

# **Employee sustainability and work organisations: A critical review, map and research agenda**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of the article is to review and map out the literature on employee sustainability. A further purpose of the article is to generate a new and updated research agenda on employee sustainability. The article is based on a review of literature on employee sustainability from the past 20 years. The article also draws upon contemporary literature from industrial relations and labour process traditions that implicitly refers to employee sustainability themes. Key contributions made by the article include a novel and expanded map, which paves the way for further conceptual unification of employee sustainability, and, a detailed and thorough account of research priorities related to employee sustainability. The main wider implication of the article is in how the findings allow scholars and practitioners to think differently and more widely about employee sustainability in relation to work organisations.

## **Introduction**

It is nearly two decades since concepts and ideas of “sustainability” became a feature of academic research and professional practice related to work and employment. What is meant by sustainability in the widest context of work organisations is organisations recognising the role they play in ecological, social and economic problems and, in turn, how work organisations are showing a growing readiness to demonstrate a commitment to making their organisations more sustainable (Ehnert et al., 2016). Such trends are most notable in the widest sense with the recent rise of literature on sustainable (e.g. Ehnert, 2009; Jabbour and Santos, 2009), green (e.g. Dumont et al., 2016; Guerci et al., 2016) and socially responsible forms of HRM (e.g. Shen, 2011; Voegtlin and Greenwood, 2016).

Sustainability in work organisations evidently covers a vast range of issues. However, the focus of this article is one facet of the social aspect of exploring sustainability in work organisations, that of what work organisations do to make sure their employees are managed in a manner that makes them able and willing to remain in employment and in the future (Van Vuuren and Van Dam, 2013) – referred from now onwards in the article as employee sustainability. In other words, work organisations

operating long-term plans to foster rather than exploit their workforces (Docherty et al., 2009). Such an approach is likely to be of mutual benefit for employers and employees. Such forms of employee sustainability are also likely to bring wider social benefits including, for example, lower unemployment, lower demand for out-of-work benefits, and, lower demand for healthcare related to work-related illness.

How employee sustainability can be achieved through work organisations appears to take on broadly one of three approaches. Firstly, organisations have been known to invest in the built environment by creating “intelligent buildings” (Clements-Croome, 2005), which are said to boost productivity and employee “happiness” through more efficient interaction between the employee and the built environment (Smith and Pitt, 2009). Secondly, organisations can foster employee sustainability through HRM. For instance, making workplaces more inclusive through work-life balance initiatives for all employees (Hirsch, 2009), flexible working practices (Atkinson and Sandiford, 2016), regulating working time to promote gender equality (Zbyszewska, 2013) and occupational health services (Koolhaas et al., 2011). A third area of debate on employee sustainability concerns the growing interest in the concept of “sustainable working lives” and “sustainable employment”, or the creation of work environments aimed at regenerating its human resources (Eriksson et al., 2017). In this instance, employee sustainability relates to organisations, social partners and governments working together at delivering benefits for both organisations and wider society (e.g. Van de Ven et al., 2014). For instance, better preparing new entrants and re-entrants for contemporary employment markets (e.g. Akkermans et al., 2015), keeping older employees active in employment markets (Atkinson and Sandiford, 2016) and catering for the general and unique needs of disabled and chronically ill employees (e.g. William et al., 2010).

However, the literature on employee sustainability is problematic in a range of ways. First, the literature appears largely driven by an employer and neo-liberal government agendas, typically underpinned by employer-dominated HRM, organisational behaviour and occupational health discourses, and denoted by strong rhetoric of concern for employee health and well-being. The reality is often quite different with employee sustainability practices turning out to be hidden means to reinforce corporate profitability and corporate survival (Wilkinson et al., 2001). Linked to the first point, despite a growing body of literature, the current literature on employee sustainability is remiss in terms of engaging with a wider and more critical body of literature related to work organisations, such as associated with industrial relations and labour process traditions. Currently, such literature may not make explicit reference to employee sustainability, but without engaging with such literature, a comprehensive and critical appraisal of employee sustainability is simply not possible.

To address such oversights and current limitations, the main aim of the article is to provide a more comprehensive review of employee sustainability, with further express aims of mapping out such literature and generating a refreshed and more inclusive research agenda. A total of 64 specialised accounts of employee sustainability, including journal papers (41), books and edited book chapters (18) and reports (5) were consulted when putting together the majority of this current research. The critical literature review and subsequent mapping and research agenda exercise will allow a range of parties to the employment relationship to better understand/conceptualise a specific aspect of employee sustainability. The critical literature review will also act to encourage and direct further research on a key and growing area of academic research and professional practice related to work and employment.

To achieve such an aim, the article is to be set out as follows. First, employee sustainability will be further defined, with a focus on how employees fit with plans to make work organisations more sustainable. Second, key findings from the extant literature on sustainability in work organisations will be discussed. A further aim of this section is to identify key themes to inform a search and subsequent discussion of competing literature on employee sustainability. The third section represents a discussion of the key features of studies on employee sustainability. In this section the discussion focusses on the type of paper, geographical locality, type of employee group, methodological and theoretical approaches associated with the literature on employee sustainability. Fourth, is a discussion of a competing body of literature that does not explicitly refer to employee sustainability, yet is at least broadly consistent with key themes on employee sustainability discussed earlier in the article. The article ends with a discussion mapping out the literature and a conclusion highlighting key gaps in the literature on employee sustainability.

### **Defining employee sustainability in relation to work organisations**

The literature to emerge from studies based on built environment and ergonomics traditions largely defines employee sustainability in relation to increased employee productivity. In such situations, for example, sustainability is defined in terms of employees accessing a more natural environment and employers better meeting the needs of the workforce (Gould, 2009), providing comfortable spaces that inspire employees to be creative and take less time off through sickness absence (Clements-Croome, 2005), and improving air quality with the use of plants (Smith and Pitt, 2009). If employers invest in such an environment, they can reap the benefits of employee having their needs satisfied on

work time (Zink, 2014) and increased perceptions of well-being (Martin et al., 2013; Smith and Pitt, 2009). The picture painted here is of a win-win-situation, where employee productivity comes from the strategic management of interdependencies and interrelations between employee activities and the surrounding environment (Zink, 2014).

A second means to define employee sustainability links in well with HRM practices and the broader notion of employee engagement – employers finding ways of harnessing employees to their work roles (Kumar and Kumar Sia, 2012). In this instance, employee sustainability is defined principally in terms of practices allowing employees to balance wider commitment through flexible working arrangements (FWAs) based on varying where and when employees work (Atkinson and Sandiford, 2016). A key aim in such situations is to make certain HRM practices the norm, yet a further crucial aim is to get a better understanding of employees' lives so that FWAs deliver for both employers and employees (Blake-Beard et al., 2010). Sustainability is defined in such debates in terms of attempts to understand how working time is often gendered, resulting in women more than men disengaged by long or inflexible working arrangements (Zbyszewska, 2013). According to Bichard (2008), HRM practices associated with training, performance review, recruitment, selection and job design, can also play a key part in creating employee sustainability, but providing such practices relate to corporate social responsibility commitments. Further, Lund (2004) defines sustainability in terms of striking a balance between meeting the needs of the work organisation and the employee expectation of participation in decision-making. In this instance, suggesting sustainability is achieved through partnership agreements between employers and trade unions.

A third take on defining sustainability in relation to work organisations consider wider matters beyond that of conventional HRM practice and into, to a point, the realms of socially responsible HRM and the promotion of social justice through such practices (Parkes and Davis, 2013). This third take on employee sustainability is based on attempts to solve organisational problems, but also to tackle wider societal problems arising from unsustainable work organisations, such as in-work poverty (Richards and Sang, 2018) and the exclusion of disabled employees because of disabling working environments (Sang et al., 2016). Key to defining this aspect of sustainability is aiming to play a part in creating in sustainable working lives (e.g. Hirsch, 2009; Fuertes et al., 2013) and sustainable forms of employment. In one respect sustainability is defined by employers working with civil society organisations to better manage an ageing workforce (Zientara, 2009), prevent premature retirements (Ahonen, 2015) and extend working lives (Koolhaas et al., 2011; Koolhaas et al., 2013), through a range of practices including but not restricted to workplace healthcare promotion (Eriksson et al., 2017) and healthcare based on regimes joining up employer and government provisions (Hansen et al., 2013).

In a different respect, employee sustainability is achieved by employers engaging with social policy initiatives (McBride and Mustchin, 2013) to make workplaces more disability friendly (Burdorf and Schuring, 2015), more inclusive regarding career entrants and career re-entrants (Wiese and Knecht, 2015) and generally more inclusive to all non-mainstream groups (Flude, 2000; McCollum, 2012).

### **Key findings from studies on employee sustainability**

While employee sustainability can be defined in a wide range and variously helpful ways, key findings from studies related to employee sustainability inform us of many more important features of this increasingly important work organisation issue. The findings to come from research based on built environment and ergonomics traditions include, for example, how employees working in intelligent buildings reported liking their workplace, feeling pride in their workplace surroundings, increased job satisfaction and fewer ailments (Gould, 2009). Similar to Gould's study, Smith and Pitt (2009) believe smart buildings lifted the mood of employees, with a more positive mood related to a sense of well-being. Further studies (e.g. Smith and Pitt, 2011) found evidence to suggest intelligent buildings led to less cases of sick building syndrome and how such environments created a working environment where employees felt under less pressure while working (Gould, 2009; Smith and Pitt, 2009). However, the literature on intelligent buildings and employee sustainability revealed the limited influence of built environment and ergonomics traditions on organisational practices. For instance, Martin et al. (2013) related the lack of influence on organisational practice to limited research on such matters. Zink (2009), moreover, adopts a different stance on an apparent lack of influence from the built environment and ergonomics traditions, by claiming organisations are generally ignorant of the sustainability benefits of building and equipment design, as well as organisations having limited interest in the principles of corporate social responsibility, which are said to be critical to the cultural ethos of creating sustainable work environments.

Studies from HRM research revealed how such practices could contribute to employee sustainability. Most commonly reported in such findings is how employees, particularly those from non-mainstream groups, felt they were treated more equitably (Blake-Beard et al., 2010) and experienced less discrimination (Zientara, 2009). It was also found HRM practices of this kind helped counter global-wide trends in labour market deregulation, leading to better treatment for a growing army of casualised employees (Zhang et al. 2015). Further perceived benefits of HRM practices aimed at improving employee sustainability included being more likely to be respected by managers (Järlström

et al. 2016) and experiencing an improved social climate between employees and managers (Jerome, 2013). In more a more general sense, Ehnert et al. (2014) reports on how HRM can deliver increased levels of health and safety, access to training to develop new and existing skills, improved prospects in terms of work-family-balance and access to high quality jobs. Key to employee sustainability, however, is the raised prospects of employment relations systems being more grounded in pluralist traditions (Devlin and Gold, 2014). Nevertheless, a range of downsides were reported in relation to this aspect of employee sustainability. For example, research by Lund (2004) found evidence for increased employee sustainability under such regimes, but also found evidence of hidden signs of scientific management in such practice, which caused collective bargaining problems for trade unions. In contrast to the work of Zhang et al. (2015), Blake-Beard et al.'s (2010) research highlighted how such practices may make work more sustainable for higher skilled and better paid employees, but this is unlikely to be the case for those in lower skilled and paid occupational groups.

In the domain that reflects practices born out of organisational knowledge and the input of social partners and governments (Van de Ven et al., 2014) comes a distinct range of findings on employee sustainability. Employee sustainability could be, for example, achieved through employers engaging with welfare programmes aim at reducing cycling between employment and welfare (McCollum, 2012) and interventions designed by social partners to overcome the wider life traumas of the long-term unemployed (Flude, 2000). However, other key findings reveal governments to be key players in mitigating against employee sustainability by doing little to tackle inflexible employment markets (Vanroelen, 2017) and little to make employers consider longer-term workforce development plans (McBride and Mustchin, 2013). Three other key issues arose from such findings. Indeed, the management of well-being figured prominently in such literature. Examples include employers developing healthcare initiatives to suit different types of employees, especially older employees (Hirsch, 2009; Koolhaas et al., 2011) and that health interventions designed with older employees in mind should be made available for younger employees (Koolhaas et al., 2013). Key to the success of such initiatives, however, is involving employees in the planning of health interventions (Hägglund et al, 2010) and how management leadership in health promotion is key to employee sustainability (Eriksson et al., 2017). A further key issue common to this body of literature is the role of work and job design in relation to employee sustainability. Notable examples include the criticality of teamworking (Hansen et al. 2013), reducing instances of work intensification (Vanroelen, 2017), work-crafting (Kira et al., 2010) and attempts to evenly distribute how work is shared out across not just the organisation, but also based on gender and wider employee characteristics (Zwicky et al., 2016). The importance of recognising the culture of work organisations in employee sustainability figures in a small range of study findings. The culture of work organisations is seen to be an important factor in

employee sustainability because positive attitudes by colleagues towards employees from marginal groups make employee sustainability policies far more effective (Nelissen et al., 2016; Van Dam et al., 2017) and attempts to nurture an inclusive culture can help reduce negative stereotypes of groups least likely to achieve sustainable levels of employment (Zientara, 2009). A further issue concerns how employee reluctance to train employees has a negative impact on employee sustainability (Hansen, 2013), especially in relation to employee groups with the lowest levels of skills (House of Commons, 2008). Overall this part of the literature reveals social partners only being allowed to play a marginal role in employee sustainability and governments creating far more problems in relation to employee sustainability than in solving or preventing them.

### **The many approaches to researching employee sustainability**

Approximately 40 per cent of papers accessed in literature searches is characterised by an empirical contribution to the knowledge on employee sustainability (e.g. Williams et al. 2012; McBride and Mustchin, 2013; Salmela-Aro and Vuori, 2015). The result is a clear majority of papers on employee sustainability are at least broadly defined as desk-based research (e.g. Berglund, 2015; Cleary et al., 2016; Hanvold et al., 2016). However, only a minority of such papers can be defined as systematic reviews (Jabbour and Santos, 2009; and Martin et al., 2013) and conceptual pieces (Kira et al. 2010; European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2015).

The locality of studies on employee sustainability reveals both variety and evidence for clusters of studies defined by geographical location. Indeed, such studies are defined by researching employee sustainability on an international scale (e.g. Smith and Pitt, 2011; Price, 2015), as well as located in Scandinavian countries (e.g. Järilström et al. 2016; Eriksson et al., 2017), Europe more generally (e.g. Akkermans et al., 2015; Docherty et al., 2009) and North America (e.g. Gould, 2009; Blake-Beard et al., 2010). In total, such studies account for approaching 60 per cent of all papers on employee sustainability. Specific countries feature commonly in the rest of the literature, with good levels of papers concerned with employee sustainability specifically related to the Netherlands (e.g. Koolhaas et al., 2013; Van Dam et al., 2017), the UK (e.g. McCollum, 2012; Atkinson and Sandiford, 2016) and Australia (e.g. Williams et al., 2010; Hansen et al., 2013). A much smaller number of studies focus on Poland (Zientara, 2009) and Belgium and Spain (Vanroelen, 2017). However, only one study (Mannila, 2015) focuses on employee sustainability in relation to economically developing countries.

No type or group of employees dominates the literature on employee sustainability. However, the most common group associated with research on employee sustainability focuses on older employees (e.g. Hirsch, 2007; Fuertes et al. 2013), representing approximately ten per cent of all studies found through literature searches. Further groups commanding scholarly attention include young employees (e.g. Härmä, 2015; Hanvold et al., 2016), returners to employment markets (e.g. Wiese and Knecht, 2015; Vanroelen, 2017), white collar, managers and employees of large organisations (e.g. Clements-Croome, 2005; Ehnert, 2009; Fuertes et al., 2013), women (e.g. Blake-Beard et al., 2010; Zbyszewska, 2013), disabled and chronically ill employees (e.g. Koolhaas et al., 2011; Nelissen et al. 2016), employees locked into insecure employment (e.g. Berglund, 2015; De Witte et al., 2015) and employees caught in cycles of unemployed and employment (e.g. Flude, 2000; McCollum, 2012). A further range of papers focus on more specific types and groups of employees. This much smaller crop of research papers relates ideas and concepts of employee sustainability to healthcare employees (Hägglund et al. 2016), shift workers (Van de Ven et al. 2014), low skilled employees (House of Commons, 2008), low paid employees (Devlin and Gold, 2014) and agency employees (Zhang et al., 2015).

As to be expected, no one methodological approach dominates empirical studies focused on employee sustainability. For example, nine studies adopt a quantitative approach (e.g. Nelissen et al. 2016; Van Dam et al., 2017), seven studies adopt a mixed methods/case study approach (e.g. Lund, 2004; Smith and Pitt, 2008) and six studies are defined by qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews (e.g. Zientara, 2009, Williams et al. 2010). A further and smaller range of papers are denoted by the analysis of secondary data (typically governmental data) (e.g. Van de Ven et al., 2014; Ahonen, 2015) and content analysis (e.g. Ehnert, 2009; Ehnert et al., 2014). Of note, however, is a range of studies of an experimental nature, focusing specifically on preparing school leavers for sustained entry into employment markets (Akkermans et al., 2015; Salmela-Aro and Vuori, 2015).

How employee sustainability is theorised and conceptualised also varies considerably across the extant literature. However, it is reasonable to suggest, theoretical and conceptual approaches to employee sustainability disproportionately reflect theories and conceptual approaches associated with organisational behaviour (OB) and medical/health-based/occupational health scholarly traditions. Indeed, papers of such kind represent 60 per cent of studies found when searching for literature on employee sustainability. Within this crop of literature, examples of OB theoretical and conceptual approaches include studies based on applying a reasoned action approach (Nelissen et al. 2016), integrative person approach (Flude, 2000) and uncertainty navigation model (Sweeny and Ghane, 2015). Medical/health-based/occupational health theories and concepts used in studies on

employee sustainability include, for instance, the use of approaches based on inequalities in health (Burdorf and Schuring, 2015), work environment impact scale (Williams et al, 2010) and hazard analysis (Van de Ven et al., 2014). Two further, yet less common approaches to employee sustainability, apply a range of sociological and economic theories and concepts. Contributions to knowledge on employee sustainability are noted using organisation-focused approaches, including work systems (Docherty et al., 2009) and human capital development (McBride and Mustchin, 2013). Economic approaches, on the other hand, appear strongly influenced by labour market theories and concepts (e.g. Devlin and Gould, 2014; Mannila, 2015). Further approaches distinguishable from the wider crop of literature explore employee sustainability related to political discourse (Zbyszewska, 2013) and theories and concepts related to the built environment (Clements-Croome, 2005; Gould, 2009).

### **Widening the net: employee sustainability in competing literature**

The discussions so far have revealed a wide-range of ways employers and government agendas create the conditions so that employees remain able and willing to remain in employment, employees are not subject to exploitation by their employers, and employees have the least likely impact on social benefits and health systems. The attention now shifts to exploring employee sustainability themes in relation to scholarly fields where employee agendas are privileged over that of employers and governments. As such, this section of the article considers trade unions as key and under-recognised actors in emergent scholarly debates on employee sustainability. This section also considers employee self-organisation, typically through a variety of acts of coping and resistance, as a further key and under-recognised aspect of emergent scholarly debates on employee sustainability.

A key feature of the contemporary literature on trade unions is the unique support trade unions can give to both traditional and emergent groups of disadvantaged employees. For instance, a range of research highlights trade unions facilitating employment for disabled employees (Richards and Sang, 2016) and having a positive influence on employer disability practices (Bacon and Hoque, 2015). In terms of gender, research reveals how trade unions play a key role in lowering gender pay gaps (McGuinness et al., 2011), wage discrimination (Triventi, 2013), leading on equal pay litigation (Guillaume, 2015) and support employees facing domestic violence (Wibberley et al., 2018), all of which are critical to employee sustainability. Research indicates the key role trade unions can play in tackling international employer practices concerning the imposition of compulsory retirement ages (Byford and Wong, 2016). Trade unions increasingly represent and organise EU migrant (James and

Karmowska, 2012), hyper-mobile migrant (Bernsten and Lillie, 2014) and contingent (MacKenzie, 2010) employees, all of which are widely recognised as unsustainable forms of employment. In it also the case that embryonic trade unionism is an increasing feature of sex work (Gall, 2007), with attempts made to promote the interests of employees conventionally at the far margins of society and employer HRM practices.

The literature also indicates how trade unions can work with employers in a range of unique ways to support an employee sustainability agenda. For instance, partnership agreements with trade unions are known to lower employee turnover (Pohler and Luchak, 2015) and sickness absence (Goerke and Pannenberg, 2015). Such partnership arrangements are known to lead to mutual positive outcomes when employers seek to introduce new and notoriously difficult to manage annualised working (Ryan and Wallace, 2016) and working time (Fagan and Walthery, 2011) arrangements. Further advantages of employers working in partnership with trade unions is in terms of making corporate social responsibility initiatives more effective (Harvey et al., 2017) and supporting organisations expanding into the growing markets (e.g. green economy) that increase opportunities for increased employment levels and increased creation of high quality and highly paid jobs (Antonioli and Mazzanti, 2017). Further, it has also been demonstrated how trade unions can be drivers in organisation productivity (Vernon and Rogers, 2013), global economic growth (Lia, 2013) and addressing insufficient economic demand (Kelly, 2015), all of which map broadly, yet neatly on to previously discussed ideas surrounding employee sustainability.

There is a wider role for trade unions to play in employee sustainability, particularly in terms of decreasing the impact of employers on social benefits and health systems. For instance, trade unions are leaders in terms of influencing employer decisions related to paying the 'living wage' (Prowse and Fells, 2016). Trade unions are also key actors in terms of challenging emergent trends in low wages and wage stagnation (Kelly, 2015). Despite many changes in how employers and governments make provisions for employee in retirement, trade unions remain at the forefront of protecting pensions rights (Flynn et al., 2013) and the development of occupational pension systems (Kuene, 2018). Further, employers, employees and wider society stand to benefit from trade union practices designed to lead to learning partnerships (Cassell and Lee, 2009) and an equalisation of training opportunities in organisations (Hoque and Bacon, 2008). Taken together, it can be seen how trade unions maintain a unique capacity to shape the wider context of employee sustainability.

Recent labour process research appears principally defined by accounts of self-organised attempts to resist exploitation under oppressive and controlling management regimes. Three broad themes

emerge in terms of analysing labour process research in relation to employee sustainability. In the first instance, are findings on how self-organised employees cope with such management regimes. Examples of employee coping in difficult circumstances includes deflecting the pressures of work by taking selective absence and mentally reframing key parts of jobs (Clark and Thompson, 2015). In a further study, line managers colluded with subordinates, offering employees alternative leave options when given strict procedures to manage sickness absence (Hadjisolomou, 2015). Further studies revealed a range of mostly individualised forms of employee coping. Examples include mental distancing (Sandiford and Seymour, 2011), fiddling with fixed times to complete certain aspects of the job (Lundberg and Karlsson, 2011) and harbouring tactics, such as retreating to the bathroom to cry, talk to oneself, chat with friends, talk on the phone, surf the Internet, stretching and simply doing nothing (Lindqvist and Olsson, 2017).

Most labour process studies, however, reported incidences of employees resisting perceptions of exploitation by management. Call centres feature prominently in this body of literature, with many studies remarking on how such tightly controlled labour processes present a range of opportunities of employee resistance (McFadden, 2014). Further studies consider front-line employee experiences of tightly controlled labour processes and how such experiences generate humour and minor acts of defiance, which help to shape and galvanise an autonomous shopfloor or team culture (Taylor and Bain; 2003; Richards and Marks, 2007; Korczynski, 2011; Crowley et al. 2014). Such was the impact of self-organised forms of resistance, even in the most hostile of working environment, research suggests management regimes are forced to accommodate employee attributes and practices into their labour processes (Hastings and MacKinnon, 2017). A wide-range of other forms of collective employee resistance, designed to take the harsher edges of employer exploitative labour processes, is reported in such literature. For example, employees responding to management hostility by being hostile in return (Laaser, 2016), spreading animosity within and between teams (Ellway, 2013), sabotaging many aspects of production and service provisions (Harris and Ogbonna, 2004; Carey and Foster, 2011) and slowing down the pace of work and frustrating production with widespread use of foot-dragging (Ybema and Horvers, 2017).

A further key development in this aspect of employee sustainability involves employees increasingly taking to the Internet, most specifically in terms of the use of social media and smart phones, to explore new and creative forms of coping and new ways to express conflict and resistance (Richards, 2008). In the most general sense, it has been demonstrated how an evolving Internet brings a very wide-range of new advantages to employees in an age of declining trade union influence (Richards, 2012). More specifically, such research has established the importance of social media platforms in

creating on-line coping communities, or spaces for employee sustainability, which extend far beyond any such community organised in relation to the work setting (Cohen and Richards, 2015; Sayers and Fachira, 2015). In such situations employees, often self-organised on an international basis, share details of work, share how they experience work and provide and seek advice on work matters from each other (Ellis and Richards, 2009). Further research highlights how taking to social media to spout cynical views of employers can lead to employees regaining a sense of control and attachment to their occupational group or professional identity (Richards and Kosmala, 2013). Some researchers go as far as to say such activities are more akin to 'communities of resistance', where employees of often non-unionised organisations create or appropriate discussion forums to share frustrations and expose the inner workings of outwardly reputable multinational corporation employers (Bancarzewski and Hardy, 2017). Indeed, research on employees who blog about their jobs reveals how such activities act, often based on savage accounts of the modern employer or corporation, as counter-hegemonic forces against corporate rhetoric (Schoneboom, 2007) and serve as a new and emergent labour organising function (Schoneboom, 2011). Needless to say, the full range of ways employees can self-organise appears to represent an important and emergent, yet hitherto neglected facet of employee sustainability in the modern age.

### **Discussion and conclusions: a novel and expanded map and research agenda on employee sustainability**

In this final part of the article the following issues are addressed. First, study limitations and strengths will be outlined and discussed. Second, a new and updated map of the research on employee sustainability will be generated and discussed. Including in this discussion is a consideration of wider issues that arise out of mapping the literature on employee sustainability. Finally, details of the contribution of the paper will be briefly presented, followed by a discussion of the many research opportunities emerging from the current research.

The current research is characterised by a range of limitations and strengths. A key limitation of the research fits in with wider problematic nature of attempts to bring together a wide-range of incongruous bodies of literature. A second key limitation, as such, is in attempting to provide a fuller interpretation, it evidently leads to a largely superficial account of employee sustainability. A key strength of the current research is in significantly expanding what can be seen to be practices surrounding employee sustainability. A second key strength is in bringing in fresh perspectives on

employee sustainability, with such perspectives very much challenging conventional views based almost entirely on employer and government agendas. In with this strength comes the distinct possibility of significantly fresh and novel research on employee sustainability, particularly from the perspective of the employee and the use of theoretical and methodological approaches currently remiss in this emergent scholarly and practitioner field.

Reviewing the literature specifically on and related to employee sustainability allows a descriptive map of such activities to be generated (see Figure 1). By consulting Figure 1 it can be seen how employee sustainability, as well as key themes related to employee sustainability, can be mapped out. The map first distinguishes between the five approaches by providing brief, but specific detail of each aspect of employee sustainability. Figure 1 is set out to reflect the current research, in that key themes from the literature on employee sustainability are located across the top part of the map. Competing and more indirect aspects of employee sustainability form the lower half of the map. Bringing them altogether, however, are the central features of employee sustainability (central to Figure 1), that of employees being more willing able to remain in employment, measures taken to take prevent employer exploitation, and, lowered impact of employers on wider benefits and healthcare systems.

Further considerations associated with the map of employee sustainability (see Figure 1) are as follows. It is important to note how widening perspectives is likely to allow an expansion and the renewal of debates surrounding employee sustainability. Reading between the lines, there is a sense that employee sustainability is a contested terrain, especially if full recognition is given to the role of trade unions and employee self-organised coping and resistance behaviour in such matters. Given the lack of recognition of employee-driven employee sustainability practices in the “official literature”, there is a concern employer and government attempts to improve employee sustainability will prove to be problematic without far more input from employees and their representatives. Further, with a range of parties to the employment relationship not attempting to improve employee sustainability in a coordinated fashion, it is likely such parties will at some point be working at cross purposes to each other. Even if this does not prove to be the case, all parties to employee sustainability are likely to be replicating efforts for the same ends, which undermines the whole purpose of such practices.

The contribution of the article is as follows. First, the current research is unique and novel as it draws, proportionately, from five fields of interest, with two of such fields largely if not completely remiss in previous articulations of employee sustainability. Second, the map produced goes significantly beyond previous articulations based on built environment, HRM and sustainable working lives approaches. The map, as such, clearly identifies and provides a new conceptual link between extant, neglected and

over-looked aspects of employee sustainability. By drawing on literature from industrial relations and labour process traditions, which privileges employee and trade union perspectives above conventional approaches based on employer and government perspectives, this approach paves the way for scholars and practitioners to think differently and more widely about employee sustainability in relation to work organisations. In with this contribution is a unique and novel attempt to unify a wide-range of eclectic and typically incongruous literature. Given the expanded view put forward in the current research, this opens a very wide-range of empirical, theoretical and methodological research opportunities related to employee sustainability.

Based on the findings from the current research the paper now concludes with a discussion of research suggestions related to employee sustainability. First, there is ample scope for more empirical and/or conceptual research on employee sustainability. Second, there seems ample scope for further research based on geographical specificity or shared generality. This assertion seems to be particularly the case of emergent industrialising nations and associated trading areas, as well as how organisations located in such geographical areas are likely to form part of globalised supply chains linked in with organisations located in more advanced industrial nations. Third, it is reasonable to suggest there is a wide-range of possibilities in terms of furthering research on employee sustainability in relation to types and groups of employees. Fourth, methodological choices appear wide open in terms of considering further research on employee sustainability. Fifth, it seems reasonable to suggest a priority for further research on employee sustainability is to concentrate such efforts away from OB and medical/health-based/occupational approaches. More generally, there appears to be ample scope in terms of further attempts to unify how employee sustainability is conceptualised. Finally, given the omission of employees and their representatives from research specifically on employee sustainability, a priority of future research should be situations where employees and employees work in partnership to improve employee sustainability.

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Figure 1: Mapping key themes of emergent and competing approaches to employee sustainability

