HUMAN RESOURCES IN INTERNATIONAL (TRADE) COMPANIES AND HUMAN CAPITAL CHARACTERISTICS: TÜRKİYE CASE

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Abstract

This study aims to analyses human resources characteristics and human capital dynamics for sustainable corporate success of 'international trade companies' with synthesized research. Research synthesizes results show that generalist CEO's, overseas experienced managers and employee training strategic importance. Research results of synthesis indicate that qualified work force increases environmental regulation compliance and increases internationalization acceleration. It is found that human capital investments reinforce institutional trust and technological transformation is a basic requirement for human resources integration to be sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords: Human Resources, Human Capital, Generalist CEO, Employee Training, International Trade.

JEL codes: F1, O15

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1. Introduction

International trade literature positions human capital not only as a factor of production but also as a strategic adaptation and signaling mechanism. International trade literature positions human capital not only as a factor of production but also as a strategic adaptation and signaling mechanism. In this study, which aims to identify the human resources characteristics and human capital dynamics for the sustainable corporate success of international trade companies, a synthesized research method will be used.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature

Following an examination of the theoretical framework, it was observed that the human resources (HR) and human capital (HC) dynamics that trigger corporate success in international trade companies are based on five main axes. Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT): In the global trade environment characterized by increasing uncertainty and geopolitical tensions, firm success depends less on resource ownership and more on the ability to rapidly reconfigure these resources. Human capital provides strategic resilience against external shocks (e.g., sanctions or digital fragmentation) through the "Adaptive Reconfiguration Capability" (ARC) (Wei et al., 2026). Signaling Theory, on the other hand in international markets where information asymmetry is high, HR characteristics serve as a quality signal for external stakeholders. The companies' orientation towards artificial intelligence (AI) and their qualified management staff are perceived by suppliers as a "evolutionary suitability" signal, which facilitates access to commercial credit (Guan et al., 2026). Human Capital Theory and Absorptive Capacity: Investments individuals make in their own skills (training) increase organizational efficiency. Skilled labor enables the firm to respond more effectively to regulatory signals such as emission reduction targets and technological transformation by enhancing its capacity to identify, absorb and apply external information (absorptive capacity) (Andreou et al., 2026; Galbreath et al., 2026). Knowledge-Based View (KBV): Knowledge is the most fundamental production resource. The key to success in international trade lies in integrating the tacit knowledge embedded in human capital into corporate processes. Strategic changes such as the circular economy require the evolution of existing knowledge structures (Galbreath et al., 2026). Social Capital and Collective Action, Trust, reciprocity, and shared norms reduce monitoring costs and accelerate information flow, especially in export-oriented organizations. This supports sustainability by transforming institutional trust into a financial resource (trade credit) (Rajak et al., 2026).

2.1 Generalist CEOs: Leadership Characteristics

The leadership profile plays a critical role in the success of strategic decisions in international trade companies. Generalist CEOs are more effective at integrating complex technologies like artificial intelligence into business because they have extensive experience in different industries and functional areas (production, HR, marketing, finance, etc.). The broad cognitive schemas of these leaders inspire confidence among external stakeholders, thereby expanding commercial credit opportunities. According to the sources, a generalist CEO is a senior manager who possesses broad general management knowledge and skills that are not tied to a single industry, company, or area of expertise (Guan et al., 2026). These managers have gained experience in different business areas and disciplines rather than specializing in a specific function throughout their careers (Guan et al., 2026). Guan et al., 2026 defines the fundamental characteristics and roles of generalist CEOs in the modern business world as first of

all their diverse experience, generalist CEOs have a broad pool of experience across nine different functional categories, including production, R&D, design, human resources, management, marketing, finance, accounting, and law. The broader the range of experience, the higher the manager's "generalist" score. Secondly broad cognitive schemas, they possess broader cognitive schemas and mental models compared to expert CEOs. This cognitive breadth gives them a significant advantage when making complex strategic decisions and coordinating interactions between different departments. Technological Adaptation and AI Integration, where generalist CEOs can better analyze how rapidly evolving and uncertain technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) can be supported with business resources. Their Extensive Professional Networks, they generally have more comprehensive and diverse professional networks. These networks help overcome corporate barriers by facilitating access to the expertise, resources, and knowledge needed during technological transformation processes. External Stakeholder Trust and Credit Relations: Generalist leaders, with their broad vision and versatile management skills, can inspire greater trust among external stakeholders (e.g., suppliers). Research shows that firms managed by generalist CEOs with an AI orientation can obtain trade credit more easily from their suppliers. Generalist CEOs represent a leadership profile characterized by their ability to manage complex systems, interpret cross-functional applications, and provide strategic flexibility during periods of uncertainty.

Another important factor in companies' internationalization success is managers with foreign backgrounds. Directors with overseas education or work experience are better able to analyze the dynamics of international markets and serve the function of the company's "global showcase" by minimizing cultural conflicts. This type of internal connection lowers the threshold for companies to enter foreign markets. The tendency of firms to prefer generalist CEOs stems from the strategic advantages these leaders possess. Generalist CEOs are more successful than specialized leaders in managing complex technologies, i.e., in analyzing how general-purpose, rapidly evolving, and uncertain technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) can be integrated with business resources (Guan et al., 2026). External stakeholder trust is enhanced when leaders with extensive career histories signal a stronger "evolutionary fitness signal" to suppliers, thereby increasing the firm’s trade credit facilities. These managers also possess cognitive flexibility, broader cognitive schemas, mental models, and various professional networks that are not tied to a specific industry. In other words, the prevalence of the generalist CEO profile in publicly traded companies is particularly prominent as a strategic necessity during periods of increasing technological transformation and demand for corporate transparency. In Türkiye, this profile is particularly evident in top management cadres who embrace the digitalization agenda and delve deep into different departments (PwC Türkiye, 2026; Güler, 2020).

2.2 Skilled Workforce and Human Capital Capacity

The ability of companies to respond to external shocks and regulatory changes (e.g., carbon emission trading systems) depends directly on their human capital capacities. The presence of qualified employees and competent senior managers facilitates the adoption of new technologies and the optimization of production processes by increasing the firm's "absorptive capacity". Education level is also a factor that stimulates pro-environmental behavior in international trade and trade in renewable energy products. A highly educated workforce enhances a country's international competitiveness by fostering innovation. For example, the fact that workers in high-tech

fields such as the semiconductor industry generally hold master's and doctoral degrees is directly related to the strategic complexity of the sector.

2.3 Employee Training and Professionalization

Employee training is the strongest predictor of social sustainability and financial success. Training investments not only increase operational efficiency but also strengthen internal trust by improving workplace safety standards and ethical behavior culture. These investments in human capital drive revenue growth by enabling the implementation of complex value-added strategies.

2.4 Regional Development Areas and Talent Attraction

Free trade zones and e-commerce pilot zones offer corporate environments that encourage the convergence of highly qualified talent. The tax incentives and subsidies in these regions provide the necessary intellectual support for companies to emerge on the international stage by attracting high-level overseas talent. Furthermore, from the perspective of gender diversity, it is observed that most foreign female managers serving on Turkish boards of directors (13 out of 14 managers) were appointed after 2011 (Şahin et al., 2018; Güler, 2020). This situation indicates that international companies tend to ensure cultural integration in Turkey and increase diversity in line with corporate governance principles (Şahin et al., 2018).

2.5 The Türkiye Case

In the limited information available about Türkiye, a study by Lv et al. (2026) examining the impact of digital finance on renewable energy trading states that, Turkey is included in the list of countries analyzed. This study found that digital finance increases commercial efficiency at the global level. The concept of the "Generalist CEO" and their ability to convert AI investments into trust (Guan et al., 2026), as presented in the literature, offer a universal theoretical framework that can also be applied to publicly traded companies in Turkey.

When the management structures of international and foreign-capitalized companies in Turkey are examined, the presence of foreign nationals (international) CEOs and senior managers in the top management emerges as a prominent trend (Alayoğlu, 2005; Balıkçı, 2024). Türkiye's integration into the global economic order and the increase in foreign investments have spurred the spread of this leadership model (Alayoğlu, 2005). Examples of international managers in foreign companies operating in Türkiye across different sectors are as follows (Balıkçı, 2024).

1. Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) and Food. In this sector, international names play critical roles in adapting global standards to the local market. Some prominent names include:

   Coca-Cola İçecek: Zoran Bogdanovic (CEO).

   Henkel Türkiye: Michael Holtschmit (CEO).

   PepsiCo Türkiye: Sanjay K. Gupta (CEO).

   Danone Türkiye: Olivier Blanchard (CEO).

   Nestle Türkiye: Jürgen M. (CEO).

2. Technology and Digital Platforms, International managers leading digital transformation processes in the technology world are bringing the global technology vision to Türkiye operations:

   Google Türkiye: Dustin C. (CEO).

   Microsoft Türkiye: Tarek M. (CEO).

   Orange Türkiye: Tomasz Nowak (CEO).

   HCL Technologies Türkiye: Shailendra B. (CEO).

3. The influence of foreign leaders is felt in technical expertise and operational excellence in the automotive and industrial sectors:

   Bosch Türkiye: Dr. Andreas N. (CEO).

   Mercedes-Benz Türk: Johannes B. (CEO).

   Daimler AG Türkiye: Benedikt Gierse (CEO).

   BASF Türkiye: Matthias Schulz (CEO).

   Škoda Türkiye: Tomáš Uher (CEO).

4. Finance and Strategic Consulting The banking and finance sector, especially with the presence of foreign-capital banks, is one of the areas where this trend is most intensely observed (Balıkçı, 2024).

   Deutsche Bank Türkiye: Michael B. (CEO).

   HSBC Türkiye: Richard A. (CEO).

   PwC Türkiye: Michael T. (CEO).

   McKinsey & Company Türkiye: John M. (CEO).

5. Retail and Logistics Retail and logistics giants rely on international experience to manage global supply chain networks:

   IKEA Türkiye: Jens Schuette (CEO).

   Metro Cash & Carry Türkiye: Chris C. (CEO).

   Metro Türkiye: Marion H. (CEO).

   DHL Türkiye: Axel M. (CEO).

3. Methodology

This study employs a Systematic Narrative Review methodology, synthesizing current articles indexed in SSCI and Scopus in the fields of international trade and corporate strategy, followed with Türkiye case, international companies CEO information.

4. Findings

The Strategic Role of Generalist CEOs was found that generalist leaders with experience in nine different functional areas (production, HR, marketing, finance, etc.) were more successful than specialist CEOs in integrating complex technologies such as AI into business processes. These leaders' broad cognitive schemas enhance trust among external stakeholders, thereby increasing commercial credit opportunities (Guan et al., 2026). The Impact of Employee Training not only increases operational efficiency but are also the strongest predictors of corporate culture and social sustainability. A trained workforce helps companies overcome green trade barriers by encouraging pro-environmental behaviors (Andreou et al., 2026; Rajak et al., 2026). Human Capital and Corporate Sustainability is where human capital capacity directly determines firms' ability to comply with emission reduction regulations. A robust skills development system ensures the correct interpretation of regulatory signals and the implementation of sustainable growth strategies (Andreou et al., 2026). Talent Attraction and Internationalization is another factor in free trade zones and cross-border e-commerce pilot zones reduce the threshold for companies to enter international markets and accelerate internationalization by attracting high-level overseas talent and directors with foreign backgrounds through institutional openness Yang et al., 2026).

5. Research Gap

Neglect of Dynamic Processes, that is the most existing studies rely on cross-sectional data; there is a need for longitudinal studies on how human capital competencies are built over time and how they evolve during foreign trade shocks. SME-Focused Data Constraint is another area for research, as the literature largely focuses on publicly listed companies; a lack of longitudinal data on the unique HR challenges faced by SMEs and the long-term human capital building is noted (Yang et al., 2026). Lastly, the Psychological Factors, more empirical evidence is needed on the "technological anxiety" experienced by employees during the algorithmic management and artificial intelligence integration process and its impact on commercial productivity.

6. Discussion

The review shows that success in international trade companies is shifting from physical assets to "human capital Dynamics". However, there are some critical areas of debate: managerial depth versus technical expertise, the management of uncertain technologies like AI, and the need for integrative leadership skills (Generalist CEO) rather than deep technical skills. Economic rationality vs. technological anxiety Although the "black box" nature of AI can create technological anxiety among employees, it is observed that economic rationality suppresses these anxieties and builds trust when corporate transparency is ensured (Guan et al., 2026).

7. Conclusion

In the international trade world, the success of companies depends more on the human resources that manage these assets and adapt them to global changes, rather than on the physical assets they possess. Generalist leadership, overseas experience and continuous training are "invisible strategic assets" that enable a company to gain trust in international markets and achieve sustainable growth. Future research should examine in great depth the long-term effects of digital transformation and artificial intelligence on HR processes.

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