Int. j. adv. multidisc. res. stud. 2026; 6(6):416-426

Received: 22-09-2026
Accepted: 02-11-2026

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

Human Resource Management for ESG: A Structured Literature Review and Research Agenda

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2026.6.6.7143
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Abstract

Purpose: Environmental, social and governance (ESG) commitments are made in boardrooms but carried out by employees. This review asks what the literature knows about how human resource management (HRM) contributes to each ESG pillar, through which mechanisms, under what conditions, and how HRM itself is captured in ESG disclosure.

Design/methodology/approach: Guided by the assembling, arranging and assessing stages of the SPAR-4-SLR protocol, we combined keyword searches of Scopus and Web of Science (articles published from 2011 onward) with backward and forward citation chaining and selected a purposive set of 29 core empirical studies, which were coded on HRM stream, ESG pillar, level of analysis, design and context, and 17 prior reviews were used to position the contribution.

Findings: The evidence base is lopsided. Over half of the coded studies address the environmental pillar through green HRM, mostly with cross-sectional employee surveys from Asian service and manufacturing firms. The social pillar is studied mainly through socially responsible HRM and employee well-being, while governance appears only in work on ESG-linked executive pay and board diversity. Three streams that rarely cite one another, namely micro-level HRM research, corporate finance studies of employee welfare and accounting research on disclosure, are integrated here into a framework linking HRM architecture, mechanisms, pillar-specific outcomes, disclosure and firm value, with a feedback loop from ESG performance to HR investment.

Originality/value: To our knowledge, the review is the first to organise HRM-ESG research by pillar rather than by HR practice and to connect it with the new generation of human capital reporting rules (ESRS S1, ISO 30414:2025, the SEC human capital rule and Vietnam's Circular 96/2020/TT-BTC). A research agenda of six themes, each with questions, theories and designs, is proposed, with particular attention to emerging economies.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, ESG, Green HRM, Socially Responsible HRM, Sustainable HRM, Human Capital Disclosure, Structured Literature Review

1. Introduction

Few corporate agendas have spread as quickly as ESG. Investors, lenders and regulators now ask firms to report on carbon, workforce and board practices with a precision that was unusual a decade ago, and the European Union, the United States and several Asian markets have turned voluntary sustainability reporting into a legal duty for large companies. Yet the ESG debate has been conducted mostly by finance and accounting scholars, who treat the firm as a portfolio of scores. Very little of that conversation asks who inside the firm actually turns an emissions target into a changed production routine, or a diversity pledge into a promotion decision. In most organisations the answer runs through the HR function: recruitment, training, appraisal, pay and employee voice are the channels through which strategy reaches behaviour (Stahl *et al*., 2020) [54].

HRM scholarship has been aware of this link for some time. Green HRM emerged as a research stream in the early 2010s (Jackson *et al*., 2011; Renwick *et al*., 2013) [30, 48], sustainable HRM was proposed as a successor to strategic HRM (Kramar, 2014; Ehnert, 2009) [32, 15], and socially responsible HRM (SR-HRM) has been examined as CSR directed at employees (Shen & Benson, 2016) [51]. In parallel, finance research has shown that employee satisfaction carries information the stock market fails to price (Edmans, 2011) [13], and governance research has examined what happens when executive bonuses are tied to environmental and social targets (Flammer *et al*., 2019) [20]. These literatures speak about the same phenomenon from different floors of the building, but they seldom meet.

Existing reviews help, but each covers part of the terrain. Reviews of green HRM map practices and environmental outcomes (Ren *et al*., 2018; Pham, Hoang, & Phan, 2020; Amrutha & Geetha, 2020) [47, 42, 1]; reviews of the CSR-HRM nexus classify theoretical perspectives (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016; De Stefano *et al*., 2018; Podgorodnichenko *et al*., 2020) [60, 11, 46]; and reviews of sustainable HRM debate its purpose (Aust *et al*., 2020) [4] or its link with employee performance (Liang & Li, 2025) [34]. Two recent contributions bring ESG into view. Moreira *et al*. (2025) [36] show bibliometrically that HRM topics are thinly represented in ESG and GRI reporting research, and Huma *et al*. (2026) [28] map the intersection of green HRM and ESG. Neither organises the evidence around all three ESG pillars, neither integrates finance and disclosure studies, and neither reflects the regulatory turn of 2023 to 2026, when ESRS S1, the revised ISO 30414 and national reporting rules made workforce data a compliance matter.

This review addresses that gap with four questions:

- RQ1. How has research linking HRM and ESG developed in terms of streams, pillars, designs and contexts?
- RQ2. Which HRM practices and systems have been linked to environmental, social and governance outcomes, and through which mechanisms?
- RQ3. How is HRM represented in ESG disclosure and ratings, and what does this imply for measurement?
- RQ4. What should future research investigate, with which theories and designs?

The review makes three contributions. It reorganises a fragmented literature by ESG pillar, which shows plainly where evidence is dense (environmental behaviour) and where it is almost absent (governance). It proposes an integrative framework that connects HRM architecture to pillar outcomes, disclosure and value, and that treats the reverse path, from ESG performance to HR investment, as part of the model rather than as a nuisance for identification. And it sets out a research agenda that pays attention to emerging economies such as Vietnam, where mandatory disclosure is basic, labour markets are changing quickly and the bulk of recent green HRM studies have been produced.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 clarifies concepts and positions the review against earlier ones. Section 3 explains the method. Section 4 reports the profile of the evidence, Section 5 synthesises findings by pillar, and Section 6 presents the framework. Section 7 sets out the research agenda, and Section 8 concludes with implications and limitations.

2. Conceptual background and prior reviews

2.1 ESG and the place of people in it

ESG began as an investor label for non-financial risks and opportunities. The environmental pillar covers emissions, resource use and pollution; the social pillar covers relations with employees, suppliers, customers and communities; and the governance pillar covers board structure, executive incentives, shareholder rights and business ethics. Workforce issues are formally located in the social pillar, but in practice they cut across all three. Employees implement environmental routines, they are the main internal stakeholders of social performance, and incentive and oversight structures for managers belong to governance. A pillar-based reading of HRM therefore cannot stop at the "S".

Two features of ESG measurement matter for HRM research. First, ESG ratings diverge sharply across providers. Berg *et al*. (2022) [6] attribute most of this divergence to differences in how the same attribute is measured rather than to which attributes are included. Second, more disclosure does not reduce disagreement; Christensen *et al*. (2022) [10] find that it can raise it, especially for outcome metrics. Workforce indicators such as turnover, training hours or pay gaps are exactly the kind of outcome metrics where definitions vary. Studies that use aggregate ESG scores as a proxy for "good HRM" thus rest on unstable ground.

2.2 Three HRM perspectives on sustainability

HRM research has approached sustainability through three overlapping lenses. Green HRM concerns the HR practices that build employees' environmental abilities, motivation and opportunities, typically green recruitment, training, performance management, rewards and involvement (Renwick *et al*., 2013; Tang *et al*., 2018) [48, 56]. It is anchored mainly in the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) model (Appelbaum *et al*., 2000) [2] and the natural resource-based view (Hart, 1995) [26].

Socially responsible HRM refers to HR policies that treat employees as stakeholders of CSR and that support CSR toward other stakeholders. Shen and Zhu (2011) [52] distinguish legal compliance HRM, employee-oriented HRM and HRM that facilitates general CSR. Work in this stream, and in the wider micro-CSR literature it belongs to (Gond *et al*., 2017) [22], draws heavily on social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) [3] and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) [7].

Sustainable HRM is the broadest label. Kramar (2014) [32] describes it as an approach that recognises outcomes beyond the financial and that takes an explicit moral position on the effects of HR practices on people and society. Ehnert (2009) [15] frames it through paradox, since HR must reconcile efficiency with the regeneration of human resources. Chams and García-Blandón (2019) [9] tie it to the Sustainable Development Goals, and Aust *et al*. (2020) [4] go further by proposing a "common good" variant of sustainable HRM. Stahl *et al*. (2020) [54] add a multi-stakeholder, multidimensional view in which HRM should both avoid harm and create value along the triple bottom line.

2.3 Positioning against prior reviews

Table 1 summarises selected prior reviews and what each leaves open. Most were organised by HR practice or by theoretical perspective; only the most recent ones mention ESG explicitly, and none links micro-level HRM evidence to disclosure and capital-market research.

Table 1: Selected prior reviews and the gap addressed by this study

Review	Scope and method	Main contribution	What remains open
Renwick *et al*. (2013) [48]	Green HRM; narrative review	AMO-based classification of green HR practices	Social and governance pillars; disclosure
Voegtlin & Greenwood (2016) [60]	CSR-HRM; systematic review	Instrumental, social-integrative and political perspectives	Environmental outcomes; ESG metrics
De Stefano *et al*. (2018) [11]	HR role in CSR and sustainability; systematic review	Four-quadrant typology of HR roles	Link to ratings and reporting rules
Ren *et al*. (2018) [47]	Green HRM; narrative review	Antecedents, consequences and contingencies model	Social and governance pillars
Pham, Hoang & Phan (2020) [42]	Green HRM; 74 articles	Sixteen research recommendations	Pillars beyond E; finance evidence
Aust *et al*. (2020) [4]; Stahl *et al*. (2020) [54]	Sustainable HRM; conceptual	Common good and multi-stakeholder views	Empirical synthesis
Liang & Li (2025) [34]	Sustainable HRM and employee performance	Constructs, scales and mechanisms	Firm-level ESG outcomes
Moreira *et al*. (2025) [36]	HRM in ESG and GRI research; bibliometric	Under-representation of HR topics in reporting research	Mechanisms; pillar-level synthesis
Huma *et al*. (2026) [28]	Green HRM and ESG; bibliometric (SciMAT)	Thematic map of the GHRM-ESG field	Social and governance HRM; new reporting rules

3. Methodology

3.1 Review design

The review is a domain-based structured literature review. It follows the three stages of the SPAR-4-SLR protocol, namely assembling, arranging and assessing (Paul *et al*., 2021) [41]. Because the aim is to connect mechanisms across three research streams rather than to count every study in each of them, the review codes a purposive set of core empirical studies and does not claim exhaustive coverage. For the same reason it does not report a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Page *et al*., 2021) [39]; instead, it documents the search terms, eligibility criteria and coding scheme so that readers can judge the scope of the evidence. The general logic of evidence-informed management reviews set out by Tranfield *et al*. (2003) [58] and Snyder (2019) [53] guided the choice of a coded, integrative synthesis rather than a meta-analysis, because the outcome measures in the field are too heterogeneous to be pooled.

3.2 Search strategy

The start year coincides with the first special issue on green HRM (Jackson *et al*., 2011) [30]. The query combined three blocks of terms in titles, abstracts and keywords:

- HRM block: "human resource management" OR "HRM" OR "HR practice*" OR "green HRM" OR "sustainable HRM" OR "socially responsible HRM" OR "human capital management"
- ESG block: "ESG" OR "environmental, social and governance" OR "corporate sustainability" OR "sustainability performance" OR "corporate social responsibility" OR "environmental performance" OR "social performance"
- Outcome or disclosure block (used to narrow the second search round): "disclosure" OR "reporting" OR "rating*" OR "firm value" OR "executive compensation" OR "board"

Because finance and accounting studies often describe HR issues in other words (employee satisfaction, labour investment, workforce), the database search was complemented by backward and forward citation chaining from the included studies and from the prior reviews in Table 1.

3.3 Eligibility criteria and screening

Inclusion and exclusion criteria are listed in Table 2. Full texts of candidate studies were assessed against these criteria. The coded set is purposive: it is meant to cover each HRM stream, ESG pillar and type of design, not to include every eligible study.

Table 2: Eligibility criteria

Code	Criterion
IC1	Peer-reviewed journal article in English
IC2	Examines an HR practice, HR system, workforce policy or HR-related governance mechanism
IC3	Links it to an environmental, social or governance outcome, to ESG performance, or to ESG/human capital disclosure
IC4	Organisational focus (individual, team, firm, board or multi-level)
EC1	Conceptual pieces without a synthesis or framework, editorials, book reviews, conference papers
EC2	Studies in which HRM appears only as a control variable
EC3	Studies of public policy or national labour markets without an organisational unit of analysis
EC4	Duplicate reports of the same data set (the most complete version was retained)

3.4 Coding and synthesis

Each empirical study was coded on seven attributes: HRM stream, primary ESG pillar, level of analysis, research design, country context, theoretical lens and main finding. Where a study addressed more than one pillar, it was assigned to the pillar of its dependent variable. The coding sheet is reproduced in Table 3. The synthesis proceeded in two steps. A descriptive analysis answered RQ1. A thematic synthesis, organised first by pillar and then by mechanism, answered RQ2 and RQ3 and fed into the integrative framework in Section 6. Studies were weighted equally; the review does not compute pooled effect sizes.

4. Profile of the evidence (RQ1)

Table 3 lists the coded studies. Fig 1 summarises them by period, pillar and design.

Table 3: Coded empirical studies (n = 29)

No.	Study	HRM stream	Pillar	Level	Design	Context	Main finding (paraphrased)
1	Edmans (2011) [13]	Employee well-being	S	Firm	Portfolio/panel	USA	Best Companies to Work For earned positive abnormal returns that the market did not price.
2	Shen & Zhu (2011) [52]	SR-HRM	S	Individual	Survey	China	SR-HRM components relate differently to affective, normative and continuance commitment.
3	Paillé *et al*. (2014) [40]	Green HRM	E	Multilevel	Survey	China	Strategic HRM supports environmental performance through employee eco-helping behaviour.
4	Byron & Post (2016) [8]	Board diversity	G	Board	Meta-analysis	Multi-country	Female board representation relates positively to social performance, more so where gender parity is higher.
5	Ehnert *et al*. (2016) [16]	HR reporting	S	Firm	Content analysis	Global	HRM disclosure in sustainability reports is not lower than environmental disclosure; internal workforce dominates.
6	Guerci *et al*. (2016) [23]	Green HRM	E	Firm	Survey	Italy	Green HRM practices mediate the effect of stakeholder pressure on environmental performance.
7	Haddock-Millar *et al*. (2016) [25]	Green HRM	E	Firm	Qualitative case	US MNC	Green HRM is enacted unevenly across subsidiaries of one multinational.
8	Newman *et al*. (2016) [38]	SR-HRM	S	Individual	Survey	China	SR-HRM raises citizenship behaviour via organisational identification.
9	Shen & Benson (2016) [51]	SR-HRM	S	Multilevel	Survey	China	Organisation-level SR-HRM shapes task performance and helping through organisational identification.
10	Dumont *et al*. (2017) [12]	Green HRM	E	Individual	Survey	China	Green HRM affects in-role and extra-role green behaviour through psychological green climate.
11	Flammer & Luo (2017) [21]	Employee-related CSR	S	Firm	Quasi-experiment	USA	Firms raise employee-related CSR when the risk of adverse employee behaviour rises.
12	Mun & Jung (2018) [37]	Diversity	G	Firm	Panel	Japan	CSR engagement is linked to more women in senior positions above the glass ceiling.
13	Tang *et al*. (2018) [56]	Green HRM	E	Firm	Scale development	China	Green HRM comprises five dimensions: recruitment, training, performance, pay and involvement.
14	Flammer, Hong & Minor (2019) [20]	ESG-linked pay	G	Firm	Panel (IV)	USA	CSR criteria in executive pay raise long-term orientation, firm value and environmental outcomes.
15	Kim *et al*. (2019) [31]	Green HRM	E	Multilevel	Survey	Thailand	Green HRM improves commitment, eco-friendly behaviour and hotel environmental performance.
16	Pham, Tučková & Jabbour (2019) [43]	Green HRM	E	Individual	Mixed methods	Vietnam	Green training, performance management and involvement interact to raise OCB toward the environment.
17	Roscoe *et al*. (2019) [49]	Green HRM	E	Firm	Survey	China	Enablers of green organisational culture mediate green HRM and environmental performance.
18	Saeed *et al*. (2019) [50]	Green HRM	E	Individual	Survey	Pakistan	Green HRM increases pro-environmental behaviour via pro-environmental psychological capital.
19	Pham, Vo-Thanh, *et al*. (2020) [44]	Green HRM	E	Firm	Survey	Vietnam	Training and involvement drive hotel environmental performance; OCBE mediates.
20	Yong *et al*. (2020) [61]	Green HRM	E	Firm	Survey	Malaysia	Green recruitment and green training, but not other practices, relate to sustainability.
21	Zhao *et al*. (2021) [63]	SR-HRM	E	Individual	Survey	China	SR-HRM spills over into employees' citizenship behaviour toward the environment.
22	Tuan (2022) [59]	Green HRM	E	Individual	Survey	China and Vietnam	Green HRM and responsible leadership jointly promote employee green behaviour in hospitality.
23	Li *et al*. (2023) [33]	ESG to HR outcomes	S	Firm	Panel	China	Stronger ESG performance improves labour investment efficiency via finance and information channels.
24	Zhao, Chen & Liu (2023) [62]	SR-HRM	S	Individual	Survey	China	SR-HRM fosters employee moral voice, a governance-relevant behaviour.
25	Edmans *et al*. (2024) [14]	Employee well-being	S	Firm	Panel	30 countries	The satisfaction-returns link increases with labour market flexibility.
26	Ha *et al*. (2024) [24]	Green HRM	E	Firm	Survey	Vietnam	Green intellectual capital feeds green HRM, which drives SME environmental performance.
27	Hong *et al*. (2024) [27]	Green HRM	E	Individual	Survey	Vietnam	Green HRM raises green behavioural intention; perceived CSR mediates.
28	Su & Xue (2024) [55]	ESG to HR outcomes	S	Firm	Panel	China	ESG performance reduces both over- and under-investment in labour.
29	Tran *et al*. (2024) [57]	Green HRM	E	Firm	Survey	Vietnam	Green transformational leadership shapes green HRM and innovation; effects differ across sustainability dimensions.

Note: Pillar = primary ESG pillar of the dependent variable (E = environmental, S = social, G = governance).

Three patterns stand out. The first is the dominance of the environmental pillar. Sixteen of the 29 studies (55%) have an environmental outcome as their dependent variable, ten (34%) a social outcome and only three (10%) a governance outcome. The environmental cluster is almost entirely green HRM research, which accounts for 15 studies on its own. This mirrors the conclusion of Moreira *et al*. (2025) [36] that HR topics remain marginal in ESG reporting research, and it means that claims about "HRM and ESG" in general are, for the most part, claims about HRM and environmental behaviour.

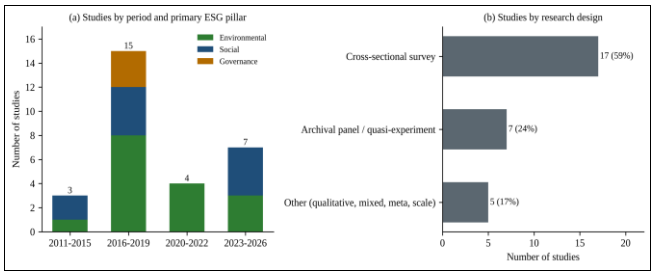


Fig 1: Profile of the coded studies

The second pattern is methodological. Seventeen studies (59%) rely on cross-sectional surveys, frequently with HR practices, mediators and outcomes reported by the same respondent. Only seven (24%) use archival panels, quasi-experiments or instrumental variables, and these come almost entirely from finance and strategy journals (Edmans, 2011; Flammer & Luo, 2017; Flammer *et al*., 2019; Li *et al*., 2023) [13, 21, 20, 33]. The field therefore has two kinds of evidence that rarely talk to each other: rich but correlational micro-level data on practices and behaviour, and causally sharper but coarse firm-level data in which HRM is inferred from rankings, ratings or CSR databases.

The third pattern is geographical. Twenty-one studies (72%) were conducted in Asia, with China (11 studies) and Vietnam (6, including one joint China-Vietnam sample) the most frequent settings. Vietnamese studies concentrate on hotels and manufacturing SMEs and use PLS-SEM almost without exception (Pham, Tučková, & Jabbour, 2019; Pham, Vo-Thanh, *et al*., 2020; Hong *et al*., 2024; Ha *et al*., 2024; Tran *et al*., 2024) [43, 44, 27, 24, 57]. Firm-level archival evidence, by contrast, comes from the United States, Japan, China and multi-country samples. No coded study combines survey data on HR practices with archival ESG or disclosure data for the same firms.

5. Thematic synthesis (RQ2 and RQ3)

5.1 The environmental pillar: green HRM and employee green behaviour

The core proposition of green HRM is that environmental performance depends on what employees do when no rule tells them what to do. The evidence supports this proposition at the individual level. Dumont *et al*. (2017) [12] show that green HRM affects both in-role and extra-role green behaviour, but that the effect on discretionary behaviour runs only through a psychological green climate, which suggests that practices work by shaping what employees believe the organisation values. Saeed *et al*. (2019) [50] reach a similar conclusion through pro-environmental psychological capital, and Zhao *et al*. (2021) [63] find that socially responsible HRM spills over into environmental citizenship, a sign that the boundary between "green" and "social" HR is thinner than the labels suggest.

At the firm level, Paillé *et al*. (2014) [40] connect strategic HRM with environmental performance through employees' eco-helping, Roscoe *et al*. (2019) [49] identify leadership emphasis, message credibility, peer involvement and empowerment as the cultural enablers that carry green HRM to environmental results, and Guerci *et al*. (2016) [23] show that green HR practices translate external stakeholder pressure into performance. These studies give the environmental pillar a reasonably complete causal story: external pressure prompts HR practices, practices shape climate and culture, and climate shapes behaviour.

Not every practice matters equally. In Yong *et al*.'s (2020) [61] sample of Malaysian manufacturers, only green recruitment and green training were associated with sustainability, while green job analysis, selection, appraisal and rewards were not. In Vietnamese hotels, training and employee involvement drove environmental performance, whereas performance management had little direct effect (Pham, Vo-Thanh, *et al*., 2020) [44], although it mattered in interaction with involvement (Pham, Tučková, & Jabbour, 2019) [43]. The qualitative case of Haddock-Millar *et al*. (2016) [25] adds that even within one multinational, green HRM is enacted unevenly across subsidiaries. Taken together, these results caution against treating green HRM as a single index. Bundles and configurations, rather than averages of practices, are the more plausible unit of analysis.

5.2 The social pillar: responsible HRM, well-being and labour efficiency

Social pillar research proceeds along two tracks that barely intersect. The first is micro-level SR-HRM research. Shen and Zhu (2011) [52] show that different components of SR-HRM relate to different forms of organisational commitment. Newman *et al*. (2016) [38] and Shen and Benson (2016) [51] find that SR-HRM raises citizenship and helping behaviour through organisational identification, and Shen and Benson's multilevel design shows that the effect works at the organisational level and not only through individual perceptions. Zhao, Chen and Liu (2023) [62] extend the outcome set to moral voice, a behaviour with obvious governance relevance because it is how problems reach management before they reach regulators. Hong *et al*. (2024) [27], studying 380 Vietnamese employees, find that perceived CSR mediates the effect of green HRM on green behavioural intention, again blurring the E/S boundary.

The second track is firm-level finance research. Edmans (2011) [13] shows that a portfolio of the "100 Best Companies to Work For" in the United States earned abnormal returns over 1984 to 2009, which suggests that markets undervalue employee satisfaction even when it is publicly certified. Edmans *et al*. (2024) [14] extend the analysis to 30 countries and find that the satisfaction-returns link grows with labour market flexibility, a result with direct implications for emerging economies where labour regulation and enforcement differ from Anglo-American settings. Flammer and Luo (2017) [21] exploit changes in US unemployment insurance and show that firms increase employee-related CSR when the risk of shirking and absenteeism rises, treating CSR as an employee governance tool.

A newer line of work reverses the direction of causality. Using Chinese listed firms, Li *et al*. (2023) [33] and Su and Xue (2024) [55] find that stronger ESG performance

improves labour investment efficiency, reducing both over-hiring and under-hiring, partly because ESG eases financial constraints and improves the information environment. These findings matter for interpretation: if good ESG firms hire and invest in people more efficiently, cross-sectional correlations between HR practices and ESG scores cannot be read as the effect of HRM on ESG.

Ehnert *et al*. (2016) [16] supply the reporting side of the social pillar. In the sustainability reports of the world's largest companies, HR-related disclosure was not lower than environmental disclosure, but it focused on the internal workforce and said far less about workers in the supply chain. That imbalance is precisely what the European ESRS split between S1 (own workforce) and S2 (workers in the value chain) was designed to correct.

5.3 The governance pillar: incentives, boards and oversight of people

Governance is the thinnest part of the evidence. Flammer *et al*. (2019) [20] document the spread of CSR criteria in executive compensation and show that adoption raises long-term orientation, firm value, social and environmental initiatives and green innovation while lowering emissions. Compensation design is an HR tool, even if it is usually decided by a board committee rather than the HR department, and this study is the clearest evidence that HR architecture at the top of the firm can shift ESG outcomes. Byron and Post's (2016) [8] meta-analysis of 87 samples finds a positive relationship between women's board representation and corporate social performance that is stronger where national gender parity is higher, and Mun and Jung (2018) [37] link CSR engagement in Japanese firms to more women in senior positions.

What is missing is research on how boards oversee human capital as such: whether remuneration or nomination committees review workforce metrics, whether the chief HR officer reports to the board on ESG matters, and whether such oversight changes either HR practice or disclosure quality. Stahl *et al*. (2020) [54] argue that HR has failed to claim a strategic role in corporate sustainability; the governance pillar is where that failure is most visible in the evidence base.

5.4 HRM in ESG disclosure and ratings

The regulatory environment for workforce disclosure changed more between 2020 and 2026 than in the previous two decades. In the United States, the 2020 amendment to Regulation S-K required listed firms to describe their human capital resources, but in principles-based terms; early analyses found disclosures that were longer but mostly boilerplate and poor in quantitative metrics (Batish *et al*., 2021) [5]. In the European Union, ESRS S1 set out 17 disclosure requirements on the own workforce under the CSRD (European Commission, 2023) [17]. The Omnibus simplification that followed postponed application for later waves and, in 2026, produced revised standards with more than 60% fewer mandatory datapoints (European Commission, 2025, 2026) [18, 19], but own-workforce disclosure remains part of the core set. ISO published a second edition of ISO 30414 in August 2025, recasting it from guidelines into requirements and recommendations for human capital reporting and aligning it with sustainability frameworks (International Organization for Standardization [ISO], 2025) [29]. In Vietnam, Circular 96/2020/TT-BTC requires listed companies to report labour policies, employee numbers, average income, training and occupational safety in the annual report (Ministry of Finance, 2020) [35].

The literature has not caught up with these changes. None of the coded studies uses ESRS-based or ISO 30414-based workforce metrics, and the archival studies rely on proprietary ESG scores whose social sub-scores are among the least comparable across raters (Berg *et al*., 2022; Christensen *et al*., 2022) [6, 10]. For HRM research, this creates both a problem and an opportunity. The problem is that results based on ratings may reflect rater methodology more than HR practice. The opportunity is that standardised, audited workforce disclosures will soon allow researchers to observe HR inputs and outcomes for large samples of firms, something survey-based green HRM research has never been able to do.

6. An integrative framework

Fig 2 brings the findings together. The framework reads from left to right but contains a feedback loop.

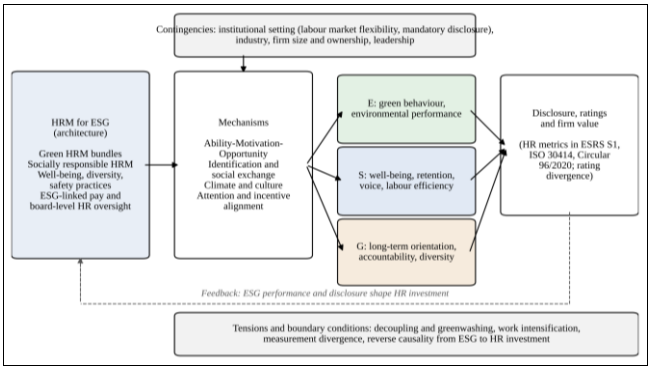


Fig 2: Integrative framework of HRM for ESG

HRM architecture comprises green HR bundles, socially responsible HR policies, well-being, diversity and safety practices, and governance-level HR instruments such as ESG-linked pay and board oversight of human capital. These operate through four families of mechanisms that the coded studies repeatedly invoke. AMO mechanisms build employees' capacity and willingness to act. Identification and social exchange mechanisms make employees reciprocate responsible treatment with discretionary effort. Climate and culture mechanisms tell employees which behaviours are valued. Attention and incentive alignment mechanisms direct managerial effort toward less salient stakeholders.

The mechanisms differ in their reach across pillars. AMO and climate mechanisms are well established for environmental outcomes, identification and exchange for social outcomes, and incentive alignment for governance outcomes, but cross-pillar combinations are rarely tested. Pillar outcomes then feed into disclosure, ratings and value, where measurement divergence and the market's slowness to price intangibles weaken the signal (Edmans, 2011; Berg *et al*., 2022) [13, 6].

Two sets of conditions frame the model. Contingencies at the top include the institutional setting, such as labour market flexibility (Edmans *et al*., 2024) [24] and mandatory disclosure, together with industry, firm size, ownership and leadership. Tensions at the bottom include decoupling, where firms report ESG commitments without changing

core HR practice (Stahl *et al*., 2020) [54], the risk of work intensification when environmental duties are added to existing jobs, and the reverse path from ESG performance to HR investment documented by Li *et al*. (2023) [33] and Su and Xue (2024) [55].

The framework yields three propositions that can guide empirical work:

- P1. The effect of HRM on any ESG pillar depends on the configuration of practices rather than on their sum; bundles that combine capability-building with involvement are more effective than incentive-based practices alone.
- P2. HR practices aimed at one pillar produce spillovers to others; socially responsible HRM raises environmental citizenship, and green HRM raises perceived CSR.
- P3. The value relevance of HRM-based ESG performance increases with the standardisation of workforce disclosure and with labour market flexibility.

7. Research agenda (RQ4)

Table 4 condenses the agenda into six themes. Each theme is tied to a gap identified in the synthesis and comes with theories and designs suited to it.

Table 4: Research agenda for HRM and ESG

Theme	Illustrative research questions	Promising theories	Suggested designs and data
1. Beyond the E pillar	How do HR systems shape social outcomes such as pay equity, safety and voice, and governance outcomes such as whistle-blowing?	Stakeholder theory; social exchange; paradox	Multi-level surveys matched with audited workforce data
2. Configurations and bundles	Which combinations of green and socially responsible practices produce which ESG profiles?	Configurational theory; AMO	fsQCA; latent profile analysis
3. Causality and dynamics	Does HRM change ESG outcomes, or do ESG-strong firms invest more in people?	Resource-based view; signalling	Panel data with fixed effects, difference-in-differences around disclosure mandates, longitudinal surveys
4. HR governance at the top	Does board oversight of human capital, or ESG-linked pay below the CEO, change HR practice and disclosure?	Agency theory; attention-based view	Hand-collected proxy and annual report data; event studies
5. Measuring HR in ESG	How consistent are workforce metrics across ESRS S1, ISO 30414, GRI and national rules, and how do raters treat them?	Institutional theory; legitimacy	Content and textual analysis; comparison of rater sub-scores
6. Emerging-economy contexts	How do state ownership, informal employment and basic disclosure regimes shape the HRM-ESG link in countries such as Vietnam?	Institutional voids; neo-institutional theory	Matched survey-archival designs on listed firms under Circular 96/2020

7.1 Theme 1: Moving beyond the environmental pillar

The evidence on social outcomes is dominated by employee attitudes, and governance outcomes are almost absent. Future studies should examine outcomes that ESG frameworks actually measure: gender pay gaps, occupational injury rates, collective bargaining coverage, grievance resolution and protection of whistle-blowers. Zhao, Chen and Liu's (2023) [62] work on moral voice points the way, because voice links employee behaviour to the integrity of governance.

7.2 Theme 2: Configurations rather than single practices

The uneven effects of individual green practices (Yong *et al*., 2020; Pham, Vo-Thanh, *et al*., 2020) [61, 44] suggest that research should model HR systems as configurations. Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis and latent profile analysis can identify which combinations are sufficient for strong performance on one or several pillars, and whether trade-offs exist, for example between cost-driven environmental targets and job quality.

7.3 Theme 3: Causality, timing and reverse effects

Most coded studies cannot separate the effect of HRM on ESG from the effect of ESG on HRM. Two recent findings make this urgent: ESG performance improves labour investment efficiency (Li *et al*., 2023; Su & Xue, 2024) [33, 55], and firms adjust employee-related CSR in response to labour market shocks (Flammer & Luo, 2017) [21]. Panel designs with firm fixed effects, difference-in-differences around new disclosure mandates such as the phased application of the CSRD, and longitudinal surveys with lagged outcomes would help. Survey-based studies should at minimum use multi-source designs to reduce common method bias.

7.4 Theme 4: HR governance at the top of the firm

Beyond the executive pay evidence of Flammer *et al*. (2019) [20], little is known about how boards govern human capital. Researchers could code board committee charters, remuneration reports and CHRO reporting lines, and test whether ESG-linked incentives for middle managers, not only for the CEO, change HR practice. Banking, where supervisory remuneration rules already tie variable pay to risk, offers a natural setting for testing the extension to ESG targets.

7.5 Theme 5: Measuring HRM in ESG

The divergence of ESG ratings (Berg *et al*., 2022) [6] and the tendency of disclosure to amplify disagreement over outcomes (Christensen *et al*., 2022) [10] call for research that unpacks the social sub-scores. Comparative content analysis of workforce disclosures under ESRS S1, ISO 30414:2025, GRI 401 to 405 and national rules would show which metrics are comparable, which are boilerplate, and how raters translate them into scores. Such work would also give green and sustainable HRM researchers validated firm-level indicators to complement survey scales such as Tang *et al*.'s (2018) [56].

7.6 Theme 6: Emerging economies and the Vietnamese case

Emerging economies supply most of the green HRM evidence but few of its theories. Edmans *et al*.'s (2024) [24] finding that the value of employee satisfaction depends on

labour market flexibility implies that results from the United States cannot be transferred to settings with different labour institutions. Vietnam offers a useful laboratory: listed firms must disclose basic labour data under Circular 96/2020/TT-BTC, many large firms are state-owned, export-oriented manufacturers face buyers' ESG audits, and a growing domestic literature already exists (Phan & Nguyen, 2024) [45]. Matching the annual report disclosures of listed firms with employee surveys would allow the first study to observe HR practice, workforce outcomes and ESG disclosure for the same firms.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary

This review set out to establish what is known about HRM as a driver of ESG performance. The answer is uneven. There is credible, if mostly correlational, evidence that green HR practices raise employees' environmental behaviour and firms' environmental performance, working through climate, culture and capability. There is good evidence that socially responsible HRM strengthens identification and discretionary effort, and finance research shows that employee welfare carries value that markets are slow to recognise. Evidence on governance is limited to executive pay and board diversity. The new generation of workforce reporting rules has not yet entered the empirical literature at all.

8.2 Theoretical implications

The review suggests that HRM-ESG research should abandon the habit of mapping one HR stream to one pillar. Green HRM has social effects, SR-HRM has environmental effects, and governance-level HR instruments shape both. A pillar-based framework with explicit cross-pillar spillovers and a feedback loop from ESG to HR investment offers a more realistic basis for theory building. It also invites HRM scholars to engage with accounting and finance theories of disclosure and valuation, which have so far developed in isolation from HRM research.

8.3 Practical implications

For HR managers, the synthesis indicates that training and employee involvement deliver more environmental impact than appraisal and reward used in isolation, and that ESG targets embedded in pay work best when they are substantive rather than symbolic. For boards, it signals that human capital oversight is becoming a disclosure obligation under ESRS S1 and ISO 30414 and should be treated as a governance matter. For regulators in emerging economies, including Vietnam, it suggests that moving from narrative labour disclosures to a small set of standardised, comparable workforce metrics would serve investors, employees and researchers alike.

8.4 Limitations

The review has limitations. Its coded set is purposive rather than exhaustive: it draws on English-language journal articles identified through two databases and citation chaining, so the counts reported in Section 4 describe the reviewed set rather than the whole field, and relevant work in other languages, including Vietnamese-language journals, may be missed. Coding by primary pillar simplifies studies that address several outcomes. The coded set includes finance and accounting studies identified through citation chaining that do not use HRM vocabulary; different search terms could change their number. Finally, the field is moving quickly, especially in disclosure regulation, and some conclusions in Section 5.4 may need updating as the revised ESRS enter into application.

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