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Human Resource Management Review xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Human Resource Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/hrmr

Win-Win-Lose? Sustainable HRM and the promotion of unsustainable employee outcomes

John T. Bush

Department of Management and Entrepreneurship, W. P. Carey School of Business, Arizona State University, P.O. Box 874006, Tempe, AZ 85287-4006, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
HRM
Triple bottom line
Sustainability
Role conflict
Role ambiguity

ABSTRACT

HRM sustainability has become increasingly important to both practitioners and scholars. Specifically, there is an increased focus on the organizational triple bottom line, or the combination of a firm's economic, environmental, and social goals. Although it is largely assumed that triple bottom line initiatives are fully intertwined, there may be more competition and conflict between these goals than previously considered. Drawing upon multiple identity theory and role theory, I explore how an organizational emphasis on the triple bottom line may create challenges at the employee level through increased role conflict and role ambiguity. Further, I identify perceived organizational support, leader initiating structure, leader consideration, and Type A behavior pattern as potential boundary conditions that may further inform our understanding of these relationships. Finally, I examine the ways in which synergies may be promoted between triple bottom line goals to mitigate potential conflicts and ambiguities and promote a more sustainable HRM function.

1. Introduction

The sustainability of a firm's human resource management (HRM) has become increasingly important to organizations, consumers, and scholars (Ehnert & Harry, 2012; Gollan, 2005; Jackson & Seo, 2010; Renwick, Redman, & Maguire, 2013; Wilkinson, Hill, & Gollan, 2001). Perhaps the most common conceptualization of sustainable HRM involves an emphasis on the "triple bottom line" (Elkington, 1994, 1998), or the integration of economic, environmental, and social goals into organizational plans and operations (De Prins, Van Beirendonck, De Vos, & Segers, 2014; Elkington, 1994; Jackson, Renwick, Jabbour, & Muller-Camen, 2011; Jackson & Seo, 2010). Scholars have suggested that a triple bottom line approach to HRM should provide "win-win-win" strategies for organizations (Elkington, 1994), benefitting not only the organization but also employees, consumers, and the external environment (De Prins et al., 2014; Elkington, 1994, 1998; Jackson et al., 2011). Moreover, in the current economic climate, firms are facing increased external pressure from both stakeholders and the general public to provide additional attention to the sustainability of their operations (Ambec & Lanoie, 2008; Pfeffer, 2010). As a result of these factors, it appears that observations highlighting the importance of a triple bottom line approach for organizations (e.g., Elkington, 1994) are largely warranted.

Although scholars assume that economic, environmental, and social goals are largely intertwined (Elkington, 1994, 1998; Jackson et al., 2011), there may be more competition and conflict between these goals than previously considered. For instance, environmental imperatives from consumers or external governance bodies may require expenditures that reduce economic returns (Jackson & Seo, 2010; Wilkinson et al., 2001). In addition, an emphasis on social responsibility via increased investments in the human capital pool may not align with organizational and stakeholder financial goals (Pfeffer, 2010; Wilkinson et al., 2001). Moreover, the

E-mail address: john.t.bush@asu.edu.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2018.11.004
Received 2 June 2018; Received in revised form 29 November 2018; Accepted 29 November 2018
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Please cite this article as: Bush, J.T., Human Resource Management Review, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2018.11.004

increased visibility and saliency of a firm's impact on the external environment may drive organizations to focus any slack resources on the physical environment while neglecting their social environment (e.g., the human capital pool; Pfeffer, 2010). In sum, a closer examination suggests that accomplishing the broad range of economic, environmental and social organizational goals within an HRM context may be more difficult to achieve than previously assumed.

At the individual level, one critical concern is that an emphasis on sustainable HRM through a triple bottom line focus may create conflicts for employees, influencing their job attitudes and behaviors while also making it less likely that they will either join or remain with an organization. For instance, a triple bottom line emphasis may require employees to fulfill multiple roles that require incompatible or conflicting behaviors. Further, employees may perceive uncertainty around their individual goals and duties and how they relate to the organization's philosophies. Unfortunately, these potential challenges suggest that an emphasis on the sustainability of a firm's HRM through focus on economic, environmental, and social goals may not be as “sustainable” as we would anticipate.

To address this potential incongruity, I draw upon multiple identity theory (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Pratt & Foreman, 2000) and role theory (Goode, 1960; Gross, Mason, & McEachern, 1958; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964) to explore how a triple bottom line approach can create conflict and confusion for employees. Specifically, I examine the concepts of role conflict and role ambiguity to investigate how and why employees may interpret and respond to sustainability initiatives in suboptimal ways. Following this, I identify perceived organizational support, leader initiating structure, leader consideration, and Type A behavior pattern as potential moderators that may further inform our understanding of these relationships. Finally, I examine the ways in which organizations may work to reduce potential conflicts and ambiguities while still promoting sustainability. Specifically, I explore how organizations may promote a sustainable HRM function by finding ways to create synergies between economic, environmental, and social goals.

This research makes several contributions to the literature. First, this work builds upon role theory and multiple identity theory by exploring how individuals in modern organizations may be impacted when provided with conflicting goals or information. In addition, I build upon sustainable HRM research by examining the ways in which an organizational triple bottom line approach may lead to unexpected and undesirable employee outcomes. Finally, this research expands upon our understanding of sustainable HRM by exploring the ways in which organizations may create synergies between organizational initiatives that promote the economic and environmental aims of the firm while also enhancing and sustaining the firm's human capital pool. Given the increased focus in both the external market and scholarly research on developing a sustainable HRM function, this research has important implications for both practitioners and scholars.

2. Theory and propositions

2.1. Multiple identity theory

A sustainability perspective on the HRM function is largely characterized by the maximization and balancing of economic, environmental, and social organizational goals (De Prins et al., 2014; Ehnert & Harry, 2012; Hahn & Figge, 2011; Jackson & Seo, 2010). Most would agree that economic sustainability is critical to every organization's mission, as the ability of a firm to meet financial goals is paramount to its viability as an organization. However, firms are also increasingly faced with environmental imperatives that require an organizational focus that extends beyond mere economic performance (Jackson & Seo, 2010; Wilkinson et al., 2001). In addition, firms must contend with both internal and external perceptions of their business practices as they relate to social issues, namely the management of the firm's human capital pool (Ambec & Lanoie, 2008; Pfeffer, 2010). This increased emphasis on different types of sustainable performance has led scholars to explore the ways in which organizations may reconcile these various aims and promote the triple bottom line (e.g., De Prins et al., 2014; Ehnert & Harry, 2012; Elkington, 1994; Hahn & Figge, 2011; Jackson & Seo, 2010).

One scholarly perspective that may inform our understanding of the downstream effects of an organizational triple bottom line focus is multiple identity theory (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Organizations are said to have multiple identities when various perceptions exist concerning the central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics of the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Multiple identity theory suggests that a specific triple bottom line goal (e.g., economic) may be viewed as an individual organizational identity that, at various times, may be either synchronized or in conflict with other organizational goals (e.g., environmental or social). Specifically, a multiple identity perspective informs our understanding of when and how these organizational identities may work together to benefit the firm, or when these identities may interact in a way that proves detrimental to the organization.

An HRM focus on the triple bottom line has the potential to promote organizational conflict, often because there is likely to be some consistent level of tension between individual dimensions (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Indeed, these specific organizational goals may often be in direct competition with each other, competing for scarce resources or promoting incompatible expectations and demands (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997). As one former CEO notes (Salvino, 2017), managing multiple organizational goals may lead to a feeling of “being whip-sawed back and forth by the often conflicting demands from customers, the chairman, the board, and employees.” In facing these challenges, organizations are often required to expend resources to negotiate a balance between these various identities (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997). In another sense, a triple bottom line focus may also create confusion regarding how the organization defines itself, impeding the quality and quantity of a firm's strategic actions (Fiol & Huff, 1992; Prahalad & Bettis, 1986) or leading to a general state of inaction (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). As a result, organizations that attempt to focus on economic, environmental, and social goals are likely to encounter various challenges that may hinder the accomplishment of these goals individually, as well as the overall sustainability of the firm's HRM.

That said, the multiple identities of a firm will not always be in direct competition with each other or promote organizational conflict (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998). Indeed, there are times when the multiple identities of an organization may be in alignment or may converge to promote synergies that the firm would otherwise not have available (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). As consumers and the external marketplace become more sensitive to issues of sustainability, an HRM function that can effectively manage an organization's economic, environmental, and social goals is likely to gain a competitive advantage over competitors (Eccles, Nohria, & Berkley, 1992; Zaugg, Blum, & Thom, 2001). One explanation for this is that the effective management of multiple identities may allow organizations to respond more adequately to the various needs of the market. Moreover, an organization that can effectively manage the triple bottom line may also have an advantage over a company that only focuses on one or two organizational goals, largely because that organization should have a greater capacity to fulfill a wider range of needs and expectations (Albert & Whetten, 1985). In sum, a multiple identity perspective on sustainable HRM suggests that an emphasis on building and sustaining the triple bottom line for the overall benefit of an organization and its people may be more nuanced than previously considered.

2.2. Role theory

A multiple identity perspective on sustainable HRM also has important implications for the organization at lower levels of analysis. Specifically, role theory (Goode, 1960; Gross et al., 1958; Kahn et al., 1964) may help to inform our understanding of exactly how a triple bottom line focus may drive the experience, attitudes, and behaviors of employees. Role theory posits that individuals in organizations are governed by and engage in roles, which are defined by internal and external expectations of behavior within an organization that are largely conditioned by individual values, experience, perceptions, and knowledge (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Organizational roles are viewed as a function of perceptions and expectations around norms (Biddle, 1986). However, norms may differ across individuals, teams, and organizations, ultimately subjecting individual employees to a variety of challenges, including role conflict and role ambiguity (Biddle, 1986; Goode, 1960; Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo et al., 1970). Given the current push for organizations to adopt a triple bottom line focus (Ambec & Lanoie, 2008; Elkington, 1994; Pfeffer, 2010), a richer understanding is needed concerning exactly how this shift at the organization level may negatively impact individuals at the employee level.

An HRM focus on the triple bottom line may first affect employees through the inducement of role conflict, which captures the extent to which the behaviors expected of an employee are either incompatible or incongruent (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo et al., 1970). Research has highlighted several negative consequences that may stem from role conflict including reduced levels of commitment, performance, and job satisfaction, as well as heightened levels of tension, anxiety, and burnout (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Lee & Ashforth, 1996). As Kahn et al. (1964) note, employee role conflict may arise for several reasons. First, employees may experience role conflict because there is a discrepancy between the employee's internal standards and the required role behavior(s). In addition, there may be conflict between the requirements of the job role and the amount of time and resources that the employee has available. Further, an employee may engage in many roles that require either different or incompatible behaviors. Finally, there may be discrepancies at the organization level regarding what is expected and required of the employee (Kahn et al., 1964).

As organizations emphasize sustainability through promotion of the triple bottom line, role conflict may first emerge because employees are required to engage in behaviors that promote one specific goal above others. For example, a salesperson who meets with clients off-site may experience internal conflict when the organization rolls out a “greening” program that requires additional on-site training, or when the organization calls company-wide meetings with the goal of enhancing employee well-being through team building. In this instance, the salesperson may have to choose which goal is “best,” causing not only internal role conflict but also opening herself up to scrutiny from others in the organization who may have made a different calculation. Role conflict may also emerge because employees do not have enough time or resources to adequately promote economic, environmental, and social goals. Extending the example above, a salesperson with a sales quota that requires the full investment of her energy to meet may simply not have the time available to meet her economic goals while also accomplishing the social and environmental goals outlined by the company. Finally, emphasizing three goals at the organization level (as opposed to one or two) may promote role conflict for employees as there is more opportunity for organizations to send mixed messages regarding what is expected and required of employees. For instance, an employee who witnesses increased expenditures in environmental imperatives and team-building training programs may experience tension when deciding the extent to which they should step away from their core job responsibilities to engage in these “extra-curricular” activities. In sum, as organizations instill a triple bottom line focus on HRM, employees are likely to experience increased levels of conflict in their organizational roles.

Proposition 1. An organizational emphasis on sustainable HRM through promotion of the triple bottom line will positively relate to employee role conflict.

A focus on the triple bottom line may also negatively influence employees by promoting role ambiguity, which captures the extent to which employees' lack clarity regarding their role expectations, the methods they should invoke to meet these expectations, and/or the outcomes that result from their performances (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo et al., 1970). Similar to role conflict, role ambiguity has been shown to negatively impact a variety of work outcomes including job satisfaction, job performance, and organizational commitment, while also enhancing anxiety and resentment (Caplan & Jones, 1975; Jackson & Schuler, 1985). However, whereas role conflict is largely concerned with the congruity of goals, role ambiguity speaks to the level of goal clarity (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo et al., 1970). Moreover, certain characteristics of roles (e.g., level of work autonomy) and individuals (e.g., age and tenure) tend to

drive role ambiguity without necessarily promoting role conflict (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). As such, role ambiguity is another unique employee outcome worth examination within the context of sustainable HRM.

As Kahn et al. (1964) note, role ambiguity occurs when the behaviors expected of individuals at work are not clearly described or articulated. Further, role ambiguity may arise from changes in the work environment that impose new demands on organizational members (Rizzo et al., 1970). Unfortunately, an emphasis on economic, environmental, and social goals represents one such instance where a shift in strategy at the organization level may require new role behaviors from employees that are not clearly explained or understood. Consider the example of a top-level manager of a mining company who receives a directive from the executive team that the company wants to increase their focus on environmental initiatives as well as their ability to recruit and maintain a highly committed, effective, and satisfied employee base. Although the end goals may be very apparent to the manager, the manager may struggle to reconcile how the organization can maintain high economic returns while fully promoting a pro-environment narrative, creating ambiguity around what specific role behaviors are expected or encouraged. Moreover, given the environmental concerns associated with this specific industry and the fact that job applicants are increasingly aware of and sensitive to the environmental practices of companies (Stringer, 2010; Wehrmeyer, 1996), the manager may lack clarity around the best ways to appeal to potential employees and enhance the firm's human capital. As another example, an HR manager who designs employee onboarding training programs may lack clarity regarding the extent to which environmental and social goals should be embedded in training programs that previously focused solely on core job functions. In sum, as organizations emphasize the triple bottom line, employees are likely to experience greater levels of role ambiguity.

Proposition 2. An organizational emphasis on sustainable HRM through promotion of the triple bottom line will positively relate to employee role ambiguity.

2.3. Boundary conditions

Although a triple bottom line focus may promote both role conflict and ambiguity among employees, there are likely boundary conditions that shape the extent to which a multi-goal sustainability focus promotes these specific stressors. As scholars have noted, role conflict and ambiguity may be affected by organizational factors, situational factors, and dispositional characteristics (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981). Given that organizational change and the assistance afforded to employees during change are likely to play a significant part in employee role experiences, one organizational factor that is worth examining is perceived organizational support (POS; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). POS is described as an employee's belief that their contributions and well-being are valued by their organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Employees tend to have a certain level of sensitivity to POS, as organizational attitudes or actions that impact individual experiences and perceptions are often quite salient to employees (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). As a result, POS appears uniquely suited for examination within the context of the triple bottom line and role stressors. Previous work examining POS within the context of role conflict and ambiguity has largely viewed POS as either an outcome of these role stressors (e.g., Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) or as a variable that buffers the potentially negative effects that these stressors may have on employees (e.g., Stamper & Johlke, 2003). However, I argue that perceptions of organizational support may also interact with an organization's focus on the triple bottom line to shape role conflict and ambiguity.

Specifically, I expect that employees who are embedded in an organization with a triple bottom line focus and concurrently perceive low levels of organizational support will likely experience more conflict and ambiguity. One reason this may occur is that conflicts and ambiguities that arise from a triple bottom line focus may be compounded when employees do not perceive support from their organization. POS provides employees with a sense of confidence that aid will be provided when challenging situations arise (George, Reed, Ballard, Colin, & Fielding, 1993), and a lack of support concerning the best way to manage multiple organizational directives may strengthen perceptions of conflict and ambiguity. For instance, a manager who is facing pressure to enhance her team's environmental awareness, further develop her team's human capital, and increase the financial bottom line will likely experience more conflict and ambiguity if she does not feel like she can ask for help, confide in upper-level managers, or gain access to additional resources to address these initiatives. It is also possible that role stressors will become multiplicative (rather than additive) when perceived organizational support is low. Indeed, low levels of organizational support may suggest an overarching lack of structure or strategic vision within the organization which may interact with a triple bottom line emphasis to promote additional conflicts and ambiguities between goals that employees would be unlikely to foresee or anticipate. In contrast, the characteristics of an organization that an employee perceives as highly supportive may serve to reduce stressors. Indeed, high levels of POS may be utilized by employees as a mechanism for coping with role conflict and ambiguity that individuals may perceive due to role challenges (Stamper & Johlke, 2003).

Proposition 3. Perceived organizational support will moderate the relationship between a triple bottom line emphasis and both role conflict and role ambiguity, such that the positive relationships are weaker when POS is high and stronger when POS is low.

In addition to organizational factors that may be experienced more globally across the firm, there are also important situational factors that occur on a much more local level and are likely to impact employee role conflict and ambiguity. Specifically, leaders may play a key role in driving both how employees perceive triple bottom line goals and how those perceptions ultimately affect role conflict and ambiguity. Though scholars have tackled the importance of leaders from multiple directions, an investigation of leader initiating structure and consideration (Fleishman & Peters, 1962; House, 1971; Kerr, Schriesheim, Murphy, & Stogdill, 1974) seems especially relevant for several reasons. First, these specific leader characteristics are likely to guide the way in which triple bottom

line goals are communicated, implemented, and understood, ultimately shaping the employee experience and how employees reconcile either conflicting or ambiguous demands. Moreover, meta-analytic examination has shown that both initiating structure and consideration are associated with reduced levels of role conflict and ambiguity (Jackson & Schuler, 1985), further suggesting that these specific characteristics have important implications for employee roles. Finally, these characteristics tap very specific leader behaviors that may shape role experiences, likely more inclusively than other related leadership constructs (e.g., supervisor support) which may capture a wide array of leadership strategies and might also be confounded with other types of organizational support (e.g., POS).

Leader initiating structure represents the extent to which a leader defines, structures, and organizes the role of a follower by providing direction, clarifying expectations, and promoting goal attainment (Fleishman & Peters, 1962; House, 1971). As organizations emphasize the importance of triple bottom line goals, employees are likely to face questions around their roles and the potential changes in behavior required to meet organizational objectives. In these instances, leaders who initiate structure may be an employee's greatest source of information, providing insight concerning what behaviors are expected and how specific changes may influence an employee's job role. Further, as leaders focus on clarifying expectations and providing direction to employees, the organization's vision for sustainability should become clearer to employees, ultimately reducing the extent to which employees experience conflicting or ambiguous demands. For instance, a supervisor leading a team of marketing professionals may reduce ambiguity around triple bottom line initiatives by clarifying exactly how these new goals will influence customer messaging and organizational branding. Moreover, role conflict may also be reduced through clarification of role expectations and how individual role requirements may be adjusted to make time for newly implemented environmental or social initiatives. In sum, as organizations shift to a triple bottom line focus, employees who receive clear structure and guidance from their leaders should experience lower levels of role conflict and ambiguity.

Proposition 4. Leader initiating structure will moderate the relationship between a triple bottom line emphasis and both role conflict and role ambiguity, such that the positive relationships are weaker when initiating structure is high and stronger when initiating structure is low.

In addition to initiating structure, leader consideration is also likely to play a critical role in this context. Defined as the extent to which leaders show concern, express appreciation, and promote an environment of psychological support (Bass, 1990; Fleishman & Peters, 1962; House, 1971), leader consideration taps into important leader behaviors that may further benefit employees as they attempt to understand and reconcile triple bottom line goals. As scholars have noted, a focus on multiple organizational initiatives can serve as a source of tension for employees, creating confusion, frustration, and discontent around both how the organization is defined and what that means for employees (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Fiol & Huff, 1992; Prahalad & Bettis, 1986). Beyond emphasizing work structure and organization, one way leaders may ease this tension involves creating a work environment that provides safety, support, and help to employees. Indeed, as employees attempt to manage the multiple messages and goals delivered from the organization, leaders may aid in reducing perceptions of conflict and ambiguity through their approachability, concern, and willingness to help employees reconcile potential challenges. In addition, leader consideration may involve rewarding specific behaviors (Jackson & Schuler, 1985) that a leader feels are in alignment with the organization's sustainability aim, subsequently clarifying to employees what behaviors are expected and rewarded and reducing the extent to which role requirements are either in conflict or unclear.

Proposition 5. Leader consideration will moderate the relationship between a triple bottom line emphasis and both role conflict and role ambiguity, such that the positive relationships are weaker when consideration is high and stronger when consideration is low.

Finally, dispositional traits may also play a role in driving consequences of a triple bottom line focus. One trait that is uniquely suited to affect role conflict and ambiguity is Type A behavior pattern (Caplan & Jones, 1975; Rosenman et al., 1970). Individuals high in Type A are described as hard working, ambitious, persistent, competitive, and more likely to experience a sense of time urgency or restlessness (Caplan & Jones, 1975; Rosenman et al., 1970). Scholars have theorized that Type A behavior pattern will serve as an important boundary condition that interacts with role stressors to produce strains (e.g., Caplan & Jones, 1975; Gavin & Axelrod, 1977). However, empirical findings around these relationships are somewhat mixed, with some scholars (e.g., Caplan & Jones, 1975) finding that Type A is only a significant moderator for certain strains (e.g., anxiety), and other scholars finding no empirical support that Type A interacts with role stressors to promote strains (e.g., Gavin & Axelrod, 1977). That said, I expect that Type A may have a fair amount of explanatory power as a trait that interacts with other characteristics (e.g., a firm's triple bottom line focus) to impact role conflict and ambiguity. Moreover, I argue that having a disposition high in Type A may benefit employees as they attempt to reconcile the organizational demands of a triple bottom line focus.

Though individuals high in Type A may be more inclined to experience strains and anxiety in their work (Caplan & Jones, 1975; Gavin & Axelrod, 1977; Ivancevich, Matteson, & Preston, 1982), there are also unique characteristics of high Type A individuals that may make these employees well-suited to handle the demands of a triple bottom line focus. Indeed, individuals high in Type A are highly driven by the accomplishment of goals and tend to both perceive and experience dissatisfaction when goals cannot be met (Barling, 1990; Caplan & Jones, 1975). In addition, high Type A individuals tend to spend more time on their job tasks and work very close to their maximum capacity (Burnam, Pennebaker, & Glass, 1975; Jenkins, Zyzanski, & Rosenman, 1971). As organizations initiate a triple bottom line focus, a likely reaction to this change by individuals high in Type A involves taking on additional work and more fully immersing themselves in their roles with the goal of reconciling the challenges and conflicts that may arise from this multi-goal focus. For instance, a CFO high in Type A that must realign her focus on the financial goals of the organization to also include environmental and social imperatives may draw upon her competitiveness and pride in accomplishment to reconcile the

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challenges inherent in this process, reducing the potential role conflict or ambiguity that she may have otherwise experienced from such a drastic change. As such, though high Type A individuals may struggle more than others to deal with work stressors and strains in more typical contexts, they may also be better equipped and motivated to reconcile the numerous challenges that may arise from a triple bottom line focus, ultimately diminishing perceptions of role conflict and ambiguity.

Proposition 6. Type A behavior pattern will moderate the relationship between a triple bottom line emphasis and both role conflict and role ambiguity, such that the positive relationships are weaker when Type A is high and stronger when Type A is low.

2.4. Organizational synergies

The investigation to this point has focused on specific challenges that may be associated with implementing a triple bottom line approach at the organizational level, namely that this focus can lead to both role conflict and role ambiguity for employees. Of course, the identification of certain challenges that stem from a triple bottom line approach is not indicative of the value of a sustainability focus in its entirety. Indeed, organizations that have multiple identities tend to have greater capacity to meet expectations and demands of stakeholders, which may ultimately result in a competitive advantage over rivals (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Eccles et al., 1992). A focus on sustainability initiatives that move beyond singular goals (e.g., economic performance) may also reap benefits for other organizational initiatives. For instance, firms that focus on environmental goals may have access to a greater pool of potential employees (Phillips, 2007; Stringer, 2010; Wehrmeyer, 1996), promoting social sustainability and environmental imperatives by improving the quality of the human capital pool. As such, what is needed is not an abandonment of sustainability principles and the triple bottom line. Rather, understanding is needed of how organizations may develop synergies around economic, environmental, and social goals so that these employee level challenges are mitigated.

One way in which synergies may be promoted across organizational goals is through investments of time, energy, and money that serve to benefit multiple goals at once. Taking an HRM perspective, this could be accomplished in multiple ways. For instance, organizations may choose to recruit and select employees who highly value pro-environment initiatives, thereby building a human capital base that is more likely to view both economic and environmental goals as core to their job. Organizations may also shift their onboarding training to include not only skills that will help employees complete their job tasks but also those skills that will promote teamwork and leadership qualities. In doing so, both social and economic goals will likely be promoted as employees should have less difficulty embedding themselves within the organization, making it more likely that they will both identify with and stay committed to the firm (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). As a final example, companies may promote both social goals and environmental goals by providing certain flex opportunities to employees, such as paid time off to volunteer.

Another potential avenue for creating synergies between triple bottom line initiatives involves enhancing the benefits of each individual goal with the purpose of improving the entire employee experience. One line of research that may inform how this occurs is the role accumulation perspective (Marks, 1977; Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002; Sieber, 1974) which suggests that taking on multiple roles may provide multiple sources of satisfaction, ultimately enhancing overall well-being and functioning. For instance, consider an organization that emphasizes environmental imperatives through the promotion of internal greening practices and tangible investments in external environmental initiatives. Further, assume that this organization also invests heavily in the human capital pool via training, indoctrination into the company culture, and ongoing mentoring. Although the initiatives that stem from each of these goals do not necessarily align, role conflict and ambiguity may be overcome by the organization's ability to strategically implement each initiative and maximize employee satisfaction with each specific organizational imperative. In short, each individual organizational goal may not lead to strain due to goal inconsistency if properly framed and implemented by the organization, but rather may provide for a greater overall experience in the organization than would be anticipated from the sum of its parts.

An additional area of opportunity for organizations involves the strategic utilization and design of employee incentives and rewards. Though scholars have suggested that financial incentives may not be heavily valued by workers (e.g., Kohn, 1993) or may hinder intrinsic motivation (e.g., Deci, 1971), empirical examinations support the notion that financial incentives have a positive impact on employees (Jenkins, Mitra, Gupta, & Shaw, 1998; Judge, Piccolo, Podsakoff, Shaw, & Rich, 2010). Indeed, some have argued (e.g., Gupta & Shaw, 2014) that the appropriate design of employee compensation systems is one of the most influential drivers of human capital effectiveness. As such, one way in which organizations might effectively reduce role conflict and role ambiguity involves redesigning the ways in which employees are incentivized and rewarded. For instance, organizations could provide rewards for employees who excel in all three areas of focus (environmental, social, and economic), enhancing employee motivation to invest in the triple bottom line while also promoting congruence between organizational goals and messaging to employees. In addition, these incentives may provide signals to other employees concerning the behaviors the organization values (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011), promoting additional attention to the triple bottom line through social learning processes (Bandura, 1977). As a triple bottom line focus becomes more prevalent and incentivized, employees should ultimately experience less conflict and ambiguity regarding the work behaviors they are expected to engage in.

Proposition 7. Organizations may reduce employee role conflict and role ambiguity by creating synergies between economic, environmental, and social goals.

3. Discussion

Aiming for HRM sustainability through the enhancement of the triple bottom line may provide many benefits for organizations,

employees, and stakeholders (De Prins et al., 2014; Elkington, 1994; Jackson et al., 2011; Jackson & Seo, 2010). However, there are also potential challenges associated with this multi-goal approach that will require attention from HRM. In this article I identified two specific role stressors—role conflict and role ambiguity—that may stem from a focus on triple bottom line initiatives and ultimately promote negative employee outcomes. In addition, I identified perceived organizational support, leader initiating structure, leader consideration, and Type A behavior pattern as potential boundary conditions that may further inform these relationships. Finally, I investigated some potential ways in which organizations may create synergies between triple bottom line initiatives to reduce role conflict and ambiguity. In the sections that follow, I explore implications of this work for both theory and practice and conclude with opportunities for future research.

3.1. Theoretical implications

Scholarship that has investigated the triple bottom line has advanced our understanding of both the importance of HRM sustainability and the ways in which organizations may promote it. As such, a natural next step in the development of our understanding of HRM sustainability involves exploring the ways in which the mechanics of the triple bottom line may be grounded and explained by different theoretical perspectives. In this article I proposed that multiple identity theory may shed light on our understanding of the benefits and challenges associated with a triple bottom line approach. In addition, I suggested that role theory can help inform our understanding of the ways in which employees react and respond to a multi-goal organizational focus. Of course, there are likely other theoretical approaches that may shed additional light on HRM sustainability. For instance, social information processing theory may provide insight concerning how employees make sense of their organizational environment through the implementation, communication, and development of a multi-goal organizational focus (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). As another example, employee perspectives on their own personal resources and how they are impacted by a triple bottom line approach may be explained through conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1988).

This work also has theoretical implications for our understanding of sustainable HRM through multiple identity perspectives. As scholars have noted, organizational identities may be separated in different factions of the organization, creating an ideographic identity, or diffused throughout the organization, creating a holographic identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). In this investigation I largely assumed that a triple bottom line approach to sustainability would be sought through a holographic approach in which organizations emphasize economic, environmental, and social goals through all levels and segments of the organization. That said, it is also possible that these types of implementations may potentially create divisions within organizations if organizational segments foster inconsistent levels of investment in triple bottom line initiatives. Though not fully unpacked in this article, this suggests that theoretical perspectives (e.g., multiple identity theory) may further inform our understanding of how HRM sustainability initiatives flow through organizations.

Finally, this investigation also has theoretical implications for our understanding of job characteristics and their relation to the promotion or reduction of role stressors. Job characteristics theory posits that individuals in organizations are best motivated through the optimal design of their jobs (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). However, I would argue that a focus on triple bottom line initiatives may change our idea of what constitutes optimal design. Specifically, organizations shifting to a triple bottom line focus may have different perspectives concerning how best to design jobs than the employees who are required to fill those specific job roles. As such, the fulfillment of organization-level sustainability initiatives as well as employee needs and preferences may require additional consideration of job characteristics to fully discern the optimal design of jobs.

3.2. Practical implications

This work also has important implications for HRM practitioners regarding the use of HRM to promote sustainability outcomes through specific HR directives. For instance, the successful promotion of environmental goals may require additional onboarding training that speaks to the firm's environmental imperatives and how they fit with the overarching mission of the organization. HR practitioners may also consider revisiting the ways in which organizational teams are structured. Indeed, practitioners may seek to expand social networks by embedding employees in multiple teams with the goal of enhancing individual human capital through increased communication and collaboration with other organization members. HRM may also be used in new and innovative ways to promote multiple organizational directives at once. For example, practitioners may create externally visible “greening” teams that focus on reducing waste and improving a firm's internal and external “footprint.” In doing so, organizations may promote environmental sustainability through the reduction of organizational waste while concurrently improving social sustainability by facilitating improvements to the human capital function through increased attractiveness of the organization to potential employees.

In addition, this work has implications for the ways we manage, build, and sustain human capital in organizations. For instance, practitioners may need to amend recruitment and selection procedures to develop a human capital base that is both willing and able to cope with a triple bottom line approach. One way to accomplish this involves emphasizing triple bottom line initiatives during the recruitment and selection process to gauge fit of potential employees. In addition to recruitment and selection, job training and training design features may also require adjustment. Indeed, as individual job responsibilities become spread over multiple domains (e.g., economic, environmental, and social), employees will need to develop work management skills that may have previously been less critical to their job performance. Finally, the investment necessary to recruit, select, and develop employees with these characteristics make retention much more critical for human capital management. As such, additional attention, energy, and investment in the retention of employees is likely necessary to fully promote a sustainable HRM function.

Further, this work has implications for the types of leaders that organizations may wish to empower to fully manage the

challenges associated with a triple bottom line emphasis. Though I identified specific characteristics of leaders that may play a role in driving sustainability outcomes, there are also more generalized leadership styles that may aid in this process. For instance, organizations may seek to promote transcendent leadership, or leadership that considers not only the leader-follower relationship but also accounts for leadership processes at additional levels of analysis (e.g., the organization; Crossan, Vera, & Nanjad, 2008). Given that transcendental leaders excel in managing multiple levels (Crossan et al., 2008; Crossan & Mazutis, 2008), it stands that they would also be well suited to manage multiple goals. Indeed, transcendent leaders may excel in shaping follower understanding and commitment to triple bottom line goals, enhancing cohesion between organizational members around the best ways to navigate the various economic, environmental, and social goals of the organization. As such, organizations would do well to focus on enhancing the dynamic capabilities and styles of leaders that may directly strengthen the ability of individuals, teams, and the organization to promote HRM sustainability.

Finally, this work has implications for our understanding of the ways in which employee and leader characteristics may interact with HRM processes and policies to shape organizational sustainability. For example, this investigation focused on Type A as a potentially important employee characteristic. Though this work suggests that high Type A employees may experience less role conflict and ambiguity following the implementation of multiple sustainability goals, it is possible that this effect may be mitigated if complementary HRM processes are not in place. For instance, Type A employees may struggle more with conflict and ambiguity if proper performance measurement or reward systems are not installed. Further, Type A employees may experience more conflict and ambiguity than other employees if they are not provided with the autonomy and decision-making authority to navigate the operational challenges that may arise from a triple bottom line focus. At their core, these examples highlight the importance of understanding the characteristics of an organization's human capital and promoting synergies between those characteristics, HRM processes and policies, and the firm's sustainability goals.

3.3. Future research directions

One potential avenue for future research involves testing these propositions empirically. Specifically, I identified role conflict and role ambiguity as two role stressors that are likely promoted by a triple bottom line approach. In addition, I suggested that perceived organizational support, leader initiating structure, leader consideration, and Type A behavior pattern are important boundary conditions to consider. Scholars may move the conversation forward by examining these relationships in their natural context, taking note to control for potentially important contextual differences (e.g., industry, job type, and team size). Scholars may also want to control for or test the proposed relationships while accounting for varying amounts of economic, environmental, and social emphasis at the organization level. Indeed, whereas some organizations may equally invest focus and resources on each of the three triple bottom line goals, others may invest a higher proportion of resources in one or two goals. These differential levels of investment may further explain how role conflict and ambiguity are impacted beyond what was accounted for here and would be well suited for future examination.

Future research might also examine if there are other constructs that play a role in explaining the relationship between a triple bottom line approach and role stressors. For instance, a triple bottom line approach may promote role conflict and role ambiguity indirectly through inconsistent organizational messaging or through negatively valenced affect-laden variables. Moreover, though I identified several potential boundary conditions, there are likely other moderators that may shed light on these proposed relationships. For example, organizational characteristics such as organizational culture and climate (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013) and relational characteristics such as leader-member exchange (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975) may further explain how a triple bottom line approach drives role stressors. Future research should examine additional linkages that may help to unpack our understanding of the outcomes of a triple bottom line approach.

In this article I explored the potential interaction between an organizational triple bottom line focus and specific leader qualities (leader consideration and initiating structure) in driving employee role conflict and ambiguity. At a high level, the arguments made for the role of leaders in this context assume that leader attitudes and behaviors will mirror those of the organization in promoting a triple bottom line focus. That said, it is also possible that leaders may choose to emphasize certain goals more or less than the organization, creating inconsistent messaging and potential confusion for employees regarding their own expected behavior. This potential dichotomy may result not only in increased levels of role conflict and ambiguity but also increased levels of employee cynicism, frustration, and withdrawal. As such, future research might explore the congruence of organizational and leader messaging around triple bottom line goals and the subsequent influence on employee attitudes and behaviors.

Finally, this examination of HRM sustainability focused on one very specific sustainability conceptualization that emphasizes the economic, environmental, and social goals of firms. Of course, conceptualizing sustainability through a triple bottom line approach is not the only theoretical backdrop that may apply to sustainability. For instance, scholarly work on strategic HRM (e.g., Ferris, Hochwarter, Buckley, Harrell-Cook, & Frink, 1999) and high performance work practices (e.g., Combs, Liu, Hall, & Ketchen, 2006; Huselid, 1995) may provide us with additional insight. That said, additional clarity is needed regarding the explanatory power and potential overlap of these various perspectives. As such, to further our understanding of sustainable HRM, future research is needed to both isolate the nuanced elements of each of these perspectives and identify where they may overlap.

4. Conclusion

Scholarship to date has largely suggested that an organizational focus on sustainability through the enhancement of the triple bottom line will provide benefits for organizations, employees, and stakeholders (De Prins et al., 2014; Elkington, 1994; 1998;

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Jackson et al., 2011). Though there is considerable support for this consensus, there are also risks associated with a triple bottom line approach that practitioners and scholars must recognize and address. In this paper I sought to move this conversation forward by identifying employee role conflict and role ambiguity as detrimental employee outcomes of an organizational triple bottom line focus. It is my hope that this paper encourages future exploration around these challenges and how organizations can best build and maintain a sustainable HRM function.

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