a reaction to major sustainability initiatives developed by their competitors.

A fourth and final approach to sustainability described above would be that of organisations that adopt a proactive attitude towards this issue, in other words, companies with proactive and innovative sustainability strategies. These types of organisations seek to go beyond strict compliance, anticipating actions in the spheres of sustainability as part of their culture and the way they compete. Sustainability, in this case, is understood as a decisive factor in competitiveness, and innovation in sustainability, both incremental and radical, is a component in the organisation's orientation (Adams et al., 2016). Innovations in products, in processes, in improvements to working conditions, etc., are the core of management decisions and orientation. For these reasons, we posit that this strategy has the highest positive impact on the Triple Bottom Line: firms that are truly concerned to outperform in terms of green impact, social effects and long term benefits and competitiveness (Aragon-Correa & Sharma, 2003; Russo & Fouts, 1997). The aim is to provide a response to stakeholders from the perspective of optimising the value contributed to each of them, assuming the principles of risk, differentiation, employer branding, influence in the sector, innovation, and entry into new markets (Laszlo & Zhexembayeva, 2011).

Hence, the four types of firms might represent different options and positions with regard to sustainability, differentiated by the way in which this concept is present in an organisation's behaviour and culture (Aragon-Correa & Sharma, 2003; Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010), affecting the management of functional areas differently depending on the organisation. One of the aspects highlighted by the development of literature about sustainability is the impact of this concept not only on an organisation's external

dimension, but also the internal effects it has, considering the short and the long term (Kramar, 2014). The systemic nature of sustainability means that its environmental, social and economic approach affects a high number of functions within an organisation (Russo & Fouts, 1997) including human resources (Adams et al., 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2001).

The sustainability approach may become the image and identity of organisations, and may guide the behaviours required from employees as well as the development of new employee abilities and skills (Groenwegen & Vergragt, 1991; Starik & Rands, 1995). Thus, the adoption of a sustainable corporate approach necessarily involves developing HRM strategies and policies that provide an organisation with the technical and management abilities it needs (Wilkinson et al., 2001) and integrates the principles of sustainability (Gollan, 2000).

The question that emerges is, therefore: which HRM strategies are congruent with the sustainability corporate strategies described above? How should HRM strategies be defined in order to be considered sustainable?

The literature indicates that the strategic approach to human resources management has been largely economist driven, and that the incorporation of sustainability into this approach requires a change in the traditional orientation (Ehnert, 2009; Guerci & Pedrini, 2014). A Sustainable HRM Strategy must be capable of integrating economic benefits and socio-economic equity, proposing a model of sustainable HRM processes in which the three essential components are company, community and government (Mariappanadar, 2003).

The internalisation of environmental sustainability within an organisation entails a cultural change, a change in the way of thinking, and a change in the system as a whole, which translates into a demand for new employee behaviours (Renwick, Redman, & Maguire, 2013). Hence, in contrast to the traditional economic orientation of the strategic approach to human resources, the sustainability approach involves developing a different orientation in HRM processes, as human resources take on a strategic role in this process of adaptation (Dubois & Dubois, 2012).

Mariappanadar (2003) focuses on the relevance of assuring a form of social sustainability in retrenchment and downsizing strategies, integrating economic benefits and social equity and assessing impacts on communities and governments. She offers a proposal regarding Sustainable HRM strategies, taking as references the orientation towards human resources based on HR transformation and HR reconciliation, but uncoupled from the generic strategies designed by the organisation. To resolve this apparent disconnection, Dubois and Dubois (2012) designed a contextual analytical model of the strategic management of human resources oriented towards environmental sustainability in organisations. Although these authors signal that the variables to be taken into consideration include the strategic management of human resources geared towards the transformation of people, they nonetheless show us different strategic options within the sphere of HRM.

This work, taking as a reference the definition of sustainable HRM strategy developed by Kramar (2014) as “the pattern of planned or emerging HR strategies and practices intended to enable the achievement of financial, social and ecological goals while simultaneously reproducing the HR bases over a long term” (pp. 1084), seeks to identify sustainable strategic human resources models congruent with the sustainable corporate strategies indicated at the start of this section.

Hence, firstly, HRM strategy is not present in firms with a reactive behaviour (Miles & Snow, 1984); therefore, it is similarly not present in the firms that we have labelled Unsustainable firms. Secondly, the HRM strategy that best fits a compliance sustainability strategy would be one in which the focus of attention is on compliance and control of regulation in terms of sustainability (Lepak & Snell, 1999). Organisations with this strategic orientation are based on and seek a high level of formalisation and specification in terms of the activities to be carried out, with no necessary identification between people and the principles of sustainability. It is a strategy based on the minimisation of costs implied through the incorporation of external regulations governing sustainability. The formulation of strategy enjoys a degree of certainty given the slowness with which legal changes or regulations governing the parameters of sustainability develop (the legal environment is foreseeable in its evolution, whereas the environment linked to the market is not) (Elkington, 1997; Russo & Fouts, 1997). This human resources strategy, coherent with the generic strategy, is termed Compliance Sustainable HRM strategy. In institutional terms, coercive pressure is the most significant external parameter (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Thirdly, when sustainable corporate strategy focuses on analyser behaviour (Miles & Snow, 1978; Miles & Snow, 1984), the most relevant aspect that defines the strategy is a certain internal flexibility that allows an organisation to react to the behaviours developed by its competitors. The relevant capacity for the organisation is its agility and speed to incorporate aspects of sustainability that the competition has shown to be internally viable and accepted by customers and the general environment (Dyer & Shafer, 1999). Internal functional flexibility and the capacity to incorporate new knowledge for the organisation (but not for the market) become a decisive component for organisations looking to mimic and copy other competitor firms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The capacity to absorb a certain degree of uncertainty and to identify the changes experienced by competitors are two behaviours that become strategic, and which should determine the orientation of HRM processes (Perez-Luño et al., 2007).

Here, the degree of formalisation of activities is reduced with regard to the compliance HRM strategy given the potential changes required. The development of this HRM strategy could lead to superior results than those achieved by the firms that spearheaded change since the followers have not had to bear the costs of developing new activities and can avoid the mistakes made by the trailblazers (Perez-Luño et al., 2007). In terms of environmental orientation or impact on the community, for example, only aspects that are truly valued by customers or the community, and those with important economic effects for the organisation, would be adopted. Internal decisions in terms of HRM policies linked to sustainability will also be marked by those developed previously by competitors. In these cases, the human resources strategy adopted is termed analyser sustainable HRM strategy. The most relevant institutional pressure is imitation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Finally, the HRM strategy adjusted to the proactive/innovative sustainable strategy would be the one that promotes and enables the behaviours that characterise the corporate strategy of innovation (Prieto & Perez-Santana, 2014; Sanz-Valle & Jimenez, 2018;



Schuler & Jackson, 1987; Schuler & Jackson, 2005; Shipton, Sparrow, Budhwar, & Brown, 2017). As Schuler and Jackson explicitly said (1987:208), this strategy “is used to develop products or services different from those of competitors; the primary focus here is on offering something new and different”. Behaviours of innovation, search and anticipation define the HRM strategy in this case. In this situation, uniqueness of knowledge oriented towards the development of products/services and processes with a positive impact on the environment is at the heart of the HRM strategy, and defines an organisation's core employees (Lopez-Cabrales, Perez-luño, & Valle-Cabrera, 2009). From the social perspective or impact on the community, recognition of the high contributions expected of employees means that the response is to offer superior incomes, working conditions and social wellbeing than those offered by companies with HRM strategies such as the ones described earlier. In this case, the internalisation of sustainability and its incorporation as a cultural component also appears to be a decisive variable (Naranjo-Valencia, Jimenez, & Sanz-Valle, 2011). Internal flexibility must be high, and such organisations have organic structures and working designs that permit and facilitate knowledge creation and sharing (Diaz-Fernandez, Pasamar-Reyes, & Valle-Cabrera, 2017; Kang & Snell, 2009). The HRM strategy described here is labelled proactive sustainable HRM strategy. Initiative, internal and external collaboration, and transformational HRM (Dubois & Dubois, 2012) would appear to be the distinctive and necessary traits of this strategic approach as competitive pressures force firms to innovate if they want to keep their competitive edge and be leaders in the market through the implementation of new initiatives.

### 3. Sustainable human resource management strategies, employment relationships and HRM systems

Literature states that one reason why the corporate sustainable strategies do not produce the desired effects is because these strategies do not integrate HRM in their strategic planning and implementation processes (BCG and MIT, 2009; Fenwick, 2007). Some research indicates that just a small number of HRM practices, such as training programmes, are involved in sustainability processes (Nohrman & Worley, 2010). However, it has been said, in a very generic way, that employees and organisational commitment to sustainability can be reinforced through the way in which human resources are managed (Longoni, 2014) and consequently by the system of employment relationships within the firm.

As indicated and argued in the previous section, the internalisation and integration of sustainability in an organisation's corporate and HRM strategies will vary, requiring therefore different models of employment relationships and HRM systems to support them (De Prins, Van Beirendonck, De Vos, & Segers, 2014; Dubois & Dubois, 2012; Peck, 1994).

The dominant reasoning found in the literature on Strategic HRM is that HRM strategies are formulated in order to improve the performance of an organisation, and human resources activities are designed to signal to employees the behaviours required that make it possible to successfully implement the firm's strategy (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009). The definition of Strategic HRM proposed by Wright and McMahan (1992) highlights vertical fit as a component thereof, pointing out that planned actions should support the development of organisational strategy. In essence, it highlights the need to adopt a contingent approach by stating that the required behaviours and the orientation of HRM will depend on the orientation of the organisational strategy (Martin-Alcazar et al., 2005). Broadening this approach out to encompass sustainability, sustainable HRM strategies are designed and aligned to configure a system that contributes to the sustainability of the organisation, seeking a vertical fit. This implies incorporating and broadening the dominant strategic approach to HRM, as indicated by Kramar (2014), who recognises three different groups of scholars in sustainable HRM. The first one includes authors who are focused on economic outcomes from HRM (a group of researchers on sustainable HRM that he called “Capability Reproduction”). A second group named “Promoting social and environmental health” studies relationships between HRM and external outcomes, reflecting an efficiency-oriented approach to sustainability. Finally, a third group known as “Connections” examines the interactions between HRM and organisational outcomes, including financial, social and environmental results. These three components of sustainability must therefore be an object of exchange in employment relationships between employer and employees.

As noted by Ehnert (2009), employment relationships are affected by sustainability in terms of their temporal orientation (short vs. long term), job security, career expectations, modifying the offers made by employers to employees as well as expected employee behaviours. When we talk about employment relationships, we are referring to the agreement of exchange that takes place between employer and employee (Shore et al., 2004).

The sustainable HRM strategies described in the previous section must be translated into sustainable HRM systems, bearing in mind the internal and external impact of factors within the control of an organisation. This approach does not lead us to propose or study solely the orientation of individual HRM practices but to consider the whole HRM system, looking for horizontal fit or internal coherency in the practices designed and the synergies between them (Kepes & Delery, 2007). Taking this argument into account, the system of employment relationships must include economic, social and environmental targets in its internal dimension, taking into consideration the effect these have externally (Ehnert, Parsa, Roprer, Wagner, & Muller-Camen, 2015). Employment relationships, from the perspective of sustainability, involve designing inducements, paying attention to the effects these have not only on employees but also on the community (Ehnert et al., 2015).

Consubstantial to the concept of sustainability and employment relationships is the fact that relationships of exchange are established over the long term (Ehnert & Brandl, 2013), noting however that sustainability in employment relationships does not refer to a job for life but rather lifetime employability (De Prins et al., 2014; Kanter, 1989). Hence, in order for sustainability to be strategically embedded, for example, systems of rewards and incentives must encompass targets and goals related with sustainability (Adams et al., 2016), and changes must be made in processes, behaviours and competencies through training (Cohen, 2010). In other words, HRM strategies and management processes developed by companies must be coherent and congruent with their sustainability strategies. The proposed need to fit within the HRM system (horizontal fit) and fit with the context (vertical fit) suggests that fit occurs at a specific point in time. Nevertheless, if the contextual variable (firm strategy) changes, the employment relationship system

should also be modified. This reasoning indicates that the system should possess a certain degree of flexibility, enabling change and adaptability (Wright & Snell, 1998).

In order to adopt an appropriate conceptual framework to analyse possible models of employment relationships in terms of sustainability, the proposal of Tsui, Pearce, Porter, and Tripoli (1997) is considered to be suitable for the purposes of this paper, since it is well established in the literature on employment relationships (Tsui & Wu, 2005; Wang, Tsui, Zhang, & Ma, 2003). This proposal considers two dimensions: inducements offered by an organisation and expected employee behaviours, borrowed from Barnard (1938). The combination of these two dimensions gave rise to four models of employment relationships: two balanced – “Quasi-Spot Contract” and “Mutual Investment” – and two imbalanced – “Overinvestment” and “Underinvestment” –. We believe that this proposal could be used in sustainability analysis, conceptualising the four employment models to the offered inducements and expected behaviours not only in economic issues but also in social and environmental aspects. Below is a detailed presentation of each of these models and their suitability in terms of sustainability.

### 3.1. Under-sustainability and underinvestment in the HRM system

The first imbalanced employment relationship in the model developed by Tsui et al., (1997), Underinvestment, would be characterised by the imbalance between the low offer and investment made in the human component, and the high demands with regard to their behaviours. The very lack of equity in this approach indicates that it lies outside the basic principles of sustainability. This model of employment relationship, termed here Under-sustainability, would be adopted by organisations that try to elude the commitment of accepting principles of sustainability, as it is the case of the firms that we have called “Unsustainable” or “Reactors”.

As stated previously, firms based on reactive behaviours lack strategic planning in any management area, and especially in issues related to sustainability. Taking into account the characteristics of these firms in the market, their limited capabilities to compete, their difficulties in terms of offering attractive products and taking risks, we might think that the survival of these companies can be explained through poorly developed employment relationships and a lack of employee incentives, just as the Underinvestment model is (Tsui et al., 1997; Tsui & Wu, 2005). The inducements offered to employees in terms of compensation, training, career or employment security do not go beyond the firm's survival in the short term. This minimum level of inducements explains the limitation of a firm's ability to compete. The competitive focus of these firms is based on asking employees to develop short term extra efforts, and the firm expects much more from employees than it offers. Therefore, since sustainability has no strategic relevance for the firm, sustainability is similarly not important in terms of designing the HRM system. Taking into account the above, the described employment relationship can be labelled Underinvestment in Sustainability or Under-sustainability.

The consequences of this employment relationship are a certain level of labour conflict, high turnover and absenteeism levels, and negative effects on sustainability in its three spheres: economic, social and environmental. This situation is clearly contrary to the search to support sustainability, since inequity between offers and demands breaks with the values and principles incorporated by sustainability (Tsui & Wu, 2005).

In this model, investment in HRM management practices would be minimal, and underinvestment in staff would have negative effects on economic, environmental and principally social sustainability (Mariappanadar, 2003). On the one hand, it leads to staff reduction and downsizing policies, which have proven to provoke depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and even health problems (Clarke & Patrickson, 2001; Seligman, 1975). On the other hand, employees are offered extremely precarious working conditions, with low salaries, a lack of incentives, no investment in training, development or career, which the worker accepts and assumes as long as they have no better employment options. This intensification of work has negative effects on the employees that remain in the organisation (Mariappanadar, 2012), and under this type of relationship, it is impossible to maintain the discourse of sustainability in the company, since it does not permit the regeneration or development of human capital, or an improvement in quality of life at work (Docherty, Forslin, Shani, & Kira, 2002).

### 3.2. Quasi-spot sustainability and compliance HRM system

The foundations of this balanced model of employment relationship (Quasi-Spot Contract) are that it is not necessarily geared towards the long term and the search for compliance with formal regulations. Jobs are simple in nature, with relationships defined over the short term (Tsui et al., 1997). Translating its distinguishing features into sustainability, this model of employment relationship is based on vigilance and control of rules established by the organisation and linked to economic, social and environmental dimensions, which pertain to the compliance required of the organisation by external institutions. The adopted time frame is short term and employees do not necessarily have to internalise (commit to) values related to sustainability, since their definition and scope are established in the rules. This approach to the content that defines the employment relationship enables us to label it Quasi-spot sustainability and link it with the sustainability HRM strategy referred to here as Compliance. This compliance would be coherent with the efficient orientation towards sustainability noted by Ehnert (2009) and Kramar (2014), since it seeks to reduce costs or generate value by maximising outputs, which has sparked certain criticism in the literature, considering this approach to be insufficient for achieving sustainability (Kramar, 2014).

The Quasi-Spot sustainability employment relationship that we propose is a balanced system following the reasoning developed by Tsui et al. (1997): the organisation offers a narrow set of inducements and expects in return a low level of behaviours associated with sustainability. As Tsui et al., explicitly state: “the balance is in the fact that the exchange is relatively short termed and closed ended by both partners” (1997:1092). This sort of equilibrium in terms of minimums also explains why employees will perceive this to be a fair employment system (Tsui & Wu, 2005), justifying their low implication in sustainability, just complying with the

minimum requirements. In the opinion of [Dunphy et al. \(2007\)](#), compliance is the first stage (rejection, non-responsiveness, compliance, efficiency, strategic proactivity and the sustaining organisation) in which a company can position itself in order to be a sustainable organisation. Hence, the quasi-spot sustainability employment relationship would characterise an organisation that is at the lower limit of the path to sustainability. In some ways, this way of understanding sustainability would be congruent with the vision put forward by [Friedman \(1970\)](#) that the only objective is the search for economic-financial results, and the rest is based on strict minimum compliance with regulations. Hence, a Compliance Sustainable HRM System is adopted, which aims to ensure compliance with the rules and procedures established in the organisation with regard to environmental and social issues.

To ensure compliance, the organisation adopts an 'economic-utilitarian' approach in its HR management system, and employs a group of workers, with very specific production targets and tasks ([Tsui et al., 1997](#)). Their skills and abilities constitute what we might term 'ancillary support' to the organisation ([Snell, Lepak, & Youndt, 1999](#)). Recruitment and selection practices are designed to guarantee the availability of the staff required to meet the needs of the firm, with no interest in Employer Branding, but instead in this case the aim is to ensure that the company only has the staff members it requires, quantitatively and qualitatively speaking ([Ehnert, 2009](#)).

Within the sphere of training, investment will be minimal; merely to guarantee compliance with environmental legislation standards and ensure that employees have the skills and abilities required in order to perform low complexity tasks effectively. The staff development procedures options (socialisation, training, career management) will therefore be token, and any process of this kind, if implemented, will be geared towards getting employees to learn and assimilate specific procedures stipulated in the rules to be followed at all times ([Doorewaard & Meihuizen, 2000](#); [Lepak & Snell, 1999](#)).

Performance appraisal and compensation practices will be oriented towards control, in order to guarantee that employees are efficient in their tasks. In fact, results will be measured, and any deviation from standards of excellence will be monitored, as in the case of the mass production factories studied by [McDuffie \(1995\)](#). This highlights the highly sanctioning nature of individual appraisal, which avoids looking for feedback and seeking improvements in employee behaviour, or detecting gaps in their competencies. In relation to remuneration criteria, in theory it would not be necessary to promote attractive rewards in exchange for certain results, but rather simply to ensure that rules and procedures are adhered to and that compensation is paid as agreed ([Lepak & Snell, 2002](#); [Mahoney, 1989](#); [Rousseau & Parks, 1993](#)).

### 3.3. Mutual investment sustainability and long term oriented HRM system

This other balanced employment relationship, termed Mutual Investment ([Tsui et al., 1997](#)), is characterised by a long-term orientation in which the firm is offering a high level of inducements whilst expecting in return a high level of contributions from employees. In terms of sustainability, the inducements offered might be considered to be supported by economic proposals, but also by social and environmental ones. In economic terms, for example, by offering salaries that comply with principles of equity and external and internal competitiveness, and which are also linked not only to performance but also to social and environmental aspects (for example energy efficiency); in social terms, by offering opportunities in terms of development through training or career expectations, and incorporating work/life balance practices. Regarding expected behaviours, those that are directly linked to commitment and involvement in matters of sustainability are valued, provided the market and the competition demand them. Employees will react positively to this form of employment relationship because it is balanced, and the high level of expected behaviours is compensated by the high level of investments made by the firm in employees.

The actions of competitors are the true focus of attention and the trigger for changes linked to sustainability incorporated into the organisation. This model of employment relationship, which could be termed Mutual-Sustainability, on account of its content and its orientation towards the long term, as well as the behaviours it seeks to promote geared towards monitoring the competition, might well support the Analyser Sustainable HRM strategies described in the previous section ([DeSarbo et al., 2005](#)). In general, the HR management practices that best fit this type of employment relationship would be characterised by their orientation, in this case, combining changes as a reaction to competitors' initiatives and adapting employees to new situations, which would be reinforced by a Long Term Oriented Sustainable HRM System ([Miles & Snow, 1978](#); [Miles & Snow, 1984](#)).

Hence, in this system of practices, the most convenient orientation for recruitment and selection processes would require the organisation to hire employees who are potentially prepared to implement and develop within the firm the 'best' sustainability practices taken from other competitors. For example, in the environmental sphere, [Boiral \(2002\)](#) and [Rothenberg \(2003\)](#) suggest that in these cases employees should possess tacit knowledge of these types of practices, having participated in the implementation of projects that improve environmental impact. Hence, inefficiencies can be detected and mistakes in application can even be corrected, and the most successful firm might even be the one that developed these sustainable practices in the first place.

For these companies, more than ensuring mere employee compliance with regulations (environmental, or social, health and safety, etc.....), the important thing is to convince them that these practices are positive and that it is in everybody's best interest to follow them so as not to lose the company's competitive position. Hence, practices of empowerment and engagement favoured by the company's managers and supervisors would seem to be adequate, not only at an environmental level ([Kitazawa & Sarkis, 2000](#); [Ramus & Steger, 2000](#)) but at all levels of sustainability, generating a "Supportive culture for Sustainability" which leads the company to accept and internalise principles of sustainability over the long term, seeking excellence in their application ([Stone, 2000](#)).

Finally, performance appraisal processes and compensation must be geared towards recognising and rewarding success and efficiency in the application and development of practices that enable the Triple Bottom Line of sustainability: economic, social and environmental. In this employment relationship, innovation or leadership in these sustainable policies is not rewarded – as it would be in the Over-Sustainability employment relationship – but rather these firms will reward the improvements made as reactions to

what is done by competitors, in order to maintain the firm's position in the market. An example of this situation would be recognising and rewarding departments that successfully apply policies that respect and recognise diversity through equity and distributive justice – diversity management (social sustainability) (Greenwood, 2002; Jabbour & Santos, 2008a) – or by assuring the reduction of emissions at a lower cost and more efficiently (environmental sustainability) (Jabbour & Santos, 2008b; Wehrmeyer, 1996).

#### 3.4. Over-sustainability and innovative HRM system

The last imbalanced employment relationships is known as Overinvestment (Tsui & Wu, 2005). It is characterised by the fact that the inducements offered by the organisation surpass the responses expected from employees. The organisation is ahead of the results, but aware that its competitiveness depends on this. In terms of sustainability, this could be understood as the organisation's option to stand out not only in terms of the economic offer it makes to employees but also with regard to the investments it makes in their development, with a view to ensuring its leadership with regard to sustainability through such investments. This could be understood as an employment relationship oriented towards innovation, proactiveness, prevention, always looking to the future, and which could be termed Over-Sustainability. The firm's investments in employees surpass the latter's current level of contributions; therefore, workers would perceive this as a driver to reinforce their commitment and involvement with sustainability. This employment relationship would fit with a Proactive Sustainable HRM strategy, in order to achieve the Triple Bottom Line of sustainability: economic, social and environmental (Guerci & Pedrini, 2014; Martinez-del-Rio, Cespedes-Lorente, & Carmona-Moreno, 2012).

The Over-sustainability employment relationship is made specific through an Innovative Sustainable HRM System. Given that this employment relationship would be concerned to attract and incorporate into the organisation potentially more qualified employees to achieve triple sustainability, practices of Employer Branding should be adequate in such cases (Ehnert, 2009). Hence, the company would convey and make it clear in its process of recruitment and selection that it is committed to sustainability, so that this becomes an element of attraction, for candidates who are motivated by such matters, and an element of dissuasion for those not interested in it. Accordingly, the approach adopted would be coherent with signalling theory in its recruitment and selection processes, so that candidates anticipate future intentions and actions of the company on account of its commitment to sustainability (Renwick et al., 2013).

In this employment relationship, the company also seeks innovative training formulas oriented towards sustainability, thus encouraging employees to reflect on the economic, social and environmental impacts of the company's activities (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Mariappanadar, 2003; Vidal-Salazar, Cordón-Pozo, & Ferrón-Vilchez, 2012). This would involve increasing employee knowledge and abilities with regard to new processes and actions, as well as promoting feedback about desirable values that enables employee participation and motivation (Jabbour & Santos, 2008a).

Finally, by adopting a proactive and innovative sustainability strategy, the company must seek to develop mechanisms and formulas that evaluate and incentivise such initiatives among employees and not only among executives or middle managers (Merriman and Sen, 2012; Renwick et al., 2013). These mechanisms might include non-monetary remunerations linked to the employee's contributions to sustainability, such as extra holidays, flexible working hours, or certificates of recognition. However, this is an area that requires further development, with certain evidence indicating the positive impact of these practices on environmental sustainability targets (Govindarajulu & Daily, 2004; Ramus, 2001).

As shown in Fig. 1, the employment relationships models indicated in this section, together with the HRM practices that define each of them, seek to reflect their fit with the sustainable corporate and HRM strategies in four different scenarios or stages.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

This article seeks to offer a conceptual model that would allow the concept of sustainability to be incorporated into the strategic analysis of human resource management. A review of the literature allows us to identify the strategic proposals of corporate sustainability and, consequently, to draw up a typology of sustainable HRM strategies. Each of the HRM strategies indicated here differs in the degree and intensity with which sustainability is present in their formulation and in the orientation of the sought behaviours. The supports or foundations of HRM strategies are made explicit through the set of practices that, in turn, configure the system of employment relationships in the organisation. Taking this aspect into consideration, the paper also identifies four possible models of employment relationships: one of them is characteristic of firms that lack sustainable corporate and HRM strategies, and the other three types are associated with HRM systems adapted in line with the sustainable HRM strategies proposed. Each employment relationship model establishes different inducements and demands made of employees, which are materialised through the orientations given to HRM practices. Ultimately, this paper shows a model of analysis based conceptually on the principle of horizontal fit (internal coherency of HRM practices within each sustainable Employment model) and vertical fit (alignment of Employment Relationships with different sustainable corporate and HRM strategies).

One aspect not considered in this paper, and which should be taken into consideration in future research, would be the incorporation of institutional variables into the analysis. Research on sustainability highlights that institutional pressures have obliged organisations to initiate strategic processes oriented towards sustainability, understanding that they are seeking congruence with the expectations of their surroundings (De Prins et al., 2014). In short, institutional pressures that might be conditioning sustainability strategies would include laws, regulations, and social and ethical obligations (Epstein & Roy, 2003).

In this process of evolution and new behaviour demanded of companies, it would also be important to study the role of leadership as being responsible for the definition of the organisation's mission and values. Sustainable leadership is a relatively new idea that represents a radically expanded understanding of leadership, encompassing leaders who undertake actions to make a sustainable



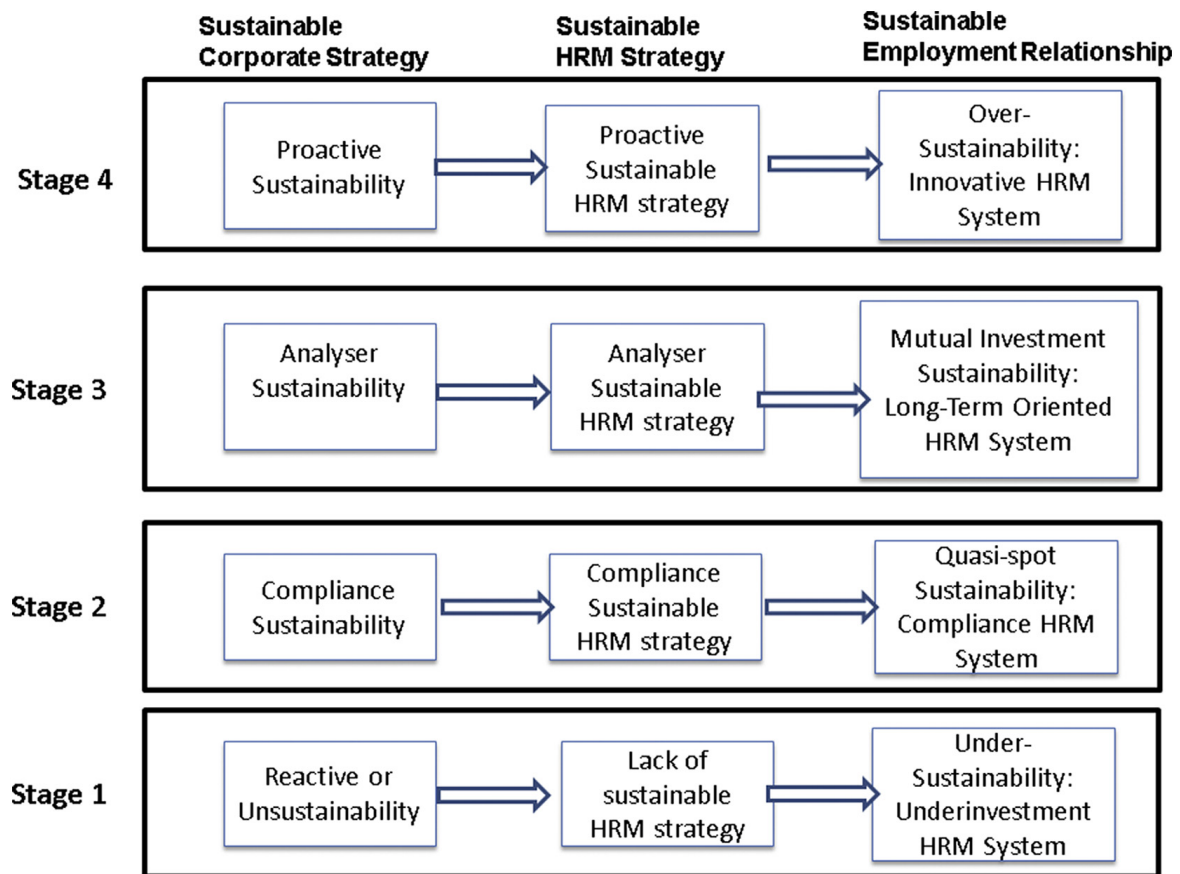


Fig. 1. Strategies and employment relationships for sustainability

difference in organisations and communities (Ferdig, 2007). Leadership style can be considered an essential factor in the development and implementation of sustainability within an organisation (Kurucz, Colbert, Lüdeke-Freund, Upward, & Willard, 2017). Also, employees' and employers' perceptions about trade-offs in these strategic models and employment relationships may differ, but such a study would imply a more detailed analysis of these perceptions in future research, especially from the employees' point of view.

Sustainability and new emerging leadership styles require companies to translate and apply to their specific context new values such as cooperation, equity, transparency, honesty and liberty. These are all defined globally, but the challenge today is to make them context specific so that they are part of the formulation of sustainability strategies (Twomey, Twomey, Farias, & Ozgur, 2010) and reflect the organisation's commitment to its different stakeholders.

Finally, it would be advantageous to develop a proposal of dependent variables/results linked to the three areas of sustainability: environmental, social and economic. In this regard, Bansal (2005) proposed a methodology to incorporate measures of Environmental Integrity, Social Equity, and Economic Prosperity. Nonetheless, measurement is a controversial subject and generates doubts if self-reporting is used, or if archival data or public reporting is employed, using the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) as a possible criterion, as suggested by Ehnert et al. (2015).

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