

**FRONTLINE CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN DAA DURING THE COVID-19  
PANDEMIC: THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE ENGAGEMENT  
PROCESS**

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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the MA in Human Resource  
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## **Abstract**

**Title:** Frontline Change Management in daa during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The role of communication within the engagement process.

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This research explored how Dublin Airport Authority (daa) engaged with SIPTU on implementing front-line change during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the role of communication within this engagement process is considered. The research sought to understand the perspective of the central participants regarding what worked well during the engagement process and what issues arose, what role did management play in the engagement process and what role did communication play in the engagement process.

The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of the central participants of the engagement process including union officials, local union representatives, executive management, senior operational management and HR management. Through this qualitative research the author sought to better understand the engagement process by considering the approach to change management, the role of communication, the role of the manager and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The history of daa's relationship with their trade union partners and the context of previous engagements is also considered.

The author concluded that the communication strategy implemented during this engagement process included a number of effective communication channels that considered, in particular, the virtual and digital world that surrounds us. The communication strategy was however very top-down focused, leading to gaps in information or miscommunication at the frontline. The author also concluded that frontline management need to be more included, better informed and better supported so that a bottom-up communication strategy can be designed and implemented for future engagement processes.

## Declaration

**Submission of Thesis and Dissertation**  
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*(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)*

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*Jean Darcy*

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**Jean Darcy**  
**17<sup>th</sup> August 2021**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This research explores how Dublin Airport Authority (daa) engaged with their various union partners on implementing front-line change during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the role of communication within this engagement process is considered.

### **1.1 Who is Dublin Airport Authority?**

Dublin Airport Authority (daa) is a global airports and travel retail group with businesses in 16 countries. Daa is owned by the Irish State and headquartered at Dublin Airport, managing Dublin and Cork airports, with international airport operations and investments in Cyprus, Germany and Saudi Arabia. ARI, daa's travel retail subsidiary, has outlets in Europe, North America, the Middle East, India and Asia-Pacific. Daa also provides aviation advisory services through their daa International consultancy business. Dublin and Cork airports are the two largest airports in the Republic of Ireland (Daa, 2021).

### **1.2 Daa and Their Trade Union Partners**

Daa has a long tradition of operating within a heavily unionised environment, participating in the voluntary approach to partnership as described by Geary and Roche (2012). There is a well-established engagement model in daa, facilitating dialogue and engagement between management and the various union partners on employment related issues and proposed change for employees. Within daa five trade unions represent various cohorts of employees; SIPTU, Forsa, Mandate, Connect and Unite. The engagement explored in this paper is set against the backdrop of an evolving relationship between daa and these trade union partners. Over the last number of years there have been many companywide change programmes at daa.

In the mid-1990s to early 2000s daa engaged with their union partners on a change programme called Constructive Participation (CP) which sought to develop a framework through which employees could input on decision making within the organisation (Geary, J.F. and Roche, W.K., 2012). In 2009 the company embarked on the Cost Recover Programme (CRP) which was a cost savings initiative to be achieved

through staff reductions, freezing salaries & bonuses, buying out of some existing terms & conditions and other internal changes (Coughlan et al. 2011). Better Together (daa, 2018) was a change and pay proposal which concluded in 2017 without reaching agreement - this followed rejection of the proposals by SIPTU (O'Connor, F., 2018). During 2018, daa concluded a significant new change and pay agreement with the trade union SIPTU, known as the Phase Two Agreement, on behalf of its members working at daa (Daa, 2019). These previous programmes & agreements, and their outcomes, are important in understanding the context of the Airport's approach to change in 2020.

### **1.3 The Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In addition to change programmes, many environmental considerations influenced the need for change in Dublin Airport during the COVID-19 pandemic. These considerations included the socio-economic and political landscape at the time and the challenges within the aviation sector resulting from the pandemic, specifically as they affected Dublin Airport and the financial position of daa. The unprecedented events of the pandemic in early 2020 and a combination of internal and external factors created a need for change in daa, requiring swift engagement outside of current consultation procedures, given the urgency and uniqueness of the current situation (Higgins, C., 2020a).

### **1.4 The Focus of This Research**

This paper explores how this swift engagement occurred, focusing specifically on the engagement processes in Dublin between daa management and SIPTU on frontline change. Although similar engagement processes took place with other unions and in other locations, they are excluded for the purposes of this study.

The rationale for this focus on the daa/SIPTU engagement only is based on several considerations. SIPTU are the largest union present in daa - twenty-two of the twenty-four engagements that concluded with agreements being reached between 2020 and 2021 involved SIPTU. Frontline areas of the business represented by SIPTU in Dublin Airport that engaged on the agenda of New Ways of Working (NWOW) include

Security Operations, Terminals Facilities, Airfield Operatives, Airside Cleaning and Airport Gardeners. In addition, the engagement sessions in focus for this research have concluded, unlike engagement sessions with other trade unions.

This research aims to understand the role that communication played within the engagement process between daa and SIPTU during the COVID-19 pandemic on implementing frontline change. The objectives for this research are to determine, from the perspective of the central participants of the engagement process only:

- What worked well during the engagement process and what issues arose?
- What role did management play in the engagement process?
- What role did communication play in the engagement process?

The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of the central participants of the engagement process including SIPTU union officials, SIPTU local union representatives, executive management, senior operational management and HR management.

The next section looks at the engagement process in more detail, including the format of the engagement sessions and the communications that were shared throughout the process.

## **1.5 The Engagement Process in Detail**

In Dublin, daa began engagements on change with their trade union partners in June 2020. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on passenger numbers in the airport, change was required in almost all areas of the business – frontline and non-frontline – to reduce costs and create efficiencies across daa. At a strategic level, weekly calls were arranged between senior daa executives and the union officials of each of the five trade unions with membership across the entirety of daa to share business updates and forecasts for the coming months.

At the same time, local engagement sessions between management and employee representatives were planned for each of the local business areas to discuss the changes required locally and, most importantly, what these changes meant for employees working in these teams.

### 1.5.1 The Format of the Local Engagement Sessions

Each local engagement followed the same format to begin negotiating specific changes across daa. Three separate sessions were co-ordinated for each of the business areas. The sessions were led by the respective senior manager for the area, with members of the wider local and central Human Resources (HR) team also in attendance to support and answer any relevant process questions.

The focus of the initial session was to present the specific change requirements for the business area in question and to present the proposed change solutions from management to address the requirements. A second session was then arranged to formally provide answers to any questions raised in session one and to collate any further questions. This second session allowed for any updates or developments to be shared and to begin discussions around the operational implementation of the proposed changes including timeframes for each stage of the implementation plan. A third and final session was then facilitated to confirm the final proposed changes, with full consideration to feedback received from sessions one and two. Following this final local engagement session, a draft agreement was shared with the union official to facilitate a balloting process with the local membership on accepting or rejecting the proposed changes.

Between each session a two-week period of consultation followed to allow the union representatives to discuss the proposed changes with their wider membership and to allow the local managers, Team Leaders, and Supervisors to discuss the proposed local changes with their teams.

The above process was replicated across the twenty-seven separate engagement processes that took place across daa, with twenty-four concluding with agreements being reached. These engagement sessions took place between June 2020 and July 2021, with some sessions running concurrently and others running sequentially. Through this engagement process format, 93% of frontline employees represented by SIPTU voted in favour of accepting the proposed changes and the agreed outcomes of same.

### 1.5.2 Communications During the Engagement Process

Throughout the various engagement processes explained above, several communications were shared with employees at various stages and through various forums.

Weekly updates were circulated to all employees across daa. These updates included a video from the Chief Executive of daa, Dalton Phillips, giving a high-level update on the engagement processes and sharing any relevant business updates and relevant COVID-19 related updates that may be of interest to employees. The video was available for employees to view via the internal employee intranet. An employee Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document was also circulated weekly to all employees. This FAQ was not specific to the local engagement processes but rather answered relevant employee questions that were continuously arising due to the changing nature of the on-going pandemic e.g., working remotely, sick pay during COVID-19, social distancing in the airport etc.

At a local level, communications specific to the engagement processes were also being shared with the relevant employee cohorts. After every engagement session the relevant senior manager created a short video detailing the specifics of the engagement session and the changes being proposed. Senior management also circulated a localised FAQ to the teams containing pertinent details of the changes in the area being proposed. Normal, business-related team meetings and team huddles also continue, allowing for informal discussions between the team members and their supervisors. Feedback from these sessions were fed back into the engagement process either through the senior manager attending the sessions or through the local HR representative.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2. 1 Introduction**

The following chapter will explore different aspects of the change management process including models and theory, the role of management within the process, employee's resistance to change and the role of communication. The context of the COVID-19 pandemic will also be explored considering both how it affected the aviation sector in general and the impact of the pandemic within Ireland and in daa. Finally, the literature review will consider trade unions and the collective bargaining process, concluding with the specifics of daa's engagement with their trade union partners during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

### **2.2 Change Management**

For organisations who are looking to become and remain profitable, evolving and adapting is unavoidable (Bose, I., 2020). To respond to the difficulties that organisations face in making constant, rapid and evolving improvements, many implement a structured approach to managing change (Schaffer, R. H., 2017). The recognised discipline of Change Management has been in existence for over half a century, yet despite the huge investment that organisations have made in training, tools and processes, the failure rate of change management processes is often cited as high as 70% due to the challenges and complexities that exist – a statistic that has stayed constant since the 1970s (Ashkenas, R. et al., 2013). In addition, the pace of change and the ever-increasing need for change is happening at an accelerated rate - the cycles of change occur more frequently, allowing for almost no break between change programmes, as management, leaders and employees all required to keep up with the ever-increasing speed of business (Welbourne, T. M., 2014). So, what strategies can be put in place to reduce the likelihood of failure?

By underpinning the change management process with an established model or framework organisations can plan and manage the steps of the process more effectively. By reviewing business processes and anticipating changes required, management can proactively respond to evolving business demands (Syed Ibrahim, M. et al., 2019). The following sections look at several change management models

that have evolved over the last number of decades, the key callouts of each and the strengths and weaknesses of some of the factors considered within the models. The Lewin, Prosci ADKAR and Kotter models are explored in greater detail below, with a focus placed on the Kotter model.

## 2.2.1 Change Management Models

Several change management models have been developed that can improve the success rate of change projects – many have similar factors that are crucial in determining the success of the change programme, while other models incorporate factors that are unique and are not included in others (Errida, A. & Lofti, B., 2021).

### 2.2.1.1 *Kurt Lewin's Model*

Lewin's three-step model details the sequential phases of Unfreezing, Moving and Refreezing to manage change (Memon, F. A., Shah, S. and Khoso, I. U., 2021). Burnes, B. and Bargal, D. (2017) argue that during the first step of Lewin's model, the "Unfreezing" step, is where current customs, habits and practices are broken and challenged. Swanson, D. J. and Creed, A. S. (2014) expand this point further and propose that a stimulus is needed to kick-start the "Unfreeze" stage. Browning, T. R. and Collins, S. T. (2019) further support this approach and explain that for "Unfreezing" to happen effectively, a sense of urgency is required, with clear communication of how and why the future, desired state differs from the current. Lewin suggests that it is not enough to simply rely on the supporters or drivers of change, even if one of the key drivers in an external regulatory or governmental body, but that proactive consideration of resistors is critical for effective change management (McKimm, J. and Jones, P. K., 2018).



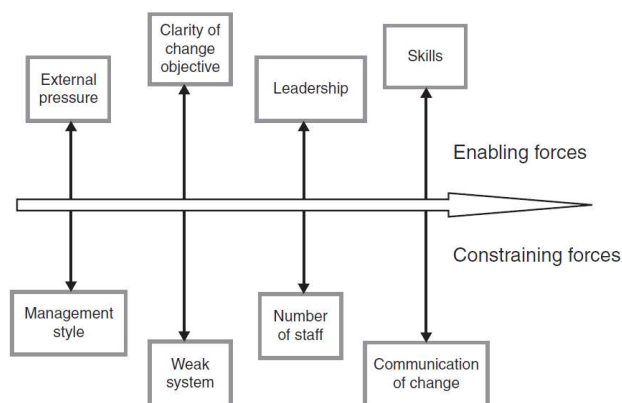


Table 1: Examples of Enabling and Constraining Forces (Swanson, D. J. and Creed, A. S., 2014).

Akan, O. H. and Medley, B. C. (2008) suggest that the second step in Lewin’s process, which is defined as the “Moving” phase, is where the desired end state, including values and behaviours is identified. Burnes, B. (2020) supports this idea, adding that change actually occurs when the enabling forces for change, are greater than the forces resisting change. The third and final step of Lewin’s model is known as “Refreezing”, and is explained by Bridgman, T., Brown, K. G. and Cummings, S. (2016) as the phase during which new habits or norms are implemented and established at the next level. Burnes, B. (2020) also notes that this phase also seeks to bring about a new status quo and “to bring about the permanence of the new situation”.

Although this three-step model has provided the basis for subsequent models of change, it has often been criticized for its linear approach (Bakari, H., Hunjra, A. I. and Niazi, G. S. K., 2017). Jost, J. T. (2015) observes that Lewin’s model focuses on “unfreezing” the opinion of the collective of the group rather than on individual opinions.

### 2.2.1.2 The Prosci ADKAR Model

This five-step model was created by Jeffrey Hiatt, the founder of Prosci, in the late 1990s and it focuses on the activities and results achieved by each individual - it is a goal-oriented change model (Erskine, P., 2013). Bose, I. (2020) explains that this model can be used to understand and diagnose employee resistance to change, making the transition easier for them and creating a plan for the successful

implementation of change. The ADKAR model consists of five elements that define foundations for successful change. The five-fold constructs are Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability and Reinforcement i.e., ADKAR (Kiani, A. and Shah, M. H., 2014).

<b>The ADKAR Change Competency Model</b>	
<b>A</b>	Awareness of the need for change
<b>D</b>	Desire to support and participate in the change
<b>K</b>	Knowledge of how to change
<b>A</b>	Ability to launch required skills and behaviours
<b>R</b>	Reinforcement to sustain the change

Table 2: The ADKAR Change Competency Model (Kiani, A. and Shah, M. H., 2014)

As highlighted by Bose, I. (2020) the ADKAR model shares some similarities with Lewin’s three-stage model; Awareness and Desire overlap with Lewin’s first stage of “Unfreezing”. Knowledge and Ability relate to the “Moving” or “Changing” second stage of Lewin’s model, with education, training, upskilling, system changes and new techniques contributing to the change initiative. The last phase of the ADKAR model, Reinforcing, seeks to stabilise the introduced change, similar to Lewin’s final step of “Refreezing” (Bose, I., 2020). De Cremer, D., Rousseau, D. M and Stouten, J., (2018) observe that the ADKAR model ADKAR focuses “considerable attention on the processes that help employees to serve as ambassadors of the change”, by considering their individual needs and the consequences the change might have for specific groups of employees. Although the ADKAR model is easy to understand and apply it has been criticised for its sequential nature – progress to each stage is depended on the successful and full completion of the previous stage (Bejinariu, A. C. et al., 2017).

### 2.2.1.3 *Kotter’s Eight-Step Model*

As explained by Sanchez, J., Thornton, B. and Usinger, J. (2019) Kotter’s model can be broken down into eight steps: steps one to four relate to preparing the employees for change, managing resistance, and getting the organisation ready, Steps five and six detail how to get the organisation to a new place and, finally, steps seven and eight

examine how the organisation can integrate the change into the organisation's culture going forward.

Kotter's model is probably the most well-known and well-regarded for managing organisational change, albeit that the popularity of the model seems to be based on its direct and simple format rather than an analysis of the results it produces (Appelbaum et al., 2012). Cohen and Kotter (2012) discuss the eight stages of the model as a flow of change rather than as sequential steps noting that there are overlaps in the stages and some change programmes don't allow for the rigid sequencing of the eight steps systematically. Cohen and Kotter (2012) further explain that the most difficult problem throughout the flow of change is changing the behaviour of people. The following table details both an explanation of the eight-stage process and the desired new behaviours that each stage of the process is trying to achieve.

Step	Action	Desired New Behaviour
1	Establish a sense of urgency	People start telling each other, "Let's go, we need to change things !"
2	Create a guiding Coalition	A group is formed to guide the change and they start to work well together
3	Develop a vision and strategy	The guiding team develops and communicates the right vision and strategy for the change
4	Communicate the change vision	People begin to buy into the change, and this can be seen in their behaviour
5	Empower employees for broad-based action	More people feel able to act, and do act, on the vision
6	Generate short-term wins	Momentum builds as people try to fulfill the vision. Less resistance exists
7	Consolidate gains and produce more change	People continue to make wave after wave of changes until the vision is fulfilled
8	Anchor New Approaches in the Culture	New and wining behaviour continues despite the pull of tradition, new leadership etc.

Table 3: Kotter's Eight Step Change Management Model and New Desired Behaviours (Cohen, D. S. and Kotter, J. P., 2012, p.6)

Kotter's model is supported by many others - Radwan, A. (2020) notes that gradual introduction of the idea of change where complexities exist can help foster trust amongst the employees and avoid rejection of the idea. Sanchez, J., Thornton, B. and Usinger, J. (2019) also note that during complex change, empowering a broad base of people to take action by removing as many barriers to the implementation as possible can increase the chances of success. Holmes and Wheeler (2017) support

the idea that short-term wins that are highly visible can quickly propel change forward whilst Lv and Zhang (2017) note that strong leadership is essential to reinforce the sense of urgency, a focus on the vision and to encourage ongoing stakeholder engagement - senior leaders need to maintain a sense of urgency.

#### 2.2.1.4 *A Comparative Analysis*

There are pros and cons to each of the models and a “one size fits all” approach to change management is difficult – and as Sidorko (2008) observed, no single model can provide all the answers that arise during a change management programme. Each of the models detailed above highlight the importance of making people aware of the need for change and explaining why the change is necessary. However, each model emphasises or focuses on differing aspects of the change management process, some models have overlapping aspects and some insights that are specific to themselves.

Lewin’s three-step model is linear in approach and considers change management through a narrowly focused start, middle and end. The ADKAR and Kotter models seem to take a more holistic approach, with the ADKAR model potentially more suited to incremental change rather than a large-scale change management approach (Lawler, A. and Sillitoe, J., 2010). Stakeholder management is a key theme across all models but to differing degrees. Lewin’s approach focuses on management telling their teams what to change. Kotter specifies the importance of wider, top-down stakeholder management and creating a powerful coalition (Pollack, J. and Pollack, R., 2015). In contrast, the ADKAR model focuses on instilling a desire to change and understanding how to change rather than on communicating a pre-determined need for change, as decided by Management.

In relation to communication, Kotter’s model explicitly focuses on preparing for change and the importance of communication with all stakeholders. Kotter suggests that to capture the “hearts and minds” of those impacted by the change, the vision should be communicated consistently at every possible opportunity, through as many forums as

possible using the mantra “Repeat, Repeat, Repeat” (Kotter, J.P., 2012, p. 96). Kotter’s model focuses on leading change and not just managing change. In considering change management during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bradison (2021) observes that Kotter’s model can be used at the micro and macro level to provide the workforce with clarity, to develop a strategic vision to look beyond the pandemic, to engage staff incrementally day to day while adjusting to the evolving environment and to engage a small team to develop an intentional change management plan, including considerations for flexible working.

All models consider to varying degrees how to prevent, tackle or overcome resistance to change and the role of management in the change process. The following sections will look more closely at the role of communication in change management, resistance to change and the role of management.

### 2.2.2 The Role of Communication

George Bernard Shaw once wrote “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place” (Turaga, R., 2019). Communication can be defined as “the process of exchange of ideas and information between two or more people, leading to a mutual understanding” (Bakirbekova, A. M. and Suleimenova, A. R., 2018). But how can we tell if this exchange of information and ideas is effective or not?

Gupta and Reddy (2020) note that effective communication is - amongst other things - proactive, polite, imaginative, innovative, creative, constructive, professional, progressive, energetic, enabling, transparent and technology friendly. When considering this definition in the context of engaging with employees on change, the task of fulfilling each of the outlined requirements seems almost impossible. So how can an organisation manage their communication strategy to support the wider change management agenda and the engagement process with employees?

Rajhans (2018) defines effective communication management as “*a process in which multiple types of communications are delivered in such a way that the objective for which the communication is released is achieved to the maximum extent*”. This aligns with step four of Kotter’s model, which highlights the importance of communicating the

vision consistently, at every possibility and through as many forums as possible to capture the hearts and minds of those affected by the proposed changes. Balogun and Hope Hailey (2014) maintain that, during a change management process, there needs to be a stepped communications process to create ongoing dialogue with employees – starting with a conversation on the need for change, moving through conversations for understanding purposes and finally discussions on implementation and conversation for closure. They go on to say that two-way dialogue is important, allowing employees to voice their concerns about change. Townhalls, Employee Forums and focus groups allow employees to give feedback to management and allows management to answer questions and provide clarity to help employees make sense of what is going on (Balogun, J. and Hope Hailey, V., 2014).

Chaudry (2020) supports that communication that is timely, clear, and consistent can help close the gap between organisational goals and individual concerns and can increase willing participation in the change process. Chaudry also argues that a communication strategy is crucial to provide consistent messaging to all stakeholders (Chaudhry, S., 2020). Buick et al. (2018), considering a different perspective, noted that communication failure can result in uncertainty, ambiguity and employees feeling uninformed, all of which increase the change resistance.

The above details the role of communication in the change management process, why a communication strategy is so important, what this strategy needs to consider and the forums through which communications can be shared.

### 2.2.3 Resistance to Change

When evaluating why change initiatives fail, employee resistance has emerged as a key factor (Brunetto Y. and Teo, S. T. T., 2018). During change management programmes employees often try to assess who will gain and who will suffer – this often leads to employees questioning the intentions of management, perceptions of unfairness, lack of cooperation or, in some instances, a sense of betrayal by Management (Cui, Y. and Jiao, H., 2019).

In addition, an organisation's history and culture can affect changes in direction and momentum (Brunetto, Y. and Teo, T. T., 2018). Transformational change requires

individuals and cohorts of employees to let go of what has happened in the past and create new workplace practices and behaviours. Trust between stakeholders is not only critical to the success of a change programme, but also essential in managing the variations that occur before, during and after the change has been implemented (Rose, J. and Schlichter, B. R., 2013).

Buick et al. (2018) suggest that engaging employees in a collaborative approach to the change process increases employee “buy-in”. This view is supported by Chaudry (2020) who believes that employee participation in the process promotes psychological support for change and that by including employees they can understand how important their work and contribution is to the success of the project. Bankar and Gankar (2013) call out that employee engagement is paramount in successfully implementing organisational change – and the primary driver of engagement is the ability of senior management to show an interest in employees’ wellbeing, further highlighting the need for management to be close to employee issues on the ground.

#### 2.2.4 The Role of Management

Organisations who can successfully engage their middle managers as change agents, have a greater chance of successfully implementing the change (Buick et al. 2018). This sentiment is also supported by Hansell, V. (2018) who notes that middle managers have a unique position during a change management process as they have a unique position of influence whilst also managing stressors from all directions. So how can management positively influence the stakeholders in the process to bring about successful change?

Leaders of change need to adopt a Relational Leadership style, which leverages the relationship between the leader and the follower to gain support for the change agenda (Higgs, M. and Levene, F., 2018). Buick et al. (2018) add that strong and trustworthy relationships need to exist between management and the employees. The relationship between management and employees becomes even more important for frontline workers who can feel removed from senior management and who often find local change initiatives much more meaningful than companywide change programmes (Balogun, J. and Hope Hailey, V., 2014).

Does this mean that Management should “own” the change management process for their area? And be the only conduit for communication? Organisations must support their managers in developing what is required of them during successful change management programmes. Management not only need the capability to support their teams through the change but also the capacity and time to invest in liaising with and communicating on the ground with their team - organisations need to systematically develop change management skills and capabilities within their middle management cohort to reduce resistance to change and build trust within the organisation (Cui, Y. and Jiao, H., 2019).

Managers however cannot deliver change on their own – other internal and external stakeholders are crucial in delivering successful change programmes. Engaging with employees on an individual or collective basis is an important step in the change process, as highlighted in all of the change management models previously discussed. In a unionised environment, trade unions are key stakeholders and engagement with employees on the change agenda is predicated on 3<sup>rd</sup> party agreements with trade union partners and collective bargaining is required.

### **2.3 Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining**

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) define collective bargaining as *“the process by which working people come together and through their trade unions, negotiate contracts with their employers to determine fair conditions of employment”* (ICTU, 2021). Roche and Gormley (2020) develop this definition further by explaining two further decentralised but coordinated approaches to collective bargaining. Concession bargaining takes place where unions concede on work practice changes and potential pay cuts for assurances that no involuntary job cuts will occur (Roche, W. K. and Gormley, T., 2020). Pattern Bargaining exists where unions seek to achieve similar outcomes across separate negotiations (Roche, W. K. and Gormley, T., 2020).

Where collective bargaining processes result in internal conflict, organisations in Ireland tend to take a reactive approach, often engaging with the third-party mechanisms that exist in Ireland – cases are referred to the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) for formal hearings, with onward appeals to the Labour Court (LC) (Currie, D. et al., 2020). This institutional focus on dispute resolution is favoured



instead of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) methods, such as utilising mediators and facilitators, proactively seeking resolution without the need for a formal hearing in the WRC or LC (Currie, D. et al., 2020).

Before exploring the role that collective bargaining played in the engagement that took place across daa in 2020/2021 in more detail, it is important to consider the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact it had not only on daa's operation, but the impact it had on aviation across the globe.

## **2.4 Aviation and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Similar to other sectors of the economy, aviation is vulnerable to external factors such as natural disasters, military conflicts, terrorist attacks, economic recessions and disease outbreaks or pandemics (Cugueró-Escofet, N., Suau-Sanchez, P. and Voltes-Dorta, A., 2020). These factors can influence passenger numbers, travel bans, flight cancellations and border closures, all of which have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic to unprecedented levels – most airports experienced traffic downturn in excess of 90% (Burger, R.G. and Orr, B., 2021). It is estimated that in 2020, \$113 billion was wiped out in worldwide airline revenues (Dobre, C., 2021) and that two-thirds of the world's passenger jets are grounded due to COVID-19 (Štimac, I. et al., 2021).

For airport operations there have been some specific impacts. The reduction in airline traffic has a knock-on effect to the revenues earned by the airport, from both passengers passing through and airlines withdrawing flights, while still having to meet high fixed costs (Button, K., 2020). The impact was felt not only for direct airport employees but also for employees in retail, restaurant, taxis, car rental (Mundy, R. A., 2020).

In Europe, airport authorities are seeking governmental support and financial assistance to ensure their survival – this is in addition to supports sought from the government from the wider aviation sector including airlines, aeronautical manufacturers and ground handling staff who have been affected by the almost complete standstill of global air traffic (Dobre, C. 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted potential weakness in the business model of most airports, prioritising their

infrastructure around the ability of passengers and cargo to embark and disembark a plane (Burger, R.G. and Orr, B. 2021). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may challenge this business model going forward, disrupting the aviation sector even further if new and innovative products and services can be designed and offered to passengers and customers. The aftermath of the pandemic may also force local airports to consider how they can adapt their strategies to protect local employment, increase their resilience to external factors and remain competitive in situations where their key income stream is under threat (Štimac, I. et al. 2021). Some of these changes have already begin – small positive trends are beginning to emerge as airports continue to implement measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 - but further planning and investment is required to increase airport resilience to external threats (Guo, J. et al., 2021).

The above highlights how COVID-19 has resulted in challenges for airports across the globe – but what does it mean for the aviation sector in Ireland as a whole and, more specifically, for daa operating in Dublin Airport?

## **2.5 Daa's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

As discussed in the previous section, the pandemic resulted in many players in the European aviation sector, particularly airlines, implementing radical cost saving measures in response to the crisis to protect their business (Adrienne, N., Budd L. and Ison, S., 2020). In Ireland, daa was losing €1 million a day throughout the pandemic and it became clear that drastic action was needed in both the Dublin and Cork Airports (Paul, M., 2020).

In March 2020 daa responded to what was predicted to be at least a 75% drop in air traffic with an initial four-week plan – during this time employees were paid for their rostered hours, but one week's mandatory leave had to be taken. Pay increases and recruitment for 2020 were also frozen (Higgins, C. 2020b). In May 2020 however, as the scale and longevity of the crisis became more apparent, daa's CEO Dalton Philips announced more drastic and longer-term measures to be taken; most noticeable among these measures were a reduction to an 80% working week for all employees until at least June 2020, staffing reductions across daa, and major changes in work practices (Higgins, C. – 2020c). At the time daa committed to working collaboratively

with employee and staff representatives to carry out a right sizing exercise of the business, to introduce new ways of working and to facilitate several employees to exit the business (Higgins, C., 2020c).

The organisation began engagement with the unions seeking agreement on five key changes in work practices at both Dublin and Cork airports - the changes mainly focus on rostering, flexibility around cross terminal working, teamwork and a commitment from staff to clean workspaces (O'Connor, F., 2020). In June 2020 this position was reinforced by all unions representing employees in daa who recognised that management had an absolute need to right size the business, with the unions noting that they hoped a voluntary approach to redundancies would allow those who chose to remain to support the company in moving towards a sustainable future by embracing the changes required (Higgins, C., 2020d).

As talks progressed throughout the summer and autumn of 2020 New Ways of Working proposals had been recommended for acceptance in 90% of sections affected ahead of balloting, facilitating a number of voluntary redundancies, on severance terms broadly similar to those offered in previous redundancy programmes and working hours remaining at 80% for those that accepted the proposal (Miley, I., 2020). Some cohorts however on the frontline at Dublin Airport, including the craft group and baggage struggled to agree to several aspects of the proposal and were moved to a 60% working week (Higgins, C., 2020d). As a result, no voluntary redundancies or career breaks could be facilitated in these areas as the efficiencies to allow this reduction in FTE were not achieved (Higgins, C., 2020d). Daa confirmed that, for cohorts of employees that accepted the New Ways of Working in their area, 100% working hours and 100% pay would be restored from March 28th, 2021 for employees in both Cork and Dublin – the restoration of 100% working hours was contingent on each employee taking 20 days annual leave to help meet the cost of increasing working hours. The arrangement is in place until at least 11<sup>th</sup> September 2021 (O'Halloran, B., 2021).

Throughout the crisis daa's Chief Executive Officer, Dalton Philips, became the organisation's "Chief Communicator" – reflecting on the role of communication throughout the crisis in May 2021 he noted that "you really can't communicate too much in a crisis," and that telling people exactly what's happening, what the plan

moving forward is and why you are doing what you are doing is so important – you need to listen, explain and answer questions, liquidity is critical to the company but “safety, support and strong communications are ultimately what carry people through”(Noonan, L., 2021).

## **Chapter 3: Research Aims and Objectives**

Considering the literature review above, understanding the context in which the engagement between daa and its trade union partner's took place, the aim of this research was to explore how daa engaged with SIPTU on implementing front-line change during the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific focus of the research was to understand the role communication within this engagement process.

### **3.1 Research Question**

This aim of the research was to address the following overarching research question: What role did communication play within the engagement process between daa and SIPTU during the COVID-19 pandemic on implementing frontline change?

The objectives for this research were to determine, from the perspective of the central participants only, within the case organisation:

1. What worked well during the engagement process and what issues arose?
2. What role did management play in the engagement process?
3. What role did communication play in the engagement process?

### **3.2 Research Methodology**

The research question and objectives detailed above are exploratory in nature and as such a qualitative approach was taken to the research. This approach allowed for the research to begin with a broad focus that became narrower as the research developed and progressed, as suggested by Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill (2012). Based on the Research "Onion", also described by Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill (2012), the following sections detail the philosophy, approach, methodology and design taken for this research.

### **3.3 Research Philosophy**

This qualitative research was conducted through the epistemological lens of interpretivism – the research considers the social world of the research subjects and try to reflect their input through an understanding of their own world and unique perspective (Gupta, R. K. and Awasthy, R., 2015, p. 6). This philosophy also underpins the idea that the research is based on a particular set of individuals, coming together at a specific time to understand the social setting they find themselves in (Monk-Turner, E., 2020).

The philosophy of positivism was also considered for this research but was disregarded. As explained by Haydam, N. E. and Steenkamp, P. (2020), positivism views the world as an objective reality which exists outside of personal experiences. This research will consider the personal experiences of the central participants throughout the engagement process.

### **3.4 Research Approach**

As explained by Mitchell, A. (2018), deductive reasoning takes a “top-down” approach by beginning with a theory and then narrowing the focus down further into specific hypothesis that can be tested. Once observations have been made and data is collected, the hypothesis can be tested to confirm (or not) the original theory.

Inductive reasoning takes the opposite approach, working "bottom up" to build on observations and data collected to patterns and regularities, allowing for tentative hypotheses to be explored and finally developing some general conclusions or theories (Mitchell, A., 2018). Corley, K. G. (2015) explains further that with inductive research there is room to adjust the process as the research progresses as the researcher begins to familiarise themselves with the research context and collect preliminary data.

An inductive approach was taken to this research to understand and collect data on the experiences of the central participants during the engagement process that took place, to determine if any patterns exist in the data and to develop conclusions and findings about the engagement process from the perspective of the central participants.

### 3. 5 Qualitative Research – Validity and Reliability

As explained by Morse, J. M. et al. (2002), several leading qualitative researchers argue that the concepts of validity and reliability are more relevant to quantitative research, and that instead rigor is what should be considered when conducting qualitative research.

The idea of rigor in qualitative research had previously been referred to as “Trustworthiness”, albeit that different aspects of trustworthiness can be referred to differently in qualitative and quantitative research (Walle, A. H., 2015, p. 133).

Aspect of Trustworthiness	Quantitative Research	Qualitative Research
<b>Truth Value</b>	<b>Internal Validity:</b> (a) Changes in an independent variable trigger changes in the dependent variable. (b) Other variables controlled.	<b>Credibility:</b> Understanding the subjective “reality” experienced by research participants
<b>Applicability</b>	Have the threats to <b>External Validity</b> that could compromise the findings been adequately addressed?	Does “ <b>Transferability</b> ” exist? Is there a goodness of fit between the research and the uses of the findings?
<b>Consistency</b>	The same experiment or procedure gives the same consistent results.	All research participants are in consistent agreement regarding an issue.
<b>Neutrality</b>	An appropriate and rigorous methodology maintains a neutral focus.	Closely involvement with research participants can lead to understanding.

Table 4: Aspects of Trustworthiness in Quantitative and Qualitative Research (adapted from Walle, A. H., 2015).

### 3.6 Limitations of Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Trustworthiness can be problematic in qualitative research, particularly when considered through the narrow lens of consistency or transferability as qualitative research, in particular inductive research, allows for the specific context of the research to be considered. For this reason, the dependability of the methods of data collection and analysis should also be considered (Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2013).

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013) also recognise the importance of transferability in qualitative research and add that transferability is determined by the reader of the

research and it is up to them to determine if their own setting and circumstances are similar enough to the original research to facilitate a safe transfer.

Trustworthiness is considered in the research approach taken for this study – the next section details the research instruments used and how the methodology is applied through these instruments.

### **3.7 Research Instruments**

#### **3.7.1 Semi-structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather information by asking a list of open-ended questions, allowing the interviewee to raise issues and discuss topics that are important to them in the context of the interview – some of which may not have been anticipated (Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2013).

Quimby (2012), suggests that interviews should take place face-to-face to facilitate rich and detailed discussions, allowing the interviewee to discuss unplanned topics, address any sensitive discussion with the interviewer and to explore the meaning that they attach to their experience. However, due to the public health restrictions in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews for this research took place in person only when it was safe to do so. In instances where this was not possible, virtual face-to-face interviews took place over Microsoft Teams. The virtual interviews were recorded, with each interviewee giving written consent in advance. In addition, notes were taken during the interview to capture the interviewee's responses.

Although interviews may be time consuming, the focus of this research was to understand individual experiences of the engagement that took place and capture unexpected or unanticipated inputs from the interviewees – for this reason focus groups, surveys and questionnaires and other research methods were discounted.

A copy of the guiding questions used in the semi-structured interviews can be found in Appendix 1.



### 3.7.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

In order to identify emerging themes and patterns, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was conducted to identify emergent themes and patterns of meaning across the data (Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2013, p. 202). IPA was used for analysis rather than Thematic Analysis (TA) as this research is concerned not only with the themes emerging but also in the specifics of individual experiences within the engagement process - IPA is commonly used to analyse semi-structured interviews, allowing for follow-up questioning within the interview on particular or personal points of interest and also exploring how interviewees made sense of their experiences (Riley, R. and Spiers, J., 2019). As recommended by Doran, Fox, and Rodham (2015), the semi-structured interviews were recorded and, to ensure the trustworthiness of the data when employing IPA, the audio recordings were listened to with the purpose of verifying the data captured in the interviews to decrease the likelihood of superimposing researcher presuppositions or interpretative bias onto the data.

### 3.7.3 Themes and Coding in IPA

IPA doesn't look to produce succinct codes, but rather draws commentary from "sweeping" or reading through the data at three main levels to make descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments (Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2013, p. 214). Comments were also captured from reviewing the recordings of the interview to verify the data captured. Although succinct codes are not produced in IPA, master themes were identified to anchor key findings in direct quotes from the participant interviews, this helps to demonstrate that the findings are based on a rigorous and analytical process rather than personal opinion (Charlick, S. et al., 2016).

In addition to the above, IPA coding also includes "free associating", which involves the researcher noting what comes to their mind as they read the research data (Flowers, P., Larkin, M. and Smith, J. 2009). An example of the IPA carried out in this research – including comments captured, direct quotes and free association – can be found in Appendix 2.

#### 3.7.4 Sampling

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of participants from the engagement process. Participants were included in the sample based on specific and particular characteristics (Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2013, p. 214). As noted by Adkins, Chauvi and Johnson (2020), qualitative researchers appreciate that certain individuals are uniquely positioned to offer insights and an in-depth understanding of the research topic and are therefore more relevant and useful in answering the research question at hand - purposive sampling reflects intentional selection of research participants to leverage their personal experiences.

The non-probability handpicked sample consists of union officials, local union representatives, executive management, senior operational management and HR management all of whom were central participants in the engagement process. All union officials and union representatives were members of the SIPTU Trade Union only. All central participants participated in engagement sessions relating to change for frontline areas of the business that were represented by SIPTU only.

In total sixteen interviews were conducted consisting of eight members of the wider management team and eight employee representatives from SIPTU.

### **3.8 Ethics**

Ethical consideration is given at every stage of the research. An Employee Information Sheet was sent to all participants prior to conducting the interview detailing how information would be collected, recorded, stored and presented in the final dissertation. This Information Sheet also explained that participants could decide to stop their participation at any stage of the process. Contact details of the author were also shared to answer any questions that participants may have. An Informed Written Consent Form was sent to all participants, who were required to read, sign and return before their interview took place. As this research is qualitative in nature, and relies on individual participation and input, complexities and sensitives were always considered (Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2013, p. 65).

### **3.9 Limitations**

There are limitations that result from the scope of this research. As the research is focused solely on the input from the central participants of the engagement process the research does not consider the perspective of the frontline teams who were directly impacted by the changes negotiated and, in most cases, agreed by the central participants of the engagement process. The input of the frontline employees, capturing the reality of what happened on the ground, could be researched in a subsequent study.

In addition, and as previously explained, the research is solely concerned with exploring the engagement process that took place between daa and SIPTU represented areas of the frontline. There has been no input from union officials or employee representatives from the other unions that engaged with the company on New Ways of Working including Mandate, Forsa, Connect and Unite. The research conducted in this study could be expanded upon in a future study considering the input of these unions.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This section details the findings of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) conducted following the semi-structured interviews with the sixteen central participants of the engagement process between daa and SIPTU in relation to frontline change.

### **4.2 Interview Participants**

The sixteen participants are referenced as Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3 etc.

Participants 1 to 8 represent the eight members of the wider management team (including daa executive management, senior operational management and HR management).

Participants 9 to 16 represent the eight employee representatives from SIPTU (including union officials and local employee representatives).

### **4.3 Detailed Analysis**

The analysis has been captured under emergent master themes, as described by Charlick et al. (2016). Based on direct quotes provided in the interviews, IPA commentary has been captured as descriptive comments, linguistic comments or conceptual comments - commentary captured as “free association” was also considered in the analysis (Chan, C. D, Farmer, L. B. and Miller, R. M., 2018). The six master themes that emerged from the analysis of these interviews are Technology, Process & Structure, Trust, Participants, The COVID-19 Pandemic and New Approaches. The following sections will analyse the research under each of these master themes in greater detail. An overall conclusion is also included.

### 4.3.1 Technology

In addition to general commentary captured under the theme of Technology, three sub-themes emerged. These sub-themes include - Video, WhatsApp Groups and Electronic FAQs.

#### 4.3.1.1 Video

All sixteen participants interviewed agreed that the introduction of the weekly video from the Chief Executive was hugely positive. From a management perspective Participant 7 suggested that *“the constant and consistent drum of the CXO’s video became a vehicle for communication that all employees expected each week”*. Participant 4 proposed that video was *“a gamechanger, particularly given the context of the pandemic”*.

Participants from the employee representative cohort observed that the video facilitated the Chief Executive in giving messages, even when difficult, directly and transparently to employees. This position was reinforced by Participant 9 who commented that *“seeing his facial expressions as he spoke helped people to know that he was sincere”* and by Participant 10 who noted that the message was shared *“straight from the horse’s mouth”*. The employee representatives did however identify challenges with effectively communicating on the frontline. One such challenge exists because laptops are not required to carry out the core daily tasks of several frontline teams. Participant 16 explained that *“as the team don’t access e-mails or the intranet, they prefer to ask their rep for information”*. This position was reinforced by Participant 10 who shared that *“people put greater trust in what their rep says rather than what they see in a video or read in an FAQ”*. What is most noticeable is that whilst employee representatives highlighted the difficulties communicating at the frontline, none of the management participants identified these challenges with technology for the frontline teams.

#### 4.3.1.2 *Electronic FAQs*

Most of the participants agreed that the electronic FAQs were effective, with 13 of the 16 participants supporting the use of the FAQs.

From a management perspective, participants 1,3, 4 and 6 noted that the messaging in the FAQs was aligned to that shared in the video. This approach of repeating the same message through different communication channel aligns to step four of Kotter's change management model that suggests that information should be communicated consistently at every possible opportunity, through as many forums as possible using the mantra "Repeat, Repeat, Repeat" to be effective (Kotter, J.P., 2012, p. 96). Participants 2 and 5 also commented that the electronic FAQ was "*vital in getting information to the frontline*", and that the FAQ was "*front and centre for frontline colleagues*".

From an employee representative perspective there was support for the idea of the FAQ with Participant 11 noting that "*everyone had access to the same information*". Participant 15 supported this view, adding that "*it is a good tool to ensure everyone involved had access to the same info*". The employee representatives did however highlight some challenges with the FAQs, particularly around timing. Participant 14 noted that the FAQ was often circulated "*before the reps could brief their teams*". In contrast, Participant 15 highlighted that the document was circulated too late, with "*additional questions coming to light that were not included in the FAQ*". These comments identify an inconsistency in the timing of the FAQ across the various engagements.

#### 4.3.1.3 *WhatsApp Groups*

The use of WhatsApp groups as a means of communication during the engagement sessions was an unexpected addition to the interview discussions – this was not part of the author's questions but came out during the discussions at the interviews. This mode of communication was mainly discussed by employee representative participants but was also referenced by management.

Several employee representatives agreed that this form of communication was effective amongst the representatives themselves, with Participants 12 and 14

detailing that WhatsApp facilitated the *“sharing of information consistently with a large number of people”*. Of further interest, of the six employee representative participants, three proposed that while WhatsApp is effective for sharing information, it was not effective for discussion or answering questions. This position was supported by Participant 9 who suggested that WhatsApp is only useful *“in areas where the cohorts are very small”* and Participant 15 who noted that *“it is easier to make a quick phone call to explain the details”*.

From a management perspective a diametric view emerged from the discussions about WhatsApp. Management participants shared a general frustration with the use of WhatsApp to circulate communication, with Participant 2 noting that it is hard to *“monitor or control”* what is shared on this platform. Participant 3 expanded on this position, commenting that information is circulated *“like wildfire or Chinese whispers on WhatsApp”*. Participant 5 remarked that *“Management are always competing with the rumour mill and hearsay, and WhatsApp makes this more difficult”*.

The most interesting finding from the discussion on WhatsApp was uncovering the reliance employee representatives have on this mode of communication to circulate information to their colleagues on the frontline teams and, on the other hand, management do not consider this platform in their communications strategy at all.

#### 4.3.2 Process & Structure

Within the theme of Process & Structure, four sub-themes emerged. These sub-themes include – Format, Preparation, Informational Slides and Follow-Up.

##### 4.3.2.1 *Format*

All six management participants supported the format of the engagement sessions. This view was highlighted by Participant 1 who noted that the *“format was good, consistent and aligned”* and was supported by Participant 7 who explained that *“there was a consistency to the process across the board focusing on the five common NWOW themes”*.

From an employee representative perspective 50% of participants felt that the format was helpful and agreed with management's perspective that the approach was consistent. Participant 9 added that the format was "*agreed and aligned across all engagements*" and Participant 11 noted that there was "*a good structure in place where information was well explained*". However, some suggestions to improve the format were suggested by the employee representatives. Three of the participants stated that the same level of change was not required from every team within the business area, and that some topics were not as relevant as others. Participant 11 suggested that a further breakdown of the business area into sub-teams might have supported a more targeted approach to communication for these smaller teams, noting that they felt "*bombarded with information not relevant for my area*". This idea was supported by Participant 15 noting that "*it doesn't have to be one size fits all with number of sessions*". An example of the above can be demonstrated on the wider Airfield team, where the ask of the Airfield Operatives was not the same as the ask on the Foreign Object Debris (FOD) team. These teams were both discussed within the Airside engagement sessions.

#### 4.3.2.2 *Preparation*

Two distinct perspectives emerged from the interviews regarding preparation. From a management perspective the overarching view was that a lot of time, effort and planning went into preparing for the engagement. Participant 2 noted that the "*asks under New Ways of Working were clarified by management in advance of the first session*" and Participant 7 detailed how "*an enormity of preparation was required so that neither the strategy nor the communications was undermined*".

On the other hand, the employee representatives felt unprepared for the first session, describing how they attended the engagement "*blind*", as shared by Participant 11, and "*cold – with nothing shared in advance*", as noted by Participant 15. Participant 16 suggested that "*more prep with the reps in advance could have prevented time wasting later on*".



#### 4.3.2.3 *Informational Slides*

PowerPoint slides prepared by Management were provided in first session of each engagement detailing for example roster changes, FTE requirements, changes to where employees worked, increased flexibility etc. as required for each area. As the discussions evolved the slides were updated and recirculated.

All sixteen participants agreed that the provision of information through PowerPoint slides was positive, and the format of using the five pillars of the New Ways of Working in the slides further ensured a consistent approach. From a management perspective Participant 5 noted that *“the consistent approach helped”* and Participant 7 supported this, noting that *“the five pillars of NWOW were reinforced at every session”*. Management was also confident in the effectiveness of the slides in communicating the changes required, noting that the slides *“detailed the ask of the business”* (Participant 1), *“clearly defined what was needed”* (Participant 2) and *“gave the session a specific focus”* (Participant 8).

From an employee representative perspective there was an appreciation that slides could be circulated to colleagues after the session, with Participant 10 noting that *“being able to share the slides meant information was available to colleagues”* and Participant 13 highlighting that the *“transparent sharing of slides made the process easier”*. Similar to the feedback on the overall format however, employee representatives suggested that the information circulated could have been distilled further - Participant 11 explained that the information was *“too high level”*, with Participant 12 adding that the slides *“focused on process changes and not on how people would be impacted”*.

#### 4.3.2.4 *Follow-Up*

Similar to other sub-themes within Process & Structure, two opposing views emerged regarding the follow-up activities to the engagement sessions.

On the management side, Participant 1 felt that managers demonstrated *“structure and control in the messaging after the sessions”*, with Participant 3 agreeing that *“formal and structured comms was required after each engagement”*. Participant 6 noted that colleagues *“expected comms after every session – it became the norm”*.

This view was not shared by most employee representatives, with five of the six participants critical of the follow-up provided. Participant 15 described how *“management went missing after the engagement and reps were left to communicate to the team with little or no support”*. Participant 10 shared that *“local management were not so good at following-up with the team”* and Participant 13 described how *“reps felt like they were caught between a rock and hard place if follow-up information was shared in an untimely fashion”*.

Of particular interest are two comments relating to who was responsible for follow-up communications on the ground. Participant 12 suggested that *“if management had asked someone on the ground who understands the area to explain what the changes would mean for team, it may have prevented some of the chaos that followed”* and Participant 14 noted that *“senior managers feel the need to always have the answer, they don’t seem to stop to think about if the line manager or local manager is better placed to answer the question”*.

#### 4.3.3 Trust

Davis, Mayer and Schoorman (2007) define trust as the *“willingness to take risk or be vulnerable in a relationship”*. This definition is explored under the three sub-themes that emerged under the wider theme of Trust. These sub-themes include – The Employee/Union Relationship, The Management/Union Relationship and Frontline Management. General commentary on Trust was also captured.

##### 4.3.3.1 *The Employee/Union Relationship*

Different views were shared by the participants in relation to employee/union trust, without one dominant view emerging. However, from a communications perspective, many participants commented on the reliance put on employee representatives to lead the communication on the frontline. From a management perspective Participant 4 noted that the organisation *“delegates the responsibility of communication at the frontline to local reps”*, and Participant 7 added that *“reps do a good job locally at understanding the business in their area”*.

From an employee representative perspective Participant 5 suggested that “*people trust their rep as a starting point*”, with Participant 16 agreeing that “*employees will pick up the phone to a rep rather than to their manager*”. Of particular interest is a comment made by Participant 12 who noted that the “*burden of co-ordinating seemed to fall on the shoulders of a small number of senior managers*” and that this created a requirement on a number of local representatives to “*step up locally when local management weren’t able to*”. From a general employee/union perspective it was noted by Participant 14 that the union official “*was spread very thin*”, and by Participant 15 that “*staff often felt let down by the official*”.

#### 4.3.3.2 *The Management/Union Relationship*

Three of the sixteen participants felt that the introduction of the weekly call between management and the unions was a positive development, with all three agreeing that it allowed for “*open and transparent discussion*”.

From a management perspective this view is expanded on by Participant 4 who argued that “*we need to engage positively with the unions, both informally and formally, so that when challenges arise there is an existing relationship and elements of trust*”. Participant 8 noted however that while “*an understanding exists at the highest levels between the union and management, it appears this is not the case on the ground*”.

#### 4.3.3.3 *Frontline Management*

When considering the role that frontline management played in communicating with their teams, and how trust factored into the effectiveness of the frontline communication, an interesting common perspective emerged. All six of the employee representatives and four management participants shared a frustration that local management were largely not in a position to provide clarity to the frontline. From a management perspective Participant 5 noted that “*we didn’t involve frontline managers enough*”, with Participant 8 adding that “*local management weren’t on message*”.

This view was shared from an employee representative perspective, with Participant 8 commenting that *“it would be better for a local manager to say they don’t know the answer than to share incorrect information”*. Participant 16’s comment captures the overall sentiment of the employee representatives noting that *“if a manager can only accurately answer 2 out of every 10 questions accurately, how are staff supposed to trust them?”*.

As previously mentioned, this research indicates that employees often trust their representatives to give them the information they need. However, when the addition of management is added to this dynamic there appears to be a negative impact on local engagement. Participant 12 shared that *“it felt like senior management were forcing macro issues to fit into small areas of the business, it would be better to let local management and local representation discuss what the changes mean with the team”*. Participant 14 noted that many employee representatives have been around for a long time and that *“as management has changed over the years, they are better off leaving the comms to the reps and shouldn’t interfere”*.

Albeit that much of the feedback seems critical of local management, Participant 5 noted that *“we didn’t do enough to support frontline management, we told them what was happening, we didn’t nurture their input”*. This sentiment also emerged when considering the participants of the engagement, which is discussed in the next section.

#### 4.3.4 Participation

The emergent themes within Participation are closely aligned to those discussed above regarding the frontline manager, with eleven participants noting the absence of the line manager in the engagement sessions.

Although that there was *“a good overall balance of management and reps”*, as highlighted by Participant 13, it was often the case that the *“local decision maker was not in the room”*, as observed by Participants 2, 3 and 4 from a management perspective and Participants 9 and 16 from the employee representatives.

However, it is not merely the absence of the local frontline manager that was highlighted. Participation and Trust are further entwined when considering additional comments from employee representatives. Participant 12 states that *“senior*

*managers need to take more time to understand what happens on the ground,”* and Participant 14 notes that *“most of the senior management in the room don’t understand the history and context of the teams and don’t fully understand what happens at the frontline”*. Participant 10 summarises the general position by stating *“The line manager didn’t know what was going on”*.

#### 4.3.5 The COVID-19 Pandemic

Buick et al. (2018) notes that communication failure can result in uncertainty, ambiguity and employees feeling uninformed, all of which increase the change resistance. The communication challenges that existed during this engagement process were magnified when considered against the uncertainty arising from the unique context of the global COVID-19 Pandemic. During a pandemic, heightened levels of stress and anxiety are experienced by adults due to significant changes in their daily lives, changes in their social structures and a general restriction of their movements (Gupta, A and Reddy, B.V., 2020).

The context of the pandemic did not go unnoticed by management - Participant 5 noted that *“this change agenda came at a time when people were very uncertain in the life outside of work”* and Participant 6 observed that *“it was an abnormal setting for engagement”*.

From an employee representative perspective Participant 13 observed that *“the whole world was upside down”* and Participant 15 added that *“heightened emotions in people’s personal lives didn’t necessarily help”*.

The pandemic also had the effect of solidifying for many of the employee representative participants a clear reason for the changes required. This step in the change management process is crucial, as highlighted in the Lewin, ADKAR and Kotter models discussed in the literature review. Participant 10 simply noted that *“the reasons for the change were clear”*, whereas Participant 15 expanded on this commenting that *“the reasons for change were absolutely clear and people were happy to start the engagement”*. This view was shared by management - Participant 2 noted that *“the business was on the edge of a cliff, we had to take action to safeguard*

*the business and as many jobs as possible*", with Participant 3 pointing out that "we needed to right-size our business to respond to the crisis".

A finding that was unexpected by the author was the emergent theme of appreciation that the participants felt towards the company during the pandemic. Participant 9 acknowledged that "real options were created for individuals to consider". This position was supported by Participant 13 who "appreciated the options available to those who got on board with the changes required". The author notes in particular a comment from Participant 16 who shared that they "really appreciated what the CXO and the Board did for us, as did many of my colleagues. Remaining on 80% was unbelievable, it's a pity it got lost in the mix of the wider change agenda".

#### 4.3.6 New Approaches

In addition to general commentary captured under the theme of New Approaches, two sub-themes emerged – The Role of Management and Changing Behaviours

##### 4.3.6.1 *The Role of Management*

Banwart (2020) highlights how management and communication go hand-in-glove and communication is in and of itself an integral part of management. Many of the participants have reflected this position in the comments and recognise that management need to make some changes going forward to support their teams through change.

From a management perspective Participant 1 noted that "managers need to manage change on an on-going basis as part of their role". This position is supported by Participant 2 who suggest that "managers need to be closer to what is going on and capture the frontline input as it evolves to "minimise shocks". Focusing specifically on communication Participant 5 notes that "we need to find a way to better manage two-way dialogue on the ground".

From an employee representative perspective this research indicates that management can be seen a barrier to effective local communications. Participant 12 reflects that "we know the history of how things have gone wrong in the past, but

*managers don't seem to want to listen. It doesn't feel like the personal touch that used to exist locally is there anymore*" and Participant 10 laments that *"line management don't know what is going on"*.

#### 4.3.6.2 Changing Behaviours

75% of participants agreed that the behaviours observed within the engagement process were different to those of previous engagements and recognised this as a positive change.

From a management perspective Participant 4 noted that *"behaviours in NWOW were more collaborative than in previous engagements"*. In addition to being more collaborative, management felt that the engagement was more transparent, with Participant 8 highlighting that *"there is a lot more communication than there ever has been, this helps to build trust through transparency"*. This view was shared by employee representatives. Participant 9 noted that the engagement was *"a more transparent process, information as shared in a way that wasn't there in the past"* and Participant 15 shared that *"this is the first engagement where things changed along the way and there wasn't a yes/no or win/lose approach to the discussion"*.

Cohen (2019) explains that a more inclusive approach to change can shift efforts towards shared goals. This position is supported by Participant 13 who noted that *"this engagement was more positive as it was based on a mutual understanding rather than a win-lose approach"*. Participant 14 also identified this changing approach, adding that *"there has been a change in mindset, we were looking for solutions rather than a win-lose situation"*. Participant 16 best summarises this evolving approach commenting that *"NWOW were unprecedented in creating a common goal of reaching agreement. Decisions evolved with the discussion which was different than how things were done in the past"*.

Of particular interest to the author were comments made by employee representatives in relation to the evolving role of HR/IR in the engagement process. Participant 12 noted that they *"appreciated the straight talking and conciliatory approach of HR/IR"*, with Participant 15 agreeing that *"the language used in the engagement has changed, IR is more transparent, honest and direct"*. This view was also supported by

management, with Participant 7 noting that *“NWOW have begun to demystify IR, previous engagements were approached with fear and were confrontational”*

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The analysis of the research under the six themes highlighted some positive and some negative aspects to the engagement process. The introduction of the video was considered positively by all sixteen participants, particularly when considered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This view is captured in the comments of employee representative Participant 9 who noted that *“there is nothing like face-to-face comms, even if it is virtual”* and Participant 16 who adds that *“Comms has vastly improved with the introduction of different communication channels, I can't fault the company”*.

There are challenges however with digital or virtual communication. From an employee representative perspective, the reliance on WhatsApp to share information is clear, with Participant 14 highlighting that the platform is *“the only way to ensure the same message gets to everyone is as quick a time as possible”*. From a management perspective Participant 2 highlighted that *“in the world of social media we need to evolve with technology and understand employee preferences for different types of communication”* and Participant 3 commented that *“management need to ensure that technology doesn't eradicate their responsibilities to be available to engage with employees”*.

One of the main positives uncovered by the research is an appreciation for some changed approaches that have evolved since previous engagements. Participants shared a view that information was accessible and transparent – management Participant 8 suggested that information was *“really clear and available to share”* and employee representative Participant 10 indicated that *“all info was shared through the rep and all info was made available to people”*. The sharing of information was not without its faults, as highlighted by the comments made regarding timing and the “nitty-gritty” required.

Positive changed behaviours were also identified from the research. From a management perspective Participant 1 commented how *“this engagement felt like we*



*were all in it together*”, and Participant 6 agreed that *“NWOW were more collaborative - it is amazing what can be achieved in a short space of time when there is a common goal identified”*. This is supported from an employee representative perspective by the comments of Participant 13 who suggested that *“this engagement was very different to Phase 2, with much more focus on the local changes and implications”* and Participant 15 who shared that the *“language in the engagement has changed, I can see management and IR being more transparent, honest and direct in their language”*.

On the more critical side the predominant finding is that the communication strategy executed during the engagement process was very top-down focused. Heckelman, W. (2017) notes that communications that are managed “top-down” only, giving no consideration to the reaction from employees or to constructive two-way feedback, can sometimes create resistance. This is evident in the commentary shared regarding the role of the line manager and trust, which are common themes throughout the analysis. Participant 7 observes that *“two-way dialogue can only work if the discussion is given oxygen – it won’t work if management come with a fixed, predetermined outcome in mind”*.

The challenges that this top-down focus on communication created and further key findings are discussed in the next section. Recommendations for overcoming these challenges are also identified.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Introduction

Based on the above broader analysis, the author has identified four key findings that merit further detailed discussion. The following section will explore the role of the line manager, information preparation and distribution, trust and training & support, with recommendations included under each of these headings. The section will conclude with a summary of the key recommendations.

### 5.2 Key Findings

#### 5.2.1 The Role of the Line Manager

A recurring theme throughout the analysis, and the key finding of the analysis relates to the role of the line manager. Buick et al. (2018), Brunetto and Teo (2018) and Balogun and Hope Hailey (2014) all recognise the importance of engaging line management to translate the change agenda into operational asks and to mediate and communicate between senior management and the employees affected by the change.

The absence of line management in the engagement process affected the ability of the participants to make decisions in the room and the ability to discuss local issues in detail. This was called out by the employee representatives, with Participant 15 noting that *“local line management was left out and this made it hard for employees to get answers”*. This view was supported by Participant 14 who suggested that *“senior managers feel that they have to have all the answers, but they don’t stop to think about their direct reports who are better placed to provide the correct answers”*.

Management shared in this frustration with Participant 4 reflecting that *“with the line manager missing we didn’t have the local decision maker in the room”*. Participant 5 supported this view commenting that *“we let frontline management down. In some instances, we simply didn’t have the answer”*. These comments indicate how the exclusion of line management from the discussions hindered their ability to communicate effectively on the ground as it often seemed that they did not have answers to questions that were raised locally.

### 5.2.1.1 *Recommendations*

Based on the research conducted the author recommends that future engagement processes, and specifically the relevant communication to the frontline, would be improved by including the line manager at every stage of the change management process. The inclusion of the line manager at all stages of the process empowers them with the information to support the overall communication strategy at a local level with accurate and consistent messaging, crucial to the success of the change programme (Chaudhry, S., 2020).

The facilitation of specific, local engagement between the line managers and local employee representatives should also be considered. Local engagement sessions would allow for constructive employee involvement and local two-way feedback – this in turn would enhance employee participation and reduce resistance to the change (Heckelman, W. 2017).

### 5.2.2 Information

As previously discussed, most participants – fourteen of sixteen participants acknowledged that information was circulated throughout the engagement process. The findings however identified three central concepts relating to challenges regarding the preparation and distribution of information: the use of WhatsApp, the level of detail in the information and the timing of circulation.

Virtual communication can connect people and fill communication voids that are created due to distance - people can access knowledge, learning, information and connect with other people virtually at the click of a button, irrespective of their location (Yasir, H. S. M. et al., 2021). In the context of daa, this is relevant in the context of shift working.

The use of the WhatsApp platform was an unexpected finding in this research. Employee representatives favoured this communication, with Participant 12 noting that WhatsApp is “*the priority means of communication in my area*”. This allowed for the instant sharing of information, often in real time as the engagement sessions were taking place, to large groups of employees. In contrast, it proved to be a challenge for management as these communications were unstructured, unfiltered and

untransparent, with Participant 1 frustrated that information was circulating on WhatsApp *“from inside the engagement session before it had been finalised or agreed”*. Although WhatsApp was used by many employee representatives, participants did identify some limitations, as noted by Participant 16 who suggested that *“WhatsApp is good for sharing info one-way but not for discussion”* and Participant 3 noting that WhatsApp messages can *“sometimes get confused and muddled”*. These comments are supported by a recent study conducted in a Dublin university of students working virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants described how the absence of body language when communicating virtually hindered effective communication and that WhatsApp only allowed for passive engagement rather than active discussion (MacMahon, M. E. and Valente, M., 2020).

Challenges were highlighted by the employee representatives regarding the content of the informational slides, with several participants noting that the detail was too high-level – Participant 16 highlighted that the *“information that was shared needed more local detail”* and Participant 15 said that *“as a whole comms fell short for employees on the ground”*. Two participants, Participants 14 and 16 noted that the slides were *“lacking the nitty-gritty”* of what the changes meant for people.

Employee representatives identified a separate challenge regarding inconsistencies in the timing of updated electronic FAQs. In some engagements these happened immediately after the engagement, with Participant 9 noting that *“reps had no time to digest the information before it was shared with wider employee cohorts”*. In contrast, Participant 15 highlighted that the document was circulated too late, with *“additional questions coming to light that were not included in the FAQ”*.

#### 5.2.2.1 Recommendations

It is recommended that a working group is created, comprising equally of management and employee representatives from frontline areas of the business to establish and agree a communications policy for company/union engagements.

This policy should consider what information should be shared between the relevant parties before an engagement session, including timelines for sharing information in advance of the engagement session. This approach would allow for bottom-up input to the comms strategy and prevent employee representatives *“feeling like*

*management are one step ahead*", as highlighted by Participant 15. The policy should detail the responsibilities of the manager and the employee representative, both of which have a role to play in communicating to the wider employee groups throughout the engagement. In particular, the role of the line manager should be considered. This research highlights a concern about the lack of the line manager involvement in both the engagement sessions themselves and regarding frontline communications. Participant 11 concludes that "*local management need to be there*". The policy should also clarify what and how information is shared within the engagement session(s) and what and when information should be shared following the engagement session.

The Communications Policy for union/company engagements should specifically address ground rules for communicating on social media and other virtual platforms. Communicating to employees working on shift at the frontline should be a primary focus. Choosing the suitable communication channel depends on the message, the sender, and the target audience – and choosing correctly is essential as it impacts the effectiveness of the communication (Hodgson, S., Mazrouei, M. A. and O'Neill, K., 2015). As noted by Participant 15 "*individuals have personal preferences when it comes to communication, so it is good to have choices*". Creating ground rules would also alleviate some of the concerns management have around the use of WhatsApp including that highlighted by Participant 2 who noted that management currently "*can't control internal WhatsApp groups*".

Extending the use of video to communicate the content of future discussions down to local management should be considered. This would allow the local line manager to play a greater role in communicating to their team and get into the "*nitty-gritty*", a gap identified by Participants 14 and 16. A local video would also allow for a more detailed update on specific, local discussions and "*what it means for me*", as suggested by Participant 10.

### 5.2.3 Building Trust

To build trust, managers need to meet with their people and communicate regularly and consistently (Overstreet, R.E. and Stubbendorff, J.R., 2019). The research conducted highlighted several challenges in relation to trust, including a command-and-control approach to communication rather than a collaborative approach with all

participants. From a management perspective Participant 4 suggested that *“to establish a single source of truth there needs to be management control over the communications”* and Participant 8 confirmed that there was a *“top-down approach to ensure consistency”*.

Another interesting concept that emerged was the context of how previous engagements affects the ability of the participants to build trust going forward. Management recognised that previous engagements had created elements of mistrust. Participant 3 who suggests that *“in order to unlock the future through NWOW, past resistance to change also needs to be unlocked”*. Participant 6 also noted that *“the only way to manage historical rumours and hearsay is to ensure consistent written and verbal communications from management”*.

A key observation called out by Participant 5 was that *“the history of the organisation results in management not wanting to share half a plan. Perfection is sometimes the enemy of good”*. An example of this was seen in roster negotiations, where draft rosters were not shared early in the negotiations for wider discussion as management were concerned that there would be further changes required before the final roster could be confirmed. This minor issue slowed down the overall discussion, didn't allow for a collaborative approach and created more mistrust.

### **5.2.3.1 Recommendations**

Buick et al. (2018) suggests that strong and trustworthy relationships need to exist between management and the employees to improve the likelihood of successfully implementing the change. Participant 14 suggested that to improve engagement, trust should be *“given and not earned - it is about having the right attitude”*.

To improve trust at a local, and to reinforce the role of the local line manager, a recommendation for the company to consider is to begin creating joint communications at a local level between the employee representatives and local line management. This approach to joint communications would need to be carefully considered and introduced slowly, focusing initially only on positive changes or developments within the local team, for example, local increases in pay ranges negotiated with management and the employee representatives. This recommendation is underpinned by the suggestion of employee representative Participant 9 who states

that *"in an ideal world there would be a joint platform for communication, but the trust isn't currently there to facilitate this"*. The current obstacles to joint local communications have built up over an extended period - and the longer an organisation has been entrenched in the old way of doing things the harder it is to change thus lowering the chances of success (Cohen, H., 2019).

In addition, the establishment of local townhalls, whether virtual or face-to-face, would allow for discussion between management and employees. This mode of communication can also help to build trust between the parties allowing for verbal communication (Bhardwaj, S., Deepshikha and Sharma, V., 2017). The position is supported by Participant 3 who observes that *"you can tell if a message is sincere when you can see the person's facial expressions"*. Local townhalls could allow for smaller or less significant issues to be siphoned off for local discussions, preventing delays in companywide engagements.

These joint communications and local townhalls would form the basis of a bottom-up approach to engagement, would improve trust at a local level so that when more significant change or difficult messages are required, the foundation of the local relationship already exists. Managers should consider not only building employee trust but also minimizing employee suspicion as 2 distinct areas of management practice (Liao, J-Q. et al. 2017).

#### 5.2.4 Training and Support

If the organisation is to complete the "Refreezing" step of Lewin's model and implement and establish new habits or norms (Bridgman, T., Brown, K. G. and Cummings, S., 2016), to reinforce and sustain the change called out in the ADKAR Change Competency Model (Kiani, A. and Shah, M. H., 2014), or to anchor new approaches as highlighted in Kotter's model (Kotter, J. P. and Cohen, D. S., 2012, p.6) it is essential that management have the correct knowledge, skills, ability and information to execute these asks.

The effectiveness of communication is influenced by several factors including characteristics of the individual communicating, presentation style, the content of the messages being communicated and the setting in which communication takes place

(Matthews, J. 2009). Therefore, employee representatives, who are also key stakeholders in the engagement process overall and in the specific, local communication process, also need to have the correct knowledge, skills, ability, and information.

#### 5.2.4.1 *Recommendations*

It is recommended that effective communication training is researched and designed specifically relating to change management for frontline management in daa. Organisations need to systematically develop change management skills and capabilities within their middle management cohort to reduce resistance to change and build trust within the organisation (Cui, Y. and Jiao, H., 2019).

Kotter's change management model recognises the importance of a guiding coalition who can support and drive the change agenda (Kotter, J. P. and Cohen, D. S., 2012, p.6). The research suggests that many employees within the frontline teams trust their local employee representative in the first instance to share the relevant information and communications. This is evident from a management perspective, Participant 4 states that "we delegate responsibility of communicating to the frontline to the local reps" and by the employee representatives themselves who note that "responsibility is given to reps to own the comms", as suggested by Participant 10. It is therefore recommended that effective communication training and support is also provided to the employee representatives. By doing this the company can leverage the existing relationships that employee representatives have on the ground – management Participant 8 recommends that "*the company need both management and local reps to be transparent even when the message is difficult*".

Aligned training, development and support for all participants will also support an aligned approach to communications strategy of the change agenda, recognised within the ADKAR change competency model as crucial in reinforcing and sustaining the change (Kiani, A. and Shah, M. H., 2014).



### 5.3 Summary of Recommendations

The suggested recommendations are not intended to be considered as stand-alone actions. They should instead work in unison to enhance trust between the participants, reinforce the role of the line manager and improve the alignment of the process and structures across the wider engagement to create more transparent, consistent, and effective communication to the frontline teams affected by the change programme.

Whilst all the recommendations are important, the research indicates that the role of the line manager is a common theme to all findings. When considering trust, Participant 11 notes that “line managers and Employees don’t have a relationship when it comes to talking about change” and Participant 16 shared that “trust and comms breaks down at the level of local management”. When considering participation at the engagement sessions Participant 3 recognised that “in some instances the voice of the local manager was missing”. Although many communication channels fed into the communication strategy, employees preferred to discuss with their local representative rather than local management. This was highlighted by Participant 14 who noted that “*people prefer face-to-face comms with their reps*” and Participant 15 who suggested that “*the local manager didn’t understand what was agreed to be able to answer questions*”.

## **Chapter 6: Additional Considerations**

The following section looks at further recommended actions that should be considered, including planning, cost and timelines. The personal learnings of the author are also captured.

### **6.1 Further Recommended Actions**

In the first instance, the role profile for the role manager should be reviewed to incorporate responsibilities for managing change and communication into their role. Facilitating local engagement sessions, local townhalls and participating in the working group should all be included in the role profile for frontline management. In addition, the manager's objectives should be amended to reflect these responsibilities, so that these activities can be priorities and measured. The local HR Business Partner can support senior management to adapt role profiles and objectives for frontline managers. The cost of implementing this recommendation consists of internal time and salaries. These activities should begin in Q4 2021, ensuring that all documentation is updated and agreed in advance of performance year 2022.

The creation of the proposed Employee Communications Working Group should take place in Q4 2021. This forum could be supported by local HR and members of the Industrial Relations and Internal Communications team, who can advise on other relevant company-wide initiatives and best practice in their specialist fields. The requirement for local videos and/or local joint communications could also be discussed and agreed at this forum. The cost of implementing this recommendation is also internal time and salaries.

In addition to these internally supported initiatives, the effective communications training would need to be researched and developed with the support of external consultants who are experts in this field. The internal Organisational Development team, together with the Industrial Relations team, the HR Team and the Internal Communications team, would need to scope out the exact requirements for this training. Proposals can be shared with the Employee Communications Working Group for their input and feedback. Once the requirements are finalised and an external provider is chosen, in line with internal procurement procedures, the training should

commence in Q1/Q2 2022, prioritising frontline management for operational teams on shift. This training should be rolled-out to all frontline management within daa throughout 2022. In parallel, the relevant local representatives for the same frontline teams should complete the training, enhancing the effectiveness of local engagements and local townhalls taking place during 2022. All relevant objectives setting for 2022 should include this training under the development plan.

The company should review the effectiveness of the training at the end of 2022 and consider rolling it out to other colleagues, who could support local line management as communication champions for the relevant area. In addition, local talent pipelines could consider this training for individuals requiring enhanced understanding of the communication strategy across the business or who needs to improve their internal communication skills to prepare for a bigger or more complex role in the future. The cost of this training programme is likely to be a minimum of €150,000 in 2022 to cover the initial frontline management and local employee representative training, and an additional €100,000 in 2023 should management wish to extend the training to other cohorts of employees.

This investment of time and money into local management, communication infrastructure and training for management, employee representatives and those in a talent pipeline is significant. The benefits however should be seen by an improvement in the bottom-up communication for the frontline and in the breath of targeted development for individuals in the talent pipeline desiring an enhanced understanding of the business and in communication skills.

## **6.2 Personal Learnings**

The process of completing this dissertation has allowed me to reflect on some of my strengths, areas for development and learnings. The first and most prevalent reflection is that time cannot be underestimated – it always takes longer than you think to complete certain sections of writing or tasks. Time management skills are crucial in successfully completing a dissertation. Allowing time for reading, thinking, and having time away from the dissertation is as important as planning time to write. Allowing time for the unknown or unexpected in your planning is also crucial.

Within my organisation, this research has given me the opportunity to talk to colleagues I hadn't known before, to learn more about what happens at the frontline and to understand more about the history, culture, and evolution of the company. It has also allowed me to interact with colleagues in a different way, discussing topics independent of our daily role. This will enrich my role going forward and has given me a greater appreciation of the role different individuals play within internal change management processes.

Finally, this process has shown me how to develop resilience and to work through obstacles or roadblocks that I had not previously encountered. It has given me a newfound confidence to tackle new challenges head on and to believe that I can achieve what I set out to achieve. It has allowed me to grow and enrich my internal network and to deepen my understanding of the different aspects of my chosen research topic.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

The literature review underpinning this research reinforced the importance of a structured approach to change management model, as highlighted by the Lewin, Prosci ADKAR and Kotter models. The role of the manager and their influence over employees is also considered, in particular regarding communicating the changes required to their teams. By communicating effectively with employees, ensuring they are involved in the change programme and encouraging their input and feedback, resistance to the required changes can be reduced.

Within daa the context of previous engagements cannot be ignored. With a long history of engaging with their union partners through collective bargaining, change programmes have been negotiated with varying degrees of success. Whilst the additional consideration of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 created a clear rationale for some of the changes required by daa, the author concludes that the context of the pandemic also presented several challenges and created a unique environment for engagement and negotiation between daa and SIPTU. Communication became a key focus of the change management agenda, captured by Participant 1 who commented that that *“you can’t communicate enough in a crisis”*. The communication strategy implemented during this engagement process included the introduction of new communication channels that considered, in particular, the virtual and digital world that surrounds us. Participants in the engagement strategy recognised the company’s efforts to provide information from the engagement sessions to employees. The communication strategy was however very top-down focused, leading to gaps in information or miscommunication at the frontline.

The strategic approach to the communications strategy is very top-down focused. The research indicates that some of the communications initiatives, such as the use of video, the transparency and sharing of information and the format of engagement established during the NWOW engagements have been received positively and show improvement on previous engagements. The author further concludes that frontline management need to be more included, better informed and better supported. Improving can help improved trust and support top-down communication with an aligned bottom-up strategy to enhance the effectiveness of communications in future company/union engagements. The suggested recommendations however could

further improve communication between the local line manager, the union representatives and the employees the effectiveness of communications. Implementing these additional actions should enhance the role of the local line manager, placing them at the centre of future engagements and responsible for the communications at a local level.

Participant 13, an employee representative, perfectly sums up the overall sentiment towards effectiveness of the communications deriving from the engagement process concluding that *“the new way of communicating was one of the best things to come from the NWOW engagement - it's a pity it took such a terrible and drastic pandemic to get communications to improve, but I think that's what's happened”*.

## **Appendix 1: Sample Questions from Semi-Structured Interviews**

### **OPENING**

- 1) Can you tell me about your role?
- 2) Between March 2020 and March 2021, daa engaged with their trade union partners to implement frontline change. Can you tell me about your involvement in this process?
- 3) In your opinion what worked well during the process and what issues arose?

### **FOCUSED**

- 4) From your perspective what was the experience of the front-line employee (TLs, Supervisors and Team Members) throughout the engagement process?
- 5) What role did you play in communicating the outcome of the different engagement sessions to those outside of the process?
- 6) What is your opinion on how communication to the frontline was delivered?
  - a. By senior management
  - b. By frontline management (line managers, supervisors and team Leads)
  - c. By the trade union (officials and representatives)
- 7) From your perspective can you tell me your opinion the effectiveness of the communications that arose from the engagement sessions?
- 8) From your perspective did the frontline employees understand at each stage the changes that were proposed as an outcome of the engagement process?
- 9) From your perspective did all central participants and those impacted by the changes proposed understand how the changes would be implemented on the ground/in reality?

## **CLOSING**

- 10) Overall, how would you describe your experience of the process?
- 11) From your perspective were the communications arising from the engagement process on changing work practices on the frontline effective
- 12) With the benefit of hindsight, what learnings do you think could be taken from this particular engagement process that could enhance future engagements, in particular with regards to communication?
- 13) Is there any other information you would like to share from your experience in the engagement process that you think is relevant for this research?



## Appendix 2: Sample of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Themes/Codes	Subtheme	Original Commentary	IPA Commentary			Free Association
			Descriptive	Linguistic	Conceptual	
Technology	Video  Electronic FAQ  WhatsApp  General	Excellent - needed more at local level  We printed them and left them in break rooms. People don't access e-mail or the internet if they don't have to  Whatsapp is good for sharing info oneway but not for discussion  Our team dont use e-mails at all for their role so they are 100% reliant on team briefings and conversations for their updates.  Breakout sessions with rep is preferred engagement  Comms has VASTLY IMPROVED over the last few years - can't fault the company			Resistance to technology	Company should consider both approaches  Challenges with 2-way comms on WhatsApp  Challenges with shiftwork should be considered
Process & Structure	Number of Sessions  Info / Slides  Prep    Follow-Up	No real issue  No issue with the info - it just needed more detail at local level  NEED TO BE ABLE TO ANSWER BASICS AND GET OFF ON GOOD FOOT  More prep upfront could prevent time wasted in follow-up  Management circulated info straight after the sessions - good to have info but not always timed right		We always underestimate how much time people need to talk things through		
Trust	General Trust    union - company  Ee - union  Ee - Mgt	Trust and comms breaks down at the level about the local manager  A softer approach with more discussion prevents errors  If a manager can only answer 2 or 3 out of every 10 questions .... How are staff supposed to trust them?  Unless a question can be answered quickly or explain some of the "chinese whispers" then the issue can grow legs  People will pick up the phone to their rep but not to their line manager		If management and reps were left to look after their own sections it would be more effective and more transparent	Reliability and Honest and transparency	
Partipants	# Partipants  Who Partipated  Participation	Good balance in terms of numbers  Local management weren't in the room so this added the pressure on the reps to have the answers  Line Manager input was missing				
COVID-19	Reason for Changes   Heightened Anxiety	People understood the asks - what wasn't always clear was what exactly it meant for people in their roles.  For many this was their first experience of major change and "expectations were heightened"				
New Approaches	History / Context   Discussion Vs Instruction	Different negotiations to the past - there was a common goal of reaching agreement, those with experience "knew the place was really in trouble"  NWOW were unprecedented  Decisions evolved with the discussion - this was different than in the past				LOS and representation - how does the company support rep training etc.

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