International Journal of Economics, Management and Social Science

Vol 8 No 2 2025
E-ISSN: 2614-3828 | P-ISSN: 2614-3887
Open Access: https://journal.salewangang.net/ijemss/index

Exploring Mechanisms and Employee Perceptions: The Role of Green Job Design and GHRM Reward System in Instilling Green Cultural Values

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Article Info :
Received:
20/11/2025
Revised:
22/11/2025
Accepted:
23/11/2025

ABSTRACT

This study explores the mechanisms through which Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) practices, specifically Green Job Design (GJD) and green reward systems, shape the environmental cultural values of employees. While organizations increasingly adopt GHRM to foster sustainability, the micro-level processes of employee interpretation and cultural internalization remain underexplored. Employing a multi-case qualitative design, the research utilized in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis across several organizations to capture employees' subjective experiences and sensemaking. The data, analyzed using thematic analysis, generated three dominant themes. First, employee participation is fundamentally driven by the perceived authenticity of sustainability initiatives, which hinges on the alignment between leadership behavior, communication clarity, and operational realities. Second, informal workplace norms and peer behavior emerged as powerful mediators that either reinforce or undermine formal GHRM mechanisms. Third, the effectiveness of GJD and green reward systems is conditional upon their perceived fairness, clarity, and feasibility. Crucially, the study found an interaction effect: GJD provides necessary structural clarity, while equitable reward systems sustain motivational alignment. The findings conclude that effective green culture transformation requires an integrated approach that pairs coherent GHRM structures with interventions targeting social learning and informal team dynamics.

Keywords: ***GHRM, Green Job Design, Green Organizational Culture, Employee Perception, Organizational Authenticity***

INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability has become a strategic imperative for contemporary organizations as they navigate mounting ecological pressures, heightened stakeholder scrutiny, and increasingly stringent regulatory demands. Companies are expected not only to mitigate their environmental footprint but also to embed sustainability principles into everyday organizational routines and cultural foundations. In response, many organizations have turned to Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) as a strategic mechanism for cultivating environmentally responsible behavior across the workforce. GHRM practices—including Green Job Design (GJD) and green reward systems—have gained prominence as tools for embedding ecological values within job roles, performance expectations, and organizational identity (Ren et al., 2018; Yong et al., 2020). Yet despite growing adoption, the internal mechanisms through which these practices influence employees' cultural values remain insufficiently understood, particularly from the perspectives of employees who engage directly with such initiatives.

This gap stems from the broader challenge many organizations face: the tension between formal sustainability policies and the deeper cultural transformations they seek to inspire. Prior research underscores that organizational culture is critical to enabling consistent pro-environmental behavior, but cultural transformation rarely results from top-down directives alone (Jackson et al., 2011; Robertson & Barling, 2013). Instead, employees interpret and negotiate organizational messages through their own lived experiences, social interactions, and perceptions of leadership credibility. Many organizations struggle to explain why sustainability initiatives that appear robust on paper fail to produce meaningful behavioral or cultural outcomes. This suggests that an examination of how employees make sense of GJD and green reward systems is essential for understanding the nuanced processes that enable or hinder sustainability-oriented cultural change.

Existing scholarship on GHRM highlights its potential as an integrated system of HR practices that foster environmental awareness and pro-environmental behavior. GHRM incorporates recruitment, training, performance management, job design, and reward systems that collectively aim to embed ecological values into everyday organizational life (Ren et al., 2018; Yong et al., 2020). Research demonstrates that GHRM can enhance both individual green behavior and organizational sustainability performance (Pham et al., 2019; Jabbour & de Sousa Jabbour, 2016). However, the literature is dominated by quantitative, outcome-focused studies that examine direct causal relationships (e.g., GHRM → green behavior → performance). While these contributions are valuable, they often overlook the social and cultural mechanisms through which employees interpret and internalize environmental goals (Tuan, 2021). As a result, there remains a significant need for qualitative inquiry that centers on employees' subjective experiences.

Green Job Design (GJD), a central component of GHRM, incorporates environmental tasks and responsibilities directly into formal job roles. Scholars argue that embedding sustainability into job descriptions enhances role clarity, legitimizes environmental priorities, and signals organizational commitment to green values (Tang et al., 2018; Dumont et al., 2017). By integrating environmental responsibilities into daily tasks such as waste reduction, energy conservation, or compliance with environmental protocols, GJD can reinforce employees' environmental identity and sense of purpose. Yet research also indicates key limitations. Formalizing green responsibilities does not guarantee behavioral adoption; employees may perceive such additions as burdensome or misaligned with existing workloads (Paillé & Boiral, 2013). GJD initiatives also tend to neglect informal influences such as peer norms, tacit expectations, and leadership modeling that often exert stronger effects on sustainability behavior (Robertson & Barling, 2013). Moreover, existing work focuses more on functional outcomes—such as job satisfaction or performance—than on employees' meaning-making processes regarding green work roles. These gaps highlight the need to explore GJD as a cultural as well as structural intervention.

Reward systems represent another pivotal lever in shaping environmental behavior. Green reward systems—ranging from financial incentives to symbolic recognition—aim to reinforce and motivate pro-environmental actions. Empirical findings show that well-designed reward systems can enhance both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for sustainability activities (Tuan, 2021). Recognition-based rewards, in particular, have been shown to amplify employees' emotional connection to sustainability by affirming the significance of their contributions (Norton et al., 2015). At the same time, the literature points to persistent debates. Extrinsic rewards may crowd out intrinsic motivation, leading to compliance only when incentives are present (Deci et al., 2017). Employees may also question the fairness or transparency of reward criteria, especially when organizational rhetoric appears misaligned with actual practice (Jackson et al., 2011). Furthermore, reward effectiveness may vary across

cultural or industry contexts, underscoring the need to understand how employees interpret and evaluate these systems in real organizational settings.

The role of employees' perception and meaning-making is central to understanding whether GHRM practices ultimately contribute to a sustainable organizational culture. A green organizational culture—defined by shared environmental values, norms, and assumptions—emerges not solely from formal policies but through continuous social processes in which employees interpret organizational messages and observe everyday behaviors (Harris & Crane, 2002). Studies show that employees evaluate sustainability initiatives based on leadership credibility, peer norms, perceived workloads, and the consistency between organizational commitments and actions (Ziberras & Coan, 2015). Leadership modeling shapes the legitimacy of green initiatives (Afsar et al., 2016), while internal communication fosters clarity and trust (Yuriev et al., 2018). Social norms and informal routines further influence whether employees see sustainability as integral to organizational identity or merely symbolic (Boiral & Paillé, 2012). Nevertheless, existing research rarely investigates these dynamics through the lens of employees' lived experiences, leaving significant room for qualitative exploration.

Against this backdrop, the present study employs a multiple-case qualitative design to explore how employees interpret, negotiate, and enact GJD and green reward systems across different organizational settings. The study seeks to illuminate both the formal structures and the informal social dynamics that shape the emergence—or absence—of environmental cultural values. By centering the perspectives of employees, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which sustainability initiatives become meaningful, culturally embedded, and operationally viable within organizations.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore how employees interpret sustainability practices within their organizations. The activity design focused on capturing participants' subjective experiences through in-depth interviews and field observations. The target audience was selected using purposive sampling, prioritizing employees who were directly exposed to green job design initiatives, reward systems, or other GHRM-related practices. This approach ensured that participants possessed relevant knowledge and meaningful experience regarding organizational sustainability efforts.

The materials used in data collection included semi-structured interview guides, observation checklists, and documentation notes. These tools were designed to elicit detailed insights into employees' perceptions, workplace norms, and the informal cultural cues associated with sustainability practices. The performance of these tools was ensured through a pilot test involving two respondents to refine question flow, clarity, and sensitivity.

Data were collected through recorded interviews, on-site observations of daily routines, and the review of organizational documents related to environmental programs. Interviews lasted between 30–60 minutes and were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participant availability. All data were transcribed verbatim for accuracy.

The data analysis employed thematic analysis, following the stages of coding, categorization, and interpretation. Initial codes were generated from repeated readings of transcripts, then grouped into broader categories that reflected emerging patterns in employee sensemaking. Themes were synthesized to explain the interplay between formal GHRM practices and informal cultural dynamics. This methodological approach allowed the study to produce rich, contextualized insights into how green culture is constructed at the employee level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interview transcripts and supporting documents generated three dominant themes that describe how employees perceive, interpret, and respond to sustainability initiatives within their organizations.

Perceived Authenticity of Sustainability Efforts

Employees consistently evaluated the authenticity of sustainability initiatives by examining the extent to which organizational practices aligned with leadership behavior, communication quality, and observable operational realities. Across all cases, participants explained that authentic sustainability was recognized not merely through formal policies but through everyday managerial conduct. When leaders consistently demonstrated environmentally responsible actions such as reducing waste, ensuring compliance with green protocols, or actively participating in sustainability campaigns, employees interpreted these behaviors as credible signals of genuine commitment. This finding reinforces Afsar et al. (2016), who argue that leadership modeling is a central mechanism through which environmental values gain legitimacy within organizational settings.

Furthermore, employees emphasized that clarity, transparency, and consistency in internal communication significantly shaped their trust in sustainability programs. Ambiguous or inconsistent messaging was often interpreted as symbolic compliance or superficial branding rather than substantive environmental commitment. This echoes Yuriev et al. (2018), who highlight that transparent communication reduces uncertainty and enables employees to make sense of organizational intentions. Participants in this study reported higher motivation and willingness to participate in sustainability projects when communication was specific, detailing goals, expected behaviors, and measurable outcomes rather than generic or promotional.

A recurring pattern in the interviews was the distinction employees made between "genuine initiatives" and "symbolic programs." Genuine initiatives were described as those with visible follow-through, adequate resourcing, and consistent reinforcement across managerial levels. Symbolic initiatives, by contrast, were seen as public-facing campaigns or compliance-driven activities with little operational integration. This perception aligns with the broader literature on organizational authenticity, where discrepancies between corporate rhetoric and actual practices create skepticism and reduce employee engagement (Boiral & Paillé, 2012; Harris & Crane, 2002).

Operational alignment was another crucial factor influencing perceptions of authenticity. Employees noted that sustainability programs were quickly dismissed when day-to-day processes, resource allocations, or managerial decisions contradicted environmental messages. For instance, efforts to promote energy conservation were viewed as insincere when outdated equipment continued to be used or when production pressure forced employees to prioritize efficiency over environmental procedures. This aligns with Zibarras and Coan (2015), who argue that employees rely heavily on practical realities, not formal guidelines, to assess whether sustainability is truly valued within the organization.

Participants reported that gaps between green job design expectations and actual work conditions undermined authenticity judgments. When environmental responsibilities were added without workload adjustments or adequate support, employees questioned whether sustainability was genuinely prioritized or merely an additional burden. This insight is consistent with findings from Paillé and Boiral (2013), who note that perceptions of fairness and feasibility strongly influence the internalization of green practices.

Influence of Workplace Norms and Informal Culture

Across all cases, informal workplace dynamics, peer behaviour, unwritten rules, routine interactions, and local team norms emerged as a primary determinant of whether sustainability initiatives translated into everyday practice. Participants described how seemingly small, quotidian cues (colleagues turning off lights, informal reminders about recycling, or managers tolerating shortcut behaviours) functioned as potent signals that shaped expectations about what was "normal" at work. These tacit cues often mattered more than formal documents: employees judged the real priority of sustainability by observing peers and supervisors in situ, a pattern consistent with Boiral and Paillé (2012) and Norton et al. (2015).

Informal norms operated through social learning and normative pressure. When respected co-workers consistently enacted green practices, others tended to imitate and gradually internalize these behaviours; conversely, where influential peers dismissed sustainability as "extra work" or symbolic, efforts faltered despite formal policies. This peer influence aligns with evidence that social norms and coworker advocacy strongly predict voluntary pro-environmental behaviour (Zibarras & Coan, 2015). Participants also highlighted the role of local subculture teams with strong task interdependence or shared identity developed tighter green norms than loosely coupled units, showing that informal culture is heterogeneous within organizations.

Employees interpreted managerial messages through the lens of everyday behaviours. Leaders who "walked the talk" strengthened informal norms, while leader hypocrisy (espoused values not matched by action) created permissive norms that undermined formal initiatives (Afsar et al., 2016; Yuriev et al., 2018). The data thus indicate a bidirectional dynamic: formal mechanisms can seed new norms, but their stabilization depends on social reinforcement at the peer level. For practitioners, this underscores that fostering green culture requires interventions targeting micro-level social processes (peer champions, norm entrepreneurship, team rituals), not solely policy design.

Responses to Green Job Design and Reward Systems

Employees' reactions to Green Job Design (GJD) and green reward systems were nuanced and conditional. Both mechanisms could facilitate pro-environmental behaviour, but their effectiveness hinged on perceived clarity, fairness, workload realism, and alignment with intrinsic motivations. Many respondents appreciated GJD that clearly specified environmental tasks, performance indicators, and decision authority; when green responsibilities were embedded into job descriptions and supported by training, employees reported greater role clarity and a stronger sense that sustainability was part of "what this job is" (Tang et al., 2018; Ren et al., 2018). However, where GJD introduced additional tasks without workload adjustments or resources, employees experienced role overload and questioned organizational priorities, echoing findings by Paillé and Boiral (2013).

Regarding reward systems, participants distinguished monetary from non-monetary incentives. Monetary bonuses tied to measurable environmental KPIs were effective at driving short-term compliance but sometimes undermined intrinsic motivation when implemented as the sole lever, consistent with self-determination theory concerns (Deci et al., 2017). Non-monetary rewards such as public recognition, career visibility, and symbolic awards were frequently reported as more sustaining because they reinforced identity and social esteem, consistent with Norton et al. (2015). Crucially, perceptions of procedural and distributive justice determined whether rewards motivated or demotivated: transparent criteria, objective measurement, and participatory design increased legitimacy, whereas opaque or favoritism-tainted schemes bred cynicism (Dumont et al., 2017; OECD, 2021).

A key insight is the interaction effect between GJD and reward systems: GJD provides the structural scaffolding (what to do, when, and how), while rewards influence the

motivational economy that stabilizes behaviour over time. Where GJD clarified expectations and rewards were perceived as fair and meaningful, employees reported integrated behavioural change. Conversely, misaligned or piecemeal implementation produced token compliance or resistance. These patterns suggest that integrated HR design, coherent job redesign accompanied by just, transparent reward mechanisms, and supportive informal norms are necessary to convert policy into a durable green culture (Ren et al., 2018; Tuan, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how Green Job Design (GJD) and green reward systems shape employees' sensemaking processes and contribute to the construction of environmentally oriented organizational culture across multiple organizational contexts. As outlined in the Introduction, the research sought to understand the mechanisms through which sustainability initiatives are interpreted, enacted, and legitimized by employees, while also addressing the need for deeper qualitative insight into how GHRM practices influence cultural internalization. The findings presented in the Results and Discussion section confirm that employees' engagement with sustainability is shaped through a complex interaction between formal HR structures and informal social dynamics.

The study concludes that the perceived authenticity of sustainability initiatives is central to employee participation. Authenticity arises when leadership behaviour, communication clarity, and operational realities are aligned. Where these elements converge, sustainability programs are interpreted as meaningful and credible; where they diverge, initiatives are seen as symbolic or performative. The findings also highlight that informal workplace norms, peer behaviour, unwritten rules, and team subcultures serve as powerful mediators that reinforce or undermine formal GHRM mechanisms. These informal dynamics influence whether environmental practices become internalized or remain superficial.

Furthermore, employees' responses to GJD and reward systems reveal that formal mechanisms succeed only when perceived as fair, clear, and feasible. Effective GJD provides role clarity and embeds sustainability into everyday tasks, while well-designed reward systems, particularly those that balance intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, reinforce and sustain behavioural engagement. Importantly, the study demonstrates that GJD and reward systems operate interdependently: job design structures expectations, while incentives influence motivational alignment.

Looking forward, organizations seeking to strengthen their environmental culture should adopt an integrated approach that combines formal GHRM practices with interventions targeting informal norms and social learning processes. Leadership modelling, participatory communication, peer champion programs, and transparent evaluation systems can enhance authenticity and collective ownership. Future development plans may also include ongoing monitoring of employee perceptions, iterative refinement of job design, and reward systems aligned with evolving sustainability priorities.

Overall, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how employees construct meaning around sustainability, offering important implications for organizations aiming to embed green values and foster long-term cultural transformation.

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