ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

EMPOWERING SUSTAINABILITY: GREEN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AS A CATALYST IN THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

SÜRDÜRÜLEBİLİRLİĞİ GÜCLENDİRME: DÖNGÜSEL EKONOMİDE YEŞİL İNSAN KAYNAKLARININ ROLÜ

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Abstract

The circular economy is emerging as a key approach to tackling environmental challenges. Organizations are using their expertise to improve their sustainability management in support of a circular economy. However, the role of green human resource management (GHRM) practices in the transition to a more circular economy remains somewhat unclear. Companies adopting green GHRM practices as part of their sustainability goals are implementing initiatives such as green recruitment and selection, green training and development, green performance appraisal, green compensation and incentives, and sustainable employee relations. This study seeks to refine and extend a more integrated approach that links green human resource management (GHRM) with the circular economy (CE).

Keywords: GHRM, Circular economy, corporate sustainability, human behavior Iel Classification: M1, M10

Öz

Döngüsel ekonomi, çevresel sorunlara çözüm bulmak için temel bir yaklaşım haline gelmiştir. Organizasyonlar, sürdürülebilirlik faaliyetlerini geliştirmek ve döngüsel ekonomiyi desteklemek için uzmanlıklarını kullanmaya başlamışlardır. Ancak, daha döngüsel bir ekonomiye geçişte yeşil insan kaynakları yönetimi uygulamalarının önemi hala belirsizdir. Sürdürülebilirlik hedefleri kapsamında yeşil insan kaynakları uygulamalarını benimseyen şirketler, yeşil işe alım ve seçim, yeşil eğitim ve gelişim, yeşil performans değerlendirme, yeşil ücretlendirme ve teşvikler ile sürdürülebilir çalışan ilişkileri gibi önlemleri hayata geçirirler. Bu çalışmada, yeşil insan kaynakları yönetimi (GHRM) ve döngüsel ekonomi (CE) arasında daha bütünleşik bir yaklaşım geliştirilip genişletilmekte ve incelenmektedir.

Keywords: Yeşil insan kaynakları yönetimi, döngüsel ekonomi, kurumsal sürdürülebilirlik, insan davranışı Jel Sınıflandırması: M1, M10

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1. Introduction

Sustainability has become a pressing global issue, and companies are increasingly recognizing the importance of incorporating sustainable innovation and green processes into their operations. This shift towards environmental stewardship reflects a growing corporate commitment to reducing environmental impact and promoting sustainability and innovation (Mishra, 2017). Organizations are actively engaging in practices such as investing in low carbon technologies and utilising renewable energy sources, demonstrating a strategic focus on environmental sustainability (Fachada et al., 2022).

The circular economy is rapidly emerging as a transformative economic paradigm that fundamentally rethinks the traditional linear 'take-make-dispose' model in favour of a more sustainable approach that emphasises the minimization, reuse, recycling and recovery of materials throughout the life cycle of products. This model challenges the traditional notion of the "end of life" of products by promoting the continuous use of resources, thereby reducing waste and encouraging more efficient use of materials (Kirchherr et al., 2017). The circular economy seeks to redesign the way goods and services are produced and consumed, with the reuse of products and materials as a core principle. Central to the concept of the circular economy is its potential to bridge the gap between economic growth and environmental sustainability. By advocating an economic system in which products and materials are kept in use for as long as possible, it offers a way to decouple economic development from resource consumption. This shift not only helps to reduce the environmental impacts associated with the production and disposal of goods, but also increases resource efficiency, which can lead to significant economic benefits (Ghisellini et al., 2016). Businesses are encouraged to design products with their next life in mind, which often means innovating in design and manufacturing processes to facilitate disassembly and reuse.

The circular economy also has fundamental implications for business strategies and supply chains. It encourages organizations to rethink their operations and logistics to create closed-loop systems that recycle and reuse resources. This approach is gaining traction among policymakers and business leaders who see the potential for circular strategies to contribute to economic resilience and sustainability. Governments and international organizations are increasingly promoting circular economy policies that support these transitions, recognising the importance of aligning economic activities with environmental goals to achieve sustainable development (Ormazabal et al., 2018). In this evolving economic landscape, the adoption of circular economy principles is seen not only as an environmental imperative, but also as a strategic business advantage that can drive innovation, reduce costs and open up new markets. By integrating these principles into their core operations, companies can not only improve their sustainability, but also build a competitive advantage in a world where resources are becoming increasingly scarce and consumer preferences are shifting towards more sustainable products and practices.

However, the academic discourse often overlooks the critical "human element" of sustainability and the circular economy. The "soft side" of organizations, which includes human resource management

(HRM), plays a central role in driving sustainable outcomes and innovation. Senior management increasingly views HR as a strategic pillar that is essential to achieving both economic performance and environmental stewardship (Singh et al., 2019). This perspective is supported by a body of research highlighting the profound link between HR strategies, environmental management practices and economic performance, underscoring the significant impact of human resources on organizational success (Mousa and Othman, 2020).

The concept of green human resource management (GHRM) has emerged to address this link, aiming to align HRM policies and practices with an organization's broader sustainability goals. GHRM focuses on empowering employees and fostering a culture committed to sustainability, thereby facilitating the transition to a circular economy (Renwick et al., 2013, 2016). Despite decades of interest in the 'human side' of organizations (Wilkinson, 1992; Jabbour et al., 2019), there remains a gap in research investigating how green HRM practices can promote a circular culture focused on sustainability.

2. Green Human Resource Management

Human Resource Management (HRM) plays a crucial role in steering organizational strategies towards sustainability. By implementing environmentally friendly policies and promoting regulatory compliance, HRM lays a financial and sustainable foundation for organizations. This strategic alignment with sustainability benchmarks enables organizations to not only meet but also exceed emerging environmental standards (Ahmad, 2015). Furthermore, such initiatives significantly increase the environmental awareness of employees and form a core element of an organization's identity and operational ethos (Al-Zgool, 2019).

The green behaviours adopted by employees, including practices such as duplex printing, recycling, the use of energy-efficient equipment and the reuse of old office furniture, are instrumental in achieving an organization's environmental goals (Hameed et al., 2020). This highlights the critical importance of HRM in fostering a culture that supports sustainable development, as recognised in recent literature (Mensah, 2019; Shah et al., 2021).

The development of green human resource management (GHRM) marks a significant shift in organizational values. Modern job seekers are attracted to organizations with a strong environmental ethos, making GHRM a strategic asset in attracting top talent. GHRM integrates sustainability into all facets of HR, leading to a re-evaluation of human resources as critical to an organization's environmental and strategic goals. This study focuses on the responsibility of HRM in managing and promoting the organization's environmental practices (Shahzad et al., 2023).

Jackson et al. (2014) describe GHRM as recognising the impact of organizational activities on the environment and the mutual influence of HRM systems. GHRM, as outlined by Renwick et al. (2013), includes HR strategies that support environmental sustainability efforts by emphasising the policies, strategies and actions that contribute to achieving green goals (Sabokro et al., 2021). Adhering to the principles of GHRM, organizations adopt environmentally friendly practices with

the aim of cultivating a workforce that exhibits pro-environmental behaviours. These practices increase environmental awareness and motivate employees to adopt sustainable behaviors, thereby conserving resources and improving environmental management skills (Al-Zgool, 2019).

Organizations pursue various GHRM initiatives, including green recruitment, training, performance appraisal, compensation and engagement policies. Green recruitment involves the selection and hiring of individuals who possess the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours essential for effective environmental management within an organization. This recruitment strategy focuses on identifying candidates who are sensitive to environmental issues and committed to meeting environmental performance standards (Pham et al., 2020). In addition, employee training plays a vital role in the effective implementation of an environmental management system and in fostering an environmentally friendly organizational culture. This type of training equips employees with the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute positively to the environmental goals of the organization (Mishra, 2017). In the studies conducted, it is identified as the most important HRM practice in creating a culture where employees feel responsible for the environmental performance of the organization. Green performance management refers to the evaluation of employees' activities to monitor whether they add value to the organization's environmental management activities (Farooq et al., 2022). Clarifying green criteria for employees and highlighting these criteria in performance evaluations is said to guide employees to improve their environmental performance (Darvazeh et al., 2023). These initiatives are designed to foster a workplace culture that values sustainability and encourages employees to actively participate in environmental conservation efforts. In IT companies, the integration of GHRM practices such as green recruitment, training and performance appraisal has led to reduced carbon footprints and improved business sustainability, a study highlighted by Shobhana et al. (2022) shows how these practices have contributed to energy conservation, cost reduction and profitability in IT firms. Yahya and Zargar (2023) discuss how GHRM supports sustainable business practices in the banking industry, leading to reduced environmental impact and enhanced corporate sustainability.

GHRM blends traditional HR strategies with environmental goals, adding a strategic layer to the role of HR in organizations (Gholami et al., 2016). Integrating environmental considerations into HR practices is an emerging focus within environmental management, leading to a reorientation of HR strategies to support sustainability (Jabbour et al., 2015). Renwick et al. (2013) identified key development areas for GHRM, such as enhancing green skills and behaviours through various HR processes and fostering an organizational culture that supports green initiatives. These strategies have been expanded by academics to highlight the importance of recruitment, training, performance management and organizational learning in promoting environmental stewardship (Pham et al., 2019).

3. Circular Economy

The circular economy (CE) paradigm is gaining momentum as a transformative approach that challenges the traditional "take, make, use and dispose" model by advocating for a sustainable,

low-carbon and resource-efficient economy. This model aims to decouple economic growth from the consumption of finite resources by shifting towards circular production and consumption processes (García-Quevedo et al., 2020; Ghisellini et al., 2016). The European Union's endorsement of CE as a strategy highlights its potential to create new business opportunities and improve production and consumption patterns across sectors, involving a wide range of stakeholders including governments, businesses, NGOs and academic institutions (European Commission, 2015).

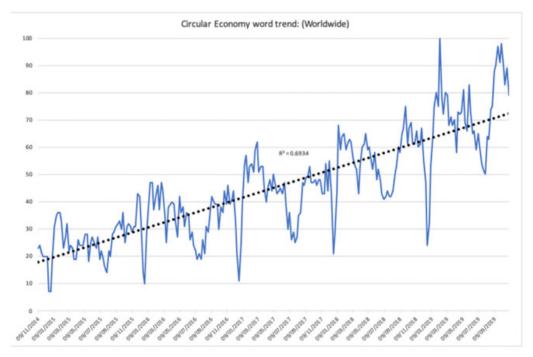


Figure 1: Circular Economy Word Trend (2014-2019)

 $Ref: Google\ Trends\ (2014-2019),\ https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=now\%201-d\&q=circular\%20\ economy\&hl=tr$

At the heart of the circular economy are the principles of "reduce, reuse and recycle", which aim to minimize waste and resource use, thereby promoting economic systems that benefit both the environment and society (García-Quevedo, 2020). The Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF) expands on this by defining CE as an industrial system that is restorative by design, focusing on improving efficiency at all stages of production and consumption (EMF, 2013; 2014). The core elements – recycle, reduce and reuse – encapsulate the circular economy's cyclical approach to production, encompassing production, use, recovery, recycling and remanufacturing processes (Rehman Khan et al., 2022).

The circular economy's alignment with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, highlights its role in advancing global sustainability agendas. Emerging research in CE also explores the integration of human development to ensure a socially

equitable transition (Opferkuch et al., 2022). This model emphasises the importance of extending the lifecycle of products through sharing, leasing, reuse, refurbishment, repair and recycling, thereby maximizing their utility and lifespan (EU Parliament, 2023).

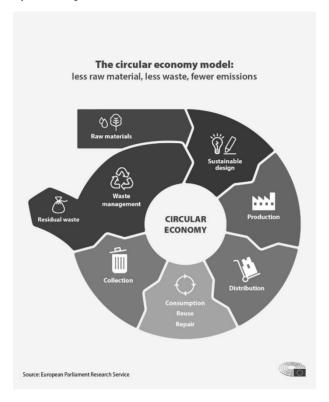


Figure 2: Circular Economy Model

Ref: European Parliement (2023), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20151201STO05603/circular-economy-definition-importance-and-benefits#: \sim :text=The%20circular%20economy%20is%20a,reducing%20waste%20to%20a%20minimum.

The adoption of CE strategies has shown great promise in improving global sustainability. The literature on CE and sustainability can be categorised into three levels: micro, meso and macro. At the micro level, individual companies incorporate CE practices such as recycling, reduction and refurbishment into their operations and address sustainability challenges through innovative business models. The meso level emphasises collaborative efforts, such as green supply chain management and eco-clusters, between companies to promote sustainable development and efficient material exchange. Meanwhile, the macro level involves policy-driven strategies by governments and regional bodies to promote sustainability on a broader scale. This comprehensive framework highlights the importance of integrating CE practices across different levels of society and the economy to minimise resource consumption and improve the efficiency of material and energy cycles (Nikolaou et al., 2021; Rincón-Moreno et al., 2021).

4. Human Side of Circular Economy

The circular economy (CE) has emerged as a transformative model in the fields of business and management, promoting sustainable development by redefining production and consumption patterns (Obeidat et al., 2022). In parallel, the field of green human resource management is growing, which is increasingly seen as central to aligning HR strategies with CE principles and promoting environmental sustainability within organizations (Jabbour et al., 2019).

Green HRM strategies, ranging from training programmes to green supply chain practices, play a critical role in the implementation of CE business models and have been shown to have a significant impact on organizational performance. These HR initiatives are instrumental in driving advanced environmental management practices that contribute to improved business outcomes (Jabbour et al., 2019).

Underpinning the synergy between green HRM practices and CE are two theoretical frameworks: stakeholder theory and the resource-based view (RBV). The RBV, as posited by Barney (1991), suggests that unique resources within a firm can create a sustainable competitive advantage, especially when these resources support circular processes such as the reuse and recycling of materials (Chaudhuri et al., 2022; Jabbour et al., 2019). In the context of CE, green HRM practices serve as an invaluable resource that aligns with a company's sustainability goals and enhances organizational competitiveness by promoting green employee engagement and cultivating a culture of environmental awareness (Ramus & Steger, 2000; Marrucci et al., 2021).

Stakeholder theory complements this by framing the role of business in society, emphasising the importance of engaging with a wide range of stakeholders for sustainable value creation. This approach departs from traditional models by prioritising environmental and social benefits alongside economic ones, recognising the essential role of stakeholders in the transition to a CE (Freeman et al., 2020; Freudenreich et al., 2020; Marcon et al., 2023). Stakeholder engagement is critical to overcoming the challenges and harnessing the incentives associated with the CE, thereby driving collective efforts towards sustainable practices (Marjamaa et al., 2021; Jabbour et al., 2020).

Empirical research highlights the significant contribution of green HRM to sustainable business practices. Studies by Mishra (2017), Ren et al. (2018) and Chowdhury et al. (2022) highlight the instrumental role of HRM in embedding environmental sustainability in organizational processes, thereby advancing the goals of CE. These findings confirm the strategic importance of HRM policies aligned with environmental goals, catalysing the shift towards more sustainable business frameworks and underscoring the critical intersection between HRM practices and CE principles.

5. Discussion

The increasing integration of social dimensions into the circular economy model reflects a significant shift in the strategic responsibilities of human resources. HR departments are instrumental in cultivating an organizational culture that not only prioritises sustainability, but actively promotes

it. This involves developing specific skills and competencies, as well as promoting inclusive practices that ensure all segments of the workforce are engaged and empowered to contribute to the organization's sustainability goals. Such an approach positions HR as a critical driver in the transition to a more sustainable and circular business model. Burger et al. (2019) shed light on the diverse skill sets required in different sectors within the circular economy, highlighting the different demands for physical, technical and complex cognitive skills. This diversity highlights the critical role of targeted training programmes, tailored to sector-specific needs. HR departments are uniquely positioned to lead these initiatives and align workforce skills with the evolving demands of a circular economy. In doing so, they facilitate a smoother transition by ensuring that employees are not only aware of the importance of sustainability practices, but are also equipped with the necessary tools and knowledge to implement them effectively. In addition, HR's role goes beyond training and development to include the strategic alignment of recruitment, retention and employee engagement with the organization's sustainability goals. By embedding circular economy principles into all facets of HR management, from performance appraisal to leadership development, HR can increase its impact on the organization's overall sustainability performance. This comprehensive integration helps to build a resilient workforce that is adaptable, innovative and fully engaged in the company's environmental mission, thereby advancing the organization's transition.

The relationship between green human resource management and the circular economy is a critical aspect of advancing sustainable business practices. GHRM promotes a sustainable organizational culture by integrating CE concepts into the core values of the company. This encourages employees to adopt and apply these principles routinely, strengthening the company's commitment to sustainability.

This study aims to develop an in-depth framework that explores the link between green human resource management and the circular economy. It focuses on the critical role of incorporating GHRM strategies to enhance CE initiatives within organizations, leading to the promotion of a greener, more sustainable approach to business. GHRM encompasses a range of strategies that integrate environmental responsibility into an organization's core policies and procedures. It includes recruiting, training and motivating employees to adopt environmentally friendly practices. By embedding GHRM, companies cultivate an ethos of sustainability that inspires creative solutions to reduce waste, improve resource use and adopt green business practices. In contrast, the circular economy aims to minimise waste and optimise resource use. It prioritises the recycling, reuse, reduction and recovery of materials at all stages of the product lifecycle, from production to consumption, and seeks to extend the usability and overall life of products and infrastructure.

4.1. Recommendations for Future Studies

There's a growing emphasis on incorporating social aspects more thoroughly into the circular economy model, as highlighted by researchers such as Merli et al. (2018), Mies and Gold (2021) and Murray et al. (2017). While discussions on economic and environmental sustainability have been prevalent, there is a growing focus on the social sustainability dimensions within the circular

economy. In particular, there is a need to analyse and empirically test the human aspects of the circular economy. In order to provide support for the claim that green human resource management and the circular economy model lead to improved sustainable performance, it is essential to analyse the functions of green human resource management as green recruitment and selection, green training and development, green performance appraisal, green compensation and incentives individually within a research framework. Furthermore, exploring moderating and mediating mechanisms can significantly strengthen the link between GHRM practices and circular economy initiatives. This could include qualitative case studies or quantitative surveys that help to understand the pathways through which GHRM influences environmental performance. Conduct comparable studies across different industries to explore how industry-specific factors may act as moderators. This can provide insights into tailoring GHRM practices that are most effective for specific sectors.

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