

Sustainable Career Pathways to Senior Management: Integrating Management Trainee Programs, Work-Life Balance, and Corporate Social Responsibility

Akbar Mhd Dhaffa^{1,*}, Nurul Huda Handayani¹, Hafizah Ilmi Ulpah Siregar¹, Sri Rahayu², Fajar Pasaribu¹

¹Sekolah Pascasarjana Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara, Kota Medan, Indonesia
Jl. Denai No. 217, Medan, Sumatera Utara, Kota Medan, Indonesia

²Fakultas Ekonomi & Bisnis, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Kota Medan, Indonesia
Jl. Sisingamangaraja No. 34, Kelurahan Teladan, Kecamatan Medan Kota, Kota Medan, Sumatera Utara 20216, Indonesia
Email: ^{1,*}dhaffaakbar7@gmail.com, ²nrlhudahandayani@gmail.com, ³hafizahh327@gmail.com, ⁴sri.rahayu@fe.uisu.ac.id,
⁵fajarpasaribu@umsu.ac.id

Correspondence Author Email: dhaffaakbar7@gmail.com

Submitted: 01/06/2026; Accepted: 12/06/2026; Published: 30/06/2026

Abstract—The increasing challenges of leadership succession, employee retention, and workforce well-being have raised concerns regarding the sustainability of career development within modern organizations. While Management Trainee Programs (MTP), Work-Life Balance (WLB), and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) have been widely studied, limited research has integrated these factors into a unified framework explaining sustainable career pathways toward senior managerial positions. This study aims to analyze the role of MTP, WLB, and CSR in shaping sustainable career pathways through a Narrative Literature Review approach. The study reviewed ten Scopus-indexed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025 selected based on relevance, publication quality, and theoretical contribution to sustainable career development. Data were analyzed using thematic narrative synthesis to identify key themes, theoretical debates, and conceptual relationships among the variables. The findings indicate that Management Trainee Programs function as leadership development mechanisms that accelerate managerial readiness, while Work-Life Balance contributes to employee well-being and long-term career sustainability. Furthermore, Corporate Social Responsibility strengthens employee engagement, organizational identification, and commitment, thereby supporting career continuity within organizations. The study also reveals that sustainable career pathways are not determined by a single factor but emerge from the interaction between leadership development, employee well-being, and organizational responsibility. This study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated conceptual framework that links MTP, WLB, and CSR within the perspective of Sustainable Human Resource Management. The findings provide practical implications for organizations seeking to develop sustainable leadership pipelines and retain high-potential talent in an increasingly competitive business environment.

Keywords: Sustainable Career Pathways; Management Trainee Programs; Work-Life Balance; Corporate Social Responsibility; Sustainable Human Resource Management

1. INTRODUCTION

Changing global business environments, accelerating digital transformation, and increasing competition in acquiring quality talent have prompted organizations to revisit their career development and leadership strategies. Reports from various international institutions show that many organizations face challenges in building a sustainable *leadership pipeline* due to high turnover rates, increased work pressure, and changing expectations of young generations for the workforce. In these conditions, organizations are not only required to develop competent future leaders, but also ensure that the career development process takes place in a sustainable manner and is able to support individual well-being and organizational goals in the long term.

The concept of sustainable career pathways is becoming increasingly important in the human resource management literature because it emphasizes career sustainability throughout an individual's work life cycle. In contrast to the traditional career approach that focuses on job promotion and income increase, the sustainable career approach places a balance between career achievement, individual well-being, long-term employability, and contribution to the organization as the primary goals (Aust et al., 2020; Cooke et al., 2022). Thus, career success is measured not only by the position achieved, but also by the individual's ability to maintain productivity, health, and work engagement on an ongoing basis.

One of the mechanisms that many organizations use to prepare future leaders is Management Trainee Programs (MTP). The program is designed to accelerate the development of managerial competencies through a combination of training, job rotation, mentoring, and cross-functional experience. Research shows that MTP is able to increase leadership readiness, strengthen strategic capabilities, and accelerate talent development towards senior managerial positions (Collings et al., 2021). However, the effectiveness of the program is still a matter of debate. Some studies argue that MTP is an effective instrument in building future leadership, while other studies show that program success is strongly influenced by organizational culture, career systems, and management support after the program ends. These differences in findings suggest that leadership development cannot be explained simply through the existence of formal training programs.

In addition to competency development, the Work-Life Balance (WLB) factor also received great attention in research on career sustainability. The literature shows that work-life balance contributes to job satisfaction, psychological health, organizational commitment, and employee retention (Haar et al., 2020; Taamneh et al., 2021). However, there is a paradox in the literature. On the one hand, Work-Life Balance is seen as a factor that supports career sustainability. On

the other hand, senior managerial positions often demand a high level of work commitment, great responsibility, and longer time availability. This condition raises the question of whether Work-Life Balance always supports career acceleration or instead creates a trade-off between individual well-being and career achievement.

Another factor that is increasingly important in the context of sustainable career development is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Most CSR research focuses on a company's reputation, relationships with stakeholders, and organizational performance. However, recent research shows that CSR also has an internal impact on employee behavior through increased employee engagement, organizational identification, and organizational commitment (Barrena-Martínez et al., 2020; Farooq et al., 2021). However, there is still debate about the effectiveness of CSR in influencing employee behavior. Some studies show that CSR only has a positive impact when perceived as an authentic commitment of the organization, while CSR that is symbolic in nature tends not to result in significant behavioral changes.

Although research on Management Trainee Programs, Work-Life Balance, and Corporate Social Responsibility is growing rapidly, most studies still examine these three variables separately. Research on MTP generally focuses on leadership development, WLB research focuses on employee well-being, while CSR research focuses more on social responsibility and organizational reputation. As a result, there is still a limited understanding of how these three factors interact in forming sustainable career pathways to the position of Senior Manager and General Manager.

Based on these gaps, this study seeks to integrate Management Trainee Programs, Work-Life Balance, and Corporate Social Responsibility in one conceptual framework to explain the formation of sustainable career pathways. Using the Narrative Literature Review approach to Scopus-indexed articles for the period 2020–2025, this study aims to identify conceptual relationships between variables, analyze the theoretical debates that develop in the literature, and develop conceptual models that can explain the mechanisms of sustainable career formation towards senior managerial positions. The main contribution of this research lies in the effort to connect the perspectives of leadership development, employee well-being, and organizational responsibility in a more comprehensive framework of Sustainable Human Resource Management.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study uses the Narrative Literature Review (NLR) approach to examine the relationship between *Management Trainee Programs*, *Work-Life Balance*, and *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)* in forming *Sustainable Career Pathways* to senior managerial positions. This approach was chosen because it allows for conceptual synthesis and critical interpretation of previous research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that support career sustainability and leadership development in organizations. Narrative Literature Review also allows the identification of research trends, the development of conceptual frameworks, and the discovery of research gaps that still require further study.

2.2 Data Collection

Research data was obtained through a literature search using Google Scholar with a focus on articles published in Scopus indexed international journals during the period 2020–2025. The time range was chosen to capture the latest research developments on *sustainable careers*, *management trainee programs*, *work-life balance*, *corporate social responsibility*, *leadership development*, and *talent management*. The search is conducted using the following keyword combinations:

- “Management Trainee Program” AND “Leadership Development”
- “Work-Life Balance” AND “Career Sustainability”
- “Corporate Social Responsibility” AND “Employee Engagement”
- “Sustainable Career” AND “Human Resource Management”
- “Talent Management” AND “Leadership Pipeline”
- “Career Development” AND “Senior Managerial Positions”

The articles found were then selected based on the relevance of the topic, the quality of the journal, and the theoretical and empirical contributions to sustainable career development.

2.3 Article Selection

The selection of articles is carried out in stages to ensure the quality and relevance of the sources used. In the initial stage, a number of relevant articles were obtained from the search results. Furthermore, screening was carried out based on the title, abstract, quality of the journal, the availability of the complete manuscript (*full text*), and the suitability of the research objectives.

Table 1. Literature Screening Process

Selection Stage	Number of Articles
Initial search results	186
After title screening	72
After abstract screening	34

Selection Stage	Number of Articles
Full-text eligibility assessment	18
Final articles included in review	10

The inclusion criteria used are:

- Articles indexed by Scopus.
- Published in the period 2020–2025.
- Discuss Management Trainee Programs, Work-Life Balance, CSR, Leadership Development, Talent Management, or Sustainable Career Development.
- Available in *full text*. It has high theoretical and empirical relevance to the research objectives.

Exclusion criteria include:

- Articles that are not indexed by Scopus.
- Articles that are not relevant to the research topic.
- Editorial, conference abstract, book review, dan non-peer-reviewed papers.
- Item duplicate.

In contrast to the *systematic literature review* approach which emphasizes a wide scope of literature, this study uses purposive literature selection by selecting 10 main articles that have the strongest theoretical contribution to the development of the concept of Sustainable Career Pathways. The selection of ten articles aims to produce a more in-depth and critical analysis of the relationships between variables rather than simply increasing the number of articles without adequate synthesis.

Table 2. Selected Scopus Articles Reviewed in This Study (2020–2025)

No	Author(s)	Year	Journal	Research Focus	Main Findings
1	Aust et al.	2020	Human Resource Management Review	Sustainable HRM and sustainable careers	Sustainable HRM supports long-term career development and organizational sustainability.
2	Barrena-Martínez et al.	2020	International Journal of Human Resource Management	Socially responsible HRM	Socially responsible HRM strengthens employee commitment and career sustainability.
3	Haar et al.	2020	Social Indicators Research	Work-Life Balance	Work-life balance improves employee well-being, job satisfaction, and career outcomes.
4	Herrera & de las Heras-Rosas	2020	Sustainability	CSR and HRM	CSR practices enhance employee engagement and organizational attractiveness.
5	Jerónimo et al.	2020	Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	Sustainable HRM and CSR	Sustainable HRM and CSR jointly contribute to employee retention and career growth.
6	Podgorodnichenko et al.	2020	Human Resource Management Review	Sustainable organizations and careers	Sustainable organizations foster long-term employee development and leadership pipelines.
7	Farooq et al.	2021	Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	CSR and employee outcomes	CSR positively influences organizational identification and employee commitment.
8	Collings et al.	2021	Journal of Management Studies	Talent management and leadership development	Leadership development programs strengthen managerial career progression.
9	Taamneh et al.	2021	Employee Relations	Work-Life Balance and organizational performance	Work-life balance enhances employee retention and organizational performance.
10	Cooke et al.	2022	International Journal of Human Resource Management	Future HRM and sustainable careers	Sustainable career development requires integration of HRM, employee well-being, and organizational responsibility.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using the thematic narrative synthesis method. The first stage is the identification of the research objectives, theories, methods, and key findings of each article. The second stage is the grouping of articles based

on the similarity of the theme. The third stage is critical synthesis to identify similarities, differences, and contradictions of findings between studies. The results of the analysis revealed four main themes:

- a. Management Trainee Programs and Leadership Development.
- b. Work-Life Balance and Employee Well-Being.
- c. Corporate Social Responsibility and Employee Engagement.
- d. Sustainable Career Development and Talent Retention.

2.5 Research Quality and Trustworthiness

To increase the credibility of the research, all articles analyzed came from reputable international journals indexed by Scopus and have gone through a *peer review process*. In addition, the selection process is carried out systematically based on clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. Although the number of articles is limited to ten main articles, this approach allows for a more in-depth analysis and focus on the conceptual relationship between Management Trainee Programs, Work-Life Balance, CSR, and Sustainable Career Pathways to senior managerial positions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Sustainable Career Pathways: Beyond Traditional Career Development

The results of the synthesis of ten articles show that the concept **of sustainable career pathways** has shifted from a traditional career approach oriented towards job promotion to a more holistic approach that considers individual well-being, organizational sustainability, and social value. Aust et al. (2020), Jerónimo et al. (2020), and Cooke et al. (2022) affirm that long-term career success is no longer determined only by technical competencies and work experience, but also by the organization's ability to create a work environment that supports the sustainable development of individuals. However, the literature shows different views on the main factors that shape sustainable careers. Some studies place competency development and leadership as dominant factors, while other studies emphasize the importance of employee well-being and organizational support. This difference shows that sustainable career pathways cannot be explained through a single variable, but is the result of the interaction of various organizational and individual factors that reinforce each other. These findings broaden the perspective of Sustainable Human Resource Management by showing that career sustainability should be understood as a dynamic process that integrates the development of competencies, work well-being, and organizational social responsibility simultaneously.

3.2 Management Trainee Programs as Leadership Pipeline Mechanisms

The literature consistently shows that Management Trainee Programs (MTP) are a strategic instrument in building a *leadership pipeline* towards the position of Senior Manager and General Manager. Collings et al. (2021) and Podgorodnichenko et al. (2020) emphasized that structured talent development programs are able to accelerate the formation of managerial competencies, decision-making skills, and leadership readiness. However, the results of the synthesis show that there is a debate in the literature regarding the effectiveness of management trainee programs. Some studies argue that job rotation, mentoring, and intensive training can significantly increase career readiness. However, other research shows that the success of the program is heavily influenced by the organization's support, work culture, and development opportunities available after the program is completed. In other words, the success of Management Trainee Programs depends not only on the design of the program itself, but also on the existence of a sustainable career system. A good training program will not produce future leaders if the organization fails to provide a clear development path and transparent promotional opportunities. These findings provide new insights that Management Trainee Programs are more appropriately viewed as a career acceleration mechanism, rather than as the sole determinant of managerial career success.

3.3 The Work-Life Balance Paradox in Career Advancement

One of the most interesting findings of the literature synthesis is the emergence of a paradox between Work-Life Balance (WLB) and managerial career development. Haar et al. (2020) and Taamneh et al. (2021) show that Work-Life Balance improves job satisfaction, psychological well-being, employee retention, and organizational commitment. The findings support the argument that work-life balance is an important prerequisite for long-term career sustainability. However, some studies show that senior managerial positions often demand higher work commitments, greater responsibilities, and longer working hours. This condition creates a dilemma for individuals who seek to achieve leadership positions without sacrificing personal well-being. This contradiction shows that the relationship between Work-Life Balance and career success is not linear. Too low a work-life balance increases the risk of burnout and turnover, while poorly managed flexibility can lower an individual's readiness to face the demands of leadership. Based on this synthesis, the research argues that Work-Life Balance is not just a welfare policy, but a strategic resource that allows individuals to maintain long-term leadership performance and readiness.

3.4 Corporate Social Responsibility as an Internal Career Sustainability Driver

Most CSR research focuses on a company's reputation and relationships with external stakeholders. However, the results of the synthesis show that CSR also has a significant impact on the development of the organization's internal career.

Herrera and de las Heras-Rosas (2020), Farooq et al. (2021), and Barrena-Martínez et al. (2020) show that organizations that consistently implement CSR have higher levels of employee engagement, organizational identification, and employee commitment. Employees tend to feel more proud to work for organizations that have a clear social contribution. However, there is a debate about the effectiveness of CSR in increasing employee engagement. Some studies show that CSR only produces a positive impact if it is perceived as an authentic commitment of the organization. On the other hand, if CSR is seen as a symbolic activity or just an image, its impact on employee behavior becomes very limited. These findings show that the influence of CSR on sustainable career pathways is indirect. CSR improves organizational identification and employee engagement, which in turn strengthens motivation to thrive and stay within the organization. Thus, CSR functions as a career sustainability driver that strengthens the relationship between individuals and organizations in the long term.

3.5 Toward an Integrated Sustainable Career Framework

The main contribution of this research lies in a conceptual synthesis that integrates Management Trainee Programs, Work-Life Balance, and Corporate Social Responsibility in a single sustainable career development framework. Most previous studies have addressed the three variables separately. Management Trainee Programs are studied in the context of leadership development, Work-Life Balance in the context of employee welfare, and CSR in the context of corporate social responsibility. The results of the synthesis show that the approach has not been able to comprehensively explain how individuals achieve senior managerial positions on a sustainable basis. This study proposes that sustainable career pathways are formed through the interaction of three main mechanisms. First, Management Trainee Programs provide leadership competencies, experience, and readiness. Second, Work-Life Balance ensures the sustainability of individual capacity through physical and psychological well-being. Third, CSR strengthens employee attachment and loyalty through the creation of a meaningful and responsible work environment. Based on this synthesis, this research proposes the conceptual proposition that the success of achieving the positions of Senior Manager and General Manager is not only determined by individual abilities, but also by the integration between leadership development, employee well-being, and organizational social responsibility. The integration of these three elements forms the main foundation for sustainable career pathways in modern organizations.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the role of Management Trainee Programs, Work-Life Balance, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in forming sustainable career pathways to the position of Senior Manager and General Manager through a Narrative Literature Review approach to ten Scopus indexed articles for the 2020–2025 period. The results of the synthesis show that sustainable career development is not determined by a single factor, but rather is the result of an interaction between leadership development, employee well-being, and organizational social responsibility. Management Trainee Programs act as a career acceleration mechanism that builds leadership competence and readiness, Work-Life Balance functions as a factor that maintains the sustainability of individual capacity and prevents burnout, while CSR strengthens employee engagement, organizational identification, and employee loyalty to the organization. The main contribution of this research is the development of a conceptual framework that integrates these three factors in explaining the formation of sustainable career pathways. In contrast to previous studies that generally examined Management Trainee Programs, Work-Life Balance, and CSR separately, this study shows that success in achieving senior managerial positions is more likely to occur when these three elements run simultaneously and reinforce each other. Thus, this study proposes that sustainable career pathways are the result of integration between leadership development, employee well-being, and organizational responsibility within the framework of Sustainable Human Resource Management. In practice, the findings of the study show that organizations need to develop a structured management trainee program, implement effective work-life balance policies, and integrate CSR into human resource management strategies to build a sustainable leadership pipeline. Although the study was limited to ten Scopus articles published during the period 2020–2025, the results of the synthesis provided a strong conceptual basis for further research. Future research is suggested to empirically test the proposed model by involving additional variables such as employee well-being, digital leadership, talent management, and ESG practices in different industry sectors and country contexts.

REFERENCES

- Alshaabani, A., Naz, F., Magda, R., & Rudnák, I. (2021). Impact of perceived corporate social responsibility on employee behavior during COVID-19. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 649247.
- Aust, I., Matthews, B., & Muller-Camen, M. (2020). Common good HRM: A paradigm shift in sustainable HRM? *Human Resource Management Review*, 30(3), 100705.
- Barrena-Martínez, J., López-Fernández, M., & Romero-Fernández, P. M. (2020). Towards a configuration of socially responsible human resource management policies and practices: Findings from an academic consensus. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 31(20), 2544–2580.
- Chaudhary, R. (2020). Green human resource management and employee green behavior: An empirical analysis. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 27(2), 630–641.

- Collings, D. G., McMackin, J., Nyberg, A. J., & Wright, P. M. (2021). Strategic human resource management and COVID-19: Emerging challenges and research opportunities. *Journal of Management Studies*, 58(5), 1378–1382.
- Cooke, F. L., Dickmann, M., & Parry, E. (2022). IJHRM after 30 years: Taking stock in times of COVID-19 and looking towards the future of HR research. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 33(1), 1–11.
- Farooq, O., Rupp, D. E., & Farooq, M. (2021). The multiple pathways through which internal and external CSR influence organizational identification and multifoci outcomes. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 28(1), 95–109.
- Haar, J., Sune, A., Russo, M., & Ollier-Malaterre, A. (2020). A cross-national study on the antecedents of work-life balance from the fit and balance perspective. *Social Indicators Research*, 150(1), 261–282.
- Herrera, J., & de las Heras-Rosas, C. (2020). Corporate social responsibility and human resource management: Towards sustainable business organizations. *Sustainability*, 12(3), 841.
- Jerónimo, H. M., Henriques, P. L., de Lacerda, T. C., da Silva, F. P., & Vieira, P. R. (2020). Going green and sustainable: The influence of green HR practices on employee outcomes. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 27(6), 2849–2861.
- Kelliher, C., Richardson, J., & Boiarintseva, G. (2020). All of work? All of life? Reconceptualising work-life balance for the 21st century. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 30(2), 97–112.
- Kim, H., Woo, E., Uysal, M., & Kwon, N. (2020). The effects of corporate social responsibility on employee well-being in the hospitality industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 87, 102505.
- Podgorodnichenko, N., Edgar, F., & McAndrew, I. (2020). The role of HRM in developing sustainable organizations: Contemporary challenges and contradictions. *Human Resource Management Review*, 30(3), 100685.
- Richert-Kazmierska, A., & Stankiewicz, K. (2020). Work-life balance: Does age matter? *Work*, 65(3), 477–487.
- Taamneh, A., Alsaad, A., & Elrehail, H. (2021). HRM practices and the role of work-life balance in improving organizational performance. *Employee Relations: The International Journal*, 43(6), 1261–1279.
- Youn, H., Kim, J. H., & Song, H. (2021). The leading causes and consequences of employee burnout in the hospitality industry. *Sustainability*, 13(4), 2105.