

REVIEW
of a doctoral dissertation by a self-directed doctoral student

Author of the dissertation: ANDREAN JOE

Dissertation topic: “CHALLENGES FACING LEADERS IN HUMAN RESOURCE
MANAGEMENT IN THE ERA OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY”

Reviewer: Prof. Dr. Velislava Nikolaeva

Description of the Dissertation

The dissertation submitted to me for review consists of 211 pages in total. It contains a list of figures (35), a list of tables (26), a list of abbreviations, an introduction, 3 chapters with a total of 11 paragraphs, a conclusion, a list of references, and two appendices. The list of references includes a total of 102 sources, of which 4 are in Cyrillic and the remaining 98 are in Latin script, including electronic sources.

The relevance of this topic stems from the need for businesses to engage more actively and responsibly in the sustainable and “green” management of their material resources, organizational processes, and human resources, as a prerequisite for market success, in the context of the transition to a circular economy. The paper skilfully argues that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that successfully transform and adapt to this new reality enhance their market resilience, competitiveness, and business performance.

The subject of this dissertation is human resource management and organizational processes (between leaders and employees) in small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany, specifically in the real estate management, financial consulting, and skilled trades sectors, which are operating in the context of the transition to a circular economy.

The specific challenges and competencies required for effective human resource management in the context of a circular economy are highlighted in this dissertation, with a focus on “the development of leadership strategies, organizational culture, ESG-oriented practices, and integrated models that foster sustainability and management standards in enterprises.”

The research problem is justified by the “limited number of scientific studies and data on practically applied integrated HRM models in SMEs within the context of the circular economy.” As the author of the dissertation points out, in most of the studies conducted, the circular economy has been analyzed primarily through “the lens of technologies, material flows, and business models” and even then, mainly in large enterprises, while “the human factor, competencies, motivation, organizational culture, mindset, and employee well-being” have not been sufficiently explored in terms of their role and significance in this new reality.

The author’s thesis is that “the challenges facing leaders in human resource management within the context of a circular economy are not limited solely to external economic, regulatory, or technological factors,” but are determined by the potential of SMEs to generate and develop knowledge, the established ESG culture, the level of leadership, and the practices implemented for “attracting, motivating, and developing human capital.” Management in the context of the transition to a circular economy “requires a new managerial capacity that combines leadership vision, strategic HRM, digitalization, business partnerships, and employee well-being within an integrated framework for sustainable organizational transformation.” Human capital is not viewed as a factor of production (labor resource), but rather as “a driver of the transition to a circular economy.”

The objective of this study is to develop an integrated model in the context of the transition to a circular economy for the simultaneous sustainable management of human and natural capital in SMEs. Based on this objective, five research tasks were formulated and systematically carried out in the course of the study. As a result, the

author's view is clearly articulated: the transition to the circular economy is not merely an environmental or technological change, but rather a purposeful, managerial transformation in which SMEs change the way they create, use, and restore value.

The trend toward the increasing irrelevance of the linear model in the modern economy is also clearly highlighted, as is the rapidly gaining momentum of the circular economy in all spheres of socio-economic life.

Chapter 1 presents the scope of the circular economy in theory and practice, and on this basis identifies challenges for SME management. The book skilfully develops the idea of the need to create synergy between human and natural capital as a prerequisite for the circular transition of business, as well as the role of corporate social responsibility in sustainable business management. The linear and circular models, as well as the challenges facing small and medium-sized enterprises, are appropriately and skilfully synthesized and analysed.

Already in this section of the dissertation, the author's assertion regarding the importance of the quality of human capital including managerial capital is categorically substantiated, and organizational culture and the work environment are critically and thoroughly examined as the foundation for transforming the concept of the circular economy into effective management practice.

Chapter 2 presents the methodological framework of the empirical study. The selection of the three SME economic sectors in Germany in which circular business models are applicable is clearly justified. A mixed-methods approach was chosen, combining the analysis of qualitative and quantitative responses using the R software program (for quantitative questions) and a content-structured qualitative analysis based on Kukarcz (for open-ended questions). I consider the choice of tools for processing the results of the dissertation research to be appropriate and correctly and precisely applied. Various management practices in circular business models relevant to the three sectors studied are also presented, such as: product life cycle and repair, ESG-oriented management, Product-as-a-Service, digitalization, sustainable partnerships, and

knowledge and competency management. It is demonstrated why HRM is not viewed as a standalone administrative function, but rather as an integrated management system through which greater synergy between people and nature and a more responsible use of natural resources are achieved.

Chapter 3 presents the results of the empirical study conducted among 102 small and medium-sized enterprises, based on 49 questions. The sample and the course of the study are described in detail, and the data from the analysis of each question are summarized. The grouping of responses according to elements of the model proposed by doctoral candidate Joe for the sustainable integrated development of human and natural capital in small and medium-sized enterprises makes a very positive impression; specifically: leadership, human resources and synergy with natural capital, corporate social economy, ESG orientation, and the circular economy. The barriers identified as a result of the study indicate that SMEs face financial constraints, a knowledge gap, a lack of partners, and insufficient formalized practices in the field of the circular economy. On this basis, Andrean Joe develops and proposes “seven management strategies and recommendations for the effective development of knowledge, competencies, and organizational capacity for the sustainable management of human and natural capital in SMEs.” The proposed three-stage integrated model for strategic transformation, with specific phases and steps outlined, implies a structural sequence of processes and strategies, measurability through pre-identified performance indicators, and adaptability to sector-specific characteristics and the particularities of SMEs, thereby creating a sustainable management framework for development.

A formula for sustainable development in the context of the circular economy has been synthesized (SLOT sme's (Sustainable Leadership Oriented Transformation in SMEs) = f (L, SHRM, K, C, M, D, P)), which includes leadership, knowledge, motivation and well-being, strategic human resource management, culture, digitalization, and partnership.

The problem addressed in the dissertation is timely and significant, and the methodology for addressing it was appropriately selected and effectively applied.

Strengths of the Dissertation

- Ph.D. candidate Joe's commitment to and interest in the subject matter are clearly evident from the way the dissertation is structured and from the depth and analytical rigor of the discussion.
- The difference between the linear and circular models of the economy is highlighted with exceptional precision and depth. It is clearly stated that the difference lies not only in management but also in the manner in which value is created: in the linear model, this occurs at the moment of sale, whereas in the circular economy, it occurs throughout the entire life cycle of the product, which is cyclical in nature.
- The doctoral candidate's ability to identify, synthesize, and systematize information in support of his thesis on the role of effective human capital management in SMEs in the context of sustainable development and the circular economy makes a very positive impression.
- I consider the conceptual model developed for SME participation in the circular economy and the formula for sustainable development proposed therein to be an indisputable strength of the proposed dissertation.
- Given the quality of the work, I consider Andrean Joe to be a motivated and ambitious researcher with great potential for further development.
- I believe that the submitted paper constitutes a complete, independent scientific study with significant theoretical and practical merits and findings.
- I believe that the work done by Ph.D. candidate Joe can be applied not only to SMEs in Germany in the economic sectors he studied, but also to other

economic sectors, in other countries, and to all enterprises based on the criterion of “enterprise size.”

Comments and Recommendations on the Dissertation

I have no significant critical comments or recommendations regarding the dissertation submitted for review. However, I would like to draw attention to the following:

- The text as a whole could be formatted better. The lists of figures and tables, as well as Appendix 2, do not start on a new page. In some places there is spacing between the tables in others, there is not. The tables and figures could be formatted better; sources for their creation are not cited everywhere. It is recommended to use justified alignment for the lists, bibliography, and citations. The titles of the appendices are missing.
- I believe that listing and above all, highlighting all the questions included in the survey can be avoided, especially when they are listed in an appendix. The approach chosen by Ph.D. candidate Joe tends to unnecessarily burden the exposition in Chapter Three. This also increases the imbalance between the length of the dissertation’s final chapter and the others.
- I recommend that the doctoral candidate disseminate the results of his dissertation research by making them available to the stakeholders mentioned in the dissertation.
- I agree that the results achieved in the dissertation should be published in a book (monograph) after the text has been further developed.

I would like to emphasize that, regardless of the comments and recommendations I have made, the dissertation constitutes a fully completed, high-quality scientific study, and these comments do not diminish its indisputable merits.

A check of the texts of the dissertation and the abstract for plagiarism revealed no instances of plagiarism.

Doctoral dissertation abstract

The submitted abstract is 44 pages long. It accurately reflects the content of the dissertation and correctly identifies its original contributions.

Publications on the Dissertation Topic

The submitted scientometric report shows that the minimum requirements of the Higher Education Act have been exceeded. I am partially familiar with the texts of the publications themselves. I accept that they are consistent with the topic of the dissertation and objectively reflect the author's scientific and research interests.

Contributions

I accept the material submitted by Ph.D. candidate Joe as his dissertation; it is logically structured and scientifically sound, and allows for the identification of contributions in three main categories: scientific, scientific-applied, and applied.

Ph.D. candidate Joe has identified 2 scientific, 5 scientific-applied, and 1 applied contribution.

I accept all contributions as the candidate's own work, logically and correctly derived from the text of the dissertation.

The scientific contributions enrich and supplement existing knowledge in the field of human resource management and objectively reflect the results achieved in Chapter One of the dissertation. The scientific-applied and applied contributions he has formulated are logically and appropriately synthesized.

Questions for the Ph.D. Candidate

I would like to ask Ph.D. candidate Joe whether he has already shared the results of his study with any of the companies involved and what the outcome was?

Conclusion

Everything written thus far gives me reason to propose to the esteemed members of the academic jury that they support the awarding of the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor” to ANDREAN JOE, a self-directed doctoral candidate in professional field 3.7. “Administration and Management,” doctoral program “Organization and Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production.”.

15.10.2026 г.

Varna

Reviewer:

/Prof. Dr. V. Nikolaeva/