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HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY OF MALAYSIAN AGEING WORKFORCE: BEYOND THE RETIREMENT OF 60

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Abstract:

Malaysia is projected to become an aged nation by 2048, when the proportion of citizens aged 65 years and above is expected to exceed 15% of the total population. Although the statutory minimum retirement age is 60, average life expectancy is approximately 76 years, potentially leaving many individuals to finance 16 years or more after leaving formal employment. Inadequate retirement savings and limited opportunities for continued participation may increase financial insecurity and dependency on families and public support systems. This concept paper draws on Sustainable Human Resource Management theory to propose a framework for extending meaningful working lives in Malaysia. The framework comprises four age-inclusive HRM practice bundles: maintenance, development, utilisation, and accommodation of older workers. These practices are expected to sustain work ability, protect workplace dignity, and enhance meaningful working life. In turn, the framework proposes two interrelated levels of sustainability outcomes. Organisational outcomes include talent retention and knowledge continuity, while societal outcomes include financial security, reduced dependency, and intergenerational cohesion.

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The framework also positions the workplace as a shared site in which HR professionals design age-inclusive employment systems and workplace social workers address psychosocial, caregiving, financial, and adjustment needs. It supports the implementation of the National Ageing Blueprint 2025-2045 by translating national priorities concerning lifelong employability, skills development, financial security, and social participation into workplace practices and assessable outcomes.

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Keywords:

Ageing Workforce, Malaysia, Retirement, Social Sustainability, Sustainable HRM

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Introduction

Malaysia is renowned for its natural landscapes, culturally diverse with multi-ethnic society. With a population of approximately 34 million (DOSM, 2024) the country has sustained steady economic growth, positioning itself as one of the stable and resilient economies in Southeast Asia. Along with its economic growth, Malaysia has also achieved significant achievements in the health sector, including better health services, better public health awareness, and longer life expectancy. The Malaysian healthcare system is now well known as one of the best healthcare systems in the region, and it has played a significant role in improving the health and longevity of its citizens.

These successes are significant for the nation, but they also bring new socioeconomic issues. The ageing population trend is growing as Malaysians are living longer and healthier lives, which is putting increasing strain on retirement systems, pension sustainability, health spending and workforce planning. People who retire at the mandatory age of 60 are now likely to enjoy two decades or more of retirement, and need to be financially secure, have access to health care, and have opportunities for social engagement. Retirement is no longer a phase of life that can be simply considered as the end of working life, but rather a new stage that requires careful planning and supportive public policies (Lassen & Vrangbaek, 2021, Sharpe, 2021, Bordia et.al, 2020, Moffatt & Heaven, 2017).

The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025) stated that the labor force participation rate in Malaysia in 2024 was 70.6% based on the Labor Force Survey (LFS) 2024. The report also showed that 48.7% of the population aged 55-64 are in the labor force. This implies that older workers will remain a significant part of the workforce. The situation shows that a significant number of older people still participate in economic activities after the retirement age. Some of the contributors for their still dynamic participation are more flexibility, subject matter

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experts, as well as informal work arrangements as opposed to full-time employment (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025). This evidence further strengthens the case for policies to promote lifelong employability, flexible working and active ageing in an ageing society.

Due to the increasing number of older employees in work setting, the policy moment is equally significant. In response to this trend, the Government of Malaysia had introduced the National Ageing Blueprint (NAB) 2025-2045, which is a twenty-year plan covering the economy, employment, education, social protection, healthcare and long-term care (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2025). The government's action reflects a greater understanding that the workplace needs to be reimagined to accommodate an ageing population, not to exhaust their abilities.

From a bigger perspective, the increasing participation of older workers has implications to organisational sustainability and social cohesion. Productive activities during the later years of life maintain income and retirement savings, maintain social networks and identity, decrease old-age dependency on families and the state, and keep older Malaysians as active members of their community. On the contrary, premature or poorly managed workforce exit transfers financial and psychosocial burdens onto adult children, extended families, community institutions, and the social welfare system. The workplace should be conceptualized as an enabling environment that enhances psychological well-being and encourages older employees' organizational contributions. Henceforth, the workplace is a frontline institution of social sustainability.

The purpose of this concept paper is to propose a conceptual framework linking sustainable human resource management practices to dual sustainability outcomes, organizational and societal for the wellbeing of Malaysia's ageing workforce. Drawing on sustainable human resource theory (Ehnert, 2009; Kramar, 2014) and the age-inclusive practice bundles identified by Kooij et al. (2014), the framework traces a pathway from four bundles of workplace practices, through older-worker outcomes such as work ability and workplace dignity, to organizational sustainability which composes element of talent retention and knowledge continuity, and societal sustainability such as financial security, reduced dependency, and intergenerational cohesion. The role of social worker to support the well-being of ageing workforce is also discussed to strengthen the ecosystem.

Literature Review

Sustainable Human Resource Management (HRM)

Sustainable HRM is developed because of the contradict practices in traditional HRM, where organizations depend on employees for long-term success, and yet manage them in ways that deplete their energy and well-being (Ehnert, 2009). While strategic HRM focuses on deploying people to maximize organizational performance, sustainable HRM addresses how human resources can be maintained, regenerated, and developed over time, ensuring that neither the organization nor the broader social environment is depleted in the process (Ehnert et al., 2014). Positioned by Kramar (2014) as the next stage in the evolution of the field, sustainable HRM adopts a triple-bottom-line framework that simultaneously pursues financial, social, and ecological outcomes while actively minimizing the negative impacts of work on employees, their families, and communities. Although this approach has matured from a peripheral concept

into a recognized research stream, its societal-level impacts remain the least theorized dimension of the discipline (Kramar, 2022).

Several models operationalize the concept of sustainable HRM. Among the most influential is the Respect Openness Continuity (ROC) framework proposed by De Prins et al. (2014), which posits that sustainable HRM rests on three core pillars, (i) respect for the employee as a whole person and internal stakeholder, (ii) openness toward the organization's external environment and societal context, and (iii) continuity through a long-term perspective on employability and organizational viability. The continuity dimension is particularly significant to this study because it directs attention to employees' workability and employability across their entire life course, rather than confining focus to a single peak-productivity phase. Consequently, a continuity-grounded workforce management strategy cannot treat mature workers such as those aged 50 and above as depreciating assets awaiting retirement.

Furthermore, sustainable HRM is normatively anchored in the global development agenda. Sustainable Development Goal 8 explicitly advocates for sustained, inclusive economic growth and decent work for all, encompassing older workers within its mandate (United Nations, 2015). Viewed through this lens, how an organization manages its late-career employees provides a key benchmark for evaluating whether its sustainability commitments extend beyond environmental reporting into social sustainability. However, as Kramar (2022) notes, empirical and conceptual research connecting sustainable HRM to concrete societal outcomes such as late-life financial security, dependency burdens, and social cohesion remains scarce. It is precisely this underdeveloped societal dimension that the present framework seeks to advance.

The Ageing Workforce: Concepts and the Malaysian Context

The scholarly literature on workforce ageing offers two individual-level lenses in this paper. The first is *work ability*, developed by Ilmarinen (2006) which conceptualizes an individual's capacity to continue working as a dynamic balance between personal resources (health, competence, values and motivation) and the demands of work. Central to this argument is that work ability in later career stages is not a fixed biological trait, but an adaptable outcome. It can be actively preserved or compromised by organizational design, leadership approaches, and human resource management practices.

The second lens is *successful ageing at work* (Zacher, 2015), which reframes later working life in terms of maintenance and growth rather than inevitable decline, and directs attention to the person–environment fit that enables older employees to remain engaged and productive. At the practice level, Kooij, Jansen, Dikkers and De Lange (2014) provide the typology of human resource bundles that anchors the present framework. They distinguish four aspects of practices relevant to ageing workers: (i) *maintenance* practices that protect current functioning in the face of age-related change such as health management, ergonomic job redesign, (ii) *development* practices that promote growth and advancement like training, reskilling, lifelong learning, (iii) *utilization* practices that harness accumulated experience in new ways, for example, mentoring roles, knowledge-transfer assignments; and (iv) *accommodation* practices that adjust work to changed capacities or life circumstances, for instance, flexible scheduling, reduced hours, phased retirement.

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In the Malaysian context, work accommodation practices frequently take the form of flexible working arrangements for mature employees such as a 58-year-old worker balancing job responsibilities with eldercare duties. The urgency of these practices is underscored by Malaysia's evolving institutional landscape. Following the Minimum Retirement Age Act 2012, which established the government and private sector retirement floor at 60, periodic proposals to extend the threshold to 65 reflect broader international responses to lengthening life expectancies and widespread retirement savings deficits (Yeah, cited in *The Star*, 2026). Over overarching policy frameworks have increasingly taken shape to address this demographic shift. Among the initiative taken is the establishment of the *Dasar Warga Emas Negara* positions older citizens as active and dignified societal contributors, the Twelfth Malaysia Plan introduced senior-friendly community initiatives, and the National Ageing Blueprint 2025–2045 provides a comprehensive twenty-year roadmap across employment, social protection, and long-term care (Ministry of Finance, 2025).

Nevertheless, the individual workplace remains the weakest link within this national framework. Malaysian empirical studies continue to highlight persistent age-related barriers in recruitment, lower training investments in mature staff, and entrenched early-exit culture (Samad & Mansor, 2013). Consequently, employer-driven age management practices which are institutionalized in countries such as Finland, Japan, and Singapore, remain the exception rather than the norm across Malaysian organizations.

Despite growing interest in Sustainable HRM and workforce ageing, three limitations remain. First, Sustainable HRM research has concentrated mainly on organisational and employee-level outcomes, while its implications for financial dependency, family well-being, and intergenerational cohesion remain underdeveloped. Second, ageing-workforce studies have identified maintenance, development, utilisation, and accommodation practices, but these practices are rarely integrated into a broader social-sustainability framework. Third, Malaysia's ageing policies establish national priorities for active ageing, employability, and social protection but provide limited guidance on how employers can operationalise these priorities through workplace HRM practices. This paper addresses these limitations by integrating age-inclusive HRM practices, older-worker mechanisms, and organisational and societal outcomes within a Malaysian conceptual framework.

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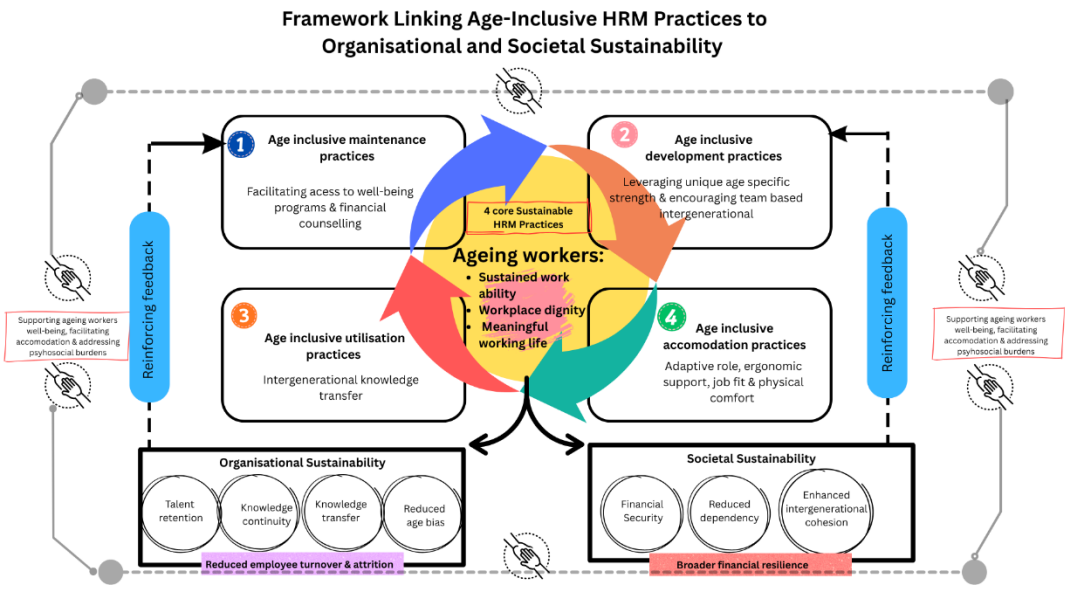


Figure 1: Framework Linking Age-Inclusive HRM Practices to Organisational and Societal Sustainability

Source: Self-constructed

Age-inclusive HRM practices constitute the organisational inputs of the framework. These practices influence older workers through three intermediate mechanisms, notably, i) sustained work ability, ii) workplace dignity, and iii) meaningful working life. Together, these mechanisms are expected to improve organisational outcomes and contribute to wider social sustainability.

Human Resource Maintenance and Development

The framework is centred on four core Sustainable Human Resource Management practices, age-inclusive maintenance, development, utilisation, and accommodation. Together, these practices provide an integrated approach to preserving ageing workers' well-being and work ability, developing their competencies, utilising their accumulated experience, and accommodating changes in their capacities and circumstances.

Age-inclusive maintenance practices are designed to preserve ageing workers' physical, psychological, and financial well-being. These practices may include access to employee well-being programmes, health-related support, retirement planning, and financial counselling. Such interventions can help ageing workers maintain their work ability while making informed financial decisions and preparing more effectively for later life.

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Age-inclusive development practices focus on sustaining the employability and professional growth of ageing workers through continuous learning, reskilling, upskilling, and career-development opportunities. These practices recognise that ageing workers remain capable of acquiring new competencies and adapting to changing organisational and technological requirements. Continued access to development opportunities can also prevent skill obsolescence and ensure that ageing workers remain productively engaged throughout their later careers.

Age-inclusive utilisation practices involve creating opportunities for organisations to benefit from the accumulated knowledge, experience, and age-specific strengths of ageing workers. These practices may include mentoring, coaching, advisory responsibilities, intergenerational teamwork, and structured knowledge-transfer activities. Through these arrangements, the expertise of ageing workers can be shared across different age groups, thereby strengthening organisational learning, knowledge continuity, and intergenerational collaboration.

Finally, age-inclusive accommodation practices involve adjusting working conditions to reflect ageing workers' changing capacities, health conditions, and personal circumstances. These practices may include flexible working arrangements, ergonomic workplace modifications, job redesign and modification, reduced working hours, and phased-retirement options. Such accommodations enable ageing workers to remain actively and meaningfully employed while maintaining their health, dignity, and capacity to perform their responsibilities effectively.

Systemic Regeneration via Reinforcing Feedback Loops

The framework includes Reinforcing Feedback loops that link organizational and societal outcomes to core practices, consistent with the regenerative capacity needed for Sustainable HRM. These feedback mechanisms are not linear or one-way, but rather form a cycle, for example, positive organizational culture and improved societal well-being continually reinforce and refine workplace practices, making them sustainable over time.

Mitigation of Organizational and Social Depletion

The framework creates Dual Sustainable Outcomes to achieve balance. The framework at the organizational level helps to avoid loss of institutional memory and human capital by ensuring talent retention, knowledge continuity, knowledge transfer, and reduced age bias through integrated social work support and mediation. The second part, societal level, extending meaningful employment, the model reduces public welfare strain by increasing financial security, reducing dependency, and enhanced intergenerational cohesion. The framework integrates social work interventions with Sustainable HRM practices, offering a holistic approach to sustaining ageing workers and ensuring the viability of the organization and socio-economic balance in an ageing country.

Discussion

The proposed conceptual framework is aligned with the strategic direction of the National Ageing Blueprint (NAB) 2025–2045 (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2025) and the 13th Malaysia Plan. Macro-level policy frameworks are increasingly acknowledging that old-age security cannot be achieved solely through post-retirement welfare transfers or exhausted pension assets as Malaysia moves towards becoming an "aged nation" by 2048 (Ministry of

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Finance Malaysia, 2025). The framework links the NAB's key pillars, namely skills development, lifelong employability and social protection, at the national macro-policy level with the micro-level of organizational practices. Recent empirical projections confirm that prolonged workforce participation among older Malaysians is no longer a temporary economic response, but a structural reality (Ismail, 2026). Therefore, institutionalizing sustainable human resource management at the workplace level serves as the operational engine needed to translate the overarching vision of the NAB into measurable organizational outcomes.

Sustaining Older Workers as a Socio-Economic Necessity

Sustaining older workers within the formal economy is a vital necessity for Malaysia's long-term socio-economic resilience. Recent data from the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) indicates a severe retirement savings deficit, where a vast majority of private-sector workers under the age of 55 hold inadequate funds to cover two decades of post-retirement living expenses (Tan, 2026). Early financial problem may arise from the labor force amplify old-age financial vulnerability, transferring substantial fiscal and caregiving burdens onto public assistance programs and intergenerational family structures (Bordia et al., 2020, Menon et al., 2024). Implementing the four core Sustainable HRM Practices may protect mature employees from rapid human capital depletion. Extending meaningful working lives mitigates institutional memory loss, maintains productivity, and supports personal financial autonomy, directly reinforcing Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Aust et al., 2024, United Nations, 2015).

Integrating Sustainable HRM and Workplace Social Work

HR professionals and workplace social workers perform complementary roles in sustaining older employees. HR professionals create age-friendly employment policies, learning experiences, job structures and retention programs. Workplace social workers also deal with psychosocial issues, care responsibilities, financial problems, work adjustment and access to support services. Their partnership allows organisations to address employment and social well-being issues at the same time. When social workers are integrated into corporate wellness and retention programs, they can more effectively support employees who are facing complex issues like balancing eldercare needs, chronic health conditions, and age discrimination (Van der Heijden et al., 2020; Menon et al., 2024). This comprehensive support system strengthens employee dignity and workability (Ilmarinen, 2006), creating a framework for the sustainability of the workforce in the long term.

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