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## **HR managers and environmental sustainability: strategic leaders or passive observers?**

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In this paper, we explore the challenges posed to, and reactions of, human resource (HR) managers by the concept of environmental sustainability. From interviews with 14 New Zealand HR managers, we explore three related aspects of morality identified by Fineman: private, conventional, and enacted. Findings indicate that while the HR managers note a private position of environmental concern, they take a passive approach to environmental sustainability within their organizations. We note that this passive position is not without potentially adverse effects in relation to the role of HR as a strategic partner and for the advancement of environmental sustainability within organizations.

**Keywords:** environmental sustainability; human resource management; strategic partner

### **Introduction**

Many organizations have been quick to jump onboard the ‘sustainability bandwagon’. However, little appears to have been done to consider the role of, and effect on, the human resource (HR) function and manager. In fact, organizations have tended to treat sustainability and HR in silo. In this paper, we examine questions such as: How are HR managers defining and enacting environmental sustainability? And what is the effect of the HR managers’ social and political contexts in this role? We address such questions by focusing on the relationships between HR and environmental sustainability. In particular, we explore the challenges posed to, and reactions of, HR managers by the concept of sustainability and corporate sustainability rhetoric.

Drawing on a set of interviews undertaken with 14 New Zealand HR managers, we explore three related aspects of morality identified by Fineman (1997): private, conventional, and enacted. We also examine what this group of HR managers believes the role of HR could be, and perhaps should be, in relation to fostering environmental sustainability within organizations. As such, we analyze a group of HR managers’ private views on the environment and consider how these views and values relate to their organizations stated position, as well as how they are enacted (or not) within their work context. In doing so, we begin to examine how environmental territories are construed and contested within the HR arena, the field of HR thinking and practice, something not presently considered in the extant literature. Moreover, drawing on interview data, we explore and analyze the current state of HR and environmental sustainability within the New Zealand context, examining not only what the HR function is doing in the name of

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environmental sustainability but also what this group of HR managers believes they can, and should, be doing. Our aim is to begin to critically examine the relationship between HR and environmental sustainability and start to explore what environmental sustainability may mean for various HR functions – and perhaps with a little concern, note what HR may mean for environmental sustainability.

We structure the paper as follows. First, we provide an overview of relevant background literature. We consider the concept of sustainability within the business context and identify how we use the term in this paper, in particular, our preference for the term ‘environmental sustainability’. Then, we briefly introduce strategic HR issues in relation to how it is relevant to this particular study, and present the emerging, but as yet limited, HR and environmental sustainability literature. Second, we present the framework and approach taken followed by an overview of our data sources and method. Findings are then presented and discussed. The paper ends with implications and a call for future research.

### **Background literature**

Since Shrivastava’s (1994) call for organization studies to seriously engage in environmental discourse, there has been a notable increase in organization and management studies’ consideration of the natural environment. The recognition of the environmentally destructive nature of organizations’ activities (Shrivastava 1994; Welford 1997) and acknowledgement that organizations have contributed to the present ecological ‘crisis’ are likely to be the reasons for this consideration, so is the recognition that ‘no other institution in the world is powerful enough to foster the necessary changes’ (Hawken 1993, p. 135). However, whilst organization studies (e.g. Banerjee 2003; Milne, Kearins and Walton 2006) and disciplines such as accounting (e.g. Gray and Bebbington 2001; Unerman, Bebbington and O’Dwyer 2007) and to some extent operations management (e.g. Angell and Klassen 1999; Sarkis 2006) have been somewhat active in considering their role on, and impact of, environmental sustainability, the HR field (academics and practitioners) has so far largely failed to seriously engage. This failure to engage, we argue, is not without potentially adverse effects – not only for organizational practices in relation to environmental sustainability, but also for the HR function and HR practitioners in general. Here, we discuss environmental sustainability, strategic HR, and the literature which links the two. This section of the paper provides both background literature and establishes key concepts, as we understand them, in this paper.

### ***Environmental sustainability and organizations***

The natural environment has become a site of discursive struggle arising out of alternative representations of the human–nature relationship (and subsequently the organization–nature relationship) and contestation around what the ‘correct’ relationship should be (e.g. Dryzek 1997). A range of different discourses on the environment exist in this struggle (see Egri and Pinfield 1996; Dryzek 1997; Livesey 2001). Sustainability is one such discourse.

It is widely understood that the ‘meaning’ of sustainability/sustainable development<sup>1</sup> is contested (Lele 1991; Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause 1995; Dryzek 1997; Welford 1997; Jacobs 1999). To recognize this contestation and range of meanings, much of the sustainability literature refers to the ‘weak’ vs. ‘strong’ sustainability continuum (Pearce 1993; Wackernagel and Rees 1996; Dobson 1999; Bebbington 2001) based on the ‘triple

bottom line' perspective, which suggests that sustainability is made up of three elements: economic, environment, and society (Elkington 1997).

Under weak sustainability the three elements are viewed as related, but fundamentally separate entities. Trade-offs are subsequently made where the advancement of one component will occur at the expense of others. It is upon these foundations that the business case for sustainable development is made. The business case suggests that the economy is equal to the environment and society, and therefore, sustainability becomes about achieving win-wins; actions which are good for both the environment *and* the business (e.g. recycling, reduction of waste, and other eco-efficiencies). However, this often leads to the economy being prioritized over the environmental and social.

Under strong sustainability, the economy, society, and environment are not conceptualized as separate entities. Rather, the economy is perceived as part of, not apart from, society and the environment, and the recognition is made that the economy relies on these two elements not only for its 'success' but also for its existence. The 'strong' perspective ultimately places emphasis on the environment and society, and fundamentally acknowledges the presence of limits. In this paper, we focus on environmental sustainability. We do so to highlight the environmental element of sustainability which we consider important, and importantly overlooked, within the current HR arena (and arguably in other business disciplines as well).

It is generally acknowledged that sustainability will not be 'business as usual' (Bebbington and Gray 2001). While some suggest that a 'revamp' of existing models and theories of organization's is a way to bring about sustainability (e.g. Hart 1995; Jennings and Zandbergen 1995; Starik and Rands 1995), others note that more radical change is required (Gladwin et al. 1995; Purser, Park and Montuori 1995). In addition to theorizing the level of reform, redesign, and restructuring required, studies have also considered the pragmatics of 'going green'. Several authors have considered the adoption, on a number of levels, of organizational awareness and practices (e.g. Hussain 1999; Green, Morton and New 2000). Weinberg (1998, p. 242) notes that 'one way to dimensionalize green business is to assess how they manage growth' and thus the organizations ability to reconcile economic growth with ecological objectives. Weinberg (1998, p. 242) dimensionalizes on these criteria as he notes 'a paradoxical tension for green business between growing and staying green'. Bansal and Roth (2000) carry out a comprehensive analysis of why organizations are motivated toward 'corporate ecological responsibility' and identify three major motivators: competitiveness; legitimation; and ecological responsibility.

However, despite Prasad and Elmes' (2005) seemingly positive observation that the natural environment has moved from occupying a position of neglect, as identified by Shrivastava (1994) above and others such as Egri and Pinfield (1996), to a more central position in organization studies, there is still concern by them and others. Recent analyses of the corporate sustainability discourse note that while organizations may be 'talking green' the level to which they may be 'acting green' is questionable (Prasad and Elmes 2005; Milne et al. 2006; Milne, Tregidga and Walton 2009). Powerful rhetorical strategies inherent in the discourse, including the 'journey metaphor' (Milne et al. 2006), the discourse of pragmatics (Prasad and Elmes 2005), lead such authors to question the organizational response to the issue of sustainability, and perhaps of more concern, note the ability of such strategies to deflect 'attention away from debating about what kind of (radically different) performance is needed to provide a sustainable future' (Milne et al. 2006, p. 822).

We believe that any corporate shift from a 'business as usual' position to a more environmentally responsible paradigm requires organization-wide environmental

sensibilities. We also believe that such a shift will require, or will at least be assisted by the inclusion and involvement of the HR function. Therefore, in this paper, we examine the effect that the sustainability concept has had on the HR function and manager as well as the role of HR in enabling and fostering environmental sustainability. Before presenting our approach, findings, and conclusions, we first outline the current state of the literature relating to HR and environmental sustainability.

### ***Human resource management and environmental sustainability***

The concept of strategic Human Resource Management (HRM) evolved during the late 1980s and the early 1990s with an increased emphasis on a pro-active, integrative, and value-driven approach to HRM. Once the role of HR professionals and HR activities was reframed in terms of strategic HRM, HR professionals' responsibility became aligned to the interests and goals of the top executives (Kramar 2006). Wang and Shyu (2008) acknowledge that consistency between business strategy and HRM practices is an important component in the success of organizations. According to Andersen, Cooper and Zhu (2007), for HR to be a strategic partner HR managers should be involved in strategic decision making alongside other senior managers, providing greater opportunity to align HR goals, strategies, philosophies, and practices with corporate objectives and the implementation of business strategy (Ulrich 1997; Budhwar 2000). Buyens and De Vos (2001) further note that the role of the HR function as an organization strategic partner can be fulfilled in different ways, varying from involvement in strategy formulation to mere implementation of strategic decisions.

It is well noted that the role of HR professionals is one fraught with tensions, which arise because HR needs to serve a number of 'mistresses and masters' (Kramar 2006). Lowry (2006, p. 175) describes the role of the HR manager as 'potentially ambiguous and complex, given the inherent tensions associated with the reconciliation of organizational and individual interests'. Consistent with the view taken in this study, Lowry (2006) identifies that a necessary feature of the role of the HR manager is interaction characterized by debate and negotiation, based on a blend of both organizational and personally held values. Kochan (2004) argues, in relation to the strategic function of HRM, that the HR profession faces a crisis of trust. He argues that while previously HR managers were responsible for managing the interests of various stakeholders, strategic HRM has increasingly aligned them with senior managers. He stresses that 'as a result, HR professionals lost any semblance of credibility as a steward of the social contract because most HR professionals had lost their ability to seriously challenge or offer an independent perspective on the policies and practices of the firm' (p. 134). It is the perceived role of, and ability for, HR and HR professionals to seriously influence and enact environmental sustainability strategy that this paper is particularly concerned with.

We would argue that to date only scant attention has been paid to the role of HR in environmental sustainability (see Wehrmeyer (1996) for a collection of early writings). It is, for some however, not surprising that environmental issues have not received research attention as wider issues of social responsibility and ethics have also failed to feature strongly in the research agenda of HR. Zappalà (2004) notes that while HR and industrial relations scholars have previously touched on the issue of the social responsibility of business (see, Flanders 1970; Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Mills and Walton 1984; Muller-Camen, Hartog, Henriques, Hopkins and Parsa 2006; Wilcox 2006), these issues have failed to become incorporated into the discipline – in either a practical or a conceptual way. Winstanley and Woodall (2000) postulate that ethical issues have been of

marginal significance to the unfolding academic debates around HR, citing Mabey, Salaman and Storey's (1998) view on the lack of an ethical perspective 'as a curiously undeveloped area of analysis'.

Ehnert (2009) states that few authors have started linking the concept of sustainability to HR-related topics (e.g. Wilkinson, Hill and Gollan 2001; Docherty, Forslin and Shani 2002; Mariappanadar 2003; Boudreau and Ramstad 2005). Furthermore, the social dimension of sustainability is often used synonymously with the concepts of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or with business ethics (Jones-Christensen, Peirce, Hartman, Hoffman, Carrier and Ethics 2007) thus further confusing the meaning of 'sustainability'. Discussions about sustainability in the HR field primarily emphasize the social dimensions of sustainability. The result is that sustainability is linked to HR issues through the main concepts of 'sustainable work systems', 'sustainable HRM,' and 'sustainable management of HR' (Ehnert 2006). Environmental sustainability has largely failed to materialize as an important issue for consideration and action by either HR researchers or practitioners.

There are a few exceptions though. A report by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD 2005) explicitly considers the relationship between HR and environmental sustainability. The WBCSD, an international business association whose mission is 'to provide business leadership as a catalyst for change toward sustainable development, and to support the business licence to operate, innovate, and grow in a world increasingly shaped by sustainable development issues' (WBCSD 2010), identifies how sustainable development can be considered in a number of core HR functions such as recruiting and retaining top talent, creating incentives for exceptional performance, and enhancing critical competencies (WBCSD 2005).

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), Europe's largest HR development professional body, has also begun exploring the role of HR in organizational 'greening' (see Glade 2008). A 2007 CIPD quarterly survey asked HR professionals what action they and their organizations were taking to tackle climate change. Of the 757 organizations surveyed, less than half (44%) had an environmental policy. Environmental policies were found to be most prevalent in manufacturing and production organizations. The results suggest that organizations fare less well in the difficult task of winning the hearts and minds of employees to engage with green issues in the workplace. Only 39% of employers agree that their 'employees are aware of the organization's environmental policy' and only 38% agree that their 'employees act on the environment policy'. Although HR's expertise in change management and internal communications makes it ideally placed in this respect, the CIPD survey found that only 45% of HR departments have at least 'some responsibility' for the environment. Furthermore, they found that only 29% of 'employers agreed that HR is pro-active in facilitating ways by which employees can help the environment'.

The CIPD survey also explored aspects of the business case for environmental policies. Employers were asked whether a link was found between the green credentials of an organization and its ability to recruit and retain staff. The results suggest that the environment can be used as an important recruitment and retention tool, and therefore underlines the relevance of the environment to good people management.

The Society for HRM in the USA conducted a 2009 Green Workplace Survey to examine environmentally responsible practices from the perspective of HR professionals and employees. They found that 51% of HR professionals reported that their organization had a formal (written) or informal environmental responsibility policy. The majority (84%) of HR professional respondents indicated that encouraging employees to be more environmentally friendly in the workplace was the most common initiative. The HR

professionals' perceptions of the barriers to environmentally responsible programs were: the costs of implementing environmentally responsible programs (90%); cost of maintaining programs (84%); and lack of support from management (35%) (Society for Human Resource Management 2009).

Although academic literature on environmental sustainability and HR is, at present, lacking, it is acknowledged that HR does have a role to play. As Wilcox (2006) claims with regard to the related concept of CSR, a broad view of CSR requires consideration of the duties owed to social and economic stakeholders and therefore encourages examination of 'big picture' implications of corporate strategies and decisions. Furthermore, the role of 'values custodian' provides the potential for HR professionals to shape the way organizations interpret CSR and environmental issues. Also, as Young and Thyil (2009) find, there is often divergence between views and statements on CSR and how these are operationalized throughout the organization. They note that emphasis appears to be on environmental and financial management with less importance placed on dimensions of workplace management and accompanying employee relations approaches.

From a wider perspective, it could be argued that HR should be more involved in the decision making and implementation of environmental sustainability policies and practices if environmental sustainability is to be effective and successful (see Zappalà 2004 for such a discussion in relation to CSR). A key component for the business case for corporate citizenship, according to Zappalà (2004), is the HR benefits for companies. Zappalà (2004) identifies that studies have noted that an important mediating factor in the positive relationship between corporate social performance and corporate financial performance is the beneficial effect that corporate citizenship and community involvement practices can have on employee morale, motivation, commitment, loyalty, training, recruitment, and turnover (Weiser and Zadek 2000; Tuffrey 2003; Orlitzky, Schmidt and Rynes 2003).

In addition to this literature, we examine the effect that the sustainability concept has had on the HR function and manager as well as on the perceived role of HR in enabling and fostering environmental sustainability. We do so in order to provide an understanding of how environmental sustainability issues are currently construed and contested within the HR arena, and with the intention of attempting to understand the current situation upon which debate and action can be subsequently built. We do so by drawing on, and modifying, the framework and approach utilized by Fineman (1997). We outline this framework and approach in the following section.

### **Framework and approach**

We take a social constructionist approach and seek to elucidate the personal and social meanings of environmental sustainability as situated in HR managers' everyday work realities. In his study of 'green' managers in the UK automotive industry, Fineman (1997) examines the social and political contexts of managers' organizational lives and how they interact with, and define, the green corporate agenda. Fineman (1997) addresses the question 'can the moral imperative and ethical values underpinning the wider environmental debate be enacted by managers?' by exploring three-related sub-questions. We outline these sub-questions below in relation to how they are understood and utilized in our study, which explores the moral imperative and ethical values of a group of New Zealand HR managers and addresses whether they can be enacted within their everyday work contexts. The three-related questions adopted from Fineman (1997, p. 32) are as follows.

- (1) What are the HR managers' *private* moral positions on the environment?

Following Fineman (1997), we are concerned here with exploring an individual's personal views and values on the environment. This includes internalized views on what is 'right' or 'wrong'. As Fineman (1997) notes, such views often reflect parental, educational, community, and religious influences. Private positions were explored by asking participants their views on the current state of the environment, asking them to reflect on their personal behaviors and practices, and in some cases asking them to identify and reflect on whether they thought they were more/less environmentally aware than their friends or neighbors.

- (2) How do such beliefs transfer to managers' views about what is appropriate for their work roles, and how are they reconciled with the *conventional morality* of the corporation – its public statements of environmental intent?

The HR managers' awareness and understanding of their organization's stated position on the environment and sustainability, either internal or externally espoused, was explored here. Awareness of conventional morality, reflected through such things as corporate symbols, policies, codes of conduct and public reports and other statements, is important when considering everyday working realities. Job roles are contextualized and have norms which need to be reconciled with personal positions and values. Participants were therefore asked about their organization's position on the environment, how familiar with this position they felt they were, how they gained this knowledge, and how this conventional morality was evident in the workplace.

- (3) What emotions, rationalizations, and political processes influence HR managers' *enacted morality* – what they do (or say they do) in terms of environmental protection and action?

'Enacted morality refers to the moral tone and structure of manifest actions' (Fineman 1997, p. 32). Here manifest actions – which may be different from what people say they ought to do – were explored. We examined what interviewees said they did in relation to environmental actions and behaviors, perceived compatibilities and tensions between their private moral position and the conventional morality of the corporation, and any specific enabling or constraining factors in undertaking action. How enacted morality was justified and rationalized was examined here.

In addition to these three questions adopted and adapted from Fineman (1997), we explored a fourth area important in analyzing the current HR/environmental sustainability terrain

- (4) What is, should, or can be the role of HR and the HR manager in fostering environmental sustainability within organizations?

After exploring their own positions and actions above we here asked the HR managers to reflect on what they believed the New Zealand HR community is currently doing, can do, or should do, in relation to fostering environmental sustainability within organizations. We were interested in the HR managers' views about the HR/environmental sustainability relationship more broadly and outside the constraints of their own organization setting.

### Data sources and method

Findings are based on interviews with 14 HR managers based in Auckland and Wellington, New Zealand. For the purposes of this study, a HR manager was defined as a



'senior HR manager/practitioner who makes decisions or performs tasks that have the ability to influence organizational practices and/or culture'. Participants were sourced from the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors, covering a range of industries – banking, software development, hotels, manufacturing, tertiary education, entertainment facilities provider, telecommunications, and social service organizations. Seven of the 14 organizations were multi-nationals. Ten females and four males, with ethnic backgrounds ranging from NZ European, Maori, Pacific Island, and Asian, were interviewed.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face between June 2009 and January 2010. The initial four interviews were carried out by both the researchers, while the later 10 were conducted by just one of the researchers. The decision for only one researcher to conduct the latter interviews was made after the responses during the first four interviews were found to be strikingly consistent. That is, while each participant discussed their own individual position, the general underlying themes and opinions/insights were consistent. Subsequent interviews, therefore, provided confirmation by uncovering similar responses and allowed us to gain further insights across more industry settings. Interviews ranged from 25 min to an hour, with most being approximately 40 min in length. During the interviews, participants were asked questions organized around the four areas identified above. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Both researchers analyzed each of the transcripts independently recording what they believed were the themes and points of interest from the responses. The researchers then discussed the transcripts and individual analysis and decided on key themes through consensus. Due to the responses across the interview participants being somewhat consistent, as mentioned above, findings, consisting of key themes under each of the four interest areas, were able to be agreed upon.

## **Findings**

Findings are presented in order of the four areas discussed above from private positions through to general thoughts and views on the role of HR in fostering environmental sustainability within organizations. We highlight the overall similarities uncovered during our analysis and also present inconsistencies or differences where they existed. We attempt to let the participants speak for themselves by providing a large number of quotes. However, due to space restrictions not all quotes related to the topic and points have been included. Furthermore, as we are interested in the findings at the level of the group of managers (as opposed to individuals), and to ensure anonymity, individual quotes have not been attributed.

### ***Private 'green' positions***

Interestingly, participants had no hesitation, nor difficulty, articulating their private views on the environment or role as a citizen and community member. Generally, participants discussed their internalized views of the state of the environment in an open and seemingly honest manner.

I'm a believer in the concept of global warming and climate change. So, yes I subscribe to that argument.

I mean, my Dad, used to throw litter out the car and I used to be absolutely appalled . . . I just was personally affronted at that.

Several factors which have appeared to influence these private positions were either evident or expressed explicitly by the respondents during the interviews. Parents, other relatives, and former employers were all mentioned as influencing viewpoints.

In particular, growing up on a farm was noted on several occasions as having a substantive effect on internalized views.

... we had a farm that backed onto the estuary, so it was always quite a bit of awareness about what we did with effluent and all those kind of aspects, if for no other reason than Dad wanting to go fishing.

So, I guess sustainability and management of farmland is something that I've grown up with. So although I've done my far share of weed spraying with very very toxic things, yeah, I've been brought up to care and manage the environment in a sustainable way.

Protection of NZ's clean, green image was a common reference among respondents and living in New Zealand also appeared to impact participants' views and values.

I think we're hidden from a lot of it down in New Zealand... we always hear about the ozone layer and those aspects, but when you go to Europe or Asia and stuff and you just see the mass de-forestation and all those kind of aspects and you know, like coral reefs where they're still using dynamite fishing kind of things.

So I think we've [New Zealand] got an image of it [clean and green]... and compared to world standards we're not too bad, but I don't think we're great.

These findings as to the influences on private positions are consistent with Fineman's (1997) description of private morality. Although during this study we did not find reference to religious influences, we did observe that an individual's internalized views often reflected parental, educational, and community influences.

Visible environmental impacts seemed to dominate the participants' positions. Factory smokestacks, litter, and noticeably, packaging were found to be things which influenced participants and their views.

I am deeply offended at the way we are forced to buy some products that are heavily packaged with the polystyrene bases and the plastics and the cardboard packaging... you think about taking everything out of all its packaging and it does offend me.

One of the things that really irks me is excess of packaging. I don't know how to avoid it except to choose not to buy that particular product.

Concern for the environment was expressed by all participants but one, who when asked whether he was concerned about the current state of the environment stated:

Personally, not really. It's just perhaps probably more of a personality trait than anything else. If I can't personally fix it all on my own then it's not worth spending my whole life doing it. But aware versus concerned I guess.

Despite the voiced concern by the other participants, however, many of the participants did not express many actions beyond recycling or picking up litter. As such, there appeared a failure to engage in, or perhaps even consider, some of the 'harder' environmental actions such as purchasing and consumption decisions. One respondent did however note effects that her personal values had on purchasing decisions – although identified that she did not seek out such information and, like others, and discussed further below, was not '*an activist*'.

... when I buy stuff I think about where it's made and I think more, not just about the environment but child labor and whether it's been tested on animals and things like that... I'll read stuff about it [environmental and social effects] but it [information] just has to be more around as opposed to searching for it.

Furthermore, for many participants their concern for the environment was moderated by a cynicism about their ability to know about the environment and sustainability based on the 'noise' and 'hype' created in the media on such topics.

My feeling is that there is a lot of, well, what I see, is a lot of media hype really about the environment. It is in a poor state, however, there's a lot of, a lot of confusion around, among the scientific world about how much influence we have on climate change generally.

I only know it [state of environment] through the media. So I think I get, you know, you get a very slanted view and they see what they want to.

Overall, concern for the environment in their private life largely ranged from mildly to somewhat interested and participants appeared comfortable with these positions. 'Not being a 'lentils and sandals' type' (Fineman 1997, p. 33) was also a favored position among the participants.

I'm not an activist in any way.

I mean I'm not a fanatic.

As such, what could be termed a 'reasonable' or 'realist' self description was evident, with the majority of the participants not wanting to be identified as 'radical' or 'obsessive'.

### ***The green employer***

All participants were aware of their organization's position on the environment. Many, however, were unable to clearly identify what that position was beyond several initiatives involved.

Well, I'm pleased to say we do have a policy which you know, is always a great starting point. I wouldn't say it's sophisticated and advanced, but I think it has a level of understanding and maturity and has identified the environment in all its facets as an important issue.

If I were honest I wouldn't be able to recite it. But I'm aware of initiatives such as the transport scheme and recycling...

Several participants believed that their organizations tended to communicate the majority of environmental sustainability policies and practices internally, rather than making public statements on the environment.

It's a slightly kiwi thing about it. Just getting on with it but not blowing the trumpet too loudly.

I don't think we publicize it [the organization's position on the environment] very much.

However, the majority of organizations in our sample do appear to have external statements on the environment. Interestingly though, whether the participant's organization held a high-profile conventional morality or a limited one, knowledge of this conventional morality was found to be somewhat limited across the group of HR managers.

Actions taken in relation to the environment focused on paper use (e.g. double-sided printing), recycling of paper and rubbish, and other eco-efficiencies.

So we've got, you know, recycling arrangements, we're energy conscious, you know, we're turning lights off, thinking about our heating systems, thinking about, you know, how we are managing all those kinds of issues.

We're not creating any more waste than we need to. We utilize food usage in the right ways so we're not wasting provisions and all those aspects... changing the lights.

And perhaps due to public statements (or at least knowledge of them) being relatively limited in intention and extent, most did not feel that there was a gap between the organization's public statements on the environment and sustainability and what the organizations were actually doing. In fact, one participant noted that his organization

did more than they stated in public due to them being in an industry that was exposed to scrutiny and therefore needed to be ‘whiter than white’.

What we found particularly interesting in relation to conventional morality was that all participants identified that they were not actively involved in the construction or redefining of their organization’s position and policies. This was even the case in an organization where the participant was a member of the organization’s environmental council due to his senior management position. Despite this council membership however, he did not feel he contributed in a substantial manner to the construction of the organization’s position – nor did he indicate a desire to. HR not being involved in the development of organizational policies and practices on the environment is, perhaps both surprising, due to HR’s often stated position as a strategic partner of the organization, and concerning. We discuss this further below.

### *Limiting and limited action*

Participants were aware that their enacted morality was limited.

Well, you know, I think, it’s all very well the paper, but papers like the least of our worries when you look at mobile phones, computer equipment, you know, old furniture, like the landfill that organizations must create is huge. So I think we’ve done the easy things, like turn off the lights. Recycle paper.

It was actually a marketing exercise more than anything, but what I guess I’ve done is tried to support them with it. For instance, when new staff come on board, like part of their induction, I will go through and talk to them about the new initiatives we have, show them the recycling stations or just talk to them generally about it.

The business case was given as a strong rationalization for this limited action. Pursuing eco-efficiencies in their departments to save money for the organization was seen as the main goal. The benefits of environmental actions to the business were fairly well understood.

We’ve moved to LCD lights which use a tenth of the power, . . . I think it saves us something like 70k a year.

As noted above, interviews were conducted with HR managers in 2009 and early 2010. At this time, many New Zealand organizations were feeling the impact of the recession and taking action to reduce expenditure. Many HR managers identified that the focus was to review budgets in order to save money where possible, and several noted that they were preparing business cases to keep existing HR initiatives, for example training programs. Increased action from the HR arena focusing on environmental sustainability was therefore not seen as a priority while managers were fighting for what they considered more important (and relevant) actions in the basic HR functional areas (e.g. recruitment, training, and remuneration).

The business case was also cited as a reason for lack of action, as it was ‘not a priority’, especially in the current resource constrained economic environment.

And I would say that as an organization, if it, it’s like any organization, if it works in their favor, so they look good in an environmental way and it helps save them money, then they’ll do it . . . if it costs an organization in the way they look, or in how much it’s going to cost to sort it out, then it becomes an issue.

While they supported initiatives that were implemented by their organization, the HR managers were not a key driver of these initiatives. This passive position was rationalized through by employing the following three arguments.

*Argument 1:* Environmental sustainability is ‘not a priority’ for HR. HR has more urgent priorities related to people.

*Argument 2:* HR does not have the resources (time, money, and organizational influence) to pursue environmental sustainability initiatives.

*Argument 3:* Environmental sustainability is the responsibility of another department/individual.

Ultimately, participants saw environmental initiatives as ‘non-priorities’ or as ‘nice to do’s’ and, as can therefore perhaps be expected, when resource stretched and balancing a range of ‘priorities’, such initiatives did not get considered. Several participants also noted that environmental sustainability was the responsibility of others, most often property management or an individual champion with an interest in the area.

The prevalent justification of non-action based on a lack of resources, in particular financial resources, offered by the HR managers in this study aligns with the Society for HRM’s findings from their 2009 Green Workplace Survey which revealed that 90% of HR professionals’ cited the costs of implementing programs as the prime barrier they perceived to environmentally responsible programs, and 84% cited the cost of maintaining programs as the second largest barrier. Our findings resonate with the US study, particularly in the recessionary environment where the HR managers interviewed were fighting to maintain existing HR initiatives and did not perceive that there was any room to introduce new initiatives in HR, particularly on the environmental sustainability front.

Interestingly, no participants noted that they would not know how they would contribute to the environmental agenda if they had the resources or inclination to do so. However, in our investigation of what the HR managers believed the HR function could or should be doing; we found a very limited, or perhaps just under considered, view.

### ***HR and the transformation of workplace***

All participants felt that the HR function has a role in fostering environmental practices within an organization due to their role as stewards of values, and as skilled communicators in the organization.

As part of HR we’re responsible for driving culture. But it’s interesting, our values have just come out. I can’t remember. But I don’t think environment sits in there.

We’re dealing with people so much and all parts of the organization. I mean, it seems crazy for us not to be really involved in it.

However, participants did not see a role for HR as the strategic drivers of environmental and sustainability initiatives. Instead, they saw themselves as the ideal partners to communicate the relevant values to encourage behavior change, once strategy had been developed outside of HR. By having other stakeholders (e.g. senior managers and customers) responsible for driving for sustainability initiatives, participants felt that it would gain more traction, than if driven by HR. Thus, there is a reluctance to champion sustainability from the HR platform in a pro-active manner.

It’s not something that HR would be the sole proprietor of. We prioritize things and you know, its, there’s stuff that just has to be done and then the wish list is kind of at the bottom and to be honest, we just battle to get to the nice-to-have stuff.

The problem is if it sits too thickly in HR no one else takes responsibility. So, you know, like sometimes they, like, you think, oh, HR, its mumbo jumbo, it doesn’t actually matter, just ignore it, they’ll go away. So I think sometimes it might be better if it does sit out in the business because they would take a bit more responsibility and a bit more energy in behind it.

There also appeared little demand for HR to be involved in fostering environmental sustainability within their organizations, or for HR to consider the environment in general.

In many cases, participants noted that responsibility for the environment lies with the properties management (however, interestingly in one organization HR and properties reported to the same director and appeared to have a close relationship) or another individual. Only one respondent identified the existence of any interest from staff in relation to the environment.

I run the employee survey across the group and there's a vocal minority [interested in environmental practices of the organization] . . . I would say 1–2% of the 4–5000 people who responded . . . We're talking 50–60 people, but it was literally what was the one thing you'd change about [the organization] and they actually took the time . . . so there's a vocal minority and that 1% created a lot of noise.

Interestingly, we would suggest that a concern for the future of the HR community and environmental sustainability, and the potential role key HR functions such as recruitment and selection, training and development, and performance management could play in fostering environmental sustainability were not well considered.

### Discussion

Findings indicate that the HR managers espouse *private* moral positions around concern for the environment. Environmental action in their personal lives, however, appears limited (e.g. recycling and litter). While the HR managers are aware of the *conventional morality* of the organization, many do not appear to be actively involved in shaping the organization's position. In regard to *enacted morality*, we found that the HR managers have only made minor adjustments to current procedures. There is a dearth of evidence that HR managers have changed job roles and practices, which are arguably necessary for organizations to go beyond first-order change or reorientation (Laughlin 1991) – change that many believe is essential to move toward sustainability (Owen, Gray and Bebbington 1997; Milne et al. 2006; Milne et al. 2009).

While environmental sustainability was described by several participants as being strategically important for their organization, and, when prompted, felt they as HR managers could play a role in assisting the organization in pursuing such strategies through communicating values and encouraging behavior change, the HR managers were not actively aligning the HR function with environmental sustainability to any great degree. The findings from this study suggest that environmental sustainability was not seen as a strategic driver for the HR function, not because it is not important at the strategic level for the organization, but because other, what were considered more core HR issues, and therefore constituted as more crucial, required resourcing by the HR managers.

Through an analysis of the interplay of private, conventional, and enacted morality, the contested terrain of HR/environmental sustainability and what is enabling and constraining the HR/environmental sustainability agenda have been examined. We believe that any corporate shift from a 'business as usual' position to a more environmentally responsible paradigm requires company-wide environmental sensibilities; something that we are not presently seeing occurring within HR. Instead what was found can be considered as an organizational rhetoric of weak sustainability. The business case is often used to support the presence of environmental initiatives within some participant's organizations, for example 'printing policies save money'. However, lack of action regarding the environment was also justified on the basis of resources, in particular the identification that HR did not have the resources (time and money) to spend on environment-related issues. This was perhaps particularly so due to the current economic recession. Some HR managers noted that they were struggling to find funding for what

they considered 'core' HR functions such as training – let alone 'extras' like fostering or supporting environmental sustainability. This position is in line with business thinking that protects and advances the economic or financial over the environment, and is to us concerning as economically driven initiatives will not go far enough in creating more environmentally sustainable organizations.

However, despite the absence of a 'strong' sustainability perspective and the challenges posed by the current economic climate, we believe that HR, due to the core functions it undertakes, has the potential to be a vanguard in the corporate environmental movement. We would suggest, however, that this leadership role is not occurring, and pose the unsettling suggestion that currently HR may in fact constitute a rearguard. Based on our findings, we argue that environmental sustainability has not largely affected the role of HR, nor have HR managers begun to examine what sustainability means for various HR functions. Of greater concern is that the HR managers interviewed could not clearly articulate what action they could take in specific HR functions. Further research is needed which explores how the environmental agenda could influence HR functions.

For HR to be a strategic partner, HR managers should be involved in strategic decision making alongside other senior managers, providing greater opportunity to align HR strategies and practices with organizational objectives (Andersen et al. 2007). We feel this is particularly important for organizational objectives to be realized in regard to environmental sustainability. As was found in the earlier mentioned CIPD (2007) study, organizations have not done well in winning the hearts and minds of employees to engage with 'green issues'. HR professionals have a very real role to play as a strategic partner in an organization's environmental sustainability agenda. This role includes involvement in strategy formulation and also in the implementation of strategic decisions through specific HR functions such as recruitment, development, and performance management.

While the CIPD (2007) survey which explored aspects of the business case for environmental policies found that the environment can be used as an important recruitment and retention tool, our findings are more generalized. HR managers in our study note that while they would like to recruit people whose 'values align with the organizations' they did not explore specifically the environmental values of potential recruits in relation to their organization's stated position – nor did they explore environmental sustainability as one area for evaluating the fit of potential candidates with the organization. We believe that it would be valuable to evaluate potential candidates with regard to their knowledge, behaviors, and values in the area of environmental sustainability if organizational strategies in this area are to be enacted by the employees. The recruitment process is often the first point of contact that potential employees have with an organization, so it would seem an ideal place to first communicate the organization's environmental sustainability values and strategies. Communication of organizational environmental values and strategies would allow candidates to consider how their own values align with the organizations in this area, as well as further promulgating the organization's environmental sustainability strategy to labor pool.

Building environmental sustainability into recruitment would also enable the organization to build a cohort of employees who understand early into their tenure the commitments made by the organization. We suggest that further research could assist in examining whether demonstrating the importance of environmental sustainability aids the organization to achieve a position as an 'employer of choice', whether it contributes to improved employee morale and retention, and whether it assists in entrenching and enacting its environmental sustainability policies and practices.

With regard to training and development, HR managers could consider the following questions:

- Can our employees articulate the organization's sustainability principles?
- Do our employees understand what our mission to be carbon neutral means?
- Are our learning and development contractors evaluated for their environmental practices?
- Do we realize our workplace as a key learning site for environmental values and actions?
- Have we integrated content on the environment into our leadership development programs?

While the HR managers in our study espoused that encouraging employees to be more environmentally friendly in the workplace, particularly through attention to recycling and resource use, was common practice, they do not measure the environmental behavior of their employees through performance management, nor do they reward such behavior through remuneration structures. The rare exception to this was noted by one HR manager where employees in CSR and environmental roles within their organization were, not surprisingly, set environmental objectives which were subsequently measured. It is our contention that for environmental sustainability to register as a serious organizational strategic issue for employees then it must be clearly communicated as an objective during performance planning, evaluated during performance reviews, and even rewarded through remuneration structures. Otherwise the risk is that organizations will remain at the stage of 'talking green' rather than moving to the level at which they are 'acting green' (Prasad and Elmes 2005; Milne et al. 2006; Milne et al. 2009).

### **Implications and future research**

The subsequent implications of this study are twofold. First, we note that if HR does not play a strong role in the formulation and implementation of environmental sustainability policy and practices, there is the potential for the marginalization of the role of HR as environmental sustainability becomes seen as a more strategic area for organizations. This is particularly pertinent if, consistent with the views of the authors of this paper, and in light of the claims as to the growing environmental crisis (Meadows, Randers and Meadows 2004; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005; World Wide Fund for Nature 2008; Worldwatch Institute 2008), it is believed that environmental sustainability is more than a passing fad for organizations. Second, we would also argue that a passive position toward environmental sustainability by HR also has potentially adverse effects for the achievement of environmental sustainability within organizations. We therefore urge HR managers and practitioners to reconsider the implications of what their seemingly passive position on the environment could mean, given their important role for shaping people's behavior in organizations and beyond.

As we have noted, for HR not to be involved is detrimental for environmental sustainability and also for the HR function and manager in terms of their stated role as a strategic partner. As environmental sustainability requires behavior change by employees, the lack of engagement and strategic integration by HR managers uncovered here is concerning. Furthermore, that the HR function is not aligned with environmental sustainability at a strategic level is likely to weaken the role of HR role as an organizational strategic partner. If environmental sustainability is indeed important at the strategic level as many of the participants suggest, and HR is a strategic partner for the



organization, then HR needs to be playing a stronger role in enacting and supporting environmental sustainability initiatives and thinking. Moreover, given our finding that HR managers are focused on functions considered core HR to the detriment of strategies in other areas such as environmental sustainability, we question what this means for the ability of HR to be a 'true' strategic partner. If HR was operating as a strategic partner should it not be open and able to enact HR policies and practices to support all the strategic drivers of the organization?

There is likely to be a cost to HR and to the organization if HR managers take a constrained view of their role and limit or bound their support of strategic imperatives. Or perhaps HR managers perceive environmental sustainability more in terms of a rhetorical strategy rather than organizational reality, and therefore believe that supporting it in does not require much beyond lip service? We would be concerned if for some organizations environmental sustainability is seen as just another popular rhetoric, such as an organization that espouses that 'our employees are our most valued assets' while simultaneously cutting initiatives to encourage employee retention, slashing training budgets, and refusing to measure employee engagement. If, however, HR practitioners do see a role for the HR function in environmental sustainability, their lack of support could severely undermine the likelihood of any environmental sustainability initiatives being successful. For environmental sustainability to be enacted behavior change by employees regarding the way resources are procured and utilized for example are needed. Behavior change can be facilitated by the HR function through recruitment, socialization, training, performance management, leadership and career development, and remuneration processes.

Even if HR managers are not acting as a strategic partner in developing an organization's environmental sustainability strategy, they need to be involved in supporting the strategy due to the significant role of HR in driving behavior change in an organization. We urge HR researchers to further engage in the area of environmental sustainability to further understandings and to facilitate necessary debates.

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### **Note**

1. We note that sustainability is often conceptualized as a state whilst sustainable development is conceived of as a process by which we move toward sustainability (see Bebbington and Gray 2001). However, the two terms are often used interchangeably in the literature and as such we do not distinguish between the terms and concepts in this paper,

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