The International Journal of Human Resource Management, Volume 33, Issue 1, 2022, pp. 1-15
DOI:10.1080/09585192.2021.2021732

Building sustainable societies through human-centred human resource management: Emerging issues and research opportunities

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Abstract

In this paper, we argue that adopting a human-centred approach to human resource management (HRM) will contribute to building sustainable workforces, organizations, communities and societies against a backdrop of a global pandemic and political and economic uncertainty. The economic and social cost of the pandemic will continue to be felt for years to come, and the road to recovery should be human-centred and sustainable, with built-in climate actions as part of the socio-economic rejuvenation programme. We draw on several cross-cutting themes to illustrate how the use of digital technology and how remote working, for example, may impact workers from different socio-economic backgrounds in diverse ways. We call for researchers to engage in in-depth qualitative research to identify new phenomena related to work and HRM in the context of accelerating adoption of digital technology and post-Covid recovery to explore power dynamics and forms of exclusion in the labour market and workplaces. Findings of these studies can contribute to positive policy actions to prevent the exacerbation of existing socio-economic inequality and exclusion. They will also contribute to new ways of conceptualizing HRM models and practices and extending HRM theories.

Keywords: employee assistance programme, employee wellbeing, digital technology, human-centred HRM, human capital, fairness and voice, Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

The year 2021 has been another eventful year. The global Covid-19 pandemic continues to cause major disruptions to life and work, the trade war between China and the US has been unfolding with significant politico-economic repercussions in different regions, and the Glasgow-based United Nations' (UN) 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) has pushed for a dramatic reduction of coal to generate power. COP26, predominantly involving the signatory countries to the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), also illuminated that other human challenges are pressing. The pandemic has continued its course, but humanity has begun to find ways to cope more effectively with this through a range of activities, most notably vaccination programmes in many countries. These global events and high-level political activities have far-reaching impacts on the economic structure and business operations at national, industry and firm levels with important human resource management (HRM) implications. In the meantime, an increasing amount of research attention has been devoted to broader societal issues and the 'grand challenges' (Buckley, Doh, & Benischke 2017) associated with environmental, economic, technological and social changes.

This article examines what these opportunities and changes might mean for HRM. We argue that a human-centred approach to HRM is essential to building a sustainable and resilient society. Human-centred HRM is one of the ways of implementing the human-centred agenda for the future of work that the International Labour Organization (ILO) is promoting in a world characterized by a number of grand challenges (Rogovsky & Cooke, 2021). This agenda is aimed at 'strengthen[ing] the social contract by placing people and the work they do at the centre of economic and social policy and business practice' (ILO, 2019, p. 11). It consists of three 'pillars of action', which together are expected to drive growth, equity and sustainability for present and future generations: (a) increasing investment in people's capabilities; (b) increasing investment in the institutions of work; and (c) increasing investment in decent and

sustainable work (ILO, 2019, pp. 11–13). A 'human-centred' approach to HRM is in line with the societal goals as outlined by the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are expected to be achieved by 2030 (UN, 2015). Business organizations, especially those in the private sector, have a critical role to play towards achieving these SDGs (Ghauri & Cooke, 2022). A 'human-centred' approach to HRM is also essential for achieving a human-centred Covid-19 recovery that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient, as proposed by the ILO (ILO, 2021; Samans, 2021). In essence, we present a normative approach that argues that economic, technological, social and ecological challenges and opportunities should be worked on for the benefit of a large variety of stakeholders, including organizations, individuals and wider societies. Below, we capture several HR phenomena and illustrate how human-centred HRM could help develop better workplaces and improve the workforce's wellbeing in different global and local contexts. We encourage researchers to embrace opportunities to advance the HRM field by engaging in phenomenon-oriented HRM research with policy relevance.

Building sustainable societies through human-centred HRM: emerging HR issues and research opportunities

In this section, we select five thematic areas to exemplify how research can shed light on these emerging issues to keep pace with new realities and to inform practice. The themes we selected for discussion below are by no means mutually exclusive or collectively exhaustive. Indeed, they are not necessarily new *per se*, rather, we identify new work-related phenomena that may need to be investigated and conceptualized more extensively and from new angles to extend existing knowledge. In echoing scholars in the international business field (e.g., Buckley et al., 2017; Qamar & Child, 2021), we suggest that a qualitative methodological approach will be most suited for phenomenon-driven research in order to uncover what happens, to whom, why and under what circumstances, how, and what can be done to address the issue at various levels.

Digital workplace and human capital

A human-centred approach to HRM is one that invests in people to equip them with employable skills and capabilities and that provides them with decent and sustainable employment opportunities. As businesses are transitioning towards digital workplaces, this presents a serious challenge of how to provide the workforce with digital skills as part of their human capital for gainful employment. Take China as an example. In order to enhance their competitiveness and as part of industry upgrading, more and more firms in the manufacturing sector in China are adopting 5G techniques and smart manufacturing. On the one hand, this automation removes workers from dangerous and harmful tasks, improves the quality of products and can make more efficient use of energy. On the other hand, it may create skill shortages and bottlenecks for businesses if the displaced semi-skilled workers are unable to upskill themselves into digital technicians or other forms of needed work. For example, in the production of ceramic toilets, after a toilet is produced, it needs to be glazed. This is the most polluting part of the production stage and most hazardous to workers' health. However, as reported by Ba (2021a), in a 5G digital factory of sanitary ware in China there is no glaze worker anymore. They are replaced by robots with deep learning capabilities. The robot glazes a toilet product in 35 seconds and works 24 hours a day. After the glaze is applied, the firing step is entered. The total length of the ceramic tunnel kiln in this factory is 138 metres, and dozens of sensors are installed in it. The temperature of the tunnel kiln can be adjusted as and when necessary, and the factory can use the low peak electricity period for production to manage energy costs. After firing, the testing/inspection stage comes in. The factory has a workbench with six camera lenses. Through image capturing and AI calculation, the pass rate of sanitary products is greatly improved due to the precision and thoroughness of the inspection (Ba, 2021a).

What does this mean for the workforce of the future? The transformation from manual/semi-manual production to full automation in this and other industries requires substantial investment in skills training to upgrade the skills of the existing workforce (some may not be possible) and to equip the new workforce with digital skills. In addition, automation means that some workers will find that their skills are obsolete and therefore need to develop entirely new skills. For example. McKinsey (2019) found that by 2030 advances in robotics and AI will lead to the automation of 39 per cent of current work activities in the UK, meaning that some roles, and related skills, will disappear. It was predicted that 30 per cent of workers could be forced into different (low and/or high-skilled) jobs and will inevitably be obliged to change jobs, occupations and to convert their skill levels. A result of this will be the creation of millions of new jobs which will require new skills (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2020). Consequently, the demand for soft skills is expected to increase as more and more manual and technical roles are automated.

In fact, based on a survey of a number of global companies in a wide range of industrial sectors, the WEF (2018) identified top 10 skills that are likely to be in greater demand and top 10 skills that are likely to decline in demands in 2022, as the Fourth Industry Revolution folds (see Table 1). It will be interesting to examine the extent to which these trends identified, as reported by global firms, are shared in smaller firms across nations, and what implications these may have for HRM.

Insert Table 1 here

The effective up-skilling and re-skilling of the workforce will require the coordination of the state, education and vocational training sector and employing organizations as key stakeholders (Hall & Soskice, 2001). The literature on coordinated market economies can be instructive in

this, with Germany as a country where such coordination is well developed (Busemeyer & Schlicht-Schmälzle, 2014). However, in general this is a major challenge for many nation states with developed and developing economies alike (see also below on digital poverty, equity and fairness). For the latter, there exist a large cohort (millions) of workers who are semi-skilled but are highly mobile in terms of hopping between jobs, occupations and locations. The transformation of the national economic structure and sustainable development is to a large extent underpinned by the fact that these workers (and their family) are not left behind.

For example, it has been reported that 40% of the takeaway delivery workers in China came from the manufacturing sector (Ba, 2021b), having abandoned their factory job for takeaway delivery because the latter was believed to offer more flexibility, autonomy and income than the former. In addition, some workers have left their manufacturing job because their private employers were more concerned about making a profit than caring about their workers' welfare and wellbeing. However, these workers, the majority of whom semi-skilled rural migrant workers, soon realized that takeaway delivery does not offer as much freedom and income as they had anticipated and that they experienced a high work intensity that was so strong that it was difficult to sustain. Some of the takeaway riders then returned to the factory jobs (Ba, 2021b), but these jobs, albeit with repetitious work tasks and poorly paid, may be phased out in the near future as factories turn to automation.

The displacing effect of digital technology is not restricted to manual production workers, but those in previously quite knowledge intensive service jobs such as employees in the banking sector. The large-scale adoption of AI and online banking has led to the closure of many bank branches and the reduction of workforce in many countries. How can these workers be re-skilled and up-skilled to take on new tasks and have sustainable employment? A successful approach would harbour many opportunities for integrated development as well as different, safer and more meaningful work. We encourage researchers to follow these

developments, identify challenges and the role of organizations and other stakeholders, disseminate good practices for adoption/adaptation, provide policy suggestions, and further conceptualize what these developments may mean for the (digital) future of work (see also below on digitally poor social groups).

Digital technology at work and human rights

A human-centred approach to HRM takes into account workers' rights and dignity while taking advantage of technological advancement to improve productivity. For example, digital platforms use algorithms for selecting and recruiting workers (Köchling, & Wehner, 2020). An increasing number of organizations have adopted digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI) to manage their activities, including the use of sensors and biometric data (e.g., facial recognition, fingerprints, GPS tracking) to monitor the mobility and performance of their workforce (Moussa, 2015). Some organizations also use digital technology to monitor employees' physical conditions in real time for health and safety reasons. However, it has been reported that pervasive algorithm tracking in order to monitor performance is damaging workers' physical and mental health and that such practices should be regulated by law (Milmo, 2021).

These developments in algorithmic management (Duggan, Sherman, Carbery, & McDonnell, 2020) potentially have implications for workers' rights as human rights and some national governments have started to develop regulations to provide better governance on the use of digital technology in the work domain, especially the legal accountability for private sector use of AI (e.g., Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021). It has been argued that workers should be given the right to be involved in the design and use of algorithm-driven systems that would determine fundamental aspects of their work, including those relating to recruitment and remuneration (Milmo, 2021). Plenty of research opportunities exist in

furthering our understanding of the role and impact of digital workplace and algorithm management. For example, what forms of resistance have workers adopted in the adoption of digital technology and monitoring? How can organizations go about involving employees in the digitalization of workplaces to reduce the potential harmful impact on employees and gain their acceptance?

Equity and fairness through workers' voice

A human-centred approach to HRM is underpinned by the notion of equity and fairness, in which workers' voice and empowerment are vital especially for disadvantaged groups. This is also in line with the UN's commitment of 'leaving no one behind' which is at the heart of the SDGs (UNSDG, 2019). There remain considerable gaps between different groups of people in many aspects of human development, some arguably widening, due to various forms of inequalities, discriminations, marginalization and exclusions. 'Leaving no one behind' is a humanitarian aspiration and political endeavour that can only be achieved with strong resource commitment and operational support from key stakeholders. As nation states, sub-national administrative regions, communities and businesses work hard to overcome the impact of Covid-19 and to design activities to reboot post-Covid-19. Such interventions may create new forms of inequality due to the uneven distribution of resources. Different industries and occupational groups will have varying levels of resources and may compete with each other (even if unintentionally and unwittingly) in their strive to advance their own interests, thus leading to an uneven redistribution of resources and opportunities. For example, those who are able to organize collectively and mobilize institutional supports (e.g., the trade unions) are more likely to benefit than those who are unorganized (e.g., service industries relying on migrant workers including international students). These tensions may be mirrored within organizations where there may be sectional interests that compete for organizational resources,

causing inequitable access to those. We draw on two specific social groups for illustration: ethnic minorities and those who are digitally poor.

Research on ethnic minorities remains insufficient in HRM research, with extant research often focusing on Western firms. For example, Alm and Guttormsen's (2021, p. 1) review of 7500 articles published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Business Ethics Quarterly* (2000–2019) revealed that business ethics researchers 'seldom consider marginalized people's voices and experiences as resources to understand their lives' and no studies 'discussed the potential for theorizing based on such voices. Instead, these marginalized people 'are conventionally perceived to lack traditional forms of power such as public influence, formal authority, education, money, and political positions' even though 'they still possess the resources to impact their situations, their circumstances, and the structures that determine their situations' (Alm & Guttormsen, 2021, p. 1).

As workplaces become increasingly digitalized, digital poverty or digital exclusion, in the form of poor or no digital skills/literacy and/or the lack of access to digital technology and infrastructure, will have a serious impact not only on organizational productivity, but also on individual workers (also see above on human capital). Research may examine causes and forms of digital poverty/exclusion (as sources of inequality), how these may impact businesses and workers (including those who are disabled and may not be able to use certain digital technology designs that are designed for able persons), and what can be done to address these issues to ensure more equitable outcomes.

The phenomena discussed above highlight the issue of uneven resource allocation and organizational power, and accentuate the need for voice and inclusive policy to eliminate inequalities. They also reveal research gaps and avenues.

Work-life issues, employee wellbeing and forms of employee assistance

A human-centred approach to HRM places employees' needs at the heart of its policy and practice, including a focus on employees' work-life balance and wellbeing. Providing flexible work arrangements (including working time and location flexibility) to accommodate employees' work-life needs is an important means to help workers achieve a level of work-life balance. Here it would be important to distinguish between flexibility-willingness, for example, the desire of staff to be working from home during a time where working from home has been more frequently imposed on staff by their employers and flexibility-ability (Beauregard, Basile & Canónico 2019; Matthews, Barnes-Farrell & Bulger, 2010). The ability of staff to work from home will be determined by the actual nature of the work – some work such as in many jobs in agriculture of hospitality are difficult to pursue while being at home – the investment of organizations to enable their employees to remotely work (e.g., in creating the virtual infrastructure needed), and the specific context that individuals are embedded in (family commitments, home schooling, spaces at home). Understanding flexibility willingness and ability and managing these to the benefit of employees and their organizations (Basile & Beauregard, 2021) is important and will continue to be crucial. It is important to note that, after realizing the efficiency gain of having staff working from him, some large companies with expensive office buildings in central business districts (CBDs) have imposed restriction for staff to return to work in the office after Covid-lockdowns have ended. Limited office space was made available and staff wishing to work in the office needed to book in advance and no more than one day per week was permitted. Such restrictions, while saving a substantial amount of cost, induces unnecessary stress and dissatisfaction to staff who may wish to work in the office in order to have a break from the home environment and to socialize with colleagues, which may in turn lead to reduced motivation and productivity. Therefore, it is important that employees are given the choice in terms of flexible working arrangements.

Furthermore, the extensive use of working from home during the pandemic period, a practice that is likely to be more widely adopted in the future compared to pre-pandemic levels, has brought to the fore several work-life issues that may be unprecedented and require management attention. For instance, Covid-19 and working from home make organizations and people realize more fully the challenge of balancing work and family care commitments and the disproportionate effect this has on women who bear most responsibility of home schooling and care responsibilities (Collins, Landivar, Ruppanner, & Scarborough 2021). In addition, women are more likely than men to have lost their jobs or have their working hours cut as women are disproportionally more concentrated in the service sector where job losses have been most severe. According to a study conducted by McKinsey & Company (2020), while the Covid-19 crisis has been challenging for all employees, Covid-19 could push many mothers out of the workforce, and companies are at risk of losing women in leadership. In addition, black women are less likely to feel supported at work during Covid-19. These setbacks will affect the future pipeline of women at work and women in leadership roles and undermine the level of gender equality that has been achieved in recent years (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

The impact of Covid-19 and working from home is highly contextual. Therefore, the issues are not just between men and women, but also between women with care responsibilities and those who do not have care responsibilities. For instance, emerging evidence suggests that the latter might have to take on additional work responsibilities; workflow may also be disrupted where teamwork is necessary. Moreover, the work-life conflict of women with care responsibilities may spill into the work-life domain of co-workers without care responsibilities involuntarily and continuously during the working hours when they have virtual meetings. To date, most research and policy attention has focused on women with care responsibilities. By contrast, the negative effect of one group of working women (women with care responsibilities)

on the other (women with no care responsibilities) has not been sufficiently examined. The same could be explored amongst men with care responsibilities and those who do not. There are many emerging issues – often triggered by the pandemic and finding expression in emergent work arrangements – that are worthy of further exploration.

Moreover, Covid-19 has seen an increase in domestic violence and brought this issue to more attention from policy makers, researchers and employers. Domestic violence is often regarded as a private matter that employers do not get involved in, although some large organizations may offer counselling services to employees on personal relationship matters as part of their employee assistance programmes (EAPs). However, businesses may suffer from the consequence of domestic violence more severely than they realize due to reduced productivity and absenteeism. For instance, in Australia, 62% of the women who suffer from domestic violence are employed in paid work and it has been reported that the loss of productivity was as high as AUD 2 billion a year (Khadem, 2021). It is important to note that while women are more likely to be the recipient of domestic violence, this is not always the case – overall, this is a topic that deserves more research and management attention than has received.

More broadly, to date, EAPs have not yet featured as part of strategic HRM, despite that organizations have reported the increased use of EAPs by employees during the Covid period. Emerging evidence shows that organizations in different societal contexts have provided different kinds of support to their employees in the light of the local situations and cultural traditions. For example, in Indonesia, some large companies have provided company transports to assist employees commuting to and from work to reduce their chance of being infected while taking public transport. Some companies have also provided temporary accommodations, food, doctors and nurses to Covid-positive employees as they were not able to access hospital resources. Such provisions to some extent reflect a collectivist and

paternalistic cultural tradition in which employers are expected to look after their employees like a parent and provide care and support when needed in return for the employees' hard work, obedience and loyalty. What assistances have organizations based in Western societies been providing for their employees? To what extent may these assistances (or the lack of them) reflect the legal and cultural traditions and institutional arrangements of the nation, as well as the risk management approach of the organization? Therefore, more research can be conducted to identify what issues employees are confronted with and what the most effective EAPs may be for different groups of employees in order to facilitate appropriate HRM interventions to improve employees' work-life conditions and wellbeing. These scholarly investigations will yield insights beneficial to multinational firms operating in different parts of the world and extend our knowledge of international HRM.

Sustainable HRM and implications for international HRM

A human-centred approach to HRM is also underpinned by the notion of sustainability. There has been a strong momentum on sustainable HRM research in the last decade. However, the concept of sustainable HRM is contested in that it has been linked to green HRM (Renwick, Redman, & Maguire, 2013; Jackson, Renwick, Jabbour, & Muller-Camen, 2011), ethical HRM (Mason & Simmons, 2011, Shen & Benson 2016), socially responsible HRM (Jackson, Schuler, & Jiang, 2014; Newman, Miao, Hofman, & Zhu 2016), triple bottom line HRM (Jackson et al., 2011; De Prins, Van Beirendonck, De Vos, & Segers, 2014) or common good HRM (Aust, Matthews, & Muller-Camen, 2020). Within the literature, it seems that the broader conceptualizations are becoming more common with the triple bottom line finding a strong resonance in the research community (Bush, 2020). The triple bottom line of goals related to 'people', 'planet' and 'prosperity' goes beyond narrow ethical and environmental foci to concentrate on broad economic, social and environmental purposes of HRM. In fact, it is

possible to add to the number of areas that should be managed to attain sustainable HRM, for instance, a quadruple bottom line can factor in temporal dimensions through generational learning as well as knowledge transfer effects.

Unfortunately, authors have identified that many companies are engaging in 'greenwashing', in essence using corporate communication regarding their social and environmental responsibilities while not actually substantially changing their underlying business models (Crilly, Zollo, & Hansen, 2012; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). The most likely effect is that their sustainability-oriented HRM is instrumental or compliance-related (Maak, Pless, & Voegtlin, 2016) and has some way to go to achieve more effective sustainability outcomes (Lopez-Cabrales & Valle-Cabrera, 2021). Such organizations often have not moved to a 'profit with purpose' business model (Levillain & Segrestin, 2019) which is why the common good HRM approach argues that a fundamental change in understanding the purpose of business and the role HRM plays in this is needed (Aust et al., 2020). Common good HRM encourages organizations to move beyond a focus on individual goals to give higher importance to collective interests.

A definition of sustainable HRM that captures the above issues well urges organizations to design, implement and continuously refine 'HRM strategies and practices that enable the achievement of financial, social and ecological goals, with an impact inside and outside of the organization and over a long-term time horizon' (Ehnert, Parsa, Roper, Wagner, & Muller-Camen, 2016, p. 90). In a wide-ranging article, Stahl, Brewster, Collings and Hajro (2020) have developed a multi-dimensional framework of sustainable HRM in which they incorporate multiple stakeholders, spatial and temporal dimensions to outline a variety of outcome domains related to actions aiming at doing good or avoiding harm.

As Editors of IJHRM, we believe that sustainable HRM and its implications for individuals, groups, organizations, single countries and the world is one of the key areas of

interest in today's HRM discourse. Ironically, much of the writing in the field is based on analyses of organizational HRM and its operational impact on people, prosperity and the planet without explicitly taking account of the location of the organization. More recently, however, some authors have started to call for more comparative, cross-country analyses to depict and contrast institutional pressures (Ehnert et al., 2016; Aust, Muller-Camen, & Poutsma, 2018). In addition, the spatial dimension of the Stahl et al. (2020) framework starts to point to headquarters versus subsidiary tensions, the need to balance global versus local interests and the potential divergence of developed market versus emerging market perspectives. Over the last decades, it has become increasingly clear how fragile our planet is and that we need to truly understand how to best manage its resources. In addition, the on-going pandemic has stressed the plight of many people and organizations – be it related to health and well-being, financial pressures or the need for substantial agility and learning. Generating more exciting and useful insights into how to build and implement sustainable HRM in a variety of countries, industries, for a variety of stakeholders will be instrumental to construct sustainable societies through human-centred HRM.

Conclusion

The world has arguably become more divided politically, economically, socially and technologically in the last decades. Nevertheless, we hold that it can become more united through humanistic and humanitarian efforts. In this paper, we argue that adopting a human-centred approach to HRM will contribute to building sustainable workforces, organizations, communities and societies against a backdrop of a global pandemic and political and economic uncertainty. The economic and social cost of the pandemic will continue to be felt for years to come, and the road to recovery should be human-centred and sustainable, with built-in climate actions as part of the socio-economic rejuvenation programme. We draw on several cross-

cutting themes to illustrate how the use of digital technology and how remote working, for example, may impact workers from different socio-economic backgrounds in diverse ways. We highlight tensions between productivity and capital power on the one hand, and the rights, organization/representation and voice of workers on the other. Sectional interests and workplace treatments differ, social groups are advantaged or disadvantaged disproportionally in global crisis. Pockets of resilience and areas of resistances may co-exist, reflecting institutional and social forces within and outside the organizational boundary. These lived experiences may be best investigated through a nuanced and pluralistic lens. In addition, we have pointed out the core role that sustainable international HRM can and should play in years to come. We call for researchers to engage in in-depth qualitative research to identify new phenomena related to work and HRM in the context of accelerating adoption of digital technology and post-Covid recovery to explore power dynamics and forms of exclusion in the labour market and workplaces. Findings of these studies can contribute to positive policy actions to prevent the exacerbation of existing socio-economic inequality and exclusion. They will also contribute to new ways of conceptualizing HRM models and practices and extending HRM theories.

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Table 1. Comparing skills demand, 2018 vs. 2022, top ten

Today, 2018	Trending, 2022	Declining, 2022
• Analytical thinking and innovation • Complex problem-solving • Critical thinking and analysis • Active learning and learning strategies • Creativity, originality and initiative • Attention to detail, trustworthiness • Emotional intelligence • Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation • Leadership and social influence • Coordination and time management	• Analytical thinking and innovation • Active learning and learning strategies • Creativity, originality and initiative • Technology design and programming • Critical thinking and analysis • Complex problem-solving • Leadership and social influence • Emotional intelligence • Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation • Systems analysis and evaluation	• Manual dexterity, endurance and precision • Memory, verbal, auditory and spatial abilities • Management of financial, material resources • Technology installation and maintenance • Reading, writing, math and active listening • Management of personnel • Quality control and safety awareness • Coordination and time management • Visual, auditory and speech abilities • Technology use, monitoring and control

Source: WEF (2018, p. 12)