Employee social sustainability: prioritizing dimensions in the UAE's airlines industry

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper aims to identify and prioritize the dimensions that impact employee social sustainability in the airline industry in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).*

Design/methodology/approach – *The five main criteria (employee well-being, communication, management support, reward and control system and training) and 18 sub-criteria were identified from the literature. The sample comprised four experts covering the HR, finance and training functions from a major UAE airline organization. Applying the analytical-hierarchy-process (AHP) methodology resulted in obtaining priority weights for the factors assigned to employee-social-sustainability implementation.*

Findings – *Management support was found to have the highest priority among the study dimensions impacting employee social sustainability. Surprisingly, reward system was found to be the least important dimension.*

Research limitations/implications – *The study was carried out on a single airline organization, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should be extended to cater to different organizational contexts and varying operational conditions.*

Practical implications – *The findings should be of value to human resource management and policymakers in developing countries, such as the UAE, where employee social sustainability should be sought as a means to develop an efficient and sustainable workforce in different industrial sectors.*

Originality/value – *This study is among the few pioneering studies that focus on employee social sustainability. The use of AHP to prioritize employee-social-sustainability dimensions is also considered pioneering within the field and is anticipated to support future studies, and a deeper understanding, of employee social sustainability.*

Keywords *United Arab Emirates, Airline industry, Analytical hierarchy process, Employee social sustainability*

Paper type *Research paper*

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1. Introduction

The airline industry is a major contributor to the global economy (Raut *et al.*, 2014) that is continually expanding, with services extending to around 3.5 billion passengers and over 50 million tons of cargo [International Air Transport Association (IATA), 2015]. As an emerging economy, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has seven international airports built and operated with the most modern equipment. In 2012, there were more than 657,000 air traffic movements from, through and to the UAE airports. Aviation has become a core sector of the UAE's economy that drives development, diversification and aviation-related activities, hence, contributing to the country's non-oil GDP [United Arab Emirates delegation to the International Civil Aviation Organization (UAE-ICAO), 2013]. The aviation industry in the UAE is expected to see a rise in the number of employees as well as their contribution to the country's GDP (Oxford Economics, 2011).

Owing to the importance of the airline industry, the critical role of employees in fostering sustainability is becoming a critical objective of most forward-looking organizations

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(Wang *et al.*, 2015). The current study will focus on employee social sustainability within the airline industry, grounded in stakeholder theory. Stakeholder theory is a conceptual framework concerning business ethics and organizational management, defined as any group or individual who can affect or be affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives, in which employees are regarded as important stakeholders (Freeman, 2010; Greenwood and Freeman, 2011; Van Buren and Greenwood, 2011). As an internal stakeholder, employees are always at the core of organizations' processes, performance and productivity (Burke and Terry, 2004; Van Buren *et al.*, 2011). They are a major contributor to organizational success (Ramlall, 2008) and, being the most influential stakeholder, a core sphere of influence in any organization (Hitchcock and Willard, 2011). The discussion of employee social sustainability from the perspective of stakeholder theory aims to position this study within the field of human resource management (HRM) and, more specifically, focuses on sustainable HRM practices. The inclusion of employee social sustainability within HRM is driven by the fact that HRM involves the effective management of people to achieve organizational goals (Greenwood and Freeman, 2011), where the management of employees as a resource can be effectively attained through employee social sustainability.

Additionally, the substantial economic contribution and large workforce base of the airline industry in the UAE, as well as the fact that the airline industry is important in the UAE for economic diversification (Ishutkina and Hansman, 2008), constitute practical drivers for this study that focuses on the dimensions that enable employee social sustainability within the airline industrial sector. Organizations enhance employee social sustainability by establishing critical functions, including effective recruiting, knowledge enhancement through training, encouraging employee productivity through motivation and opportunity and performance management through rewards (Edvardsson, 2008; Elnaga and Imran, 2013; Guest *et al.*, 2004; Scheel *et al.*, 2014; Wolf, 2013). Consequently, the social dimension of sustainability has gained greater interest from practitioners, including leaders and policymakers (Boström, 2012), although there has been relatively limited literature focusing on social sustainability (Dempsey *et al.*, 2011; Luthans and Stajkovic, 1999) and even less focus on employee social sustainability. Additionally, HRM has become less focused on employee aspects and more focused on overall organizational strategy, contradicting the main intention of HRM (Van Buren *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, the gap that this research is aiming to bridge is in the area of sustainable development (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2010), in which the social dimension will be addressed, targeting the advancement of corporate and business sustainability (Gao and Bansal, 2013; Klettner *et al.*, 2014), while placing greater emphasis on employee social sustainability as an overall sustainability driver.

In addition, this gap will be addressed by linking HRM and sustainability through the examination of employee social sustainability. Further emphasis can be found in the HRM literature on the sustainability requirements of HR systems (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2014). App and Büttgen (2016) reported an expanded interest in the current research and practice in exploring the sustainability of HR systems as a means of sustaining a long-term relationship between organizations and their employees, primarily built on social exchange. Furthermore, HRM has always been centered on the need to sustain employee welfare and meet their expectations as the main stakeholders (Van Buren *et al.*, 2011).

Social sustainability is defined as "the impact of products or operations on human rights, labor, health, safety, regional development and other community concerns" (Katsoulakos and Katsoulacos, 2007), where the inclusion of employees as a prime contributor enables the development of sustainable organizational systems through socially sustained human capital (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2010). In other words, the relationship between employees and sustainability implementation is based on the ability of employees to sustain their own potential through employee social sustainability (Katsoulakos and Katsoulacos, 2007). A central aim of this study is to explore in detail the factors of HRM that enable employee social sustainability, especially regarding the success of service organizations, which are highly dependent upon the performance of its customer-contact employees (Chebat *et al.*, 2002). The identification of employee social sustainability factors in the airline sector will help in advancing organizations' understanding of employee social sustainability and the contribution to the overall organizational productivity.

Organizations use different approaches regarding employee social sustainability, but the most effective ones link it to facets of human resources such as employee engagement (Garg, 2014; Swarnalatha and Prasanna, 2013), which in turn assures added value for the employees themselves. By exploring employee social sustainability dimensions within the airline industry, this study also aims to enhance the overall industry outcomes by enhancing employees' perceptions and commitment to deliver the best possible customer experience.

The study is segregated into five main sections: introduction; literature review; research methodology; analysis and discussion of study outcomes; and, finally, the conclusion. From the literature review, the dimensions influencing employee social sustainability will be identified to develop a model (hierarchy) that will be used for analysis. The analytical hierarchy process (AHP) technique will be used to determine the priority and relative importance of the identified employee social sustainability dimensions.

2. Literature review

2.1 Employee social sustainability

Social sustainability is defined as practices that make people satisfied, engaged and positive in their mindset, thus, driven toward high productivity (Anisul Huq *et al.*, 2014). More broadly, social sustainability focuses on sustaining a healthy and satisfactory way of living for people and communities (Rogers *et al.*, 2012). The social dimension of sustainability places people's well-being as the prime concern for organizations (Crossman, 2011; Galuppo *et al.*, 2014). As a key contributor within organizations, managers have the greatest role in assuring employee social sustainability as they spend substantial amounts of time managing the sustainability of their workforce (Mathur and Dabas, 2014). Hence, the focus should be on considering employee social sustainability as a governing aspect of the overall corporate and business sustainability (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002).

In more general terms, corporate sustainability refers to organizations' activities that encompass social and environmental issues related to business operations and interactions with stakeholders (Van Marrewijk and Werre, 2003). Given the link between stakeholder value and corporate sustainability, organizations are obliged to establish the prominence of employee social sustainability through active commitment (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2010; Galuppo *et al.*, 2014). Despite the need for building a socially sustainable workforce, there have been few contributions in the literature concerning the magnitude of commitment to employee social sustainability and there remains uncertainty concerning its direct impact on overall corporate sustainability (Dillard *et al.*, 2008; Klettner *et al.*, 2014).

Several studies have attempted to quantify the value of employee social sustainability. In their discussion of the creation of sustainable performance, Spreitzer and Porath (2012) defined sustainable individuals as employees who are not just satisfied and productive but also engaged in shaping both the future of the company and their own career. Combining the definitions of corporate sustainability, social sustainability and employee social sustainability, this study defines employee social sustainability as sustaining a healthy and satisfactory work environment through applying sustainable human-resource practices aimed at making employees satisfied, engaged and committed, hence highly productive.

Employee social sustainability has varying importance for different industries. The service industry, in particular, is one of the industries in which employee social sustainability is strategically essential. This is because of the fact that service organizations' survival is highly conditional on the quality of service delivered by customer-contact employees and their role in maintaining service quality (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996). Thus, employee–customer interaction is key to business-process efficiency. As a result, service-industry employees must be socially sustained, as this impacts organizational effectiveness through proper attitude and behavior toward customers in the front-line nature of their job (Yeh, 2014).

Grounded in stakeholder theory, employees should be a central focus when considering social sustainability within service industries. An underlying principle of stakeholder theory is that successful companies recognize the link with stakeholder interests and continuously build and sustain these intersections to realize real value for all stakeholders (Strand and Freeman, 2015). Stakeholder theory is the most commonly used framework when considering social sustainability (Galuppo *et al.*, 2014), characterized by organizational responsibility to fulfill needs of all stakeholders, which significantly links to employees and aspects of HRM (Greenwood, 2002). Stakeholder theory also constitutes a paradigm shift in terms of organizational management (Amaeshi and Crane, 2006), with fields such as HRM benefitting from the inclusion of the ethical prominence of employees' instrumentality and normative value as stakeholders (Van Buren and Greenwood, 2011). Further, the consideration of employees as human beings, rather than just a resource, should be at the core of any business model (Greenwood and Freeman, 2011), confirming the applicability of linking stakeholder theory to the study of employee social sustainability.

Within the service sector, the airline industry is well-known for employee–customer interactions and its role in developing and promoting organizational image (Limpanitgul *et al.*, 2013; Spiess and Waring, 2005). Airline employees have an essential role in influencing passengers' perceptions of the services offered (Street, 1994), as they deal with passengers and address external stakeholders (Limpanitgul *et al.*, 2013). The airline industry is a particularly sensitive service industry, given the extent of interactions with customers at different levels and stages (Yeh, 2014). Competition between airlines has become more intense and the service quality of airlines has received more attention than ever before (Hussain, R. *et al.*, 2015). Social sustainability studies of the airline industry have tended to focus on organizations' external stakeholders (Chong, 2007; Hussain, R. *et al.*, 2015; Raut *et al.*, 2014). The emphasis on internal stakeholders, i.e. employees, has been scarce within the social-sustainability literature regarding the airline industry. This may be because pf the profit-driven nature of the industry and the higher priority given to customer (external stakeholder) satisfaction. Factors that are crucial for the sustainability of an industry such as the airline industry include recognition of employees' contributions, communication, proper and effective training and developing strategic goals (Hvass and Torfadóttir, 2014), all of which are built around the application of an effective and sustainable HRM system.

HRM aspects or practices have usually been studied with an emphasis on fostering the development of human capital; enhancing the motivation of employees; and building organizational social capital (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2014). The emphasis on these three areas is directly related to employees and sustaining their performance as a logical result of socially sustaining their existence within an organization (Greenwood, 2002). Within the HRM literature, HR aspects have been extensively studied and, despite the great volume of research carried out in this field, the fundamentals supporting their effective design are not yet fully understood (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2014; Monks and Loughnane, 2006). In the study of the employment value proposition, Browne (2012) discussed the employee-engagement trends in Asia and found that communication, rewards, work-life-balance and training were only minor contributing factors. Therefore, this study will seek a better understanding of the influence of sustainable HR aspects on employee social sustainability as a major strategic organizational outcome. This study will explore the relative importance of HR aspects, selected based on elements of participative policies (management support), equity and justice (reward and control), transparent internal communication, training (Galuppo *et al.*, 2014) and employee well-being (Robertson and Cooper, 2010). The selection of the elements signifies their influence on employee social sustainability and their relative importance when studied jointly.

2.2 Employee well-being

The driver for successful organizations is their people (Kesen, 2016). They are the asset that constitutes the basic competitive advantage, and successful organizations are those that continually maintain and enhance this competitiveness (Burke and Terry, 2004; Pahuja and Dalal, 2012). Strategically, people comprises the only factor that cannot be duplicated or imitated by competitors and are considered the most valuable asset if managed and engaged properly (Anitha, 2014; Luthans and Stajkovic, 1999; Spreitzer and Porath, 2012). Given its heightened importance within organizations, the human role needs to be promoted and sustained for organizations to sustain their competitive advantage.

More specifically, employees' well-being can be ensured through the fulfillment of aspects that enhance, for example, engagement and satisfaction (Robertson and Cooper, 2010), and such factors are considered key indicators for socially sustained organizations. Additionally, socially sustained employees have to be given a sense of being alive, passionate and excited through a healthy sense of well-being, both physical and emotional (Spreitzer and Porath, 2012). Workplace well-being is also seen as an antecedent of employee engagement and is an essential indicator of the influence of organizations on their employees (Anitha, 2014) by ensuring that employees are not detached from their normal life by their fulfillment of work requirements (Au and Ahmed, 2014). Sustainability-seeking organizations should, therefore, ensure a balance between aspects of work and life to socially sustain their employees (Lewis, 2010). Work−life balance, as an aspect of employee well-being, is defined as an individual's ability to meet both their work and family commitments, as well as other non-work responsibilities and activities (Parkes and Langford, 2008). This definition simply implies the need for the proper distribution of work and non-work activities to avoid overloading employees, hence leading to disengagement. Following the same line of argument, employee well-being will be an essential factor that impacts employee social sustainability.

2.3 Communication

Established communication with industry stakeholders is an important element of sustainability in general (Upham and Mills, 2005) and particularly for employee social sustainability, as communication is, by default, a human social interaction. The effective delivery of important messages and the sharing of information across the organization, i.e. clear, consistent and constructive, is essential for employee engagement (Saks, 2006; Spreitzer and Porath, 2012) and an organization's productivity (Kohn, 2001). Therefore, management should invest great effort in establishing effective and integrative communication with stakeholders and, more importantly, their employees. As affirmed by Mishra *et al.* (2014), internal communication is critical for establishing effective relationships between organizations and employees. The importance of integrative communication has been advocated by academic research as being an excellent tool in delivering consistent messages to all business stakeholders, while in practice, however, its adoption has been slow. The implementation of effective communication, as opposed to the realization of its importance, is, therefore, not receiving the attention it merits in practice.

Additionally, the method of delivering a message, the amount of detail, to whom the message is delivered (span) and the frequency of message delivery are all factors that impact the effectiveness of communication within organizations (Johlke and Duhan, 2000). These factors impact the clarity, consistency and constructiveness of the delivered message, hence impacting the effectiveness of communication. For example, in his study of a Singapore airline, Chong (2007) asserted that focusing on face-to-face dialog between management and staff helped the organization to deliver brand promises to the customers through its employees.

Communication, in terms of detail and to whom the message is delivered, should be defined in each and every case for the effective delivery of information. Effective communications should involve both formal and informal communication at all levels within the organization (Kalla, 2005). The integration between internal and external communication is essential for the effective delivery of a consistent message that is recognized by all stakeholders (Mishra *et al.*, 2014). The research interest in communication and its impact on employee engagement leads to the consideration of effective communication as an essential aspect of employee social sustainability.

2.4 Management support

Behind every organizational success story is the support and commitment of the management. A friendly and supportive organizational setup is essential in building effective teams and enhancing employee performance (Danish *et al.*, 2014). An open and supportive work environment is imperative for employees to feel safe and engage deeply with their responsibilities (Anitha, 2014). This will, in turn, ensure homogeneity within the organization and lead to employees realizing their value within the organization. Supportive leaders influence employees' engagement which, in turn, results in better involvement with, satisfaction with and passion for their work (Schneider *et al.*, 2009). Support within organizations can take different forms in different situations (Dawley *et al.*, 2008), ranging from direct regulatory support to indirect psychological support, all with varying degrees of importance and impact. Different forms of support have been linked to job stress (Yang *et al.*, 2015), turnover intention (Newman *et al.*, 2011), job satisfaction and extra-role behaviors (Chen and Chiu, 2008). These attitudinal and behavioral outcomes indicate the extent to which employees are socially sustained and can be used as an assessment tool for organizational outcomes. Such efforts enhance employees' perception of management support as value-adding and increase their commitment to the organization (Carleton, 2011). Management support will be considered, therefore, in this paper as a critical element that enables employee social sustainability.

2.5 Reward and control system

Incentives and rewards, both of a financial and a non-financial nature, are essential aspects of employee engagement (Anitha, 2014; Heger, 2007), motivation for personal development (Anitha, 2014; Rynes *et al.*, 2004) and performance (Danish *et al.*, 2014). However, the lack of an established, or a poorly designed, reward system drives employee disengagement and low performance (Zheng and Lamond, 2010). Therefore, the establishment of an efficient reward scheme is essential both for the organization and its employees (Luthans and Stajkovic, 1999). As posited by Danish *et al.* (2014), a systematic reward system enhances employees' self-confidence, leading to lively interaction within the work environment. However, employees tend to underreport the importance of rewards, specifically monetary rewards, when linked to motivational factors in organizational settings (Rynes *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, this study will include rewards as a crucial factor that is often underestimated by employees and overlooked by managers when considered as a motivational factor influencing employee social sustainability.

In terms of the initiation of, and expectations for, a reward system, a psychological contract is key to employee satisfaction as it reinforces how much the organization values their outcomes and contributions and enables this value to be translated into an effective reward system. Ghosh *et al.* (2013), for example, concluded that a strong psychological contract is one of the HR interventions that increases employee retention.

Consequently, we define the influence of the reward system on employee social sustainability in terms of it being an enabler of employee well-being, motivation, engagement and many other positive behavioral aspects. The consistency and fairness imbedded in the reward and control system is also crucial. Consistency and fairness in reward systems is a result of the systematic nature of such systems, leading to a positive influence on employee social sustainability through satisfaction and commitment.

2.6 Training

Training and knowledge enhancement through learning are crucial to employee social sustainability (Spreitzer and Porath, 2012). Training is among the most effective HR practices that enable high organizational performance and productivity (Combs *et al.*, 2006) and a common HR practice that can be found in any effective HR system (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2014). Training can be linked to employee social sustainability owing to the fact that helping employees grow and develop helps sustain a high-performing workforce (Spreitzer and Porath, 2012). Additionally, employees are normally seen as creative, proactive and always worthy of development (Van Buren *et al.*, 2011). Supporting the importance of training in organizations, in their study of the banking sector in Pakistan, Sattar *et al.* (2015) concluded that training had the highest impact on job performance and employee engagement among various HR practices.

Employee engagement and belonging is highly dependent on their belief in the organization's interest in elevating their skills and their work experience, especially through training. Anitha (2014), for example, suggested that career development, through the timely use of training and development, needs to be considered important by organizations. Additionally, effective training and development enable and maintain desirable employee behavior and attitudes (Williams, 2008). Given the influence of training on the aspects and outcomes of effective employee social sustainability, training will be included as a factor that has a direct impact on employee social sustainability.

3. Research methodology and analysis

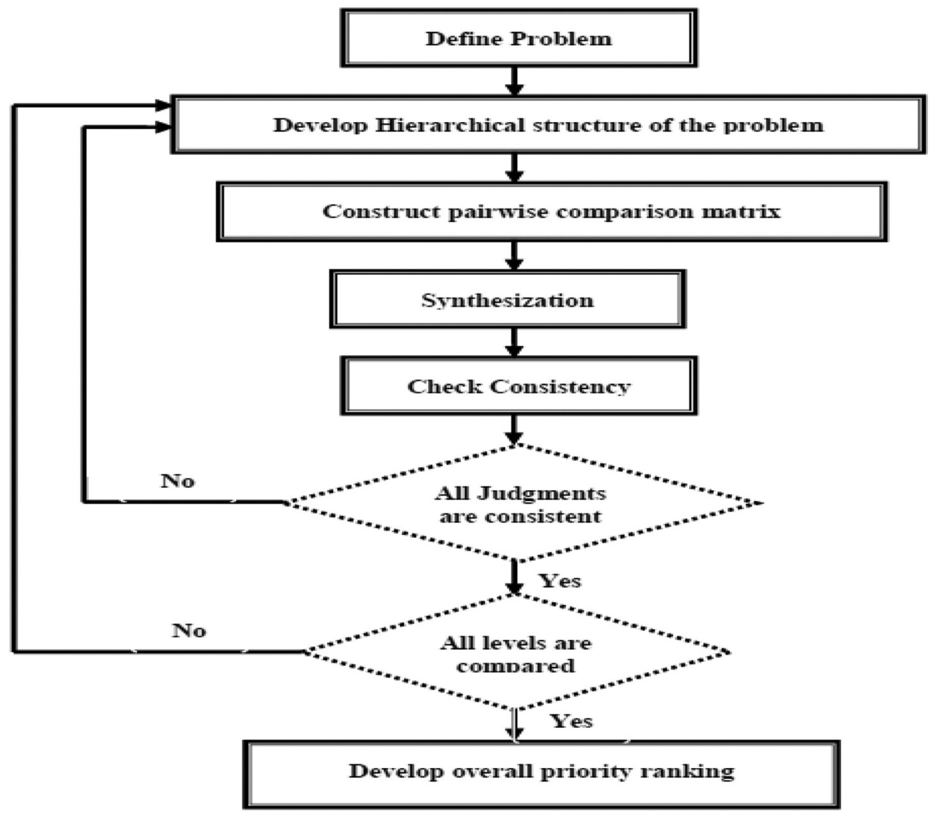
3.1 Analytical hierarchy process (AHP)

AHP is a methodology, developed by Saaty (1980), that has been widely used for selecting best alternatives, resource allocation, resolving conflicts and solving complex decision-making problems (Subramanian and Ramanathan, 2012) without linking to the relations hypothesis of interactional variable framework. The AHP process involves four main phases (see also Figure 1):

1. structuring the decision problem;
2. conducting measurement and data collection;
3. computing normalized weights; and
4. determining a synthesized-finding solution to the problem (Saaty, 1990).

The first phase in AHP is dividing any complex problem into several sub-problems in terms of hierarchical levels, where each level characterizes a set of criteria or characteristics relative to each sub-problem (Chin *et al.*, 1999). The top-most level of the hierarchy consists of the overall goal of the problem, while the bottom level consists of all possible alternatives for achieving the goal. The intermediate levels consist of factors

Figure 1 AHP phases



Source: Hussain *et al.* (2015)

identified as strategic and operational to the goal. The criteria are mutually exclusive, and their priority does not depend on the elements below them in the hierarchy (Partovi, 1994).

The second phase involves measurement and data collection; pair-wise comparisons are used to indicate the strength of each element, at all levels of the hierarchy, in relation to the other elements. Elements in each level are compared pair-wise with respect to their importance to an element in the next higher level (Partovi, 1994). The pair-wise comparison in AHP assumes that the decision-maker can associate any two elements at the same level of the hierarchy and provide a numerical value of the ratio of their importance (Sevkli *et al.*, 2008). The nominal scale used in AHP enables the decision maker to incorporate experience and knowledge in a simplistic and natural way (Partovi, 1994). The nominal scale representation used in AHP is detailed in Table I.

The preferences or priorities scale uses values of 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9 to represent the compared preference with the advantage of being insensitive to smaller changes in preferences. The scores 2, 4, 6 and 8 are meant to represent intermediate levels of preferences to cater for areas of unclear preference judgments.

Once the preferences ratings are collected and fed into pair-wise comparison matrices, then the third phase commences to obtain the relative priority weights. Then, based on the pair-wise comparison matrices, local priority weights are calculated and the ranking of desired alternatives (global weights) is obtained to satisfy the ultimate goal of the problem

Table I AHP nominal preferences scale definition and explanation		
Intensity of importance	*Definition*	*Explanation*
1	Equal importance	Two criteria equally contribute to the objective
3	Moderate importance	Judgment slightly favors one over another
5	Strong importance	Judgment strongly favors one over another
7	Very strong importance	A criterion is strongly favored and its dominance is demonstrated in practice
9	Absolute importance	Absolute importance
2,4,6,8	Intermediate values	Used to present a compromise between the priorities listed above

(Chin *et al.*, 1999). The consistency of the obtained weights needs to be assured through the consistency index (CI), defined by Saaty (1983) as:

$$\mathrm{CI} = (\lambda_{\max} - n)/(n - 1)$$

where, $\lambda_{\max}$ is the maximum eigenvalue of the matrix of the priority ratios and n is the number of factors in the main criteria level. The consistency ratio (CR) is then used to assess whether a matrix is sufficiently consistent or not. The inconsistency is acceptable if CR is less than or equal to 0.10 (Saaty, 1983). This is the ratio of CI to the random index (RI), which is the CR of a matrix of comparisons generated randomly:

$$\mathrm{CR} = \mathrm{CI}/\mathrm{RI}$$

Random pair-wise comparisons for this study were simulated to produce average random indices for different sized matrices (Hussain, M. *et al.*, 2015). The values of RI are given in Table II.

The final phase in the AHP methodology is synthetization. In this phase, the global priority weights are calculated. The global priority weights are calculated by multiplying the normalized priority weights into the above level (Pun and Hui, 2001).

3.2 Hierarchical model of social sustainability

The aim of this research is to identify the factors/elements that have the highest influence on employee social sustainability implementation/consideration in the airline industry in the UAE. For this purpose, a hierarchy of multi-criteria decision-making model of elements influencing employee social sustainability was constructed, for the use of AHP.

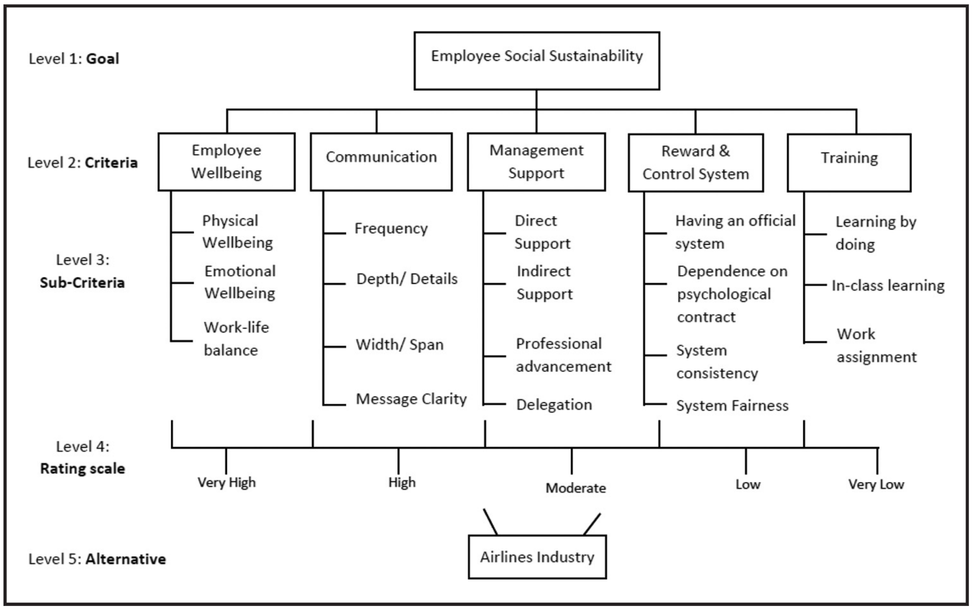
Applying the four phases of AHP, the hierarchical model was structured for the identification of elements influencing employee social sustainability within the airline industry in the UAE. Figure 2 represents the AHP hierarchical model used in this study. Level one represents the goal, i.e. implementation of employee social sustainability. Five main criteria were included in level two: employee well-being; communication; management support; reward and control system; and training. Level three includes the sub-criteria under each main criterion. Level four defines the rating scale used, while the last level includes the airline industry as the alternative or area of consideration of this study.

Table II Random index

N	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*
RI	0.00	0.00	0.58	0.90	1.12	1.24	1.32	1.41	1.45	1.48

Note: *n* is the number of factors

Figure 2 AHP hierarchical model



The five main criteria and 18 sub-criteria were identified from the review of the literature as having an influence on employee social sustainability. The sample of this study was based on expert opinion of employees from a major airline organization in the UAE, with four responses obtained from experts handling HR, finance and training functions within the studied organization. The respondents were two males and two females. The years of experience for the respondents ranged from 12 years (HR specialist) to 18 years (training manager). All respondents were also in direct contact with a considerable number of employees within the organization, which is advantageous in terms of providing greater experience regarding social considerations for employees.

Applying the AHP methodology resulted in obtaining priority weights for the factors assigned to employee social sustainability implementation. As highlighted in Table III, it is apparent that management support (0.33) achieved the highest weight and communication (0.24) achieved the second-highest weight. These two factors accounted for 57 per cent of the total priority (importance) assigned by respondents to all five factors considered in the study.

The least important factor was the reward and control system (0.07). Employee well-being (0.19) and training (0.17) had similar levels of importance. The CR value of 0.09 (<0.1) for results in Table I indicates consistent results.

Table III Pair-wise comparison: geometric means and priority weights of main criteria

	Employee well-being	*Communication*	*Management support*	*Reward and control system*	*Training*	*Priority weight*
Employee well-being	1.00	1.47	0.27	2.33	1.40	0.19
Communication	0.68	1.00	1.63	3.00	0.93	0.24
Management support	3.75	0.61	1.00	3.50	2.33	0.33
Reward and control system	0.43	0.33	0.29	1.00	0.42	0.07
Training	0.71	1.07	0.43	2.39	1.00	0.17

Note: CR = 0.09 (<0.10 = acceptable)

The sub-criteria under employee well-being resulted in the priorities summarized in Table IV. Physical well-being had the highest priority across the sub-criteria, with a weight of 0.55. Emotional well-being had a weight of 0.26, while work–life balance had the least priority (0.19). The CR value for the sub-criteria was 0.06 (<0.1), indicating consistent results.

The highest priority sub-criteria related to communication was frequency, with a priority weight of 0.44. Message clarity was second with a priority weight of 0.21. Detail (depth) and span (width) scored priority weights of 0.19 and 0.16, respectively. The CR value of these sub-criteria was 0.07 (<0.1), indicating consistent results. The results are shown in Table V.

The sub-criteria under management support resulted in direct support having the highest priority (0.47), whereas indirect support, professional advancement and delegation scored almost equivalent priorities. The CR value of the sub-criteria, shown in Table VI, was 0.07 (<0.1), indicating consistent results.

The sub-criteria under reward and control system showed highest priority for having and official system with a priority weight of 0.48. The other three sub-criteria, dependence on psychological contract, system consistency and system fairness, scored priority weights of 0.19, 0.19 and 0.14, respectively. The CR value of 0.09 (<0.1) indicates a consistent result, as shown in Table VII.

Training sub-criteria indicated the highest priority for learning by doing with a weight of 0.42, with in-class training having the second-highest priority weight of 0.32. The lowest

Table IV Pair-wise comparison: geometric means and priority weights of employee well-being elements

	Physical well-being	*Emotional well-being*	*Work–life balance*	*Priority weight*
Physical well-being	1.00	2.80	2.33	0.55
Emotional well-being	0.36	1.00	1.83	0.26
Work–life balance	0.43	0.55	1.00	0.19

Note: CR = 0.06 (<0.10 = acceptable)

Table V Pair-wise comparison: geometric means and priority weights of communication elements

	Frequency	*Depth/details*	*Width/span*	*Message clarity*	*Priority weight*
Frequency	1.00	3.83	2.83	1.37	0.44
Depth/ details	0.26	1.00	1.79	1.07	0.19
Width/ span	0.35	0.56	1.00	1.09	0.16
Message clarity	0.73	0.93	0.92	1.00	0.21

Note: CR = 0.07 (<0.10 = acceptable)

Table VI Pair-wise comparison: geometric means and priority weights of management support elements

	Direct support	*Indirect support*	*Professional advancement*	*Delegation*	*Priority weight*
Direct support	1.00	4.00	3.00	1.83	0.47
Indirect support	0.25	1.00	2.17	0.97	0.19
Professional advancement	0.33	0.46	1.00	1.12	0.15
Delegation	0.55	1.03	0.89	1.00	0.19

Note: CR = 0.07 (<0.10 = acceptable)

Table VII Pair-wise comparison: geometric means and priority weights of reward and control system elements					
	Having official system	*Dependence on psychological contract*	*System consistency*	*System fairness*	*Priority weight*
Having official system	1.00	4.00	3.00	2.13	0.48
Dependence on psychological contract	0.25	1.00	1.60	1.45	0.19
System consistency	0.33	0.63	1.00	2.33	0.19
System fairness	0.47	0.69	0.43	1.00	0.14

Note: CR = 0.09 (<0.10 = acceptable)

priority weight was for work assignment, with a priority weight of 0.26. The CR value, as shown in Table VIII, shows highly consistent results with a CR value of 0.01 (<0.1).

The local weight of each sub-criteria was then multiplied by the weight of the criterion it fell under to obtain global weights for all sub-criteria. The calculation of global weights showed that the highest priority was given to the management for direct support and the second highest sub-criteria comprised the physical well-being of employees. Communication frequency was the third-highest sub-criteria in the entire group. The three sub-criteria with the low priority were all within the reward and control system criterion: system consistency; dependence on psychological contract; and system fairness. Figure 3 shows sub-criteria global weights.

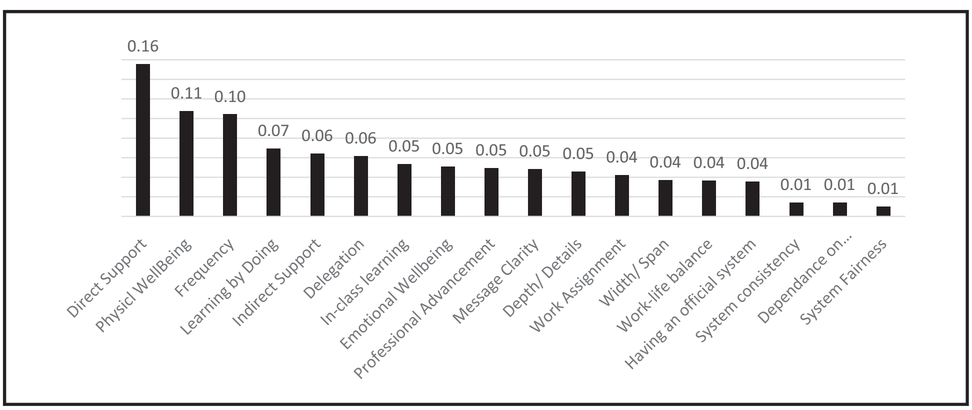
4. Discussion and recommendations

The aim of this study was to explore employee social sustainability dimensions within the airline industry in the UAE. These dimensions were explored to determine their priorities to understand their impact on employee social sustainability implementation. AHP was used to prioritize the dimensions and measure the priority (importance) of these dimensions on

Table VIII Pair-wise comparison: geometric means and priority weights of training elements				
	Learning by doing	*In-class training*	*Work assignment*	*Priority weight*
Learning by doing	1.00	1.47	1.45	0.42
In-class training	0.68	1.00	1.43	0.32
Work assignment	0.69	0.70	1.00	0.26

Note: CR = 0.01 (<0.10 = acceptable)

Figure 3 Sub-criteria global weights



employee social sustainability. Five dimensions (main criteria) and 18 factors (sub-criteria) were included in this study. The results of this study show the greatest priority for management support (0.33) and communication (0.24). Employee well-being and training had a second-level priority, with weights of 0.19 and 0.17, respectively. Reward and control had the least priority of 0.07. Figure 4 shows a visual representation of the ascending order of the social sustainability dimensions.

The emphasis on management support and communication indicates the need for realizing the value of employees and their contributions within the organization. The high priority of management support and communication is in agreement with previous literature, indicating employees' need for belonging (Anitha, 2014) and value-added contributions (Mishra *et al.*, 2014).

However, previous literature has suggested a crucial role for reward and control in employee social sustainability by sustaining high performance (Danish *et al.*, 2014). Other research has shown that, even though the reward system is among the most effective HRM practices (Luthans and Stajkovic, 1999), employees and managers tend to underestimate the importance of the reward system (Rynes *et al.*, 2004). The results of this study support the established notion in literature that indicate the lesser importance given by managers to the reward system in influencing human resources and employee social sustainability. Such findings should, therefore, encourage managers to expend more effort in ensuring that the reward system is perceived as having a greater value for employees.

We propose to link the three highest-priority dimensions so that organizations should utilize management support as a "tool" through the "means" of effective communication to achieve the "objective" of enhancing employee well-being. Figure 5 explains the proposed relationship between the three dimensions with the highest priorities.

Figure 4 Social sustainability dimensions with increasing priority

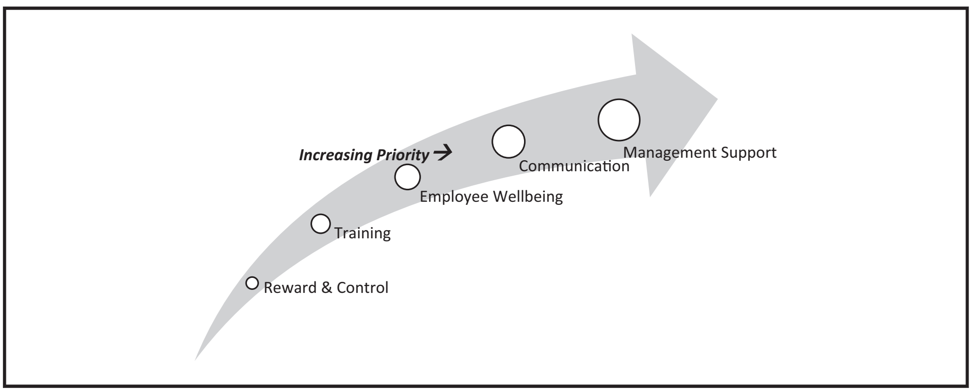
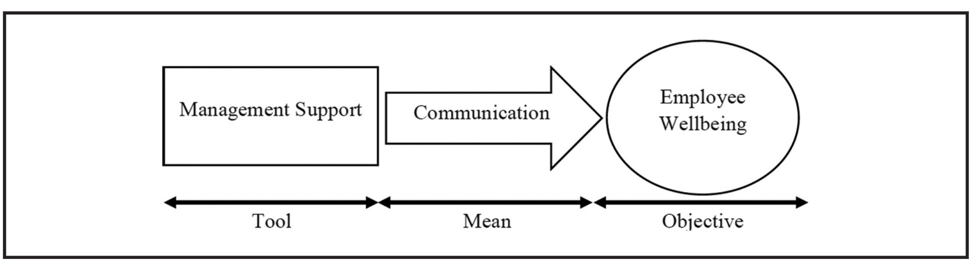


Figure 5 Proposed relationship between highest-priority dimensions (criteria)



Emphasis should also be given to the factors (sub-criteria) that were found to have high priority in this study. Comparing the relative importance of all factors (sub-criteria) yielded a better explanation of the study results. Direct management support, employee physical well-being and communication frequency had the highest priorities, whereas consistent reward system, dependence on psychological contract and reward system fairness had the lowest. The lower priority of such elements (all related to reward system) indicates that organizations within this sector should give more attention to establishing a healthy and value-adding reward system that enables better employee commitment and engagement (Heger, 2007), as the lack of an effective reward system might lead to employee disengagement (Zheng and Lamond, 2010), which, in turn, would affect overall organizational performance.

4.1 Implications

The results of this study have critical implications for both researchers and practitioners. For practitioners, establishing and sustaining an effective reward system and training scheme should be given higher priority. The focus on these two aspects should lead to enhanced employee satisfaction and an improved feeling of belonging toward the organization. Similarly, the productivity of employees will be enhanced, which, in turn, will result in establishing better organizational image and performance, especially when interactions with external stakeholders are required. Employee well-being should be given higher priority, i.e. establishing a balance between workload and social life. Employees who are emotionally stable and have a heightened sense of physical well-being should be more productive and exhibit higher performance levels.

Additionally, organizations should always focus on employees' social sustainability as a core driver for developing an overall scheme of healthy work environment. The focus on employees, as crucial (internal) stakeholder and a starting point in developing an organizational image that other (external) stakeholders will view, is the right sequence of interests for any organization. The buildup of the right priority and sequence of factors will enable organizations to achieve their objectives and visions. Service organizations, in particular, should not build their organizational image based on an outside-in approach but rather on an inside-out approach.

For researchers, more focus should be given to employee social sustainability factors. While much research has focused on customers and local communities that are being impacted by the operations of the airline and tourism industry, there has been little research regarding employee social sustainability within these sectors. This study highlights some critical aspects related to employee social sustainability in the airline industry, linking them to HRM practices through priority ranking.

4.2 Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is the narrow operational focus on a single industry sector. There is a need for expanding the research focus to different sectors, incorporate more factors that affect employee social sustainability and use a larger sample. The nature of the AHP methodology of depending on experts' opinion can be for the initial determination of critical factors that need to be focused upon for future studies. The generalizability of results is limited because of the focus on only one airline within the UAE. Changing organization settings and cultural attributes may lead to different results in similar studies.

4.3 Future study

Future research in the area of employee social sustainability should focus on a wider sample of contributors, i.e. from multiple organizations. Deeper investigations of the aspects impacting employee social sustainability should also be a theme of future studies. The segregation of enablers and indicators of employee social sustainability should also be considered. The enablers of social sustainability are dimensions that permit the implementation of employee social sustainability, while indicators are dimensions that measure the influence of employee social sustainability implementation.

5. Conclusion

Employees are essential stakeholders that have not received enough attention in the sustainability literature. Linking employee social sustainability to HRM practices both enhances employee social sustainability and improves HRM practices. Addressing HRM aspects that are meant to enhance employees' positions within organizations has a potential relationship with, and underlying effect on, sustaining employees, especially in the social dimension. This study aimed at addressing a gap in the literature in terms of the lack of attention paid to employees, given the current shift towards strategy-driven organizations and the consideration of employees as a resource that can simply be replenished at any time, rather than stakeholders who have a right to continuous development and sustainability. The selection of stakeholder theory added value to the study and its findings, especially in terms of employees regaining their critical role in the success of an organization.

The prioritization of HRM practices that have a direct influence on employee social sustainability has helped in highlighting avenues for future studies of a similar scope in service industries where employees and their contributions are crucial and always in high demand. The use of a decision-making methodology such as AHP in determining the priority of the HRM practices that influence the implementation and success of employee social sustainability is a step in the right direction to provide a better understanding of the role of these practices through understanding employees' opinions and their perceptions of their actual experiences within their organizational setup.

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