

**Mediating Role of Meaningful Work between Sustainable Human Resource Management and Employee Engagement: A study on banking sector of Pakistan**

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**Abstract**

Organizations today take sustainability stance and its related elements as the key objective in order to become the agent of sustainable development. Research studies on organizational sustainability is increasing with the passage of time. The objective of the current study was not just to discuss the significance of sustainable HRM in banking industry but the objectives were to find out the role of sustainable HRM in creating employee engagement. In relation with studying the association between sustainable HRM and employee engagement, this study also proposed and studied meaningful work as a mediator between the positive relationship of sustainable HRM and employee engagement. This study used quantitative research design. Structured questionnaire was used for the collection of data from 250 employees working in the commercial banks of Islamabad and Rawalpindi through convenient sampling technique. SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version-28 is used for descriptive analysis while proposed hypotheses were tested through PLS-SEM (Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling) version 3.2. The study results showed positive correlation between sustainable HRM and employee engagement. Similarly, it has been found that meaningful work partially mediates the relationship of sustainable HRM with employee engagement. Practical implications of the result were also discussed.

**Keywords:** Sustainable HRM, Employee Engagement, Meaningful Work, Banking sector, Pakistan

**INTRODUCTION**

Organizations today take sustainability stance and its related elements as the key objective in order to become the agent of sustainable development. Research studies on organizational sustainability is increasing with the passage of time. The focus of this research article is on sustainable HRM, taking into consideration the fact that like other resources skilled and qualified people in the organizations are becoming scarce, so writers (Stankeviciute & Savaneviciene, 2018; Vihari & Rao, 2018) have emphasized organizations to shift from prevailing traditional practices of human resources, that utilize people skills instead of developing them towards sustainable HRM system. They have advised integrating the elements of sustainability into human resource management system for the lasting well-being and retention of the organization's people. Keeping in view the practical benefits of sustainability Notions like green and socially responsible HRM (Ehnert, 2009; Guerciet al., 2016; Jabbour & Santos, 2008; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016) are widely discussed in the literature.

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Like any other sector, sustainability of financial sector is taken as crucial in developing economies due to their position in the economic enrichment of the country and its role in supporting the sustainability projects both on local as well as at global level (Macini et al., 2020; UNFIP, 2016). Like the banking sector in the world, the development in new banking processes, introduction of new products, advancements in technologies, and mergers have affected Pakistani banking industry also, that has created challenges for skill building and employee retention (Balagam & Fariduddin, 2008). Although, banking sector in Pakistan is doing well in generating profitability and expending on CSR activities such as health, education and development of the infrastructure (Ehsan et al., 2019) but less attention can be observed regarding the internal stakeholders that are the employees (Szegegi et al., 2020). Providing less consideration to the organization people is forming various issues like stress, burnout and that is ultimately increasing employee turnover problems resulting to problem of employee engagement (Asrar-ul-Haq & Kuchinke, 2016; Hassan et al., 2012; Siddiqui & Sahar, 2019). Less engaged employees and greater turnover issues generally create problems for organizational sustainability as the sustainability of human resources is disturbed (Ehnert, 2009). Scholars in the past (Jerónimo et al., 2020; Aust et al., 2020) have stressed on encompassing sustainability elements into HRM practices as according to them it plays role for long-term supply of human resource, their development, and employee wellbeing.

Financial institutions specifically banks are trying to adopt sustainable practices through incorporating social, environment and governance measures into their key organizational strategy (Prakash & Kumar, 2018). Skilled and qualified people are critical for the banks as it provides services through the employees. Though, different sustainability guidelines (for example, UNEP FI, ISO 14001-26000, Global Reporting Initiative, United Nation Global Compact principles) have been developed in the past decades to enhance the social and environmental performance of the organizations. However, literature lacks empirical studies on the construct. There is need for more employee-oriented sustainable HRM research (Richard, 2020). This study is first of its kind especially in Pakistani banking sector organizations, where corporate sustainability is considered as part of organizational strategy but the emphasis is more on the external stakeholders than the employees (Szegegi, Khan & Lentner, 2020; Zulfiqar et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was not just to discuss the significance of sustainable HRM in banking industry but the objectives were to find out the role of sustainable HRM in creating employee engagement. In relation with studying the association between sustainable HRM and employee engagement, this study also proposed and studied some intervening factors like meaningful work that in association with sustainable HRM is considered responsible to increases employee engagement.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Sustainable HRM**

Sustainability is an organizational activity that takes into consideration the social, economic and environmental materials in the organization while dealing with stakeholders (Ayuso & Navarrete-Báez, 2018; Bernal-Conesa et al., 2017). Exploration of Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) started during late nineties in the countries like Germany, Australia and Switzerland (Piwowar-Sulej, 2020). SHRM was explained by authors (e.g., Mariappanadar, 2003; Thom & Zaug, 2004; Gollan, 2005; Ehnert, 2009) as to establish and implement socially responsible, long-term oriented and economically effective human resource practices of the organization designed by focusing on the benefit for the employer, employee and the community as a whole. Studies on green HRM and socially responsible HRM (e.g., Guerciet al., 2016; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016) are trending in the literature. Researchers (Stankeviciute & Savaneviciene, 2018) consider SHRM as a survival strategy for organizations

as it is responsible for constant supply of future employees (Zink, 2014), employee wellbeing (Guest, 2017) and engagement of the employees (Aust, Matthews & Muller-Camen, 2020).

Scholars have divided the SHRM consequences into three categories; (i) organizational outcomes like, improved organizational performance (Arman, 2017), increase in innovation and customer satisfaction (Wikhamn, 2019), social responsibility and profitability (Mack & Genari, 2018), value creation at organizational, employee and societal level (Karman, 2020), organizational sustainability (Bombiak & Marciniuk-Kluska, 2019); (ii) individual outcomes like, organizational commitment and citizenship behavior (Kim et al., 2019) of the employee, job satisfaction (Strenitzerová & Achimský, 2019), reduced turnover intentions (Guerci et al., 2018; Vihari & Rao, 2018), employability (De Prins et al., 2013), employee engagement, motivation and productivity (Cohen, Taylor & Muller-Camen, 2012); (iii) societal outcomes like CSR (Martínez-García, 2018), transparency, ethics, or honesty in business management (Barrena-Martínez, López-Fernández, & Romero-Fernández, 2017). Globalization and technological breakthroughs have made talent management a challenge for organizations due to increase in the demand of skilled employees (Backes-Gellner, 2004). The main problem observed in banking sector of Pakistan is that the emphases is more on the sustainability of the external stakeholders rather than the organization people (Zulfiqar et al., 2019), this is a hinderance towards applying the sustainability stance in a true sense. This problem is considered as dangerous for the sustainability of the organization as well as for the sustainability of human resources (Ehnert, 2014).

This study will examine employee engagement as consequences of SHRM by considering the characteristics of SHRM as having long-term orientation that ensures attraction and retention of skillful employees today, as well as, it guarantees access to healthy and productive group of people overtime (Ehnert, 2009). Sustainable HRM is the tool that is responsible to keep the employee engaged with the organization by having an emphasis on employee well-being along with long-lasting socially and economically proficient recruitment, development and retainment policies (Santana & Lopez-Cabrales, 2019; Jia et al., 2019).

### **Employee Engagement**

Kahn (1990), the founding father of employee engagement concept, defined employee engagement as a psychological state where the individuals dedicate their physical, mental and emotional energies into their work. Later scholars (e.g., Schaufeli et al., 2017) elaborated Kahn (1990) employee engagement notion as an obtaining positive state of mind in work that is indicated by vigor, dedication and absorption. Employee engagement description given by Kahn (1990) is discussed in different studies (like, Akingbola & Berg, 2019). It can be seen that the research work on employee engagement phenomenon has expanded throughout the world, ranging from review articles to empirical researches reflecting different cultures and industries (Bailey et al., 2017; Stanley, Matthews & Davidson, 2017). Currently, researchers (like, Alola & Alafeshat, 2020; Lambert, Elgayeva & Akinlade, 2019) have considered engagement as a management practice and studied with different human resource management practices.

The Job demand-resource model (JDR) has been referred in most of the employee engagement studies till date in order to study the different antecedents and consequences (for example, Buttigieg et al., 2019). This model assumes that the employee work consists of two facets i.e., job demands and job resources that can have a positive or negative impact on employee engagement and overall on job performance. Accordingly, the more job resources with less job demand will lead to more employee engagement (Saks & Gruman, 2014). While studying the antecedents of employee engagement researchers (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008; May et al., 2005) have found that organizational/ job resources like, management style & process, organizational norms, work environment, supervisor, senior management team,

colleagues, participation, feedback, rewards, job security, job enrichment, work role fit and personal factors like, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and optimism as important aspects in predicting engagement (Roof, 2015; Gan & Gan's, 2014; Simbula et al., 2011).

### **Relationship of sustainable HRM and employee engagement**

Writers (like, Zhou, Luo, & Tang, 2018) argued that nowadays keeping employees engaged in jobs are a great challenge for organizations. It has become essential for organizations to shift from materialistic to intellectual capital where employee engagement is viewed as one of the vehicles to achieve this shift (Bhuvanaiah & Raya 2014). Moreover, Panneerselvam and Raya (2017) argued that employees feel those human resource management practices aggressive which entail unrealistic demands while providing lesser resources. So according to job demand resource model of employee engagement, such organization will have low employee engagement. Hence, past researchers (like., Jerónimo, De Lacerda & Henriques, 2020) declared that through incorporating social responsibility and green HRM, SHRM is highlighting the fact that employees are a long-term investment, rather than a financial cost. Sustainable employability is a term given by researchers (Van Dam et al., 2017) to those sustainable HRM policies with the purpose of enhancing employee skills, knowledge, motivation and health so that they can be willing to remain with the organization now and in future. Thom and Zaugg (2004) declared that the focus of sustainable HR policy is on realizing proper, clear procedures for recruitment and retention, training and development, performance management, motivation, and employee engagement. Social Exchange Theory (SET) gives a strong theoretical background in elucidating employee engagement by explaining that the relationship between employee and employer is based on reciprocity, that, if employees get something of significance they will make a sense of responsibility to return the employer. Saks (2006) argued that one way for individuals to repay their organization is through their level of engagement. Employee engagement has been observed as a hot topic after environmental management, socially responsible human resources and turnover, in sustainable HRM research (Santana & Lopez-Cabrales, 2019).

**Hypothesis 1 (H<sub>1</sub>):** Sustainable HRM is positively related to employee engagement.

### **Meaningful Work**

Meaningful work is stated as a work that is significant and worthwhile to an individual (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Meaningful work has positive correlation with various individual work-related outcomes, such as work engagement (Johnson & Jiang, 2016), job satisfaction (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012), and, career development (Duffy & Dik, 2013) that is the reason organizations consider meaningful work as an important way to engage and retain the employees (Deloitte, 2017). From the past literature it can be seen that most of the meaningful work theoretical models have focused on personal or individual elements of meaningful work ignored the societal and organizational factors (e.g., Duffy et al., 2016). Consequently, other frameworks that have integrated organizational features (e.g., Bailey et al., 2017) have not taken the social, cultural, and the economic factors within which the individuals and organizations exist.

### **Relationship between sustainable HRM and meaningful work**

Researchers (like, Guerci et al., 2018) have studied positive association between sustainable HRM and meaningful work due to the fact that sustainable HRM is committed to make the work more satisfactory and meaningful for the employees as it emphasizes more on employee well-being and employability than just on financial returns. Psychological theories like, social identity theory, social exchange theory, and the job demands-resources framework (Cohen-Meitar et al., 2009; Rafferty & Restubog, 2011; Steger et al., 2013) meaningful work was taken

as predictor or as a mediating variable within a larger model of workplace outcomes. Organizations that act in socially responsible manner and contribute to social and environmental programs increase feeling of meaningfulness at work to employees who remain attached to the organization (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Afsar, Al-Ghazali & Umrani, 2019).

**Hypothesis 2 (H<sub>2</sub>):** Sustainable HRM has a positive relationship with meaningful work.

### **Relationship between meaningful work and employee engagement**

Studies on work meaningfulness and employee engagement can be found in the study of Kahn (1990). The author has elaborated words like psychological meaningfulness, safety and availability to explain employee engagement. Kahn (1990) defined meaningfulness as a positive feeling that one gets as a return on putting in physical, cognitive or emotional energy into the work. Various current studies (like, Fletcher et al., 2018; Karam et al., 2017; Glavas, 2016) did in-depth research and found that meaningful work is associated with employee engagement. The authors found that though financial returns play role in attracting and retaining people but they have less significant role in engaging people in their work. Referring to engagement theory, getting meaning and purpose in a work makes one remain engaged to the job and organization (Hirschi, 2012).

**Hypothesis 3 (H<sub>3</sub>):** Meaningful work has a positive relationship with employee engagement.

### **Mediating role of meaningful work between sustainable HRM and employee engagement**

Writers (for example, Chiang & Birtch, 2007) stated that organizational outcomes of SHRM cannot be the result of direct and single factor only as there must be various elements that need to be explored while studying such consequences. Similarly, the main focus of past research on SHRM was on direct associations between sustainable HRM practices and its outcomes (Chow et al., 2006), whereas less attention can be seen in finding the processes that leads to that outcomes (Butts et al., 2009). Thus, this study examined the mediating role of meaningful work between sustainable HRM and employee engagement. The current study suggests that that meaning of work mediates the positive relationship between sustainable HRM and employee engagement. The proposed mediation mechanism is based on previous researches that have linked sustainable HRM with meaningful work (e.g., Guerci et al., 2018) and the studies that show a significant link between meaningful work and employee engagement (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Fletcher et al., 2018; Michaelson et al., 2014). Employees feel worthy and conceitedly attach themselves to organizations that not only work for obtaining profits but sincerely strive for the wellbeing of their employees and society as a whole. The factors that are found to be essential for employee engagement were organizational values, better CSR programs (Santana, Morales-Sánchez & Pasamar, 2020), socially responsible human resource practices that gives meanings to one's work etc.

**Hypothesis 4 (H<sub>4</sub>):** Meaningful work mediates the relationship between sustainable HRM and employee engagement.

Below are the study hypotheses that have been derived from the above literature review:

**H1: Sustainable HRM has a positive relationship with Employee Engagement.**

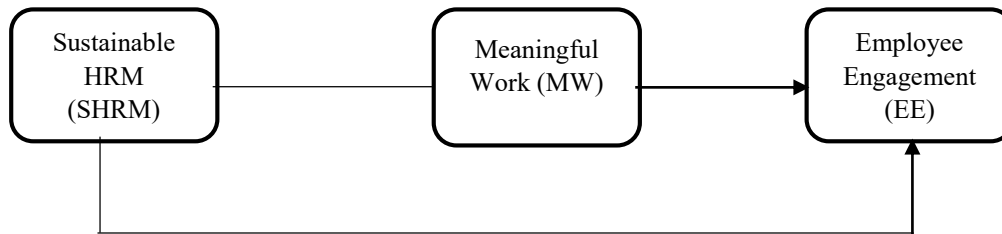
**H2: Sustainable HRM has a positive relationship with Meaningful Work.**

**H3: Meaningful Work has a positive relationship with Employee Engagement.**

**H4: Meaningful Work mediates the relationship between Sustainable HRM and Employee Engagement.**

## Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework of the study proposed based on the above literature review and listed hypotheses.



*Note: SHRM= IV, MW= Mediator and EE= DV.*

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Non-probability convenience sampling technique was used to collect data from 250 bank employees at the managerial level of the listed commercial banks in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Out of which 240 responses were useable with a response rate of 80% were collected.

### Questionnaires

The questionnaires were measured through 5-point Likert scale with 1 been Strongly Agree to 5 Strongly Disagree. Questionnaire has an introduction part with demographical information and measuring items.

**Sustainable HRM.** Questionnaire was developed by the authors following Churchill (1979) scale development procedure.

**Organizational Culture.** 10-items scale by Van den Berg and Wilderom (2004) wa used to measure organizational culture.

**Employee Engagement.** A 9-item scale by Schaufeli et al. (2006) was used.

**Meaningful work.** 6-item scale of meaningful work by May et al's (2004) was used.

### Procedure

The conceptualized model of the study was analyzed through PLS-SEM. Model was analyzed in two steps: first step examined the measurement model by estimating reliability, convergent and discriminant validity. Cronbach alpha tells the reliability of the variables. Secondly, structural model was explored to check the research hypotheses and test the significance of path coefficients. All was done through using Samrt-PLS 2.0 software.

## RESULTS

The sample of the study consisted of 240 respondents out of which 135 were males and remaining 105 were females showing the majority of employees as males in the banking sector. 105 (44%) participants belong to the age bracket of 36 to 50 years. Majority of the participants (i.e. 120 participants) had a work experience of 6 to 10 years.

### Step I: Analysis of Measurement Model

Measurement model was analyzed through calculating these tests: indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminant validity.

### ***Indicator Reliability***

Indicator reliability is examined by calculating the outer loadings value in smartPLS. Outer loadings values of 0.4 or above is acceptable and thus values below 0.40 are deleted (Hair, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2011). Table 1 below shows the accepted indicators of SHRM, EE and MW constructs.

**Table 1. Indicator Loadings**

Constructs/ Indicators	Outer Loadings
<b>Sustainable HRM (SHRM)</b>	
SRS1	0.92
SRS2	0.90
SPM1	0.87
SPM2	0.89
STD1	0.90
STD2	0.91
SRC1	0.94
SRC2	0.92
SER1	0.93
SER2	0.92
SHS1	0.91
SHS2	0.94
<b>Meaningful Work (MW)</b>	
MW1	0.9
MW2	0.9
MW3	0.9
MW4	0.8
MW5	0.9
MW6	0.7
<b>Employee Engagement (EE)</b>	
EE1	0.64
EE2	0.67
EE3	0.89
EE4	0.90
EE5	0.91
EE6	0.93
EE7	0.92
EE8	0.93
EE9	0.92

### ***Internal Consistency (IC)***

IC was calculated through two criteria i.e. Cronbach alpha and composite reliability. Table. 2 below shows the results of both criteria of the study model that has all the values higher that cut off point 0.60.

### ***Convergent Validity***

Correlation between the observed variables is checked through convergent validity. AVE is used. Table 2 below shows that the AVE of all variables is above 0.50 which reveals every variable is explaining more than 50 per cent of variance of its observed variables.

**Table 2. Internal Consistency**

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
SHRM	0.97	0.89	0.79
MW	0.79	0.90	0.73
EE	0.86	0.87	0.75

Note: n= 240. SHRM= sustainable HRM, MW= meaningful work, EE= employee engagement.

### Fornell Larcker Criterion

Table 3 below shows the outcome of Fornell Larcker Criterion. The values in bold letters are the square-root of AVE, which is higher than the correlation among the constructs, thus, discriminant validity of the constructs is confirmed. Some of recent studies (e.g. Hamid et al, 2017; Hyland et al., 2019) have also used the criterion and validated the results.

**Table 3.** *Fornell-larcker Criterion*

	EE	MW	SHRM
EE	<b>0.865</b>		
MW	0.765	<b>0.898</b>	
SHRM	0.705	0.659	<b>0.86</b>

### Hetro-Trait Mono-Trait (HTMT)

Table 4 below illustrates the HTMT values calculated to determine discriminant validity criteria. The results show that all the values are below the threshold value of 0.9. Hence, HTMT results also reconfirmed discriminant validity standards.

**Table 4.** *Hetero-Trait Mono-Trait Criterion*

	EE	MW
EE	<b>0.814</b>	
MW	0.766	
SHRM	0.428	<b>0.689</b>

n= 240

## Step II: Analysis of Structure Model

### Direct Hypotheses

Table 5 below shows the results of the structural path model coefficients.

**Table 5.** *Direct Hypotheses Path Coefficients*

Path	β-value	t-values	p-values	CI Biased Corrected		Decision (p<0.05)	Hypotheses	
				5.00%	95%		No.	Status
SHRM -> EE	0.41	9.65	0.00	0.330	0.465	Significant	H <sub>1</sub>	Supported
SHRM -> MW	0.66	15.76	0.00	0.503	0.624	Significant	H <sub>2</sub>	Supported
MW -> EE	0.59	15.29	0.00	0.441	0.545	Significant	H <sub>3</sub>	Supported

n= 240, p<0.05, t>1.65

The results in Table 5 above show the significance of path coefficients between the constructs. Thus, these results support the study hypothesis 1, 2 and 3 of the study.

### Mediation Analysis

Table 6 below shows the results of the mediation analysis after adding the mediator.



**Table 6. Mediation Results**

Hypothesis	Relationship	Total Effect	t-value	Sig	Direct Effect	Sig	Relationship	Indirect Effect	t-value	Sig	Decision
H.	SHRM-EE	0.71	15.96	0.00	0.41	0.00	SHRM-MW-EE	0.30	8.264	0.00	supported

Note: Significance ( $p < 0.05$ );  $n = 240$ ;  $t > 1.96$

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The main purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship of sustainable HRM with employee engagement with the mediating role of meaningful work between the variables in the banking sector of Pakistan. The results of the study have shown that all the hypotheses proposed in the study are accepted and thus it shows that sustainable HRM lead to employee engagement by creating the work meaningful for the employee. Hence it has proved the notion that sustainability of skilled and qualified people is critical for the banking sector as highlighted by the past researchers (like, Macini et al., 2020), as the banks operate through their employees who are supposed to provide services to customers every now and then.

This study will help in creating organization-wide sustainable HRM strategies that will guide organizations in retaining the qualified and motivated employee. Moreover, this study emphasized on the employee engagement and thus directed the organizations to concentrate more on employees than just on external stakeholders because spending on CSR activities by ignoring employees becomes just a marketing strategy (Zulfiqar et al., 2019) that can jeopardize organizational and sustainability of human resources (Ehnert, 2009). Banks are required to understand that employees are part of the organization and their well-being is linked with the reputation and external prestige of organization. Promoting sustainable HRM policies is in a fact protecting both the internal and external image of organization as well as at the same time increasing the commitment, engagement and satisfaction of the employees.

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