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BUILDING SUSTAINABLE CAREER IN THE ERA OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

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Abstract: *The transition toward a circular economy represents a profound transformation of contemporary economic systems and labour markets, creating new conditions for career development and sustainability. In this context, the concept of sustainable careers has gained increasing relevance, emphasizing long-term employability, adaptability, well-being, and productivity throughout the lifespan. This paper aims to explore how the circular economy influences the formation of sustainable careers and to identify key competencies and organizational practices required to support career sustainability under changing labour market conditions. Drawing on a qualitative literature review, the study integrates insights from sustainable human resource management, sustainable career theory, and circular economy research. The analysis highlights that the circular economy reshapes skill requirements, job structures, and career paths, thereby increasing the importance of continuous learning, career adaptability, and employee well-being. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the critical role of sustainable human resource management in enabling individuals and organizations to respond effectively to these transformations. By conceptually linking circular economy principles with sustainable career development, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of career sustainability in times of economic and environmental transition and provides a foundation for future empirical research and policy development.*

Keywords: *Sustainable careers, circular economy, sustainable human resource management, employability, career adaptability.*

1. Introduction

In today's business landscape, marked by globalization, technological advancements, and diverse work arrangements, sustainable human resource

management has become essential for fostering long-term resilience and success for both organizations and their employees. In contrast to conventional human resource management, which primarily concentrates on immediate outcomes and organizational objectives, sustainable human resource management focuses on harmonizing economic, social, and human dimensions of work. The core idea is that nurturing employee development, health, well-being, and employability serves not only individual interests but also is a key factor in maintaining the long-term competitiveness of organizations.

While studies in sustainable human resource management mainly focus on employees as assets that organizations should develop for their long-term viability, it is important to recognize that employees have their own resources that form the basis of their individual career sustainability (Schweitzer et al., 2023). Within this context, employees who are "equipped" with the right competencies serve as the foundation not only for the long-term sustainability of organizations but also for employees' personal adaptability to shifts in the job market, thus leading to the emergence of the concept of a sustainable career.

A sustainable career refers to a professional journey that aligns with individuals' values and personal needs, as well as with broader social contexts. It is supported by organizations through effective (sustainable) human resource management policies and practices (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017). Within this framework, sustainable human resource management acts as a "transportation tool," helping employees maintain their employability and fostering meaningful long-term professional growth through training, skill development, and employer assistance. This mutual support leads to advantages for both organizations and employees. Organizations foster a resilient and engaged workforce through sustainable human resource management, while employees, in turn, achieve continuity, adaptability, and enduring value for both themselves and their employers.

The concept of the circular economy plays a crucial role in nurturing an environment conducive to building sustainable careers in today's world. Commonly referred to as a "closed-loop economy," this model aims for comprehensive sustainability by promoting a zero-waste culture (De los Rios & Charnley, 2017). However, the intricate demands of this model present challenges across all economic sectors, including the labour market. If the changes in the labour market driven by the circular economy are not integrated into human resource management strategies, the diverse skill sets essential for thriving in this new economic era, as well as the pursuit of sustainable development goals, may be overlooked, ultimately hindering organizations from achieving long-term sustainability.

Recognizing that the circular economy alters the labour market dynamics and establishes new competency demands, this research aims to explore how this model facilitates the growth of sustainable careers. It also seeks to identify the essential skills that both individuals and organizations require throughout this transformation. The study particularly highlights the relationship between sustainable human resource management, the concept of a sustainable career, and the shifts initiated by the transition to a circular economy.

The following research question arises from the above-mentioned research objectives:

Research question: How does the transition to a circular economy shape the conditions for sustainable career development, and what role does sustainable human resource management play in supporting career sustainability under these conditions?

To address the research question, this paper adopts a qualitative literature review that integrates insights from sustainable career theory, sustainable human resource management, and circular economy research. The paper is structured as follows. First, the conceptual foundations of sustainable careers are examined, with particular attention to their defining characteristics, core dimensions, and relevance to long-term employability, well-being, and productivity across the lifespan. Second, the circular economy is analysed as a broader economic and labour market context, focusing on how the transition from linear to circular production and consumption models reshapes job structures, skill requirements, and career trajectories. Building on this, the paper explores the role of sustainable human resource management as a key enabling mechanism that supports the development of sustainable careers under circular economy conditions, emphasizing practices related to lifelong learning, career adaptability, and employee well-being. The paper then discusses the main challenges and future perspectives associated with career sustainability in the era of the circular economy, highlighting risks related to skill mismatches, job quality, and labour market inequality, as well as opportunities for inclusive and resilient career development. Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing the key conceptual insights, outlining implications for individuals, organizations, and policymakers, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. The conceptual basis for sustainable careers

Sustainable careers represent a relatively recent conceptual approach within career research that extends traditional understandings of career development by emphasizing long-term viability and adaptability. Growing scholarly and practical interest in this concept has largely been driven by demographic changes, particularly the transition of a substantial proportion of the baby boomer generation into the later stages of their careers, including retirement (Newman, 2011). This shift entails potentially significant economic and social costs, such as increased employee replacement costs for organizations and heightened pressure on pension systems at the societal level. As a result, the sustainability of careers together with the necessity to prolong working lives and enhance their adaptability across the lifespan has emerged as a central concern in contemporary career theory and practice. Accordingly, the following Table 1 outlines key definitions of the sustainable career concept as developed in the academic literature.

Table 1. Sustainable career definitions

Source	Definition
(Russo et al., 2025)	“The concept of a sustainable career reflects a non-linear sequence of individual work experiences spanning various life domains, social contexts and the lifespan,

	facilitating the development of health, happiness, productivity, and ensuring social integration and empowerment.”
(Curado et al., 2023)	“Sustainable careers are regarded as a cyclical process characterized by mutually beneficial consequences for both the individual and the environment from a long-term perspective.”
(Curado et al., 2023)	“Sustainable careers can be defined as a form of human sustainability aligned with the ability of individuals to create, test, and maintain their adaptive capacity.”
(Heslin et al., 2020)	“A sustainable career is one in which individuals enjoy at least a moderate degree of productivity, health, and happiness across their lifespan.”
(Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015)	“Sustainable careers are defined as ‘the sequence of an individual’s different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, thereby providing meaning to the individual’”
(Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015)	“Sustainable careers are characterized by three broad indicators: health, happiness, and productivity, suggesting that people who have a sustainable career are more productive in terms of work performance, are more employable, have less stress, better physical and mental health and report being more satisfied with their career progress as well as with life in general.”
(Newman, 2011)	“Sustainability implies preserving and enhancing human capital rather than depleting it.”

Source: Authors’ presentation.

Across the reviewed definitions in Table 1, sustainable careers are consistently framed as long-term, dynamic, and adaptive processes that evolve across the lifespan and multiple work and social contexts. Rather than being linear, careers are conceptualized as non-linear sequences of experiences, shaped by individual agency and the capacity to continuously adapt to changing personal and environmental conditions. A central commonality is the emphasis on career outcomes that integrate health, happiness, and productivity, reflecting the alignment of individual well-being with sustained work performance and employability. Moreover, several definitions underscore the principle of human capital preservation and development, highlighting that sustainable careers enable individuals to maintain and enhance their capabilities instead of exhausting them over time. Collectively, these perspectives position sustainable careers as mutually beneficial for individuals, organizations, and society, ensuring long-term career viability through the balanced interplay of adaptability, well-being, and productive engagement.

The four core elements underpinning the concept of sustainable careers, such as time, social space, agency, and meaning, highlight important directions for both theory and research. As career trajectories become increasingly fragmented and less predictable, greater scholarly attention must be paid to the temporal dimension of careers, which calls for a shift away from predominantly cross-sectional research designs toward more longitudinal approaches. The expansion of careers across multiple social spaces further necessitates consideration of the risks and challenges individuals encounter when transitioning between work contexts. In addition, the element of agency points to the need for more dynamic career models that account for ongoing adult identity development rather than static career stages. Closely related to this, the notion of meaning in careers requires a developmental perspective that recognizes how individuals’ interpretations of their career experiences evolve over time. While significant progress has been made in advancing the sustainable career framework, these considerations underscore the need for continued conceptual refinement and methodological innovation (Lawrence et al., 2015).

These elements give rise to specific implications for human resource management in organizations when viewed from the perspective of employees' sustainable career development. In this context, organizations are expected to implement measures and practices aimed at aligning employees' skills and interests with the content of their jobs, thereby enabling employees to realize their full potential. Furthermore, organizations should devote adequate attention to harmonizing employees' work-related demands with their non-work lives in order to reduce turnover resulting from conflicts between job requirements and family responsibilities. Beyond serving as a mechanism for employee retention, such practices also contribute to strengthening employees' organizational commitment.

The existing body of research on sustainable careers suggests that this model shares several common features with other contemporary career concepts, while also exhibiting important distinctions. In the literature, the sustainable career model is most frequently examined in comparison with the protean career and the boundaryless career frameworks.

Compared with other contemporary career models, the concept of a sustainable career adopts a broader and more integrative perspective. Similar to the *protean career*, it emphasizes individual agency, adaptability, and continuous learning, recognizing that individuals actively shape their careers in response to changing contexts (De Vos et al., 2020; Hall, 2004). Likewise, it shares common ground with the *boundaryless career* model in acknowledging non-linear career paths that transcend organizational boundaries and involve mobility across roles, organizations, and life domains (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). However, unlike protean and boundaryless careers, which primarily focus on self-direction, mobility, and subjective or objective career success, the sustainable career framework explicitly incorporates a long-term, lifespan perspective and places central emphasis on career sustainability outcomes, namely health, happiness, and productivity. Moreover, sustainable careers adopt a systemic view, considering not only individual agency but also organizational, societal, and contextual factors that enable or constrain career continuity over time. In this sense, the sustainable career model extends earlier contemporary career concepts by integrating adaptability and mobility with concerns for long-term well-being, employability, and the preservation of human capital.

The concept of sustainable careers emphasizes long-term career viability through the balanced development of health, happiness, and productivity across the lifespan. It highlights the dynamic, non-linear nature of careers shaped by individual agency, continuous learning, and changing social and organizational contexts. As such, sustainable careers represent a shift from short-term employment outcomes toward preserving and enhancing human capital over time.

3. The role of the circular economy in the development of sustainable careers

The increasing shortcomings of the traditional linear economic model, characterized by intensive resource extraction, short product life cycles, and waste generation, have highlighted the urgent need for alternative approaches to production and consumption. In the context of finite natural resources and escalating environmental pressures, the circular economy has emerged as a central principle of contemporary economic development. This systemic shift not only transforms production processes but also significantly reshapes labour market dynamics, creating both new

challenges and opportunities, particularly in relation to the emergence and development of sustainable careers.

At its core, the circular economy seeks to minimize resource use and environmental impact by redefining how materials and energy are managed throughout the economic system. Instead of following a linear trajectory of extraction, production, and disposal, this model promotes closed-loop processes in which products, components, and materials are continuously reused, repaired, recycled, or regenerated. By extending the lifespan of resources and reducing waste generation, the circular economy supports long-term sustainability while fostering new skill requirements and career pathways aligned with these principles.

The transition toward a circular economy is increasingly reshaping the global labour market by altering employment structures, transforming job content, and redefining skill requirements across sectors. Moving away from the traditional linear model of production and consumption, circular economic systems emphasize resource efficiency, product longevity, reuse, and regeneration, which have implications for both job creation and job transformation rather than simple job substitution (De los Rios & Charnley, 2017; Prashant et al., 2025). Empirical evidence suggests that circular economy activities already account for a substantial share of global employment, particularly in sectors such as recycling, repair, remanufacturing, and waste management, although a significant proportion of these jobs remain informal and characterized by precarious working conditions, especially in developing economies (Prashant et al., 2025). Importantly, the circular transition does not primarily generate entirely new occupations but rather modifies existing roles by expanding their task profiles and competency demands, requiring workers to integrate circular principles into established professional practices (The International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2020). As a result, skill requirements are shifting toward a combination of technical skills related to materials, repair, and sustainable production processes, digital skills for tracking resource flows and managing product life cycles, and transversal competencies such as systems thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving (Buyukyazici & Quatraro, 2025; European Commission, 2018; OECD, 2023). Studies further highlight growing demand for sustainability-related expertise, including lifecycle assessment, eco-design, and environmental management, underscoring the need for continuous upskilling and reskilling throughout the working life (De los Rios & Charnley, 2017). Without targeted investments in education, vocational training, and lifelong learning systems, skill mismatches may emerge that risk slowing the circular transition and exacerbating labour market inequalities, thereby emphasizing the importance of coordinated policy responses to ensure a just and inclusive transformation of work (OECD, 2023; Prashant et al., 2025).

The transition to a circular economy provides an important contextual foundation for the development of sustainable careers by reshaping how work is organized, how skills are developed, and how employability is maintained over time. By prioritizing resource efficiency, product longevity, and regenerative production systems, the circular economy encourages continuous learning, adaptability, and long-term workforce engagement as core elements of sustainable career theory (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Rather than promoting short-

term employment trajectories, circular business models emphasize ongoing value creation through repair, reuse, remanufacturing, and recycling activities, which require workers to regularly update their competencies and remain employable across changing labour market conditions (De los Rios & Charnley, 2017). Empirical research suggests that these dynamics foster career sustainability by supporting skill renewal, enhancing job mobility, and reducing the risk of career obsolescence, particularly in sectors undergoing ecological and technological transformation (Curado et al., 2023; Prashant et al., 2025). In this sense, the circular economy aligns closely with the sustainable career perspective, as both stress the preservation and development of human capital, individual agency, and the integration of economic, social, and environmental objectives over the lifespan (Heslin et al., 2020; Newman, 2011).

While the circular economy creates new opportunities for skill development, employability, and long-term workforce engagement, it also introduces significant challenges related to job quality, skill mismatches, and unequal access to learning opportunities, which have important implications for the sustainability of careers and are examined in the following section.

4. Reframing career sustainability in the era of the circular economy – challenges and perspectives

The transition toward a circular economy fundamentally reshapes the conditions in which careers are developed and sustained, presenting both significant challenges and promising perspectives for individuals, organizations, and labour market institutions. Although the circular economy is increasingly promoted as a pathway toward environmental sustainability and economic resilience, its implications for career sustainability remain complex and uneven across regions, sectors, and occupational groups. Sustainable careers, understood as career trajectories that enable individuals to maintain health, happiness, productivity, and employability over time, are deeply influenced by the structural transformations induced by circular economic models (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015; Heslin et al., 2020). One of the central *challenges* in this context lies in the rapid pace of change in skill requirements, as circular business models demand new combinations of technical, digital, and sustainability-related competencies that many workers currently lack (De los Rios & Charnley, 2017; Prashant et al., 2025). Without adequate access to continuous learning opportunities, workers risk skill obsolescence, which threatens long-term employability and undermines the sustainability of their careers.

Another major challenge concerns labour market polarization and inequality. Although the circular economy has the potential to generate employment in activities such as repair, recycling, remanufacturing, and resource recovery, empirical evidence indicates that a substantial share of these jobs is characterized by informality, low wages, and limited social protection, particularly in developing economies (Prashant et al., 2025). Such conditions pose serious risks to career sustainability, as precarious employment undermines workers' ability to plan, invest in skill development, and maintain well-being over the life course (Newman, 2011).

Moreover, transitions toward circular production systems may lead to job displacement in linear industries, creating uncertainty for workers whose skills are closely tied to declining sectors. In the absence of effective reskilling policies and inclusive transition strategies, these workers may face fragmented and unstable career paths, contrary to the principles of sustainable career development.

From an organizational perspective, the implementation of circular economy principles requires a rethinking of human resource management practices to support long-term career sustainability. Sustainable human resource management plays a crucial role in enabling employees to adapt to changing job demands by fostering continuous learning, internal mobility, and employee well-being (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017). However, many organizations struggle to align short-term performance pressures with long-term investments in human capital, which may limit their ability to fully support sustainable careers in circular contexts. Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature of circular economy work often requires collaboration across organizational boundaries and value chains, challenging traditional career structures and progression models that are based on linear advancement within a single organization.

Despite these challenges, the circular economy also offers important *perspectives* for strengthening sustainable careers. By emphasizing resource efficiency, innovation, and long-term value creation, circular systems create demand for adaptive, learning-oriented workers who can navigate diverse roles and transitions over time. This aligns closely with contemporary sustainable career frameworks, which highlight individual agency, adaptability, and meaningful work as key dimensions of career sustainability (Curado et al., 2023; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Furthermore, international policy initiatives increasingly recognize the importance of linking circular economy strategies with skills development, lifelong learning, and just transition frameworks. Organizations such as the OECD and the ILO stress that coordinated investments in education, vocational training, and active labour market policies can help transform circular economy transitions into opportunities for inclusive and sustainable career development (OECD, 2023; Prashant et al., 2025).

In this regard, the circular economy can be seen not only as a technological or environmental transformation but also as a social and career-related one. When supported by appropriate institutional frameworks, the circular economy has the potential to foster careers that are more resilient to economic shocks, more aligned with societal sustainability goals, and more conducive to long-term employability. However, realizing this potential requires addressing existing labour market inequalities, ensuring decent working conditions, and embedding considerations of career sustainability into circular economy policies and organizational practices. Ultimately, the development of sustainable careers under circular economy conditions depends on the ability of stakeholders to balance economic efficiency, environmental responsibility, and social inclusion throughout individuals' working lives.

5. Conclusion

The transition toward a circular economy represents a profound transformation of contemporary labour markets, with significant implications for the development of sustainable careers. This paper has highlighted that sustainable careers are no longer shaped solely by individual choices or organizational practices, but increasingly by broader economic and environmental contexts that reshape work, skills, and employability. By linking the concepts of sustainable human resource management, sustainable careers, and the circular economy, the study emphasizes that long-term career sustainability depends on the ability of individuals and organizations to adapt to continuous change while preserving human capital, well-being, and productivity over time.

The findings suggest that the circular economy creates both opportunities and challenges for sustainable career development. On the one hand, it fosters new forms of work and skill requirements that encourage lifelong learning, adaptability, and meaningful employment aligned with sustainability goals. On the other hand, it exposes risks related to skill mismatches, job insecurity, and unequal access to training and career opportunities, particularly for vulnerable groups in the labour market. These challenges underline the critical role of sustainable human resource management in supporting employees through targeted training, career development initiatives, and policies that promote health, engagement, and employability across the lifespan.

From a broader perspective, the development of sustainable careers in circular economy conditions requires coordinated action among individuals, organizations, and policymakers. Individuals must actively invest in their own competencies and career adaptability, while organizations are expected to integrate sustainability principles into their human resource strategies. Policymakers, in turn, play a key role in creating institutional frameworks that support lifelong learning, decent work, and inclusive labour market transitions. By addressing these interconnected dimensions, the circular economy can serve as a supportive context for building sustainable careers that contribute to long-term economic resilience, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

This paper contributes to the literature by conceptually integrating the circular economy, sustainable human resource management, and sustainable careers, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding how contemporary labour market transformations shape long-term career sustainability. Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its reliance on a qualitative literature review, which does not allow for empirical testing, and by its broad perspective that may overlook sectoral and regional differences. Future research could address these limitations through quantitative, mixed-method, and comparative studies across industries and countries to empirically examine sustainable career development in circular economy contexts.

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GRAĐENJE ODRŽIVE KARIJERE U ERI CIRKULARNE EKONOMIJE

Apstrakt: *Prelazak na cirkularnu ekonomiju predstavlja značajnu transformaciju savremenih ekonomskih sistema i tržišta rada, stvarajući nove uslove za razvoj karijere i održivost. U tom kontekstu, koncept održive karijere dobija na značaju, naglašavajući dugoročnu zapošljivost, prilagodljivost, blagostanje i produktivnost tokom celog životnog veka. Cilj ovog rada je da istraži kako cirkularna ekonomija utiče na formiranje održivih karijera i da identifikuje ključne kompetencije i organizacione prakse potrebne za podršku održivosti karijere u promenljivim uslovima tržišta rada. Oslanjajući se na kvalitativni pregled literature, studija integriše uvide iz održivog upravljanja ljudskim resursima, teorije održive karijere i istraživanja cirkularne ekonomije. Analiza ističe da cirkularna ekonomija menja zahteve za veštinama, strukture poslova i karijerne puteve, čime se povećava značaj kontinuiranog učenja, prilagodljivosti karijere i blagostanja zaposlenih. Štaviše, rad naglašava ključnu ulogu održivog upravljanja ljudskim resursima u omogućavanju pojedincima i organizacijama da efikasno odgovore na ove transformacije. Konceptualnim povezivanjem principa cirkularne ekonomije sa održivim razvojem karijere, studija doprinosi dubljem razumevanju održivosti karijere u vremenima ekonomske i ekološke tranzicije i pruža osnovu za buduća empirijska istraživanja i razvoj politika.*

Ključne reči: *Održiva karijera, cirkularna ekonomija, održivo upravljanje ljudskim resursima, zapošljivost, prilagodljivost karijere.*