

SUSTAINABLE HRM PRACTICES FOR MANAGING GIG WORKERS IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

M. Keertana & C. Vijayvishnu Kumar

*Department of Commerce, Faculty of Science and Humanities,
SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Tamil Nadu, India*

Corresponding Author: keerthikowski1210@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.34293/blp.9789395659611.ch021>

Abstract

The rapid expansion of the gig economy has reshaped tourism employment, accelerating the use of short-term, task-based labour to respond to seasonality and volatile demand. Tourism organisations increasingly depend on gig workers – such as tour guides, translators, photographers, independent travel facilitators, freelance hospitality staff, and platform-mediated service providers (including ride-hailing and delivery) – to sustain visitor experiences while controlling labour costs. Yet this employment model often shifts risks to workers, creating persistent challenges related to income instability, limited job security, weak access to training, and inadequate social protection. These concerns became particularly visible during the COVID-19 shock, when many tourism gig workers experienced sudden income loss and limited safety nets.

This chapter argues that traditional HRM models, designed primarily for standard employment relationships, are insufficient for managing gig work in a way that supports service quality and long-term workforce resilience. Drawing on Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) principles and job design perspectives, the chapter explains how HR systems can be reoriented to balance operational flexibility with decent work expectations. It highlights key HRM challenges in gig tourism – algorithmic and rating-based performance pressures, inconsistent pay structures, limited development opportunities, weak voice mechanisms, and well-being risks – while recognising that gig work can also offer autonomy and entry points to tourism livelihoods.

The chapter's main contribution is a conceptual framework linking SHRM practices (fair and transparent compensation, inclusive talent management, continuous skill development, well-being protections, ethical leadership, and performance sustainability) to intermediate gig-worker outcomes (capability, engagement, and well-being). These outcomes strengthen workforce sustainability through improved retention intentions, service consistency, and organisational resilience, ultimately supporting sustainable tourism outcomes such as destination competitiveness, visitor satisfaction, and inclusive growth. The chapter concludes with managerial and policy implications, emphasising collaborative responsibilities among tourism firms, platforms, and regulators to embed fairness and sustainability in gig-based tourism work.

Keywords: *Decent work, Gig workers, Platform work, Sustainable HRM, Tourism employment, Workforce sustainability.*

1. Introduction

Tourism is among the world's most employment-intensive industries, providing livelihoods across accommodation, transport, food services, attractions, events, and destination services. At the same time, tourism employment has long been shaped by seasonality, high turnover, variable demand, and a large share of non-standard work arrangements. The expansion of the gig economy has intensified these dynamics by normalising work that is short-term, task-based, and often mediated by digital platforms or intermediaries. In tourism contexts, gig workers include freelance tour guides, event staff,

translators, content creators, photographers, independent travel facilitators, and platform-based service providers such as ride-hailing drivers who support tourist mobility.

For tourism organisations, gig arrangements offer flexibility and the ability to scale labour rapidly during peak demand. For workers, gig work can offer autonomy, multiple income streams, and entry into tourism livelihoods without formal contracts. However, gig work can also expose workers to income volatility, weak access to training, limited social protection, and unclear career progression—issues that directly affect workforce sustainability and service quality. These vulnerabilities were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when tourism demand collapsed and many gig workers experienced abrupt loss of income and limited institutional support (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2019; World Tourism Organization, 2021).

Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) provides a useful lens for rethinking gig workforce management. SHRM emphasises long-term value creation by integrating economic goals with social responsibility, ethical governance, and workforce well-being (Kramar, 2014; Guerri et al., 2018). Within tourism, workforce issues are not simply operational; they shape destination experience quality and competitiveness. Baum (2018) notes that employment and workforce considerations are often overlooked in tourism policy and planning despite their centrality to sustainable tourism outcomes.

This chapter examines how SHRM principles can be applied to gig work in tourism and proposes a conceptual framework linking SHRM practices to gig worker outcomes, workforce sustainability, and sustainable tourism outcomes. The central argument is that tourism organisations and platforms can preserve flexibility while improving gig work quality through HR practices that are transparent, inclusive, development-oriented, and ethically grounded.

2. Gig Economy and Employment Structure in Tourism

The gig economy refers to labour markets characterised by short-term engagements, on-demand work, and task-based contracting. In many contexts, gig work is enabled by digital platforms that match labour supply and demand at scale and govern work through algorithms, ratings, and dynamic pricing mechanisms. De Stefano (2016) describes the “just-in-time workforce” as a model that can increase labour commodification and weaken traditional labour protections if institutions do not adapt.

Tourism is particularly compatible with gig arrangements for several reasons. First, demand is volatile, influenced by seasons, events, weather, and macro shocks. Second, tourism services require local knowledge and “last-mile” delivery (guiding, mobility, translation, experience facilitation) that can be efficiently sourced through flexible labour. Third, tourism businesses often operate with thin margins and seek variable cost structures.

In practice, gig tourism work appears in at least three forms:

- a. **Platform-mediated gig work** (e.g., ride-hailing and app-based services used by tourists; platform-based experience or freelance marketplaces).

- b. **Freelance contracting** (e.g., independent guides, photographers, event staff hired per project).
- c. **Agency/intermediary-based casual work** (e.g., staffing networks supplying short-term labour to hotels and events).

While gig models can increase opportunities, they also shift risks to workers. Earnings are often tied to fluctuations in demand, platform policies, customer ratings, and unpaid waiting time. Workers may bear costs of tools, transport, insurance, and compliance. Moreover, gig workers are commonly classified as independent contractors, placing them outside many standard employment protections, including paid leave, retirement contributions, and employer-provided health benefits (ILO, 2019; Wood et al., 2019).

From a tourism sustainability perspective, these employment structures raise two concerns. First, insecure and low-quality work can undermine the attractiveness of tourism as a long-term career path, worsening turnover and skill shortages. Second, unstable labour conditions can reduce service quality consistency, affecting visitor satisfaction and destination reputation.

3. HRM Challenges in Managing Gig Workers

Managing gig workers differs from managing standard employees because employment relationships are often fragmented, mediated, and transient. Several HRM challenges are especially salient in tourism.

3.1 Income instability and pay transparency

Tourism gig workers commonly experience variability in earnings due to seasonality and demand shocks. In platform work, pay may also be shaped by dynamic pricing, algorithmic assignment, and incentive structures that workers do not fully understand. This unpredictability can harm perceived fairness and job satisfaction. In tourism, where service performance depends on emotional labour and customer interaction, stress linked to income uncertainty can indirectly affect service quality.

3.2 Social protection gaps and employment security

Many gig workers are excluded from traditional benefits such as paid leave, health insurance, and retirement plans. These gaps increase vulnerability during crises and can push workers into precarious coping strategies. The pandemic underscored these risks: when tourism stopped, many gig workers faced immediate income loss and limited safety nets (World Tourism Organization, 2021; ILO, 2019).

3.3 Skill development and service quality risks

Tourism service quality is highly human-dependent. Yet gig workers are often treated as interchangeable labour rather than investable human capital. Limited training access can reduce capability, weaken consistency, and compromise safety. This challenge is especially relevant where gig workers directly shape destination experiences (guides, mobility providers, experience hosts).

3.4 Engagement, voice, and organisational connection

Gig workers may feel disconnected from tourism organisations' culture and goals. They often lack voice mechanisms and grievance channels, especially in platform-mediated settings. Wood et al. (2019) emphasise how autonomy may coexist with strong control via ratings and platform governance, producing mixed experiences of freedom and constraint.

3.5 Algorithmic management, control, and well-being

Where platforms are involved, workers can experience performance pressures driven by customer ratings, surveillance, and automated penalties. Waldkirch et al. (2021) show how HR-like functions (selection, appraisal, rewards, and support) "take shape" on digital work platforms and are experienced by workers through algorithmic rules and crowd-based feedback. These features create distinctive well-being risks: anxiety about ratings, overwork during peak times, and uncertainty around deactivation or loss of visibility.

4. Conceptual Foundations of Sustainable Human Resource Management

SHRM extends beyond short-term performance objectives to consider long-term workforce capability, employee well-being, fairness, and ethical governance. It aims to align HR practices with sustainability principles – economic viability, social responsibility, and, where relevant, environmental responsibility (Kramar, 2014; Guerci et al., 2018).

In tourism, SHRM is particularly relevant because service quality depends heavily on people, and workforce instability directly affects organisational resilience. Baum (2018) argues that tourism planning and policy often neglect workforce considerations, despite the industry's reliance on human capability to deliver experiences and build destination competitiveness.

4.1 SHRM and decent work

SHRM is conceptually aligned with the ILO's decent work agenda, which emphasises productive work, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue. Gig and platform work intensify the importance of decent work considerations because many gig workers fall outside traditional labour protections (ILO, 2019). More recently, the ILO has continued to focus on decent work in the platform economy, reflecting the global policy relevance of this issue.

4.2 Job Demands–Resources perspective

A helpful complementary lens is Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) theory, which proposes that job demands (e.g., workload, emotional demands, insecurity) can strain well-being, while job resources (e.g., autonomy, support, development, fair rewards) foster motivation and engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In gig tourism, job demands often include uncertainty, customer pressure, and safety risks, while job resources can include flexibility, skills development, supportive communication, and fair pay structures. SHRM practices can be interpreted as organisational efforts to increase resources and reduce harmful demands, thereby improving well-being and performance sustainability.

5. Sustainable HRM Practices for Managing Gig Workers in Tourism

This section translates SHRM principles into practical HR domains that fit gig-based tourism work. The emphasis is not on converting gig work into standard employment in every case, but on raising work quality and sustainability within flexible arrangements.

5.1 Sustainable recruitment, selection, and onboarding

Even when work is short-term, quality onboarding matters. Tourism organisations can implement:

- **Transparent role communication:** clear task expectations, work hours, conduct standards, cancellation policies, and payment terms.
- **Ethical selection criteria:** non-discriminatory processes, transparent requirements, and accessible onboarding materials.
- **Values-based induction:** brief modules on destination ethics, visitor safety, inclusivity, and responsible tourism behaviours.

Transparent onboarding reduces misunderstandings, improves trust, and provides a baseline for service consistency.

5.2 Fair and transparent compensation systems

Fair pay is foundational for sustainability. SHRM-oriented pay practices for gig tourism can include:

- **Minimum earnings floors during high-commitment shifts** (where feasible).
- **Timely payments and transparent deductions.**
- **Pay clarity:** clear explanation of how rates are calculated (including platform fees or commissions).
- **Rewarding quality without over-penalising:** balancing customer feedback with context and worker voice.

These practices address a major driver of insecurity and perceived injustice in gig work (De Stefano, 2016; Wood et al., 2019).

5.3 Inclusive talent management and voice mechanisms

Gig workers often contribute repeatedly to the same destination or organisation. SHRM encourages inclusion through:

- **Access to communication channels:** updates, schedules, safety alerts, and service standards.
- **Grievance and appeal systems:** especially for disputes involving ratings, cancellations, or deactivation.
- **Representation opportunities:** periodic forums or feedback surveys where gig workers can influence service improvements.

Inclusion supports psychological safety and reduces the “outsider” experience that undermines engagement.

5.4 Continuous skill development and employability support

Tourism service quality depends on interpersonal and destination knowledge skills. Organisations can provide:

- **Micro-learning modules** (customer service, language basics, cultural sensitivity, local history).
- **Safety and compliance certifications** (first aid basics, responsible driving, harassment prevention).
- **Digital capability training** (platform literacy, dispute processes, financial planning basics).

Even limited, accessible training can strengthen capability and destination competitiveness over time.

5.5 Well-being and occupational safety initiatives

SHRM treats worker well-being as a core sustainability outcome. For gig tourism workers, relevant measures include:

- **Safety protocols** (risk reporting, emergency contacts, safe pickup zones, late-night safety support).
- **Reasonable workload expectations** and discouraging excessive hours driven by incentives.
- **Mental well-being support** via resources, peer support channels, or referral partnerships.
- **Anti-harassment policies** and enforcement mechanisms, especially for customer-facing roles.

Such practices reduce harmful job demands and improve retention intentions (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

5.6 Ethical leadership and accountability in gig work systems

Ethical leadership in gig systems is expressed through rule transparency, fair dispute handling, and consistent enforcement. It also includes monitoring unintended harms from algorithmic rules and ensuring that performance systems do not create unsafe behaviours (e.g., speeding to meet targets). Ethical leadership is especially critical where platforms mediate work and can impose opaque decisions (Waldkirch et al., 2021).

5.7 Performance sustainability rather than short-term optimisation

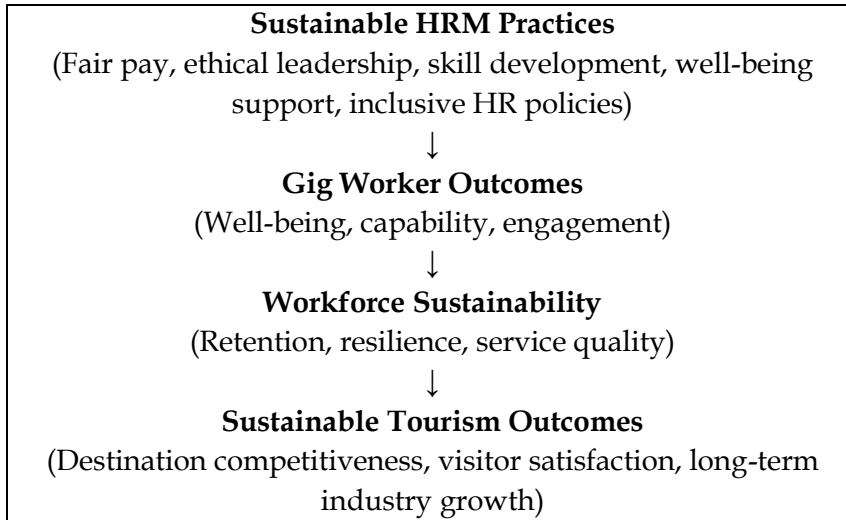
Tourism organisations can shift from purely output-focused control to performance sustainability by:

- Using **balanced scorecards** (service quality, safety compliance, professionalism) rather than ratings alone.
- Offering **coaching feedback** rather than punitive penalties as the default.
- Creating **repeat-engagement pathways** for high-quality gig workers (preferred pools, seasonal return offers).

These practices support service consistency and reduce churn.

6. Proposed Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework presents Sustainable HRM practices as the main inputs shaping gig worker outcomes. These practices influence gig workers' well-being, capability, and engagement, which then contribute to workforce sustainability. Workforce sustainability ultimately supports broader sustainable tourism results.



The framework assumes that SHRM practices increase job resources (e.g., fair rewards, training, support, voice) and reduce harmful job demands (e.g., insecurity, uncontrolled customer pressure), thereby improving worker motivation and resilience (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Over time, improved gig worker outcomes contribute to workforce sustainability, which supports broader tourism sustainability goals.

7. Managerial and Policy Implications

7.1 Implications for tourism organisations

Tourism managers can adopt “gig-inclusive HR” without necessarily changing contract status by:

1. **Standardising minimum fairness rules** (pay clarity, dispute handling, anti-harassment standards).
2. **Investing in micro-training** that improves service quality at low cost.
3. **Building repeat-work pathways** to reduce recruitment churn and preserve skills.
4. **Creating voice mechanisms** that allow gig workers to report risks and contribute suggestions.
5. **Auditing performance systems** (especially rating-driven rules) for unintended harms.

These actions can improve service reliability and reduce reputational risks.

7.2 Implications for digital platforms operating in tourism

Platforms can embed sustainability by:

- Improving transparency of pay calculations and rule changes.
- Ensuring due process in account suspensions and dispute resolution.
- Designing incentives that do not encourage unsafe or exploitative work patterns.
- Partnering with training providers and destination bodies to improve capability.

Waldkirch et al. (2021) illustrate that HR functions exist on platforms even when organisations claim workers are “independent”; therefore, platform design choices are effectively HR choices.

7.3 Policy implications

Policymakers can support decent work and workforce sustainability by:

- Establishing baseline labour standards for platform/gig work (fair pay, transparency, safety).
- Enabling **portable benefits** systems that follow workers across gigs.
- Supporting training subsidies for service sectors with high non-standard work.
- Encouraging social dialogue mechanisms for gig workers.

The continued international focus on decent work in the platform economy highlights the policy urgency of these areas (ILO, 2019).

8. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

Gig work has become a structural feature of tourism employment, offering flexibility for organisations and income opportunities for workers. However, without supportive HR and policy frameworks, gig work can generate insecurity, well-being risks, and skill underinvestment—outcomes that undermine workforce sustainability and service quality. This chapter argues that SHRM provides a practical and ethical pathway for strengthening gig work quality while retaining operational flexibility.

The proposed conceptual framework links SHRM practices to gig worker well-being, capability, and engagement, which in turn support workforce sustainability and sustainable tourism outcomes. Future research can (a) empirically test the framework across tourism segments (mobility, guiding, hospitality freelancing), (b) examine the role of algorithmic management and ratings in shaping well-being and retention, and (c) compare outcomes across regulatory environments and destination types. Mixed-method designs combining interviews with gig workers, platform data, and service quality metrics would be especially valuable for understanding how sustainability-oriented HR practices can be implemented effectively in real tourism contexts.

References

1. Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2017). Job demands–resources theory: Taking stock and looking forward. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 22*(3), 273–285.

2. Baum, T. (2018). Sustainable human resource management as a driver in tourism policy and planning: A serious sin of omission? *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 26(6), 873–889. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2017.1423318>
3. Baum, T., Cheung, C., Kong, H., Kralj, A., Mooney, S., Nguyen, T. H. H., ... Siow, M. L. (2020). *Sustainable human resource management in tourism: A handbook of theory and practice*. Springer.
4. De Stefano, V. (2016). The rise of the “just-in-time workforce”: On-demand work, crowdwork, and labour protection in the “gig-economy”. *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal*, 37(3), 471–504.
5. Eurofound. (2018). *Employment and working conditions of selected types of platform work*. Publications Office of the European Union.
6. Guerci, M., Decramer, A., Van Waeyenberg, T., & Aust, I. (2019). Moving beyond the link between HRM and economic performance: A study on the individual reactions of HR managers and professionals to sustainable HRM. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 160(3), 783–800. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3879-1>
7. International Labour Organization. (2019). *Organizing on-demand: Representation, voice, and collective bargaining in the gig economy* (Conditions of Work and Employment Series No. 94). ILO.
8. International Labour Organization. (2019). *Work for a brighter future: Global Commission on the Future of Work*. ILO.
9. International Labour Organization. (2021). *World employment and social outlook: The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work*. ILO.
10. International Labour Organization. (2025). *Realizing decent work in the platform economy* (Report V(2), International Labour Conference, 113th Session). ILO.
11. Kramar, R. (2014). Beyond strategic human resource management: Is sustainable human resource management the next approach? *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(8), 1069–1089. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2013.816863>
12. Kuhn, K. M., & Maleki, A. (2017). Micro-entrepreneurs, dependent contractors, and instaserfs: Understanding online labor platform workforces. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 31(3), 183–200.
13. Meijerink, J., & Keegan, A. (2019). Conceptualizing human resource management in the gig economy. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 34(4), 214–232.
14. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2019). *OECD employment outlook 2019: The future of work*. OECD Publishing.
15. Pfeffer, J. (2010). Building sustainable organizations: The human factor. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 24(1), 34–45.
16. United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2021). *Tourism and employment in a post-pandemic world* (Report). UNWTO.

17. Wood, A. J., Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., & Hjorth, I. (2019). Good gig, bad gig: Autonomy and algorithmic control in the global gig economy. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(1), 56-75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018785616>
18. World Bank. (2024). *The gig economy and the future of work: Global trends, challenges and opportunities* (Report). World Bank.
19. World Economic Forum. (2020). *The future of jobs report 2020*. World Economic Forum.