

**HR Managers and Environmental Management
in Thai Business Organizations¹**
**ผู้บริหารงานทรัพยากรคนกับงานด้านการจัดการสิ่งแวดล้อม
ในองค์การธุรกิจของไทย**

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งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาสถานภาพการจัดการด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมและบทบาทและภาระหน้าที่ของผู้บริหารงานทรัพยากรคนด้านการจัดการสิ่งแวดล้อมในองค์การธุรกิจไทย ด้วยการสอบถามความคิดเห็นผู้บริหารทรัพยากร คนที่ทำงานกับองค์การในตลาดหลักทรัพย์แห่งประเทศไทยโดยการใช้แบบสอบถามส่งทางไปรษณีย์ กลุ่มตัวอย่างมีทั้งหมด 472 องค์การ จำนวนองค์การที่ตอบแบบสอบถามที่นำไปใช้วิเคราะห์ได้ คือ 194 องค์การ อัตราการตอบแบบสอบถามคือ 41.1% ผลการวิจัยสรุปเป็นสามส่วนตามคำถามการวิจัย คือ (1) องค์การธุรกิจไทยมีนโยบายและความเข้าใจ/ความตั้งใจดีเรื่องสิ่งแวดล้อม แต่มีมาตรฐานการปฏิบัติและผลงานด้านการจัดการสิ่งแวดล้อมปานกลาง (2) ผู้บริหารทรัพยากรคนให้ความสำคัญกับงานและมีบทบาทภาระหน้าที่ทางด้านงานสิ่งแวดล้อมปานกลาง และมีผลงานทางด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมน้อย และ (3) ผู้บริหารงานทรัพยากรคนมีความพร้อมเรื่อง ความรู้เกี่ยวกับงานสิ่งแวดล้อมขององค์การ, ความรู้ความสามารถด้านการจัดการสิ่งแวดล้อม, และ ความชอบความเต็มใจ

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ที่จะทำงานด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมอยู่ในระดับปานกลาง ข้อเสนอแนะจากผลการวิจัย คือ (1) การพัฒนาปัจจัยที่สำคัญ คือ ความรู้และความชำนาญขององค์การด้านการจัดการสิ่งแวดล้อม, ทัศนคติของผู้บริหารระดับสูงขององค์การ และ กฎหมายและข้อบังคับด้านสิ่งแวดล้อม เพื่อส่งเสริมผลงานด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมขององค์การธุรกิจ (2) การสร้างกฎเกณฑ์หรือรางวัลทางธุรกิจที่เป็นแรงจูงใจให้องค์การธุรกิจสร้างผลงานด้านสิ่งแวดล้อม เพื่อส่งเสริมภาพลักษณ์หรือจุดขายขององค์การ (3) การสร้างคณะกรรมการด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมขององค์การที่ประกอบด้วยผู้บริหารทุกฝ่ายและมีผู้บริหารสูงสุดเป็นผู้นำ และ (4) การใช้ปัจจัยและความสามารถในงานของหน่วยงานทรัพยากรคนเพื่อช่วยทีมงานด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมขององค์การ

Abstract

This research investigates the performance and roles of HR managers in environmental management in Thai companies listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand. Data were collected through questionnaires sent by mail to HR managers of 472 companies. From these, 194 returned the completed questionnaires yielding a response rate of 41.1%. The findings from the study indicate that: (a) Thai businesses commonly have policies covering protection of the environment but perform only moderately well in implementing those policies or in achieving good results; (b) the role of HR managers in environmental management and the attention by HR managers to their task were moderate, and their performance in the environmental area was minimal; and (c) HR managers have a "fair" level of readiness to work in the environmental area, have a "fair" level of knowledge about their organization's environmental status and data, general knowledge of environmental management, and willingness to do the job.

Key words: HR managers, Thai business organizations, Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET), Environmental Management, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

The focus of Thailand's national development for the last forty years has emphasized expanding industrial production and therefore the business sector has played a crucial role in the country's growth and well-being. The country's main source of revenue has changed over time, from agricultural goods to products with high margins and added value, such as electronic components and manufactured goods. For example, in 1956, forty percent of export income came from rice. In 2002, the amount of rice exported was seven times that of 1956 but the revenue gained was only 2.42% of total export value (National Statistical Office, 2003).

Recent GNP figures for Thailand show that the industrial sector accounts for 32% of total export income, while the agricultural sector accounts for only 10.28% (Bank of Thailand, 2002). Socioeconomic indicators as published by both local and international units indicate that conditions have gradually improved in many areas (National Statistical Office, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d; United Nations Development Programme, 1991, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2004). However, over the last fifteen years, environmental stability and preservation has been identified by scholars and social leaders as one of the country's urgent and critical issues. Environmental problems such as decreasing forest areas, increasing pollution, and the accumulation of industrial toxic wastes are regularly reported in Thai media and research studies. Following are some statements from reports describing environmental issues in Thailand:

flooding in rainy season; conflict of water users; coastal degradation and loss of mangrove habitat; urban air pollution; pollution from solid waste, hazardous materials and hazardous waste.

Causes - Non-strategic and sporadic developments and destruction of critical watersheds; unmanaged aquaculture developments; growth in tourist industries exceeding growth in tourism carrying capacity; deficiency in urban and rural infrastructure, particularly central draining - freshwater resources being polluted by domestic and industrial wastes and sewage runoff (ESCAP, 2000, p. 355).

In 2000, chemical waste from industries in Thailand was approximately 1.28 million tons... to eliminate these wastes is a critical issue because the land required for disposal is quite limited... it is estimated that only 20% of the chemical wastes produced are being disposed of using methods that eliminate or reduce their danger to the environment. About 500,000 tons a year of chemical waste are not disposed of in a safe or proper manner, a similar amount of toxic waste each year accumulates awaiting disposal (Ministry of Public Health, 2002b, pp. 2, 4, in Thai).

The total amount of imported and locally produced hazardous chemicals was 29.49 million tons Hazardous chemicals utilized in various activities evidently had an impact on public health, workers in factories, as well as farmers (Pollution Control Department [PCD], 2005, pp. 64, 65, see Figure 1).

Department of Industrial Works, 2002; PCD, 2005; Ministry of Public Health, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, Sathirathai, 2003).

The Thai business sector includes approximately 126,700 factories and 3.5 million employees (Department of Industrial Works, 2005). Without the help of business managers, public agencies do not have enough resources to enforce effective environmental regulations. As is the case in many countries around the world, the decisions made by thousands of business people every day are as essential to preserving the environment and sustaining economic growth as are government regulations and public policies. As described in Manion and Evan's study (2002), the safety of any society from modern technology disasters requires cooperation among politicians, the general public, academics, government officials, and business managers.

Carroll and Buchholtz (2006) state that businesses play a major role in environmental protection and preservation because they are the primary consumers of materials and energy, as well as the major source of waste accumulation. Many reports, including that of Taylor and Morrissey (2004), suggest that managing toxic and non-toxic wastes effectively and reducing those wastes to a level commensurate with the earth's ability to absorb waste are critically important if the world's development goals are to bring to all regions the same standards of living as those enjoyed by people in the western, developed countries. Thai business managers, including those in HR, accordingly, have a significant role to play in managing the environment of the country.

Problem Statement

In addition to being directly responsible for managing and developing human resources (HR) in their organizations, many HR managers in Thailand are assigned to the organization's environment committee. However, their contribution to the team's activities ranges from significant to being merely a

name on the committee list. There are very few studies in Thailand, if any, investigating HR involvement in environmental issues. As it is apparent that the environment is a critical external factor affecting the existence and success of business organizations, collecting data and information about their thoughts and activities regarding this issue may contribute to knowledge about HR professionalism in Thailand. Moreover, environmental management is often studied as an issue related to *corporate social responsibility (CSR)* and *good governance* in business organizations in which HR managers are considered the key players. This research, therefore, investigates business organizations' performance and the role of HR in environmental management by surveying the opinions of HR managers in Thai business organizations regarding the following research questions:

1. How do Thai HR managers view the environmental management of their organizations?
2. What do Thai HR managers think their role and responsibility are in regard to environmental management?
3. To what extent are Thai HR managers ready to take part in the environmental management of their organizations?

Methodology

A questionnaire was used to gather data. Following is a description of the techniques employed for data collection.

Sample

HR managers of the companies listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) were selected as the target respondents. Between March and August 2005, when the research was conducted, there were 472 companies having the appropriate qualifications. The reasons for choosing the target respondents

were: (a) their organizations' management structure is controlled according to SET regulations resulting in some level of similarity in their qualifications for the research; (b) SET organizations usually have an official HR unit which makes it easy to access the target participants; and (c) most SET companies are leaders in their industry and their practices set the standard for other Thai businesses.

Responses were received from 197 companies but three of these were by non-HR managers; therefore, the findings were based on 194 completed questionnaires. This represents a 41.1% response rate. All respondents were HR professionals. The number of male respondents was a little higher (54.6%) than female (44.8%). The majority of the respondents (80.9%) were aged between 31 and 50 years. Most of the respondents (98%) have completed a bachelor's degree and many (42.3%) have worked for more than 12 years in the HR field. About a third (34.5%) hold the top position in their unit and more than half (60.8%) are working with companies that have fewer than 1,000 employees. A profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Questionnaire

Questions were constructed by the author, in consultation with HR colleagues at NIDA, based on a literature review and interviews with HR professionals who enrolled in the Master's Degree Program in Human Resource Development (HRD) at NIDA in 2004 and 2005. The questions were also checked for clarity with a pilot group of 30 HRD graduate students who critiqued the instrument, establishing the validity of the questionnaire.

There are two main sections to the questionnaire: company and respondent data, and the research questions. The latter consist of three parts: (a) six questions relating to research question 1, the company's environmental management performance; (b) five questions relating to research question 2, the role and responsibility of HR managers; and (c) three questions relating to

research question 3, the readiness of HR managers. Where appropriate, questions have space for the respondents to provide more details to their answers. All questions are multiple choice except for one question relating to research question 2. This question asks the respondents to list five HR duties and to rank them from highest to lowest priority. The responses are calculated according to frequency of response to a particular rank; duties chosen as first priority are given 5 points, second choices are given 4 points, and so on. This technique is derived from previous HR research relating to Thai business organizations (Virakul, 2002).

Questionnaires were sent twice to HR managers by mail; the first time at the end of March 2005 and the second at the beginning of May 2005. The first mailing was to 472 companies, of which 114 companies returned the questionnaires. The second round was for following up with those companies that did not return the questionnaires after the first mailing. Eighty-three companies answered the questionnaires the second time round, yielding a total of 197 respondents. However, three questionnaires were excluded from the analysis because they were answered by non-HR managers.

The questionnaire was designed to protect the participants' anonymity. The researcher did not know which questionnaire belonged to which company. This was done to increase participant's confidence and willingness to answer the questions honestly without fear of being traced. A postcard, having the return address of the researcher and the address of the participant, was attached with every questionnaire. The participants were asked to return the questionnaire and the postcard separately. The postcard helped the researcher in two ways. Firstly, it helped identify the companies that had answered and returned the questionnaires, and secondly, it avoided sending the questionnaires during the second time round to companies that had already returned them. However, the source of each questionnaire remained unknown to the researcher. This method is adapted from the HR research conducted by Virakul and McLean (2000).

Results

The research findings are reported according to the research questions presented.

Research question 1: How do Thai HR managers view the environmental management of their organizations?

In terms of *policy and intentions*, Thai business organizations are doing well since 66.5% of respondents indicate that their companies have policies emphasizing the importance of environmental management. Nearly 68% said that their companies have given attention to improving, and have made an effort to improve, environmental management (see Table 2). However, in terms of *practice and performance*, Thai business organizations are doing only fairly or moderately well and possibly not at the level indicated by their policy. This research interpretation is based on the following results: (a) only 20.6% stated that their company had received any kind of environmental awards; (b) fewer than 42% indicate that their companies employ good environment management standards and 33.0% state that their companies employ only moderate level standards; and (c) 45.9% answered that their company's business has somewhat polluted the environment.

Of the 20.6% of companies that have received environmental awards, half of these were reported to have been a result of a business objective to gain or maintain an international recognition award, such as ISO 14000, ISO 14001 (ISO: International Organization for Standardization) or SA8000 (SA: Social Accountability). According to the respondents, the factors most affecting environmental management in their companies are: the company's knowledge and skills (33.0%), the top executives' attitudes (25.2%), and laws and regulations (23.2%). Surprisingly, financial resources, which is commonly thought to be the most important factor influencing business companies' activities, ranks fourth. As some respondents wrote:

My company has been doing business for more than 30 years and 'yes' there is a waste water management problem. Because the company has limited free area and the surrounding community is very crowded, we cannot do anything much regarding building an effective water treatment system, especially big ponds. But we are trying to do our best to correct the problem (Respondent number 24; in Thai).

At present, the company is trying to achieve the ISO 14000 certification award. This effort is being led by the engineering and the environmental departments, and the environmental committee. The HR department is also part of the committee. Our job is to support and suggest anything that would help our company reach this goal. (Respondent number 36; in Thai)

Our company has somewhat polluted the environment. But our top management knows about the problem and they are trying to build a

Research question 2: What do Thai HR managers think their role and responsibility are in regard to environmental management?

The findings indicate that many Thai HR managers are involved in the organization's environmental management in one way or another. However, the level of their involvement ranges from *direct and high* to *low*. When asked to indicate the five highest priority HR activities, only 4.1% of the respondents listed environmental management, which therefore ranked seventeenth on the list (see Table 3.1). Nevertheless, when a similar question but with a different technique was applied, the respondents replied differently. To this question, 29% of HR managers chose environmental management as one of the top five, and 38% chose it as one of the top ten HR activities (see Table 3.2; Question 2). This may indicate a common situation in the business workplace— theoretically, many HR professionals recognize that the environment is a critical issue in business but their priorities are established by the organizations' demands and resources. This forces most HR managers to focus on accomplishing the tasks for which they are directly responsible, such as recruitment and selection; training and development; the setting of compensation and benefits; career and competency development; and performance appraisals. It appears that environmental management receives attention from HR managers only after they have completed their more direct tasks.

Table 3.2: Responses to questions relating to research question 2 (continued Table 3.1)

Question	Answer	Percentage
2. Compared to other HR work, how would you rank managing the environment	2.1 Between 1 st - 5 th	29.4
	2.2 Between 6 th - 10 th	38.6
	2.3 Between 11 th - 15 th	8.8
	2.4 Between 16 th - 20 th	2.6
	2.5 No work involvement	14.4
	2.6 Other	1.0
	2.7 No answer	5.2
3. In terms of role and responsibility, to what extent are you involved in your organization's environmental management?	3.1 High	25.3
	3.2 Moderate	39.2
	3.3 Low	23.7
	3.4 None	7.7
	3.5 Other	2.6
	3.6 No answer	1.5
4. Indicate managers that have a role and responsibility in your organization's environmental management (can give more than one answer).	4.1 Plant manager	43.8
	4.2 HR manager	41.2
	4.3 Health and safety manager	32.0
	4.4 Environmental manager	20.1
	4.5 Other	28.9
5. To what extent do you think HR managers should be involved in an organization's environmental management?	5.1 Direct and high involvement	10.3
	5.2 A member of the environmental committee led by a specific line manager	71.6
	5.3 Somewhat involved	15.5
	5.4 No involvement	0.5
	5.5 Other	1.0
	5.6 No answer	1.0

The findings show that 88% of the respondents are involved in their organization's environmental management—25.3% high involvement; 39.2% moderate involvement; and 23.7% low involvement. The research responses also show that plant managers (43.8%), HR managers (41.8%), health and safety managers (32%), and environmental managers (20.1%) are the managers that usually have a role and responsibility in Thai business organizations for managing the environment. Managers from other sections (28.9%) involved in environmental management in Thai business organizations are: chief executive officers, administration managers, quality control managers, labour relations managers, office systems managers, or engineering managers. Almost all of the respondents (97.4%) agree that HR managers should participate in the organization's environmental management. Not many (10.3%) suggest that HR managers should be involved directly. The majority of the respondents (70.1%) think that HR managers should participate as a member of their organization's working team, which should be headed by a manager appointed specifically for the task. The following are excerpts from respondents' comments:

Environmental management should involve everyone in the organization, both managers and employees. It should not be seen as the responsibility of a single group of people. If all of us agree to participate in this issue, I think we will easily accomplish the task.
(Respondent number 15, in Thai)

Environmental management involves everybody in our organization.
(Respondent number 55, 62, 127, and 168; in Thai)

Our company must have high standards in environmental management. It is one of our business strategies to compete with other companies.

were very willing to participate in the organization's environmental management. Half of the respondents (50.5%) are moderately willing to participate in this area. Following are some comments by respondents:

I am not ready to take this responsibility because I have so much work to do already. There are many things that the HR department must do and I need to set the system. So, I do not think I have enough time to concentrate on doing the environmental job well.
(Respondent number 4; in Thai)

I have not been assigned by the company to have direct involvement in environmental management. However, if I were, I think that I can learn and be trained to do the job. (Respondent number 42; in Thai)

I cannot say whether or not I would like to do environmental management because I have no knowledge in this area.
(Respondent number 190, in Thai)

Discussion

Because the environment is clearly a critical issue in Thailand, it is inevitable for Thai business organizations to be cautious about their conduct regarding environmental safety. The research finding is that the performance of Thai business organizations in environmental management is moderate. The fact that many companies still pollute public areas indicates the urgent need to improve factors that affect the issue. The three important factors found in this research are: the company's knowledge and skills, the top executives' attitudes, and laws and regulations. It is the companies' social responsibility to take good care of the environment they are doing business in. But it is also the responsibility of the government and other public agencies. In addition to developing effective laws and regulations, the government may need to find ways to reach out to the business sector and to help business managers improve their knowledge and skills in environmental management. Moreover, the research indicates that a common motivator for Thai businesses to attend to environmental management is that it helps them gain access to international investment and markets, or enhances their marketing image. A possible approach to promoting environmental management in Thai business organizations may be for public or private agencies to create legal or economic measurements that would provide a competitive advantage for environmentally-concerned companies.

HR managers in Thailand are often assigned to participate in their organization's environmental management as one of the environmental team. Many HR managers in Thai business organizations themselves agree that they should be part of the environmental team, but they should not be given a leading role because their main obligation is to perform core HR functions, such as developing human resources for accomplishing their organizations' objectives. The leaders of Thai business organizations' environmental teams

should be managers assigned specifically to lead the environmental team; preferably the chief executive officer. HR managers, however, should participate as one of the team members because environmental issues are likely to increase in importance at both the national and international levels. Being included in the environmental team would allow HR managers to use their professional talents to help their organizations maintain a healthy environment and thereby fulfill their social responsibility.

HR managers could help their organization achieve its goals by utilizing their professional skills in communication, training and development, knowledge management, or cultural change. They would be able to: (a) provide needed information to all members of the organization; (b) maintain a consistent flow of relevant information between management and employees; and (c) build understanding and acceptance among employees of the organizations' environmental objectives. In order to perform the task effectively in environmental management, HR managers in Thai business organizations need to be capable. Many HR are not well-equipped for the task, technically or mentally. Therefore, HR managers should be encouraged to seek training, inside or outside the organization, to help them improve their task competency. Some of the main topics HR managers should be acquainted with include: their organizations' environmental data; the key environmental indicators of the industry; current laws and regulations; and international environmental standards in their industry.

Another interesting finding from this research is that nearly forty-seven percent of the respondents reported that their companies did nothing to pollute the environment. However, it should be noted that the number of respondents that reported this was close to the number of respondents that worked in companies in non-manufacturing industries, such as banking, finance, telecommunications, trading, retailing, or services (hospitals, tourism, transportation, entertainment, etc.). It would appear that many HR managers that work in such industries think that the activities of their companies have no

harmful effects on the environment. However, the annual report of the Pollution Control Department (PCD, 2005) suggests that, due to the huge and rapid expansion of urbanization in Thailand, solid and liquid waste from buildings occupied by those businesses, if not well-managed, poses a threat to the country's environment as well. Illegal or improper disposal of untreated wastes generated by these types of buildings was found by the PCD. Thus, HR managers that work in such industries could have a positive impact by being aware of the problem and by encouraging policies and non-formal procedures that could reduce or prevent excessive or unnecessary creation of waste, as well as a more proactive attitude to maintaining a safe and clean environment in the workplace.

Recommendations

This research suggests the following implications: (a) The importance to environmental management of improving key factors such as an organizations' skills and knowledge, attitudes of top management, and environmental laws and regulations; (b) Creating performance measurements or rewards that will motivate business organizations to achieve high environmental standards and thereby strengthen an organization's advantages; (c) The significance of having every line manager on an environmental management team headed by the top executive; and (d) Utilizing HR competency and functions to enhance an organizations' environmental teamwork.

Limitations

The findings of this research should be considered cautiously because of some possible limitations. Firstly, the respondents in this research are HR managers of companies which are bound by SET's regulations. Their answers

may be different from HR managers that work in companies that are not bound by standards required by SET. Secondly, the data about the companies' environmental performance were based on HR managers' opinions, not on hard data, because information was either unavailable to the public or not yet developed. Future research could be improved by using indicators that are related to companies' environmental performance as well as respondents' opinions.

Conclusions

Mass media reports indicate increasing concern about pollution in Thailand. Therefore, taking good care of the environment will gradually become as important to Thai business organizations as making profits. The task of environmental management in organizations involves all line managers, including HR. This research was not meant to demonstrate the shortcomings of HR managers in Thai business organizations on environmental management. On the contrary, the findings show that HR managers are increasingly being assigned to participate as a member of their organization's environmental team. Their participation will be valuable to the environmental team because they can use their professional strengths in human resource development for enhancing organizational goals. This research is one of the first studies on HR managers and environmental management in Thai business organizations. The findings of this research can be used in future studies which could contribute more knowledge to the role of HR managers, corporate social responsibility, and environmental management.

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