
THE SUSTAINABLE WORKPLACE: USING THE SOSUCOMPASS TO DRIVE SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Traditional sustainability models in business have disproportionately focused on economic and environmental metrics, often leaving social sustainability on the periphery of corporate strategy. However, global disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated that long-term organisational resilience relies heavily on the internal social fabric and relational strength of the workplace. This paper attempts to link urban planning literature and organisational management by operationalising the SoSuCompass (Social Sustainability Compass)—a diagnostic framework originally designed to evaluate urban human settlements—within Human Resource Management (HRM). The article explains the four interdependent pillars of the SoSuCompass: Equity, Well-being, Participation, and Social Capital. It details how modern HR functions can transition from standard personnel administration to strategic "workplace architects" by embedding these principles directly into job design, governance, and organisational networks. Additionally, a data-driven monitoring framework utilising advanced metrics is proposed to track social outcomes. The paper demonstrates that the pillars form a self-reinforcing, synergistic system where actions like democratizing governance directly boost internal trust and employee well-being. Ultimately, the study concludes that by treating the workplace as a complex social ecosystem, HRM serves as the primary driver of organisational social sustainability, transforming the firm from a transactional space into a highly resilient community optimised for long-term viability.

Keywords: Social Sustainability, SoSuCompass, Human Resource Management, Organisational Resilience, Workplace Governance, Social Capital.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has traditionally been conceptualised through the "triple bottom line" of environmental protection, economic growth, and social equity (Elkington, 1997). Historically, however, the discourse has disproportionately focused on the environmental and economic pillars—prioritising resource efficiency, carbon reduction, and financial profitability—leaving the social dimension in a secondary, often reactive role (Vallance et al., 2011). Similarly, the concept of social capital—defined as the networks of relationships, trust, and shared norms that enable collective action—has deep roots in sociology and community development (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). It has traditionally been used to explain how neighbourhoods thrive, how civic engagement functions, and how communities recover from external shocks by leveraging internal bonds, serving as a critical indicator of community health and resilience (Adger, 2003).

While urban planning literature has established that social sustainability—defined by equity, community cohesion, and quality of life—is essential for the long-term viability of human settlements

(Dempsey et al., 2011), this framework remains strikingly underutilised within organisational setup. Organisations, much like modern urban centres, function as complex social ecosystems where the well-being and interaction of individuals dictate systemic health. Recent global crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, have underscored this misalignment, demonstrating that firms possessing higher levels of internal social capital and robustness were better equipped to anticipate disruptions and maintain operational continuity (Rai et al., 2021). These crisis-driven insights suggest that structural resilience is fundamentally rooted in the everyday governance of human relationships, rather than in peripheral corporate policies. It is thus opined that by bridging the gap between urban social sustainability and human resource management (HRM), firms can transition from reactive corporate social responsibility (CSR) to a proactive model of organisational resilience, positioning HRM not merely as an administrative function, but as the primary architect of an enduring and socially sustainable workplace. To design and navigate this complex social architecture, management requires an actionable diagnostic tool derived directly from urban sustainability principles. This study proposes the SoSuCompass as the operational matrix needed to guide HRM in structuring this new resilient paradigm.

2. OPERATIONALISING THE SOSUCOMPASS WITHIN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The SoSuCompass—derived from "Social Sustainability Compass"—is an analytical framework designed to map, evaluate, and guide the human and relational dimensions of a community to ensure its long-term viability. The SoSuCompass (Nilsson et al., 2024) is a diagnostic framework originally developed to assess and navigate social sustainability within urban environments. By translating macro-level urban planning needs into organizational metrics, the model provides a structured map to measure how communities—and by extension, corporate workforces—sustain their social fabric over time. The framework is built upon four foundational, interdependent pillars: Equity, Well-being, Participation, and Social Capital.

To effectively transform the modern workplace into a resilient socio-technical ecosystem, this compass provides a robust theoretical framework that enables Human Resource Management (HRM) to transcend the limitations of traditional personnel administration. By anchoring organisational policy in these four core domains, HR functions can systematically cultivate an environment that harmonises high-performance expectations with human-centric sustainability.

Pillar 1: Equity - Distributive Justice and Structural Access

Within the SoSuCompass framework, equity is conceptualised not merely as legislative compliance but as the proactive dismantling of systemic barriers to the distribution of resources. It necessitates a fundamental deconstruction of systemic barriers that facilitate uneven resource distribution (Bramley & Power, 2009). HRM operationalises this through Resource Calibration and Structural Fairness. Resource Calibration ensures parity of access to non-tangible assets. Critical organisational assets—such as professional development, mentorship, and the infrastructure for hybrid work—are independent of an employee's tenure or geographic proximity to headquarters. **Structural Fairness means moving beyond subjective evaluation toward objective distributive justice.** This involves the institutionalisation of intersectional pay-gap audits and transparent promotion taxonomies that ensure rewards are insulated from unconscious bias and strictly aligned with role contribution and meritocratic outcomes. (Adams, 1965). Ultimately, this institutional shift transforms equity or fairness from being just a checkbox rule for the company and becomes a powerful driver of employee trust and workplace integrity.

In broader social sustainability theory, equity is recognized as a primary condition for societal survival; without a fair distribution of resources, social cohesion fractures and community systems fail (Dempsey et al., 2011). When human resource management applies this principle internally through resource calibration and structural fairness, it directly reinforces the organization's social sustainability. By eliminating systemic bias and ensuring fair access to opportunities, the firm prevents the internal polarization and alienation that typically lead to high turnover and labor friction. Ultimately, an equitable workplace ensures that human capital is sustained rather than depleted, creating a stable, loyal, and socially sustainable workforce that can reliably support the organization's long-term objectives.

Pillar 2: Well-being – A Holistic Quality of Life and Job Design

Under the SoSuCompass framework, well-being is reframed from a discretionary fringe benefit into a core operational prerequisite for organisational survival. This shift requires human resource management to move away from reactive wellness initiatives—like standalone mental health days or gym discounts—and transition toward proactive, sustainable job design. HRM operationalises this structural shift through two primary dimensions: Psychological Infrastructure and Bio-Cognitive Sustainability. Psychological Infrastructure involves the active cultivation of psychological safety as a foundational workplace resource. By fostering an environment where interpersonal risk-taking is protected and employees can speak up without fear of reprisal, HRM drives innovation and prevents the cognitive exhaustion associated with self-silencing (Edmondson, 1999). The Bio-Cognitive Sustainability principle recognises that human capital is subject to entropy, meaning that mental bandwidth and physical health are finite resources that naturally deplete over time. Rather than treating labour as an asset primed for indefinite extraction, sustainable management practices integrate structured recovery periods and strict workload boundaries. This intentional design prevents systemic burnout and depletion of the workforce, ensuring long-term employee viability.

In urban planning and social sustainability theory, a community cannot endure if its inhabitants are subjected to environments that actively degrade their health and quality of life (Dempsey et al., 2011). When applied internally to an organisation, the well-being pillar ensures that the firm functions as a healthy, regenerative habitat rather than an exhaustive one. By protecting psychological safety and enforcing workload boundaries, HRM prevents the human erosion that manifests as chronic stress and high turnover. Ultimately, anchoring well-being in the daily job design preserves the vital human energy of the workforce, creating a stable and resilient organisational community capable of sustaining performance through long-term operations and unexpected crises.

Pillar 3: Participation and Influence - The Democratisation of Governance

A sustainable organization, as defined by the SoSuCompass, views employees as active internal stakeholders with legitimate claims to governance, rather than passive units of labor. This paradigm shift requires the formal democratization of workplace governance, moving beyond traditional top-down command structures. Crucially, the framework distinguishes between superficial "consultation"—where employees merely voice opinions that leadership can easily ignore—and genuine "influence," which grants workers co-decision authority over their operational realities. When employees lack structural influence, organizational rigidity increases, leaving the firm vulnerable to operational blind spots. HRM operationalises this pillar by embedding employee voice into the corporate structure through two essential mechanisms: Inclusive Policy Formulation and Operational Agency. Participation refers to the structural mechanisms that allow employees to voice their insights and be physically involved in organisational discourse. It is the baseline requirement of an open workplace. HRM operationalises this through *Inclusive Policy Formulation*. This mechanism requires the establishment of robust, institutionalised "bottom-up" channels that allow employees to exercise

meaningful influence over the policies governing their daily work lives. Rather than relying on superficial annual surveys, HRM implements structures such as democratically elected representative councils, cross-functional task forces, and digitised feedback loops. These channels ensure that frontline insights directly inform executive decision-making, allowing policies regarding hybrid work rules, safety, and workplace culture to be co-created by the people they affect most.

Influence measures the actual structural power devolved to those employees. Participation without influence creates what urban planning literature calls "tokenism"—an empty ritual where people are allowed to speak, but possess no real authority to change outcomes (Arnstein, 1969). Influence occurs when HRM establishes an *Operational Agency*. While policy formulation deals with high-level rules, operational agency focuses on day-to-day autonomy. This means actively empowering staff to participate in decisions regarding their immediate team structures, project assignments, and daily workflows. When HR systems grant employees the latitude to shape their immediate environments, it fosters a deep sense of "psychological ownership" (Pierce et al., 2001). This psychological state shifts the employee mindset from merely executing tasks to actively safeguarding the collective health and success of the enterprise, which significantly boosts long-term organizational commitment and adaptive capacity during crises.

In urban social sustainability discourse, civic participation and political influence are deemed absolute necessities for the survival of any community; a city that excludes its citizens from governance inevitably faces civil friction, institutional distrust, and systemic decay (Dempsey et al., 2011). When HRM translates this principle into the corporate arena, it directly establishes organizational social sustainability. By democratizing governance and elevating employee voice, the firm minimizes the institutional alienation that drives labor disputes, disengagement, and quiet quitting. Ultimately, a participative workplace culture ensures that the organization functions as a transparent, collaborative, and self-correcting ecosystem, building the collective resilience required to navigate complex socio-economic disruptions.

Pillar 4: Social Capital - Architecting Trust and Cohesion

Social capital serves as the critical relational glue that maintains organizational integrity and functional stability, particularly during periods of volatility. Rather than viewing a corporation merely as a collection of isolated contracts, the SoSuCompass framework treats the enterprise as a dense social network where shared values and mutual obligations drive performance. When unexpected disruptions occur, formal hierarchies often struggle to adapt; it is the underlying social fabric of the company that dictates its true resilience. HRM acts as the principal architect of this relational infrastructure through two primary mechanisms: Relational Maintenance and Institutional Trust Building. Relational Maintenance and Network Density dimension involves moving beyond rigid reporting lines to actively facilitate the growth of informal networks and "weak ties" across departmental silos (Granovetter, 1973). In traditional structures, information often becomes trapped within specific functional divisions, leading to operational friction and slow response times. By deliberately designing collaborative physical or digital spaces, cross-functional mentorship programs, and informal community forums, HRM increases organizational network density. These lateral, informal connections are essential for rapid knowledge transfer, spontaneous cross-pollination of ideas, and collective problem-solving when traditional top-down communication channels fail during a crisis.

While relational maintenance builds horizontal connections across teams, trust-building secures the vertical alignment between leadership and the workforce. HRM strengthens this structural trust by institutionalising radical transparency and maintaining consistent, predictable channels of vertical communication. By actively reducing information asymmetry—where management holds critical data

away from employees—HRM minimises organisational ambiguity and anxiety. This open information exchange fosters a shared cognitive framework where employees understand the true "why" behind executive decisions, aligning individual efforts with the broader organisational mission and ensuring deep stability in high-pressure environments.

In urban planning and social sustainability literature, a neighbourhood’s long-term viability and capacity to recover from external shocks depend heavily on its internal civic trust and the density of its community bonds (Adger, 2003; Putnam, 2000). A city lacking social cohesion disintegrates into isolated, self-interested factions when faced with adversity. When HRM applies this principle to the internal architecture of a firm, it directly builds organisational social sustainability. By cultivating both horizontal networks and vertical trust, HRM ensures that the workforce behaves as a cohesive, mutually supportive community rather than a transactional group of individuals. Ultimately, robust social capital prevents the cultural erosion and internal polarisation that lead to systemic collapse, leaving the firm with a deep well of collective goodwill to draw upon during industry transitions and crises.

3. THE INTERDEPENDENCY OF THE SOSUCOMPASS PILLARS

The four pillars of the SoSuCompass do not operate in isolation; rather, they form a synergistic system where the strength of one dimension serves as a catalyst for the others. When HRM prioritizes Participation and Influence, it effectively democratizes organizational governance, which research suggests is a primary driver of Social Capital and collective trust (Misztal, 2013). This heightened sense of agency and inclusion acts as a significant buffer against occupational stress, thereby enhancing Well-being by providing employees with a sense of control over their work environment (Karasek, 1979). Furthermore, robust Social Capital—characterized by high-density internal networks and open communication—creates the transparency necessary to identify and rectify systemic disparities in Equity. As noted by Eizenberg and Jabareen (2017), the integration of these social components is what allows a community—or in this case, an organization—to maintain its functions and resilience in the face of external shocks. By operationalizing this interconnectedness, HRM transforms the firm from a transactional entity into a resilient, cohesive community where equity and participation drive a sustainable cycle of organizational health.

4. MEASUREMENT AND KPIS: A DATA-DRIVEN APPROACH TO SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

To operationalise the SoSuCompass, HRM must transition from qualitative aspirations to quantifiable impact. Establishing a robust Measurement and Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework is essential for holding the organisation accountable to its social sustainability goals and for validating the organisational return on investment for human-centric management.

Table 1: The SoSuCompass Monitoring Framework

Pillar	Strategic KPI	Operational Metric
Equity	Pay Parity Index	Intersectional pay-gap ratios and diversity representation at all levels.
Well-being	Holistic Health Index	Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) and voluntary turnover rates.
Participation	Influence Velocity	Number of bottom-up initiatives successfully implemented.
Social Capital	Network Connectivity Score	Organizational Network Analysis (ONA) density and internal trust survey scores.

The Equity metrics must move beyond passive demographic snapshots. The Pay Parity Index should be utilised to track wage differences after adjusting for role, experience, and performance, providing a clear view of systemic bias. Complementing this, Diversity Metrics should focus on representation across the entire leadership pipeline, identifying bottlenecks where equitable advancement stalls.

To assess the sustainability of the workforce, HR must measure the health of the "organizational body." The Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) serves as a vital signal for overall morale and institutional loyalty. When paired with Voluntary Turnover Rates, these KPIs provide a diagnostic view of potential burnout or cultural misalignment, allowing leadership to intervene before systemic attrition occurs.

The impact of a participative culture is best reflected in "Influence Velocity"—the speed and success rate of ideas moving from the frontline to policy implementation. Tracking the Number of Bottom-Up Initiatives Implemented provides a concrete measure of employee agency. A high implementation rate demonstrates that leadership is not merely soliciting feedback but is actively integrating the collective intelligence of the workforce.

Measuring social capital requires evaluating both the formal and informal structure of the firm. Organizational Network Analysis (ONA) is a critical tool here, enabling HR to map "network density"—identifying if the organization is siloed or well-connected. By correlating these maps with Internal Trust Survey data, firms can identify "trust deserts" and proactively facilitate cross-departmental connections to strengthen organizational resilience.

5. CONCLUSION:

The integration of the SoSuCompass into the HRM mandate signals a fundamental shift in the definition of corporate success. As firms face an increasingly volatile global landscape, the "soft" components of management—equity, well-being, participation, and social capital—emerge as the "hard" infrastructure required for long-term viability (Rai et al., 2021).

Human Resource Management is uniquely positioned to act as the primary driver of this transition. By evolving from an administrative function into an Organisational Social Architect, HR professionals assume responsibility for the "urban planning" of the workplace. When HRM successfully operationalises these pillars, the organisation ceases to be a mere site of economic production; it evolves into a resilient, cohesive, and sustainable community. Ultimately, a firm's commitment to social sustainability is not a secondary objective but the very bedrock upon which its future capacity for innovation, resilience, and performance is built.

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