

‘LEVERAGING OUTSOURCING TO ACHIEVE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW’

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ABSTRACT

In order to sustain in today's competitive environment, revenue generation, global competition and innovation has opened an alternative door for organizations in the form of outsourcing. This paper presents an insight into outsourcing as a corporate strategy to achieve sustainability, based on a comprehensive review of literature from research papers covering outsourcing and sustainability, published within a period of six years i.e. 2010 & 2016. The journals were selected on the basis of the availability of the research papers covering the topic and also the availability of all the volumes and issues within the period of study.

This paper presents outsourcing as a leveraging strategy to achieve sustainability. Outsourcing is the transferring of the non-core but value generating activities of the business to some external expert service providers to avail benefits like cost reduction, flexibility etc. Despite the increasing popularity, outsourcing is not free from criticism. The paper identifies various drivers and challenges associated with it. The recent trends in human resource outsourcing are also identified. Professionals today view outsourcing not only as a cost reduction approach to present a better balance sheet but also as a business strategy for sustainability. Sustainability in business refers to the ability of the firm to meet the present needs of business without compromising the long terms needs for future. The paper presents different perspectives held by the researchers in area of sustainability. Outsourcing from being a firm driven strategy to providing corporate sustainability, leaves many opportunities in this area to be explored. The Operational and innovational efficiency achieved through outsourcing provides a sustainable competitive edge to a business. Directions for future research are also provided based on the suggestions from the reviewed papers.

Keywords: Challenges, Drivers, Outsourcing, Sustainability, Trends.

I INTRODUCTION

The word “outsourcing” originated from an American Glossary ‘outside resourcing’. Outsourcing was embarked for the first time in 1963 when Electronic Data System (EDS), a company of Ross Perot signed an agreement for data processing services with Blue Cross. The origin of offshore outsourcing in India was initiated when American Express outsourced its accounts receivable process to Tata Consultancies in 1979 [1]. In 1989, Eastman Kodak outsourced major portion of IT- related services to IBM, DEC and Businessland [2].

Oxford dictionary defines outsourcing as ‘the process of arranging an outsider who is not a part of the company to do work or provide service for that company’. Outsourcing as defined by the Cambridge dictionary is ‘a situation of employing another organization rather than own employees to do its work’. The concept of outsourcing was first explained by Mr. Peter Drucker in 1989, in his Wall Street Journal’s article titled “Sell the Mailroom”. Since then, the tag line “Do what you do the best and outsource the rest” was recognized internationally [3]. Externalization, crowdsourcing, contracting out, facilities management, leased work, independent contracting [4], strategic alliance, near shoring and many other alternatives with which outsourcing is known and practiced today. Outsourcing is the transferring of certain value generating activities, processes and services to one’s owned premises or to outside agent to reap the benefits of economizing and gaining competitive advantage [1]. Mr. Drucker’s perspective on outsourcing was contracting out those areas in which an organization demonstrate no specialized skills. With the advent of globalization, outsourcing is not just a buzz word but a survival alternative for the organizations [2].

In the year 2016, one of the top telecom giant Vodaphone renewed its outsourcing contract worth \$750-850 million (Rs. 5025- 5695 crore) with IBM for 5 years, and which followed approx. \$ 600 million outsourcing contract in 2007 [5]. With more and more corporates investing a hefty sum in contracting out the major portion of its activities, outsourcing has become a major trend prevalent in today’s scenario [6]. With the increasing number of multinationals today, IT outsourcing has become a common and the most researched topic [7].

In the process of transferring activities to outside agencies, jobs have been created globally. Global outsourcing has resulted in the generation of employment opportunities. According to NASSCOM report 2016, the IT-BPO industry has created direct employment of 2.2 million and indirect employment of 8 million. The figures are expected to go up to 10 million and 20 million respectively by 2020. Also by 2020, the IT-BPO industry in India is expected to account for 10 per cent of India’s GDP and 14 per cent of total services sector revenues providing a sustainable advantage to the country (NASSCOM, 2016). Some of the most renowned outsourcing companies today include OrangeHRM (www.orangehrm.com), Accenture (www.accenture.com), Deloitte (www.deloitte.com). The debate on outsourcing is polarized, among the papers reviewed some researchers mentioned its benefits in form of cost reduction, flexibility, risk sharing, and value creation while others mentioned the threats associated with it. Outsourcing from being a firm’s driven strategy, has now emerged as a sustainability strategy for business. The term “sustainability” is used frequently in the context of environment. Cambridge dictionary defines sustainability as ‘the ability to continue over a period of time at the same time causing little or no damage to environment’. The World Commission on Environment and Development defines sustainability as a process of change in which the resources, investments, technological development and

institutional change are in harmony, enhancing the potential of current as well as future to meet their needs. The terms ‘sustainability’, ‘corporate sustainability’, ‘corporate social responsibility’ [8], ‘corporate social performance’ [9] have been used interchangeably by many authors. Discussion about sustainability gained momentum in the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations in 1992 [9]. The commission identified the pillars of the sustainability as social, economic and environmental. It also presented a broad view on sustainable development taking account all the stakeholders. This definition of sustainable development define it as a development which meets the present needs without compromising the future generation’s ability to meet their own needs. The Brundland sustainability views rose interest in highlighting the role of sustainability in business.

Sustainability has been a major concern area not only for environmentalists, researchers but also for business organizations. Sustainability in business refers to ability of the firm to meet and respond to the present performance needs making use of scarce resources, without compromising the long term future needs of the firms [10]. Researchers have come up with different areas to understand sustainability in business like corporate social responsibility (CSR) [21], green HRM [22], sustainable competitive advantage [10] as a means to achieve sustainability in organizations.

Outsourcing has emerged as a strategy for providing a sustainable competitive advantage to an organization. Contracting-out the non-core activities to external experts provides a non-imitable advantage to the organization. Thus, the current paper (through the reviewed papers) looks at outsourcing as a rising trend, in order to achieve business sustainability.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purpose of the study the papers from selected journals, within a period of six years i.e. 2010 & 2016 have been reviewed. This comprises of papers from the following journals - Global Business Review (GBR), Journal of Management (JOM), Management Review (MR), The Indian Journal of Industrial Relations (IJIR) and others. The journals were selected on the basis of the theme of the paper i.e. outsourcing & sustainability and also on the availability of all the volumes and issues of the selected journals within 2010 to 2016. The features of the reviewed papers are illustrated in Table 1

TABLE 1. FEATURES OF THE REVIEWED PAPERS

Name	Area	Scope	Year
Seungbum Lee	Outsourcing (GBR)	Outsourcing of sports labor- Migration	2010
Soni Agrawal, Kishor Goswami, Bani Chatterjee	Outsourcing (GBR)	Offshore outsourcing in India	2010

Abigail Mc.Williams & Donald S. Siegel	Sustainability (JOM)	Corporate Social Responsibility(CSR) and sustainability	2011
Dr. Manisha Seth & Dr. Deepa Sethi	Outsourcing (IJMT)	Theoretical review of outsourcing	2011
Isık Cicek & Bilal Ozer	Outsourcing (IJBMS)	Outsourcing, organization culture & productivity	2011
Kankan Mukhopadhyay, Jaya Sil, N.R. Banerjea	Sustainability (Vision)	Sustainable development & competency based management system	2011
Sumit K Majumdar	Outsourcing (IJIR)	Corporate debt & outsourcing	2011
Ananda Das Gupta	Sustainability (GBR)	CSR & corporate sustainability	2012
Ajay K. Jain , Cary L. Cooper	Sustainability (MR)	Organizational Citizenship Behavior(OCB) & outsourcing	2011
Herman Aguinis & Ante Glavas	Sustainability (JOM)	CSR	2012
Judit Beregszaszi & H.D. Polay	Outsourcing (IJHRM)	Human Resource Outsourcing	2012
Jeevan Jyoti & Himani Arora	Outsourcing (GBR)	Client-vendor relationship in outsourcing	2013
Dhiman Deb Chowdhury	Sustainability (IJMES)	OCB and sustainability	2013
Robin Kramar	Sustainability (IJHRM)	Strategic Human Resource Management	2013
Peter Wells	Sustainability (MR)	Sustainable business models	2013
R.K. Jena & R. Goswami	Sustainability + Outsourcing (GBR)	OCB and shift workers	2014

Gowda & Jayantia	Sustainability (MR)	Sustainability performance	2014
R Sridar & S Panda	Outsourcing (IJIR)	Contact employees	2014
Debendra Kumar Mahalik	Outsourcing + Sustainability (GBR)	IT outsourcing and sustainability in decision making	2014
Andrea Kim.et.al	Sustainability (JOM)	Green workplace behavior	2014
Saher Sayed	Sustainability (IJAR)	Green HRM	2015
Rima Zitkien & Ugn Blusyt	Outsourcing (Intellectual Economics)	Management model on service sector outsourcing	2015
Matilda Alexandrova	Outsourcing (GBR)	IT-Outsourcing and risk factor	2015
Clint Chadwick & Carol Flinchbaugh	Outsourcing (JOM)	Part-Time workers and financial performance	2013
John K. Mawdsley & Deepak Somaya	Outsourcing (JOM)	Employee mobility and impact on organization	2016

Among all the reviewed papers (Table 1), most of the papers studied outsourcing and sustainability as individual areas. It is worth mentioning that only [2] and [12] have explored the area of outsourcing with respect to sustainability.

III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The papers were collected and reviewed. The research methodology involved 2 steps: material collection and descriptive data analysis.

3.1 Material collection

Collection and descriptive analysis of the data are detailed in this part.

- Papers were collected from various database like Sage publications (www.sagepub.com), ResearchGate (www.researchgate.net), ScienceDirect (www.sciencedirect.com) and Taylor & Francis (www.taylorandfrancis.com). The journals included JOM, GBR, MR, IJIR and others which included The International Journal of Human Resource Management (IJHRM), International Journal of Management, Economics and Social Science (IJMESS), International Journal of Business and Management Studies (IJBMS), Vision, Indian Journal of Applied Research (IJAR), International Journal of Innovation, Management and Technology (IJIMT) and Intellectual Economics.
- Papers were selected entirely on the basis of the topic of review and the availability of all the volumes and issues of publications between 2010 & 2016.

3.2 Descriptive data analysis

This study attempts to analyze papers on “outsourcing and sustainability” from the selected journals published between 2010 & 2016. Maximum number of papers reviewed across the period of study were from years 2011, 2013 and 2014.

The distribution of journals in which selected papers were published indicates the interest of these journals in outsourcing and sustainability. The papers were selected on the basis of the theme. There were more papers in these selected journals which studied outsourcing and sustainability as individual areas but very few papers addressed both the issues together.

IV DETAILED ANALYSIS AND REVIEW

The reviewed research papers have been discussed and analyzed in this section to construct a holistic view in the area of outsourcing and sustainability. Subsequently, based on the recommendations of the researchers, future research opportunities have been identified. In the context of outsourcing, it is important to understand the reasons behind the same. Following are the drivers identified from these papers:

4.1 Drivers for Outsourcing

The decision to outsource depends on a number of factors. From a comprehensive review of the papers, the following emerged as the factors for outsourcing:

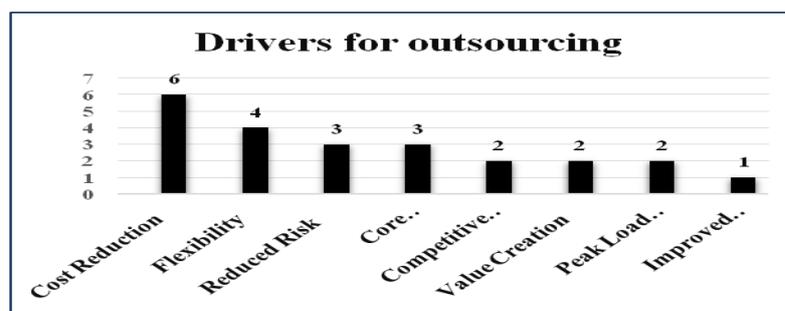


Fig 1. Distribution of the number of papers addressing various drivers of outsourcing

In figure 1, most of the researchers suggested cost reduction as the main motive behind outsourcing, followed by flexibility and reduced risk.

- **Cost Reduction:** Among all the reviewed papers, maximum papers focused on cost reduction as the key driver for outsourcing. It reduces the in-house cost [1]; [14]; [15] borne by the organization. Just-in-time deployment approach of contract labors, reduces both direct as well indirect costs [6]. Although today cost reduction is not the sole objective of outsourcing.
- **Flexibility:** The use of temporary subcontractors by organizations to meet the increasing and fluctuating demand for labor increases the flexibility of the firms [6]. Increase in flexibility of operations, provides the organization to adapt itself to the volatile situations.
- **Reduced risk:** Outsourcing reduces the risk of the organization [2]. Outsourcing helps the organization to shift the uncertainty and risk associated with the business onto some third party service providers [6]. The degree to which a firm can outsource its activities depends on the risk taking attitude of the outsourcing firm.
- **Concentration on core activities:** Activities can be divided into core and non-core activities. Outsourcing the non-core activities to some outside service provider helps the organizations to focus on more value generating and core activities. This provides long term sustainable advantage to the firm [6].
- **Competitive advantage:** The outsourcing vendors offer superior quality [16] services. Organizations that outsource can gain through comparative competitive advantage provided by the expert service providers [6].
- **Value creation:** Outsourcing creates value for the clients in form of improved quality, leveraging firm's skills, improved customer satisfaction [1]. This value generated provides long terms benefits to the organization.
- **Peak load absorption:** Various forms of outsourcing such as contract labor, temporary employees [15] have emerged as an option to absorb the demands of skilled but deficit labors during peak time. This enable the organization to meet insufficient labor supply.
- **Improved Process cycle:** Outsourcing the non-core activities to outside firms that are more specialized in performing them in a better, faster and more efficient manner can improve the process cycle and save organization's time [1]. The managers can utilize this time in focusing on other important areas.

Traditionally outsourcing focused mostly on non-core activities aimed to reduce cost and thereafter moved towards value creation, strategy oriented, managing uncertainty [1]. Outsourcing over the years has shifted from low-end to high-end services. Researchers also mentioned some challenges associated with it

4.2 Challenges for Outsourcing

Despite the increasing popularity for outsourcing, it is not free from criticism. It is pertinent to see the associated problems which a business could encounter while resorting to outsourcing. Following are the

challenges which have been highlighted by the authors of the reviewed papers:

- **Poor service quality:** Among the papers reviewed on outsourcing, five papers criticized outsourcing for the poor service quality. Despite achieving service levels, a degraded service quality was a powerful negative in outsourcing as reported in a review by Deloitte consulting's of 140 companies in 30 different countries [17]. Inadequate quality and capability of the vendor make outsourcing less attractive to organizations [1].
- **Loss of control:** Another major challenge that emerged was loss of control, mentioned in four papers. Outsourcing reduces the control of the organization over the outsourced functions [6]. Due to this fear of loss of control, organizations give outsourcing a second thought.
- **Risk of data security:** Loss of confidential data [1] was identified as another major challenge faced by the outsourcing organization, mentioned in four papers. No organization would feel reluctant to share confidential information with some outside vendor, due to risk of data security.
- **Employee insecurity:** One-third of the HR employers resists outsourcing due to fear of loss of job and anxiety due to temporary work employees [14]. The problems resulting from outsourcing not only affects the employers but also the employees, resulting in job insecurity and low morale [6]. Issues like job loss, low salaries [1] while outsourcing HR were addressed by two papers.
- **Choosing a wrong vendor:** Choosing a wrong vendor is another major drawback, mentioned in three papers. Choosing a wrong vendor and realizing that latter becomes a major time consuming problem for outsourcing companies [6]. So an outsourcing company have to take utmost care while choosing a right and efficient vendor.
- **Cultural differences:** When the vendor and the client are from different countries, like in case of offshore outsourcing, the parties often face the problems associated with different culture [1]. A lack of cultural understanding as one of the issues in global outsourcing [18]. Among the papers, two studies mentioned cultural difference as an emerging challenge to outsourcing.

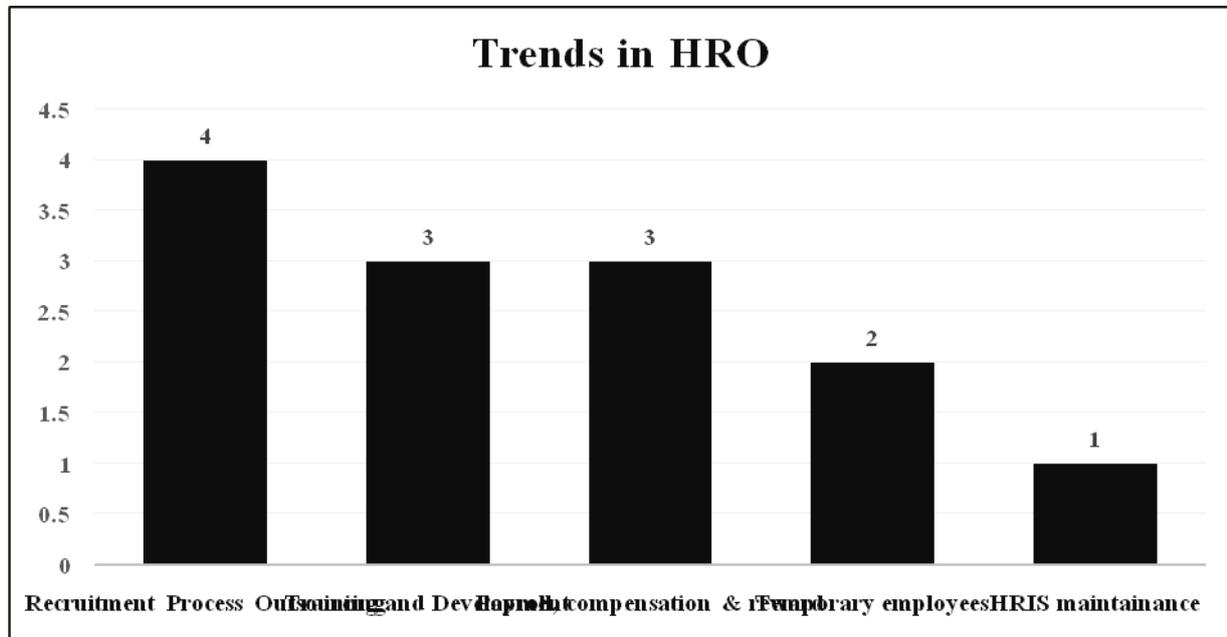
The debate on outsourcing is polarized. Outsourcing is seen as an opportunity for some at the same time threat for others. Most of the studies focused on outsourcing the non-core activities but today the growing trend to outsource the core has widened the area for outsourcing.

V HUMAN RESOURCE OUTSOURCING (HRO)

With the advent of globalization, today outsourcing is not only confined to IT or non-core elements but also the human resource. HR is the core of every organization, and outsourcing this core to some outside vendor shows the changing trend in outsourcing. A number of large companies have started opting for HRO services realizing the need of the senior management to focus on key areas of strategic planning, core competencies, customer satisfaction and decision making [6]. Traditionally cost reduction was the sole motive behind HRO but now, the need for flexibility, productivity, innovation has resulted in more and more companies opting for HRO [14].

5.1 Recent trends in HRO activities

From recruitment to payroll, now most of the HR activities are outsourced. Based on the analysis of the reviewed papers, it is very important to see the recent trend for HRO activities. The following trends emerged in



HRO as represented in Figure 6:

Fig 2. Distribution of the papers based on trends identified in HRO

In figure 2, among all the identified HRO activities, Recruitment has emerged as the most outsourced HR activity followed by others:

- Recruitment Process Outsourcing (RPO) as defined by Human Resource Outsourcing Association, is a form of outsourcing which transfers the whole of the company's recruitment process to some outside agency who assume the responsibility and ownership of designing and management of recruitment process (www.hudsonpro.com). RPO is an emerging trend in HRO. The need for RPO is felt to reduce cost and gain the needed expertise knowledge [14]. RPO is estimated to grow by 35-35% annually [19] as more and more companies are opting to for it.
- Training and development is another preferred HRO activities in today's scenario [6]. Due to increase in number of technical projects, the level of outsourcing the training activities by organizations is rising [14]. Training provided by an expert, delivers key skills [6] and increases the efficiency of the employees that prepares him to handle volatile situations.
- Among all the HR functions to be outsourced, temporary staffing is the most common outsourced activity [20]. Some researchers studied the relation between temporary employment and its impact on firm's performance. A negative and U shaped relationship between part-time employees and financial performance of a firm was found [4] which means as the number of temporary employees in an organization increases, its financial performance goes down.

- Payroll is among the top five HRO activities [6]. Being the most transactional and routine activity, payroll processing is the most frequent HR activity to be outsourced by an organization [14]. In a survey conducted by Deloitte (2014) it was found that 33% of the companies plan to outsource their payroll and compensation reward administration [17].
- Human Resource Information System (HRIS) is an interaction of HR and IT through HR software. Accenture uses IT to create a link between IT and HR, via ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) such as SAP, Oracle, and PeopleSoft [14]. In a survey conducted by Deloitte in 2014, 34% of the responding companies outsource the management and support of HRIS to some outside vendor [17].

Today HRO activities include recruitment, counselling, employee pension or retirement plans, employee benefits like medical, insurance, health, training, payroll, facility management, HRIS maintenance. These activities when performed by professionals provides an inimitable strength to the business.

VI OUTSOURCING AS A SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

Today outsourcing is seen as a sustainability strategy by firms which provides a competitive edge. Based on the papers reviewed, outsourcing has emerged as a strategy which makes business defensive in long run. Different researchers interpreted sustainability from different angles. Figure 3 represents perspectives held by different researchers.

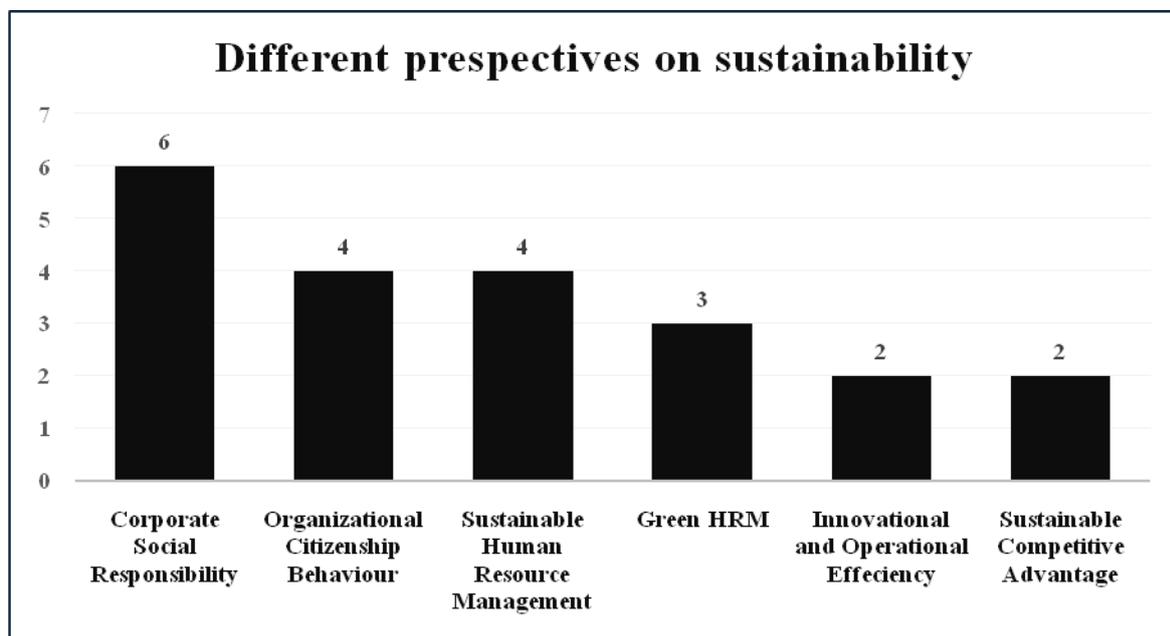


Fig 3. Distribution of reviewed papers on sustainability based on the interpretations by different researchers

In figure 3, most of the researchers mentioned CSR as a means to achieve corporate sustainability, followed by OCB and SHRM. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an extension of corporate social performance [9] which analyzes the organizational impact on society and on a number of stake holders. The social aspect of

sustainability considers the social obligations that the organization has towards the society, by managing issues like poverty, education, provision of health care facilities etc. [10]. Every organization has a responsibility towards society and all the other stake holders, which makes it viable in the long run.

Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) refers to the behavior possessed by employees, which is not mandatory nor compensatory but which contribute to social systems in an organization [21]. OCB has the power to resolve conflict and harmonize the pillars of sustainability [22]. This at the same time, creating organization's capability to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders, aims towards social, economy, environmental and organizational equity.

Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) is an extension of strategic human resource. It focuses on achieving economic outcomes and organizational sustainability, contributing to social outcome through HRM practices [9]. Human resources are an inevitable part of every organization. Managing them effectively not only increases the organization's retention rate but also contributes to business sustainability.

Green HRM involves increasing the awareness and commitment of the employees towards the issue of environmental sustainability [12]. The impact of the organizational activities on the environment like resource depletion, pollution is considered as the environmental aspect of sustainability [10]. Environment friendly initiatives results in reduced cost, increased efficiency, better employment relations [12]. Managing and greening the HR dimension right from job description, recruitment to appraisal makes a business economically sustainable.

Innovation and operational efficiency, sustainability has also been associated with innovation and operational efficiency [10]. This approach focuses on the reduction of consumption cost and achieving value creation through innovation [9]. Organizational sustainability can be achieved by measuring the efficiency of the value generated by people and technology and the cost incurred by organization on them.

Sustainable competitive advantage is the ability to not only survive but also sustain that survival in a competitive environment. Sustainable competitive advantage as the economic aspect of sustainability [9]. The economic aspect of sustainability is to thrive viably in the competitive economic environment and to attain long lasting competitive advantage [10].

Researchers have widened the boundaries of sustainability by adding the element of HR to it. The operational efficiency and OCB achieved through outsourcing provides a sustainable competitive advantage to the outsourcing organization [13] thus, making it viable in the long run. Outsourcing has emerged as one of the strategies leading to sustainability.

Most of the authors viewed outsourcing as a cost reduction strategy [6]; [18]; [1]. A reduction in cost provides an inimitable sustainable competitive edge to the outsourcing organization. This fulfills the economic objective of sustainability [9] which is to survive viably in a competitive environment [10]. Other benefits of outsourcing like flexibility, core concentration, peak load absorption, value creation makes a firm defensible in long run [1]

Authors also viewed outsourcing from the point of view of outsourced employees. Among the outsourced employee, every satisfied employee displays OCB [13]. It helps the organization to build a sustainable competitive edge in long run. OCB has the power to harmonize the pillars of sustainability [22]. Outsourcing providers are experts and invest in latest technology which provide competitive strength to the outsourcing firm [16]. Sustainability is linked to innovation [10], competitive advantage, differentiation and better HR practices.

The success of every organization depends on its employees, so it is important for it to possess right person, with right skills to succeed [23]. Human resources are a firm's greatest asset and SHRM aims at a long term development of human resources [10]. Aligning the HR strategies like recruitment, training and appraisal with the sustainability strategy, business sustainability can be achieved [10].

Outsourcing is viewed as a strategy that unites the social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability with the organizational objectives. Outsourcing when used as a strategy by business provides a sustainable strength to it.

VII CONCLUSION

In the current review of papers, outsourcing has emerged as a sustainable strategy by organizations. From being a cost reduction strategy to a sustainability strategy, outsourcing has deepened its roots in majority of the organizations. The paper identified various drivers of outsourcing and also the challenges associated with it. While most of these papers have stressed on outsourcing IT and other processes, there were a few papers which addressed the human aspect in outsourcing. This only shows that gone are those days when an organization would achieve its objectives by having all its employees on the rolls. Today, organizations are also being run wherein a major proportion of humans resources are on the payroll of other companies. As identified in the paper, the recent trends in HRO include recruitment, training, payroll and compensation, HRIS maintenance.

The authors of different papers shared various perspectives on sustainability majorly including OCB, CSR and SHRM. These explored areas provide competitive advantage to a business. Thus, outsourcing has emerged as a business strategy to survive viably in the long run.

VIII LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper presented a review during the period 2010 and 2016 from specific journals. A major limitation is with the quantity of papers considered for the study. This also highlights that much work has not been done in this area. More number of journals could be taken into account contributing to an in depth review.

The papers reviewed came up with various suggestions, which leaves ample scope for future research in this area.

- Further research should be conducted to study outsourcing with respect to sport labor migration [18].
- Future research needs to be conducted on the different proportion of part time employees and their performance effect in greater detail [4].

- A study considering the perception of vendors and the employees of the outsourcing organization on the development of client-vendor relationship was suggested [16].
- The effects of organizational commitment, individualism and collectivism, and demographic variables on OCB in different cultures and occupations should be studied [13].
- Studying the key performance indicators of corporate sustainability and OCB [22].
- There is a need to conduct a study considering service industry at a macro level [23].
- The effect of organizational culture and its dimensions on outsourcing HR processes needs a detailed research [14].
- To conduct a study on the impact of stress and OCB on employees from service (other than BPO) and manufacturing sector [21].
- To conduct research in green management and broadening it by adding additional HR elements to it [12].

Based on the current reviews, an empirical study could be conducted to study the impact of outsourcing independently as well as with regard to HRO activities, on the organization's long term survival.

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