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LEADER WELLBEING WITHIN REMOTE WORK THROUGH SUSTAINABLE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Following the remote work transition, leaders faced magnified responsibilities imposing wellbeing vulnerabilities. Through a qualitative Design-Based Research approach, composed of two studies, the researcher explored how sustainable Human Resource Management may support leaders' wellbeing within remote work. Study 1 unveils which sustainable Human Resource Management practices support leader wellbeing, while reinstating the industry wide problem: leader wellbeing negligence. Study 2 investigates the effectiveness of three interventions on leader wellbeing in the remote environment by using before-after measurements and evaluating the solution blueprint. The findings suggest a degree of leader negligence; however, amplify the potential to support wellbeing though wellbeing, learning and development and work-life balance practices. By completing the Design-Based Research cycle, the researcher appraised and improved the solution blueprint and the implementation process. Despite perceived wellbeing improvements being minimal, this research initiated a crucial conversation amongst leaders, demonstrating the importance of wellbeing and need for systematic change within organisations.

Key Words: Sustainable HRM, Leader Wellbeing, Remote Work, Talent Management

GLOSSARY

Leader wellbeing

'The overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work'

(Grant, Christianson and Price, 2007: p.52)

Remote work

'Organisational work performed outside of the normal organisational confines of space and time'

(Olson, 1983: p.182)

Sustainable HRM

'The pattern of planned or emerging HR strategies and practices intended to enable the achievement of financial, social and ecological goals while simultaneously reproducing the HR base over a long term'

(Kramar, 2014: p.1084)

Work-Life Balance

'The extent to which an individual is engaged in – and equally satisfied with – his or her work role and family role ...'

(Greenhaus, Collins and Shaw, 2003: p.513)

ACRONYMS

HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resource Management
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
UN	United Nations

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INTRODUCTION

Leader wellbeing remains a pressing matter for organisations who neglect to recognise its repercussions (Wirtz, Rigotti, Otto and Loeb, 2017). The nature of wellbeing is vital for any human; it is an essential factor in the quality of life (ODPHP, 2020) and is a *universal* human right (WTO, 2020). In today's fast-changing environment, organisations strive to facilitate wellbeing (Ponting, 2020); however, a clear focus remains on the mass employees, neglecting leaders (Roche, 2013). Leaders are best identified by their strong interpersonal skills, social networking capabilities, confidence and empathy (Judge and Piccolo, 2004; Ferris et al., 2005). Leadership stems from a formal or informal context (Van de Mieroop, Clifton and Verhelst, 2020), where formal leaders hold '*a position of leadership*' (Pielstick, 2000, p.100). However, the association with hierarchical positioning dwindles (Oedzes, Van der Vegt, Rink, 2019), enabling individuals to be perceived as leaders irrespectively of their position (Pielstick, 2000).

External parties often perceive leaders as dynamic, sensitive, intelligent and motivated, which are key attributes that transmit strength and wellbeing (Epitropaki and Martin, 2005). Barling and Cloutier (2017) unveil that leaders are considered responsible for wellbeing, contributing to the oversight in academic literature. Brazeau, Frenzel and Prescot (2020) support this notion, believing leadership predominantly promotes wellbeing. However, insufficient wellbeing levels causes resource depletion (mental and physical energy) triggering defective decision making (Bernerth and Hirschfeld, 2016), drastic changes in leader behaviour and interaction (Byrne et al., 2014), and the risk of burnout (Guillen-Royo, 2016; Wirtz et al., 2017). In 2020 alone, 76% of the Gallup study participants experienced some form of work burnout (Wigert, 2020). The consequences of leader wellbeing negligence constitute an industry-wide problem. Fisher (2002) proposes work-life balance adjustments, while Panaccio, Donia, Saint-Michel and Liden (2015) recommend scanning the work environment to stimulate idyllic conditions. Nonetheless, it is vital to further investigate sustainable leader wellbeing solutions.

The United Nations (UN) recognises that wellbeing establishes sustainable development; thus, 'Good Health and Wellbeing' has been identified as the third Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for 2030 (UN, 2020). With changing work conditions, it has become increasingly prevalent to designate attention towards leader wellbeing (Barling and Cloutier, 2017). After all, we must recognise that leaders are a viable source of sustainable competitive advantages when talent is managed correctly (Avedon and Scholes, 2009; Madi and Almsafir, 2014; Toor and Ofori, 2010). Understanding how to sustain their attributes is of the essence when wishing to achieve organisational success (Rabbi, Ahad, Kousar and Ali, 2015). Therefore, it remains crucial to preserve the talents' experience and functioning at work to support their wellbeing (McLellan, 2017) and an organisation's competitive edge (Avedon and Scholes, 2009). As without it, detrimental effects may spill over to the workforce productivity (Parry and Sherman, 2015) imposing unfavourable influences on SDG eight 'Decent Work and Economic Growth' (UN, 2020).

The global health crisis has wounded the progression of the UN SDGs yet exemplifies its importance. COVID-19 initiated a chain of drastic measures, where 88% of global organisations have transitioned towards remote work (Baker, 2020). The term is defined as '*organisational work performed outside of the normal organisational confines of space and time*' (Olson, 1983, p.182). Work is revolutionising, where technological advances initiate continuous shifts in the international economy (Perez, 1983; Howells, 2005). However, according to a recent study, 25% of employees believe that their organisation have effectively developed digital leaders, where only 30% of future leaders are adequately trained to meet the evolving changes (Zuckerman, 2020).

These cascading changes put leaders under immense pressure, who must facilitate a smooth transition to remote work, tarnishing their wellbeing. Prior to the pandemic, remote work was considered optional (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). Organisations pose it as an adaptation to meet the needs of their employees and provide flexibility (Wilson, Sofroniou, Beaven, Mary-Grillings and Perkins, 2016). However, remote work has ramifications that, due to personal choice, have previously been minimised. Now, consequences of a blurred work-life balance and work exhaustion are magnified due to the ongoing pandemic (Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai and Bendz, 2020). Organisations prioritise the safety of their workforce, by implementing remote work, but fail to recognise its long-term repercussions on leader wellbeing.

Inadvertently Human Resource Management (HRM) absolved themselves from their core responsibility of talent management: taking care of their employees. A shift towards workforce performance and talent acquisition absorbs the majority of their attention (Vanhala and Tuomi, 2006; Guest, 2017), whereby, the demands for a sustainable perspective within HRM have intensified (Ehnert, Matthews and Muller-Camen 2020). Sustainable HRM can be defined as:

> '*the pattern of planned or emerging Human Resource (HR) strategies and practices intended to enable the achievement of financial, social and ecological goals while simultaneously reproducing the HR base over a long term*'. *(Kramar, 2014, p.1084)*

Ehnert and Harry (2012) emphasise the importance of incorporating human regeneration and development into sustainable HRM practices, while Fisher (2002) further elaborates on implementing work-life balance strategies to truly preserve human and social capital. Current practices do exist to sustain employee wellbeing; however, one must consider that one size does not fit all, especially for leaders who have diverse experiences and are responsible for greater complexity.

Furthermore, leader wellbeing is dynamic and multidimensional, where a change in one variable has altering influences on another (Baptiste, 2008). COVID-19 heightened this vulnerability, where the challenges of remote work exceed the natural domain of responsibilities leaders typically face. Leaders are juggling their personal and work responsibilities, while also ensuring their employees' wellbeing. Often employees share their hardships, and leaders are expected to take it in, without considering the heavy burden placed or emotional impact (Pickering, 2021). A study highlights that 42% of the participants experience competing priorities, while 67% have interruptions during work (Gallup, 2020). It is unfeasible for leaders to manage these aspects while ensuring their wellbeing; therefore, sustainable HRM must contribute to facilitating positive qualities of leaders' experiences and functioning at work, while ensuring long-term sustainable remote work strategies (Makarius, Larson and Vroman, 2021).

Wellbeing is a prerequisite towards the quality of life, this includes the experiences leaders have within their work environments (Rao and Min, 2018). Leader wellbeing, learning and development, and work-life balance are key sustainable HRM practices identified by relevant academics. It is imperative that HRM actively mediates between organisational performance and wellbeing by assessing leader work conditions to provide sustainable environments (Kalliath and Kalliath, 2012). Leaders must also be given the opportunity to develop their competencies, as it prepares and supports them for their roles (Wikhamn, 2019; Spreitzer, 1995). The 2019 Global Human Capital Trends survey indicates that 80% identify leadership as a high priority; however, only 41% feel that their organisations are '*ready to fulfil their leadership requirements*' (Volini et al., 2019, p.1), thus emphasising the need to adjust development programs. Lastly, remote work has imposed negative implications on leaders' work-life balance; the organisation must identify how to maintain a balance (Zaugg, Blum and Thom, 2001).

This research, which is composed of two studies, investigates a group of leaders, within a case study, and how they have been fairing within the remote environment. Study 1 aims to unveil how sustainable HRM may contribute towards their wellbeing by exploring their perception of wellbeing, the types of learning and development they have undergone, and evaluating their work-life balance. Furthermore, Study 1 provides an opportunity to reconfirm the industry wide problem, source the causes and consequences of leader wellbeing negligence, and find a possible sustainable HRM solution based on the propositions through a qualitative exploration. The designed solution blueprint will be implemented within the case study, where Study 2 will explore and evaluate how the solution blueprint, composed of three sustainable HRM interventions, has influenced the experimental and control groups' leader wellbeing in the remote environment. The evaluation will appraise the implementation process and solution blueprint, allowing the researcher to integrate the leaders' feedback and outcomes to make corrective adjustments to the solution blueprint.

This research is valuable for numerous stakeholders; the findings and knowledge primarily benefit leaders and future leaders. The identified solution will help improve their wellbeing, which positively contributes to the quality of life and experiences. Additionally, these positive effects enable leaders to perform at higher levels within sustainable remote work environments. Secondly, this achievement directly influences employee's wellbeing, where flourishing environments and positive leader-employee relationships are established. Finally, when leader and employee wellbeing are maintained, organisations may benefit from positive outcomes in productivity, corporate culture and brand reputations.

Drawn upon the discussion, the aim of this research will be to gain an understanding of the relationship between the remote work environment and leader wellbeing, while exploring how sustainable HRM practices are associated. The conceptual model (Figure 1) will provide guidance and a foundation for the literature review, in order to achieve a concrete analysis and propositions. Thus, the research question has been derived:

How may sustainable Human Resource Management facilitate the wellbeing of leaders working in a remote environment?

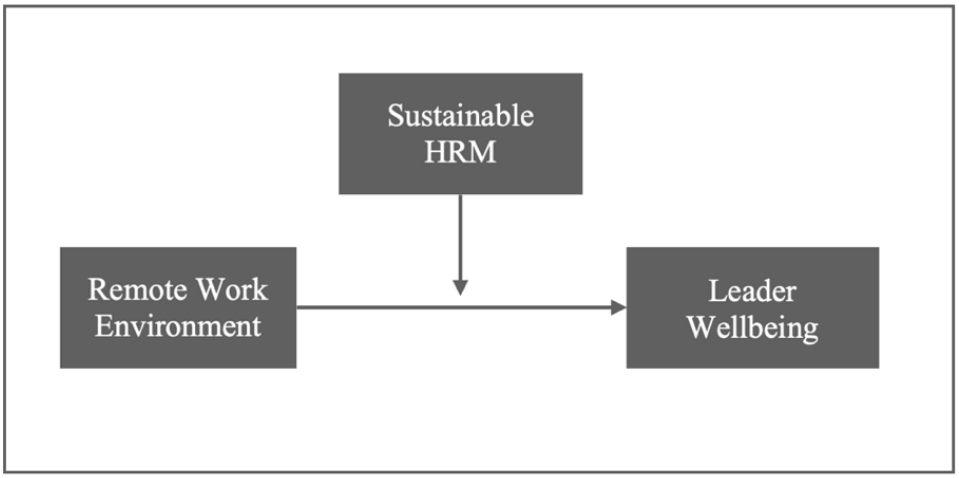

Figure 1. Remote Work Leader Wellbeing Framework

LITERATURE REVIEW

The complexity of Leader Wellbeing

When investigating leader wellbeing, academic articles are scarce; the topic is often overlooked (Bernerth and Hirschfeld, 2016). However, while conceptualising this matter, employee or work wellbeing are considered coinciding terms (Beamish, 2019). Extensive literature has been consulted to unearth the meaning; however, countless definitions have yet to provide a complete mutual understanding. Grant, Christianson and Price (2007, p.52) build upon Warr's (1987) definition of work wellbeing as '*the overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work*'. They highlight psychological, physical and social functions as three main components: creating a depth of dimensions to the definition. Comparably, Cartwright and Cooper (2009) interpret it as the positive physical, mental and emotional state; while Currie (2003) reiterates that positive work experiences are conducive to wellbeing. 'Psychological', 'mental', and 'emotional' are interchangeable terms, embracing the commonalities and multidimensional traits within the academics' definitions.

However, wellbeing is dynamic; changing environments have a significant influence. Baptiste (2008) and Azarbouyeh and Naini (2014) explore the relationship of wellbeing and the quality of life; a stress-free and physically safe environment contribute to wellbeing. Similarly, Bakke (2005) explores conditional environments as facilitating factors. The work environment remains relevant as its constructs determine a positive or negative outcome. According to Guest and Conway (2004), six elements of a positive environment include manageable workload, personal control over a job, organisational support, positive work relations, a clear role and lastly a sense of control of involvement in organisational changes. However, the multidimensional characteristics of wellbeing must not be undermined; a change in one dimension may irrespectively inflict unintended consequences on another (Grant et al., 2007).

The outcome of leader wellbeing goes beyond environmental conditions. Both the chosen leadership- and-life balance of a leader have influencing effects (Panaccio, Donia, Saint-Michel and Liden, 2015; Järlström, Saru and Vanhala, 2018). Greenhouse, Collins and Shaw (2003, p.513) define work-life balance as '*the extent to which an individual is - and equally satisfied with his or her work role and family role*'. A distinctive balance provides positive attitudes and behaviours, contributing to increased wellbeing and quality of life (Fisher, 2002). Contrarily, an imbalance increases stress (Burke, 1988), reduces job and life satisfaction (Allen, Herst, Bruck and Sutton, 2000), and consequently decreases wellbeing and quality of life (Grant-Vallone and Donaldson, 2001).

Furthermore, Kaluza, Boer, Buengeler and van Dick (2020) highlight that destructive leadership types negatively contribute towards leader wellbeing, when compared to passive styles. Similarly, Panaccio et al., (2015) elaborate that over time, a service leadership approach presents detrimental effects on wellbeing. Servant leaders become emotionally draining by putting the needs of others before their own (Zhang, Zheng, Zhang, Xu, Lui and Chen, 2019), which may become a commonality when working remotely.

The Evolution of Remote Work

Businesses are going against societal norms and offering flexible work solutions to meet their employee's needs (Goodstein, 1994; Ingram and Simons, 1995). Messenger and Gschwind (2016) note technological evolutions enable stable networks for remote connectivity. Coincidingly, an economic shift towards the knowledge economy increased intangible economic assets (Drucker, 1959; Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan, 2001), which Felstead and Henseke (2017, p.197) describe as *'knowledge creation becoming less spatially bound'*. Additionally, the flexible firm, associated with adaptable work schedules and locations, enables remote work (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010).

However, Purvanova (2014) claims that organisations choose this approach to reduce costs and utilise its unique flexibility, while Bailyn, Rayman, Bengtsen, Carré and Tierney (2001) elaborate that the workforce displays interest due to the ability to equalise their work-life balance. Similar to flexible firms, organisational adaptations entail changes within traditional working conditions (Goodstein, 1994; Ingram and Simons, 1995), where feminisation has significantly contributed towards organisations providing adaptations, by meeting employees' personal and domestic circumstances (Wilson et al., 2016; Felstead and Henseke, 2017). In 2020, the global pandemic triggered most non-essential organisations to convert to remote work (Bartik, Cullen, Glaeser, Luca and Stanton, 2020).

Countless academics have examined the implications; however, for the most part, this has been within the context that individuals sought remote work out (Bailyn et al., 2001). Back in 1985, Elling elaborates that remote work offers the possibility to integrate the work and professional life, she saw this as an opportunity to both save energy and space. Westfall (1998) shares a similar view, that costs are significantly reduced. More recently, academics identified work exhaustion (Golden, 2006), isolation (Cooper and Kurland, 2002), lack of organisational identification (Thatcher and Zhu, 2006; Wiesenfeld et al., 2001) and blurred work-home boundaries (Mirchandani, 2000; Crosbie and Moore, 2004; Marsh and Musson, 2008) as destructive outcomes.

Contrarily, increased productivity and job satisfaction is associated with remote work (Kalliath and Kalliath, 2012; Wheatley, 2012); however, the academics do not disclose which specific work agreements were made. With COVID-19, many individuals have been forced to work from home, without having the organisation consider their domestic or personal circumstances (Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai and Bendz, 2020). Parents struggle to balance their responsibilities between work and their children; stress and fear levels increased tremendously, while time management and planning became difficult to achieve (Garbe, Ogurlu, Logan and Cook, 2020). Remote work may seem ideal in practice, but during uncertain circumstances, external factors may aggravate adverse consequences. Identifying sustainable practices for remote work is crucial.

Sustainable HRM: The Optimal Solution?

The concept of sustainable HRM is in its infancy; thus its definition remains ambiguous (Wikhamn, 2019). Inherently, Bhushan and MacKenzie (1992) elaborate that sustainable HRM tackles both societal and ecological issues, while Rainey (2010) explains that it involves altering organisational processes through environmentally sustainable solutions. Similarly, Dyllick's and Hockerts' (2002) interpretation focuses on the economic, social and ecological aspects. More concretely, Kramar (2014, p.1084) emphasises that sustainable HRM incorporates strategies and practices which aim to achieve *'financial, social and ecological goals while simultaneously reproducing the HR base over a long term'*. Through a detailed focus on sustaining human capital, organisational triple bottom lines (people, planet and profit) may be achieved.

However, academic literature neglects to specify sustainable HRM practices. Chams and García-Blandón (2019) merely hint control of employee competencies and resource consumption. Whereas, Ehnert and Harry (2012, p.227), summarise that a '*focus on human regeneration, health and development is where sustainable work systems has informed and overlaps within the works on sustainable HRM*'. Accordingly, HRM is considered responsible for wellbeing (Van De Voorde, Paauwe and Van Veldhoven 2012), learning and development (Ehnert and Harry, 2012), and work-life balance (Mazur, 2015) of their workforce, specifically their leaders. These elements are considered due to their prevalence in the literature.

HRM is accountable for leader wellbeing (Van De Voorde et al., 2012); ideally, HRM comprehends it's multidimensional characteristics, where conceptual awareness and active contribution deems exemplar (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). However, an increased focus on leader performance and financial measures distracts them from their primary responsibility towards wellbeing (Vanhala and Tuomi, 2006; Guest, 2017). Grawitch, Gottschalk and Munz (2006) argue that the mediation between the two is possible and critical towards facilitating positive performance. Alternatively, Kalliath and Kalliath (2012) state that environmental factors, beyond workplace performance, negatively influence wellbeing, and thus job and organisational performance.

The diverged academic views, nevertheless, reiterate the importance of assessing the work conditions, more specifically the leaders' remote environments, to support positive outcomes. There cannot be a trade-off between organisational performance and wellbeing. Organisations should seek indirect paths towards performance improvements that simultaneously provide a significant positive effect on wellbeing (Schmidt, Welch and Wilson, 2000; Williams, 1994). Hereby, we propose:

Proposition 1: *Wellbeing practices support leader wellbeing in remote environments.*

Moreover, development falls under the category of sustainable HRM practices that enable imperishable work systems within organisations (Ehnert, 2009). Wikhamn (2019) identifies learning and development as an essential element when contributing to '*an organisation's social sustainability and responsibility profile*' (p.103). According to Spreitzer (1995) competence development empowers the individuals, providing preparation and support for their role. Leaders too are within this scope; leader development relates to an organisation's human capital, while leadership development to their social capital (Day, 2001).

Correspondingly, Suutari (2002) recognises the urge to develop leaders; he explores extensive literature to understand which competencies and actions contribute towards effective development. Now more than ever, leaders require specific expertise on how to approach uncertain circumstance that may occur within virtual work environments. Dalakoura (2010) elaborates that leadership development creates an integrated network of multiple leaders, building a sustainable leader structure within organisations, while leader development improves and expands competencies of individual leaders. She emphasises that both initiatives must be integrated within everyday practices to enhance effective development at all levels.

According to Keeman, Näswall, Malinen and Kuntz (2017) learning and development facilitates wellbeing. Continuous learning stimulates self-esteem, promotes an active life and encourages social interactions, which Feinstein and Hammond (2007) argue has positive effects. A recent study indicated that evidence-based learning interventions support wellbeing at larger scales (Yaden, Claydon, Bathgate, Platt and Santos, 2021).

Hereby, we propose:

Proposition 2: *Learning and development practices support leader wellbeing in remote environments.*

Furthermore, a growing focus returns to work-life balance; Ehnert, Harry and Zink (2013) consider it to be an essential practice within sustainable HRM. Similarly, Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė (2018) identify work-life balance as a key characteristic, under the category of 'care of employees', while Zaugg, Blum and Thom (2001) believe the balance must be an organisational objective. According to Song and Goa (2020), blurred lines of remote work may trigger work-life conflict, imposing consequences on leader wellbeing. Felstead, Jewson, Phizacklea and Walters (2002, p.65) claim that '*when working at home is a requirement ... it does not contribute to work-life balance*', supporting the aforementioned notion.

Likewise, Kelliher and Anderson (2010) elaborate that work intensification has become a consequence for leaders who fail to segregate their professional and personal lives when working virtually, hinting the influences remote work has on the work-life balance. Thus, organisational proactiveness is imperative, as informational, financial, time-related and direct support for leaders enable the achievement of work-life balance (Hoeppe, 2014). Herewith, we propose:

Proposition 3: *Work-life balance practices support leader wellbeing in remote environments.*

Drawn upon the literature review, the interlinking relations between leader wellbeing, remote work and sustainable HRM are apparent. Figure 2. illustrates the adapted conceptual framework.

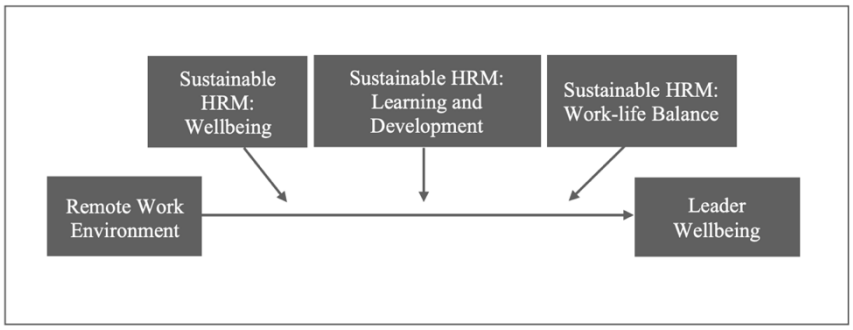

Figure 2. Remote Work Leader Wellbeing Framework – second version

METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy, Approach and Strategy

For this research, interpretivism, a philosophical stance linked to epistemology (Hiller, 2016) was the main chosen research branch (illustrated in Figure 3). Epistemology entails '*how phenomena [can] come to be known*' (Giacomini, 2010: p.131), while interpretivism explores '*meaning and motives behind people's actions like: behaviour and interactions with others in the society and culture*' (Chowdhury, 2014: p.433).

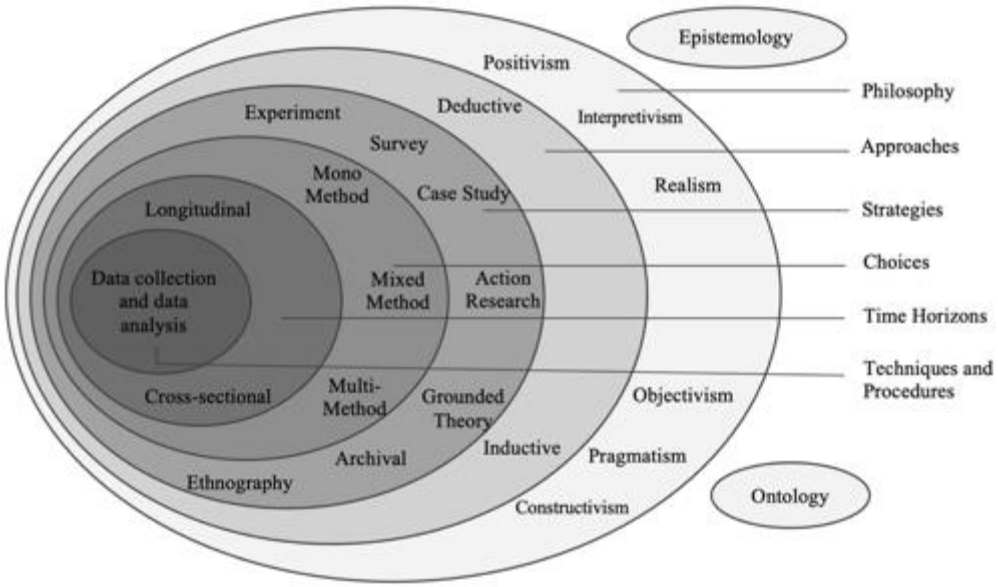

Figure 3. Research Onion (Saunders et al., 2009: p.108)

There are three reasons as to why this philosophy was utilised. Firstly, interpretivism acknowledges differences between individuals, incorporating a human interest (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2012). Secondly, this approach allows one to explore the field more in-depth (Hiller, 2016). Finally, interpretivism provides an ideal approach towards exploring the field of HR and leader wellbeing (Saunders et al., 2009). All aforementioned aspects ensured that this approach provides a good foundation towards exploring a social phenomenon (Chowdhury, 2014).

To collect the perspective of leaders working remotely, qualitative data was utilised. This approach generates '*narrative or non-numeric information*' and '*focuses on the experiences and meanings of individuals*' (Carter and Henderson, 2005: p.215). Based on the literature review and theoretical frameworks, a deductive approach allowed the researcher to refute or affirm the propositions (Azungah, 2018). However, an opportunity for an inductive approach was left open, due to lacking leader wellbeing literature, which enabled the opportunity for a deeper insight into new concepts that may answer the research question (Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault, 2015). This research, composed of two studies, utilised semi-structured interviews and was based on a set of open-ended questions that created a guide to align the interviews. Sekaran and Bougie (2016) state that this approach still allows one to deviate, allowing the opportunity for follow up questions.

The researcher used a single case study; the following page (Figure 4) provides background knowledge on the case study's size, industry, culture and study sample. Yin (2012) states that this strategy provides a real-life context to the problem at hand while enabling a holistic approach, as only one case study was used. Considering the data required and the purpose, the researcher utilised interviews to gather primary data, which according to Trochim (2020) fall under the category of surveys. As this research involved real individual cases, who might wish to remain anonymous, the researcher ensured their confidentiality with a signed agreement.

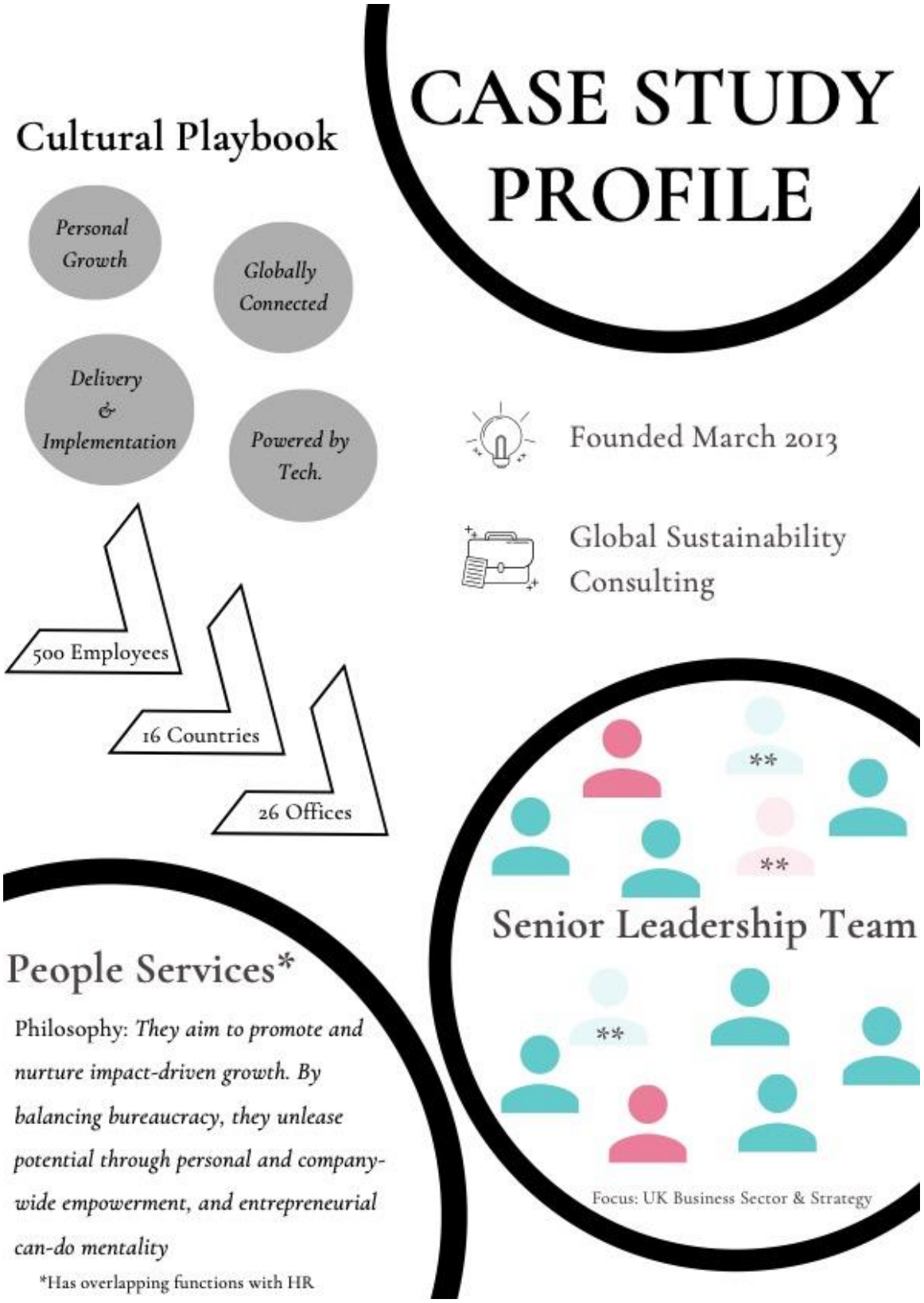

Figure 4. Case Study Infographic

* People Services refers to HRM. **Leaders did not participate in the study.

Research Choice and Time Horizon

A mono-qualitative method was the best fit for this research as a total of 18 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with nine leaders were conducted. A qualitative approach provides flexibility and the ability to gain a deeper insight (Kahlke, 2014). Furthermore, the flexibility allowed the researcher to be intuitive when asking further follow up questions, which according to Black (1994) opens the possibility of discovering or providing a greater understanding towards the phenomena explored.

Taking into consideration that the research is composed of two studies, where data was collected at two points in time, the research was longitudinal. This enabled the researcher to take a before and after measurement of leader wellbeing, also known as a pre-post random experimental research design (Trochim, 2002). However, due to the time constraint and willingness of participation, a non-probable sampling technique, more specifically purposive sampling, was utilised. This allowed the researcher to select the sample of nine participants, which according to Saunders et al. (2009) provides the possibility to gain detailed data to answer the research question.

Techniques and Procedures

As this research explored leader wellbeing in remote environments the sample had to be homogenous. According to Yin (2012) the case study helped limit any influencing variables of the sample. Additionally, it provided a realistic representation of leaders within the global workforce. Three set criteria helped ensure a homogenous population; this made the research generalisable (Schofield, 2002). Firstly, the interviewees all work at the case study organisation. Secondly, the participants are part of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), ensuring their formal leadership position. Lastly, the leaders have adopted remote work within the past year.

The Two Research Studies

Study 1 explored a group of leader insights into their wellbeing while working in a remote environment. This helped reconfirm the industry-wide problem, source the causes and consequences of leader wellbeing negligence, and find a possible sustainable HRM solution based on the propositions. Study 2 explored a solution blueprint, derived from the findings of the first Study, to evaluate its effectiveness and make corrective adaptations. The solution blueprint effectiveness was compared between the before-after perceived wellbeing measurements of the experimental and control group. As this topic has minimal research, the studies were exploratory (Stebbins, 2001), which aligns with Yin's (1981) theory that a case study goes hand-in-hand with this strategy.

To alleviate the time constraint, the researcher conducted two one-on-one interviews with the sample. The first interview was composed of Study 1 and Study 2.1, while the second interview included Study 2.2. The interview questions were created using the conceptual frameworks as a foundation. The open-ended questions provided structure and covered the material explored in the literature review. This enabled the researcher with the ability to increase interview replicability (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). The researcher could ask follow up questions during the conversation, if a topic seems relevant (Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault, 2015). The second interview included the same questions used in the first interview for Study 2; however, an additional set of questions focused on the solution blueprint were used.

Due to the pandemic and geographic limitations, all interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams and in English. The first interviews were approximately 50 minutes, while the second round of interviews had a shorter time commitment of 20 minutes since less content was covered. The researcher built rapport with each participant; this could be achieved by exchanging pleasantries, finding commonalities, using active listening skills and mirroring (Abbe and Brandon, 2014). This created a comforting atmosphere for the study participant, allowing them to trust the interviewer, answer more honestly and accurately. To further ensure honest answers, the researcher thoroughly explained the purpose and aim of the studies.

With the consent of the participants, the researcher recorded each interview, which were then transcribed and analysed. A consent form ensured the ethical use of data derived and the participants' anonymity. Primary data (interview recordings and transcriptions) was ethically stored on the researcher's cloud-storage and with the Hotelschool The Hague research centre. Furthermore, confidential information, such as organisations or names mentioned, were redacted whilst transcribing.

Data from the two interview rounds were analysed through a qualitative approach, which used '*open codes, categories and thematic analysis*' (Lim, 2011: p.52). Thus, data was deductively categorised, using colour codes, within themes found in the literature review. The researcher also opened the opportunity to discover thematic insights inductively. Data was analysed manually, whereby the researcher went through each interview transcription three times. The first round included deductive reduction, while during the second-round thematic insights were collected inductively. The final round allowed the researcher to check both deductive and inductive findings and left the opportunity to collect any data that might have been missed in the first two rounds. Finally, conclusions were drawn from the categorised data.

Solution Creation and Implementation

The conclusions from the first set of interviews allowed the researcher to brainstorm potential interventions for the solution blueprint, which would address how sustainable HRM practices support leader wellbeing within remote work environments. These ideas were brought to the commissioner, where feedback was exchanged, and clear expectations were set. This allowed the researcher to create a solution blueprint, composed of three interventions supported by academic literature, which highlighted a clear implementation plan for the sample. The three interventions focused on wellbeing, learning and development, and work-life balance sustainable HRM practices, aligning with the literature explored and research findings. Due to geographical limitations, the researcher had to ensure that the solution blueprint could be executed independently.

The interventions' objective was to support and potentially improve leader wellbeing, where each specific intervention had its own objective that could contribute towards wellbeing. By integrating practitioner, scientific literature, organisational and stakeholder perspectives, the solution blueprint offered a holistic approach towards supporting wellbeing. The 'SLT Resource Group' socialised knowledge on best practices for wellbeing and remote working. The 'Building a New Habit' intervention aimed to improve efficiency within the remote workday and strengthen the leaders' wellbeing as part self-development. Finally, 'Realistic Finish Time' encouraged leaders to be consequent with realistic workday finish times.

These interventions are operationalisation friendly; their design is socially, economically, and technically feasible. The blueprint's design and content, integrated calming components and the leaders' feedback, overcoming potential resistance barriers. Furthermore, the solution is economically interesting; implementation costs were eliminated by the researcher acting as a consultant. Finally, the instructions were self-explanatory ensuring the possibility of independent implementation.

The researcher and commissioner agreed on a timeline (Figure 5) to ensure the seamless implementation of the intervention. Firstly, the key findings of the first round of interviews were shared with the SLT, this dissemination included a short introduction to the solution design, after which the solution blueprint was virtually delivered to all participants one week prior to the trial period. This allowed leaders to familiarise themselves with the three interventions and ask the researcher for further clarification.

Figure 5. Intervention Timeline

The participants could freely choose amongst the three interventions. However, the intervention was only executed by seven sample participants, where the remaining two participants were considered the randomised control group[1]. Thus making Study 2 a within random experimental design with a treatment group and control group (Trochim, 2002). The trial period of two weeks was then executed independently within the case study, whereby the control group resumed their natural routine, and the execution group trialled their chosen intervention. After the implementation all participants reconvened for the second round of interviews with the researcher.

[1] Unforeseen circumstances in the participants' work had inhibited them from participating in the intervention

Solution Evaluation and Improvements

These interviews allowed the researcher to evaluate the intervention effectiveness and collect feedback from the leaders. The solution blueprint was evaluated by gathering before and after (Study 2.1 and Study 2.2) measurements of the leaders' perceived wellbeing, where the control and execution group were compared. Wellbeing is subjective (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006; Diener, Suh, Luca, and Smith, 1999), thus the researcher measured wellbeing in a qualitative and quantitative form to gain a holistic understanding. Leaders were asked to quantify their perceived wellbeing between a range of 0-10 to enable benchmarking amongst the sample. Secondly, descriptive explanations elaborated on why they had scored it at the given value. This method allowed the researcher to evaluate if the interventions influenced the perceived leader wellbeing and in what ways.

There are two ways to assess the success; firstly, wellbeing has improved if the leaders explicitly stated in the after interview that it got better or if the after-rating scores were higher than the initial one. Secondly, wellbeing was supported if the leaders respond in a positive or satisfied manor. Should the outcomes lead to lower after-intervention wellbeing scores or negative qualitative responses, then the flaws or drawbacks of the solution were explored and improved.

The solution blueprint evaluation was then analysed by the researcher to create a final deliverable to the commissioner. Feedback given during the second interview allowed the researcher to make specific amendments to the original solution blueprint. As a result, a focused leader perspective was integrated. Finally, the intervention evaluation of Study 2 was communicated to the commissioner and SLT in the form of a second dissemination. This provided an opportunity to both inform the case study of research progress and share the final solution blueprint.

FINDINGS

Respondents have been coded accordingly: X.1 or X.2, where X is the participant number and X .1 is Study 1 and X.2 is Study 2.

Deductive Approach

Remote Work Experience

Study 1 highlighted the fortunate and privileged position the leaders were in, but also the challenges imposed by remote work. There were '*peaks and troughs*' (8.1) throughout the past year, where '*it all just morphs into a continuum*' (2.1) and became '*pretty monotonous*' (9.1) but also '*ranged from very good to excellent, to really quite gruelling*' (8.1). As the leaders are in a senior position they had '*a more settled environment and […] better accommodation'* (4.1), where many had their own designated offices.

However, the work intensity and areas of unknown lead to moments where leaders *'had no precedent*' (3.1). The ongoing pandemic contributed to obstacles leaders faced, where it was '*challenging managing it all*' (5.1). Following the transition to remote work leaders experienced a '*blurriness between work and home*' (9.1), which have been identified both as advantageous and disadvantageous.

Two months after the initial interview, leaders were once again asked to evaluate their remote work experience. Similarly, Study 2 indicated that leader 7.2 went '*through an incredibly busy time*', where leader 2.2 felt that they were '*reaching a limit*'. Others felt there were no distinctive changes, while respondent 6.2 even mentioned that '*pressure has been slightly reduced*' as the organisation '*got more streamlined'* working in the remote environment.

Despite the hardships experienced during remote work, leaders perceived their wellbeing to be positive in Study 1. Respondent 1.1 admitted that '*work has been quite stressful and intense'* but they '*managed fairly effectively*' and felt that remote work had benefited their wellbeing. Figure 6 illustrates the perceived wellbeing of leaders before the solution design implementation. Respondent 2.1, 4.1, 8.1 and 9.1 indicated a variation of wellbeing levels, which coincided with the '*peaks and troughs*' (8.1) experienced while working remotely.

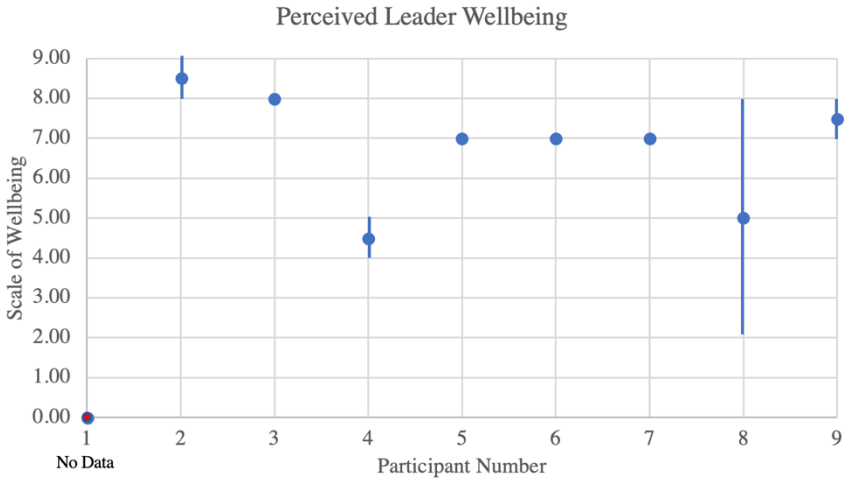

Figure 6. Perceived Leader Wellbeing (Before Intervention)

On the other hand, the general outcomes leaned towards the higher end of the wellbeing spectrum. There was a consensus that the leaders had a positive work environment. Most of the leaders managed their workload, despite the '*sheer volume*' (6.1) being strenuous. The leaders have a high level of control over their job, a '*very good amount' (4.1)* of organisational support and positive work relations. Furthermore, their clear role enabled '*autonomy*' (5.1), however there were mixed findings on the sense of involvement with change.

Similarly, the general work environment remained positive when asked in Study 2; many respondents noted that there were no significant changes within the six elements over the past two months. In some cases, positive work relations strengthen as '*high stress can support the growth of relationships*' (7.2). Figure 7. highlights the perceived wellbeing of leaders after implementing the solution design. Both control group (7.2 and 8.2) respondents had minimally higher ratings in second interview, whereas only two of the seven experimental group (1.2, 2.2, 3.2, 4.2, 5.2, 6.2, and 9.2) respondents had the same result.

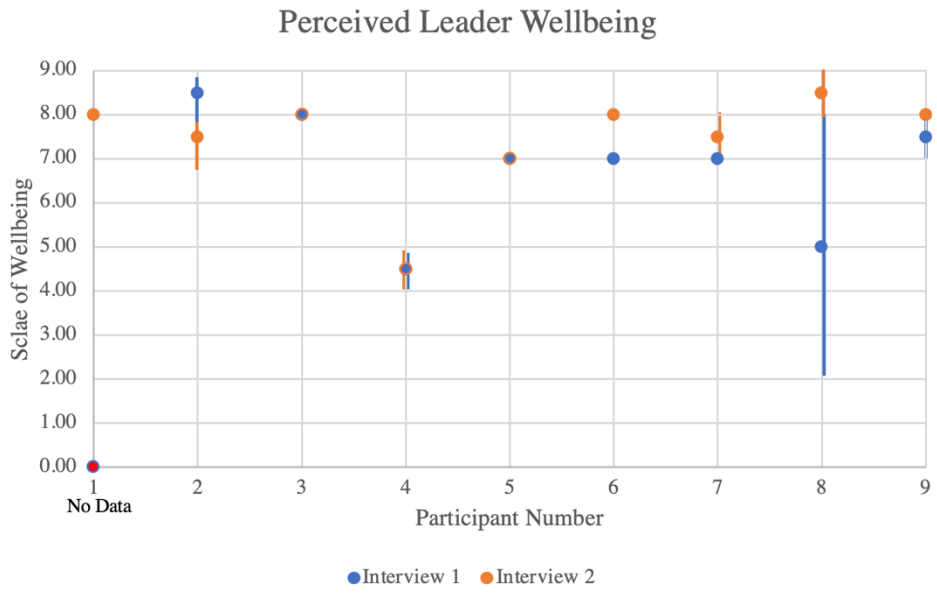

Figure 7. Perceived Leader Wellbeing (After Intervention)

Leaders 6.2, 7.2, 8.2 and 9.2 perceived a minimally higher level of wellbeing, compared to Study 1, as they felt '*quiet/pretty good*' (8.2 and 9.2). On the other hand, leader 3.2 said, '*I don't think its [perceived wellbeing] surpassed it, it certainly isn't any worse*', resulting in the same perceived wellbeing as from Study 1 (respondents 3.2, 4.2, and 5.2). Another leader felt their wellbeing was '*slightly lower*' (2.2) than before, where leader 7.2 elaborated, wellbeing was '*easy to go spiralling down*', as '*wellbeing during this time has an ability to take second place to work when it all gets very intense*'.

Solution Blueprint Interventions

The respondents highlighted the importance of providing variability and choice within the solution design. '*Furnishing the choices people have*' (2.1), while providing '*flexibility*' (5.1) and taking into '*consideration of what access*' (5.1) leaders have must be considered in the interventions. Respondent 8.1 mentioned that the solution design should create '*awareness of what people do[…] socialising that knowledge*', while respondent 7.1 noted that '*the ability to talk to other people who understand what you're talking about*' could also add value towards wellbeing. Furthermore, respondent 4.1 considered it important that there were '*specific wellbeing requirements that are for leaders because they have a different role to play*'. Thus, ensuring the wellbeing intervention is not '*excluding leaders because they just felt that they're dealt with*' (4.1).

Of the seven participants who trialled the solution blueprint, two felt comfortable to tailor the intervention to their needs to best impact their wellbeing. However, respondent 5.2 mentioned that there should be an '*implicit permission*' to '*genuinely work flexibly*' and alter the interventions to suit the leaders' needs. The presentation of the intervention was complimented by leader 3.2, as it was '*really calming*', which helped overcome '*any negative barriers*' leaders typically face when asked to participate in a study. Furthermore, some felt that both the intervention and participation motivated them to focus on their wellbeing. One explained that '*having to be accountable to you for this made it happen*' (3.2), while another leader (9.2) indicated that being '*deadline and commitment driven*' further ensured the intervention execution.

Proposition 1: Wellbeing practices support leader wellbeing in remote environments.

The findings of Study 1 indicated that wellbeing practices were introduced to the organisation, yet leaders often disregard the suggestions made. Furthermore, wellbeing was '*sometimes a bit of an afterthought*' (1.1), where '*leadership is less or often left wanting*' (4.1). The leaders acknowledged that the organisation was '*very active in trying to make folks aware of what we should be doing*' (9.1) and '*impressed with material that's gone up*' (3.1). However, respondent 9.1 mentioned their regular '*inactivity*' in participating, while another noted '*I tend to feel that they're less aimed at me*' (3.1) hinting the lack of leader involvement within the wellbeing practices.

Most respondents had participated in the work environment assessment, where many felt confident and comfortable with their setup. Respondent 9.1 even got '*too comfortable*', while others were ready to have a more constructed office space. There is an '*element of personal responsibility' (1.1)* to ensure that the work environment encourages wellbeing, where many were '*fortunate to have that opportunity to create the right space and environment*' (3.1) that would help facilitate their wellbeing.

A SLT resource group was established, as a wellbeing intervention, by three leaders who met virtually on a weekly basis for 30 minutes during the trial period. Leader 2.2. described it as '*useful just to have that half an hour just to chat about other things*', where they '*parked all other [work] conversations'* (3.2), allowing them to talk about their wellbeing. Furthermore, the meetings provided an opportunity to '*carve out an amount of time each week, really, for us as peers who were involved in similar sorts of challenges to be able to force ourselves just to reflect a little bit, which was really helpful*.' (4.2).

These weekly engagements provided '*a bit more support and encouragement*' (2.2) and allowed the leaders to '*come back a little bit refreshed […] you sort of start the next task maybe with a different mindset […] it's quite a good reset*' (3.2). Furthermore, respondent 4.2 felt that '*it's a little bit like talking to a mirror, you don't have to sort of explain so much of the context which actually can be burdensome sometimes*'.

However, '*you have to be engaged for it to be successful*' (4.2), which for these leaders was sometimes challenging due to the intense work periods. Respondent 3.2 stated '*there are other interventions that as senior managers, we've probable developed ourselves over time that are more impactful [on wellbeing] than what I did in this case*'. Furthermore, the sessions were '*only 30 minutes […] it's not enough to change the dial [on wellbeing] on its own*' (2.2). The findings indicate that wellbeing had been maintained, as leader 3.2 said '*it* [*wellbeing*] *certainly isn't any worse*'.

Proposition 2: *Learning and development practices support leader wellbeing in remote environments.*

The leaders had been able to positively adapt and learn from the transition to remote work; for some it was '*a massive hurdle' (4.1)*, while others were '*very quick to adopt a lot of very effective online tools' (3.1)*. Their agility and readiness reflected on the leaders' adaptability to remote work. This was supported through the extensive work experience that many leaders had, which helped build a foundation of accumulated skills for adverse times.

Most of the leaders' learning and development had been informal and from '*learning by doing*' (5.1), whereas the minority had formal opportunities. These opportunities were in the form of personal coaching, which had been described by leader 3.1 as '*hugely valuable*' and taught leader 9.1 to use '*empathy and understanding of putting yourself into the shoes of colleagues'*. Nevertheless, there was a clear consensus that learning and development had the potential to positively influence wellbeing, as leaders could '*manage the time [… and] be better prepared*' (1.1).

Remote work had generated informal leadership development throughout the organisation; leaders took their '*own initiative […and] immediately set up social breakfasts*' (4.1). Respondent 6.1 noted that the SLT went '*into crisis management mode…'* and *'were able to come closer as a group,'* where their *'relationships became stronger far quicker*'. Furthermore, leaders took it upon themselves to build their social network through informal channels, where they could '*learn from [their] peers and learn things that you need to adapt within what you're doing' (1.1).* Leaders believed that the proactive social networking was strongly supported by the technological infrastructure they had rolled out back in February 2020.

Two leaders tried out the learning and development intervention; during the trial they worked on developing their personal habits, where one leader took daily walks during the afternoon, while another picked up running three to four times a week. The leader who took daily walks, felt it was more of a discipline, rather than a habit. However, acknowledged that they '*extended the time that I'm away from my IT*' (1.2). Furthermore, leader 9.2 who started running felt that this habit '*fits best with my lifestyle and my interests*', which had been a motivating factor to continue running after the trial period.

Leaders acknowledge the benefits this intervention brought; walking provided a '*break in your day*' (1.2), whereby this '*good behaviour*' (1.2) encouraged productive working and calmness within the workplace. Similarly, running enabled the leader to '*relax into the work day*' (9.2) and prioritise the tasks that needed to be completed. However, there wasn't '*a significant change*' (1.2) within their wellbeing, thus questioning the overall effectiveness of the intervention. The initial intention was to follow a learning and development course, which would guide the leaders into developing a strong habit that would support their wellbeing. However, both participants did not feel that was necessary. They '*jumped in with both feet*' (9.2) to do the habit.

Proposition 3: *Work-life balance practices support leader wellbeing in remote environments.*

Adapting remote work had blurred the work-life boundaries for many leaders. More specifically, the leaders were '*in a national lockdown*' (3.1) and had '*nothing to do' (3.1),* so there was a tendency and '*temptation*' (7.1) to continue working past office hours. Some felt an '*additional pressure to work harder and longer'* (2.1) due to the uncertainty COVID-19 brought. Constantly working in the same environment, competing personal responsibilities, and limited external human interactions are also work-life conflicts leaders had experienced. This had negatively influenced the work-life balance, where many leaders were not as satisfied with their division between personal and professional responsibilities.

This outcome, however, was also expected by a few leaders, where respondent 6 acknowledged that as a leader working in a fast-growing organisation '*you accept [that] your work life balance might get rather messed with*'. Furthermore, many were very dedicated and committed; leader 3.1 is '*passionate about the company and the sustainability agenda'*, whereas another mentioned that this work-life balance enabled a '*positive busy rather than negative busy*' (7.1).

The organisation currently did not promote work-life balance practices; however, leaders shared a clear interest in wanting to improve their current situation. The concept of providing training was brought up regularly, where leader 4.1 mentioned that this could '*make me more effective*'. Moreover, many felt that the organisation should '*further legitimising stopping and starting*' (5.1) so that leaders could create '*flex in their lives*' (8.1) to look after their wellbeing. Furthermore, knowledge on work-life balance practices should be socialised, which would create '*a greater awareness*' (8.1) within the organisation.

Two leaders decided to implement the work-life balance focused intervention; one leader started to '*block out chunks of my diary*' (5.2) that would be dedicated to non-work time, whereas the later set realistic switch off times. Creating the work-life flexibility sometimes '*causes more anxiety*' (5.2), however it also helped prevent '*diminishing returns*' (5.2) that would support work productivity and reduce the work hours. Setting clear finish times had also motivated the leader to not work during the weekend.

As a result, respondent 6.2 stated the clear finish times were '*clearly effective from the perspective that […] it's forcing you to stop in the simplest fashion*', which ultimately reduced '*time at the screen'* and the '*chance of deep vein thrombosis from sitting in a chair for too long'*. Furthermore, a '*calmness*' was induced as leader 6.2 was '*not working for a long period of time'*, while leader 5.2 noted that this intervention did help '*draw some lines*' in terms of work-life boundaries within the remote environment. However, the main drawback was that the effectiveness was hindered through the lack of '*group commitment*' (6.2).

Inductive Approach

Leader Expectations and Experience

There are many expectations one has of a leader; they are expected to '*lead by example*' (4.1) and '*make sure everyone's okay*' (5.1). Often, they have '*other considerations*' (9.1), leading to competing responsibilities and making it difficult for them to focus on themselves. The larger complexity of leader responsibilities gets overlooked, which leaders themselves '*are guilty of*' (6.1) because they are expected to pay '*attention to the [wellbeing] advice that is given*' (8.1). Afterall, leaders should '*walk the talk*' (8.1) and take care of themselves as no one will follow up. A leader (6.1) put it bluntly: '*big boys don't cry, you get on with it*' indicating the stigma on leaders solely looking after themselves.

Furthermore, leader 3.2 state, '*we have to put up a "we're coping face" to everyone else*', which sets a false pretence of how the leaders are doing. However, leaders have accumulated tactics that that help them address their wellbeing best. Leader 3.2 further elaborated, '*I've had 25 years of learning what works and doesn't work, and I've been through other programs […] that have helped me refine that [wellbeing]*'. With this knowledge, leaders were able to maintain their wellbeing individually.

The organisational culture had been described as '*avoiding being too bureaucratic*' (1.1), where the organisation '*all care about each other and look out for each other'* (6.1). However, the lack of systems and polices had prevented the organisation from addressing wellbeing proactively '*rather than just considering wellbeing as an afterthought to the symptoms of it starting to appear'* (1.1). By trying to '*embed these things [wellbeing initiatives] culturally on the basis*' (1.1), leaders felt that they could potentially better '*flow that culture through*' (2.1) the whole organisation to have a positive impact.

Study 2 further highlighted that the current organisational culture does not activity incorporate wellbeing. As a result, leaders have trouble with setting time aside to focus on themselves, they lack '*the discipline of saying I can't*' (2.2). Furthermore, there are moments where leaders block out time for themselves, but '*people have no respect for the purple blobs in your diary*' (5.2) and schedule themselves in. Leader 3.2 stated '*I think you've come to this at a really timely period [...] everything you help us to think about, I think has been really, really useful whether or not we end up adopting exactly what you've suggested or just building that into something else*', confirming the importance of the research and the potential added value.

The organisation allows flexible work, however '*there's still a bit of a culture of presenteeism thinking like other people in the leadership business say you don't need to be here, but actually you do*' (5.2). Thus, flexible working schedules throughout the full organisation has not been fully adopted or accepted culturally, often limiting the possibility for leaders to adopt this practice. Leader 6.2 suggested that to integrate flexible working into the organisational culture '*we would have to, as a group, get really solid on certain subjects […] and it would have to be absolutely from the top*.'

Organisational Context

The case study is a '*fast growing business*' (2) with a '*start-up'* (9) mentality, as a result, roles naturally fell into place. Many of the leaders are shareholders, thus they are '*seriously invested in the business*' (6.2). Consequently, '*there is a trade-off you [leaders] take in exchange for an element of your wellbeing*' (6.2) to ensure the organisation can thrive. Leaders acknowledged that the '*HR team has been busy*' (1) and they have a '*lack of resource availability*' (4), therefore certain aspects within HRM, such as learning and development, have not been '*invested in*' (6). However, the leaders mentioned that they are going through '*an evolution where we are emerging from the first phase of start-up*' (9). Thus, the HR department is expected to become mature and established soon.

CONCLUSION

The importance of leader wellbeing while working remotely was reinforced and confirmed by the conducted research. COVID-19 initiated substantial global workforce changes, where the transition to remote work imposed a series of vulnerabilities on leaders. Unprecedented events put the interviewed leaders into new territories, where immense workload and long hours were a commonality. Leader wellbeing, however, persevered; responses in both Study 1 and 2 gravitated towards the higher end of the spectrum, with the average score being 7.4 out of 10. This outcome coincides with the positive work environment elements leaders agreed were present, confirming the influence environment factors have on wellbeing.

Leaders accepted their wellbeing levels, and elaborated that current external factors, such as the pandemic, had initiated fluctuations between '*peaks and troughs*' (8.1). Furthermore, this was expected from individuals in a leadership position; they acknowledged that these hardships were necessary sacrifices to ensure the organisation's success. Fortunately, these pressures did not drive wellbeing towards a detrimental direction. Thus, the sustainable HRM interventions implemented were there to further stimulate and support wellbeing.

Practices addressing wellbeing were proposed to support wellbeing within remote work. Unfortunately, those introduced into the case study lacked a leader orientation, resulting in participation inactivity and confirming the notion of leader negligence. The SLT resource group, enabled an opportunity to redirect the wellbeing focus. However, the wellbeing outcomes were contradictory: perceived wellbeing, between Study 1 and 2, remained the same, while leaders enjoyed the experience, stating that the social connectivity and reflective moments were helpful. The intervention lacked adaptability and the opportunity to adjust and individually personalise; as a result, the lack of flexibility, did not optimise the benefits. Conclusively, formal wellbeing practices may be considered inhibitors towards wellbeing, where a laisser-faire approaches could provide greater support as the control group results hint.

Learning and development, another dimension within sustainable HRM, was proposed to support wellbeing within remote work. Given the case study's nature, these practices were premature; most skills were acquired through informal learning opportunities. Nevertheless, they were considered helpful, as leaders learned from their peers; however, it remains uncertain if these aspects impacted wellbeing. Contrarily, the intervention, despite not being treated as a traditional training, provided the necessary push for leaders to incorporate the wellbeing habits into their routine. Furthermore, they clearly stated positive outcomes, where supportive traits helped increase the perceived wellbeing scores minimally. Ultimately, learning and development practices provide the necessary support to facilitate wellbeing.

Work-life balance initiatives were proposed to be another sustainable HRM practice that would support leader wellbeing in remote work. Blurred work-life boundaries, longer hours, and competing personal responsibilities were key consequences of remote work; respectively, the leaders' work-life balance satisfaction became impaired. The final intervention enabled leaders to create flexibility into their workday and prevent working-hours from leeching into their personal time, where health benefits followed. However, the positive changes minimally improved perceived wellbeing; a lack of organisational commitment hindered the effectiveness. To conclude, the benefits of the intervention itself addressed the needs leaders were initially lacking; work-life balance practices supported leader wellbeing working remotely.

Different elements within the remote work experience had impacted leader wellbeing diversly; leaders acknowledged their fortunate position and genuinely managed their wellbeing, despite facing hardships. Most importantly the interviews reflected that the three sustainable HRM interventions must include the following to provide a supporting nature: flexibility and freedom to enable personalisation, a structured platform to initiate necessary wellbeing developments, and finally organisational commitment to ensure a greater positive impact on wellbeing.

DISCUSSION

Literature Relevance and Significance

The research validated leader wellbeing negligence as an industry wide problem. The wellbeing of employees remain leaders' predominant responsibility, supporting Barling and Cloutier's (2017) views that this contributes to the disregard. Repercussions of this negligence were not deeply explored; leaders mentioned strained physical and mental resources, however noted it was due to work intensification and was not detrimental. Hence, consequences explored by Byrne et al. (2014), Guillen-Royo (2016) and Wirtz et al. (2017) were not addressed. Arguably, immense engagement demonstrated leaders' passion and drive. These behaviours, interpreted as intrinsic job satisfaction, mitigate work intensification consequences (Sparham and Sung, 2007; Li, Xie and Huo, 2020).

The leaders' high engagement overshadowed their own wellbeing; therefore, sustainable HRM wellbeing proactivity (Ehnert and Harry, 2012) is imperative. The research suggests that wellbeing, learning and development, and work-life practices support the wellbeing of leaders working remotely. Literature-based themes, explored deductively, affirmed the three propositions. Thus, answering the research question: '*How may sustainable Human Resource Management facilitate the wellbeing of leaders working in a remote environment*.'

The first proposition, '*wellbeing practices support leader wellbeing in remote environments*', is weakly affirmed. Initial practices lacked a direct focus towards leader roles and responsibilities, confirming leader wellbeing negligence (Roche, 2013); accordingly those initiatives did not appeal to the interviewed leaders. Alternatively, the implemented SLT resource group was openly accepted and provided reflective opportunities, which were described as helpful, hinting a level of support. However, wellbeing remain unchanged, refuting Spence (2015) and Clinton and Van Veldhoven's (2013: p.369) theory explored in the solution design that social connectivity '*has a more direct effect on wellbeing*'.

The work environment had a greater response, compared to the aforementioned formal practice. The pre-existing environmental conditions, aligning with Guest and Conway's (2004) six positive elements[2], were identified and acknowledged by leaders. Their satisfaction towards the naturally integrated factors helped support perceived wellbeing, echoing the literature of Schmidt, Welch and Wilson (2000) and Williams (1994) that indirect performance pathways simontaneously provide positive outcomes.

Similarly, the second proposition stating that, '*learning and development practices support leader wellbeing in remote environments*' is partially supported. Leaders clearly expressed that their extensive work experiences and informal learnings greatly contributed to their skill set, supporting Spreitzer's (1995) view that foundational competencies enable the necessary preparation and support, even for remote work roles. This aided their transition, which in turn alleviated potential stress, indirectly facilitating wellbeing (Quick and Henderson, 2016). The leaders' agility presented potential positive influences on wellbeing; virtual social networking opportunities were swiftly organised and integrated into the organisation stimulating social capital. In remote work, supportive networks developed by social capital compliments wellbeing (Portela, Neira and Salinas-Jiménez, 2012).

[2] Six elements: manageable workload, personal control over a job, organisational support, positive work relations, a clear role, and a sense of control of involvement in organisational changes.

Leaders believed that practices focusing on leadership and leader improvement had the potential to support wellbeing, linking to Kelloway and Barling's (2010) theory that leadership development interventions support wellbeing. The habits intervention enabled positive experiences, as the new routine stimulated productivity and brought a calming atmosphere, aligning with Bakke's (2005) literature. However, a significant change was lacking, wellbeing scores reflected a minimal improvement. A degree of support is considered as the intervention did not negatively influence wellbeing; according to Yaden, Claydon, Bathgate, Platt and Santos (2021) learning and development practices incorporating evidence-based interventions can enhance wellbeing, creating a potential supportive wellbeing facilitator for the future.

The third proposition, '*work-life balance practices support leader wellbeing in remote environments*', is affirmed. In Study 1, leaders acknowledged that their work-life balance had been muddled since adopting remote work, which confirms Felstead et al., (2002: p.65) perspective that '*when working at home is a requirement… it does not contribute to work-life balance*'. Leaders frequently worked long hours, leading to a dissatisfactory division in personal and professional responsibilities. This aligns with Kelliher and Anderson (2010) statement that work intensification is a key consequence, which Fein, Skinner and Machin (2017) note has deteriorating effects on wellbeing in the long run.

Once adopting the work-life balance intervention, wellbeing had improved by simply achieving a more satisfactory level of work-life balance. The practice helped leaders segregate their professional and personal responsibilities while working remotely, which echoes Wepfer, Allen, Brauchli, Jenny and Bauer's (2018) view that clear boundaries are necessary to enable positive outcomes. Once again, the increase was minimal, which one leader noted may be due to the lack of group commitment within the organisation. Daniels, Watson and Gedikli (2017) argue that shared activities amongst employees can further stimulate wellbeing, highlighting the importance of group commitment.

This research has a considerable number of practical implications. The sample has extensive work experiences, where many leaders had their own wellbeing methods. Thus, this research could have a greater potential to impact new leaders (0-3 years' work experience). Despite the research having a modest impact on perceived wellbeing, leaders recognised the importance of leader wellbeing. Involving leaders in this research had initiated an important conversation, shifting the wellbeing focus, that many respondents themselves neglected. This impact is considered valuable, as raising awareness is a key step to institute change (Kotter, 1995) and it can positively impact SDG 3 'Good Health and Wellbeing'. Finally, the case study, working in environment sustainability, could use this research to integrate sustainable actions targeting their employees to further facilitate positive remote work environments.

The disseminations, both with the SLT and internship company, highlighted the value and significance of the research. These moments opened the opportunity to receive relevant feedback that the researcher could incorporate into their deliverable, as well as the report itself. Furthermore, sharing the acquired knowledge initiated a meaningful dialogue for those who were not part of the study and enabled the researcher to incorporate the attained knowledge into a new environment outside of the research field. In the future, the researcher would consider disseminating for a larger audience to initiate a greater impact.

Additional Findings

The researcher had not anticipated the inductive themes 'leader expectations and experience', 'organisational culture' and 'organisational context' to be prevalent influencers on wellbeing within the remote work environment. These aspects were not considered, due to their abstract relation to sustainable HRM. However, through the interviews their relevance and impact on leader wellbeing became apparent.

'Leader expectations and experience' entails the accumulated years of involvement individuals have as leaders, while acknowledging the notion people have of leaders. This theme is both a barrier and facilitator, in the sense that acquired leader experiences taught many individuals methods to support wellbeing, whereas the expectations others had of leaders obscured their wellbeing. Chaigneau, Brown, Coulthard, Daw and Szaboova (2019: p.10) raise the point that '*experiences derived from people's interaction with their environment become endowments*' which contribute to wellbeing. Contrarily, leaders face complex responsibilities while working remotely, during which leaders were expected to '*put up a "we're coping face" to everyone else*' (3.2). Haver, Akerjodert and Furunes (2013: p.287) state that emotional regulation is '*considered a key competence associated with effective and good leadership*', however excessive emotional suppression impairs interpersonal functioning and wellbeing (Coté, 2005; John and Gross, 2004). Leaders acknowledged that they were accountable for these behaviours yet felt this was a discussion the organisation still had to have.

The case study integrated a non-bureaucratic approach within their culture, leading to an absence of policies or systems that would safeguard leader wellbeing. Furthermore, leaders felt that wellbeing and flexible working were not culturally integrated and adopted by the organisation. Consequently, their wellbeing initiatives were often inhibited due to lacking group commitment. Huhtala, Kaptein, Muotka and Feldt (2021) stress the importance of integrating an ethical culture within organisations to support wellbeing, whereas Albrecht (2012) emphasises that supportive and fair organisational cultures will indirectly contribute to wellbeing. Nevertheless, integrating a wellbeing perspective into organisational culture has the potential for greater support and group commitment.

Finally, the case study's organisational context provided reasoning to certain findings; leaders noted that they were a fast-growing business, trying to emerge from the start-up phase. Therefore, the nature of the organisation entailed different environments and constraints on wellbeing compared to large organisations, which from a sustainable HRM perspective would need to be addressed differently (Youssif Abo Keir, 2019). Furthermore, most interviewees were personally invested in the case study; thus, they sacrificed their wellbeing for the organisation's success. These two components as a result created additional barriers towards leader wellbeing that were not anticipated.

Evaluation Method Improvements

Leaders described their wellbeing qualitatively and quantitatively, where some found that quantitative scores were easier to give than others. The evaluation implied that the 0-10 range of wellbeing was interpreted differently amongst the leaders, leading to inconsistencies. Furthermore, the findings reflected that the two-week trial period was limiting; it was difficult for the leaders to feel a significant change or impact on their wellbeing. As a result, the evaluation did not capture the full potential of the solution blueprint.

Figure 8. Solution Blueprint Evaluation

The wellbeing metric improvements were minimal, therefore Figure 8 illustrates the new proposed evaluation method to assess if the solution blueprint has supported and or improved leader wellbeing within the remote work environment in the future. The researcher recommends extending the trial period to four weeks, in addition to weekly check in moments for leaders to shortly quantify and qualify their wellbeing in a journal. Finally, the predefined wellbeing range (Table 1) should be utilised to ensure a cohesive understanding and interpretation of each score.

0	Worst
1	Very Poor
2	Poor
3	Significantly below average
4	Below average
5	Average
6	Above average
7	Significantly above average
8	Good
9	Very good
10	Best

Table 1. Wellbeing Scale 0 - 10

Solution Blueprint Evaluation

The objective of the solution blueprint was to support and potentially improve leader wellbeing through the implementation of one of the three interventions. Given the previously discussed findings, the solution blueprint is considered effective. Perceived leader wellbeing outcomes were slightly higher than the initial scores and there were mentions of a positive quality of functioning at work, indicating supported wellbeing. However, the changes are interpreted as minimal, which is explained by the lacking leadership perspective within the initial solution. Many leaders noted that their extensive experience had allowed them to create their own wellbeing interventions, something this blueprint did not address. Furthermore, flexibility and permission to take 'Me and We time' to have a greater impact on wellbeing was lacking.

The three interventions themselves were further improved on. For instance, the wellbeing intervention should enable more flexibility in format and frequency. Moreover, ensuring people can execute their learning and development intervention independently was seen as valuable, however a greater focus on sharing productivity methods was needed, which could facilitate wellbeing (Prochaska et al., 2011). Furthermore, involving the whole organisation and translating work-life values within the culture could potentially eliminate the '*implicit permission*' (5.2) needed to work flexibly. This aforementioned feedback was incorporated into the final blueprint to potentially facilitate greater support and improvements of leader wellbeing in the future.

The final solution blueprint operationalisation has elements to be considered. Testability entails verifying and validating the interventions' outcomes (Hassan, Afzal, Blom, Lindström, Andler and Eldh, 2015). The original evaluation method hindered the testability of perceived wellbeing, where the new method, previously introduced in the discussion (Figure 8), has the potential for more concreate measurable observations (Simon, Anand, Gray, Rugkåsa and Yeeles, 2013). Furthermore, the revised solution blueprint offers flexibility and adaptability, ensuring short-term maintainability. As the remote work environment and leader wellbeing dimensions evolve, a time efficient and effective maintenance is required for the long-term (Alvarez and Possamai, 2002).

The implementation integrity was moderate; the original design was not entirely executed as planned (Crane and Frederick, 2018). Some participants strayed from the original interventions, which was partially unavoidable due to external factors such as the leaders' work responsibilities and personal interpretation of the interventions. The geographical difference also contributed to the researchers lacking involvement during implementation. However, the first solution blueprint outcomes minimally supported leader wellbeing, hinting that the intervention integrity was directed towards success. By incorporating the feedback into the final solution blueprint, there is a potential to increase the integrity for future use.

The external integration, ethics and management of the final solution blueprint remain inconclusive. The solution blueprint has the potential to align itself with the case study's strategy, by incorporating an alternative sustainable perspective. Ethical implications may be minimised and controlled, by following the actions taken in the methodology. However, a positive outcome on these two mentioned aspects depends on the management of the solution blueprint and who within the organisation wished to take on the responsibility. Ideally, this would be an individual within HRM, that is familiar with this research and leader wellbeing practices to ensure the best possible outcomes.

Limitations

Actions have been purposefully implemented within the methodology to mitigate the number of limitations; however, they are still subject to be present in the research. Choosing a qualitative approach, enabled a holistic understanding on the researched phenomena (Black, 1994), but prevented the opportunity to draw quantitative conclusions. These conclusions could have provided statistical value to identify correlations or cause-effect relations (Queirós, Faria, and Almeida, 2017). Furthermore, an alternative data collection method could have been utilised instead of the mono-method approach; journaling, for instance, promotes deep reflection and 'records participants experiences in a natural context' (Hayman, Wilkes and Jackson, 2012: p.27). Data analysis could have also been executed differently; NVIVO takes the '*analysis of qualitative data significantly further*', compared to doing it by hand (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007: p.578). The chosen strategies and approaches were appropriate to the research, however eliminated the opportunity to collect, analyse and explore using alternative methods, which in turn could have offered different perspectives.

Furthermore, the research philosophy, interpretivism, was initially chosen due to its suitability for exploring a social phenomenon such as sustainable HRM. However, this approach has led to a gap of verifying validity (Pham, 2018), where perspectives are rather subjective than objective (Mack, 2010) and the research generalisability, according to Kelliher (2005) is put into question. Furthermore, the concept of interpretivism could have resulted in misaligned interpretations between the researcher and respondents. For instance, many terms were defined by the researcher and introduced as such to the interviewees, yet there is a possibility that the sample still relied on their personal understandings when answering the questions.

It was challenging to meet the golden standard method during the implementation. Both control and experimental groups were randomised, however not on the researchers account, as leaders could individually choose their intervention. The control group was not initially planned, this puts the research's level of evidence into question (Bondemark and Ruf, 2015). Since base line measurements were collected, the silver standard method was adopted. However, due to the methodology's complexity and small sample size, the researcher compared the two groups at a superficial level. In the future, the researcher proposes using a larger sample to run a thorough comparison.

The researcher took COVID-19 into consideration but did not expect the impact's extent. The pandemic created three relevant limitations. Firstly, the British lockdown initiated a series of implications, which heavily influenced the leaders remote work experience, which was not explored in the literature. Secondly, the pandemic created unexpected work responsibilities, which were unaccounted for, hindering the solution blueprint participation of two leaders. Thirdly, due to social distancing and geographical differences the interviews were held virtually; interviews had technical disruptions that interrupted and distracted the leaders' line of thought. Furthermore, the researcher involvement during the implementation was hindered, limiting the control and overview of the execution.

Finally, pre-existing relations and the nature of the research between the researcher and case study introduced the risk of social desirability bias, diminishing the validity (King and Bruner, 2000). Despite the interviews being held one-to-one, the personal relation and connections the researcher had with the interviewees potentially influenced the respondents to adapt their true answers to ensure favourable research outcomes. This was most present in Study 2, when asked to evaluate the intervention effectiveness. In the future, indirect questions and prefacing them could eliminate potential judgement, which limits social desirability bias (Bergen and Lobonté, 2020).

Recommendations

This research has initiated an important dialogue amongst senior leaders within a remote work environment, showcasing the relevance and importance of the conducted research. The additional findings of the interview outcomes indicate the opportunity and direction for future research. The influences of COVID-19 on the general remote work experiences would suggest replicating this research once the ongoing pandemic has passed to examine how voluntary remote work influences leader wellbeing. Furthermore, expanding the scope would enable the opportunity to explore the differences of leader wellbeing either within diverse leadership levels or industries. Moreover, repeated reference to the improvement of productivity by achieving wellbeing and a satisfactory work-life balance suggests a potential relationship to further research. Finally, the possibility to explore alternative sustainable HRM practices and their influence on wellbeing still remains.

Reflection

The relevance and importance of sustainable HRM addressing leader wellbeing within remote work environments has been reinstated. Drawn from the discussion, it remains evident that there are clear areas of improvements within the research and opportunities to explore diverse perspectives into leader wellbeing, remote work and sustainable HRM dimensions. Reflecting upon the dissemination, it is apparent that the conversation of leader wellbeing has merely been started. Nevertheless, the outcomes initiated a critical discussion amongst leaders, where systematic changes within remote work environments is crucial. We must acknowledge that organisational commitment and cultural adaptation are both imperative to sustain wellbeing. Now more than ever, we must realise that sustainability goes beyond the environment, and it is time to defend the significance wellbeing has on us.

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