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Putting employees at the centre of sustainable HRM: a review, map and research agenda

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Putting employees at the centre of sustainable HRM: A review, map and research agenda

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Putting employees at the centre of sustainable HRM: A review, map and research agenda

Abstract

Purpose – Currently, sustainable HRM is largely an employer driven exercise based on raising employee productivity. The purpose of the article is to expand this position by fully mapping out sustainable HRM and placing employees at the centre of such practices. A further purpose is to provide a research agenda suited to a wider take on sustainable HRM.

Design/methodology – The article centres on an analytical review of extant sustainable HRM literature, plus an analytical review of wider literature considering further ways to sustain employment.

Findings – Employee-centred sustainable HRM goes far beyond what is accounted for in the extant HRM literature. The new map accounts for wider parties to sustainable HRM, including trade unions and self-organised employees. An extensive research agenda is a further key output from the study.

Research limitations/implications – The article is based on a literature review. Follow up empirical research is required to test out aspects of the new map, as well as address research gaps identified by the review.

Practical implications – The findings have practical implications for HRM and occupational health practitioners, line managers, built environment and ergonomics specialists, governments, trade unions and workplace activists. A key practical implication is the potential

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3 to create micro-forms of corporatism, where wider political structures are absent, to foster
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5 employee-centred forms of sustainable HRM.
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9 **Originality/value** – The article is novel in terms of drawing on a wide-range of incongruous
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11 literature and synthesises the literature into a new map and an extensive research agenda.
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15 **Key words:** Sustainability, Sustainable HRM, Built environment, HRM, Sustainable working
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17 lives, Industrial relations, Labour process, Map, Research agenda
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21 **Paper type:** Research paper
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28 **Introduction**

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31 Sustainability in work organisations consists of employers playing their part in fixing
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33 ecological, social and economic problems, with evidence suggesting employers are
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35 increasingly willing to make their organisations more sustainable (Ehnert *et al.*, 2016).
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37 Sustainability in work organisations has increasingly become a feature of academic research.
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39 The trend is evident with the rise of literature on sustainable (e.g. Ehnert, 2009; Jabbour and
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41 Santos, 2008), green (e.g. Guerci *et al.*, 2016; Renwick *et al.*, 2013) and socially responsible
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43 (e.g. Shen, 2011; Voegtlin and Greenwood, 2016) forms of HRM.
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49 **This article, however, focuses on one aspect of the wider organisational sustainability**
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51 **agenda - sustainable HRM**, broadly defined as practices designed to make employees more
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53 able and willing to remain in employment and in the future (Van Vuuren and Van Dam, 2013).
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55 **Such practices emphasise employers fostering, rather than exploiting, their workforces**
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57 (Docherty *et al.*, 2009). Key to sustainable HRM is mutual benefit for employers and
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3 employees, as well as creating wider social benefit, including lower unemployment (Zwicky,
4 2016), demand for out-of and in-work benefits (House of Commons, 2008), and demand for
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6 healthcare related to work-related illness and disability (Koolhaas *et al.*, 2011).
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11 A key aim of the article is to address a range of problems associated with the current
12 and dominant take on sustainable HRM – an approach that is employer- rather than employee-
13 centred. A significant problem with the current literature concerns how the interests of two key
14 parties to sustainable HRM - the employer and recent governments, is privileged over that of
15 employees, creating a problematic vision of sustainable HRM based on employer and
16 governmental interests, rather than employee interests and the capabilities of trade unions and
17 collective bargaining. This crop of literature adds greatly to understandings, particularly in
18 terms of demonstrating gains for organisations (e.g. Jerome, 2013; App *et al.*, 2012), yet these
19 contributions represent an incomplete image of sustainable HRM. As such, it is critical to
20 revisit sustainable HRM, mainly because current understandings are remiss in terms of
21 acknowledging wider aspects of what makes employment sustainable for employees. For
22 instance, trade unions have a long history of winning better working conditions for employees
23 (Tuckman, 2018), and even in workplaces without trade unions, self-organised employees have
24 a similar history of shaping unsustainable HRM practices (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999).
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45 The danger is future understandings of sustainable HRM, without a revisionary agenda,
46 is likely to continue to reinforce a corporate profitability and corporate survival agenda
47 (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2001), which in all probability will only serve to undermine attempts to make
48 organisations truly sustainable. As implied already, a second key problem is the extant
49 literature neglects and underplays key parties to the employment relationship, such as trade
50 unions. Put another way, current understandings neglect literature based on industrial relations
51 and labour process traditions. Indeed, without engaging with such literature, a meaningful
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3 vision of sustainable HRM seems unlikely. As such, the article aims to answer the following
4 questions. First, what are the many constituent features of sustainable HRM? Second, how do
5 the parties to the employment relationship feed into sustainable HRM? Third, what does an
6 employee-centred approach to sustainable HRM look like? Fourth, in the light of key findings
7 to come from this article, what are priorities for further research on sustainable HRM?
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16 By addressing these questions, the article contributes to understandings of sustainable
17 HRM as follows. First, sustainable HRM will now be conceptualised in terms of being of
18 greater mutual benefit for employers and employees. Second, the new means to conceptualise
19 sustainable HRM recognises all parties to such practices, creating space in particular for
20 collectivised, self-organised and individualised labour. A further contribution comes in terms
21 of generating an extensive research agenda for sustainable HRM.
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31 The article is structured as follows. First, the methodology is described and discussed.
32 Second, the extant literature on sustainable HRM is discussed. This discussion includes
33 attempts to variously define sustainable HRM, identify key features of sustainable HRM, and,
34 identify key features of this specific body of literature. Third, the discussion of sustainable
35 HRM is extended to include industrial relations literature and literature reflecting labour
36 process traditions. A final section discusses key findings, represented mostly in the form of a
37 new map of sustainable HRM and an extensive associated research agenda.
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51 **Methodology**

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54 The methodology is broadly based on a systematic review/meta-analysis. Such an approach
55 requires an analysis of as many already existing studies as relevant (Thorpe *et al.*, 2005). The
56 approach taken is suited to the aims of this study as it is based on a reliable knowledge base
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3 accumulated from a range of studies (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003). Further, the approach adopted
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5 allows the generation of new research ideas (Borenstein *et al.*, 2009).
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9 The article was approached in the following way. First, a literature search was conducted using
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11 the following databases: *Web of Knowledge*, *EbscoHost*, *Emerald*, *Wiley*, *JSTOR* and
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13 *Cambridge Journals Online*. The searches used the following key terms ‘sustainability’ and
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15 ‘sustainable’ and were accompanied with further search terms: ‘employee’, ‘work’,
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17 ‘employment’ and ‘HRM’. Preliminary searches revealed literature from the year 2000
18
19 onwards. Then on, further refined and advanced searches concentrated on literature from the
20
21 year 2000 onwards. Searches for literature captured approximately 100 research items. After
22
23 sifting, a range of literature was discarded, principally as it was based on environmental or
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25 green issues, matters outwith the scope of the study. Eventually, 64 specialised accounts of
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27 sustainable HRM were identified, including journal articles (n=41), books and edited book
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29 chapters (n=18) and reports (n=5).
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36 Subsequently, the literature was analysed for key sustainable HRM themes. The analysis was
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38 guided by two broad questions: what is meant by ‘sustainable’, and, what leads to
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40 ‘sustainability’? The analysis allowed the literature to be divided into three broad areas:
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42 sustainable HRM related to built environment and ergonomics traditions, HRM and employee
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44 engagement, and, ‘sustainable working lives’. The three broad strands of literature were
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46 analysed in terms of extracting key information based on definitions; main research findings;
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48 type of article; and where applicable, geographical location of study, employee group,
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50 methodological approach and theoretical framing (see Figure I).
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56 Key themes to emerge from this stage of analysis (see Figure I) included employee
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58 well-being, quality of working life and equality. Such themes were used to inform further
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60 searches, using the databases as previously detailed, and aimed at industrial relations literature

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3 and literature reflecting labour process traditions. The themes were used because they related
4 to benefits for employees (e.g. a better working life), employers (e.g. higher levels of
5 productivity) and governments (e.g. lowered demands for public welfare and healthcare
6 systems). To be consistent with the earlier approach, the second stage of the search also focused
7 on literature from the year 2000 onwards. The search resulted in the identification of research
8 articles indirectly related to sustainable HRM. The search was based on two approaches. First,
9 given the association of trade unions with the field of industrial relations, the term ‘trade union’
10 and key themes identified above were used to search for further relevant literature. Second,
11 there was a search for literature using the term ‘labour process’ and the same key sustainable
12 HRM themes. The second stage of the literature search resulted in the collection of a further
13 48 research items (all journal articles), or a wider total of 112 research items specifically
14 selected to further explore and map out sustainable HRM. The second crop of literature was
15 divided between industrial relations and studies of the labour process and analysed to identify
16 similar and further means by which sustainable HRM could be understood. Further key themes
17 to emerge included, for example, outcomes from collective employee representation and many
18 other ways to regulate the employment relationship.
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45 **Sustainable HRM: Definitions, key findings and characteristics of extant** 46 **literature** 47 48

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51 This section follows the three broad strands of sustainable HRM literature identified in the
52 previous section. First, sustainable HRM is defined in a range of ways, with an emphasis on
53 establishing the nature of how such practice is defined. Second, key findings are discussed,
54 including problems associated with sustainable HRM. The emphasis is on highlighting the
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3 many ways by which HRM is distinguishable from regular HRM practice. The second part
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5 further highlights key strengths, but also highlights limitations to this body of knowledge.
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7 Third, the discussion shifts to consider a wide-range of defining features of the literature. The
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9 aim here is to further and specifically identify gaps in the literature on sustainable HRM.
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13 *Defining sustainable HRM*

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17 The built environment and ergonomics literature principally defines sustainable HRM in terms
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19 of raising employee productivity, although consideration is given to employee interests in such
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21 situations. For example, employers can increase productivity by creating ‘intelligent buildings’
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23 (Clements-Croome, 2005), which boosts employee ‘happiness’, leading to a more efficient
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25 interaction between the employee and the built environment (Smith and Pitt, 2009). Sustainable
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27 HRM is defined in terms of employees accessing a more natural environment, with employers
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29 better meeting the needs of the workforce (Gould, 2009). Employee needs are met through
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31 comfortable spaces to work in, which inspire employees to be creative and take less time off
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33 through sickness absence (Clements-Croome, 2005). Such practices also lead to improved air
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35 quality with the use of plants (Smith and Pitt, 2009). By investing in an environment of this
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37 kind, employers can reap the benefit of employees having their needs satisfied on work time
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39 (Zink, 2014) and increased perceptions of well-being (Martin *et al.*, 2013; Smith and Pitt,
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41 2009). Taken together, the outcome is a ‘win-win-situation’, based on the strategic
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43 management of interdependencies and interrelations between employee activities and the
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45 surrounding environment (Zink, 2014).
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53 A second means to define sustainable HRM links with broader HRM practices and the
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55 notion of employee engagement – employers finding ways of harnessing employees to their
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57 work roles (Kumar and Kumar Sia, 2012). The employee engagement approach is also based
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59 on the notion of both parties to the employment relationship benefitting from the practice of
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3 sustainable HRM. However, the literature suggests such practices are problematic as they are
4 principally aimed at raising employee productivity. In this instance, organisations foster
5 sustainable HRM largely through a range of increasingly common HRM practices, as well as
6 the critical input of HRM practitioners. As line managers are increasingly seen as the
7 “guardians” of human resources (Ehnert, 2009), such employees are increasingly more
8 responsible for implementing sustainable HRM policy (Järlström *et al.*, 2018; Kramar, 2014).
9
10 In this instance, sustainable HRM concerns making workplaces inclusive through work-life
11 balance initiatives (Hirsch, 2009), flexible working practices (Atkinson and Sandiford, 2016),
12 regulating working time to promote gender equality (Zbyszewska, 2013) and referral of
13 employees where necessary to occupational health (OH) services (Koolhaas *et al.*, 2011).
14 Sustainable HRM is defined principally in terms of practices allowing employees to balance
15 wider commitments through flexible working arrangements (FWAs), based on varying where
16 and when employees work (Atkinson and Sandiford, 2016). A key aim is to make sustainable
17 HRM practices the norm, with, as noted above, line managers playing a key enabling role in
18 this process (Kramar, 2014). However, a further aim is to better understand employees’ lives
19 so FWAs deliver for both employers and employees (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2010). Sustainability
20 is defined in terms of attempts to understand how working time is often gendered, resulting in
21 women more than men disengaged by long or inflexible working arrangements (Zbyszewska,
22 2013). According to Bichard (2008), sustainable HRM practices is in effect incorporating
23 corporate social responsibility into everyday HRM practice related to, for instance, training,
24 performance review, recruitment, selection and job design.
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52 A third competing definition relates the principles of social justice to HRM practice
53 (Parkes and Davis, 2013). Although also aimed at raising employee productivity, the third
54 approach aims to do so in a more humanistic and sustainable manner. A further key difference
55 is drawing on the input and expertise of a range of social partners, including governments, to
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3 deliver benefits for both organisations and wider society (e.g. Van de Ven *et al.*, 2014). This
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5 approach could be compared to some sort of corporatist system of employment relations,
6
7 denoted by close co-operation between trade unions, employers and governments (Järlström *et*
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9 *al.*, 2018), leading to, for instance, better prepared new entrants and re-entrants to employment
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11 markets (e.g. Akkermans *et al.*, 2015), older employees willing to remain in employment
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13 markets (Atkinson and Sandiford, 2016) and better treatment for disabled and chronically ill
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15 employees (e.g. Williams *et al.*, 2010). This third perspective is based on attempts to solve
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17 organisational problems, but to also tackle wider societal problems including, for example, in-
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19 work poverty (Richards and Sang, 2019) and the exclusion of disabled employees from the
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21 workplace (Sang *et al.*, 2016). More specifically, sustainable HRM in this instance involves,
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23 for example, employers working with civil society organisations to better manage an ageing
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25 workforce (Zientara, 2009), prevent premature retirements (Ahonen, 2015) and extend working
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27 lives (Koolhaas *et al.*, 2013; Koolhaas *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, at the heart of such practices is
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29 workplace healthcare promotion (Eriksson *et al.*, 2017) and healthcare based on joining up
30
31 employer and government provisions (Hansen *et al.*, 2013). A further angle on this approach
32
33 to sustainable HRM involves employers engaging with social policy initiatives (McBride and
34
35 Mustchin, 2013) to make workplaces disability friendly (Burdof and Schuring, 2015), more
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37 inclusive for career entrants and career re-entrants (Wiese and Knecht, 2015) and wherever
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39 possible, all other non-mainstream groups (McCollum, 2012; Flude, 2000). In brief, this
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41 perspective of sustainable HRM centres on a belief of causing no harm to employees, with
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43 employees of all descriptions engaged, thriving and flourishing at work.
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52 *Key findings from studies on sustainable HRM*

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56 While sustainable HRM is defined in a range of ways, key findings reveal much more about
57
58 such practice. Findings from the field of the built environment and ergonomics include, for
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3 example, how employees working in intelligent buildings reported liking their workplace,
4 feeling pride in their workplace surroundings, increased job satisfaction and reported fewer
5 ailments (Gould, 2009). As with Gould's study, Smith and Pitt (2009) found smart buildings
6 lift the mood of employees, leading to a positive mood and sense of well-being. Further studies
7 (e.g. Smith and Pitt, 2011) realised intelligent buildings decreased the risks associated with
8 sick building syndrome and lowered the sense of pressures at work (Gould, 2009; Smith and
9 Pitt, 2009). Overall, research of this kind points towards increased employee productivity, yet
10 it also indicates how employees appreciate working in a better designed work environment.
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23 However, a key issue raised in such literature is the limited influence of built
24 environment and ergonomics specialists in work settings. A key outcome, for example, is a low
25 uptake of a particular type of sustainable HRM practice (Martin *et al.*, 2013). Zink (2014)
26 believes, for instance, the low status of built environment and ergonomics specialists relates to
27 organisational ignorance of the benefits of building and equipment design, coupled with limited
28 interest in adopting the principles of corporate social responsibility. The result is only the most
29 progressive of employers seems to invest in such practices.
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40 Studies from an HRM perspective clearly indicate how sustainable HRM is critical to
41 employer competitive advantage (App *et al.*, 2012). App *et al.*, for example, found sustainable
42 HRM to be key to attracting and retaining high-quality employees. In more specific terms,
43 employees, particularly those from non-mainstream groups, reported being treated more
44 equitably (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2010) and experienced less discrimination (Zientara, 2009).
45 Sustainable HRM has also been linked to reports of better treatment for a growing casualised
46 work force, with such practices helping to mitigate against global-wide trends in labour market
47 deregulation (Zhang *et al.*, 2015). Further, multinational corporations have been linked to such
48 good practice, with organisations of this type influential in setting sustainable HRM agendas
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3 in a wide-range of international settings (Aust *et al.* (2019). Further benefits include employees
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5 experiencing high levels of respect from line managers (Järlström *et al.*, 2018), resulting in an
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7 improved social and productive climate between employees and managers (Jerome, 2013). In
8
9 a more general sense, Ehnert *et al.* (2013) identified how sustainable HRM leads to increased
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11 levels of health and safety, access to training to develop new and existing skills, improved
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13 prospects in terms of work-family-balance and access to high quality jobs. In effect, further
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15 supporting the view of HRM practitioners, increasingly via the everyday work of line managers
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17 (Ehnert, 2009), as central to achieving the goals of sustainable HRM. Overall, sustainable HRM
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19 reflects a commitment to going beyond regular HRM practice.
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26 Nevertheless, a range of downsides are associated with this version of sustainable
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28 HRM. For example, Lund (2004) found sustainable HRM, as per regular HRM, is characterised
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30 by “hidden” forms of scientific management, typically resulting in collective bargaining
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32 problems for trade unions. In contrast to the work of Zhang *et al.* (2015), Blake-Beard *et al.*'s
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34 (2010) research found sustainable HRM to be more commonly associated with attempts to
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36 motivate highly skilled and better paid employees, rather than making working life better for
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38 lower skilled and low paid occupational groups. On the whole, this form of sustainable HRM
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40 represents a mixed bag and in particular highlights how a lack of employee representation is
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42 likely to result in uneven outcomes in most work settings.
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48 In the domain reflecting practices born out of organisational knowledge and the input
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50 of corporatist or pseudo-corporatist arrangements (Van de Ven *et al.*, 2014) comes an important
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52 range of findings. First of all, this form of sustainable HRM is significantly different in nature
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54 from the previous two. For example, sustainable HRM is achieved through employers engaging
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56 with welfare programmes aimed at reducing cycling between employment and welfare
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58 (McCollum, 2012) and buying into interventions designed by social partners to overcome the
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3 wider life traumas of the long-term unemployed (Flude, 2000). However, other key findings
4 reveal governments have the potential to undermine sustainable HRM. For instance, some
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6 governments show a lack of willingness to intervene in problematic employment markets
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10 (Vanroelen, 2017) and putting little pressure on employers to consider long-term workforce
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12 development plans (McBride and Mustchin, 2013). Three further key issues arose from these
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14 studies. Indeed, the management of well-being figured prominently in such literature.
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16 Examples include employers developing healthcare initiatives, often involving OH
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18 practitioners, to suit different types of employees, especially older employees (Koolhaas *et al.*,
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20 2011; Hirsch, 2009) and health interventions designed with older employees in mind, being
21
22 made available for younger employees (Koolhaas *et al.*, 2013). Key to the success of these
23
24 initiatives, however, is involving employees in the planning of health interventions (Hägglund
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26 *et al.*, 2010), ideally with a supportive, responsive and inspiring line manager (Shift, 2009), as
27
28 well as recognising the wider importance of management leadership in health promotion
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30 (Eriksson *et al.*, 2017). A further key issue is the role of work and job design in relation to
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32 sustainable HRM. Notable examples include the criticality of teamworking (Hansen *et al.*
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34 2013), reducing instances of work intensification (Vanroelen, 2017), work-crafting (Kira *et al.*,
35
36 2010) and attempts to evenly distribute how work is shared out across not just the organisation,
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38 but also based on gender and wider employee characteristics (Zwicki *et al.*, 2016). The
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40 importance of recognising organisational culture in sustainable HRM also figured in a small
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42 range of studies. Organisational culture is seen to be an important factor in sustainable HRM
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44 because positive attitudes by colleagues towards employees from marginal groups make
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46 sustainable HRM policies far more effective (Van Dam *et al.*, 2017; Nelissen, *et al.*, 2016) and
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48 attempts to nurture an inclusive culture can help reduce negative stereotypes of groups least
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50 likely to achieve sustainable levels of employment (Zientara, 2009). A further issue concerns
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52 how employer reluctance to train employees has a negative impact on sustainable HRM
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3 (Hansen *et al.*, 2013), especially in relation to employee groups with the lowest levels of skills
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5 (House of Commons, 2008). Overall the literature suggests employers tend to put limits on the
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7 activities of social partners, with governments often reluctant to intervene except in extreme
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9 circumstances. The outcome is this approach to sustainable HRM is unlikely to achieve its full
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11 potential.
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14 15 16 *The many approaches to researching sustainable HRM*

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19 As can be observed by consulting Figure I, only about 40 per cent of sustainable HRM articles
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21 is based on an empirical approach (e.g. Salmela-Aro and Vuori, 2015; McBride and Mustchin,
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23 2013; Williams *et al.*, 2012). As such, the majority of articles are based on desk-based research
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25 (e.g. Cleary *et al.*, 2016; Berglund, 2015). In a broader sense, only a small amount of such
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27 literature is based on systematic reviews (e.g. Martin *et al.*, 2013; Jabbour and Santos, 2008)
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29 or conceptual pieces (e.g. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working
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31 Conditions, 2015; Kira *et al.* 2010).
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36 **FIGURE I GOES HERE**

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40 The research on sustainable HRM is evidently defined by geographical location, with
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42 some clusters around certain parts of the world (see Figure I). For instance, the majority of
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44 studies were conducted in Europe more generally or specifically (e.g. Akkermans *et al.*, 2015;
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46 Docherty *et al.*, 2009). However, a good range of studies have been conducted on an
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48 international scale (e.g. Price, 2015; Smith and Pitt, 2011), in Scandinavian countries (e.g.
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50 Eriksson *et al.*, 2017; Järnlström *et al.* 2018) and North America (e.g. Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2010;
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52 Gould, 2009). Specific countries feature commonly in the literature, including the Netherlands
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54 (e.g. Van Dam *et al.*, 2017; Koolhaas *et al.*, 2013), the UK (e.g. Atkinson and Sandiford, 2016;
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56 McCollum, 2012) and Australia (e.g. Hansen *et al.*, 2013; Williams *et al.*, 2010). A much
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3 smaller number of studies centre on, for example, Poland (Zientara, 2009) and Belgium and
4 Spain (Vanroelen, 2017). However, only one study (Mannila, 2015) relates sustainable HRM
5 to developing countries, with no studies of such practices associated with India or Africa (Aust
6 *et al.*, 2019). The geographical spread of studies suggests sustainable HRM is principally
7 practiced in countries with a history of corporatism, but variants on such practices can also be
8 found in countries that have moved away corporatism.
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18 No type or group of employees dominates the literature (see Figure I). However, the
19 most common group reflected in the literature is older employees (e.g. Fuertes *et al.* 2013;
20 Hirsch, 2007), representing approximately 15 per cent of all studies. Further groups attracting
21 research include young employees (e.g. Hanvold *et al.*, 2016; Härmä, 2015), returners to
22 employment markets (e.g. Vanroelen, 2017; Wiese and Knecht, 2015), white collar, managers
23 and employees of large organisations (e.g. Fuertes *et al.*, 2013; Ehnert, 2009; Clements-
24 Croome, 2005), women (e.g. Zbyszewska, 2013; Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2010), disabled and
25 chronically ill employees (e.g. Nelissen *et al.* 2016; Koolhaas *et al.*, 2011), workers employed
26 in precarious employment (e.g. Berglund, 2015; De Witte *et al.*, 2015) and employees caught
27 in cycles of unemployment and employment (e.g. McCollum, 2012; Flude, 2000). A further
28 range of literature draws attention to specific types and groups of employees. This research
29 relates sustainable HRM to healthcare employees (Hägglund *et al.*, 2016), shift workers (Van
30 de Ven *et al.* 2014), low skilled employees (House of Commons, 2008), low paid employees
31 (Devlin and Gold, 2014) and agency employees (Zhang *et al.*, 2015). Overall, there is a sense
32 sustainable HRM is principally used by some employers to plug gaps in labour markets, rather
33 than a means to improve the quality of working life more generally.
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56 No one methodological approach dominates empirical studies (see Figure I). For
57 example, nine adopt a quantitative approach (e.g. Van Dam *et al.*, 2017; Nelissen *et al.* 2016),
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3 seven a mixed methods/case study approach (e.g. Smith and Pitt, 2008; Lund, 2004) and six
4 are defined by qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews (e.g. Williams *et al.*
5 2010; Zientara, 2009). A further and smaller range of articles are based on secondary data,
6 typically governmental data (e.g. Ahonen, 2015; Van de Ven *et al.*, 2014), and content analysis
7 of employer documentation (e.g. Ehnert *et al.*, 2013; Ehnert, 2009). **Of note, however, is a**
8 **range of studies based on experimentation, concentrating specifically on preparing school**
9 **leavers for employment markets** (Akkermans *et al.*, 2015; Salmela-Aro and Vuori, 2015). On
10 the whole it seems a lack of empirical research suggests there is plenty more to find out about
11 sustainable HRM, especially in terms of how employees experience and shape such practices.
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25 How sustainable HRM is conceptualised varies considerably, although organisational
26 behaviour (OB) and medical/health-based/OH scholarly traditions are disproportionately
27 represented in the literature (see Figure I). Indeed, articles of this kind represent more than 60
28 per cent of studies on sustainable HRM. Within this literature, OB approaches include the
29 application of reasoned action approach (Nelissen *et al.* 2016), integrative person approach
30 (Flude, 2000) and uncertainty navigation model (Sweeny and Ghane, 2015). Medical/health-
31 based/OH approaches applied include, for instance, theories based on inequalities in health
32 (Burdorf and Schuring, 2015), work environment impact scale (Williams *et al.*, 2010) and
33 hazard analysis (Van de Ven *et al.*, 2014). An emphasis on OB and medical approaches seems
34 to further confirm how current understandings of sustainable HRM are principally based on
35 post-corporatist employment relations, where individualistic employment relations command
36 vastly more attention than their collective equivalents.
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54 That said, wider theoretical frameworks are used to conceptualise sustainable HRM
55 (see Figure I). Sociological theories, such as work systems (Docherty *et al.*, 2009) and human
56 capital development (McBride and Mustchin, 2013), have been used to conceptualise
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3 sustainable HRM. Economic approaches, on the other hand, appear strongly influenced by
4 theories related to labour markets (e.g. Mannila, 2015; Devlin and Gold, 2014). Further
5 approaches distinguishable from the wider crop of literature explore the political discourse of
6 sustainable HRM (Zbyszewska, 2013) and notions of the built environment (Gould, 2009;
7 Clements-Croome, 2005). Overall, it seems reasonable to suggest a wider range of theories
8 should be used to study sustainable HRM.
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22 **Widening the net: Making employee interests the focus of sustainable HRM**

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25 **Discussions so far reveal employer interests**, often supported by governments, dominate the
26 extant sustainable HRM literature. If anything, the majority of the extant sustainable HRM
27 literature reflects the abandonment of corporatism from the early 1980s, whereby collective
28 bargaining was undermined in favour of individualistic work arrangements particularly in
29 countries such as the USA and UK (Bamber *et al.*, 2011). The attention now shifts to exploring
30 sustainable HRM themes in relation to scholarly fields where employee interests are privileged
31 over employer agendas. Therefore, this section of the article considers trade unions as key and
32 under-recognised parties to sustainable HRM. Trade unions are included in this part of the
33 article for three reasons. **First, the extant literature is remiss in terms of recognising how**
34 **contemporary HRM practice reflects gains made over many decades by labour movements.**
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36 Second, the extant literature does not reflect the nature and role of contemporary trade unions.
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38 Third, even when many advanced industrial nations have abandoned or heavily diluted
39 corporatist traditions, **trade unions remain an important means by which employee interests are**
40 **brought to the attention of employers and governments.** This section also proposes employee
41 self-organisation, typically through a variety of acts of coping and micro-resistance, as a further
42 key and under-recognised aspect of sustainable HRM. The emphasis on self-organisation
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3 reflects in part the decline and marginalisation of corporatism and trade unions and how self-
4 organised practices represent further, yet informal means by which employers are reminded of
5 employee interests in the modern era.
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10 *Industrial relations and sustainable HRM*

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14 A key feature of industrial relations literature is the unique contribution of trade unions in
15 supporting many groups of disadvantaged or non-core workers. Such support typically comes
16 via collective bargaining, including works councils and wider voice mechanisms. Many
17 contemporary employers may not see the activities of trade unions as beneficial, but there
18 seems little doubt trade unions can play a central part in delivering sustainable HRM outcomes.
19 For instance, recent research reveals trade unions as facilitators of employment for disabled
20 employees (Richards and Sang, 2016) and having a positive influence on employer disability
21 practices (Bacon and Hoque, 2015). In terms of gender, trade unions play a key role in
22 narrowing gender pay gaps (Callan, 2011; McGuinness *et al.*, 2011), lowering wage
23 discrimination (Triventi, 2013), leading on equal pay litigation (Guillaume, 2015) and
24 supporting employees facing domestic violence (Wibberley *et al.*, 2018). Research further
25 indicates how trade unions question employer practices concerning the imposition of
26 compulsory retirement ages (Byford and Wong, 2016). Trade unions increasingly represent
27 and organise EU migrant workers (James and Karmowska, 2012), hyper-mobile migrants
28 (Bernsten and Lillie, 2014) and contingent employees (MacKenzie, 2010), all of which are
29 widely recognised as unsustainable forms of employment, yet typically off the radar of
30 mainstream HRM practice. It is also the case embryonic trade unionism is an increasing feature
31 of sex work (Gall, 2007), with attempts to make employment more sustainable for employees
32 typically marginal or completely off the agenda of HRM practitioners.
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3 The literature indicates a range of further ways trade unions can work with employers
4 to support sustainable HRM agendas. A key forum for such activity is works councils, often
5 firm-level compliments to national or sectoral bargaining arrangements (Grund and Schmitt,
6 2011). In such situations, trade unions use works councils to increase levels of trust and
7 organisational justice for employees (Kougiannou *et al.*, 2015), critical in terms of fostering
8 good, respectful and mutually productive employment relationships. It has been demonstrated,
9 moreover, how works councils can contribute to job satisfaction, by directly and indirectly
10 affecting changes in work processes, the working environment and job context (Grund and
11 Schmitt, 2011).
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25 In more general terms, employer-trade union partnership agreements have been linked
26 to lower employee turnover (Pohler and Luchak, 2015) and sickness absence (Goerke and
27 Pannenberg, 2015). Such arrangements lead to mutual positive outcomes when employers seek
28 to introduce new and notoriously difficult to manage annualised working (Ryan and Wallace,
29 2016) and wider working time arrangements (Fagan and Walthery, 2011). Further advantages
30 of working in partnership comes in terms of making corporate social responsibility initiatives
31 more effective (Harvey *et al.*, 2017), supporting organisations expanding into growing markets
32 (e.g. green economy), and increasing opportunities for employment levels and high quality and
33 highly paid jobs (Antonioli and Mazzanti, 2017). Further, it has been demonstrated how trade
34 unions can be drivers in organisational productivity (Vernon and Rogers, 2013), global
35 economic growth (Lia, 2013) and addressing insufficient economic demand (Kelly, 2015), all
36 of which map neatly on to notions of sustainable HRM.
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54 There is a wider role for trade unions to play in sustainable HRM, particularly in terms
55 of decreasing the impact of employment on social benefits and public health systems. For
56 instance, trade unions are leaders in terms of influencing employer decisions related to paying
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3 the “living wage” (Prowse and Fells, 2016). Trade unions are also key actors in terms of
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5 campaigning against low pay and wage stagnation (Kelly, 2015). Despite many changes in how
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7 employers and governments make provisions for employees in retirement, trade unions remain
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9 key in the protection of pension rights (Flynn *et al.*, 2013) and the development of occupational
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11 pension systems (Kuene, 2018). Further, employers, employees and wider society stand to
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13 benefit from trade union practices designed to lead to learning partnerships (Cassell and Lee,
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15 2009) and an equalisation of training opportunities in organisations (Hoque and Bacon, 2008).
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17 Taken together, it can be seen how trade unions represent a unique means to lead, as well as
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19 directly and indirectly shape, sustainable HRM agendas.
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25 *Sustainable HRM and studies of the labour process*

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28 Much of contemporary labour process research is defined by accounts of self-organised
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30 attempts to resist problematic people management practices. In other words, largely non-
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32 unionised employees, act as understated, yet key parties to subverting unsustainable HRM
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34 practices. A range of themes emerge in terms of analysing labour process research in relation
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36 to sustainable HRM. First, there are studies based on how self-organised employees cope with
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38 unsustainable expectations from employers. Examples of employees coping in difficult
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40 circumstances includes deflecting the pressures of work by taking selective absence and
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42 mentally reframing key parts of jobs (Clark and Thompson, 2015). In a further study, line
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44 managers colluded with subordinates, offering employees ‘alternative’ leave options when
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46 given strict procedures to manage sickness absence (Hadjisolomou, 2015). Further studies
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48 reveal a range of mostly individualised forms of employee coping. Examples include mental
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50 distancing (Sandiford and Seymour, 2011), fiddling with fixed times to make certain aspects
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52 of the job tolerable (Lundberg and Karlsson, 2011) and the deployment of anti-burnout tactics,
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3 including retreating to the bathroom to cry, talk to oneself, chat with friends, talk on the phone,
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5 surf the Internet, stretching and simply doing nothing (Lindqvist and Olsson, 2017).
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9 Many studies of the labour process, however, provide accounts of employees resisting
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11 HRM practices. Call centres feature prominently in such studies, with many studies considering
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13 how tightly controlled labour processes and unsustainable forms of HRM present a range of
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15 opportunities for employee resistance (McFadden, 2014). Further studies consider front-line
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17 employee experiences of tightly controlled labour processes and how experiences of this kind
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19 generate humour and minor acts of defiance, which help to shape and galvanise an autonomous
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21 and well-being protecting shopfloor or team culture (Crowley *et al.*, 2014; Korczynski, 2011;
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23 Richards and Kosmala, 2013; Taylor and Bain, 2003). Such is the impact of self-organised
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25 forms of resistance, even in the most difficult of working environments, research suggests
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27 management regimes come to accommodate employee attributes and practices into their labour
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29 processes (Hastings and MacKinnon, 2017), thus making employment sustainable. A wide-
30
31 range of other forms of self-organised employee resistance, designed to take the harsher edges
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33 off difficult working conditions, is reflected in this type of literature. For example, employees
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35 mirroring employer problematic behaviour (Laaser, 2016), spreading a lack of goodwill within
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37 and between teams (Ellway, 2013), slowing down and moderating the pace expected in many
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39 aspects of production and service provisions (Carey and Foster, 2011; Harris and Ogbonna,
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41 2004) and foot-dragging as a means to cope with the pace of work (Ybema and Horvers, 2017).
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43 The key issue is acts of this kind may on the one hand be branded as “employee misbehaviour”,
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45 but in another sense, represent a range of key practices many employees take to make
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47 employment sustainable. Practices of this kind seem to emerge in situations where HRM
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49 practitioners or line managers have little control or concern over practices designed to unfairly
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51 stretch worker capacity to perform.
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3 A further key development involves employees increasingly taking to the Internet, most
4 specifically in terms of the use of social media and smart phones, to explore new and creative
5 forms of coping and new ways to express conflict and resistance (Richards, 2008). In the most
6 general sense, an evolving Internet brings a wide-range of new advantages to sustain
7 employment for employees in an age of declining trade union influence (Richards, 2011). More
8 precisely, labour process research establishes the importance of social media platforms in
9 creating on-line coping communities, or spaces making employment sustainable, which extend
10 far beyond any community organised in relation to the work setting (Ellis and Richards, 2009;
11 Sayers and Fachira, 2015). In these situations, employees often self-organise on an
12 international basis, share details of work, share how they experience work and provide and
13 seek advice on work matters from each other (Cohen and Richards, 2015). Further research
14 highlights how taking to social media can lead to employees regaining a sense of control and
15 attachment to their occupational group or professional identity (Richards and Kosmala, 2013).
16 Some researchers go as far as to say such activities are more akin to ‘communities of
17 resistance’, where employees of anti-trade union organisations create or appropriate discussion
18 forums to share frustrations and expose inner workings of outwardly reputable multinational
19 corporations (Bancarzewski and Hardy, 2017). Indeed, research based on the activities of
20 employee bloggers reveals how activities of this kind act as counter-hegemonic forces against
21 corporate rhetoric (Schoneboom, 2007), effectively serving as a new and emergent labour
22 organising function (Schoneboom, 2011). The full range of ways employees can self-organise
23 appears to represent an important and emergent, yet neglected facet of sustainable HRM. What
24 is more, acts seemingly based on employee defiance, combined with traditional and emergent
25 activities of trade unions, represent further means to achieve the goals of sustainable HRM, a
26 contribution rarely acknowledged by employers or governments.
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Discussion and conclusions: Towards a map and research agenda for employee-centred sustainable HRM

The aim of the article was to develop extant notions of sustainable HRM to better reflect employee interests. As noted above, in one sense understanding sustainable HRM appears straightforward – it concerns a way and means by which HRM practice develops and oversees attempts to make sure employees are willing and able to stay in employment now and for as long as reasonably possible (Van Vuuren and Van Dam, 2013) and foster, but not exploit workforces (Docherty *et al.*, 2009) (see Figure II). What is more, how employment can be made more sustainable may well represent contested terrain, yet it seems attempts to make employment more sustainable leads to benefits for all parties to the employment relationship. Taken together, if HRM practice can create settings where employees are paid well, line managers treat employees with respect, employees can expect good quality jobs and benefit from some level of employer-led healthcare, then there will probably be a neutral to minimal impact of HRM practice on public benefits and healthcare schemes (see Figure II). However, in another sense, it seems these assumptions represent only a surface or partial understanding, with sustainable HRM, as evidenced in the first part of the review, far from being a straightforward matter for HRM practitioners and line managers to contemplate, suggesting sustainable HRM remains an aspiration for many employers and in some instances a cynical and short-term attempt to engage employees. Such literature, moreover, is very much influenced by ideological undertones of a post-corporatist era, where notions of collective and centralised industrial relations systems and social partnership arrangements have been abandoned or ‘airbrushed’ out of contemporary practice, representing in itself a barrier to employee-centred sustainable HRM.

FIGURE II GOES HERE

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3 In specific terms, the literature linked to the built environment revealed the following.
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5 The findings from this facet of the article highlighted, for example, how built environment and
6 ergonomics specialists, via their expertise related to intelligent and smart buildings (Clements-
7 Croome, 2005), managing and monitoring air quality (Smith and Pitt, 2009), building
8 perceptions of well-being (Martin *et al.*, 2013) and design of comfortable workspaces
9 (Clements-Croome, 2005), make work pleasant, more productive and therefore more
10 sustainable (see Figure II). Indeed, the built environment literature represents a distinct facet
11 to sustainable HRM. Such literature highlights a key role for built environment and ergonomics
12 specialists and concepts in sustainable HRM, but at the same time reveals a range of important
13 barriers to achieving the goals of sustainable HRM. One barrier is the low or marginal status
14 of built environment and ergonomics specialists in work settings (Zink, 2014). To overcome a
15 barrier of this kind, it seems reasonable to say more research highlighting the positive impact
16 of built environment and ergonomics specialists is required, but in doing so, more needs to be
17 done in terms of effectively feeding the findings back to employers.
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36 A second facet reveals how HRM practice and practitioners, increasingly including line
37 managers, hold a key and central status in the execution of effective sustainable HRM practice.
38 For instance (see Figure II), the research clearly indicates how HRM practitioners and line
39 managers can play a key part in sustainable HRM via the introduction and effective
40 management of flexible working practices (Atkinson and Sandiford, 2016), equality practices
41 (Zbyszewska, 2013), nurturing respectful employer-employee relations (Järlström *et al.* 2018)
42 and the creation and design of high-quality jobs (Ehnert *et al.*, 2013). However, the review
43 revealed a range of barriers to this aspect of sustainable HRM, including hidden and alienating
44 forms of work organisation (Lund, 2004) and discrimination against all but core employees
45 (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, the findings indicate a need for more research to explore
46 how HRM practitioners and line managers work with trade unions and local staff
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3 representatives, as well as non-union staff representatives, to execute effective forms of
4 sustainable HRM. It seems more research is also required in terms of how HRM practice can
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6 be adapted to make employment sustainable for employees with low and marginal
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8 organisational status.
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13 The extant literature identified a range of further third parties key to achieving the
14 central aims of sustainable HRM (see Figure II). In this instance, while there is a clear emphasis
15 on the role of corporate social responsibility (Shen, 2011) in relation to these practices, research
16 revealed OH and wider health specialists (Eriksson *et al.*, 2017; Koolhaas *et al.*, 2011), civil
17 society organisations (Zientara, 2009) and governments (House of Commons, 2008) to
18 represent important parties to sustainable HRM. It seems there is some overlap in the input of
19 parties to this facet of sustainable HRM, but what sets this facet aside is the criticality of a
20 range of third-parties to achieving sustainable HRM. This type of research reveals how
21 employers can work in partnership with various external organisations, or under the legislative
22 guidance of governments, to create workplaces capable of reflecting the core characteristics of
23 sustainable HRM (see Figure II). However, despite a range of research reflecting this facet of
24 sustainable HRM, there appears to be scope for more research contemplating the role of the
25 employer in such practices, as research revealed a further range of barriers to sustainable HRM
26 in the form of employer reluctance to engage with wider parties to the employment relationship
27 (e.g. Hansen *et al.*, 2013). Further research should aim to better explain why employers hold
28 contradictory views towards sustainable HRM.
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51 Trade unions represent a further and largely unrecognised party to sustainable HRM.
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53 **Principally centring on a more contemporary role for trade unions in the workplace, research**
54 **reveals sustainable HRM to be achievable through**, for example, influencing disability and
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56 wider equality practices (Bacon and Hoque, 2015), supporting vulnerable employees (James
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3 and Karmowska, 2012), putting pressure on employers to close gender pay gaps (McGuinness
4 *et al.*, 2011) and generally working with employers through partnership agreements to deliver
5 many of the objectives of sustainable HRM (Pohler and Luchak, 2015) (see Figure II). Largely
6 as a result of the decline of corporatism, the influence of trade unions in the workplace and
7 beyond has diminished on an international scale in recent times, and although trade unions face
8 a far from certain future, which is in itself a key barrier to sustainable HRM, it seems trade
9 unions retain a capacity to shape sustainable HRM practices beyond the organisations they are
10 recognised by. There appears to be a good range of research on such matters, but more research
11 should be undertaken to explore trade unions working in partnership with employers to
12 facilitate sustainable HRM. By doing so could help make a case for a return to a wider use of
13 collective bargaining arrangements and the rebuilding of corporatism.

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30 A final emergent facet to sustainable HRM involved individual and self-organised
31 employees, as evidently noted in studies aligned to labour process traditions. In this instance
32 employees act outwith the jurisdiction of employers, governments, OH and wider healthcare
33 practitioners, civil society organisations and increasingly, trade unions. Indeed, what we see
34 here is research (see Figure II) suggesting sustainable HRM can be achieved through micro-
35 resistance (McFadden, 2014), attempts to create an autonomous shopfloor culture (Korczynski,
36 2011), organic forms of labour organising (Schoneboom, 2011), coping practices (Cohen and
37 Richards, 2015) and the appropriation of social media platforms (Schoneboom, 2007). While
38 these activities are unlikely to be viewed by many HRM practitioners and line managers in the
39 same light, acts of this kind have not historically been researched in terms of contributing to
40 sustainable HRM. This appears an oversight as these practices appear to fill or relate to gaps
41 previously identified in the article, particularly in terms of the rhetorical side of sustainable
42 HRM practice (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2001) and how the best features of sustainable HRM are
43 typically reserved for core employees (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2010). It is also evident how there
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3 is not a short supply of research indirectly looking at sustainable HRM aspects of the labour
4 process. However, it is fair to say more research could be directed towards a better integration
5 of labour process theories into how sustainable HRM is both understood and practiced.
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7 Specifically, more research, as stated above, should aim to explore how self-organised
8 employees could be a key, yet until now under-explored means to achieve an employee-centred
9 model of sustainable HRM.
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18 As noted in Figure II, employee-centred sustainable HRM seems only achievable if the
19 many direct and indirect parties to the employment relationship work together, ideally as social
20 partners (see Figure II). Indeed, to be truly effective, sustainable HRM requires at the very least
21 some form of micro-level corporatism. For many HRM practitioners and line managers,
22 particularly in countries such as the UK or USA, such a perspective is unlikely to be accepted
23 without a significant change in attitude towards how the employment relationship is managed
24 on a day-to-day basis. That is, there is likely to be resistance to ceding a degree of power in the
25 day-to-day management of employees, but in return there is likely to be sustainable gains in
26 terms of employee commitment, engagement and productivity. However, without a wider
27 political compulsion to engage in at least micro-forms of corporatism, it seems many employers
28 will need to lead on such matters, effectively inviting a range of parties to the employment
29 relationship, to work on making employment sustainable. As such, a final specific research gap
30 concerns researching micro-corporatist contexts, ideally using participatory and democratic
31 forms of action research, to develop practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human
32 purposes (Reason and Bradbury, 2008).
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54 In broader and general terms, the review reveals a wide range of further research
55 priorities (see Figure I), not least because of the many mutual benefits achievable via
56 sustainable forms of HRM. First, there is scope for more empirical and/or conceptual research
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3 on sustainable HRM. Second, extant research is dominated by advanced industrial settings,
4 suggesting far more research needs to be conducted on sustainable HRM in relation to
5 industrialising contexts (Aust *et al.*, 2019). Third, research is required on a wider range of
6 occupational and professional employee groups than at present. Fourth, extant research
7 specifically on sustainable HRM seems biased towards quantitative methods and aligned
8 positivist paradigms, suggesting future research should involve more use of qualitative
9 methods and wider research paradigms. Fifth, as much of the sustainable HRM research seems
10 dominated by OB and OH perspectives, more should be done in terms of designing future
11 research based on key industrial relations and labour process themes, including works councils,
12 collective bargaining, and employee coping mechanisms and acts of micro-resistance.
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27 Overall, sustainable HRM is a well-researched topic across the many sub-fields of
28 HRM and employment-related studies. However, on closer inspection it is evident how there
29 is clear scope for more research based on further conceptualising and exploring the many finer,
30 hidden, inter-linked, yet key facets to achieving employee-centred sustainable HRM.
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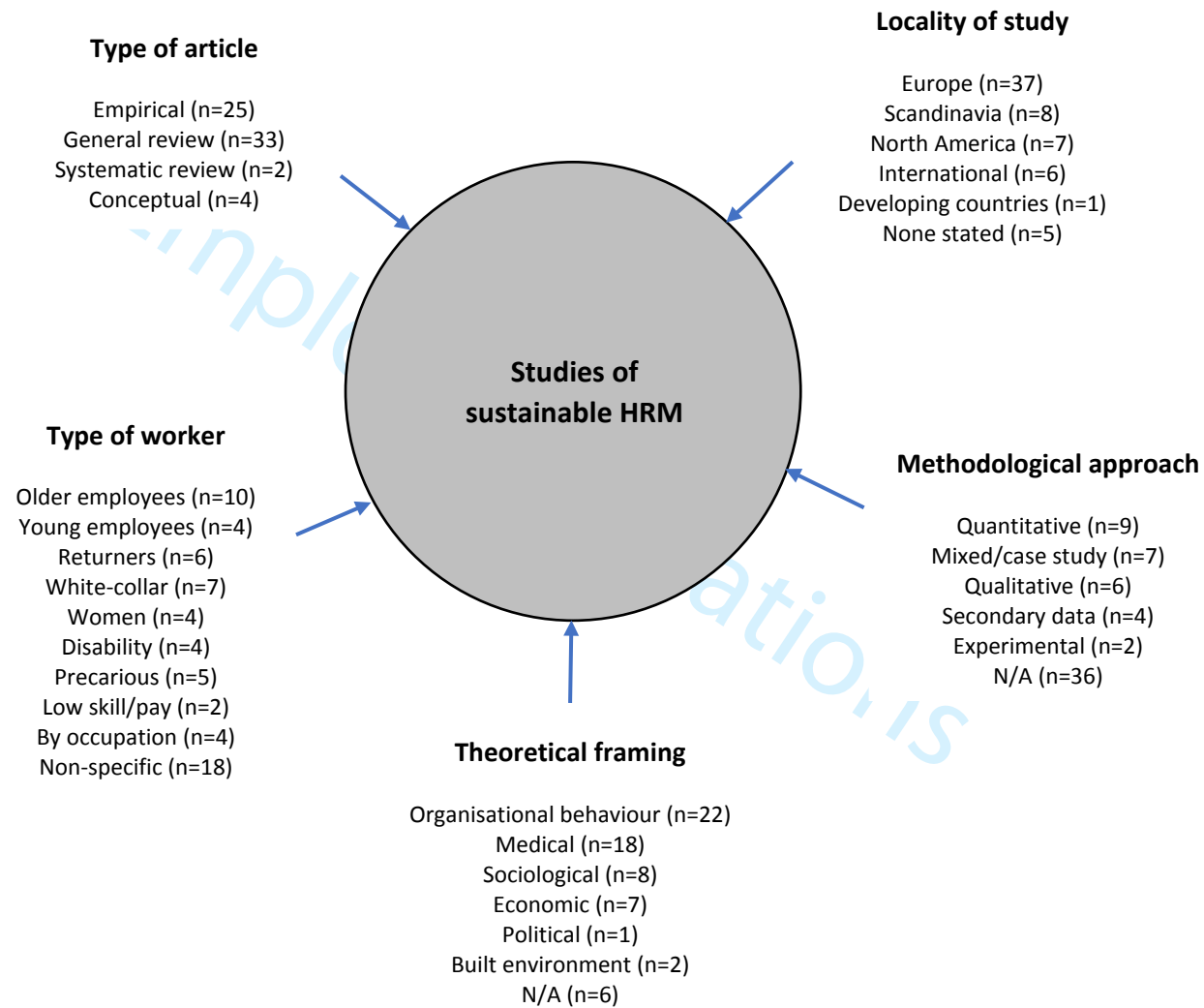


Figure I: Mapping the many approaches to researching sustainable HRM (n=64)

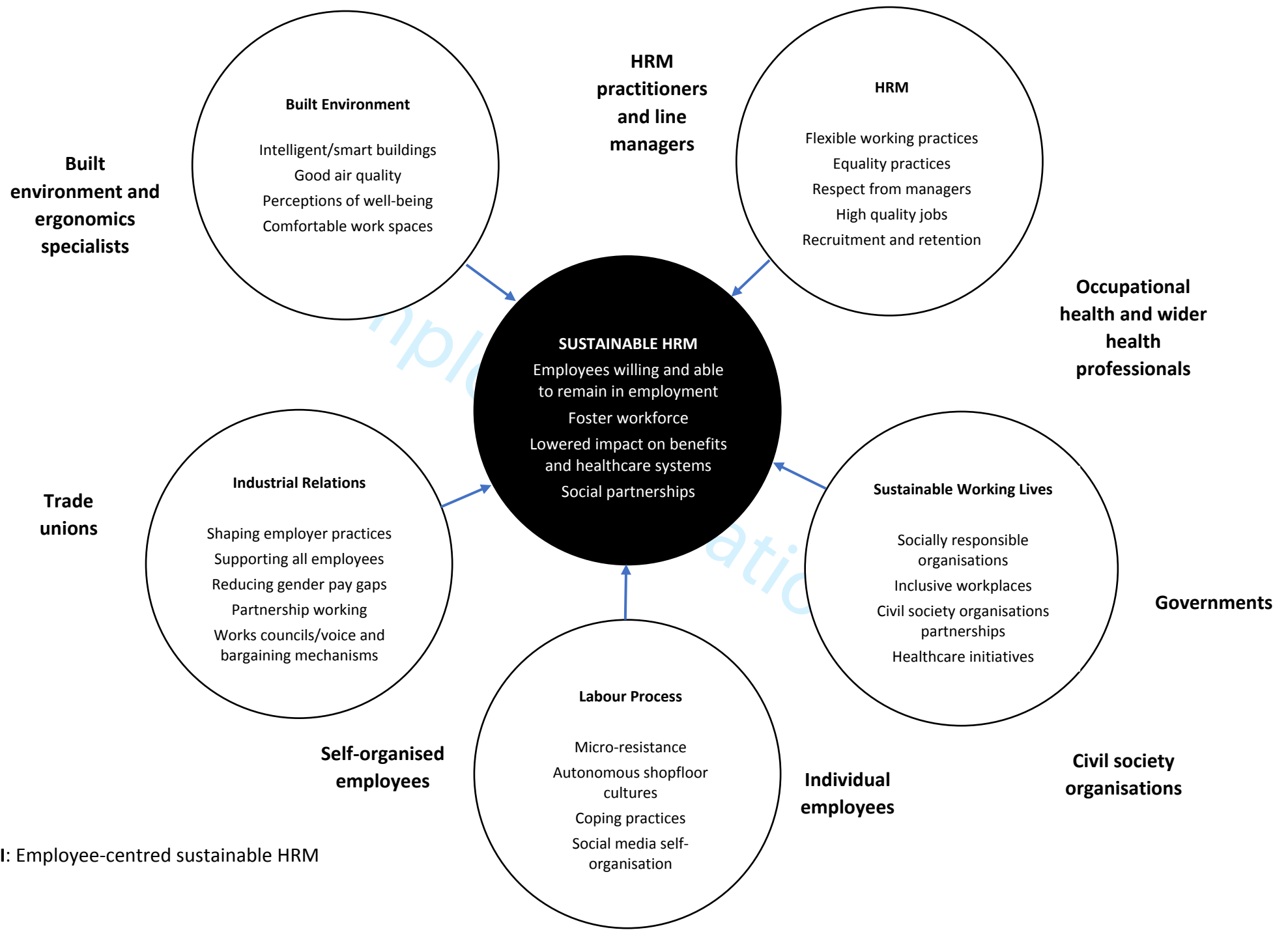


Figure II: Employee-centred sustainable HRM

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