

**‘An investigation of HRM perspectives  
on the interventions organisations  
implement to support the psychological  
wellbeing of employees’**

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# **‘An investigation of HRM perspectives on the interventions organisations implement to support the psychological wellbeing of employees’**

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## **Abstract**

There is a growing concern from employees about their psychological wellbeing. This phenomenon has implications for employees' health and HR as poor psychological wellbeing can negatively affect performance thus creating costs from lowered performance and treating the employee. A study by Deloitte shows that the cost of ill psychological wellbeing to employers in the UK is billions and increasing. Therefore, this study aimed to understand what is done in organisations for this growing and costly phenomenon by researching HR in relation to their support of employee psychological wellbeing (EPW) as HR are strongly linked to EPW. Specifically, the role and perspectives of HR, what supports HR implements and what affects this selection, and the challenges to HR in relation to EPW have been studied. The literature review for this study revealed that there are many supports and interventions that HR can implement which can benefit both the employee and the organisation. However, this comes with its own challenges.

The qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews with an inductive and interpretivist research philosophy was utilised to gain further insight into the research questions.

It was found that HR's role in relation to EPW is to enable employees to access qualified psychological supports as HR have a limited responsibility for EPW. HR perceives EPW as important for the employee's health and also the organisation's financial position. Currently, the most common supports by HR are the EAP, counselling and time off work. The supports reported by participants show a lack of primary interventions which would reduce the chances of EPW issues from occurring or escalating. This is possibly due to the main challenge that HR faces which is their lack of education on EPW particularly on understanding what HR can do to reduce EPW issues from occurring alongside identifying and supporting EPW.

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## List of Abbreviations

CIPD – Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

EAP – Employee Assistance Programme

EPW – Employee Psychological Wellbeing

EW – Employee Wellbeing

HPWS – High Performance Work System

HR – Human Resources

HRM – Human Resource Management

N.D. – No Date

VHI – Voluntary Health Insurance Board

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of this study is to investigate the HRM perspectives on the interventions organisations implement to support employee psychological wellbeing (EPW). This research strives to add to the limited literature on the opinions of HR professionals on their role and perspectives on EPW, their methods of supporting it and the challenges related to this endeavour. Firstly, the rationale for this study will be explained to contextualise and showcase the relevancy of this study's research topic.

There is increasing concern for EPW and the associated cost this has to organisations. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic raised significant concerns for EPW (CIPD, 2021), employee mental health has been a growing issue in the UK and Ireland (CIPD, 2016; VHI, 2018). The CIPD (2016) found that in the UK three out of ten people had experienced ill mental health while in employment and 95% of those who experienced it relayed that it negatively affected their ability to work with issues like slower performance and presenteeism. Similarly, the VHI Health Insights Report on Mental Health in the Corporate Workplace (2018) found that 78% of employees are increasingly concerned about mental health issues with 20% divulging that they had been absent from work due to stress, depression or anxiety in the past year.

With these growing EPW issues, the cost of poor employee mental health is significant and continues to rise (Deloitte, 2020). Research by Deloitte (2020) found that the cost of poor employee mental health to employers in the UK is up to £45 billion which has grown 16% since Deloitte's previous study in 2017. Presenteeism and working outside of normal hours have been identified as the main causes of the cost to employers. To address these costs, Deloitte (2020) researched workplace interventions for reducing poor employee mental health issues. The interventions that had the greatest return on investment were training and early screening of individuals at risk of mental health problems so as to provide preventative support. Evidence shows a positive relationship between employee wellbeing (EW) and employee productivity which ultimately positively affects organisational performance and profitability (Krekkel, Ward and De Neve, 2019). Therefore, there is a potential cost benefit to organisations addressing EPW. This research seeks to understand HR's opinions on this area by investigating the current practices and perspectives of HR in their support of EPW within this especially negative time for poor EPW.

Upon reviewing the literature on EPW, it was found that EPW can be supported at different stages which include reducing exposure to stress, training employees to cope with stress and treating stress (Hargrove *et al.*, 2011). Some of these practices can provide benefits to both EPW and the organisation (Guest, 2017). HR is well positioned to conduct these practices as they are connected to EPW through ethics (Guest, 2017; Salas-Vallina, Pozo and Fernandez-Guerrero, 2020), economics (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Guest, 2017; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020) and HR's fundamental purpose as an employee champion (Ulrich, 1997). However, challenges complicate this, such as the unclear relationship between HR and EPW (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017), finances (Pescud *et al.*, 2015) and poor utilisation of the supports by employees (Linnan *et al.*, 2008). Primary research was gathered to answer the research questions applying a subjectivist and interpretivist philosophy using semi-structured interviews.

This dissertation is divided into chapters beginning with a literature review which will then inform the research sub-objectives and subsequent research methodology chapters. Next the findings and discussion sections will be presented ending in a conclusion and recommendations chapter.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Wellbeing definition

It is necessary to first define what is meant by EW and conceptualise the particular psychological aspect of it for us to understand EPW and HR's connection to EPW. There is no universally accepted definition of EW as it can contain different elements depending on the author (Clarke and Hill, 2012; Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). For example, EW definitions can extend from job satisfaction (Page and Vella-Broderick, 2009) to employee morale (Grawitch, Gottschalk and Munz, 2006). EW can even include external factors such as legislation and overall national employment (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). To clarify the foundation of this research, a definition of EW from Grant, Christianson and Price (2007) will be given because it is often cited in the literature for this research topic (e.g. Clarke and Hill, 2012; Guest, 2017; Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Vakkayil *et al.*, 2017). According to Grant *et al.* (2007, pp.52), EW is the 'the overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work.' Moreover, EW can be divided into physical, psychological and social elements. This research will focus on the psychological element of EW.

Psychological wellbeing has been argued to consist of two dimensions: hedonic and eudaimonic (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Hedonic wellbeing refers to a person's happiness and avoidance of pain while eudaimonic wellbeing refers to meaning, full functionality and self-realisation. An alternative framework for psychological wellbeing was presented by Warr (1990) which focuses on affect and consists of three axes: pleased-displeased, enthusiasm-depression and anxious-contented. This illustrates that psychological wellbeing is another nebulous term with varying conceptualisations. Therefore, these conceptualisations will be taken into account throughout this research and, as will be seen, become a variable that can have an impact on HR's ability to support EPW. Before this argument is explored, the rationale for why HR perspectives on EPW should be investigated will be outlined in the next section which discusses the organisation's relationship with EPW.

### Relationship between the organisation and EPW

The relationship between the organisation and EPW can vary but nevertheless it does exist as EPW issues are increasing which can negatively affect organisations in terms of cost and performance (CIPD, 2016; VHI, 2018). However, the organisation can either curb or encourage

this cost with their, and specifically HR's, ability to impact EW positively and negatively (CIPD, 2021).

The World Health Organisation (n.d.) finds that while employment is good for mental health a negative work environment can create mental health problems. Organisations can address this risk because organisations can impact EPW positively and negatively by controlling job demands and resources (Schaufeli, Bakker and Van Rhenen, 2009). Job demands include workload and emotional demands while job resources can be autonomy, social support and learning opportunities. A study found that when job demands increase and job resources decrease, the likelihood of employees experiencing future burnout rises, which is a state of negative wellbeing (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009). However, an organisation can also encourage wellbeing by increasing job resources as they can be a source of motivation (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, it is evident that organisations have the potential to impact EPW and its associated costs both positively and negatively by modelling the environment's job demands and job resources surrounding the employees. Interventions are a form of this environment modelling for EPW. As such, this research will attempt to understand what interventions organisations implement to positively affect EPW to better understand HRM's perspective on EPW.

As a result of these arguments, this dissertation holds the position that EPW would benefit from further study because of the increasing trend of EPW issues in the workplace and its subsequent cost to the employer which can be caused or prevented by the organisation. In particular, HRM is a key player in addressing EW including psychological wellbeing (CIPD, 2021) and so, acquiring their perspective on and actions for EPW is valuable. Examples of what organisations and HR does specifically for EPW will be discussed in the next section.

## Organisational interventions for EPW

Due to psychological wellbeing's breadth of concept and many types of intervention, this dissertation will clarify common interventions that are found in the literature by giving a brief overview utilising the theory of preventive stress management as an organising framework. This framework enables the literature and primary research to be categorised in terms of primary, secondary and tertiary interventions. Furthermore, this theory has been an important tool for both the health of the employee and the organisation which then results in organisational performance (Hargrove *et al.*, 2011). The aim of the theory's interventions is to

enable better reactions to job stressors and treat negative reactions. A job stressor is a factor of the work environment that can lead to a strain reaction including a negative psychological reaction (Kahn and Byosiere, 1992 as cited in Sonnetag and Fritz, 2015). There are wide ranging job stressors that exist in organisations including task-related stressors, role stressors and social stressors (Sonnetag and Fritz, 2015). Thus, there are numerous opportunities for the organisation to negatively affect EPW by fostering stressors, such as encouraging work overload (Sonnetag and Fritz, 2015). This section will give a limited and brief overview of the various interventions. It is limited because it does not discuss the target levels and specific content of each intervention.

Nevertheless, primary interventions aim to reduce or modify common job stressors (Hargrove *et al.*, 2011). Interventions for this that target the employee are job redesign (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2007; Pignata *et al.*, 2018; Tsutsumi *et al.*, 2019), improved training opportunities (Pignata *et al.*, 2018) and reduction of workload (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2007; Tsutsumi *et al.*, 2019). Primary interventions that target the employer are improved communication with staff (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2007; Pignata *et al.*, 2018; Tsutsumi *et al.*, 2019) and leadership training, such as a mental health literacy programme, to improve their management of employees struggling with psychological wellbeing (Shann, Martin and Chester, 2014; Pignata *et al.*, 2018; Tsutsumi *et al.*, 2019). For example, longitudinal evidence illustrates the effectiveness of a mental health literacy programme for leaders in their improved knowledge of mental health, self-efficacy in handling EPW issues and promotion of positive mental health in the workplace (Dimoff, Kelloway and Burnstein, 2016). Moreover the duration of mental health claims was reduced suggesting that the programme could have a cost saving effect in reducing the length of the negative impact ill EPW has on the organisation (Dimoff *et al.*, 2016). Thus, primary interventions are a proactive method of reducing stressors that could harm EPW (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2014).

Secondary interventions aim to give employees the resources and tools to cope with stressors and reduce the stress response in the employees (Hargrove *et al.*, 2011). Training interventions are usually provided for individuals to learn these coping skills (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2007; Tsutsumi *et al.*, 2019). Cognitive behavioural training (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2007; Tsutsumi *et al.*, 2019), relaxation techniques (Tsutsumi *et al.*, 2019) and emotional intelligence training (Karimi *et al.*, 2015) are recommended for this type of intervention. In an empirical study by Karimi *et al.* (2015), emotional intelligence positively correlated with EW and supported the

view that having higher emotional intelligence enabled employees to cope better with stress and improve their wellbeing. Different formats are used for this training, such as individual or group training or even digital training which has seen positive results of increased EPW and work effectiveness (Carolan, Harris and Cavanagh, 2017).

Tertiary interventions involve the treatment of employees who have experienced distress to help heal employees and repair the negative outcomes on the organisation (Hargrove *et al.*, 2011). Interventions can be classified as both secondary and tertiary interventions as is evident for cognitive behavioural training and relaxation training (Joyce *et al.*, 2015; Perski *et al.*, 2017). Other tertiary interventions include counselling, return to work programmes and employee assistance programmes (EAP) (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2007; LaMontagne *et al.*, 2014; Joyce *et al.*, 2015; Tsutsumi *et al.*, 2019; Attridge, 2019). EAPs are a common organisational intervention but when tested it was found that employees who utilised the EAP had improved productivity and reduced absenteeism but did not have statistically significant results in reducing workplace distress (Richmond *et al.*, 2017).

As such, these three levels of intervention attempt to prevent, improve reaction to and treat stress which can improve the hedonic wellbeing of an employee thus positively affecting EPW. While it can be inferred from these that HR would naturally be part of implementing some of these interventions, the connection between EPW and HR goes further than this.

### HR's connection to EPW

HR is connected to EPW by being the most likely function in the organisation to administer the interventions and by ethics (Guest, 2017; Salas-Vallina, Pozo and Fernandez-Guerrero, 2020), economics (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Guest, 2017; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020) and HR's fundamental purpose of supporting employees (Ulrich, 1997).

After the term HRM emerged in the 1980's, EW has been present in HRM conceptualisations since the 1990's (Wilkinson, Redman and Dundon, 2017). For example, Storey (1992) proposed that HR has four roles including the handmaiden role which handles the welfare of employees. Ulrich (1997) also posited that HR had an employee champion role. Thus, EW has been concerning to HR since shortly after its emergence suggesting that EPW can be considered a fundamental aspect of HRM.



To elaborate further, Ulrich's seminal research into the fundamentals of HR is particularly relevant for understanding HR's connection to EPW. Ulrich has refined this connection from HR's employee champion role (1997) to the employee advocate and human resource developer roles (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). However, these employee centred roles of HR seem to be overshadowed in the literature and in practice by the strategic role of HR (Francis and Keegan, 2006). In a study of HR practitioners, respondents prioritised the strategic role over the employee champion role in terms of importance because they argue that it more clearly contributes to the business. Additionally, most HR practitioners aspire to strategic partner roles potentially leaving the employee champion unfulfilled (Keegan and Francis, 2010). As such, there is a call for HR to create a balance between the strategic role and the employee champion role if they want to be successful because without this, employee trust and confidence may be lost (Francis and Keegan, 2006) and the organisation's human resource won't be sustainable (Ulrich *et al.*, 2007). This is further emphasised in Ulrich *et al.*'s (2007) study of what competencies HR practitioners believe HR should have to face the changing business conditions. The competencies were categorised into HR's people side and business side. To address the people side, HR needs to communicate compassion and care to its employees and serve them adequately. The business side relates to HR ensuring that organisational strategies are built and implemented to effectively meet customer and investor expectations. The authors posit that the people side and the business side of HR must both be tended to for success to occur. With HR only caring for employees without thinking of the business side, organisational goals won't be fulfilled. Contrastingly, focusing only on the business side means the organisation's workforce won't be sustained as their needs are neglected. Hence, it can be argued that HR has a fundamental connection to EPW in its role as an employee champion which is needed for sustainable organisational success.

Strategic HR roles appear to be more economically valuable to organisations than employee champion roles (Francis and Keegan, 2006). This value can be derived from the performance focused HR practices such as high performance work systems (HPWS). In a meta-analysis of the effects of HPWS, it was concluded that organisational performance can improve with increased use of HPWS (Combs *et al.*, 2006) thus likely increasing financial performance. However, there is economic value in engaging in the people side of HR too by supporting EPW. For example, practices in HPWS, such as training, can have positive effects on EPW (Loon Otaye-Ebede and Stewart, 2019). Furthermore, poor EPW can have negative implications for organisations' costs from absenteeism, poor productivity, lack of sustainability of their

workforce and hindered competitive advantage from their staff (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Guest, 2017; Salas-Vallina, Pozo and Fernandez-Guerrero, 2020). Therefore, HR practices for improving EPW may mitigate these costs and add economic value to the organisation. As a result, it is apparent that there can be a cost benefit to organisations for HR supporting EPW further illustrating their connection to each other.

A third connection between HR and EPW can be found in the ethical case. There is an argument that HR should support EPW because it's the ethical thing to do (Guest, 2017; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020). Today's changing work environment can damage EPW which HR has an ethical responsibility to protect (Guest, 2017). Winstanley and Woodall (2000) contend that a focus on the ethical treatment of EW is as justified as focusing on strategic fit and best practice in HR. The authors further posit that this ethical stance is based on an organisations' purpose being to serve society and human needs, and the focus of HR on performance, flexibility and commitment having negative implications on EPW (Winstanley and Woodall, 2000). This latter point is supported with the proposal that HR and the organisation focus too much on performance to the detriment of EW (Guest, 2017; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, HR themselves can contribute to poor EPW so, it would be ethical for them to address this issue. However, HR's ability to maintain ethical HRM could be considered to be overly optimistic given the constraints on their limited power and influence (Guest and Woodrow, 2012). These arguments nevertheless illustrate the connection between HR and EPW on ethical grounds.

In summary, HR is connected to EPW in the literature through HR's purpose, economics and ethics. Now that the connection has been made, it is important to see what HR does or can do to support EPW.

## HR practices for EPW

Guest's (2017) analytic model for wellbeing oriented HRM is useful as a starting point to understand what HR can do to support EPW and why they should do it. It builds on the work of Warr's (1987) antecedents to EW, the quality of working life model (Walton, 1974) and the job demands-resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). This model assumes that organisations realistically will need more than an ethical incentive to engage HR in EPW practices and so proposes that organisations focus on the employment relationship and apply social exchange theory to gain organisational benefits from the model. Thus it assumes that higher EW will impact employee performance because it will change the attitudes, behaviours

and motivation of employees to more positive ones, such as less absenteeism behaviour, a higher commitment attitude and higher energy levels from motivation. In order to do that, the model lists five categories of HR practices for EPW: 1) investing in employees 2) providing engaging work 3) positive social and physical environment 4) voice 5) organisational support. Each of these categories will be discussed.

The model's practices for investing in employees include recruitment and selection, training and development, and mentoring and career support (Guest, 2017). Training/learning and development in particular are regarded as important for EPW in the literature (Clarke and Hill, 2012). Learning and development can strengthen an employee's job resources (Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020), improve their coping skills (Karimi *et al.*, 2015) and reduce work intensification because of their new skills which all promote better EPW. In Loon *et al.*'s (2019) review of the literature about EPW practices, learning and development and recruitment are HR practices that can produce mutual gains for the organisation and its employees. Development of skills supports career advancement which can help EPW. Thus, investing in employees can benefit EPW while also providing organisations with more competent employees.

The second category of providing engaging work refers to practices surrounding job design, such as building autonomy, feedback and variety of skill usage into the job (Guest, 2017). Job design and autonomy are also common practices HR uses to support EPW (Clarke and Hill, 2012; Loon *et al.*, 2019; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020). However, there is some evidence that excessive autonomy can negatively affect EW (Stiglbauer and Kovacs, 2018). Feedback can be an enriching practice by fostering employee motivation (Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020). Evidence shows that a positive and supportive feedback environment can positively impact an employee's sense of autonomy but the employee's orientation to feedback limits this potential positive impact and can even negatively affect an employee's feelings of psychological wellbeing (Gabriel *et al.*, 2014). Regarding variety of skill usage, lower levels of skill use correlate with lower EPW (Warr, 1990). Summarily, these practices can enable organisations to have more motivated, autonomous employees with higher EPW.

A positive social and physical environment is the third category of wellbeing oriented HR practices. This includes making employee health and safety a priority of the organisation, employment security, no bullying, social interaction opportunities, fair rewards and pay and equal opportunities which all arguably strengthen EPW (Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020). The social element is significant as it is one of the three dimensions of EW (Grant *et al.*, 2017). Social

opportunities can come in workplace relationships and leader support (Clarke and Hill, 2012). There is some evidence that perceived fairness in rewards can directly affect EPW and that equality and equity procedures should be implemented to increase perceived fairness and subsequently EPW (Lawson, Noblet and Rodwell, 2009). Therefore, just by making the work environment safe, fair and sociable with added employment security higher EPW can occur.

The fourth category relates to voice. HR practices should promote voice with two way communication, collective representation and opportunities for employees to express themselves, such as through a survey (Guest, 2017). The empowering HR practices of giving employees a voice, involvement and collective representation are commonly agreed to be important for EPW support (Clarke and Hill, 2012; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020; Loon *et al.*, 2019). Employee voice is a useful method of mitigating stress and thus protecting EPW (Holland, Allen and Cooper, 2013). This practice is important for creating a positive employment relationship (Guest, 2017). With employee voice mechanisms, organisations can better understand employee concerns and be more accurate when supporting their employees. Ensuring employees are heard may make them feel more appreciated and reciprocate by working hard for the organisation as posited by social exchange theory.

The last category is organisational support. Provisions for this are participative and supportive management, an organisational climate of employee involvement, family friendly and flexible working arrangements and developmental performance management (Guest, 2017). These practices can improve the employment relationship through the employer showing concern for their employees. For example, flexible working arrangements can be positive for EPW in terms of their happiness (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Golden, 2018) and job satisfaction (Kröll and Nüesch, 2019). However, these practices can also result in unwanted outcomes (Loon *et al.*, 2019). Evidence signalled that participative management can be negatively associated with social wellbeing of employees (Boreham, Povey, and Tomaszewski, 2016). Furthermore, performance management practices like performance appraisals are dependent on context and can be demotivating as well as motivating (Loon *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, organisational support may apply social exchange theory's assumption that employees will respond well to the organisation's efforts for EPW.

These HR specific interventions and the general interventions mentioned previously illustrate that there are numerous ways HR can support and protect EPW. This mutual gains model shows that the employees and the organisation can benefit from HR implementing these practices. A

limitation to this is that these HR practices are mainly primary interventions. There is a lack of tertiary and few secondary interventions by HR mentioned in the literature. Perhaps this is because the mutual gains model focuses on benefiting the employee and the employer. Interventions that essentially only focus on employees without a clear benefit for the organisation, such as counselling or relaxation training, could be perceived as unattractive to organisations. This perspective is seen more in the next section. Therefore, the mutual gains model is limited by its lack of tertiary and secondary interventions potentially leading to untreated EPW by HR. Furthermore, the connection between HR and what they should or could do for EPW is not unanimously accepted in the literature (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). Even if it were, HR would still face challenges supporting EPW.

### Challenges relating to HR supporting EPW

These challenges to HR supporting EPW include the unclear and complex relationship HR has with EW (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017), financial barriers which also lead to lack of management support (Pescud *et al.*, 2015) and poor resource utilisation by employees (Linnan *et al.*, 2008).

While the previous section found evidence and support for HR's connection to EPW and the practices HR could implement for mutual gains, a contrasting argument is also present in the literature as the unclear relationship can affect HR's adoption of EPW practices (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). Kowalski and Loretto (2017) posit that this unclear relationship stems from the EW definition lacking clarity, the changing role of HR and the question of responsibility for EW. As seen, there are many definitions of EW including or excluding various factors which can prevent a clear understanding of HR's role in EW. Additionally, the changing role of HR lends itself to confusion over HR's role. For example, new trends of outsourcing HR, devolvement of HR activities to line managers, an emphasis on the strategic side of HR and flexible working all impact the relationship between HR and EPW because it changes HR's role and how HR could support EPW. The question of HR's responsibility for EW or it being solely the employee's responsibility creates hesitance to pursue this unclear relationship (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). There is evidence that employers are unsure of their responsibility to provide health promoting procedures and policies as they feel that EW is foremost the employee's responsibility and employers are reluctant to get involved in

employees' personal lives (Pescud *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, Kowalski and Loretto (2017) call for more research to clarify this relationship.

Another challenge for HR is that the costs of wellbeing promotion activities are concerning to employers (Pescud *et al.*, 2015). Perhaps this is even more of a concern for smaller businesses than larger ones as they are evidently less likely to have workplace wellness programmes (McCoy *et al.*, 2014). Commonly cited barriers to implementing workplace health interventions is lack of funding and lack of management support (Linnan *et al.*, 2008). Thus senior management's hesitance to back this investment in EPW practices by HR creates a challenge to HR's support. The research on the costs of investing or not investing in EW is lacking and there is a call for more research into this area to better understand what HR can do for EPW (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). Since this call, Deloitte's (2020) study found that workplace interventions can have a positive return on investment. However, there was a wide range of return on the different interventions meaning that some interventions are more cost effective than others. Careful selection of an intervention's suitability for the organisation is thus required. Therefore, interventions costs, their varying returns and senior management's reluctance to invest are financial challenges that HR could face when supporting EPW.

Low employee participation by high risk employees in interventions is also a highly common challenge to successful HR practices for EPW (Linnan *et al.*, 2008). This lack of resource utilisation by employees is posited to be as a result of three main factors: (1) employees do not recognise that they need help (Mojtabai *et al.*, 2002; Sareen *et al.*, 2007) (2) structural barriers, such as lack of financial resources to gain access, inconvenience or no appointments available (Mojtabai, 2005; Sareen *et al.*, 2007) (3) attitudinal factors including stigma (Van Voorhees *et al.*, 2006), employees wanting to solve their problem on their own and thinking the problem would go away (Sareen *et al.*, 2007). Attitudinal factors was the most cited barrier to using mental health services (Sareen *et al.*, 2007). In another study, the absence of recognition by the employee that they need help was the major barrier to utilisation but when removed some employees still faced structural and attitudinal barriers (Dewa and Hoch, 2015). These barriers are relevant to secondary and tertiary interventions as they require participation by the individual whereas primary interventions are applied to the workplace environment and so do not need individual participation. However, these barriers still challenge for HR in more serious cases of ill EPW, like those with mental health disorders, as they need more than just primary

interventions. Therefore, HR will need to address these barriers to aid employees in the utilisation of interventions for their psychological wellbeing.

One method of increasing employee participation is to focus on leaders. Dimoff and Kelloway (2019) studied the effects mental health literacy training for leaders had on employee utilisation, leaders' awareness of recognising deteriorations in mental health and leaders' support of employees with mental health issues. The three hour training consisted of a lecture with case studies, videos and provision of resources like a checklist to detect deteriorating mental health. Results showed that leaders that underwent this training were better able to recognise signs of deteriorating mental health of employees and supported them more effectively by increasing their communication about mental health and by directing employees to available resources. As such, employees with these trained leaders experienced a growth in both their willingness to utilise these resources and actual utilisation when compared to employees with untrained leaders. Therefore, there is evidence that HR could overcome the resource utilisation challenge by improving leaders' capabilities.

Summarily, the challenges facing HR in supporting EPW are the costs of EPW, lack of resource utilisation by employees and the unclear relationship between HR and EPW.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature review has shown that there are many interventions that could be implemented to support EPW at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. While HR is the obvious choice to implement these interventions, there are other connections between HR and EPW, such as ethics, economics and fulfilling HR's purpose as an employee champion. The literature has further demonstrated that HR can do various activities to support EPW. In particular, primary interventions like investing in employees' development, providing engaging job design, creating a positive social and physical work environment, providing employee voice mechanisms and participating in organisational support are cited as important HR practices for EPW. However, secondary and tertiary interventions appear to be limited by HR's focus on providing mutual gains for the employee and the organisation when implementing EPW practices. This is compounded by a differing perspective on HR's connection to EPW apparent in the literature. There is a hesitance to fully embrace HR's role as an EPW supporter because of issues of responsibility and lack of clarity on the relationship between HR and EPW. This hesitance is a challenge to HR's support of EPW and could prevent

positive EPW in the organisation. Additionally, the challenges of costs, managerial support and poor resource utilisation of the EPW interventions could pose more difficulties to HR. Therefore, the primary research will attempt to clarify HRM's role and perspectives on EPW interventions with the literature's findings taken into account.



## Chapter 3: Research Sub-Objectives

1. To investigate HR's role and perspective on the organisation's efforts to support employees' psychological wellbeing

This research sub-objective aims to extrapolate the perspective of HRM professionals on how HR views EPW and their own role in relation to EPW. As seen in the literature review, there are contrasting perspectives with one side arguing that HR's role is to be an employee champion for ethical and economic reasons (Guest, 2017; Francis and Keegan, 2006) whereas there is the other argument that EPW's relationship to HR is unclear and thus might not be economically attractive or the responsibility of HR (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017).

2. To evaluate from a HR perspective the supports they implement and the factors that influence the selection of psychological wellbeing supports made available to employees

The goal of this research sub-objective is to discern what EPW supports are provided by HR to employees and what affected this choice. It is evident that financial cost is a factor that influences the selection of EPW interventions (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Pescud *et al.*, 2015). Other factors may include ethics and the theory that mutual gains will arise from these supports as increased EPW could positively affect performance (Guest, 2017; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020).

3. To explore the biggest challenges to HR in their attempt to support employee psychological wellbeing

The challenges associated with HR supporting EPW will be obtained for this research sub-objective. From the literature, it appears that the unclear relationship between EPW and HR as well as the uncertain benefits that organisations could experience from supporting it might be challenges to even start supporting EPW (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). Furthermore, the cost of EPW interventions may be a significant challenge when implementing EPW interventions which may lead to the challenge of lack of managerial support (Pescud *et al.*, 2015). Poor resource utilisation by employees of the EPW supports has also been posited as a challenge to HR (Linnan *et al.*, 2008).

## Chapter 4: Research Methodology

### Research philosophy

The research philosophy, or the beliefs and assumptions the researcher has when developing knowledge, will be discussed to provide context for how the above research questions were approached. These assumptions are classified as ontology, epistemology and axiology. Ontology refers to the nature of reality (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Epistemology is concerned with the assumptions about knowledge and the validation of knowledge (Burrell and Morgan, 2016). Axiology refers to the values and ethics of the researcher and how they affect the research (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

In terms of ontology, Saunders *et al.* (2019) state that an objectivist or subjectivist ontological lens can be used. Objectivism is the view that social entities exist independently of our interpretations and labelling of them. Thus, it is believed that there is one universal social reality experienced by all people. This perspective would attempt to find the reality of the situation through quantifiable and observable data and facts by typically applying the philosophy of positivism (Quinlan, 2011). Values are a bias in objectivism so they are removed from the research as much as possible (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

Contrastingly, subjectivism views the social reality as being made from perceptions and actions of people (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, people create the social reality through their interactions and the somewhat shared meanings derived from this. Due to people perceiving this reality differently, multiple realities are constructed (Quinlan, 2011). Saunders *et al.* (2019) posit that researchers must try to understand the overall context and opinions of different people to discern the different realities and gain meaning from the research. In terms of axiology, values cannot be removed from the research in subjectivism and so, must be incorporated into it (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

When examining this study's research questions, it is evident that subjectivism would be more appropriate as a set of assumptions. This research is concerned with obtaining the opinions and perspectives of HRM professionals regarding the topic of EPW and their relationship to it. It is assumed that there will be different perspectives as people have varying beliefs and experiences on EPW and HRM. This assumption is supported by the literature review's finding of differing opinions on the relationship between HR and EPW (e.g. Kowalski and Loretto,

2017; Guest, 2017). Therefore, the subjectivist perspective of multiple social realities influenced by people's interpretation and consequent actions is more suitable to this research than the objectivist perspective. Regarding axiology, the researcher's values and ethics are likely to have an impact on the drawing of conclusions from the qualitative data thus supporting the adoption of a subjectivist approach.

In relation to epistemology, interpretivism has been applied here. Saunders *et al.* (2019) express that interpretivism is part of the subjectivist perspective as it believes that there are different social realities derived from people's different and complex interpretations and experiences of the social world which are affected by varying cultural backgrounds and contexts. Therefore, interpretivism aims to gain rich insights into the social world using this perspective of inherent complexity. This philosophy is suited to researchers adopting an empathetic approach to understand the point of view of the research participants. Additionally, this philosophy is appropriate for business research because of the uniqueness of every organisation and its particular set of circumstances (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, interpretivism is suitable for this research as HRM perspectives are likely to be unique to their set of circumstances and interpretations. An empathetic stance should be taken given the potentially sensitive nature of handling EPW.

## Research Design

Interpretivism usually involves a research strategy of inductive qualitative investigations of small sample sizes (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Qualitative research is important for exploratory research where theoretical frameworks are limited and thus it helps to develop hypotheses for further research (Greenfield and Greener, 2016). Therefore, the researcher has chosen to use an inductive approach as the goal is to collect data and draw patterns through data analysis which can help to build theory. A qualitative research instrument of semi-structured interviews is often utilised for interpretivist and inductive research such as this and will also be used here (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

An alternative approach to qualitative research is quantitative research. Quantitative research has a foundation in positivist principles which is objectivist in nature (Adams, Khan and Raeside, 2013). Its aim is to test theories using deductive reasoning by reducing complexities enough to have a controlled setting to study (O'Dwyer and Bernauer, 2014). Therefore, quantitative research would not be suitable for this research as the complexities of people's

perspectives of their different realities are integral to the goals of this exploratory study. Qualitative research has the benefit of studying phenomena in natural settings with all complexities and different realities still present (O'Dwyer and Bernauer, 2014). Additionally, inductive reasoning is more applicable as the study is exploring perspectives and does not have prior theories to test unlike deductive reasoning. Thus, qualitative research was deemed more appropriate for this study than quantitative research.

The choice of research design is also supported by previous studies similar in essence. In a study of senior managers' perspectives of EW, Vakkayil *et al.* (2017) adopted an inductive and interpretivist qualitative research methodology. Furthermore, Francis and Keegan (2006) conducted an inductive study of a new concept of HR by employing semi-structured interviews with experts as the research was exploratory in nature. These studies influenced the choice of research methodology for this dissertation as they share similarities with this research.

Qualitative research was chosen because of the issue of context as raised in the literature. The evaluation of interventions in the workplace is highly contextual (Akerstrom *et al.*, 2021; Kowalski and Loretto, 2017) and makes the measurement and analysis of the effects of these interventions difficult (Akerstrom *et al.*, 2021). Further research that accounts for contextual factors has been recommended to better understand EPW (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Akerstrom *et al.*, 2021). It is argued here that subjectivist and interpretivist qualitative research will be suitable for this recommendation as it acknowledges the complexity of context and attempts to address it by gaining HRM's perspectives on EPW from various organisation sizes.

In terms of the research instrument of interviews, there can be structured or unstructured interviews depending on the level of standardisation of questions. Of the unstructured interviews there can be semi-structured where a list of key questions relating to predetermined themes guide the interview (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Semi-structured interviews appeared to be the most suitable because it can benefit from both standardisation levels' features. For example, the structured interview's consistency of questions allows for more valid analysis while the unstructured element enables flexibility in how and when the questions are asked to allow better conversation flow. Another advantage to interviews as a research instrument is that it fosters conversations and clarification which can result in subtle data that would not have been gleaned from quantitative research (Gray *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, this research strategy includes an inductive qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews as the research instrument. This strategy involves researching small sample sizes.

## Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling has been utilised for this research. This sampling method consists of the researcher choosing participants that conform to certain criteria (Adams *et al.*, 2013). The criteria for this were being a HR professional with management experience, the ability and willingness to answer the research questions and varying organisation sizes. The present study is similar to Francis and Keegan's (2006) study as both attain the opinions of HR experts using purposive sampling because participants with rich insight in this research area were desired. Thus, purposive sampling is appropriate for this research methodology.

Six participants were interviewed as a result of this sampling. The participants were chosen based on the aforementioned criteria. There were three participants from small sized companies, two from large companies and one from a medium sized company. Table 4-1 outlines the interview participants' profiles.

**Table 4-1. Profiles of Interview Participants**

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Size of organisation</i>	<i>Length of time in HR</i>
Participant 1	HR Director	Small	28 years
Participant 2	Senior HR Manager	Large	14 years
Participant 3	HR Generalist	Medium	7 years
Participant 4	Head of Talent Acquisition and Development	Large	22 years
Participant 5	Head of HR	Small	11 years
Participant 6	HR & CPD Director	Small	24 years

## Interview Schedule

Interview duration: between 16-30 minutes

Number of interviews: 6

Interview period: 8<sup>th</sup> June – 29<sup>th</sup> June

The interview questions, see Appendix A, were created by the researcher based on the research questions and information gleaned from the literature review. The research questions were broken down into individual parts to form the basis of the questions. From there, the insights from the literature review were applied to the individual parts to finalise the interview questions. As such, the questions were divided into the topics of the research questions. The first category of questions pertained to the perspective of HR on their role and on EPW. Secondly, there were questions about the interventions HR implements and thirdly, questions relating to the challenges of supporting EPW for HR. A pilot study was not conducted due to time constraints. However, after the first interview there were slight alterations made to two questions to enhance the clarity of the questions.

## Procedure

The procedure of the data collection phase will now be described. In terms of sampling, the participants were recruited through purposive sampling from a network of a professional that has held senior management and executive positions in several companies for over thirty years. This individual introduced the researcher to HR professionals with which he has had experience and who could provide the desired perspectives. The individual contacted the participants through email with a brief description of the study and a request to send the researcher their email address if they were interested in participating in the study. When that permission was acquired and the email address given, the researcher sent an introductory email, see Appendix D, asking for their participation and availability with the participant information sheet (Appendix B) and the consent form (Appendix C) attached. Interview times were then agreed after the participants consented to participate in the research. The interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams wherein the researcher began with a short introduction to explain the study, the length of the interview, how many questions would typically be asked and acquiring the participant's consent to record the interview. Once acquired, the researcher started the recording and asked the participants the questions which they answered. When the questions were finished, the researcher informed the participant that the interview had finished and that the recording was being turned off. The participant was then thanked for their cooperation and the meeting was ended.

## Analysis

The six semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed to enable analysis of the data. The data analysis method applied to the interview transcripts and notes taken during the interview was thematic analysis. This analysis method involves “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006 pp.79). From this analysis, detailed and rich descriptions of data can occur. Once the interviews were transcribed the data were coded and then themes were developed. The findings from the analysis are discussed by theme in the next section.

The reasons for choosing this method are its flexibility, accessibility and suitability. As purported by Braun and Clarke (2006), the application of other qualitative analysis methods like grounded theory are limited by their attachments to theoretical frameworks. In contrast, thematic analysis is flexible because it is not bounded by a theoretical position. This allows thematic analysis to be applied more widely in different variations, such as variations in how a theme is identified. The flexibility of this method can thus enable this research’s data to be studied appropriately. Furthermore, this flexibility lends itself to its accessibility. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that this method is particularly accessible for inexperienced qualitative researchers, like the researcher, as it does not require a foundational knowledge of the theory associated with the analysis method because thematic analysis is free of that constraint. The suitability of this analysis method is apparent as Francis and Keegan’s (2006) study analysed their semi-structured interviews by also coding the interviews and developing themes. Therefore, thematic analysis was applied to this research for its appropriateness.

## Limitations

While the strengths of this research methodology have been extolled, there are limitations to this research. Firstly, the researcher is intimately involved in the data collection, analysis and findings stages which might result in the researcher’s biases affecting the findings. As this was known to the researcher, an effort was made to prevent the biases from having a significant effect. Triangulation using the data and information in the literature review and considering alternative explanations for what the participants reported were employed to mitigate biases.

Secondly, semi-structured interviews have limitations in practice. These interviews require the interviewer to be able to create a balance between sticking to a predetermined list of questions

to ensure consistency of data collection and improvising questions when the opportunity arises during the interview. If the balance is off then valuable discussion and follow up information may be lost or analysis and drawing conclusions may be hindered respectively. This improvisation and awareness of when it is necessary requires the interviewer to be alert and have sufficient background knowledge in the research topic to form improvised questions. The limited experience of the researcher in conducting interviews might have limited the success in achieving this balance.

Lastly, due to Covid restrictions, the interviews were conducted over virtual video conferences. While most people will be accustomed to working remotely and online, there may be some richness in conversation lost and limited conversation flow because of the lack of face to face interaction. Additionally, as the interviews were conducted during Covid, the answers, like what EPW supports HR has, were specific to the Covid context limiting the comparison of this study with others in normal contexts. However, this method of interviewing has the advantage of convenience as physical meetings take up more time and effort.

## Ethics

Applying ethical principles is fundamental to the research process (Quinlan, 2011). Thus, ethical standards and practices were adhered to throughout the process. To ensure compliance, the researcher followed codes of ethics to guide the researcher's conduct and mitigate malpractice and harm as well as considering each aspect of the research from an ethical perspective (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). The codes that were followed include the National College of Ireland's code of ethics and the code outlined by Saunders *et al.* (2019). The particular ethical principles with which this research complied were confidentiality, informed consent, voluntary participation and withdrawal and responsible management of data (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). These were maintained by ensuring anonymity of participants and any individuals and organisations mentioned at all times especially as psychological wellbeing is a sensitive topic. Information sheets were provided which detailed the participant's rights and information about the study to participants prior to agreeing to engaging in the research. Written consent was acquired from all participants prior to interview and the data were only used for the specified purpose. The data were also password protected to keep it from being misused.



## Chapter 5: Findings

The thematic analysis of the interview data found five themes and two sub-themes. These can be seen in the table below. Each theme will be outlined in depth in this section.

**Table 5-1. Themes of Primary Research**

Theme	Main findings
1. Limit to HR's responsibility for EPW - <i>Sub-theme 1</i> : EPW actions outside of HR's remit	HR fulfils their limited legal responsibility for EPW by providing access to supports rather than providing psychological support themselves.
2. Predominance of secondary and tertiary interventions by HR - <i>Sub-theme 2</i> : Factors affecting selection of interventions	Lack of primary interventions by HR. Consensus on the participants' HR interventions was absent except for an EAP, counselling, educational speakers and time off. Selection is based on various internal and external factors like budget and the environment.
3. Challenges faced by HR in supporting EPW	Lack of EPW education resulting in challenges of EPW identification and support.
4. Cost benefit of supporting EPW	HR promotes the cost benefits of supporting EPW like improved performance and less absenteeism, but poor EPW has costly effects on the individual's colleagues.
5. Covid's amplifying effect on EPW interest and subsequent management of EPW	Covid enhanced HR's interest in and management of EPW due to new EPW issues and EPW being highlighted.

### Theme 1: Limit to HR's responsibility for EPW

The theme of the limit to HR's responsibility for EPW helps to understand HR's actual role. It was the participants' consensus that HR and the employer have responsibility for EPW but the limit to that was uncertain. For example, one participant described the limit as:

“Yeah it’s very clear from a legal perspective how far it goes that the second there’s an issue you refer them to [Occupational] Health and you know it’s very black and white but in reality it doesn’t translate to black and white.”

Two other participants responded that HR is responsible in that they have a duty of care to their employees with another saying that they’re responsible for health and safety. In employment and health and safety laws, the term duty of care is used when deciding if an employer is liable for an employee’s injury. These three opinions imply that they agree on there being a legal limit to HR’s responsibility when there’s a serious issue or when the duty of care and health and safety responsibility are discharged. However, all participants showed some uncertainty when explaining their responsibility.

Three of the participants declared that they weren’t trained psychologists and how it would be a danger to the employee and the organisation for them to act like counsellors. Thus the participants explained that HR’s role is to “provide a suite of supports” and direct employees to them. One participant put this succinctly:

“What our role to do is you know if we feel that there’s somebody who could avail of assistance to point them in that direction [...] We’re not qualified to be hands on and that’s part of the training that we insist on for line managers too so that you don’t get the amateur psychologist who really thinks they’re doing the right thing but they’re not.”

Therefore, it is inferred that HR is not responsible to provide psychological support but rather to provide the employee with access to psychological support from qualified sources.

### **Sub-theme 1: EPW actions outside of HR’s remit**

The participants’ view of HR’s role in supporting EPW can also be understood by what they don’t do. For instance, outsourcing support to occupational health specialists or doctors for serious psychological issues like mental health disorders was implemented by most participants. Outsourcing support to line managers for EPW is also used. Almost all participants imparted the reliance of HR on line managers for various activities, such as identifying EPW issues, managing supportively and informing HR of any EPW issues. One participant described this reliance:

“[...] it’s our work with the line managers then because the ratios would mean HR can’t cover all of the staff. You know it’s the line manager is the person’s experience of the organisation so it’s equipping the line managers to do a good enough job.”

Here, the participants report that devolving HR activities to line managers and acquiring help from medical professionals is required. However, this view of reliance on line managers seems to be mediated by organisation size as the participants from large and medium sized organisations were the ones that shared this opinion while those from small organisations mostly did not. A small organisation participant said they relied less on line managers because they knew everyone and are aware of their EPW states personally.

In summary, it was found that HR play an assisting role by enabling access to qualified supports rather than giving psychological support themselves. A limit of serious EPW issues and a tentative legal limit of responsibility were inferred by the participants but participants were generally unsure. To fulfil responsibility, HR devolves some tasks to line managers and uses external help from doctors.

The ways in which HR carries out that role and responsibility will be discussed with an overview of the interventions HR provides and the factors affecting the selection of these interventions.

## Theme 2: Predominance of secondary and tertiary interventions by HR

There is not much consensus in this study on interventions used except that every participant mainly implemented secondary and tertiary interventions. An EAP and counselling which are both tertiary interventions were implemented by every participant. The participants reported that when managing an EPW issue, directing the employee to the EAP’s services, like counselling, was a common response. One participant proposed that healthcare, which usually includes an EAP, is a common benefit from employers in Ireland. This suggests that an EAP is the most common intervention used by HR as supported by each participants’ utilisation of EAPs thus implying its importance to HR’s EPW support.

In relation to secondary interventions, most participants employ educational speakers to discuss EPW topics, such as stress management, suicide, parenting and coping in Covid times. The speakers were occupational health professionals, psychologists or qualified personnel provided by the EAP. Here it is seen that the EAP is utilised as a source for other interventions, like with counselling, further emphasising the importance of an EAP to HR. However, it was noted by

one participant that the quality of the speaker and discussion topic can sometimes be unsatisfactory.

Exercise is another commonly used secondary intervention. Yoga, Pilates, physiotherapy and step challenges were examples of exercise interventions. This implies HR's belief in a symbiotic relationship between physical health and psychological wellbeing. For instance, one participant described that when getting feedback from employees, they asked for more of the step challenges because it was making the employee leave the house. This suggests that exercise has been used a coping method for the potentially psychologically damaging effects of remote working.

The secondary intervention of training was utilised by half of the participants. Resilience, time management, mindfulness and meditation were training topics which aim to provide coping skills for employees. Two participants are aware of the importance managers have in relation to EPW as seen in their training provided for managers on leading effectively, how to identify signs of declining EPW and how to manage it. One participant definitively linked training in EPW topics to the learning and development that employees and leaders receive.

“[...] within our broader learning and development budget we try to make wellbeing as kind of integral to overall development. All our leadership programmes have a nod to that so it's baked in there as well.”

As such, training for enabling employees to manage their own psychological wellbeing and for leaders to manage EPW are inferred as important to supporting EPW by some participants.

Throughout the interviews, there were seven interventions only mentioned once including videos on EPW, mental health ambassadors, HR check-in with employees, HR check-in with managers and a digital multimedia platform for EPW. The unique ones were the mental health tracking app and the financial allowance for wellness expenses as they could provide data on the employees' EPW health, what supports they often use and sharing EPW responsibility with the employee as they manage it themselves. This objective data could enable more accurate support provided by HR.

Every participant had experience with managing an EPW issue. There was some consistency in the steps taken after the issue came to HR's attention. Firstly, half of the participants responded to the issue by referring the employee to the doctor illustrating the limit previously specified in the limit to HR's responsibility of serious issues. Secondly, five participants also

gave employees time off from work usually upon recommendation by the doctor thus giving employees the opportunity to treat their own mental state. These two steps signify where HR is not the direct source of support for EPW but is the enabler to the employee in getting the supports. Additionally, two participants attempted to alter the working conditions to aid the employee. This primary intervention implemented at the treatment stage is unusual because primary interventions are supposed to prevent or reduce exposure to stressors so as to prevent the stress escalating to treatment levels. The alterations included reducing workload, changing work hours, remote working and allowing a return to the office during Covid.

Of these interventions, the utilisation rate was mixed among the participants and out of HR's control as these are often voluntary supports. One participant observed "double and triple the utilisation rate" of the digital content the organisation provided since Covid. Two of the smaller organisations mentioned having low participation rates due to being too busy to attend but the employees that did attend greatly appreciated the supports. However, another participant of a small organisation divulged that they usually have 60% participation rate of the organisation in the voluntary events potentially because of their strong advertisement of the interventions:

"Now these are optional so we advertise them. We strongly encourage them."

This suggests that advertisement of interventions by HR may be a differentiating factor between the small organisations' participation rates.

In conclusion, various secondary and tertiary interventions are implemented by HR in practice. Consensus on the interventions in this study was not frequently present except on utilising an EAP, educational speakers, counselling and treating an EPW issue with referrals to doctors and time off from work. HR has to advertise and encourage employees to utilise these voluntary supports as the participation rates are mixed. Participation could be dependent on the intervention type and the size of the organisation. Summarily, a major finding of this research is that HR practices for EPW are typically secondary and tertiary in nature.

## **Sub-theme 2: Factors affecting selection of interventions**

Analysis found that the wide range of interventions used by HR are affected by numerous factors. These include the environment, budget, alignment of senior management and HR, feedback from employees about what interventions they want and HR's opinions on the interventions needed.

Covid is a major environmental factor affecting the selection of interventions as every participant referred to their changes to management of EPW because of Covid. Existing supports were changed to be delivered online like online training and educational speaker due to Covid. The HR check-in meetings with employees and managers were only implemented as a result of Covid.

Half of the participants had no designated budget for EPW support while the other half did with two participants stating that it is within the HR budget under health and wellbeing. Participants from two small organisations and one from a medium sized organisation had no specific budget for EPW. While these small organisations described this as a constraining factor of what interventions they could implement, such as not being able to afford a higher quality EAP, the medium organisation did not have this view. This participant said that regardless of budget they would find the financial resources to help an employee in need and utilised free resources like linking articles about EPW topics to the organisation's wellbeing message forum. Similarly, the participant from the third small organisation had what they perceived as a satisfactory budget. Participants from the large organisations did not have budget as a constraining factor.

All participants expressed alignment between senior management and HR on HR's view of and responsibility for EPW allowing HR to action these views and implement interventions. One participant believes their ability to action their policies is connected to senior management's opinion of HR as a strategic player at the senior management table. According to two participants, the training provided to managers to educate them on EPW enables this alignment.

The selection of interventions is predicated mainly on the employees' answers to frequent surveys issued by almost all HR participants. The participants said that HR's beliefs on what is needed to address EPW in their organisation impacts selection. Competitors' offerings and the organisation's strategy were reported once as affecting the selection of interventions. One participant asserted that if the organisation's strategy involved significant change, EPW supports related to change management would be needed. Selection was also guided by external benchmarks according to two participants. These benchmarks are the Great Places to Work accolade and the National Standards Authority of Ireland's Excellence Through People audit. Thus, various factors affect the selection of interventions.

### Theme 3: Challenges for HR's support of EPW

There isn't much consensus in the present study on the main challenges facing HR in their attempt to support EPW either. However, it was implied by some participants that there are challenges for HR at each stage of the EPW lifecycle: understanding, identifying and supporting EPW. Peripheral, infrequent challenges were discussed also like budget, leadership commitment, mental health stigma and HR's reputation within the organisation.

Regarding the challenge of understanding and identifying poor EPW, the participants reported the complexity of EPW and the lack of education as sources of this challenge. The participants stated that there is a wide variety of psychological wellbeing issues that can occur among diverse people making it a subjective area unique to each individual. Additionally, some of the participants discussed that they are still learning about mental health as it is relatively new to them what with the pandemic increasing its relevance. Thus the participants imply that they are still developing their education in EPW identification and understanding. As one participant put it:

“I would say that psychological wellbeing is a very difficult subject for a HR professional. We're not licensed. [...] and we're not educated enough so I would say a big challenge is the education of HR professionals and how they handle psychological issues in a workforce.”

Specifically, participants described their struggles with identifying EPW issues and supporting them correctly because it's difficult to identify and support those who don't disclose their EPW issue. According to one participant:

“[...] from my experience people who are struggling psychologically don't necessarily verbalise it [...] and the ones that do present with that em when you dig a bit deeper there can be something going on that they either want to get in first because they've had a spat with a colleague or you know a line manager”

This participant was relaying that sometimes employees that disclose an EPW issue may mask a performance management issue or dispute as a psychological wellbeing issue to create a more favourable response to them. It appears that there are no processes or guidelines that the participants use to identify EPW issues. Instead, emotional intelligence and ad hoc assessing of employees' behaviour are common ways participants identify EPW issues. According to the participants, behavioural signs of EPW issues include absenteeism, working late hours,

changes to personality or performance level among other things. This subjective way of relying on managers' and HR's emotional awareness of employees to identify EPW is flawed as one participant stated:

“some stuff can go undetected [...] there are some people that just aren't suited to people management and that they don't have that kind of emotional intelligence to have their antenna on [...] they would only be task focused and they don't necessarily care so much about the person.”

Three participants reported the challenge of HR depending on line managers having the skill to identify signs of poor EPW and fulfilling the devolvement of HR's support for EPW. In terms of HR supporting EPW issues, not “frightening” away the employee who did not disclose their EPW struggles with HR's approach and management of them was difficult for one participant. Some participants used one-to-one check-ins between the employee and the manager or HR to approach the employee and giving them the opportunity to self-disclose. Therefore, approaching the employee and devolvement of support to managers in the supporting stage are challenges for HR.

The peripheral challenges that arose less frequently included budget, lack of commitment from leadership in supporting EPW, mental health stigma, HR's having a police like reputation in the organisation, lack of support for HR and the EPW issue being out of HR's control to help because it's too significant. In terms of budget, only two of the participants from small organisations posed budget and subsequent lack of resources as a challenge.

To conclude, the main challenge that HR faces is their education on understanding, identifying and supporting EPW.

#### **Theme 4: Cost benefit of supporting EPW**

The incentive for organisations and HR to overcome these challenges is in the theme of the cost benefit of supporting EPW. There is a link that each participant makes between supporting EPW and the benefits this has for the organisation. According to the participants, these benefits include better performance, concentration, retention, engagement, stress management and less absences. All of which could result in less costs or even financial gains. For instance, positive EPW was often connected by participants to improved performance:



“It’s fundamental to their ability to do their job so if you’re not in a good psychological place you’re not going to be able to do your best work.”

Furthermore, a quote from one participant is particularly relevant when asked about if improving the employee’s mental state or performance level leads HR’s support of EPW:

“Realistically it’s probably a mixture of the two [...] that supportive element is really important. You know also the flipside of HR is you know it’s business focused so you have to also look at performance management.”

It is inferred from this that HR has to manage both performance and EPW which can represent the business side and people side of HR respectively. The participants prioritised the employee’s mental state over their performance but then often mentioned the mutually affecting relationship between the performance and EPW. This relationship is based on the position that an employee will perform better if their psychological wellbeing is positive. Therefore, it is implied that HR is completing a financially beneficial action when supporting EPW because of the performance-EPW relationship.

However, a tension between the business and people sides of HR when supporting EPW was difficult for two participants. Specifically, the impact that a struggling employee has on their colleagues and manager was noted:

“Sometimes it’s tough from a business perspective you know you might want to kind of support someone as much as you can but then there’s the business pressures of you can only do that for so long before it starts impacting other team members. So that’s always a challenge in HR trying to support the individual while then also supporting the people around them like managers and the team members who may also be impacted by that person’s struggles.”

Thus the participants infer that the consequences and costs of poor EPW reach further than the individual due to their colleagues and manager having to cover the work of the individual. By doing so, the short-term costs of supporting EPW and lower performance from the individual and their colleagues may outweigh the potential benefits of successfully supporting EPW. This indicates the complexity HR must manage to derive the incentivising cost benefit of supporting EPW.

## Theme 5: Covid's amplification of EPW interest and subsequent management of EPW

Covid's effects on HR's view and management of EPW significantly permeated the data. Most participants included how Covid changed the perspective of HR and the organisation on EPW as having more importance than they realised. The EPW support and EPW issues that occurred because of Covid were changed also.

In relation to the shift in perspective, most participants relayed that Covid amplified their interest in EPW. In answer to when EPW became of interest to HR, one participant stated:

“I think it got accelerated in the pandemic”

Prior to Covid, participants proposed that EPW has always been of interest to HR but it came to their attention ranging from 15 to three years ago. Two participants posited that the increasing interest has been due to a lessening of the taboo around mental health. As a result of Covid highlighting EPW in a new way, HR's interest in EPW seems to have been amplified.

This new perspective of Covid is also due to Covid producing new EPW issues, such as isolation, increased burnout and the blurring of the boundary between work and home life, according to some participants. For example, one participant had a few employees feeling isolated working from home. HR successfully accommodated them by opening the office facilitating safe contact for these employees. Additionally, two participants shared that Covid has made spotting an EPW issue harder due to remote working. It is also harder for employees to speak up about an issue because they're working remotely thus some participants implemented the check-in meetings with HR or the manager. One participant believed that Covid has made more people realise that “wellness is fundamental to performance” and that EPW is a “core issue rather than a crisis issue.” This view of Covid causing new EPW issues and subsequently enhancing revelations of HR on the importance of EPW is a main finding of this research.

The participants' answers were often context specific with current supports suited to the Covid environment. Thus, HR has had to support EPW in a digital format using altered or new supports like virtual yoga and educational talks via Zoom. New and additional supports were also implemented like the step challenges and virtual one-to-one meetings with employees and HR. Therefore, this research has found that Covid positively shifted HR's perspective on the

importance of EPW which drove the implementation of new and more ways of supporting EPW.

## Conclusion

There were five main themes and two sub-themes that were found in the analysis of the data. Firstly, the limit to HR's responsibility for EPW was inferred to be uncertain but may include limits of HR's legal obligation and for serious EPW issues. HR also performs an enabling role that provides employees access to qualified supports and does not directly provide psychological support. The sub-theme of this was that HR also outsources support of EPW to line managers and medical professionals. To fulfil this role, secondary and tertiary interventions are provided by HR. The most common interventions were an EAP, counselling, educational speakers and time off. Primary interventions were not frequently used by participants. Participants were able to action their EPW practices with the alignment of senior management. The factors affecting selection of interventions were varied, such as budget and Covid. A theme of challenges faced by participants involved HR's education on understanding, identifying and supporting EPW appropriately. The participants seemed motivated to overcome these challenges because of the cost benefit from supporting EPW, such as improved performance and less absenteeism. Obtaining this cost benefit requires management of the impact a struggling employee has on those around them. The last theme was Covid's amplifying effect on HR's view and management of EPW. Thus the themes of this research have been outlined and will be discussed in the next section.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

This chapter will compare the findings of the primary research themes and the literature review to answer the overall research aim of investigating HRM perspectives on the interventions organisations implement to support EPW. The research sub-objectives aimed to answer the overarching research objective are the following:

1. To investigate HR's role and perspective on the organisation's efforts to support EPW
2. To understand from a HR perspective the supports they implement and the factors that influence the selection of psychological wellbeing supports made available to employees
3. To explore the biggest challenges to HR in their attempt to support EPW

### Research Sub-Objective 1

The results indicate that HR's role in relation to EPW support is an enabling role to provide employees access to qualified psychological support as HR has a limited responsibility for EPW. HR does not provide the psychological support themselves. The limits to that responsibility were tentatively inferred to be when the issue requires qualified help and the extent of HR's legal obligation but participants were uncertain when defining this limit. The limit of HR's role for EPW seems to include supporting employees' personal lives as participants acknowledged that personal life issues can negatively affect the working life. Thus support for that area is provided like an educational talk on parenting while working. This study demonstrates that HR's perspective on EPW includes viewing EPW as important both for the employees' wellbeing and the organisation's financial outcomes. This is seen in participants' declarations of care for EPW by prioritising it over performance but was often followed by explaining that performance can improve when EPW is supported which helps the organisation's financial position. The HR perspective alluded to balancing the sometimes conflicting sides of caring for employees and achieving business goals simultaneously. Additionally, Covid and the new EPW issues caused by Covid stimulated a shift in HR's perspective of EPW to viewing it with more importance.

These findings will now be discussed to see how they support or contrast the literature and apply in practical settings. A study proposed that EPW is solely the responsibility of the employee and does not include personal life support (Pescud *et al.*, 2015). This was not

supported by this research. HR participants definitively stated that their role includes a responsibility for EPW, albeit with a limit, which includes supporting employees' personal lives. This finding of limited responsibility helps to answer Kowalski and Loretto's (2017) question of where this limit lies. The authors posited that the limit can be explained by connecting it to the cost and effect of EPW support. This research revealed that participants connect the limit to legislation and the extent of the EPW issue which illustrates the limit more clearly what with interventions' varying returns (Deloitte, 2020). Thus more accurate and appropriate EPW support can be promoted.

Furthermore, Kowalski and Loretto (2017) posited that the unclear relationship and responsibility between HR and EPW hindered HR from understanding and performing their role. This study does not support this as participants were capable of performing their role even with some ambiguity. In fact, this study is evidence that HR performs Ulrich's (1997) employee champion role in their support of EPW as the participants performed each of the activities of the employee champion. These include representing the employees' concerns to senior management, increasing employee engagement to increase performance, providing resources to help employees meet work demands, offering employees development opportunities and training line managers to achieve high employee morale. Thus this research evidences the connection of EPW and HR's purpose found in the literature (Ulrich, 1997). The caring sentiments expressed by the participants and by being an employee champion suggest that HR feels an ethical responsibility for supporting EPW (Winstanley and Woodall, 2000; Guest, 2017; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, the participants showed that their role includes Ulrich *et al.*'s (2005) people competencies, like supporting EPW, and business competencies, like managing performance.

The participants perceive EPW as important and prioritise it over performance (Guest, 2017; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020). Covid influenced this perception. This study is evidence for the CIPD's (2021) argument that Covid has shed new light on EW, in particular psychological wellbeing, and drove HR to view EPW support as more important than before. The results also illustrated a theme of HR perceiving EPW support as economically attractive. Specifically, EPW support can create a cost benefit which supports the argument of an economic connection between EPW and HR (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Guest, 2017; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020). Evidence for this was the participants frequently listing the benefits of supporting EPW including better performance, engagement and less absenteeism. This perspective could be

applied as an incentive to managers to invest in EPW support. HR participants also acknowledged this connection by describing the tension between supporting EPW and managing performance of the individual and those around them. This conflict can arise because without sufficient performance the organisation will suffer in productivity and costs. Therefore, the participants implied that a balancing act is needed for managing the business and people sides of HR (Francis and Keegan, 2006) to gain the mutual benefits of supporting EPW. Similarly, a perspective in the literature that was contradicted by this study is that the business or strategic side of HR overshadows the employee champion or people side of HR (Francis and Keegan, 2006). One participant observed that by being viewed as a strategic player by senior management it enabled her to enact her EPW support policies.

To conclude, the results to this research sub-objective revealed that HR's role includes a responsibility for EPW support to the extent of the EPW issue and HR's legal obligation. HR is an enabler of EPW support similar to an employee champion and views EPW with importance for EW and organisational costs.

## Research Sub-Objective 2

The second research sub-objective relates to the interventions HR selects and what affects this selection. Analysis showed that secondary and tertiary interventions were predominantly used. Specifically, EAPs, counselling, educational speakers and time off from work were the most common interventions. Factors influencing this selection were budget, feedback from employees, HR's beliefs and the environment of Covid. To discuss these findings' implications, Guest's wellbeing oriented HRM model will be used as a framework like it was in the literature review. The Covid context forced interventions to be delivered online which limits this study's contextual comparison of the participants' support methods and Guest's model. Nevertheless, the participants perceived that they were effective in supporting EPW and performance according to their own observations and the positive feedback from employees which supports Carolan *et al.*'s (2017) finding of digital training producing positive EPW and work effectiveness.

The application of Guest's (2017) model to a practical setting is foundationally supported by the participants' underlying belief that social exchange theory can apply when supporting EPW and thus attain mutual gains. Evidence of this was found in most participants' perspectives that higher wellbeing will result in better performance by the employee like the literature finds

(Krekel *et al.*, 2019). Further support comes from a minority of interventions from the model being utilised by participants as discussed below.

- 1) Investing in employees: Participants only listed training and development foregoing primary interventions of recruitment and selection and mentoring/career support. However, training was emphasised by half of the participants suggesting consensus between HR practitioners and the literature on training interventions being quite important (Clarke and Hill, 2012). Furthermore, educational speakers were widely implemented by participants which is a form of learning and development. The Deloitte (2020) intervention study found that training had the highest return on investment which suggests that organisations may already be taking advantage of the return from this intervention.
- 2) Engaging work: This category was absent from the participants' answers which contradicts the literature's view of job design and autonomy being common HR practices for supporting EPW (Clarke and Hill, 2012; Loon *et al.*, 2019; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020).
- 3) Positive social and physical work environment: Participants utilised some of these practices including social interaction opportunities with check-ins and prioritised employee health and safety to create a safe physical and social environment by implementing extra remote supports for EPW during Covid.
- 4) Voice: Most participants allowed two way communication and expression from employees through employee surveys. This supports the literature's view of the importance of giving employees a voice and involvement for EPW support (Clarke and Hill, 2012; Salas-Vallina *et al.*, 2020; Loon *et al.*, 2019). Participants employed surveys to inform HR on what EPW support is desired by employees so HR can accurately support EPW. This is an example of the literature's argument that employee voice helps to mitigate stress by aiding the accurate provision of EPW supports (Holland *et al.*, 2013).
- 5) Organisational support: Little of these practices, which are primary interventions, were used. There was remote working which is a flexible and family friendly work policy that was forced upon HR to implement due to Covid. Only one participant reported incorporating flexible and family friendly work practices in relation to EPW before Covid which did not succeed in helping the EPW issue in that case. Other organisational support practices like participative management and an involvement climate did not appear in the participants' methods of EPW support. This implies that Guest's (2017) organisational support practices are not used by participants or that they do but do not associate them with EPW support.

Overall, it is evident that HR agrees with the underlying intention of Guest's model and applies the model to an extent but falls short in implementing a number of practices, particularly primary interventions.

The implications of these findings include the consequences of little primary interventions and the mismatch between the literature and practice on which interventions are used. Firstly, the participants implemented very little primary interventions including some leadership training, one instance of job redesign and improved training opportunities. Guest's primary interventions were largely absent in practice. Thus, it is implied that HR seems to not be proactively preventing EPW issues from occurring by modifying or reducing stressors in the workplace and instead reacts with coping skills provision and treatment. Potentially, this is due to the scope of participants' perceptions of supporting EPW only extending to treatment and coping skills. Another reason could be that participants have primary interventions in place but do not associate them with EPW support. For instance, participants could implement job autonomy practices for improving performance, not EPW support, but may still help EPW. Consequently, the EPW support offered by HR is missing a fundamental part by not reducing EPW issues from occurring. The organisation's costs suffer too as preventative support with early screening of issues had one of the highest returns among interventions (Deloitte, 2020). However, the extensive secondary and tertiary interventions help to build a better workplace environment that is more open to EPW issues which is a primary intervention in itself and can encourage employees to disclose their EPW issues to aid identification. Nevertheless, this implies that the participants are not aware of or choose not to use interventions that modify or reduce exposure to stressors.

This is contradictory to the literature which focuses predominantly on primary interventions and little on secondary and tertiary as is the case for Guest's (2017) model. For example, EAPs and counselling were the most commonly used interventions by the HR participants but tertiary interventions were not listed in Guest's (2017) model. This study argues that the model requires more tertiary interventions to be more practical. Therefore, a disconnect between the literature and practice appears to be present on the emphasis of certain interventions. EPW support could suffer from lack of consensus on best practices due to the literature and practice focusing on different directions.

The factors affecting the selection of interventions of budget and Covid have interesting insights. Only two participants from small organisations supported the literature's finding of



financial cost being an influential selection factor (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Pescud *et al.*, 2015). This suggests that organisation size is a variable that can affect the EPW support HR provides. Small organisations are less likely to have wellness programmes (McCoy *et al.*, 2014) which is partially supported by this research as small organisations might have less EPW supports or cheaper EPW supports. However, the effect of EPW issues might be felt more by small organisations as one participant implied that they rely more heavily on individual employees. This implies that small organisations might be at more risk from EPW issues but still have less EPW supports. However, another small organisation and medium organisation did not have budget as a major challenge suggesting that the effect of organisation size is inconsistent. Still, evidence suggests that EPW support selection can be constrained by organisation size which affects budget.

Covid was another major influence on the selection of interventions and due its recency was not evident as a factor in the literature review. Results illustrated that Covid enhanced HR's interest in EPW and drove HR to adopt new ways to support EPW in a purely digital format unlike what was done before. This study argues that HR has been innovative in the digital delivery of EPW support as evident in the adoption of new digital interventions and HR's alterations to physical interventions to be delivered online like with virtual yoga. Thus this research finds that Covid influenced intervention selection by forcing HR to adapt EPW support in the face of significant environmental disruption. Covid's effect is temporary so it will become less of a factor.

In conclusion to the second research question, mainly secondary and tertiary interventions, like training and EAP respectively, have been implemented by HR with a lack of primary interventions. Covid and budget among other things affect the selection of interventions.

### Research Sub-Objective 3

The third research sub-objective relates to the challenges to HR in their support of EPW. This study found that the challenges reported by the participants were varied but implied HR's lack of education in understanding, identifying and supporting EPW.

It seems from the first research sub-objective that HR understands EPW enough to perform a commonly shared role, see EPW's importance and can identify, albeit uncertainly, a limit to their responsibility for EPW. Even so, HR participants identified that their education on EPW

is still lacking. A part of this missing education not identified by participants which was unanticipated is the use of primary interventions to prevent EPW issues. This is inferred from the lack of primary interventions for EPW support alongside the participants' awareness of EPW's complexity and of their incomplete knowledge. This could be an unconscious gap. HR may have implemented primary interventions for other reasons but do not realise they also EPW support. This is suggested because anecdotes of EPW issues from participants did not have organisational causes so HR might have reduced job stressor exposure without realising it. Without this knowledge and intervention type consciously or unconsciously however, HR could become caught in a reactive loop of treatment and coping skills as opposed to proactively reducing EPW issues from the source by modifying job stressors intentionally. By not understanding primary interventions and using them to combat organisational causes of poor EPW, identification of EPW issues and where they might occur are made difficult which is already a challenge to participants. This understanding would aid them in their early identification of EPW issues and potentially prevent it from escalating instead of participants mainly relying on emotional intelligence to identify already present EPW issues thus only looking for symptoms as opposed to causes. Therefore, HR's education on primary interventions and identification of EPW issues are challenges to their support.

There is also the challenge of approaching and supporting the employee appropriately. HR fears not accurately supporting EPW and frightening away the employee with their approach. This hints again that their EPW education is incomplete. Consequently, there's a risk that HR might offer support that is not accurate for treating the issue thus not treating it and prolonging the issue and its costs. This applies as well to line managers as HR relies on line managers to be able to identify EPW issues and support their employees correctly. In comparison, participation by employees in HR's supports was only a challenge for two participants of small organisations while senior management support was not a challenge. As discussed previously, the tension between managing the business side of HR and supporting EPW was also a challenge for a few participants illustrating that a balancing act is needed like Francis and Keegan proposed (2006).

These challenges were similar to ones in the literature excluding the unanticipated finding of HR's lack of knowledge on primary interventions. However, different reasonings for these challenges were made which suggests that more studies on the challenges' causes are needed. For instance, Kowalski and Loretto (2017) list the changing role of HR, varying definitions of

EW, devolvement of HR and the question of HR's responsibility as the reasons for HR and EPW's relationship unclarity. In comparison, participants reasoned that it was because EPW is a complex topic which is diverse and subjective. The researcher infers that it is also their lack of education on EPW. This shows a different focus between the two as the literature focused on HR while the participants focused on EPW. Another example of this different focus is the participants proposing devolvement of HR as a challenge not because it affected how HR sees its role in EPW support (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017) but because it's a risk that line managers are not capable of identifying and supporting EPW successfully. These different focuses may hinder the acquisition of best practices for EPW support from arising.

Less concerning challenges were participation and management support. The challenge of low employee participation in interventions in the literature review (Linnan *et al.*, 2008) was only slightly supported by the current study as participation was mixed with only participants from two small organisations reported having low participation rates. Contrastingly, the other organisations including a small organisation had high or medium participation. These mainly high participation rates imply that there is an increased need from the employees for these supports like the CIPD (2016) and VHI (2018) studies reported. Alternatively, strong encouragement and advertisement by HR regarding these interventions may also be a reason for these participation levels as observed by one participant. The literature proposed that lack of management support and investment in EPW support was another challenge for HR (Linnan *et al.*, 2008). This argument was not present in the participants' perspectives. The opposite of that was found as there was common alignment of thought between HR and senior management. Thus, HR are able to action their EPW policies with the backing of senior management. This could be explained by the significant period of time between Linnan *et al.*'s (2008) study and this current study. Additionally, the training on EPW provided by some participants to senior managers likely aided this alignment. As such, the challenges of participation and lack of management support did not have as much bearing on HR practitioners as the literature proposed.

To summarise, this study finds that the main challenge to HR practitioners in relation to EPW is HR's education in understanding primary interventions and identifying and supporting EPW appropriately. Preventative, proactive and accurate EPW support can suffer from this lack of education. Therefore, HR requires more training and knowledge regarding EPW. Employees'

frequent participation in supports illustrates that EPW issues might be increasing bringing an urgency to HR's training.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

This research aimed to investigate the HRM perspectives on the interventions organisations implement to support EPW. Research sub-objectives related to HR's role and perspective regarding EPW, the interventions HR implements, the factors affecting that selection and the challenges involved in this guided the answer to the overall research question. The literature review pointed to EPW's complexity through the different definitions of EW. This study's topic of interest was then contextualised by examining the organisation's impact on EPW both positively and negatively through modifying job stressors. There are three levels of organisational interventions to positively do this: primary, secondary and tertiary. Each level addresses EPW differently as they can reduce job stressors, provide coping skills and treat EPW respectively. In terms of HR's connection to EPW, the literature found that this connection involves ethics, economics and HR's purpose as an employee champion. HR was seen to be capable of implementing interventions that can mutually benefit the organisation and the employee by following Guest's (2017) wellbeing oriented HR model. However, challenges such as financial barriers, the lack of clarity on HR's role and responsibility for EPW and resource utilisation face HR in their support of EPW.

With these perspectives from the literature in mind and an interpretivist and inductive research methodology, primary research was conducted using semi-structured interviews. This subjectivist and qualitative research was beneficial as it allowed rich descriptive data and nuance to be gathered that a quantitative method would not have yielded. Thematic analysis and participants' quotes illustrated patterns to draw a holistic, diverse and insightful picture of the answers to the research sub-objectives.

Regarding the first research sub-objective, it was found that HR's role is one of enabling employees to access qualified supports and not to provide psychological support themselves. This role is evident from HR having a responsibility for EPW but there are suggested limits to this including HR's legal obligation and the extent of the EPW issue. As such, this study has provided knowledge to answer the literature's call for more clarity on HR's responsibility for EPW (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). This role grew in importance over Covid due to the negative effect Covid had on EPW with new EPW issues of isolation and increased burnout

occurring. HR's perspective on EPW was also affected by Covid as with this rise in poor EPW HR started seeing EPW as more important than before. Subsequently, they increased their supports for EPW. These surprising findings on Covid's effects have added to the early research for further study on these areas. Another aspect of HR's perspective is that HR sees EPW support as a financially beneficial action as it can increase performance, engagement, retention and reduce absenteeism. This illustrates the dual sides of HR's duties and perspectives of business and people competencies. Simply put, HR's role is to help employees access qualified psychological supports and perceives this responsibility as important for wellbeing and the organisation's costs.

The second research sub-objective sought to understand what HR does for EPW and the factors affecting their support. Results show that HR commonly utilises the EPW supports of an EAP, counselling, educational speakers and time off. This indicates the dominance of secondary and tertiary interventions implemented by HR for EPW support. By not implementing primary interventions and not intentionally reducing the chances of EPW issues from arising, HR could be missing a fundamental opportunity to protect EPW and reduce costs with early screening of issues. Guest's (2017) model may be a solution for this as it consists of many mutually beneficial primary interventions and there is already alignment between HR's beliefs and Guest's in terms of social exchange theory. HR even already uses some of the model's interventions. However, a critique of this model which makes it less suitable for practical settings is its lack of tertiary interventions when the most common interventions used in practice are tertiary. Thus, HR would need to add tertiary interventions to their EPW policies alongside the model for successful EPW support. Factors that can affect the selection of EPW supports include budget, Covid, employee feedback and HR beliefs. Organisation size might be a constraining factor on budget for EPW support but this is an inconsistent variable which requires more testing. Covid is a temporary albeit significant influence as it moved interventions to a solely online delivery and created new EPW issues like isolation and increased burnout. Nevertheless, HR adapted to this environment and successfully supported EPW with secondary and tertiary interventions in their opinion.

The third research sub-objective strove to outline the main challenge in relation to HR's support of EPW. This study finds that HR's education is the main challenge particularly in understanding primary interventions and EPW, identifying issues and supporting EPW. The literature agrees with these findings in general excluding the one regarding primary interventions which was unanticipated. However, there were different focuses with different

reasonings for these challenges. Results show that the unsurety of HR in understanding EPW is due to the complexity of EPW and potentially the lack of education in the use of primary interventions unlike the literature which believes that the unsurety comes from HR's changing role, HR's responsibility for EPW and devolvement of HR. Devolvement only challenged HR because HR depended on line managers' competence to identify and support EPW, not because it obscures HR's understanding of their role. These two findings highlight the difference of the literature's focus on HR and the practitioners' focus on EPW. This may explain part of the mismatch on the emphasis of primary interventions in the literature and secondary and tertiary interventions in practice as primary interventions manage EPW less visibly than the other interventions hindering HR practitioners' awareness of them. Approaching EPW issues was an unanticipated challenge as the literature reviewed did not seem to have this as a challenge. Best practice for EPW support may be unclear from the lack of consensus of practitioners and the literature on the focus for EPW support and lack of studies on approaching EPW issues.

Additionally, this study argues that the findings of HR's belief of education being their biggest challenge and the lack of primary interventions suggest that HR might not be aware of primary interventions' use in reducing job stressors that result in EPW issues. HR seems reactive to EPW issues with treatment and giving employees coping skills instead of modifying the organisational causes of issues prior to escalation to reduce the chances of poor EPW. Alternatively, HR could have primary interventions in place but does not regard them as supporting EPW thus unintentionally reducing exposure to job stressors. Either way, this makes it challenging to identify and understand EPW issues as HR looks for symptoms of poor EPW and not the causes. Supporting EPW could be undermined from this when the cause is not understood and so inaccurate and ineffective treatment is given which is costly for the organisation. Thus, HR's current EPW support could be leaving EPW vulnerable by not reducing exposure to causes of EPW issues, if they are not unintentionally already doing so. This is possible because most issues seem to have personal causes not organisational ones. More training on EPW for HR to address this lack of education is needed so as to better protect and support EPW.

Participation was mostly high and alignment between management and HR was felt by all which contradict the literature's perspectives. This alignment implies HR is able to action their policies for EPW. The higher participation rates suggest that employees are more concerned about EPW or experiencing more EPW issues for which they seek support. To address this

increased need, HR urgently requires more education on EPW at all stages of EPW support. In conclusion, HRM's perspectives on EPW support in organisations are now better understood.

## Recommendations

On the back of this discussion several recommendations emerged for practice and further research.

### Further Research Recommendations

Further study on the employees' perspectives on the EPW interventions HR implements is also recommended. By comparing the findings from this study and the one on employee perspectives, a fuller picture of the state of EPW in organisations and best practices could be acquired as this study is limited to one side of the relationship.

Due to the recency of Covid, further study on Covid's effect on HR should be conducted to understand the shift that appears to have occurred in HR perspectives and management.

The challenges of EPW were similar to the literature but had different reasonings behind them. This illustrates that further study on these challenges is needed from different angles as the literature seemed to focus on HR while HR practitioners focused on EPW. Therefore, further study on challenges to HR with a focus on EPW is recommended.

### Practical recommendations

It is recommended that HR implement more primary interventions from Guest's (2017) model so as to provide comprehensive EPW support at each stage and gain mutual benefits including cost benefits. This could increase their chances of reducing EPW issues from progressing to more costly stages thus addressing the cost of poor EPW to organisations. Thus HR could more fully support EPW while also getting more cost benefits from the financial advantages and achieving of business goals from implementing primary interventions. The timescale would differ according to the primary intervention and depending on the organisation but interventions, such as flexible working and job autonomy, may require significant investment and a longer time period to write policies and to see return on investment. For example, introducing job autonomy policies may require negotiations with trade unions which can take time but reducing workload of at risk employees could be implemented quicker with efficient distribution of work among the team. Therefore, HR needs to consider which interventions

would fit their organisation in terms of available financial resources and urgency of intervention.

To start resolving HR's challenge of education on EPW issues a mental health literacy programme for leaders, HR and managers is recommended. A mental health literacy programme has seen positive results in leaders' capabilities in EPW identification and support (Dimoff *et al.*, 2016; Dimoff and Kelloway, 2019). The programme from Dimoff and Kelloway's (2019) study was a once off three hour session which shows that even if organisations only invest in one short session it can enhance leaders' education and support of EPW. This illustrates that the costs and time taken for this training can be lowered if organisations only invest in a training session as opposed to a course while still being effective in developing competence. Secondly, the Signs of Struggle checklist by Dimoff and Kelloway (2019) is an example of an effective guide on identifying signs of deteriorating mental health. By adopting a similar guide as a formal process alongside emotional intelligence, the risks of the subjective way that participants currently identify EPW issues could be mitigated. Once acquired the guide can aid EPW support immediately. The EAP service might be able to help HR find a mental health literacy programme and guide for identifying EPW issues. Meanwhile, there is a freely accessible guide from the CIPD (2018) which could be a starting point for adding to HR's education and provides many resources for more information.



## Personal Learning Statement

Undertaking this master's course and completing this dissertation were challenging but highly rewarding experiences. I have learned a great deal of academic and practical knowledge from these experiences that have highlighted new interests for me. My aim when starting this course was to build a foundation of academic knowledge on HRM to aid me in applying my learnings in future HR jobs. As I have not worked in HR before, this course helped highlight areas of specialisation that I may like to pursue in my career, such as mediation and conflict management.

Regarding the dissertation, the aim was to get a front line perspective on supporting EPW from those supporting it. As EPW is such a growing and potentially quite damaging issue, I felt it pertinent to probe HR practitioners on their actions for it and the challenges they face. I believe this was achieved and highlighted key areas of strength and weakness. These findings hopefully have added new insights to the broader academic literature and identified areas in need of further research.

A challenge and an area of improvement that I found during this assignment was drawing themes from my research as I was not very experienced in reviewing primary research that I had conducted. I have improved in this area but it could have been done more efficiently as I required more guidance for this. My method could be improved by looking at the data more holistically and making earlier connections between the answers to the interview question with the research questions.

As this dissertation and course were completed purely online due to Covid, I entered the course with the fear of my learning being hindered by this format. Fortunately, the lecturers and the college provided sufficient support and engagement. It required me to improve my independent learning and become comfortable using video conferencing software for lectures and teamwork. There were also benefits of convenience from this type of delivery for myself, the lecturers and research participants. As such, I have gained confidence in my ability to work remotely and independently.

Finally, the course and dissertation have been very beneficial experiences for my personal development of skills like remote working and researching. My academic knowledge of HRM has also improved so I feel I am now in a better position to succeed in this profession as a result of this course.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

**“What is HR’s role and perspective on the organisation’s efforts to support employees’ psychological wellbeing?”**

1. When did psychological wellbeing become a topic of interest to HR in your experience?
2. How does HR view EPW?
3. Does that align with the organisation’s perspective on EPW?
4. Can you give an example of how you’ve been able or unable to action this view?
5. Would you say HR’s role in relation to EPW is led by the wish to improve the employee’s mental state or performance level and why?
6. From an employee’s perspective, how would they view the organisation’s EPW practice?

**“From a HR perspective what supports do you implement and what factors influence the selection of psychological wellbeing supports made available to employees?”**

7. Do you have a budget for EPW? / If not how do you finance EPW?
8. What supports or interventions does HR implement for EPW?
9. If none, does HR feel the need or desire to implement interventions?
10. If none, are interventions for EPW something that might appear in the organisation in the future?
11. If yes, how effective do you feel the supports have been to employees?
12. How do you spot EPW issues?
13. What factors influence the selection of those supports?

**“What is the biggest challenge to HR in their attempt to support employee psychological wellbeing?”**

14. What are the biggest challenges to HR in their attempt to support EPW?
15. How far does HR’s responsibility for EPW extend?
16. Would senior management have the same view?
17. Can you tell me of any experiences you might have had with managing an employee that was struggling with their psychological wellbeing?
18. What additional question do you feel is relevant to EPW that I should ask?

## Appendix B

### Participant Information Sheet

Researcher: Rianne Rowan

#### **Summary of topic**

Poor employee psychological wellbeing can negatively affect the health and performance of employees and thus affect the organisation's performance. This is a costly and growing issue that HR is positioned to address. As such, it is important that HR's own perspective on employee psychological wellbeing and HR's role in supporting it are understood. This research will attempt to gain insight into this topic by asking HR about their perspective of employee psychological wellbeing and what interventions and supports they employ in their organisation. Additionally, the factors and challenges that influence the selection and implementation of successful interventions will also be researched.

#### **Participant Information**

If you choose to participate in this research you will complete an interview administered by the researcher, Rianne Rowan, on the topic mentioned above. This interview will last 20 to 30 minutes with questions relevant to the research topic being asked by the researcher for you to answer. For ease of analysis of the data, the interview will be audio-recorded and the researcher may take notes during the interview.

Participation in the interview is completely voluntary. To participate, you will be asked to read and sign a consent form specifying your voluntary participation in the research. Confidentiality of all participants, named individuals and the organisations involved will be maintained. The signed consent forms, digital records of the interviews and interview transcripts will be password locked on the researcher laptop. Physical notes and documents relating to the research will also be securely stored. The signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation. Transcripts of the interview will be retained for two years from the date the exam board confirms the dissertation results.

All information will be solely used for the purposes of the dissertation as required for completion of a Master's in Human Resource Management in National College of Ireland. The completed dissertation, which will have all individuals' names and information be

confidential and non-identifiable, will be seen by the examiners and the supervisor and may be used by NCI afterwards.

You are free to revoke your participation at any stage during the research process and up until the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2021. During the interview, you are free to decline answering any question and to stop the interview at any time.

If you have any questions about this process or want to revoke your participation, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher, Rianne Rowan, at [x20153031@student.ncirl.ie](mailto:x20153031@student.ncirl.ie).

## Appendix C

### Consent Form

#### **Investigation of HRM perspectives on the interventions organisations implement to support the psychological wellbeing of employees**

#### Consent to take part in research

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves answering questions in an audio-recorded interview.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in a dissertation.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities. They will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in password locked digital files kept on the researcher's laptop and OneDrive account which are both password protected. Only the researcher has access to the data and the passwords needed

for data access. The data will be retained until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.

- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information

Researcher: Rianne Rowan

Email address: x20153031@student.ncirl.ie

Phone number: 0872977071

*Signature of research participant*

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Signature of participant

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Date

*Signature of researcher*

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

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Signature of researcher

-----

Date

## Appendix D

Interview Request Email

Hello X,

I hope you are keeping well!

I'm emailing you to ask if you would be interested in participating in my research as part of my dissertation for my Master's in HR Management. Participation would only involve a 20-30 minute call answering questions in an audio-recorded interview over Zoom or Microsoft Teams. I am aiming to have acquired interview data by the end of June.

The title of my dissertation is "**Investigation of HRM perspectives on the interventions organisations implement to support the psychological wellbeing of employees.**"

Psychological wellbeing encompasses mental health and the presence of positive feelings of employees. The attached Participant Information Sheet has more information on the topic and what participation entails for your perusal.

By interviewing HRM professionals, I aim to gain an understanding of the opinions and role of HR in relation to employee psychological wellbeing in practice.

Confidentiality of the interviewee's identity, the organisation they work for and any information that might identify someone else will be maintained and protected. This is specified in detail in the attached Consent Form which would need to be signed by a research participant.

If you are interested in participating or would like to know more about my dissertation, please let me know. If not, no problem at all.

Kind regards,

Rianne Rowan