

Strategic Reward Management in the Sustainability Era: An Evolutionary Review of ESG, AI, and Employee Value Proposition

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Abstract

This study provides an evolutionary systematic literature review of Strategic Reward Management by synthesizing its shift from financial and contract-based compensation toward ESG-oriented, AI-enabled, and employee-centered reward architectures. It examines how ESG imperatives, AI-enabled HR analytics, and Employee Value Proposition (EVP) reshape reward systems in supporting sustainable employee performance. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, 43 peer-reviewed Q1–Q2 journal articles published between 2015 and 2024 were analyzed using Scopus-oriented search terms, Watase UAE Tools, cross-database metadata verification, manual screening, quality appraisal, and thematic synthesis. The review identifies three evolutionary waves. The first emphasizes motivation–performance alignment, fairness perceptions, and performance-based pay. The second shifts attention toward sustainable HRM, green HRM, CSR-linked rewards, and sustainable employability. The third highlights AI-enabled personalization, EVP-based value creation, ESG-linked rewards, and agility-oriented reward design. Across these waves, reward systems increasingly function not only as compensation mechanisms but also as strategic signals that communicate organizational values, reinforce fairness perceptions, enhance employee engagement, and support sustainable performance. The review also reveals theoretical fragmentation, as RBV, SET, AMO, Agency Theory, Dynamic Capabilities, and Institutional Theory are often applied separately with limited cross-framework integration. To address this gap, the study proposes an integrative conceptual model linking sustainability pressures, AI-enabled HR capabilities, strategic reward systems, EVP mechanisms, and sustainable employee performance. This review contributes by repositioning strategic reward management as an adaptive value-signaling mechanism and offers practical direction for designing ethical, data-informed, and sustainability-aligned reward systems.

KEYWORDS

strategic reward management; sustainable employee performance; ESG oriented HRM; AI enabled HR analytics; employee value proposition.

Introduction

Strategic Reward Management has undergone a significant conceptual transformation over the past decade. Traditional reward systems were primarily designed as financial and contractual mechanisms to align employee behavior with organizational objectives, improve productivity, and reduce agency-related conflicts. In this earlier perspective, compensation was largely treated as an efficiency-oriented instrument, emphasizing pay-for-performance, managerial incentives, and short-term behavioral alignment (Kang & Lee, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). Contemporary organizational environments have expanded the meaning of reward management beyond financial compensation. Increasing environmental, social, and

governance (ESG) pressures, rapid digital transformation, and changing employee expectations have shifted reward systems toward broader value-based architectures that incorporate sustainability, technological capability, fairness, well-being, and employee experience (Elias et al., 2023; Keddie & Magnan, 2023).

Recent studies describe this shift from efficiency-focused compensation toward more strategic and value-based reward architectures, although adoption varies across sectors, institutional environments, and organizational capabilities (Alabri et al., 2022). Reward systems in the sustainability era are increasingly expected to communicate organizational responsibility, reinforce ethical behavior, support employee well-being, and align workforce contribution with long-term social and environmental goals (De Prins et al., 2020). AI-enabled HR analytics has introduced new possibilities for data-informed reward design, including more personalized, transparent, and performance-sensitive compensation practices (Siregar et al., 2022). Employee Value Proposition (EVP) has also become increasingly important because employees evaluate reward systems not only through pay, but also through career opportunities, recognition, meaningful work, flexibility, fairness, and organizational values (Hassanein & Özgüt, 2022; Swanepoel & Saurombe, 2022).

These developments indicate that Strategic Reward Management is no longer limited to the administration of compensation. Reward management increasingly operates as a strategic signaling mechanism through which organizations communicate what they value, how they define performance, and how they balance economic outcomes with employee-centered and sustainability-oriented priorities. From this perspective, reward systems may shape sustainable employee performance not only by motivating individual effort, but also by strengthening fairness perceptions, trust, engagement, employability, and value alignment between employees and organizations (Dorta-Afonso et al., 2021; Gaspar et al., 2023; Gürbüz et al., 2022).

The conceptual foundation of Strategic Reward Management has also evolved. Early reward research was strongly influenced by Agency Theory, which views compensation as a contractual mechanism for aligning employee and managerial interests, reducing information asymmetry, and controlling opportunistic behavior. This perspective remains relevant for understanding incentive alignment, but it is insufficient to explain contemporary reward practices that increasingly combine productivity, well-being, sustainability, and employee experience. Recent studies have therefore drawn on broader theoretical perspectives, including the Resource-Based View (RBV), Social Exchange Theory (SET), Ability–Motivation–Opportunity (AMO) theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and Institutional Theory (Atiku et al., 2024; Sibian & Ispas, 2021). These perspectives collectively suggest that reward systems can function not only as incentive mechanisms, but also as strategic resources, exchange signals, capability-building tools, and institutional responses to sustainability pressures.

The sustainability dimension has further reshaped the role of reward management. ESG-oriented HRM encourages organizations to align reward practices with responsible behavior, ethical leadership, employee well-being, and long-term organizational legitimacy. Reward systems can signal an organization's commitment to social responsibility by linking recognition, incentives, and career development to sustainability-related values and behaviors. The influence of ESG-oriented rewards on employee outcomes depends on contextual conditions,

such as organizational culture, sectoral characteristics, institutional maturity, and the credibility of sustainability implementation (Abane & Phinaitrup, 2020; Altassan, 2024). ESG-based reward practices should therefore be understood as context-sensitive mechanisms that require alignment between organizational values, HR systems, and employee perceptions.

Digital transformation has added another layer of complexity to reward management. AI-enabled HR analytics allows organizations to collect and analyze workforce data to support more adaptive reward decisions, including personalized compensation, performance analytics, talent segmentation, and predictive retention strategies (Özkan Alakaş, 2024). These capabilities may improve transparency, responsiveness, and strategic alignment in reward design (Chen et al., 2015; Latif et al., 2020; Patterer et al., 2024). The use of AI in HR and reward systems also raises important ethical concerns, including algorithmic bias, privacy risks, data governance challenges, and the potential reduction of employees into measurable data points (Gill, 2015; Teece et al., 2016). AI should therefore not be treated merely as a technical solution for reward optimization, but as a strategic capability that must be governed ethically and integrated carefully with fairness, transparency, and employee trust.

Employee Value Proposition has become a central element in contemporary reward management. EVP reflects the broader value offered by organizations to employees, including financial rewards, career development, recognition, work environment, flexibility, leadership support, and the social meaning of work. In this sense, EVP expands reward management from a narrow compensation logic toward a more holistic employee-centered value framework. A credible EVP can strengthen perceptions of fairness, reciprocity, commitment, and organizational support from the perspective of Social Exchange Theory (Zada et al., 2024). EVP integration with reward strategy may enhance sustainable employee performance by reinforcing psychological attachment, engagement, and long-term employee–organization alignment.

The literature on Strategic Reward Management remains fragmented in at least three ways. First, studies on ESG-oriented HRM, AI-enabled HR analytics, EVP, and reward management are often developed in separate research streams, making it difficult to understand how these dimensions interact as part of an integrated reward architecture. Second, theoretical perspectives are frequently applied in isolation: Agency Theory emphasizes incentive alignment, RBV highlights strategic resources, SET focuses on reciprocity, AMO explains capability and motivation, Dynamic Capabilities Theory emphasizes adaptability, and Institutional Theory explains legitimacy pressures. Limited studies integrate these perspectives to explain how reward systems evolve across technological, sustainability, and employee-centered contexts. Third, prior studies often examine specific reward practices or employee outcomes without systematically tracing the broader evolutionary trajectory of reward management from traditional compensation logic toward ESG-oriented, AI-enabled, and EVP-centered systems.

These gaps indicate the need for an evolutionary systematic literature review. An evolutionary review is appropriate because Strategic Reward Management has not changed in a single, linear, or abrupt manner. The field has developed through successive conceptual waves, beginning with motivation–performance alignment, moving toward sustainability-oriented HRM, and more recently expanding into AI-enabled personalization, EVP-based value creation, and ESG-linked reward design. This study does not aim to test causal relationships empirically. It systematically

synthesizes existing literature to explain how the field has developed, what themes and theoretical perspectives dominate the literature, where fragmentation persists, and how an integrative conceptual model can be constructed for future research.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it contributes theoretically by integrating multiple perspectives, namely Agency Theory, RBV, SET, AMO, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and Institutional Theory, into a broader framework for understanding Strategic Reward Management in the sustainability era. Second, it contributes methodologically by offering one of the few evolutionary systematic literature reviews that map the development of reward management research using PRISMA-guided screening, quality appraisal, manual coding, and thematic synthesis. Third, it contributes practically by providing insights for organizations seeking to design reward systems that are ethical, adaptive, data-informed, employee-centered, and aligned with ESG priorities. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. RQ1: How has Strategic Reward Management evolved from traditional financial and contractual compensation toward ESG-oriented and sustainable HRM?
2. RQ2: How do AI-enabled HR analytics and Employee Value Proposition reshape Strategic Reward Management in supporting sustainable employee performance?
3. RQ3: How can an integrative conceptual model explain the relationship between sustainability pressures, AI-enabled HR capabilities, strategic reward systems, EVP mechanisms, and sustainable employee performance?

This review positions Strategic Reward Management as an evolving strategic function rather than a static compensation practice. The study clarifies how reward systems have moved from efficiency-oriented incentive mechanisms toward value-signaling architectures that combine sustainability, digital capability, employee experience, and long-term performance. The resulting synthesis provides a stronger theoretical foundation for future empirical research and practical guidance for organizations seeking to align reward systems with the demands of sustainability, technological transformation, and changing employee expectations.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts an evolutionary systematic literature review (SLR) to examine how Strategic Reward Management has transformed from traditional compensation mechanisms into sustainability-oriented, AI-enabled, and employee-centered reward architectures. Without conducting primary empirical testing, it systematically reviews, screens, appraises, codes, and synthesizes studies to explain conceptual evolution, dominant themes, theoretical foundations, and remaining gaps. The evolutionary SLR design is appropriate because the field has developed through successive waves, from compensation, motivation, performance alignment, and fairness toward sustainable HRM, ESG-oriented rewards, AI-enabled HR analytics, Employee Value Proposition, and organizational agility. Following PRISMA 2020, thematic synthesis interprets conceptual patterns, theoretical relationships, and evolution.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Bibliographic data were collected using Watase UAKE Tools, a literature mapping and metadata-enrichment platform that consolidates records from Scopus, Web of Science, Dimensions, CrossRef, and manually uploaded DOI or PDF files. Watase supported metadata organization, DOI matching, duplicate checking, citation enrichment, and document management. It was not treated as an independent academic database, but as a supporting tool for organizing and enriching records retrieved from scholarly sources. Therefore, the replicable components of this review include the search string, databases, inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening logic, quality appraisal rubric, and PRISMA flow. The search was anchored in Scopus-oriented keywords: “Strategic Reward Management,” “Total Reward Strategy,” “Employee Value Proposition,” “AI Enabled HR Analytics,” “Digital Reward Transformation,” “Sustainable HR Practices,” “Organizational Agility Strategy,” “Sustainable HR Strategy,” and “Employee Engagement Strategy.” Parameters included 2015–2024, English peer-reviewed journal articles relevant to HRM, strategy, sustainability, organizational behavior, and employee performance; only Scopus-indexed Q1–Q2 articles were retained.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were included when they met all of the following criteria:

1. published in Scopus-indexed Q1–Q2 journals;
2. published between 2015 and 2024;
3. written in English;
4. examined Strategic Reward Management, total reward strategy, Employee Value Proposition, AI-enabled HR analytics, digital reward transformation, sustainable HRM, ESG-oriented HRM, organizational agility, employee engagement, or sustainable employee performance;
5. provided complete abstracts, methodological clarity, and full bibliographic metadata;
6. showed clear conceptual, empirical, or theoretical relevance to reward management and employee-related outcomes.

These criteria clarify the same selection boundaries used in the original manuscript, which identified Q1–Q2 journal articles, 2015–2024 publication years, English language, peer-reviewed status, and relevance to HRM, strategy, sustainability, organizational behavior, and employee performance.

Screening and Selection Procedure

The screening procedure followed the PRISMA sequence of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The initial search generated 176 records. In the first screening stage, 92 records were excluded because they were outside the 2015–2024 period, 30 were excluded because they were not published in Scopus Q1–Q2 journals, and one was excluded due to an incomplete abstract. Consequently, 53 records proceeded to full-text evaluation. Eligibility assessment was conducted using the established inclusion and exclusion criteria, leaving 19 articles. Forward–backward citation tracking based on these eligible articles identified 24 supplementary records. These records were not treated as a separate dataset or automatically included; they were retained only after satisfying the same criteria, duplicate checks, journal-quality requirements, and appraisal standards. Duplicates were checked by title, author, DOI, and year. The final corpus comprised 43 peer-reviewed Q1–Q2 articles, from which all descriptive and thematic results reported in this study were generated and interpreted consistently.

Data Extraction and Manual Coding

Data extraction and coding were conducted manually to maintain interpretive depth and conceptual consistency. Microsoft Excel was used as the coding matrix, while Watase supported metadata consolidation and document organization. Each article was read and coded based on bibliographic identity, research characteristics, macro-level constructs, micro-level variables, theoretical foundations, and contribution to the evolutionary synthesis. The coding matrix covered six categories: bibliographic information; research characteristics; macro-level constructs such as Strategic Reward Management, sustainable HR strategy, AI integration, organizational agility, and ESG-oriented reward systems; micro-level variables such as performance-based pay, total rewards, employee engagement, EVP, talent retention, motivation, digital reward transformation, sustainable employability, perceived organizational support, trust, job satisfaction, organizational culture, and learning outcomes; theoretical foundations including RBV, SET, AMO, Expectancy Theory, Agency Theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and Institutional Theory; and synthesis role. Coding examples and repeated checks ensured alignment, while quality appraisal retained only articles scoring 4 or 5.

Data Synthesis Procedure

Data synthesis combined descriptive analysis and qualitative thematic synthesis. Descriptive analysis summarized annual publication trends, geographic and sectoral patterns, research design typologies, and theory usage frequency to establish the structural contours of the Strategic Reward Management research landscape. Qualitative thematic synthesis was conducted through iterative reading and manual interpretation of abstracts, theoretical frameworks, findings, and discussion sections. The synthesis identified three evolutionary waves. Wave 1, traditional motivation–performance alignment, reflects studies emphasizing performance-based pay, fairness perceptions, motivation, engagement, and alignment between reward systems and employee performance. Wave 2, sustainability-oriented HRM, includes studies on sustainable HR practices, green HRM, CSR-linked rewards, sustainable employability, employee well-being, and ESG-related legitimacy. Wave 3, AI-enabled and EVP-centered reward architecture, covers AI-enabled HR analytics, digital reward transformation, EVP-based personalization, ESG-linked rewards, agility, and employee-centered value creation. VOSviewer was used only to visualize keyword patterns, while thematic findings came from manual coding.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability was strengthened through repeated checking of coded entries, consistency checks across macro constructs and micro variables, duplicate verification, and manual validation of journal quartiles through SCImago. Validity was supported through adherence to PRISMA 2020, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, triangulation of metadata and full-text reading, quality appraisal, and alignment between research questions, coding categories, thematic synthesis, and conceptual model development.

This methodological procedure ensures that the review is systematic, transparent, and theoretically grounded. The findings represent a structured synthesis of the final corpus of 43 articles rather than primary empirical measurement or causal testing.

Result and Discussion

Publication Trend

The publication trend indicates growing scholarly attention to Strategic Reward Management within the final corpus of 43 articles. Although the search covered 2015–2024, eligible publications began in 2017. Between 2017 and 2019, output remained minimal, with only one eligible article each year, showing that the field had not yet become a consolidated Q1–Q2 research stream. A visible shift occurred in 2020, when publications increased to seven articles, followed by the same number in 2021. This period marked an acceleration phase linked to sustainability-oriented HRM, employee well-being, sustainable employability, and HR practices for organizational resilience. The highest publication counts appeared in 2022 and 2024, with nine articles each, reflecting consolidation around ESG-oriented HRM, digital transformation, AI-enabled HR analytics, EVP, and organizational agility. Although 2023 declined slightly to six articles, the trend still shows sustained attention, thematic diversification, and three phases: emergence, acceleration, and consolidation.

Journal & Author Productivity

Journal and author productivity provides insight into the intellectual structure of the Strategic Reward Management literature. The final corpus shows that the field is shaped by contributions from journals located at the intersection of human resource management, organizational behavior, sustainability, business strategy, and technology-enabled management. This distribution indicates that reward management is no longer confined to compensation studies alone, but is increasingly discussed across broader interdisciplinary domains.

The productivity analysis highlights several influential journals and authors that shape the current landscape of strategic reward management, sustainability-oriented HRM, and employee performance research. Among the journals, Sustainability emerges as the most productive outlet, contributing multiple highly relevant articles (Matei et al., 2024). Its consistent output reflects the strong alignment between sustainability themes and reward system transformation. Other leading journals include the International Journal of Human Resource Management, Journal of Business Research, and Technology Analysis & Strategic Management, each contributing highly cited foundational studies that inform the theoretical and empirical development of strategic reward management.

In terms of author impact, Jerónimo et al. (2020) stands out as the most cited article (149 citations), demonstrating its substantial influence in connecting green HR practices with sustainability rationales. Ybema et al. (2020) follow with 117 citations, reinforcing the centrality of sustainable employability within the HRM discourse. Scholars such as Shamout et al., (2022), Keddie & Magnan (2023), Margherita et al. (2021), and Nilsson & Nilsson (2021) also contribute significantly, providing critical insights into ESG-based incentives, organizational agility, and extended employability.

Overall, the productivity pattern shows that research in this domain is driven by a combination of sustainability-focused journals and interdisciplinary contributors whose work spans compensation strategy, green HRM, digital transformation, and organizational performance. This indicates a maturing field where strategic reward management is increasingly situated at the intersection of sustainability, technology, and employee-centered HR practices.

Geographic Distribution

The geographical distribution of the final sample suggests that research on Strategic Reward Management is emerging across different institutional and cultural settings. The Netherlands and Saudi Arabia show the highest representation in this sample, with two studies each. This wording is used cautiously because the difference between countries is small and does not justify claims of global dominance or prominence. The distribution should therefore be interpreted as sample representation rather than evidence of regional superiority.

Studies from Europe, the Middle East, South Africa, and other regions show that reward systems are shaped by different institutional pressures, labor market conditions, cultural expectations, and sectoral dynamics. In some contexts, the literature emphasizes sustainable employability, aging workforces, and long term workforce participation. In other contexts, studies emphasize green HRM, employee engagement, digital HR transformation, or sustainability linked organizational practices.

This geographical variation indicates that Strategic Reward Management does not evolve uniformly across contexts. ESG-oriented reward practices, AI-enabled HR analytics, and EVP based reward strategies are influenced by institutional maturity, organizational capability, regulatory pressure, labor-market structure, and employee expectations. The findings therefore suggest the need for conceptual models that can accommodate contextual diversity rather than assume that reward transformation occurs in the same way across all countries and sectors.

Network Visualization

Network visualization provides a structural overview of how key concepts, authors, and thematic clusters are connected within the Strategic Reward Management literature. These networks make the field's intellectual cohesion and evolving research pathways more observable. The visualization shows a dynamic structure in which compensation-related constructs form the central axis. Prominent nodes such as compensation, executive compensation, and firm performance indicate that traditional remuneration mechanisms remain influential as conceptual anchors. Dense links around these nodes reflect continuing attention to how compensation shapes organizational outcomes, incentives, and managerial behavior. A second major cluster appears around employee, management, and organisation, indicating a growing orientation toward human-centered perspectives. Terms such as commitment, trust, willingness, evaluation system, and sustainability show a shift from financial compensation toward employee experience, behavioral responses, and organizational development. Technology and integration also signal the early role of digital transformation in HR systems. Color gradients reflect temporal evolution: earlier studies focus on compensation, agency theory, and executive incentives, while recent studies address employee perceptions, sustainability, and managerial practices. Overall, the visualization depicts an evolving field moving toward holistic, employee-centered, legitimacy-oriented, and adaptive reward frameworks.

Evolutionary Waves of Strategic Reward Management

The qualitative thematic synthesis identifies three evolutionary waves in the Strategic Reward Management literature. These waves are not rigid chronological categories, but dominant thematic patterns emerging across the final corpus.

Wave 1: Motivation and Performance Alignment

The first wave emphasizes the traditional role of reward systems in aligning employee behavior with

organizational objectives. Studies in this wave focus on performance based pay, compensation design, fairness perceptions, incentive alignment, motivation, engagement, and organizational performance. The dominant mechanism is behavioral alignment: rewards are used to direct effort, reduce agency problems, and strengthen the connection between employee contribution and organizational outcomes.

This wave is closely associated with Agency Theory, Expectancy Theory, and early forms of performance oriented HRM. Reward systems are mainly understood as tools for improving motivation, controlling behavior, and encouraging employees or managers to act in line with organizational goals. The main contribution of this wave is that it establishes reward management as a strategic mechanism rather than a purely administrative compensation function.

The limitation of this wave is its relatively narrow treatment of performance. Employee outcomes are often interpreted through productivity, motivation, and measurable performance, while broader issues such as sustainability, well being, digital transformation, and employee experience receive less attention. This limitation creates the conceptual space for the second wave.

Wave 2: Sustainability Oriented HRM and ESG Linked Reward Logic

The second wave expands the role of reward management by connecting it with sustainable HRM, green HRM, CSR linked HR practices, employee well being, sustainable employability, and ESG oriented organizational legitimacy. Studies in this wave show that reward systems are increasingly expected to support not only productivity, but also responsible behavior, long term employability, ethical climates, environmental awareness, and employee wellbeing.

The mechanisms in this wave are broader than incentive alignment. Reward systems operate as organizational signals that communicate sustainability values, reinforce responsible behavior, and strengthen employee perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. Sustainable employability, green HR practices, engagement, and CSR linked reward practices become important variables in explaining how HR systems support long term organizational and employee outcomes (Jerónimo et al., 2020; Nilsson & Nilsson, 2021; Ybema et al., 2020).

This wave is strongly connected with Social Exchange Theory, AMO theory, Sustainable HRM, and Institutional Theory. SET explains how fair and responsible reward systems can strengthen reciprocity, trust, and commitment. AMO theory explains how HR systems enhance employee capacity and motivation to contribute sustainably. Institutional Theory explains why organizations adopt ESG oriented HR practices in response to legitimacy pressures and societal expectations.

The main contribution of this wave is that it moves reward management beyond financial incentives toward sustainability oriented value creation. The main limitation is that ESG, sustainability, and reward management are often still examined separately, making it difficult to explain how reward systems integrate sustainability goals with employee centered outcomes.

Wave 3: AI Enabled and EVP Centered Reward Architecture

The third wave reflects the newest development in the literature, where Strategic Reward Management is increasingly connected with AI enabled HR analytics, digital reward transformation, EVP based personalization, ESG linked reward structures, and organizational agility. Studies

in this wave frame reward systems as adaptive, data informed, and employee centered architectures.

AI enabled HR analytics contributes to reward management by enabling more detailed analysis of employee performance, behavior, contribution, retention risk, and workforce segmentation. These capabilities can support more personalized and responsive reward decisions. Digital transformation also creates opportunities for improving transparency, consistency, and strategic alignment in reward practices (Khodakarami & Dirani, 2020; Liewendahl & Heinonen, 2020). This wave also raises ethical concerns related to algorithmic bias, privacy, data governance, fairness measurement, and the risk of reducing employees to data points.

EVP becomes central in this wave because employees increasingly evaluate organizational rewards through a broader value lens. Pay remains important, but employees also consider career development, recognition, flexibility, meaningful work, leadership support, fairness, and organizational purpose. Reward systems therefore become part of a larger employee value architecture rather than a stand alone compensation mechanism.

The theoretical foundations of this wave are more diverse. Dynamic Capabilities Theory explains how organizations adapt reward systems in response to technological and environmental change (Margherita et al., 2021). RBV explains reward systems and HR analytics as strategic capabilities. SET explains how EVP and fairness perceptions shape trust and engagement. Institutional Theory explains why ESG linked rewards become important under sustainability pressures.

The main contribution of this wave is the emergence of reward management as a value signaling and adaptive capability. Reward systems are increasingly positioned at the intersection of technology, sustainability, employee experience, and organizational agility. The main unresolved issue is that the literature has not yet fully integrated AI, ESG, EVP, and sustainable employee performance into a coherent theoretical model.

Integrated Results Summary

Taken together, the results show that Strategic Reward Management has evolved from a compensation-centered mechanism into a broader strategic architecture. The field initially focused on motivation, incentives, performance alignment, and fairness, where reward systems were understood as instruments for directing employee behavior and improving organizational outcomes (J. Zhang et al., 2020). Over time, this focus expanded toward sustainability-oriented HRM, green HR practices, employee well-being, and ESG-linked organizational legitimacy. More recent studies further connect reward management with AI-enabled HR analytics, Employee Value Proposition, digital transformation, and organizational agility.

The results also indicate that the field remains theoretically fragmented. Agency Theory, RBV, SET, AMO, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and Institutional Theory each explain important dimensions of reward management, but they are often applied separately. This fragmentation limits the ability of existing studies to explain how reward systems simultaneously respond to economic goals, employee expectations, technological capabilities, and sustainability pressures. Therefore, the main finding of this review is that Strategic Reward Management increasingly functions as a strategic value-signaling system. Reward systems do not merely compensate employees; they communicate organizational priorities, shape fairness perceptions, support engagement, strengthen EVP, and align employee contribution with

long-term sustainability-oriented performance.

This review demonstrates that reward systems are no longer adequately explained only as mechanisms for distributing pay or aligning short-term performance. Instead, they increasingly operate as organizational systems through which firms communicate values, shape employee perceptions, support sustainability commitments, and adapt to technological change. This shift is reflected in three evolutionary waves: motivation and performance alignment, sustainability-oriented HRM and ESG-linked reward logic, and AI-enabled and EVP-centered reward architecture.

The first implication concerns the changing meaning of reward itself. In earlier literature, reward systems were primarily associated with compensation, incentive alignment, fairness, and performance outcomes. This perspective remains relevant because organizations still need reward systems that motivate employees and align behavior with strategic objectives. Agency Theory and Expectancy Theory help explain this logic by showing how incentives reduce goal misalignment and encourage desired performance. However, this traditional logic is no longer sufficient. Contemporary reward systems are expected to address broader employee and organizational concerns, including well-being, sustainability, trust, employability, and long-term value creation.

The second implication concerns the sustainability turn in reward management. The emergence of sustainable HRM, green HRM, CSR-linked reward practices, and ESG-oriented HRM indicates that reward systems increasingly function as instruments of organizational responsibility. In this context, rewards do not merely compensate performance; they signal which behaviors and values are considered legitimate, desirable, and strategically important. ESG-oriented reward systems can support ethical behavior, sustainability awareness, employee well-being, and long-term organizational legitimacy. This finding extends the traditional view of reward management by positioning reward systems as value-signaling mechanisms that connect employee behavior with organizational sustainability priorities.

The role of sustainability-oriented rewards should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. ESG-linked reward practices are not universally effective in all contexts. Their effectiveness depends on organizational culture, institutional maturity, sectoral conditions, and the credibility of ESG implementation. If sustainability-linked rewards are introduced only symbolically, without leadership commitment, transparent criteria, and consistent HR practices, employees may perceive them as superficial or inconsistent. ESG-oriented reward management therefore requires internal alignment between reward design, organizational values, employee expectations, and actual sustainability practices.

The third implication relates to digital transformation and AI-enabled HR analytics. AI and HR analytics are beginning to reshape the design and governance of reward systems. AI-enabled tools can support more personalized, timely, and evidence-based reward decisions by analyzing employee performance, skills, contribution patterns, retention risks, and workforce segmentation. This development moves reward management from standardized and input-based compensation systems toward more adaptive and data-informed architectures. Dynamic Capabilities Theory helps explain this transformation because organizations must sense workforce changes, seize technological opportunities, and reconfigure HR systems in response to changing internal and external demands.

The use of AI in reward management also introduces ethical and governance challenges. Data-informed reward

systems may improve transparency and consistency, but they can also reproduce algorithmic bias, violate privacy expectations, or reduce employee contribution to measurable indicators. This creates a tension between personalization and fairness. A reward system may become more responsive to individual differences, yet less trusted if employees do not understand how decisions are made. Responsible AI governance is therefore essential. Reward analytics should be designed with explainability, fairness, human oversight, and data protection as central principles. The future of Strategic Reward Management depends not only on technological sophistication, but also on employee trust in how technology is used.

The fourth implication concerns the growing importance of Employee Value Proposition. EVP broadens reward management from a pay-centered system into a holistic employee value architecture. Employees increasingly evaluate organizations not only through salary and benefits, but also through recognition, career development, flexibility, meaningful work, fairness, leadership support, and organizational purpose. From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, a credible EVP strengthens reciprocity, commitment, perceived organizational support, and trust. Reward systems therefore become part of the psychological and relational contract between employees and organizations.

EVP is particularly important because it connects the sustainability and digital dimensions of reward management with employee experience. ESG-linked rewards may communicate organizational responsibility, while AI-enabled analytics may support more personalized reward decisions. EVP integrates these elements into a broader value proposition that employees can understand and evaluate. Without EVP, ESG and AI may remain organizational initiatives that are not fully translated into employee meaning. EVP therefore acts as a humanizing mechanism within Strategic Reward Management, ensuring that reward systems remain connected to employee expectations, identity, and long-term engagement.

The fifth implication concerns theoretical fragmentation. Agency Theory explains incentive alignment; RBV explains strategic resources; SET explains reciprocity and trust; AMO explains ability, motivation, and opportunity; Dynamic Capabilities Theory explains adaptability; and Institutional Theory explains legitimacy pressures. Each theory provides a useful but partial explanation. The problem is not the absence of the theory, but the limited integration among theories. This fragmentation makes it difficult to explain how reward systems simultaneously address economic performance, employee experience, technological transformation, and sustainability pressures.

An integrative theoretical approach is therefore needed. Agency Theory explains why performance-based rewards remain important. RBV explains how reward systems and HR analytics can become strategic capabilities. SET explains why fairness, EVP, and employee perceptions matter. AMO explains how reward systems enhance employee capacity and motivation. Dynamic Capabilities Theory explains how reward systems adapt to changing technological and sustainability conditions. Institutional Theory explains why organizations align reward practices with ESG expectations and legitimacy demands. Integrating these perspectives allows Strategic Reward Management to be understood as a multilevel system linking organizational strategy, employee behavior, technological capability, and sustainability outcomes.

The integrative conceptual model proposed in this

review responds to this theoretical need. The model positions sustainability pressures and AI-enabled HR capabilities as key contextual and capability-based drivers. These drivers shape Strategic Reward Management by influencing how organizations design incentives, recognition systems, career rewards, and employee-centered value propositions. EVP mechanisms then translate reward systems into employee perceptions of fairness, trust, reciprocity, engagement, and commitment. Sustainable employee performance emerges when reward systems support not only productivity, but also well-being, employability, responsible behavior, and long-term value alignment.

This model contributes to the literature by repositioning Strategic Reward Management as an adaptive value-signaling mechanism. Reward systems are not merely tools for paying employees; they are strategic architectures that communicate what the organization values, how performance is defined, and how employee contribution is connected to broader sustainability goals. This view advances the field beyond traditional compensation logic and provides a foundation for future empirical testing. Future studies can examine whether ESG-oriented reward systems improve sustainable employee performance through EVP, whether AI-enabled reward analytics strengthens or weakens fairness perceptions, and whether organizational agility moderates the relationship between reward systems and employee outcomes.

From a practical perspective, organizations should design reward systems as integrated architectures rather than isolated compensation packages. Managers need to ensure that financial rewards, recognition, career development, sustainability incentives, digital analytics, and EVP are aligned. Reward practices should be transparent, ethically governed, and meaningfully connected to organizational values. ESG-linked rewards should be supported by credible sustainability practices. AI-enabled reward tools should be implemented with fairness, explainability, and human oversight. EVP should be communicated clearly so that employees understand how rewards connect to their career, well-being, and sense of purpose.

The findings also suggest that Strategic Reward Management requires contextual sensitivity. Organizations differ in institutional environments, technological readiness, sectoral demands, and employee expectations. A reward system that works in one context may not work in another. Organizations should therefore avoid adopting ESG-linked rewards, AI-based analytics, or EVP frameworks as generic templates. Effective implementation requires diagnosis of organizational culture, employee needs, regulatory expectations, and technological capability, especially for multinational organizations and institutions operating across diverse labor markets.

Overall, the discussion shows that the evolution of Strategic Reward Management is best understood as a movement from compensation administration toward strategic value orchestration. The field has expanded from incentive alignment to sustainability signaling, from standardized pay structures to AI-enabled personalization, and from transactional compensation to EVP-centered employee experience. The central challenge for future research is to explain how these dimensions interact rather than treating them as separate streams. The central challenge for practice is to design reward systems that are economically effective, ethically governed, technologically responsible, and meaningful for employees.

The conceptual model proposed in this review positions Strategic Reward Management as a central integrating mechanism connecting external sustainability and

institutional environments with internal organizational capabilities and micro-level employee outcomes. At the outermost level, the model begins with sustainability and institutional context, including ESG pressures, regulatory expectations, stakeholder demands, and societal norms surrounding responsible employment practices, as documented in studies on green HR, sustainability orientation, and ESG-linked incentives. This contextual layer shapes how reward systems are designed, justified, and communicated as organizations seek legitimacy and alignment with broader sustainability agendas.

Within this context, organizational capabilities translate sustainability expectations into concrete reward practices. AI-enabled HR analytics, digital transformational leadership, and organizational agility play crucial roles. AI capabilities allow organizations to interpret data on performance, engagement, and behavior, enabling more precise and adaptive reward decisions. Leadership and culture determine whether these tools support fairness, transparency, and innovation, or create inequality and distrust. Organizational agility emerges as a dynamic capacity shaped by reward systems that value learning, experimentation, and responsiveness.

At the core of the model lies Strategic Reward Management, conceptualized as a value-based, sustainability-oriented, and data-informed system rather than a purely financial mechanism. This core consists of financial and non-financial rewards redesigned in line with ESG priorities, EVP elements, and developmental objectives. Reward policies explicitly integrate environmental and social metrics, ethical leadership expectations, and well-being provisions, thereby functioning as strategic signals of what the organization truly values.

The next layer focuses on EVP and HR process perceptions as key relational mechanisms. EVP represents the financial and non-financial value offered to employees, including development, work-life balance, meaningful work, and social recognition. When Strategic Reward Management is aligned with a credible EVP and communicated through fair and consistent HR processes, employees are more likely to perceive justice, trust, and support. These perceptions create a social exchange dynamic in which employees reciprocate organizational investments through higher engagement, commitment, and discretionary effort.

At the outcome level, sustainable employee performance operates as the key dependent construct. Sustainable performance is understood not only as high productivity, but also as performance that is consistent over time, compatible with employee well-being, and aligned with ESG values. It emerges when employees experience rewards as meaningful, fair, and value-congruent, and when they perceive that their organization supports long-term employability and dignity.

In visual form, this conceptual model can be imagined as nested and connected layers: an outer ring of sustainability and institutional pressures, an intermediate ring of AI-enabled capabilities, leadership, and agility, a central hub of Strategic Reward Management, a relational layer of EVP and HR process perceptions, and an outcome layer of sustainable employee performance feeding back into organizational agility and legitimacy. The model integrates macro-level domains such as strategic reward, sustainable HR, AI integration, and organizational agility; micro-level constructs such as EVP, engagement, motivation, and justice; and theoretical pillars including Agency, RBV, SET, AMO, Dynamic Capabilities, and Institutional perspectives into one coherent framework.

Conclusion

This study provides an evolutionary systematic literature review of Strategic Reward Management in the sustainability era. Based on 43 peer reviewed Q1 and Q2 journal articles published between 2015 and 2024, the review shows that Strategic Reward Management has evolved from a traditional compensation centered function into a broader strategic reward architecture. This evolution reflects a shift from financial and contractual reward mechanisms toward ESG oriented, AI enabled, and employee centered reward systems.

The findings identify three evolutionary waves in the literature. The first wave emphasizes motivation and performance alignment, where reward systems are primarily used to align employee behavior with organizational goals through compensation, incentives, fairness, and performance based pay. The second wave expands reward management toward sustainability oriented HRM, green HRM, CSR linked rewards, employee well being, and sustainable employability. The third wave shows the emergence of AI enabled HR analytics, EVP based personalization, ESG linked reward structures, and agility oriented reward design.

The review concludes that Strategic Reward Management increasingly functions as a strategic value signaling mechanism. Reward systems do not only distribute compensation. They also communicate organizational values, shape fairness perceptions, strengthen trust and engagement, support EVP, and align employee contributions with long term sustainability oriented performance. This conclusion extends the traditional view of reward management by positioning rewards as part of a wider organizational system that connects economic performance, employee experience, technological capability, and sustainability priorities.

The study also reveals theoretical fragmentation in the field. Agency Theory, RBV, SET, AMO, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and Institutional Theory each explain important aspects of reward management, but they are often applied separately. This fragmentation limits the ability of the literature to explain how reward systems simultaneously respond to incentive alignment, employee reciprocity, organizational capability, technological transformation, and ESG legitimacy pressures. To address this gap, the study proposes an integrative conceptual model linking sustainability pressures, AI enabled HR capabilities, strategic reward systems, EVP mechanisms, and sustainable employee performance.

Theoretically, this review contributes by integrating economic, behavioral, capability based, technological, and institutional perspectives into a more comprehensive understanding of Strategic Reward Management. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of an evolutionary SLR approach for tracing conceptual development across successive waves of literature. Practically, the review provides guidance for organizations seeking to design reward systems that are ethical, adaptive, data informed, employee centered, and aligned with ESG priorities.

Author contributions

All authors made significant contributions to the conception, design, analysis, interpretation, or writing of this manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript prior to submission. The manuscript is original,

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest, whether financial, personal, or institutional, that could influence the research.

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