SUSTAINABLE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Olga SÂRBU, Assoc. Prof., PhD
State University of Moldova
E-mail: olga.sarbu@usm.md
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6333-0101

Abstract

This article explores the importance of sustainable human resource management (HRM) in the context of ongoing organizational transformations, with a specific focus on the Republic of Moldova. As organizations face increasing pressures from digitalization, workforce mobility, demographic shifts, and changing employee expectations,

the need to implement sustainable HRM models becomes critical for long-term organizational performance and social stability.

The study aims to analyze the extent to which sustainable HRM practices-such as continuous professional development, employee well-being, ethical leadership, and inclusive policies-are applied in Moldovan organizations. The research methodology combines a review of theoretical literature with empirical investigation, including a structured questionnaire distributed among employees and interviews with HR professionals and managers across various sectors.

The results reveal that while there is growing interest in sustainable HRM, implementation remains inconsistent and often limited to surface-level initiatives. Organizations that invest in long-term employee development and promote participatory leadership tend to report higher retention rates, improved job satisfaction, and increased adaptability to change.

The study concludes with a proposed model for sustainable HRM adapted to the Moldovan socio-economic context, offering both academic insight and practical guidance for policymakers and organizational leaders.

Keywords: *sustainable human resource management, organizational change, employee retention, workforce development*

DOI: https://doi.org/10.59642/EDR.3.2025.14
JEL: M12, O15, Q01 **UDC:** 005:658.3(478)

Introduction

In recent decades, the organizational environment has undergone profound transformations, influenced by a range of global factors such as accelerated digitalization, technological advancement, the growing economic and social interdependencies worldwide, as well as the emergence of systemic crises - economic, health-related, ecological, or geopolitical in nature. These phenomena have generated an organizational climate characterized by uncertainty, rapid change, and constant pressure for innovation, adaptability, and efficiency. Organizations, regardless of size or field of activity, are compelled to rethink their strategies, structures, and internal processes in order to remain relevant and competitive in an ever-evolving context.

Digitalization, in particular, has become a catalytic force of transformation. Emerging technologies - artificial intelligence, automation, big data, cloud computing - have reshaped economic and social activities, profoundly influencing the organization of work, the types of skills required, and the relationships between employees and employers. Simultaneously, globalization has intensified competition and diversified the labor market, amplifying professional mobility as well as the complexity of intercultural management. On the other hand, socio-economic crises - such as the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical instability, or global inflation - have placed additional pressure on organizations, demanding rapid and sustainable solutions for resource management and operational stability.

In this dynamic and often unpredictable context, human resources gain unprecedented strategic importance. Human capital is no longer perceived as a mere production factor or a functional component of the organizational system, but rather as a central element in the process of adaptation, innovation, and sustainable transformation. Employees contribute actively to organizational success not only through their technical and functional skills, but also through their ability to learn continuously, collaborate, generate new ideas, and build effective interpersonal relationships. Moreover, in an era marked by volatility and rapid change, employee well-being, satisfaction, and engagement are directly linked to long-term organizational performance.

In this context, adopting a sustainable approach to human resource management becomes not just beneficial but necessary - ne that balances economic goals with a strong sense of social

responsibility and individual well-being. The idea of sustainable HRM took shape as a way to weave economic, social, and environmental considerations into how organizations manage their people, ultimately fostering more resilient and ethically grounded institutions. Unlike traditional models, which are primarily focused on productivity and individual performance, the sustainable approach seeks a balance between employee well-being, continuous professional development, fairness in labor relations, and the protection of human capital from disruptive changes. This perspective is particularly relevant today, as organizations must rapidly adapt to new working realities - remote work, automation, generational diversity, and ethical pressures from civil society.

Sustainable human resource management also reflects a forward-thinking approach to human capital - one that views employees as essential partners in achieving organizational success and as rightful beneficiaries of its progress. When companies embrace sustainable HR practices, they're better positioned to gain long-term advantages, minimize the risks linked to employee turnover, and adapt more readily to external pressures. At the same time, such practices help foster a fairer, more inclusive, and resilient society overall.

In this context, the present research aims to analyze the theoretical and practical foundations of sustainable human resource management, explore how it addresses contemporary challenges, and identify best practices capable of supporting organizational performance in a responsible and equitable manner. The study adopts an integrative approach, combining the analysis of specialized literature with relevant case studies, in order to shape a practical reference framework for the strategic transformation of human resource management.

Results obtained and discussions

Amid growing global crises, heightened corporate social responsibilities, and the ongoing shift toward a greener and more digital economy, sustainable human resource management (HRM) has emerged as a key strategic focus. In contrast to traditional HR models that center on operational efficiency, cost minimization, and short-term performance gains, sustainable HRM emphasizes a more balanced and accountable approach to managing human capital. It integrates economic, social, and environmental considerations directly into HR strategies and everyday practices [1, 2, 10].

Within academic discourse, sustainable HRM is typically defined as a framework of policies and actions aimed at fostering employee development, advancing social equity, promoting workplace well-being, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of human resources. This approach moves beyond immediate organizational metrics, shifting the focus toward institutional resilience, broader stakeholder accountability, and the safeguarding of human potential for future generations [1, p. 215].

A relevant theoretical framework for understanding sustainable HRM is the triple bottom line model proposed by Elkington [3], which advocates for a balance between profit (economic), people (social), and planet (environmental). Applied to the field of human resources (Figure 1), this model suggests that organizations should adopt practices that not only optimize costs and productivity but also protect the physical and mental health of employees, promote diversity and inclusion, and minimize negative impacts on the natural environment [2, p. 1073].

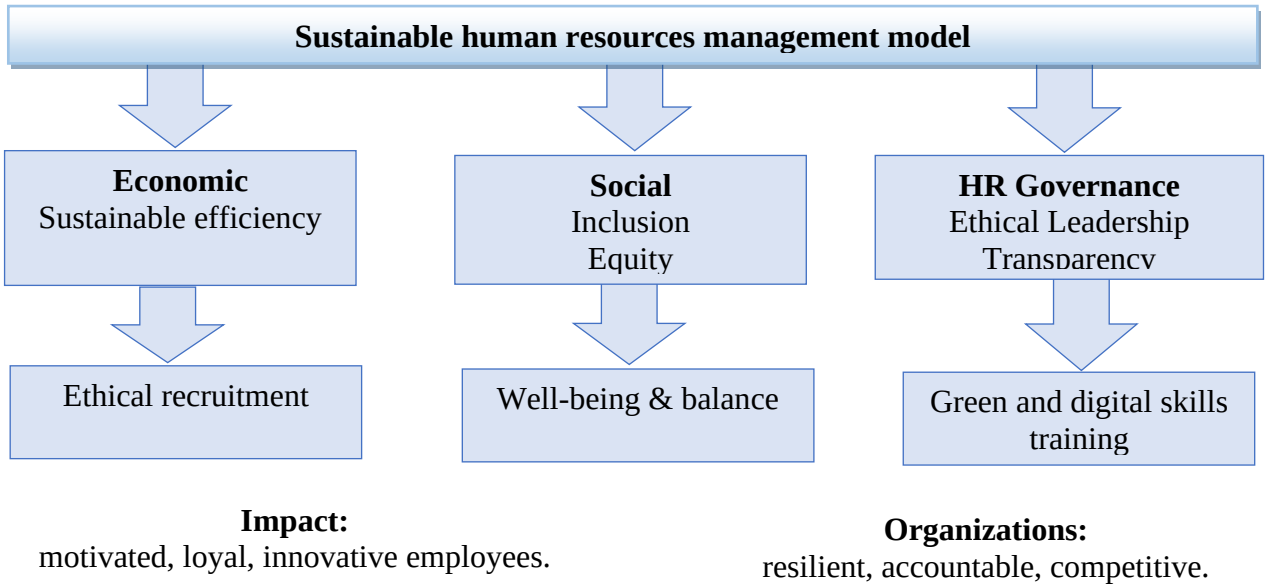


Figure 1. The Model of Sustainable Human Resource Management

Source: elaborated by the author

Furthermore, sustainable human resource management stands at the crossroads of two foundational frameworks: the sustainable development paradigm and the strategic paradigm of human resource management. Thus, sustainable HRM requires aligning personnel policies with the organization's long-term strategies and with sustainability objectives as defined by international standards such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), ISO 26000, or the new European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS).

Sustainable human resource management encompasses a range of practices, including ethical approaches to recruitment and selection, the cultivation of green and digital competencies, performance assessments that incorporate non-financial metrics, the encouragement of responsible leadership, support for work–life balance, and the fostering of meaningful social dialogue with employees. Moreover, in the context of contemporary organizational transformations - such as digitalization, automation, and remote work - it becomes essential to implement a sustainable HRM framework that anticipates changes, prevents imbalances, and facilitates employee adaptation to new demands [9].

Sustainable human resource management is not merely a trend or an ethical ideal, but a strategic necessity for modern organizations striving for competitiveness, social legitimacy, and long-term stability. This approach requires a paradigm shift - from control and efficiency to collaboration, responsibility, and the holistic development of human capital.

In an economic environment marked by accelerated change, increasing ethical pressures, and growing societal expectations, the HR function becomes essential in supporting organizational sustainability. The conventional HRM model - centered on operational efficiency and short-term performance gains - is increasingly ill-equipped to meet emerging challenges such as the green transition, digital transformation, generational diversity, and the growing focus on employee well-being. In contrast, the sustainable human resource management paradigm provides a more strategic and cohesive framework, one that prioritizes social equity, environmental accountability, and the long-term development of human potential.

The comparative table below provides a synthesized view of the two perspectives, highlighting fundamental differences in vision, practices, and the impact on both organizations and employees.

Table 1. A comparison between traditional and sustainable paradigms in human resource management

Criterion	Traditional HRM	Sustainable HRM
Strategic orientation	Short-term, focused on efficiency and profit	Long-term, integrated into sustainability strategy
Objectives	Maximizing performance and reducing costs	Ensuring resilience, equity, and employee well-being
Employee relationship	Contractual, transactional	Partnership-based, participative, built on trust
Core values	Competitiveness and control	Social responsibility, inclusion, and personal development
Performance indicators	Financial KPIs, individual productivity	Sustainable KPIs (well-being, diversity, engagement, retention, etc.)
Recruitment practices	Focused on current skills	Focused on potential, diversity, and shared values
Professional development	Based on immediate job needs	Continuous learning, adaptability to change, organizational learning
Health and safety	Minimum legal compliance	Promotion of physical, mental, and social well-being
Change adaptability	Structural rigidity	Organizational flexibility and resilience
Environmental impact	Not linked to ecological dimension	Integrated into environmental protection and green HRM policies

Source: elaborated by the author

The differences between traditional and sustainable approaches to human resource management reflect a fundamental paradigm shift in organizational thinking. Traditional HRM is oriented toward efficiency and short-term objectives, while sustainable HRM prioritizes long-term development, social equity, employee well-being, and environmental responsibility. The sustainable paradigm fosters a partnership-based relationship with employees, emphasizes continuous learning, diversity and inclusion, and integrates well-being into HR strategy. Unlike the classical transactional model, sustainable HRM adopts performance indicators that reflect not only productivity but also the quality of professional life. Furthermore, sustainable HRM contributes to an organization's ability to adapt to digital and ecological transformations by enhancing internal resilience and fostering socially responsible positioning. This holistic approach is becoming increasingly necessary in the current context, dominated by instability, digitalization, and sustainability pressures.

Contemporary organizations are undergoing a continuous process of transformation, driven by a range of endogenous and exogenous factors such as digitalization, globalization, systemic crises, ecological transition, and demographic shifts. These transformations are generating a new operational and strategic framework in which the human resource function must undergo profound adaptation to support both performance and institutional sustainability.

One of the most evident transformations is the accelerated digitalization of organizational processes. The integration of emerging technologies - such as artificial intelligence, automation, and big data - is profoundly reshaping job structures, required skill sets, and modes of professional interaction. As a result, HRM is challenged to reconfigure recruitment, training, and development policies, manage digital skill transitions, and create flexible, tech-enabled work environments.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of hybrid work models, triggering a paradigm shift in how work is organized. Flexibility, autonomy, and output-based performance have taken precedence over physical presence and hierarchical control. For HRM, this shift entails the development of new tools for performance management, maintaining cohesion among geographically dispersed teams, and promoting work - life balance.

Organizations today face mounting pressure to align their operations with the core principles of sustainable development, which requires embedding social, economic, and environmental responsibility across all areas - including human resource management. Thus, the concept of green HRM has emerged, promoting environmentally conscious recruitment, training in green competencies, reducing the ecological footprint of HR processes, and encouraging sustainable behavior in the workplace.

The diversification of the workforce in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, and culture demands the adoption of inclusive and equitable HR policies. HRM must manage differences, promote equal opportunities, and cultivate an organizational culture rooted in mutual respect and the valorization of diversity. In this context, the HR function becomes a key vector for social cohesion and organizational justice.

Amid growing uncertainty and external complexity, new leadership models are taking shape - collaborative, empathetic, and transformational - that emphasize ethics, transparency, and collective engagement. HRM plays a vital role in identifying, training, and supporting leaders capable of guiding organizations through profound change and fostering commitment in volatile conditions.

Contemporary organizational transformations demand a radical redefinition of the human resource function. Moving from an administrative and reactive role, HRM is evolving into a strategic, proactive, and sustainable function, capable of addressing the complex challenges of the modern world. In this new context, sustainable human resource management becomes not merely an option but an essential condition for the long-term resilience, relevance, and performance of organizations.

To illustrate the practical applicability of sustainable HRM principles, a comparative analysis was conducted on several organizations that implement sustainability-oriented HR policies. The study focuses on two categories of entities: organizations from the Republic of Moldova and internationally recognized companies known for their best practices in the field. The analysis is structured around three fundamental pillars of sustainable HRM: social equity and inclusion, employee well-being, and the development of green and digital competencies.

Table 2. Comparative assessment of the implementation level of sustainable human resource practices in organizations from the Republic of Moldova and internationally

Criterion	Orange Moldova	Kaufland Moldova	Endava Moldova	Unilever (ref.)
Continuous learning	Practice is present, but implemented partially or at an early stage	Practice is present, but implemented partially or at an early stage	Practice is well implemented, with visible and documented results	Practice is excellently implemented, strategically integrated and continuously improved
Well-being & work–life balance	Practice is present, but implemented partially or at an early stage	Practice is well implemented, with visible and documented results	Practice is excellently implemented, strategically integrated and continuously improved	Practice is excellently implemented, strategically integrated and continuously improved
Diversity and inclusion	Practice is present, but implemented partially or at an early stage	Practice is excellently implemented, strategically integrated and continuously improved	Practice is well implemented, with visible and documented results	Practice is excellently implemented, strategically integrated and continuously improved
Ethical leadership & transparency	Practice is well implemented, with visible and documented results	Practice is well implemented, with visible and documented results	Practice is well implemented, with visible and documented results	Practice is excellently implemented, strategically integrated and continuously improved

Source: elaborated by the author

Orange Moldova, operating in the telecommunications sector, is making significant strides toward aligning its human resource policies with sustainability principles. The company runs programs such as "Orange Digital School," aimed at developing employees' digital competencies, and targeted initiatives supporting employee well-being, particularly through flexible working arrangements and internal awareness campaigns on work - life balance. From an economic perspective, Orange Moldova applies fair wage principles and supports continuous learning, although these initiatives are still in the early stages of strategic development. Socially, the company promotes inclusion, though diversity policies and support for vulnerable groups require more systemic strengthening. In terms of governance, Orange Moldova is characterized by an open organizational climate, supported by ethical leadership and effective internal communication channels. There is a clear orientation toward responsibility and professionalism, and a feedback culture is encouraged within teams.

The comparative evaluation places Orange Moldova in a transitional phase toward sustainable HRM, with promising practices and a clear openness to aligning with ESG standards. Future priorities include the systemic consolidation of professional development, expanding diversity policies, and fully integrating sustainability into HR strategy.

Kaufland Moldova, operating in the retail sector, stands out as a notable example of integrating sustainability principles into human resource management. The company has developed

a coherent and structured approach to sustainable HRM policies, focusing on equity, inclusion, and social responsibility. One of the most prominent initiatives is the "Kaufland for All" program, which promotes diversity and actively supports employees from vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities. From an economic perspective, Kaufland Moldova has implemented a fair compensation system aligned with competence and sustainable performance, and provides motivation-based bonuses that reflect not only financial achievements but also commitment to the company's ethical and social values.

On the social dimension, the company promotes active inclusion policies, upholding equal opportunity principles and investing in safe and decent working conditions, alongside psychosocial support through well-being campaigns, counseling, flexible hours, and family support programs. Regarding governance, Kaufland Moldova organizes recurring training on ethical leadership and internal compliance, contributing to an organizational culture rooted in transparency, responsibility, and professionalism. Internal communication is maintained through effective formal channels, and employee participation in decision-making is encouraged through structured feedback mechanisms and regular evaluations.

In the comparative analysis, Kaufland Moldova achieves high levels in applying diversity and inclusion principles, being one of the few organizations in Moldova that actively promotes social equity as a core part of its HR strategy. Moreover, employee well-being is managed competently, and ethical leadership is reinforced through clear policies and corporate governance measures. The only area still in partial development is continuous training, where there remains potential for systemic enhancement and stronger alignment with long - term ESG strategies.

Overall, Kaufland Moldova represents a national best-practice model in the implementation of sustainable HRM, contributing to the modernization of the human resource function and the development of an inclusive, ethical, and high-performing organizational culture.

Endava Moldova, operating in the information technology and outsourcing sector, is distinguished by its advanced model of sustainable human resource management. The company promotes well-defined and structured policies for continuous professional development, offering employees access to international certifications, digital educational resources, and personalized career development plans. From an economic perspective, Endava's HR strategy focuses on direct investment in human capital, emphasizing talent retention and long-term performance through development initiatives.

Socially, the company excels in promoting employee well-being, providing a framework conducive to work - life balance, mental health support, and organizational flexibility. Diversity and inclusion are actively addressed, although there are still opportunities for improvement in gender diversity within leadership roles. In terms of governance, Endava is characterized by strong ethical leadership, transparent decision-making, and a culture of continuous feedback, which enhances employee trust and engagement.

The comparative evaluation positions Endava Moldova among organizations with well-developed and strategically oriented sustainable practices aligned with global trends. The company demonstrates that sustainable HRM not only supports competitiveness in digital industries but also serves as a pillar of organizational stability and innovation.

Unilever, operating globally in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, is frequently cited as a benchmark for applying environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles in human resource management. Its "Future of Work" strategy fully integrates

sustainability into HRM policies, addressing economic performance as well as employee well-being and corporate social responsibility. Economically, Unilever offers complex continuous training programs covering green skills, digital literacy, and transformational leadership.

Socially, the company is a global leader in inclusion and diversity policies, with measurable outcomes in increasing minority representation and combating systemic discrimination. In the governance sphere, Unilever has a robust framework of ethical leadership, codes of conduct, and compliance systems, fostering an organizational culture built on accountability, transparency, and sustainable innovation.

Unilever's model serves as an aspirational example for organizations in Moldova and other emerging economies, demonstrating how HRM can decisively contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to the sustainable transformation of the business environment.

Contemporary organizational transformations require a profound reconfiguration of the human resource function so that it becomes a strategic actor in promoting sustainability. The case studies analyzed demonstrate that, despite sectoral and institutional maturity differences, there is a common trend toward adopting practices that support employee well-being, social equity, and organizational responsibility. From this perspective, it becomes essential to formulate coherent and durable policies capable of generating systemic impact and long-term added value.

First and foremost, it is necessary to establish a clear policy on continuous learning and the development of green and digital skills. Organizations should implement personalized learning programs tailored to the requirements of the digital transition and the objectives of the green economy. These programs must be based on regular assessments of employee skill needs, provide open access to e-learning platforms, foster partnerships with educational institutions for relevant certifications, and integrate sustainability into managerial training curricula.

Secondly, the development of an organizational well-being policy is essential - one that addresses not only physical health, but also mental well-being and social balance. Such a policy should promote the creation of a healthy and inclusive work environment, ensure flexible work arrangements (including hybrid formats), facilitate access to psychological counseling and emotional support, and guarantee ergonomic and safe working conditions.

A further strategic priority involves adopting a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policy - an essential step toward eliminating discrimination and fully harnessing the richness of human capital in all its forms. This policy must promote fair and transparent recruitment based on merit and potential, include support measures for disadvantaged groups, encourage inclusive leadership with balanced gender and generational representation, and carry out internal campaigns to raise awareness of DEI values.

Additionally, strengthening a policy of ethical leadership and participatory governance is recommended. This involves adopting clear and consistently applied codes of conduct, creating effective internal reporting mechanisms for misconduct (whistleblowing), periodically evaluating managers based on integrity, ethics, and social responsibility, and promoting a participatory framework in which employees are actively involved in decision-making through consultations, surveys, and structured feedback sessions.

The implementation of these sustainable policies does not merely involve technical adjustments but requires a profound shift in organizational culture. HRM thus becomes a catalyst for sustainable transformation, contributing to the balance between economic performance and

social responsibility. In the Republic of Moldova, reinforcing the legislative framework and promoting collaboration between the public and private sectors can significantly advance the human resource function toward greater sustainability.

Conclusions

The findings reaffirm that sustainable human resource management is emerging as a vital element of organizational strategy amid today's evolving transformations. The integration of economic, social, and governance dimensions into HR policies significantly contributes to the resilience, adaptability, and competitiveness of modern organizations. Case studies conducted on companies in the Republic of Moldova reveal a growing openness to adopting sustainability principles; however, their application is often partial and lacks an integrative vision.

Practices such as continuous learning, the promotion of equity, support for employee well-being, and the strengthening of ethical leadership are recognized as relevant, but their implementation varies significantly depending on the sector and the maturity level of management. Moreover, compared to internationally recognized organizations such as Unilever, local companies are still in the early stages of integrating sustainability principles into the HR function, highlighting the urgent need for institutional strengthening and long-term strategic alignment.

Facilitating a successful shift toward sustainable human resource management requires the creation and execution of cohesive policies that foster the long-term development of human capital. This includes introducing continuous professional development programs aimed at building green and digital competencies, alongside establishing enduring partnerships with educational institutions and innovation hubs.

Additionally, promoting an organizational framework that supports work–life balance, mental health, and employee well-being is essential - through well-being policies, flexible work arrangements, and psychosocial support. Strengthening an inclusive organizational culture through active diversity, equity, and inclusion policies becomes another key pillar in creating a fair and participatory work environment.

On the governance dimension, it is necessary to promote ethical, transparent, and responsible leadership, supported by clear codes of conduct, internal reporting mechanisms, and regular evaluations of managerial performance. Furthermore, the HR function must be aligned with the organization's strategic sustainability objectives by integrating ESG indicators into internal assessments and complying with the new European non-financial reporting standards.

To ensure a systemic approach, it is essential to reinforce sustainable human resource management policies at the national level through targeted legislative measures, economic incentives, and the cultivation of long-term collaboration between the public sector, private enterprises, and academic institutions.

References

1. EHNERT, I. Sustainable Human Resource Management: A conceptual and exploratory analysis from a paradox perspective. Heidelberg: Physica-Verlag, 2009, 292 p. ISBN 978-3-7908-2187-1.
2. KRAMAR, R. Beyond strategic human resource management: Is sustainable human resource management the next approach? The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 2014, vol. 25(8), pp. 1069–1089.
3. ELKINGTON, J. Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business. Oxford: Capstone Publishing, 1997.
4. WILKINSON, A., REDMAN, T., DUNDON, T. Contemporary Human Resource Management: Text and Cases. 5th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2017.

5. ZAUGG, R. J., BLUM, A., THOM, N. Sustainability in Human Resource Management. Bern: University of Bern, Institute for Organization and Human Resource Management, 2001.
6. SÂRBU, O., NIREAN, E. Economia Moldovei. Manual. Chișinău: Centrul editorial al UASM, 2015. 164 p. ISBN 978-9975-56-260-7.
7. GUERCI, M., LONGONI, A., LUZZINI, D. Translating stakeholder pressures into environmental performance – the mediating role of green HRM practices. International Journal of Human Resource Management, 2016, vol. 27(2), pp. 262–289.
8. MARIAPPANADAR, S. Harm of efficiency-oriented HRM practices on stakeholders: An ethical issue for sustainability. Society and Business Review, 2012, vol. 7(2), pp. 168–184.
9. STANKEVIČIŪTĖ, Ž., SAVANEVIČIENĖ, A. Sustainability as a concept in human resource management. Sustainability, 2019, vol. 11(16), 4394. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11164394.
10. SÂRBU, O., COȘER, C. Assessment of human potential increase by stimulating the degree of employees labor satisfaction. Journal of Scientific papers series "Management, economic engineering in agriculture and rural development", 2017, vol. 17(2), pp. 309-313.
11. SÂRBU, O., CIMPOIEȘ, L. Labor force underutilization as a social and economic problem in Moldova. Journal of Scientific papers series "Management, economic engineering in agriculture and rural development", 2020, vol. 20(1), pp. 539-548.
12. SÂRBU, O. Particularities of employment in rural areas of the Republic of Moldova. Journal of Scientific papers series "Management, economic engineering in agriculture and rural development", 2013, vol. 13(1), pp. 361-370.
13. SÂRBU, O., CIMPOIEȘ, L. Problems of human capital formation and use in rural area of Moldova. In: Economic growth in conditions of globalization: welfare and social inclusion. International Conference, 15-16 October 2021, Chisinau: National Institute for Economic Research, 2022, vol. I, pp. 255-264. ISBN 978-9975-3529-4-9.
14. GLOBAL REPORTING INITIATIVE (GRI). GRI Standards: Consolidated Set of Standards 2021. Amsterdam: GRI, 2021.
15. INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR STANDARDIZATION (ISO). ISO 26000: Guidance on Social Responsibility. Geneva: ISO, 2010.
16. EUROPEAN COMMISSION. Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) – Official text and implementation guidelines. Brussels: EC, 2022.