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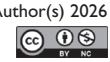

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# Human resources as a *green* business partner? The who, what, when and where HR (or business partners) enact the green UN SDGs

**Douglas W.S. Renwick**
Nottingham Trent University, U.K.

## Abstract

In this *Perspective* article, I look to go beyond the arguably legitimate pessimism of Brewster and Brookes critique of human resources (HR) not enacting the UN SDGs in HRM. Using publicly available secondary data, I cautiously offer a different and arguably more optimistic perspective. Drawing on Legge's *Deviant Innovator* (power relations) and Ulrich's *HR Champions* (HR roles) classic texts, I argue that HR might perhaps occupy a new role, in becoming a green business partner. In doing so, I theoretically advocate adopting systems thinking and research co-creation between HRM academics (rigour) and HR practitioners (relevance). I reflect on the context which sets the regulatory framework for workplace HR (in)action regarding the UN SDGs, and discuss what such context means for everyday HRM greening. Lastly, I offer future research ideas and implications for HRM theory and practice before concluding.

## Keywords

Green, human, resources, national perspectives, SDGs, sustainable HRM.

## Introduction

This article offers a different, contrasting perspective to that of Brewster and Brookes (2024: 183; in this journal), whose essential case concerns 'why HRM specialists will *not* reach the [United Nations] sustainable development goals' (my emphasis), a stance

**Corresponding author:**
Douglas W.S. Renwick, Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, 50 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham NG14FQ, UK.
Emails: douglas.renwick@ntu.ac.uk; doug.renwick@ntu.ac.uk

which in my opinion has firm reasoning, logic and evidence. This is because they state that altering organisational priorities towards achieving 'these new approaches to HRM' places a 'considerable burden' on HR specialists, especially as HR's power 'is generally assumed to be minimal' (Brewster and Brookes, 2024: 188), meaning HR adopting the UN SDGs may become 'vague and ambiguous. . .and another HRM dead end' (Brewster and Brookes, 2024: 194). However, other scholars differ, for example, Aust et al. (2024; also in this journal), in arguing that the 'practical relevance of SDGs for business and HRM is increasingly strong' (p. 96). Essentially, Brewster and Brookes (2024) build on three main arguments: (1) HRM specialists lack the necessary power to override profit motives (which I specifically contest), (2) the academic concepts of 'Sustainable HRM' are too vague to be actionable (which I agree with), and (3) the UN SDGs themselves are politically compromised and culturally specific targets (which I am neutral or ambiguous on). The focus of this article is thus on the green dimension of HRM, and the relevance of it to achieving the UN SDGs.

Herein, I argue for more nuance, as while I agree with both Brewster and Brookes (2024; above) and the practical links which Aust et al. (2024) advance, I also see other limitations arising. My reasoning is that many subtleties emerge from adopting sustainable HRM concepts, including exactly how the UN SDGs will be achieved in practice. For example, we need to know how and in what ways such concepts like the UN SDGs have clear benefits and constraints, and how to answer the who, what, when and where questions regarding the implementation of such goals in HRM too. My perspective is that by adopting a green business partner role, HR may be able to initially, and possibly answer some of these questions.

A green HR business partner[1] means HR adopting a senior strategic role advancing an external focus on planetary ecological management, and moving towards a circular/regenerative economy within all the internal people-focussed aspects of organisations. Such aspects which encompas the greening of all HR strategies, policies, processes and procedures at workplaces today. As such, my *Perspective* raises questions of power and politics in environmental/green HR roles outside a capitalist-business context, and draws on the usefulness of using political theory when examining wider government regulations surrounding the newly emerging green jobs economy globally (see Boromisa et al., 2016; Renwick, 2024, 2025).

## HR and organisational greening

An explosion in academic productivity has seen green HRM research studies now numbering around 3.5 million publications globally (Memon et al., 2022), and despite concerns over copycat, derivative publishing and plagiarism practices at the lower end of this spectrum, for example, in some open access/MDPI journals (cf. Katsaros and George, 2026; Muller-Camen et al., 2025), green HRM research thus retains much academic interest internationally. Practical examples from this workplace green HRM literature range from: graduates' ecological knowledge in recruitment and selection processes; green aspects of safety and health issues in staff inductions and onboarding; employee energy use and recycling in performance appraisals; and rewarding staff for better waste management (Jackson et al., 2011).

Yet while academically popular, green HRM has not historically had equivalent levels of enthusiasm among the HRM practitioner community (Houghton, 2019), a point which chimes with the Brewster and Brookes (2024) article. Here, the original 2009 US Academy of Management (AoM) conference theme of 'Green Management Matters' has had less influence among US-based HR practitioners since then (SE Jackson, 2018, personal communication), and the British HR profession *'HR goes green'* campaign collapsed after the 2007/8 financial crash (Renwick, 2020, 2024). Moreover, few detailed green HRM case studies have emerged in the *Harvard Business Review (HBR)* style in top HRM journals to inspire HR managers and practitioners. Part of the reasoning for these developments is that HR practitioners tell me they now use a different language to signal a change of approach – towards adopting 'organizational environmental sustainability' – because doing so shows a new direction of travel, and appears more inclusive in involving all stakeholders in organisational greening.

Thus, while changes in HRM wordplay from concepts such as sustainable HRM (Mariappanadar, 2003), to common good HRM (Aust et al., 2020), and now onto the UN SDGs (Brewster and Brookes, 2024), might appeal to HRM academics, they may appear less useful to HR practitioners and HR managers. This is because they appear to lack substance on what HR managers and functions should be doing to build more sustainable organisations and the new green jobs economy. As such, I agree with Brewster and Brookes that the sustainable HRM literature (widely defined above) may lack conceptual clarity. Indeed, it clearly contrasts with the precision of the green HRM literature, which specifically focuses on workplace practices (Jackson et al., 2011), and the pioneering voluntary workplace green behaviour literature (which examines social norms, and individual, group and team workplace extra-role eco-behaviours, see Jiang et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2017). Thus, drawing on Legge's (1978) *deviant innovator* (power relations), related works such as Guest and King (2004) which counter Brewster and Brookes' concern that HR only has the one-stakeholder option, and Ulrich's (1996) *HR roles*, I cautiously advocate using a new term of *HR as a green partner*, and now offer five reasons for doing so.

First, environmental enthusiasts might return to what the original pioneers of academic green HRM focussed on, namely green workplace HR practices that HR managers can use daily to green their HR functions and departments. Second, we are in a new, emerging global green economy, as evidenced in green jobs plans in the USA, EU and UK being adopted, enacted and funded (Renwick, 2024). Such green job plans are essentially a political template for national governments to regulate their economies and stimulate new public and private investment to build the renewable energy sector within national borders. One example of this is the new UK Labour government policy of 'government as architect', which aims to help create new, British-based green jobs (see Renwick, 2025). Enacting such green job plans requires a huge shift, to move the basis of all jobs to become greener ones over time, including jobs lost in the polluter industries transferring to the renewables sector, under a 'just transition' (Trappmann and Cutter, 2021). Third, green HRM workplace practices, whether introduced individually or in bundles (Renwick et al., 2013), are not enough on their own to achieve workplace environmental change, as they are too piecemeal. Instead, a new green jobs era requires businesses themselves to champion such new job creation among their own internal

organisational staff. Fourth, foresighted industry commentators and practitioners tell me that their focus is on building up the sustainability focus of their managers and employees. This is because doing so stimulates: (i) a focus on real-life changes organisational staff can make to develop their own personal skills and knowledge in environmental management, in a tailored, purposeful way; and (ii) managers and employees gaining useful insight on how to get a green job, by highlighting green skills gaps that they need to fill as individuals. Fifth, organisational greening may be a route out of HR's historically subordinate hierarchical organisational position, for example, being a Cinderella function under a personnel management era (Legge, 1995), and HR's lack of impact producing organisational irrelevance for HR, in HR becoming 'big hat, no cattle' (Skinner, 1981). Here, HR stressing a new strategic, green and societal role (thinking outside organisations, i.e. protecting the ecology), may see HR being able to move beyond HRM and focussing on improving organisational performance (thinking inside organisations, i.e. maintaining firm profits). Such an approach essentially embeds research discussions on strategic HRM and the future of it which highlight that dealing with HR issues strategically involves both an 'outside in' and an 'inside out' perspective(s), and creating value for both internal and external stakeholders by aligning the internal and external context of organisations (see Ulrich, 2024; Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015).

## *The wider context*

Some relevant, wider contextual developments are occurring in green jobs and sustainability skills and knowledge in the advanced, developed North Western countries. For example, in the US, green regulations on businesses increase demand for high-level analytical and technical skills, and staff retraining in the US solar industry (Valero et al., 2021: 4), 'could include coal operation engineers working as manufacturing technicians and explosives employees, plus coal ordinance handlers and blasters using their safety knowledge and skills to become solar technicians' (Pearce, 2016: 3). Skills transfers may also occur, as UK initiatives reveal that plumbers and pipefitters in the gas sector could move to occupy jobs in green hydrogen and oil rig operatives could work in offshore wind roles (Atkins, 2021: 2). Additionally, the European Union (EU) are focussing on green skills in education (European Commission, 2022: 1), and some employees are moving from brown (polluter industry) jobs and into green jobs (renewable sector ones), which have 'a high content of analytical tasks' (Broome et al., 2022: 9). Indeed, a London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) report reveals that UK investment policies and incentives could help build staff green knowledge, known in the relevant literature as 'sustainability skill sets' (Renwick, 2024; Unsworth, 2020: 2). Such skill sets are the new, emerging ones that workers need to gain a green job in the green economies of the future (Renwick, 2025). Enacting them essentially offsets challenges including how to 'assess the demand and skills needed and where [national-level] green jobs are to be created' (May, 2021: 2). The developments above mean that national governments worldwide may need to detail programmes 'stimulating the development of green skills' within particular industries, alongside national careers strategies and employment placement schemes (Faragher, 2021: 1–2). Moreover, the UK experience shows that clear training passport systems are required to recognise other qualifications, and enable

employees to transfer from carbon-heavy industries to renewable energy-based jobs (Atkins, 2021: 2, 7, 9), and that more apprenticeships, vocational training and enhanced planning and skills are both needed here too (Malnick, 2023: 6). Tackling and delivering on the global developments above appear urgently and clearly needed if HR are ever to build an HR as a green business partner role. I now discuss what the points above mean for relevant HRM theory and practice.

## Discussion

### *Implications for collaborative research*

A key theoretical implication arising concerns if and when sustainable HRM academics will go beyond their current theoretical frameworks (e.g. Ability-Motivation-Opportunity, AMO, leader-member exchange, social exchange and temporal/time theory), and adopt more holistic theoretical lenses to better predict, explain and help solve the issues and concerns surfaced herein. For example, they could adopt Reinecke's (2025: 1–5) new ideas on adopting 'transnational governance, collective oversight and multi-stakeholder collaboration'. Here, the idea of co-creation by Bex draws heavily on the broader vision of collaborative/action research, and applies it to HRM implementation. Further, sustainable HRM research (which to me includes common good HRM and the circular/regenerative economy, alongside sustainable HRM itself), could draw on Reinecke (2025) to focus on building stronger, better, and more inclusive eco-communities. Doing so requires relational systems thinking, learning from our elders and enacting ideas of communitarianism, to safeguard Planet Earth, humans, animals, plants, species and organisations together, in a new 'paradigm of the regenerative economy' (Quintelier et al., 2025). Here, a key related point of the wider green HRM literature was, and still is, to challenge the profit motive emphasis within organisations, and move staff discourse 'outside' organisations, to instead primarily focus on protecting society and the wider ecology from the climate crisis (Renwick, 2020).

As such, the points above indicate that the Brewster and Brookes (2024) article seems, perhaps unintentionally, to bypass the fact that the UN SDGs are a largely *political* means of achieving pro-green/sustainability workplace outcomes. Here, many national governments have enacted 'net zero' legislation, which either directly or indirectly helps achieve the particular UN SDGs of decent work, sustainable cities and climate action (Renwick, 2024). Further, there seems to be much global political momentum behind enacting the UN SDGs detailed above (Breuer et al., 2023), and also HR activity, especially in green HRM research studies (Memon et al., 2022), to achieve such UN SDGs, alongside building new, green jobs economies and decent work.

Ergo, the political context both within and surrounding the governance, introduction and operation of the UN SDGs in workplaces, by HRM specialists, practitioners and managers, seems important to recognise, which means that I part company with the Brewster and Brookes (2024) case that HRM specialists lack the power needed to override organisational profit motives. I do so, because the new UK national labour government green jobs plan provides a regulatory framework for green economic growth – 'green growth' – and means that going green and making profits may not always seem

as dichotomous or opposite goals, but rather, arguably more complimentary ones (see Seabrook, 2024: 3–4). Here, national, country context explains much HR behaviour, as it always has done (Farndale et al., 2023), and political context is not just an unclear means of enacting the UN SDGs by HR experts (which is part of the Brewster and Brookes critique). Instead, such contenxt is also a clear statement of intent among national governments towards building a better world of work (cf. Ashwin et al., 2026), and a roadmap ahead for governments, workplaces, and HR specialists to follow. As one example, a puzzling aspect of the Brewster and Brookes (2024) case relates to green HRM research and practice. This is because many prior, positive examples of organisations enacting workplace-based green HRM initiatives exist globally (see Renwick, 2020; Renwick et al., 2013, 2016), which relate to indirectly enacting the UN SDGs of decent work (#8), sustainable cities and communities (#11) and climate action (#13). Indeed, I mentioned 70 such different, useful organisational examples of workplace-based green HRM practices in my last internal 2025 University lecture. Thus, if such UN SDGs are not achievable in HRM, as Brewster and Brookes (2024) seem to argue, then why have so many organisations enacted so many green HRM initiatives both globally and historically? Clearly, there is a disconnect between the Brewster and Brookes (2024) perspective and some current, workable and live organisational practices in green HRM.

## *Implications for academic-practitioner collaborations*

To help move us further forward in HR potentially enacting a green business partner role, research findings point to a need for academic-practitioner co-creation in sustainability studies overall (Sharma et al., 2022), alongside doing so in HRM, to produce a 'continuous process' of HRM academics collaborating with organisations 'to innovate in the design and use of HR practices to better satisfy multiple stakeholder needs' (Hewett and Shantz, 2021: 1). Here, scholars might usefully learn from Chore and Brandl's use of scenario planning, as a new methodology promoting qualitative research at the HRM-UN SDG nexus, via employing specific scenario workshop questions (see Chore and Brandl, 2025: 409, 414). Indeed, practical steps to achieve such co-creation have been mapped out in Reinecke's (2025) recent University of Oxford lecture. In it, she argues for researchers to move:

> From retrospective analysis to prospective imagination, using stewardship as a governing principle of the future commons, with a need for transnational governance at the local level (which happened in Bangladesh after the *Rana Plaza* factory collapse[2]). . . to engage in group action via collective oversight and multi-stakeholder collaboration and managing across time using institutional imagination – where social actors take many risks, experiment, and use prototypes to build an equitable economy. . . moving from projection to imagined desirable futures, using theorising as future-making, as a collective endeavour, including thought experiments – on what if, and not what is. . . adopting prefigurate organizing and putting nature on the Board of Directors, and experimenting via interdisciplinary work, to widen our models and scope within business and management studies. . . using speculative rigour – such as imagination and discipline – with the criteria of usefulness, not truth. . . and work at the Oxford Institute 2050 to produce models for a regenerative economy – which provides a laboratory for imagination with rigour (Reinecke, 2025: 1–5).

Further, as per Sharma et al. (2022) and Bansal (2023), such academic-practitioner co-creation could occur at the *very start* of us scoping our research studies, for example, when we form research questions, to help us design feasible research projects that advance both academic rigour and practical relevance regarding, and relating to, enacting the UN SDGs.

Moreover, precise ways that actors *outside organisations* can achieve sustainable HRM *within* organisations include governments setting regulations, academics and industry learning together, sector 'best' practices, and wisdom from HR, OB, psychology and management professional bodies to undertake better sustainability research and practice. These processes of co-creation are ones that some leading Canadian companies use (Bansal, 2023), which stress 'impact by design' rather than 'impact by chance' and more widely 'reimagine research as an intentional bridge between insight and application across disciplines and contexts' (Laker, 2025: 1). I now detail some ideas for future research before concluding.

## Future research ideas

Without being prescriptive or exclusive, scholars could undertake new sustainable HRM research studies in three main areas. First, they could focus around the Brewster and Brookes (2024) critique, to understand more on how, and in what ways, HR can, or cannot, enact the UN SDGs (as single goals, or bundles of such goals enacted together). These research studies could include relevant origins, boundary conditions, limitations and contextual and cultural influences of, and among, such implementation practices. Second, to investigate how HR roles could become greener overall, including the nature of HR greening, new methods and scope to enhance it, and the meaning it has for all relevant HR stakeholders arising. This research stream might meaningfully use research tools and techniques such as staff focus groups to showcase employee views on whether HR have a green(er) role, and detailed ethnographies of HR manager viewpoints and opinions on it, plus surveys highlighting opportunities and constraints if and when HR attempt to become a green business partner. Third, to generate original, empirical global research data sets on the new green jobs economy, and HR's place within it, including the role of employment relations architecture and national government policies to achieve this outcome. Such research works may include conducting literature reviews of green job developments at many levels (cf. Aguinis, 2025), such as individual, group, organisation, country and regional levels, plus using World Bank and OECD data to build pictures of global trends in green job data, for example, national level, sector and industry-wide similarities and differences.

## Conclusions

The Brewster and Brookes (2024) article arguably appears to base their scepticism of HR enacting the UN SDGs on a historical view of HRM as a 'powerless' function. However, their perspective overlooks the massive paradigm shifts driven by regulation (hard law) and market pressure (investors/talent), which are currently empowering HRM with genuine influence. Adopting an alternative, more optimistic perspective

does not deny such existing challenge (nor new and existing critiques of green HRM), but rather highlights current trends and the pace of change, while emphasising the new institutional frameworks.

Of course, HR ever embracing the concept of becoming a green business partner over the long term comes with several constraints. First, biases towards pure pro-green/sustainability advocacy herein may mean that other worldviews are less detailed. Second, focussing on politics herein to help explain HR behaviour may obscure insights from economics, sociology, psychology and anthropology that also do the same. Third, using secondary data as I have done may only reveal partial viewpoints, and does not include all other relevant works. Fourth, any enthusiasm for academic-practitioner co-creation may obscure many practical difficulties and obstacles involved in achieving it (which my critics may well now detail and illustrate). Fifth, the political headwinds against environmentalism, especially under leaders such as Donald Trump (US) and Kemi Badenoch (UK), and political populism, national chauvinism and anti-intellectualism, may slow progress towards re-configured, greener HR roles. Sixth, as my focus in this article has been on some countries where the regulatory pressure is low, and where green industries are actively undermined by the government (such as the US under Donald Trump), we clearly need more research data from other countries to build a fuller picture. Seventh, obvious contradictions arise from HR history in organisations seeing 'humans as resources' to use, exploit and profit from (Legge, 1995; Storey, 1992), versus the global goal of tackling climate change – which requires overall resource preservation, curation and conservation, including global human resources.

Thus, in contrast to academics who argue that 'making practical impact is *not* a core academic expectation' (Baruch and Budhwar, 2025, my emphasis), scholars debating the merits of showcasing academic-practitioner relevance (Bansal et al., 2025), and others advancing 'turning ideas into outcomes that matter' (Laker, 2025: 2), I argue for *both* academic rigour and practitioner relevance in sustainable HRM studies. In doing so, while I agree with Brewster and Brookes (2024) that sustainable HRM studies (broadly defined) may lack conceptual clarity, I also defend such scholarly works too. This is due to subtle, interlocking developments occurring in adopting sustainable HRM, the circular/regenerative economy, common good HRM and UN SDG approaches, as they seem to inter-relate, and depend on each other to some extent (see Renwick, 2020). Indeed, as these four conceptual developments in sustainable HRM are, on average, only 20 years old (or less in some cases), conceptual clarity is perhaps less expected from them, and among them. This is because they need to mature, through more clarification, empirical testing, measurement-building and theory development. Here, it seems easy to say, as Brewster and Brookes (2024) appear to argue, that many sustainable HRM studies lack clarity, but much harder to offer something new to replace them. For example, where are the really new conceptual (and/or theoretical) alternatives that Brewster and Brookes (2024) advocate in sustainable HRM studies? I cannot clearly see them. To counter such criticisms from Brewster and Brookes (2024) in sustainable HRM, HR may potentially achieve more environmental and societal relevance in acting as a green business partner, at least among HR practitioner groups and utilize this new focus to help organisational staff build up their own sustainability skill sets. Now arguably seems the time for HR

adopt a new green(er) role, and use it to help organisations and society better tackle the grand ecological challenge of this century.

Ultimately, if progressive researchers, teachers and educators in sustainable HRM do not act positively and optimistically in helping HR enacting green(er) HR roles, then who will champion this important work, and who will do it exactly? My *Persective* is that academic sustainable HRM enthusiasts need to practice what they preach, rally their forces, and get to work, before new, more pessimistic voices in HRM go un-challenged and dominate HRM academic discourse and practice generally in sustainable HRM studies (broadly defined), and in enacting the UN SDGs in HRM in particular.

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## ORCID iD

Douglas W.S. Renwick https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6819-5746

## Notes

1. The term HR business partner is a common one that British HR practitioners use, as a self-description of their own role, which derives from Ulrich's (1996) original strategic business partner role.
2. See Schuessler et al. (2023) for details and context.

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