

A qualitative exploration of line managers' perceived
implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities
during the COVID-19 pandemic:
Insights from an Irish Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

The sudden pivot to remote work in March 2020 arising from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges for organisations (Geary and Belizon, 2022). Line managers have been established in the literature as central to the implementation of devolved HR responsibilities (Op de Beeck, Wynen and Hondeghem, 2018). However, it is frequently argued in the HR Devolution literature that line managers are ineffective in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities (Torrington & Hall, 1996) due to five factors that have been identified as constraining effective HR implementation: i) *Desire*; ii) *Capacity*; iii) *Competences*; iv) *HR Support* and v) *Policy & Practices* (Bos-Nehles, 2010).

As such, in the context of enforced remote working arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, this dissertation aims to explore line managers' perceived implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities in an Irish Higher Education Institution during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting on Bos-Nehles' (2010) five factors that constrain implementation of devolved HR responsibilities and the potential challenges associated with working from home. A qualitative approach was adopted, undertaking semi-structured interviews with participants with line management responsibilities who had worked from home for a large Irish HEI during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings illustrate not only the challenges associated with the implementation of devolved HR responsibilities, but also the additional challenges of doing so in an enforced remote working context.

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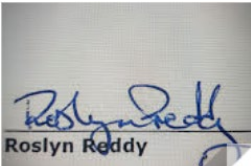
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List of Acronyms

CIPD Chartered Institute of Personnel Development

CSO Central Statistics Office

ESRI Economic and Social Research Institute

FTE Full-time Equivalent

HEI Higher Education Institution

HRM Human Resource Management

LM Line Manager

WFH Working from Home

WHO World Health Organisation

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Overview of the Study

The sudden pivot to remote work in March 2020 arising from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges for organisations and the management of work (Geary and Belizon, 2022). The majority of employees were working from home (WFH) for the first time (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke and Zimmermann, 2020), with just 13.2% of employees in Ireland having had experience of WFH pre-pandemic (Williamson, 2022). Many employees faced challenges to their productivity, well-being and work life balance through work intensification as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Geary and Belizon, 2022). Meanwhile, through the delegation of Human Resources (HR) responsibilities to Line Managers (LMs), also known as HR Devolution, LMs have been established in the literature as central to the implementation of HR policies and practices (Op de Beeck, Wynen and Hondeghem, 2018), and as such, they are considered crucial to organisational performance by influencing employee behaviour, attitudes and performance (Gilbert, De Winne and Sels, 2015). However, it is frequently argued in the literature that LMs are ineffective in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities (Torrington & Hall, 1996). In the context of enforced remote working arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, this dissertation aims to explore LMs' perceived effectiveness of their implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities in an Irish Higher Education Institution during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting on Bos-Nehles' (2010) five factors that constrain implementation of devolved HR responsibilities and the potential challenges associated with working from home, analysed through the lens of Role Theory. A qualitative approach will be administered through semi-structured interviews with LMs at an Irish HEI.

The remainder of this chapter will now discuss the background relative to HR Devolution, HR implementation and LMs, the contexts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the HEI. It will then discuss the research problem, the relevance of the research and the structure of the dissertation.

1.1. HR Devolution

HR Devolution has been defined as "the redistribution or transfer of personnel tasks or activities traditionally carried out by Human Resources Specialists to middle managers" (Brewster and Larsen, 1992, p. 412; Hoogendorn and Brewster, 1992, p. 4; Hall and Torrington, 1998, p. 46, cited in Cascón-Pereira and Valverde, 2014). In other words, HR Devolution is a process by which LMs external to the HR function assume responsibility for the implementation of HR policies and practices in an organisation (Kehoe and Han, 2020; McDermott, Fitzgerald, Van Gestel and Keating, 2015) such as hiring, onboarding, training, motivation, performance and conflict management (Blayney, Cormier-MacBurnie and Young, 2020), and thereby bringing HR policies and practices "to life" (Harris *et al.*, 2002; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007, cited in McDermott *et al.*, 2015). While the outcomes of devolution may include cost-reduction; faster decision-making; improved employee motivation; and supporting LMs' career development in terms of improving their decision-making skills (Budhwar and Sparrow, 1997), there is ongoing debate concerning the effectiveness of HR Devolution and how it impacts the effectiveness of people management in organisations more broadly (Kulik and Perry, 2008; Conway and Monks, 2010; Mitchell, Obeidat and Bray, 2013; Reichel and Lazarova, 2013; Bainbridge, 2015).

1.2. HR Implementation and the Line Manager

Criticism of LMs' effectiveness implementing their devolved HR responsibilities has been a frequent feature of the HR Devolution literature (McGovern, Hope-Hailey and Stiles, 1997; Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003; Bond and Wise, 2003; Renwick, 2003), with scholars pointing to a myriad of shortcomings that have been categorised by Bos-Nehles (2010) as follows: i) LMs do not have the *desire* to implement their devolved HR responsibilities (Cunningham & Hyman, 1995; Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006); ii) LMs have insufficient *capacity* in their roles to implement their HR related-responsibilities (McGovern *et al.*, 1997); iii) LMs have insufficient HR-related *competences* (Hall and Torrington, 1998; McGovern *et al.*, 1997, Renwick, 2003); iv) LMs receive insufficient *support* from HR specialists to effectively implement their HR responsibilities (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003; Renwick, 2003); v) LMs need HR *policies and procedures* to effectively implement their HR responsibilities (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; McConville, 2006). These challenges may give rise to a gap between how HR policies and practices are intended to be implemented and how they are actually implemented (Wright and Nishii, 2013) as partial or inconsistent implementation as well as non-implementation of HR policies and practices can result in ineffective implementation (Trullen, Stirpe, Bonache, and Valverde, 2016). As such, LMs are central to HR Devolution, and the manner in which HR practices are implemented by LMs may be a key factor in both the success or failure of HR Devolution in a given organisation (Fu, Flood, Rousseau and Morris, 2020) impacting overall organisation effectiveness (Alfes *et al.*, 2013; Bos-Nehles, *et al.*, 2013; López-Cotarelo, 2018, cited in Fu *et al.*, 2020).

1.3. The COVID-19 Pandemic: Pivoting to Enforced Remote Working

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic presented additional challenges for the implementation of devolved HR responsibilities. The novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (WHO, 2020). The disease spread rapidly around the world and by March 2020, the WHO had declared a pandemic (WHO, 2020). The communicable nature of the disease precipitated an unprecedented transition to remote work for millions of workers worldwide (WHO, 2021). In Ireland, approximately 40% of Irish workers pivoted to remote work following the implementation of COVID-19 public health measures (Eurofound, 2020). Pre-pandemic, in a 2018 pilot survey of 15,000 homes in Ireland, the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2019) found that 18% of respondents worked from home. However, later surveys undertaken by the ESRI and a National Competitiveness and Productivity Council report published in 2020 both assert a slightly lower figure of 13.2% and 14% respectively of employees working remotely (Williamson, 2022). As such, from March 2020, it may be inferred from the aforementioned data alongside research undertaken by Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke and Zimmermann (2020) that the majority of LMs were managing teams remotely for the first time. This presented both organisational (training, communications, performance management, technical and changes in strategic focus), and individual (productivity, work intensification, work-life balance, well-being, caring responsibilities) challenges to the implementation of devolved HR responsibilities (Collings, Nyberg, Wright and McMackin, 2021). As such, these challenges may have contributed additional constraints on LMs' implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities.

1.4. The Organisational Context

The study was undertaken in a large Irish Higher Education Institution (HEI). For the purposes of preserving the anonymity of participants in the study and maintaining confidentiality around their contributions to the study, details that could identify the institution have not been included in this dissertation. However, across all Irish HEIs, the number of managers has been growing (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015), and like all organisations, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the HEI to deliver all academic and administrative services at distance for the first time, with WFH a rarity pre-pandemic in line with other public sector institutions (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2019). HR responsibilities at the HEI are devolved to LMs throughout the institution. The HR function follows Ulrich’s (1997) “Three-legged Stool” model of HR. This model comprises a centralised administrative service handling minor issues administrative issues and queries such as payroll, pensions and leave administration; HR business partners with responsibility for a portfolio of units to support management achieve strategic business objectives; and centres of expertise (i.e. Learning & Development; Employee Engagement) to provide bespoke services. The Director of HR is positioned as senior manager of the HEI’s leadership team, potentially signifying a strategic position for HR at the HEI.

More broadly, HEIs in Ireland operate through a great deal of complexity, being both public sector organisations with private sector demands. This can largely be attributed to the sector experiencing a funding crisis since the onset of the Global Financial Crisis (Clarke *et al.*, 2015, cited in Clarke, Yang and Harmon, 2018), with many institutions following ambitious recruitment strategies to make up the shortfall in funding, leaving them exposed to global market conditions (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015). The sudden pivot to remote work may have

impacted revenue generation relative to student recruitment efforts, but also challenged academic programmes switching to remote delivery, as well as other administrative services, potentially giving rise to additional workloads and adversely impacting well-being, work-life balance and caring responsibilities.

1.5. Research Problem

LMs' effective implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities are of critical importance to HRM effectiveness in organizations (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013) with respect to guiding employee behavior and performance and organizational success more broadly (Gilbert *et al.*, 2015). However, it has been frequently argued in the literature that LMs are ineffective in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities (Torrington and Hall, 1996). The central areas of concern are categorised under five factors: i) Capacity; ii) Desire; iii) Competences; iv) HR Support and v) Policies and Practices (Bos-Nehles, 2010). Meanwhile, recent academic surveys by Geary and Belizon (2022) and Chung, Seo, Forbes, and Birkett (2020) point to increased workload and productivity experienced by employees during the period of government mandated working from home that led to issues concerning well-being and work life balance. Yet the topic of HR Devolution in a remote work setting is unexplored across both bodies of literature relative to how these negative outcomes attributed to working from home may have impacted the five factors identified by Bos-Nehles (2010). Furthermore, many studies in the HR Devolution literature focus on the perspective of HR managers relative to their perceptions of LMs' implementation effectiveness (Bos-Nehles, 2010). However, Bos-Nehles (2010) argues that constraints hindering implementation effectiveness should be explored from the LM perspective given that many HR responsibilities have been devolved to LMs. Additionally, while there are some studies undertaken in the context of public sector

bodies both in Ireland and overseas, only one study to date concerning HR Devolution and implementation in a HEI has been undertaken in the context of Saudi Arabia (Alqahtani and Ayentimi, 2021).

As such, the aim of this study is to explore LMs' perceived implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities in an Irish Higher Education Institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, in the context of an enforced remote working context during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study seeks to explore several research questions: i) *How do LMs perceive the five factors constraining HR implementation on their HR implementation effectiveness?*; ii) *How do LMs perceive the potential challenges associated with working from home as constraining effective HR implementation?* and iii) *How do LMs view their implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities in light of the five constraining factors and the potential challenges associated with working from home?* Finally, from a theoretical perspective, this study will harness Role Theory (Rizzo, House and Lirtzman, 1970) to support the framework of analysis of the findings of these research questions in line with Op de Beeck *et al.* (2018).

1.6. Relevance of the Research

Notwithstanding the challenges of implementation of devolved HR responsibilities, in the post-pandemic period, remote and hybrid work may well be the 'new normal' (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020) with employees seeking greater flexibility in relation to their hours and working location (Williamson, 2022). The CSO November 2021 survey found that 88% of employees would like to continue to work remotely on a hybrid basis post pandemic (CSO, 2021). And while the Irish Government has recently announced several pieces of legislation including provision for the right to request to work remotely (Geary and Belizon, 2022), the Irish

government has signalled a commitment to remote working post-pandemic to public sector workers through the establishment of a target to have 20% of public sector working remotely (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2021). As such, the aspiration for this study is to contribute to best practice and guidance for managing future crises impacting the workforce (Collings *et al.*, 2021) (such as further government mandated enforced working from home arising from outbreaks of disease or potential fuel crises) potentially informing organisational factors influencing implementation of devolved HR responsibilities in an enforced remote working context and extend the HR Devolution literature on HR implementation in a remote working context, thereby making a contribution to the paucity of research in this area.

1.7. Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is structured as follows:

Chapter 1 has presented a high level of overview and background to the research. The research problem, research aims and objectives have been identified.

In Chapter 2, the bodies of literature concerning HR Devolution and Working from Home will be reviewed to discuss the existing literature, including its gaps and limitations.

In Chapter 3, the methodology of the study will be presented. The research design will be discussed with respect to a rationale for the adoption of an inductive, qualitative study couched in an interpretive research paradigm. The research tool, data analysis and ethical considerations will also be discussed.

In Chapter 4, the findings of the research arising from semi-structured interviews will be outlined. The results will be discussed by theme and sub-theme.

In Chapter 5, the findings of the study will be discussed and critically analysed relative to the literature reflecting on its limitations and implications.

In Chapter 6, the study will be concluded, outlining how the study achieved its research aim and objectives.

In Chapter 7, to satisfy membership requirements of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD), recommendations will be detailed as well as a statement of personal development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2. Introduction

The following review of literature draws on the respective bodies of research concerning HR Devolution and Working from Home (WFH). The review will explore and draw together key concepts within both literatures to examine the challenges associated with implementing devolved HR responsibilities in an enforced remote working context for LMs. It will also examine these challenges through the lens of Role Theory (i.e., role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload). To achieve this, an extensive review of scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles and academic reports has been undertaken to address research aim of this study: How do line managers perceive their implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities in an enforced remote working context during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2.1. HR Devolution

There has been much scholarly inquiry concerning HR Devolution following David Guest's (1987) suggestion that HR should be "given away" in order for the HR function to be more strategically active in organisations (Intindola, Weisinger, Benson, Pittz, 2017; Gollan, Kalfa, and Xu, 2015). As such, there is an extensive body of literature concerning the role of LMs in undertaking their HR responsibilities (Lopez-Cotarelo, 2018; Op de Beeck, Wynen and Hondeghem, 2018) with ongoing debate concerning the organisational outcomes of devolvement (Intindola *et al.*, 2017). Indeed Bainbridge (2015) and Intindola *et al.* (2017) both highlight opposing views on the outcomes of HR Devolution with particular reference to studies undertaken by Kulick and Perry (2008) and Conway and Monks (2010) whose studies findings are contradictory in terms of the impact of the adoption of a devolution strategy on people management effectiveness in organisations. While there are more recent studies that

debate the outcomes (Mitchell, Obeidat, and Bray, 2013; Reichel and Lazarova, 2013), the answer may lay with Bainbridge (2015) who found that different rationales for HR Devolution in an organisation can yield varying outcomes depending on the objective of devolution. He found that devolution undertaken to cut costs, negatively impacts HR's strategic integration and leads to decreases in HR function size whereas devolution undertaken to increase the line's ownership of people management or HR efficiency enhanced HR's strategic integration.

Furthermore, there is some ambiguity in the literature concerning which HR responsibilities traditionally implemented by HR specialists have been delegated to LMs: Blayney, Cormier-MacBurnie and Young (2020) note that HR Devolution involves delegating HR practices such as hiring, onboarding, training, development, performance management to line managers. This is in contrast to Kulik and Bainbridge (2006) who found that LMs have been found to be mainly responsible for HR responsibilities such as performance management, coaching and disciplinary action, while HR specialists maintain responsibility for working with trade unions and human resource planning; they also found that there are "hot potato" HR practices that neither HR nor LMs wish to have responsibility for: career planning, succession planning, leadership development, compensation, coaching, performance management and culture. Yet more convincingly, Gooderham, Morley, Parry and Stavrou (2015) hold a contingency view that the devolution of HR responsibilities to LMs may be contingent on the degree of power of the HR function.

Given the ongoing debates concerning the effectiveness and the exact activities of HR devolution it might be concluded that HR Devolution is not yet fully understood (Intindola *et al.*, 2017). However, what is clear is that LMs are central to HR Devolution and the manner in which HR practices are implemented by LMs may be a key factor in both the success or failure

of HR Devolution in organisations (Fu, Flood, Rousseau, Morris, 2020) and its overall organisation effectiveness (Alfes *et al.*, 2013; Bos-Nehles, *et al.*, 2013; López-Cotarelo, 2018, cited in Fu *et al.*, 2020).

It is therefore unsurprising then that LMs have been an area of distinct focus in the HR Devolution literature. While early studies focused on the delineation of the role of the line manager in HR implementation (e.g. Hall and Torrington, 1998; McGovern, Hope-Hailey, and Stiles, 1997, cited in Intindola *et al.*, 2017), more recent studies have centred on LMs' and HR's perceptions of HR Devolution and its effectiveness (e.g. Kulik and Perry, 2008; Gilbert *et al.*, 2011, 2011b; Op de Beeck *et al.*, 2016; Bondarouk *et al.*, 2018), and LMs' implementation effectiveness, behaviours and factors for successful HRM implementation by the line (e.g., Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk, and Looise, 2013; Conway & Monks, 2010; Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; McDermott *et al.*, 2015; Op de Beeck *et al.*, 2016; Trullen *et al.*, 2016; Evans, 2017; Op de Beck *et al.*, 2018; Makhecha *et al.*, 2018; Fu *et al.*, 2020, cited in Kurdi-Nakra, 2022). Furthermore, the gap between intended and actual practices, and how these are perceived by employees are also a frequent area of research (e.g. Wright and Nishii, 2013; Khilji and Wang, 2006; Woodrow and Guest, 2014; cited in Van Mierlo, Bondarouk and Sanders, 2018).

2.2. HR Implementation

Within the field of HR Devolution, HR Implementation is widely researched (Fu *et al.*, 2020). However, Mirfakhar, Trullen and Valverde (2018) are critical that there are few studies that directly address HR implementation, without providing a clear definition of implementation. Indeed, Bondarouk, Trullen and Valverde (2018) note that some scholars view HR implementation as “the process of translating intended practices into actual practices” (p. 2995), whereas other scholars view it as a “more iterative process that includes and

sometimes is blended with the design of HRM practices and policies” (p. 2995). They further comment on the variations in definition of implementation effectiveness. Trullen (2016) however notes that a generally accepted definition of the effective implementation of HR practices as “a process leading designated organisational constituents to use HR practices as intended by their designers” (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Wright and Nishii, 2013). However, in the next section, we will examine how the process of implementation effectiveness among LMs can be constrained.

2.2.1. Constraints

A seminal study by McGovern, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles, and Truss (1997) is critical of HR Devolution. They found that there are some constraints on LM implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities such as a lack of institutional incentivisation and that implementation of devolved HR responsibilities are not prioritised by LMs. As such, they posit that HR Devolution is unrealistic, noting that “...attempts to devolve HRM to the line in any grand sense can only be regarded as quixotic.” (p.26). Further studies followed, adding to the body of criticism of LMs’ effectiveness implementing their devolved HR responsibilities in the HR Devolution literature (e.g. Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003; Bond and Wise, 2003; Renwick, 2003), with scholars pointing to several constraints that have been categorised by Bos-Nehles (2010) as follows: i) Desire; ii) Capacity; iii) Competences; iv) HR Support; and v) Policies and Practices. They are as follows:

i) **Desire:** LMs do not have the *desire* to implement their devolved HR responsibilities (Cunningham & Hyman, 1995; Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006). This constraint concerns motivation (Bos-Nehles, 2010). According to Bos-Nehles (2010) and in line with McGovern *et al.* (1997), an absence of desire to implement devolved HR responsibilities may be due to a lack of

recognition or incentives for undertaking HR responsibilities i.e. incorporation of HR responsibilities in LMs' job descriptions and performance appraisals. This is supported by Makhecha *et al.*, (2018) who found that while LMs' motivation to implement HR practices was low, they were not rewarded or given recognition for effective implementation of HR tasks. This finding supports Sikora and Ferris (2014) who suggest that an organisational climate that supports performance goals and rewards for HR roles of line managers would tend to increase their HR implementation efforts.

Bos-Nehles (2010) further draws on Cunningham and Hyman, (1999); Brewster and Larsen, (2000); Whittaker and Marchington (2003) to illustrate that where there is a focus on short-term results in lieu of long-term interests, LMs usually give lower priority to HR responsibilities, thereby encouraging LMs to view their HR responsibilities as secondary to their operational responsibilities. For example, Woodrow and Guest (2014) describe how well-designed bullying and harassment policies and practices in hospital contexts were ignored by some line managers, choosing to prioritize other aspects of their roles. This may result in fragmented and less effective people management (Bond and Wise, 2003) where line managers do not consistently implement HR policies and practices (McGovern *et al.* 1997; Budhwar 2000; Bond and Wise 2003).

ii) **Capacity:** LMs have insufficient *capacity* in their roles to effectively implement their HR responsibilities along with their operational responsibilities (McGovern *et al.*, 1997; McConville, 2006). Bos-Nehles (2010) notes that LMs may not have sufficient time to dedicate to their HR responsibilities, again, when short-term results are prioritised over the longer-term interests or if there is an increase in workload. The competing demands of operational and HR responsibilities are noted by Op de Beeck *et al.* (2018) in relation to public sector managers.

They noted that the leadership literature comments on the different roles managers in the public sector are expected perform cf. coach, leader, entrepreneur, bureaucrat, and steward (cited in Wart, Hondeghem, Bouckaert, and Reubens, 2012) which may exert additional capacity issues.

iii) **Competences:** LMs have insufficient HR-related *competences* (Hall & Torrington, 1998; Renwick, 2003) to effectively implement their HR responsibilities. HR competences are required for successful HR implementation (Bos-Nehles, 2010). However, LMs' may not possess the requisite HR-related skills and knowledge and may not be effective people managers (McGovern et al., 1997). Indeed, Maxwell and Watson (2006) found that both LMs and HR specialists perceived LMs' HR competences as insufficient. As such, LMs may require ongoing and concerted training programmes to develop these areas (Bos-Nehles, 2010). Yet many organisations do not provide this degree of training in HR for LMs (Brewster & Larsen, 2000).

iv) **HR Support:** LMs receive insufficient *support* from HR specialists to implement their HR responsibilities effectively (Whittaker and Marchington, 2003; Renwick, 2003). This factor refers to advice, guidance and coaching from HR specialists on how to implement their devolved HR responsibilities (Bos-Nehles, 2010). Renwick (2003, p. 262) found that a lack of support from HR can prevent a "capable" line manager from performing their HR responsibilities well and therefore hindering successful HR implementation from an organisational perspective. If HR support is not available, LMs may turn to their supervisors or other colleagues, and which may lead to poor decisions or ineffective implementation (Bos-Nehles, 2010). HR specialists may not always be available to provide this support when required (Nehles *et al.*, 2006). However, Ulrich's (1997) HR Partner model should mitigate this

constraint (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013) and facilitate a close working partnership between LMs and HR specialists as recommended by Whittaker and Marchington (2003).

v) **Policy and Practices:** LMs need HR *Policy and Practices* to effectively implement their HR responsibilities (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; McConville, 2006). Bos-Nehles (2010) notes the need to remove individual interpretation of HR policies through clear procedures. Without clear procedures, LMs are free to adjust the practices in a manner that is “idiosyncratic” and according to their own understanding (Brewster and Larsen, 2000; Bowen and Ostroff, 2004, cited in Bos-Nehles, 2010). Trullen *et al.* (2016) elaborate that partial or inconsistent implementation, or non-implementation results in ineffective implementation (Wright and Nishii, 2013; Woodrow and Guest, 2014, cited in Trullen, 2016). This could in turn lead to a gap between intended and actual implementation of HR practices (Wright and Nishii, 2013), thereby not eliciting desired employee behaviours that have been identified as leading to organisational success. Actual HR practices might never be implemented, and some actual practices will vary in how they were implemented relative to quality and consistency (Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013).

2.2.2. The LMs’ Perspective

However, it is noteworthy that many of the preceding criticisms of LMs’ implementation are based on HR specialists’ perceptions rather than LMs’ perceptions (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). Bos-Nehles (2010) investigated which of the five factors was a major hindrance to LMs in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities, undertaking a quantitative study surveying LMs across several organisations. LMs perceived that they had sufficient desire and competences to implement their HR responsibilities. They also reported that they were sufficiently supported by HR and had sufficiently clear policies and practices. However, similar

to McConville (2006) the issue of capacity was an area to be addressed relative to operational responsibilities and which were a hindrance to implementation. Notwithstanding issues with capacity, due to the low number of perceived constraints, these LMs perceived themselves as effective in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities. Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) comment that the positive results of this study indicate that LMs can implement their HR responsibilities effectively given sufficient support from HR, policies, practices and training. Bos-Nehles (2010) explains these positive findings may be due to the quantitative nature of this study in contrast with the qualitative nature of the other studies that have highlighted the shortcomings of LMs' implementation effectiveness. However, a shortcoming of this study is that it is based on empirical findings and has no basis in theory (Bos-Nehles, 2010). However, these findings are supported to an extent by Renwick (2003) and McConville (2006). Renwick's (2003) who previously found that LMs perceived themselves as motivated and willing to implement HR responsibilities but constrained where there is insufficient HR support. This finding was partially echoed by McConville (2006) who also undertook interviews with LMs across several Public Sector bodies in the UK and found them to be motivated to implement their HR responsibilities, but that they were impacted by capacity as HR responsibilities increased their workload significantly.

2.3. Role Theory

A relevant and reoccurring theory in the HR Devolution and HR Implementation literatures is that some scholars tend to draw on Role Theory (e.g. Van Wayenburg and Decramer, 2018; Op de Beeck *et al.*, 2016) and certain aspects of role theory such as role conflict (e.g. Bos-Nehles, 2013), role overload and role ambiguity (e.g. Bos-Nehles *et al.*, 2020, Gilbert *et al.*,

2011) or role stress more broadly as experienced by line managers (e.g. Evans, 2017) to explain barriers to effective HR implementation.

Quoting Ortqvist and Wincent (2006, p. 399) to define role theory, Evans (2017) notes that role theory concerns the varying factors of a role within an organization that can cause an individual to experience stress so that when expectations of a post holder are 'conflicting, ambiguous, or overloading, the focal person will experience role stress'. Both Evans (2017) and Gilbert *et al.* (2011) point to HR Devolution as a source of role stress for line managers.

As HR work can be "emotionally challenging" given the need to balance various stakeholders (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014, p. 1277, cited in Gilbert *et al.*, 2015), with LMs wearing various "hats" such as being an expert in their professional activity area, as a leader and coordinator, as well as responsibility for implementing HR. These expectations can lead to role conflict for line managers (Bos-Nehles, et al., 2013; McConville, 2006, cited in Gilbert et al., 2015). Consequently, role conflict can lead to decreased well-being and negatively impact performance (Tubre and Collins, 2000, cited in Gilbert et al., 2015).

Role ambiguity is a frequently occurring theme in studies concerning the diverging perceptions of LMs' and HR roles relative to HR implementation in a devolved organization (Op de Beck *et al.*, 2016; Conway and Monks, 2010; Maxwell and Watson 2006; Currie and Proctor, 2001). It is also discussed relative to possessing HR competences to mitigate role ambiguity (Op de Beck *et al.*, 2018) and having an HR function that provides sufficient training to develop these competences (Evans, 2017). Divergent perceptions of HR Devolution and HR implementation have been noted as having a negative impact on business performance (Maxwell and Watson, 2006, cited in Evans, 2017) and as such, there needs to be a "shared understanding of between HRM specialists and line managers of the latter's HR roles and

responsibilities as the basis of a partnership” (Maxwell and Watson, 2006, p. 1154, cited in Op de Beck et al., 2016). Indeed, Maxwell and Watson’s (2006) study of Hilton International’s UK hotels found that the divergent views held by LMs and HR specialists led to poor performance in the hotels. Aligned views were found in hotels that were performing effectively. Ideally, and as discussed earlier, the role of line manager and HR professional should be one of partnership (Currie and Procter, 2001). More recently, Op de Beck *et al.* (2016) drew on Role Theory to explain the factors associated with the divergent perceptions of HR Devolution between LMs and HR professionals.

Devolution contributes to an already full workload for LMs (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011). Role overload may be impacted by the rationale for devolution (e.g. cost cutting) and therefore may result impact workload (Bainbridge, 2015). Gilbert *et al.*, (2011) investigated the sources of perceptions of HR role overload along with role ambiguity among front line managers. The level of support received from the HR function and the level of HR competences possessed by the front line managers were found to influence perceptions of HR role ambiguity and overload. Possessing more HR competences seems to be the most effective strategy to mitigate HR role ambiguity, whereas a higher level of HR function can alleviate HR role overload.

The combination of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload was studied by Evans (2017) relative to front line managers’ role stress. She found that role overload was caused by wider remits, reduced staffing budgets, increased customer service requirements and increased HR responsibilities. Role conflict was caused by strategies that required front line managers to deliver high levels of customer service and implement HR policies while at the same time driving productivity and seeking cost efficiencies. Role ambiguity was found to be

caused by limited support from HR specialists and a lack of clarity in organizational strategy. It should however be borne in mind that this study is based on qualitative data from one industry; as such, this limits the generalisability of the study to other industries (Evans, 2017). However, the study does offer rich narrative data from case study organizations across the industry and serves to complement the quantitative approaches previously undertaken concerning line management and role stress (e.g. Watson, Maxwell and Farquharson, 2006; Gilbert *et al.*, 2011; Teague and Roche, 2012; Vermeeren, 2014; Azmi and Mushtaq, 2015, cited in Evans, 2017).

2.4. Working from Home (WFH)

Originally identified as a concept by Nilles (1988), WFH was originally more commonly referred to as “Telecommuting” or “Telework” in 1973 (Messenger and Gschwind 2016, cited in Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021). With terminology evolving over time to “remote work” and “working from home”, it has been defined as “a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, the worker has no personal contact with co-workers there, but is able to communicate with them using technology” (Di Martino & Wirth, 1990, p. 530, cited in Wang, Liu, Qian and Parker, 2021). Distinct from a flexible working arrangement, enforced remote working arising from the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a rapid pivot to remote working from home that was neither planned nor voluntary, but facilitated organisations to continue their operations when in-person contact was not possible (Bloom, 2020). As no definition for enforced remote working could be located in the literature, for the purposes of this study the following definition is proposed: Enforced remote working from home is a non-voluntary form of working exclusively from home, for the full duration of the regular working week over an extended

period due to an environmental barrier to on-site, co-located working in an organisational setting.

There is recognition in the pre-pandemic WFH literature that there may be differences in outcomes between those who work remotely frequently and those who do so occasionally (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Notwithstanding an extensive range of studies reporting positive outcomes such as improved well-being and increased work-life balance (Athanasiadou and Theriou, 2021) pre-pandemic on a flexible basis, De Klerk, Joubert, and Mosca (2021) note that many studies indicate that the positive outcomes that are normally associated with working from home on a flexible basis in the pre-pandemic literature are inverted when working from home for longer periods such as poor well-being, blurred boundaries between work and home life, work intensification and loneliness. As such, themes arising from this burgeoning focus of the literature are concerned with the impact of enforced remote work and individual outcomes such as productivity, work-life balance and well-being (Afrianty, Artatanaya and Burgess, 2021) and the extent to which Covid-19 has affected the work habits and outcomes (Tagliaro and Migliore, 2022). However, these studies are concerned with workers more broadly; there is no particular attention in the literature to those in managerial roles and the impact of remote work.

2.4.1. Productivity, Work Life Balance and Well-being

A recently published academic survey undertaken by Geary and Belizon (2022) based on a nationally representative sample of 2,076 workers in Ireland found that working from home during the period of enforced remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in increased productivity.

Geary and Belizon (2022) note that the vast majority of respondents reported that productivity increased as they were able to concentrate better working from home and were able to work longer hours due to no commute. For those experiencing decreased productivity, this was attributed to decreased motivation and difficulty concentrating on work, lack of appropriate equipment and software, and providing childcare. They also found that for many employees working from home is associated with work intensification, long working hours, stress and an inability to disconnect from work, giving rise to a negative impact on well-being in terms of roles that are emotionally and mentally demanding. Green *et al.* (2022) provide a comprehensive overview of empirical evidence for a variety of factors that contribute to and underpin work intensification in the workplace such as management through target setting, provision of additional tasks in job descriptions; and greater competitive pressure. Meanwhile, Chung *et al.* (2020) conducted a survey of 560 employees between May and June 2020 to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and working from home influenced a range of work-life matters. This study found that just over half of respondents identified blurred boundaries between work and home life as a negative aspect of working from home with many citing a lack of space to work when working from home.

However, in another recently published academic survey from NUIG, it was found that although employees were working longer hours remotely during the pandemic, they also reported that remote working improved their quality of life and had reduced their stress levels (McCarthy, O'Connor, Ó Síocháin and Frost, 2021). This is a surprising finding considering many factors that could cause stress may have been present at home during the pandemic e.g. caring responsibilities for children. While McCarthy *et al.* (2022) gathered a very large sample of 6,442 respondents, they receive criticism from Geary and Belizon (2022)

and Williamson (2022) as responses for their survey were obtained through respondents clicking on a survey weblink; as such, these are self-selected samples, subject to selection bias. By contrast, Geary and Belizon (2022) gather data from a randomized, nationally representative sample of 2,076 workers in Ireland, who qualified to take part in the survey through series of screening questions, giving the survey results greater reliability.

2.4.2. Adaptations to facilitate HR implementation

Notwithstanding methodological shortcomings in McCarthy *et al.*'s (2021) survey, one aspect of their survey which is not addressed in Geary and Belizon's (2022) survey is management responsibilities and presents a series of interesting findings. Out of the 2,184 respondents who had people management responsibilities, 44% reported that it is more difficult to manage their team remotely compared to being onsite; while 47% reported there was no difference. In terms of training to manage teams remotely, 45% reported that they perceived that their organization had provided them with training.

There is a small body of literature concerning the modifications to implementation of HR responsibilities in a remote environment arising from the COVID-19 pandemic with general reference to adaptations to managing a workforce in an enforced remote working context since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic e.g. Athanasiadou & Theriou (2021). There is particular interest in performance management, onboarding and employee engagement and training in terms of how these are undertaken in such a context. According to McCarthy *et al.*, (2021), 49% of LMs reported that onboarding new team members was a challenge, 21% a significant challenge, while 30% did not see it as a challenge. However, Zhu, Tatachari, & Chattopadhyay, (2017) note that research indicates that onboarding new staff is challenging,

particularly with regard to engendering identification with the organization through the socialization period and potentially influencing turnover.

In terms of Performance Management, there is limited attention given to performance management in a remote context in the literature. Although there is discussion of enablers of successful performance in remote work these being monitoring, trust and communications. Monitoring is central theme in this sub-set of the literature with particular attention to forms of monitoring, how to implement electronic monitoring and outcomes (Donnelly and Johns, 2021).

2.5. Conclusion

The review of literature has demonstrated that there is a high degree of interest in the field of HR implementation within the wider HR Devolution body of literature. LM implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities has been widely found to be beset with challenges concerning their effectiveness relative to their desire, capacity and competences. They are also found to be constrained by HR support and the need for clear policies and procedures.

Meanwhile, the WFH literature has identified challenges with respect to well-being and work life balance as well as potentially increased workloads during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is limited research on the adaptations necessitated to implement devolved HR responsibilities in a remote working context provided to LMs during the pandemic.

However, it is clear from the review of both bodies of literature that there is no crossover in terms of exploration of the challenges of implementation of devolved HR responsibilities in an enforced working from home context during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.6. Research Aims, Objectives and Questions

The foregoing review of literature has highlighted what has been established among scholars and the gaps in the literature. As the aim of this study is to explore line managers' perceived implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities in an Irish Higher Education Institution during the COVID-19 pandemic, three research objectives for this study have been identified. They are as follows:

In the context of an enforced remote working context during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research objectives are to:

1. Explore and analyse the five factors constraining effective HR implementation of devolved HR responsibilities.

This objective seeks to explore the research question: *How do LMs perceive the five factors constraining HR implementation on their HR implementation effectiveness?* As such, LMs' perceived effectiveness with regard to the following five factors will be explored: i) Desire; ii) Capacity; iii) Competence; iv) HR Support and v) Policy & Practices (Bos-Nehles, 2010).

2. Explore and analyse the extent to which the potential challenges associated with working from home may have impacted the five factors constraining effective HR implementation.

This objective seeks to explore the research question: *How do LMs perceive the potential challenges associated with working from home as constraining effective HR implementation?* As such, exploration of this question is guided by challenges identified in the literature by Geary and Belizon (2022) who identified that increased workload and productivity impacted

well-being and work life balance for employees working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also guided by McCarthy *et al.* (2021) who found that there was limited provision of training in managing teams remotely during the pandemic. Meanwhile as there is limited research on the adaptations necessitated to implement devolved HR responsibilities this area of potential challenge will also be explored.

3. Explore and analyse how LMs perceive their implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities with regard to the five factors that constrain HR implementation and the potential challenges associated with working from home.

This objective seeks to explore the research question: *How do LMs view their implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities in light of the five constraining factors and the potential challenges associated with working from home?* In light of the findings under Objectives 1 and 2 above, this objective will reflect on LMs' overall perceived effectiveness. According to Bos-Nehles (2010), LMs perceiving few constraints will perceive that they are effective in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities. As such, LMs' broad perceptions of their implementation effectiveness will be explored in light of their assessments of perceived constraints across the five factors and the potential challenges associated with working from home (cf. well-being, work life balance, adaptations to HR responsibility implementation).

Chapter 3: Methodology

3. Introduction

Following on from the research aims and objectives identified in the preceding chapter, this chapter will argue that a qualitative research design and associated data collection and analysis methods are appropriate to the aims and objectives of this study. Following an interpretivist research paradigm, a cross-sectional, qualitative study was undertaken using convenience sampling to select LMs at an Irish HEI to participate in semi-structured interviews. Data from the interviews were subsequently transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. As such, in this chapter, the research design will be critically discussed and justified with consideration to the research paradigm, research approach, research strategy, sampling strategy, data collection method, pilot study, data analysis technique, ethical considerations. Limitations of the study will be discussed in Chapter 5: Discussion. The research design of this study gives consideration to the varying methods and approaches that may be adopted in undertaking this study. The following sections outline a rationale for each design choice.

3.1. Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a belief or an assumption about what is important in the development of knowledge from a philosophical perspective (Hewitt-Taylor, 2011, cited in Halcomb, 2018) Saunders *et al.*, 2015). There are four widely implemented research paradigms used to inform research methods and analysis: interpretivism, positivism, critical realism and pragmatism (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). Each of these paradigms are underpinned by a set of philosophical assumptions that include beliefs about the varying realities encountered in the course of research (ontology), the influence of values on the research process (axiology) and

assumptions about knowledge (epistemology) (Hewitt-Taylor, 2011, Borbasi and Jackson 2015; Holloway and Galvin, 2016, cited in Halcombe, 2018).

Given that the aim of this study is to understand the subjective perceptions of LMs, this study adopted an interpretivist perspective in undertaking this research. Interpretivism presents a subjective perspective in relation to knowledge and reality based on the experiences and understandings of individuals (Ryan, 2018). From an ontological perspective, perspectives and experiences of the workplace will vary from individual to individual depending on many contextual and personal variables such as the nature of the individuals' role, seniority, educational and cultural backgrounds (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). While an interpretivist research paradigm has been subject to criticism for not yielding generalizable results, it has been argued that generalisation can negatively impact scholarly inquiry (Gollan *et al.*, 2015). Yet from an axiological perspective, values and beliefs play a key role in the research process for researchers taking an interpretivist approach relative to data interpretation (Saunders *et al.*, 2015) and so caution must be taken on the part of the researcher to not project biases on to the contributions of participants.

Conversely, positivism seeks to provide an objective understanding of reality that can be explained in a manner akin to the natural sciences to make generalisations (Al-Sharif, 2021) using scientific methods (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). Yet this perspective does not take into account the varying and unique realities of individuals (Al-Sharif, 2021). Comparable to interpretivism, critical realism seeks to explain the underlying structures of reality (Saunders *et al.*, 2015; Goldkuhl, 2021). Whereas pragmatism is concerned with action and is often associated with mixed-methods approaches.

Interpretivism aligns well with the aims of this study i.e. to explore line managers' individual perceptions of their implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities. This paradigm therefore facilitates a more nuanced capture of experiences that could not be attained through a positivist paradigm.

3.2. Research Approach

The inductive and deductive approaches to research are two ways in which research may be undertaken from a theory development perspective (Given, 2016; Saunders *et al.*, 2018). With the deductive research approach, a theoretical position and hypotheses are adopted and then tested through the research strategy (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). Conversely, with the inductive research approach, research objectives are developed and hypotheses/theoretical explanations are developed through the research strategy (Given, 2016). The inductive approach is linked with interpretivism and allows meanings to emerge from the data in order to identify patterns and relationships to develop a theory (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). As a result, this study has been approached from an inductive perspective and therefore there were no hypotheses developed to test the outcomes of the research. The research has been informed and guided by the overall objectives to draw conclusions from the data obtained. The inductive approach lends itself to qualitative research strategy which aligns with the aims of this study (Given, 2016) as it allows for theory generating from data gathered in the study.

3.3. Research Strategy

A central component of research design is the selection of qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods as a research strategy. Each of these strategies will influence the approach to data collection and analysis for the study (Given, 2016). The fields of HR devolution and HR implementation are largely split between qualitative and quantitative research strategies

while WFH tends to focus on qualitative methods. As such, the decision to use qualitative methods for this study was based on the research objective of this study i.e. to explore LMs' subjective perceptions and experiences implementing their devolved HR responsibilities. Qualitative research is an emergent and flexible research approach that is concerned with examining the perceptions, perspectives, experiences, values and beliefs of individuals (Omona, 2013). As such, qualitative methods can support answering research questions that seek answers to the 'why?' and 'how?' of a phenomenon (Marshall, 1996). In this instance, the overarching research question is "How do line managers perceive their HR implementation effectiveness?" Conversely, a quantitative approach would seek to answer research questions concerning the 'what?' of an issue and generate more generalisable results (Marshall, 1996). Its focus on the measurement of distinct variables means that it does not provide a holistic view of a given situation (Denscombe, 2010a). While qualitative research is criticised for not yielding generalisable results, yet it can help researchers to test survey instruments for use in quantitative studies (Sutton and Austin, 2015). Furthermore, due to the subjectivity of qualitative research, researchers must be cognisant of their biases when analysing results (Denscombe 2010a).

Mono-method and mixed-methods approaches were also given consideration. Mixed methods research combines qualitative and quantitative research approaches to provide a deeper understanding of an issue and more robust findings (Halcombe, 2018). A mixed-methods approach is favoured by Bos-Nehles (2020) in the devolution literature with an initial qualitative component established to inform and guide the subsequent quantitative study. However, considering the time constraints of this research, a mono-method, qualitative research strategy was adopted.

3.4. Sampling Strategy

In keeping with the emergent nature of qualitative research, determining sample size and sample design can be an iterative process (Omona, 2013). Consideration of various non-probabilistic sampling techniques were therefore explored throughout the sampling process. According to Given (2016) non-probabilistic sampling is usually adopted for qualitative research. It involves non-random selection of participants based on a set of criteria. This distinctly contrasts with probability sampling used for quantitative studies where participants are selected at random and based on their representativeness of a population (Creswell, 2016) to allow statistical inferences to be made about the wider population (Denscombe, 2010b).

The target population of participants concerned those with line management responsibilities working in a large Irish HEI and who had worked from home for the HEI during the COVID-19 pandemic, chiefly from March 2020 to September 2021. As the goal of this study was to obtain insights into a phenomenon concerning individuals, and not to generalise to a population (Omona, 2013), the researcher purposefully selected individuals that maximise understanding of the phenomenon. With purposive sampling the participants are selected on the basis of their capacity to inform the issue under exploration and experience of the issue (Creswell, 2016).

In terms of access to the target population, it is noteworthy that the researcher is an employee with line management responsibilities at the HEI. As such, to gain access to line managers at the HEI, permission to undertake this research was initially sought from the direct line manager of the researcher. Permission was then subsequently sought and obtained from the Director of HR. Once institutional approval was granted, the researcher contacted

potential participants through an email targeting staff members with line management responsibilities. The email outlined detailed information on the aims of the research, the involvement sought and included as attachments a participant information sheet and the consent form (see appendices 2, 3 and 4).

Applying convenience sampling, a total of 10 potential participants were contacted via email. To increase the pool of participants, a snowballing approach was also applied yielding interest from 2 participants. However, due to a restricted timeframe for the data collection, it was feasible to interview just 8 participants (7 from convenience sampling and 1 from snowball sampling). Each participant met the requisite criteria for participation i.e. they had line management responsibilities and had experienced working from home for the HEI during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants ranged in experience and management level, from front line managers through to senior managers, in roles across areas such as programme management, project management, operations management, student recruitment and research partnership development.

3.5. Data Collection Method

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Eight interviews were carried out with LMs at the HEI in July 2022. Qualitative research lends itself to a variety of data collection methods such as observations, focus groups and interviews (Denscombe, 2010b). Each of these methods can provide rich insights where a detailed understanding of the experiences and perspectives of individuals are sought (Barrett *et al.*, 2018).

In the HR Devolution and HR Implementation literature where qualitative studies are undertaken, semi-structured interviews are the favoured data collection method. This may be attributed to the open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews (Roberts, 2020) and its

relatively flexible format that does not enforce an order in which the topics are discussed and allows the participant to speak more widely on issues raised by the researcher (Denscombe, 2010b) using an interview guide (Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger 2020).

Similar to semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews have a goal of discovery rather than verification (Denscombe, 2010b). However, by contrast, unstructured interviews can be more useful for studies where participants are requested to recount a story of their life or experiences (Barrett *et al.*, 2018). Meanwhile structured interviews follow a tightly controlled format (Denscombe, 2010b). It can be comparable to a questionnaire and may not allow the participant to express themselves fully (Barrett *et al.*, 2018).

The features of semi-structured interviews were deemed most appropriate to allow participants to discuss what they wanted to discuss within the scope of the aims of the research.

3.6. Interview Process

The interviews were arranged via Zoom and recorded with the participants' consent using Zoom. Participants were also offered the opportunity for the interview to be conducted in-person for their convenience and comfort. However, participants for all 8 interviews were satisfied with proceeding via Zoom. Each interview lasted one hour and all participants signed and returned consent forms in advance of the interviews.

The interviews were structured into four parts as detailed in Appendix 1 Interview Protocol and as follows:

1. **Introduction and overview of research:** At the start of each interview, participants were provided with a summary overview of the research, its aims as outlined in the participant

information sheet and the structure of the interview (Creswell, 2016). Participants were reminded that all information that they provide would be treated as confidentially, stored securely and that their identities would remain anonymous. Participants were also provided the opportunity to ask any questions and address any concerns and were reminded that could withdraw from the interview process at any stage during the course of the interviews and/or decline to answer any questions.

2. **Context questions:** To begin the interviews, participants were asked four questions that served as both warmer questions and to provide key contextual information i.e. the participants' role in the HEI; their length of service at the HEI; length of service in a people management role; number of direct line reports; and to confirm how long they had worked fully remotely for the HEI.
3. **Content questions:** The interview then proceeded to address the research objectives. Probing questions were utilised to elicit further detailed responses. Questions were derived from the literature review and were underpinned and Role Theory. Questions initially focused on establishing the participants' perceptions of implementing their devolved HR responsibilities before the pandemic working in an onsite context. Next, the questions proceeded to address participants' experiences working from home. Finally, participants were asked questions in relation to their perceptions of implementing their devolved HR responsibilities working from home during the pandemic.
4. **Interview wrap-up:** This final part served to close out the interview, allowing participants the opportunity to ask in questions they may have had in relation to the study or to raise any matters that they wish to add that did not come during the course of the interview.

Following each interview, the recording of the interview was reviewed on Zoom and transcribed. The information was then analysed to identify themes arising from discussions with participants.

3.7. Pilot Study

Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger (2020) highlight that qualitative research is an iterative process where the data collection phase as well as the analysis phase can be evaluated and revised as appropriate. As such, a pilot study was undertaken to trial and refine the interview questions (Given, 2016) to support the intended research aims.

A pilot interview was undertaken with one participant from among the eight participants. This participant was a frontline manager with 2 direct line reports at the HEI. The pilot interview found that no adaptations to the questions required and that there was sufficient time to discuss each area. As such, the contributions of this participant were included in the data set.

However, in the subsequent three interviews, the open-ended nature of the interview questions coupled with their close alignment with the literature to address the overall aim of the study, yielded a broader range of data than initially anticipated. As such, the objectives shared with participants as detailed in Appendices 1, 2 and 3 are different from those identified in the preceding chapter as the decision was made during the data collection phase to redefine the objectives of the study based on participants responses. This change in objectives did not necessitate any changes in the interview questions.

3.8. Data Analysis Methods

The data arising from the eight interviews were transcribed and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is described by Maguire and

Delahunt (2017, p. 3352) as “the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data”. While there are different approaches to undertaking thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke’s (2006) 6-step framework is arguably the most influential approach to thematic analysis (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Within this framework of analysis themes are identified and analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was adhered to ensure that the themes emerging from the analysis were strongly linked to the interview transcripts (Charalampous, Grant and Tramontano, 2021) and were not pre-determined. As such, data-driven themes emerged reflecting the in-depth nature of the interview responses. (Charalampous, Grant and Tramontano, 2021).

The 6-step framework was adhered to as follows. However, it should be noted that this framework is by no means linear, but rather an iterative process:

Step 1: Become familiar with the data: Interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times to identify the commonly occurring patterns and themes (Braun and Clark, 2006).

Step 2: Generate initial codes: Labels or “codes” were assigned to ideas and concepts that were commonly occurring in the transcripts using the “Insert a comment” feature in Microsoft Word (Byrne, 2022).

Step 3: Search for themes: The codes were then grouped to identify themes and subthemes (Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger, 2020).

Step 4: Review themes: Themes were then checked to verify that they conveyed an accurate narrative of the data, with some emergent themes disregarded as there was not enough evidence to support inclusion in the analysis as well as other themes that were out of the study’s scope (Byrne, 2022).

Step 5: Define themes: An in-depth analysis of each theme's content was undertaken to select extracts from the data and draft corresponding narratives (Byrne, 2022). Extracts were drawn from across the dataset to reflect as many viewpoints as possible and to ensure an accurate reflection of participants' views.

Step 6: Write-up: The process of drafting a detailed analysis of the findings commenced at this stage. This was an iterative and reflective process which resulted in many changes relative to the ordering and definitions of themes and their corresponding sub-themes (Byrne, 2022). The findings are detailed in Chapter 4.

3.9. Ethical Considerations

Denscombe (2010a) refers to ethics as “a system of moral of moral principles by which individuals can judge their actions as a right or wrong, good or bad” and notes the imperative on researchers to carry out their studies in an ethical manner. Indeed Creswell (2016) notes that as qualitative research often involves obtaining data from individuals on emotional topics, researchers must be cognisant of the rights of individuals and to ensure that the study does not cause harm to participants. As such, drawing on Given (2016), Denscombe (2010a), Saunders *et al.* (2015), Salkind (2012), this section will highlight the protocols put in place for this study to ensure respect for the rights of participants, safeguarding their well-being before, during and after the interview process to prevent harm to participants in the course of this research.

3.9.1. Informed Consent

Key to the qualitative approach is informed consent (Salkind, 2012) and is widely discussed (Given, 2016; Denscombe, 2010a). Informed consent refers to participants in a study having the full information in relation to their participation in the study with regard to an

understanding of the exact nature of the study, the role of the participant, the potential risks and benefits, and the rights of the participants (Salkind, 2012). Participants must fully understand the implications of their participation in the study (Given, 2016). As such, documents in Appendix 2, 3 and 4 were provided to participants (Denscombe, 2010a). The email to participants, the participant information sheet, and the consent form all highlight how their information will be stored, analysed and used, providing assurance of confidentiality of their identity in the research (Given, 2016). Due care was taken in the development of each of these documents to highlight the purpose of the study (Salkind, 2012), the identity of the researcher, direct reference to the request to participate in an interview, the time requirement of the study (Denscombe 2010a), the option not to participate in the study (Salkind, 2012), possible risks and benefits (Salkind, 2012) and how the data will be stored with respect to its security (Denscombe, 2010a).

3.9.2. Protection of Participants

While there are no children or individuals with limited capacity to communicate or understand involved in this study (Salkind 2012), it remains incumbent on the researcher to be sensitive to the fact that participants could potentially be affected in some way through having participated in the interviews (Denscombe, 2010a). While not the central objective of this study, the study touches on personal feelings of motivation in relation to line managers' perceptions of their implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, it is recognised that the period of government mandated lockdowns arising from the COVID-19 pandemic was a very challenging and difficult time for individuals from a variety of perspectives cf. feelings of loneliness, depression, anxiety and grief. As such, reflecting on the period of enforced remote working could potentially lead to

the resurfacing of emotions arising from that period in time. It may also cause discomfort for participants to share potentially difficult experiences in the workplace, albeit in a remote working context. As such, the researcher remained cognisant of these factors during the interview process and monitored for any signs of distress.

The researcher followed up with all participants following the interview to debrief following the interview. Participant reported no negative impacts to their well-being as a result of the interviews.

3.9.3. Data and Storage

Signed consent forms and audio recordings of the interviews will be retained in password protected files on the researcher's personal laptop. No other individuals have access to the computer or the files. These data will be retained until the exam board confirms the results of the dissertation in October 2022.

All identifying information in transcripts of interviews have been anonymised, this includes the identity of the HEI. No personal or identifiable information will be included in the dissertation. Where a participant has referenced the name of an individual in the transcripts, the name will be changed. Furthermore, the data is stored using identification codes and placed in a password protected file on the researcher's personal laptop. No other individuals have access to the computer or the files. This data will be retained for two years after the exam board has taken place confirming the award of this degree.

3.10. Summary

In summary, this study has taken a qualitative approach to facilitate gathering rich data to support obtaining varying experiences and ideas. This has been achieved through the use of

semi-structured interviews. Through non-probabilistic sampling, a cohort of eight LMs who had worked remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic participated in the study. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the topic ethical consideration was given consideration and addressed in undertaking this research. Braun & Clarke's (2006) 6-step framework of thematic analysis guided the process of generating a range of themes that will be discussed in Chapter 4, Findings. For a detailed overview of the limitations of this study, please see Chapter 5, Discussion.

Chapter 4: Findings

4. Introduction

This chapter aims to present the findings of the thematic analysis arising from the data obtained from eight participants during semi-structured interviews undertaken to inform this study. The findings of the analysis have been divided into five themes and corresponding sub-themes to address the broad aim of this study: to explore line managers' perceived implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities in an Irish HEI during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The themes identified in the analysis are: i) Devolved HR Responsibilities ii) Pivoting to Enforced Remote Working iii) Implementing devolved HR responsibilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic; iv) HR Support and Guidance; and v) Perceived Effectiveness. Each theme contributes to the exploration of each objective. To support each theme, there is a definition, description, links to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and quotes from participants are detailed throughout the chapter (Charalampous, Grant and Tramontano, 2021).

4.1. Theme 1: Devolved HR Responsibilities

This theme contributes to addressing the first research question: *How do LMs perceive the five factors constraining HR implementation on their HR implementation effectiveness?* This theme provides insights into LMs' broad understanding of their devolved HR responsibilities and while a sub-theme *Attitudes to devolved HR responsibilities* highlights LMs' *Desire* to implement these responsibilities in general.

The definition of devolved HR Responsibilities and the time period of enforced remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic were clarified with each participant prior to the interview in the participant information sheet (See Appendix 3 Information Sheet for Research Participants) and at the start of each interview. Participants were then asked to discuss their devolved HR responsibilities in general before the pandemic.

The majority of participants (87.5%) provided an extensive list of devolved HR responsibilities such as recruitment and selection of staff members, onboarding, training, coaching, leave management, and performance management and seemed to have a shared understanding of their responsibilities.

However, one participant expressed that HR responsibilities were at times what you perceived as your responsibilities pre-pandemic on commencing their LM role, potentially indicative of a degree of role ambiguity as well as fulfilling compliance responsibilities:

“... so the things that fall to you, that come to your desk, I think some of it is what you perceive as your responsibility and some of it is just because someone needs to be at a certain level in order to do certain approvals...” – Participant 6

Role ambiguity is further expressed by all participants in relation to their understanding of their HR responsibilities on commencement of their roles as LMs at the HEI. All noted that they had no inductions to their HR responsibilities, and that job descriptions do not provide this level of detail except for reference to managing a team. All participants cited that they learned about their HR responsibilities over time:

“Well, your HR responsibilities are just one line in your job description.”- Participant 4

“I mean it's not in my job description, you know, so it's probably not something I've given a lot of thought to in advance; it's just something that's evolved.” - Participant 3

“It's not formalized in any induction that I've experienced around the role of the level of expectation around what line management and managing people and HR is. It's not stipulated.” – Participant 7

4.1.2. Sub-theme: Attitudes to devolved HR responsibilities

This sub-theme explores the underlying drivers of LMs' HR implementation through consideration of LMs' desire to undertake their devolved HR responsibilities in general.

Many participants (75%) expressed a passion for developing and fostering a sense of enthusiasm among their teams as a main motivator for implementing their devolved HR responsibilities:

“I mean, my main motivation is that I really want the people who work on my team to love their work so whatever I can do to facilitate that, that they wake up in the morning and say ‘I really love my work ‘... and I want to be a support to the people who I line manage.” - Participant 4

“But for me the sense of value and the motivation comes from seeing people grow in their role and gaining skills, getting an experience in that sense. I suppose, from a personal level, that you're almost helping somebody earlier in their career to progress and to achieve what they want.” - Participant 2

However, at the same time, the underlying view for many participants (87.5%) is that their devolved HR responsibilities are an “add-on” and not necessarily an intrinsic part of their roles:

“Yeah, I think it would probably be fair to say, in many instances, the management side is kind of an add-on ... it was like something you also do in addition to your job.”

-Participant 2

Indeed, in general terms, one participant viewed the amount of time dedicated to undertaking devolved HR responsibilities as hindering the specialisation of a role. They discussed that a recent survey of LMs in their unit within the HEI showed that LMs were dedicating 40 to 50% of their time on HR activity but that this was an undesirable finding:

“Everyone had at least 40 to 50% around HR and management...I remember speaking to the previous director around this, that it’s significant, that it’s huge... so there was almost a lack of realization as to how much time people were spending [on HR responsibilities] It was a realization that once you introduce any HR component into your role, it dilutes the specialization of a role.” – Participant 7

This same participant also expressed criticism of HR Devolution in the HEI, comparing it to a less devolved institution where the HR function was more directly involved in supporting the implementation of HR responsibilities:

“HR was dealt with by HR...all aspects, right down to recruiting, resourcing. You, would have been assigned the equivalent of an HR partner, and they would have been full time support...you would never have had devolved HR to individuals within teams...the recruitment, the selection, the development of roles that would have been led by HR in consultation with the unit...” - Participant 7

4.2. Theme 2: Pivoting to Enforced Remote Working

This theme primarily addresses the second research question: *How do LMs perceive the potential challenges associated with working from home as constraining effective HR*

implementation? As such, this theme details findings concerning LMs' broad experiences of the sudden pivot to remote working caused by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The theme is subdivided into sub-themes concerning productivity, work life balance, well-being, coping strategies. An additional sub-theme concerning capacity and prioritisation to contribute to addressing the first research question: *How do LMs perceive the five factors constraining HR implementation on their HR implementation effectiveness?* This sub-theme relates to the factors concerning *Desire* and *Capacity*.

The pivot to enforced remote working in March 2020 triggered a period of crisis management and additional workload for 87.5% of participants. Participants commented that during this early period of the pandemic they were "firefighting", in "reactive mode" and "in the trenches" with respect to making the switch to online delivery of services, programmes, assessments, recruiting students remotely, and creation of new policies and changes in strategy:

"We were in crisis management mode for that first six months. So within the first period of the pandemic, we had to introduce a lot of new policies for crisis management provisions for students overseas, you know strategic changes to some initiatives" - Participant 5

75% expressed that they were not prepared for the switch from the perspective that they had never managed a team remotely prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Just two participants reported that they had received training in managing a team remotely during the pandemic provided by the HEI, while all other participants perceived no training:

“I can't remember the titles of them, but whenever they were offered I signed up for them. They were a little bit too ... they're not practical enough. I want hard skills, not just soft skills. - Participant 1

“No, I can't remember anything specific. There might have been a few emails that came out with a few tips and things, but I don't think anything specific that I can recall.” - Participant 3

4.2.1. Sub-theme: Productivity

87.5% of participants expressed increased productivity. Reasons provided for increased productivity varied such as increased workload due to the changes in work (i.e. developing programmes to go online etc.) arising from the switch to remote working but also as there were limited alternatives in terms of activities after working hours:

“I was quite productive, but it was more that there was nothing else in my life but work” - Participant 8

Meanwhile one participant attributed caring responsibilities of their young child as hindering their productivity:

“It was a really difficult time because I had you know, a one year old at home with me. My productivity had dropped. I wasn't able to do as much as usual.” - Participant 1

4.2.2. Sub-theme: Work Life Balance

75% of participants noted that the increased productivity resulted in working extra hours:

“There were definitely extra hours. I found a lot of my time was going to Zoom calls during working hours...I was doing at least three 12 hour days a week” - Participant 2

“Oh yeah, definitely [an increased workload] and then no space to do the work because there were so many meetings or meetings that were too long” - Participant 4

In one instance a participant reported receiving work-related calls from their manager after their allocated working hours as a result of the crisis management:

“My boss before the pandemic would never have called me after six o'clock... During the pandemic, I'd say I spoke to him some nights at 11 o'clock at night. It happened very rarely, but it did happen. There were emergencies happening” - Participant 7

However, two participants discussed how the increase in hours did not necessarily impact their perceptions of work life balance because there simply was nowhere else to go during the lockdown:

“I suppose that we couldn't really do anything else, you know. It's not like the extra work meant that I couldn't go to the cinema.” – Participant 3

This increase in working hours and an increase in outputs during the period of remote working may suggest a degree of work intensification experienced by the majority of participants.

4.2.3. Sub-theme: Well-being

As the majority of participants (75%) all reported working extra hours, participants were asked how this may have impacted their overall well-being. As a result of increased workload, 50% of participants perceived a negative impact on their well-being and to varying degrees ranging from fatigue and feelings of isolation through to more difficult experiences:

“I think we were definitely tired so definitely yeah just feeling a bit worn out, you know after probably at the end of the summer.”- Participant 3

“..as the for the isolation, especially during the first year when you live by yourself, and the only interaction you're possibly having is with your work colleagues and so yeah so that's not a healthy balance to kind of have that and so it's been a bit of a roller coaster at times for sure.” – Participant 8

“I was just surviving ... I had no function other than working and taking care of my son ...” - Participant 1

“I felt I was close to burnout because I was so stretched so thin. I was trying to fit everything in an eight hour day; I was trying to fit in a lot of meetings...I was neglecting my own mental health during that period as certain things just needed to get done” – Participant 6

Meanwhile, in response to the same question concerning the impact of working additional hours on their well-being, 50% of participants expressed no impact on their wellbeing:

“I don't know that there was too much of a knock on effect because I suppose again when I'm in the office I commute for three hours a day. So in my mind, I was just using my commute to do extra work.” - Participant 2

Indeed, one participant noted that government mandated remote working reduced their team members' access to them as a positive outcome of enforced remote working and as such, this was supportive of their well-being and may be indicative of role overload or even role conflict:

“So in the first three months, and this sounds terrible because everyone's like ‘Oh, we miss the office’, where I was like actually I’m quite alright...because I couldn't be all things to all people, so, in one way that was a huge positive for me as an individual” - Participant 7

4.2.4. Sub-theme: Coping Strategies

To mitigate the negative effects of working from home over an extended period, some participants discussed the resources they drew upon to maintain their well-being. Some reported that there were resources available through the HEI but they decided that they did not need to avail of them i.e. going for a walk in the morning in place of the regular commute; spending time with a pet:

“I started breaking the morning up by going for a walk in the morning. Loads of people started doing it. Like it was called “the fake commute”. It was to get your head space into a different place.” - Participant 6

“Getting out into nature every day has kind of been my saviour...and having a dog. Just you know getting out for exercise has been critical for me.” - Participant 8

4.2.5. Sub-theme: Capacity and Prioritization

In the sub-theme: *Productivity*, it was earlier established in the findings that workload, additional hours and productivity increased for the majority of participants as a result of the switch to remote working. This sub-theme explores the extent to which increased workload impacted implementation of devolved HR responsibilities.

With regard to the pre-pandemic context, almost all participants (75%) reported that they had sufficient capacity in their roles to implement HR responsibilities before the pandemic.

“Before, yeah, I had enough time. I don't think I have enough now.” - Participant 1

Meanwhile, other participants discussed a perennial role capacity issue to implement devolved HR responsibilities that was a pre-pandemic issue:

“We kind of get the minimum done. Obviously, the administrative side of it is done. But I think there's a lot I would like to do in terms of development... we never get around to it, we're all too busy. - Participant 8

There is some evidence that the management of crises caused increased workload hindering implementation of HR responsibilities:

“I wasn't able to give any time to [HR responsibilities] because I was in crisis mode for like a year straight trying to solve problems ... looking back, I would have preferred to give more time to the human side of things ... One thing I did want to implement was something around mental health remotely and I never got around to it because of the time, like, I never got to do these things really. I probably should have because they're just as important, if not more important than getting things over the line.” – Participant 6

Another participant also highlights the crisis mode of working during enforced period of remote working as a reason for non-implementation of probationary reviews:

“Maybe those HR matters, I didn't prioritize them as much as I should have. I was just firefighting you know...there's not this big deadline that if you don't do it, then you're not going to get funding from the government”. – Participant 1

This comment highlights that there are no consequences for not implementing probationary reviews.

For many, HR responsibilities “went down the list of priorities” during the pandemic but these responses also suggest that HR was not a priority pre-pandemic:

“Yeah, maybe that the HR responsibilities part, as I said, maybe kind of went down the list of priorities...and so, because of my role, there is quite a lot of external reporting

requirements as well, and that would be the priority always. It would be to fulfil those requirements and governance requirements rather than necessarily you know, supporting the team and being too hands on.” - Participant 8

This pre-existing non-prioritisation of HR responsibilities may be imparted to LMs directly through the non-inclusion of details of HR responsibilities in job descriptions and potentially indirectly via the existing organizational culture:

“Well, you know, because it's not really, they're not really prioritized and maybe this is back to the job description, where HR is kind of down here, while the other strategic, you know, business development or that kind of stuff is prioritized. Right, so therefore it is a kind of an afterthought.” – Participant 4

“Like I say, it is considered an add-on.... so if you look at me working in the recruitment area, my priority is recruiting students. You know management is kind of a function that I need to do in order to achieve the recruitment of students, to get the rest of the team working efficiently, and to retain staff and train staff up to a level. That's certainly the message that's come through to me. That's my impression of where management sits within the role.” – Participant 2

4.3. Theme 3: Implementing devolved HR responsibilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

This theme contributes to addressing the first two research questions: *How do LMs perceive the five factors constraining HR implementation on their HR implementation effectiveness?* and *How do LMs perceive the potential challenges associated with working from home as constraining effective HR implementation?* As such, Objectives 1 and 2 are addressed with respect to the exploration of the factors that may influence managing a team remotely on the approaches adopted to implement devolved HR responsibilities and relates to the *Policies and Procedures* factor. A sub-theme *Challenges and Adaptations* has been created to capture some detailed accounts of the challenges to implementation in a remote working context.

Throughout this theme, there were varying reactions to implementation of HR responsibilities among participants during the period of enforced remote working. One participant commented that their devolved HR responsibilities were not undertaken for the first three months of the pandemic due to the perceived short-term nature of the period of enforced remote working at that period in time:

“...it did stop for the first three months because we thought this was a temporary thing and we were very much adapting to the day-to-day work. Kind of just keeping things ticking over, adapting to the new environment, the new way of doing things, getting things settled and really with HR and that we would be back in the office in the short term. So I think, from my point of view, a lot of the HR stuff got put on hold until we were going to be, in my mind, back together in the office.” - Participant 2

Another participant discussed taking a more “hands off” approach to implementation during the period of remote working to facilitate crisis management:

“So yeah there would be less guidance and hand holding or support for team members because it was about trying to get on and get things done, and so probably less time spent on supporting and managing and more time kind of dealing with crises.” -

Participant 8

Meanwhile, other participants commented on a shift in focus in their responsibilities with the onset of the pandemic and the ensuing shift to enforced remote working with respect to monitoring well-being and work life balance of their staff:

“You kind of realize that you're probably the only person outside of their home life that maybe they're talking to, and so I do think that part of it was more consciously, you know, to check-in with the team, “Let me know if there's certain or any tasks, or something that we're doing that you're being distracted from doing because of what's going on.” just to check on the well-being side...” – Participant 5

“We were still connecting with [partners overseas] instead of traveling there. So staff would need to work into the evenings. But then I'd have to say, “Look you're working into the evening, but take the morning off” or you know, “Make sure that you're not working from morning to evening”. So it was kind of around ensuring that the person wasn't blurring the lines too much between home and work, and they were actually just working for their contracted hours. - Participant 4

While another participant noted that building morale was more important than quality of outputs in terms of moving programmes to online delivery and also ensuring that staff felt connected to their role and the HEI:

“Morale building was important to support the team with transitioning and dealing with the challenges of moving a programme to online service delivery. It was just to

try and encourage people to see that there were ways to do these things... Like people take pride in their work... the degree of quality kind of had to go down a little bit, it was letting people know that it's okay as well because we're trying to do the best we can" – Participant 6

One participant reported no change at all in their HR responsibilities during the period of enforced remote working.

4.3.1. Sub-theme: Challenges and Adaptations

Participants were carrying out their devolved HR responsibilities for the first time in a remote working context and over an extended period of time. As these responsibilities could not be carried out in-person, the focus of this sub-theme concerns the potential challenges to implementation of devolved HR responsibilities that LMs perceived when the ability to implement in-person in a face-to-face context was not possible and how they adapted their approaches to overcome these challenges.

37.5% of participants reported that they perceived few or no challenges with implementation during the pandemic. This was mainly attributed to a well-established team pre-pandemic:

"I had a very strongly established team at that point so the ability to communicate and to work with that team had the foundation which had been built pre-pandemic...we did we pretty much everything that we could. We did the performance management, we did the coaching and guidance virtually" - Participant 7

Another participant who also reported a well-established team noted no challenges. However, they report leave requests and approvals as the focus of their HR responsibilities during the pandemic:

“So it wasn't any more onerous or any more difficult to do because, again, that was usually done by email anyway so that was okay” - Participant 4

Yet this participant described a very engaged and high performing team during the pandemic. They attributed this to an adaptation in the form of increasing the number of weekly meetings with the team and also the perceived short-term nature of the lockdown during that period:

“I couldn't honestly name one thing, except the extra meetings and also initially we thought it was for a few weeks...” - Participant 4

However, having an established team was not without its challenges relative to performance management conversations:

“And I would have probably delayed having to have any types of conversation around performance in a virtual sense because I find it a very impersonal way of doing it.” - Participant 7

However, many participants (62.5%), particularly those with new staff members, discussed an array of challenges. Participants with new staff who joined just before March 2020 and/or during the period of enforced remote working, perceived implementation as particularly challenging in terms of the distinct areas of onboarding, training and performance management:

“I had a new starter, for example, that was scheduled to start the week after we went remote...I have an induction procedure for those staff and it's very much based on working side by side.... you couldn't be on Zoom with somebody for the entire workday... it definitely impacts the effectiveness of onboarding even from the point of view where there's kind of a formality and a distance, I felt.” - Participant 2

The adaptations made to training and onboarding process for this participant were perceived as ineffective and the issues only came to light on return to work in-person in an office setting where gaps in the new staff members' training had not been previously perceived and the pace of work needed to be improved:

“The quality of work, that really wasn't up to standard, and that was the training ... I was kind of getting comments along the lines of ‘Look, the workload is just crazy. When is it going to calm down?’. I figured out at that stage, they don't really understand the culture of the team and the pace at which we work....I don't think you can onboard someone successfully in a fully remote environments that's just my sense through experience.” – Participant 2

Similarly, another participant felt onboarding was challenging relative to instilling a sense of the organizational culture:

“I had a member of staff start in April 2020 who was completely onboarded virtually and I remember that induction being really quite painful. And that's not to do with the individual, that's to do with the amount of time that I obviously spent on a face-to-face basis pre-pandemic to onboard, to induct, and then to do that virtually, it was a huge, huge drain. But also the cultural piece just wasn't there for that individual and you were trying to actually induct in a whole area that we just didn't have a blueprint for”. – Participant 7

This comment potentially may suggest a sense that there may not have been guidance or support from HR with this area.

Similarly for others, training new staff was a slow process but drawing on varying management styles was a useful tool:

“I had to be a bit more mentoring, rather than delegating because I was trying to train her remotely on a lot of things. I had to spend a lot of time with her on video call with mute and unmute, and share screens because I had to show them how to do certain things. So it actually worked out in an interesting way where I would meet my more long standing staff and could let them go off and do things. Then work directly with this other person, so it was kind of a mix of management styles.” - Participant 6

Meanwhile, developing a sense of trust in the team was important for LMs to monitor work activity as well as developing their own systems:

“I had to trust my team in the early pandemic that they were doing work. Then through the pandemic developed systems to support monitoring but also a sense of transparency across all team members. Use of Google chats to see if staff were online; monitoring through the Google chat whether someone is online or not, and then through the diary.” - Participant 1

Participants were asked how they knew how to adapt their approach. Many commented that they came up with their approaches independently or with colleagues:

“I mean you could talk to colleagues here who are also line managers and like you can throw around ideas. And we do that sometimes like so it's more of an internal kind of discussion on what works best. But no generally it's kind of feeling through your own sense of what's working and if something's not working you're going to jettison that approach and take on something new. So there's a lot of trial and error.” - Participant

6

Participants were also asked how they knew that their adaptations were effective. Many reported that they had no means of calibrating the effectiveness:

“There was no way of measuring it in that sense, but the best way of probably reflecting on, that is, the barometer test for this would be in terms of that the number of questions that that individual staff member had on a weekly basis started to decrease.” – Participant 7

4.4. Theme 4: HR Guidance and Support

This theme contributes to addressing the first two research questions: *How do LMs perceive the five factors constraining HR implementation on their HR implementation effectiveness?* and *How do LMs perceive the potential challenges associated with working from home as constraining effective HR implementation?* As such, this theme incorporates factors concerning *HR Support* and *Policies and Procedures* during the pandemic. This theme encompasses how LMs perceived that the HR function at the HEI supported them relative to implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities. Additionally, as the majority of LMs in this study reported that they had only ever worked in the HEI as an LM, training has been designated as a sub-theme of this theme given HR's oversight of training at the HEI.

From the perspective of HR specialist support, 62.5% of participants perceived that this service was ineffective. Several participants raised that they had experienced difficulty accessing a HR Partner before and during the pandemic. The following participant discussed difficulty accessing an HR Partner when needed to address an acute HR matters during the pandemic:

“...I think that HR Partner is completely overwhelmed with the number of units that they cover...When there's an urgent issue is when I would usually go to the HR Partner, when it's something very important, urgent, and I tell them it's urgent, and I can't get the support that I need immediately...we had a couple of HR disasters over the pandemic and we definitely needed our HR partner's input...there were some legal issues that came up that were very, very complicated so access was problematic. We got to the end point, but it was painful to get to that end point...”– Participant 6

Similarly, another participant also made reference to being unable to access “HR” to discuss staff related matters for HR guidance as a “sounding board”:

“They’re far too busy and not contactable ... so what's the point because, by the time you get in touch with them, your issue, you'd have solved that yourself. It was for you to muddle through and solve as best you could. But there isn't much of a sounding board in HR. They're just too busy.” – Participant 4

To resolve their issue, they sought advice from their line manager but expressed a preference for HR support for the issues at hand:

“I would be going to my boss. I suppose he would have been helpful in that way... But sometimes you'd prefer to go to somebody who wasn't as close to this as [my boss] was, I mean you'd want more of an outsider looking in perspective.” – Participant 4

Another participant also sought guidance from their LM and from HR:

“She provided advice and offered to intervene... we have different ways of dealing with these things, and sometimes I didn't agree with her way.” - Participant 1

More broadly, ambiguity concerning the role of the HR partner and the role of line managers was highlighted and a cause for concern for another participant:

“We work in the grey is the best description. So, it is very unclear to me as to what the remit and support that comes from our HR partner. It’s very, very unclear to me even to this day around what level of support would be provided, should there be a significant HR issue...” - Participant 7

These comments may be reflective of a potentially perennial issue at the HEI in terms of HR support pre-dating the pandemic.

However, from the perspective of policies and procedures, all participants perceived these as effective. All participants commented on a large bank of policies, procedures, forms and some toolkits that can be accessed on the HEI's HR webpages. Yet there is some indication that there were insufficiencies in this area.

One participant reported that a set of guidelines for onboarding a new staff member was developed by their local unit, independent of the HR function, one year into the pandemic to address absence of procedures and guidelines from central HR:

“There's a handbook that had been developed that was helpful ... a handbook guide to inducting new staff members. That's a really good overview of everything that you have to remember.” - Participant 1

Meanwhile, another participant felt that there was an overreliance on policies, procedures and forms at the expense of HR's direct engagement with LMs to support their HR related issues during the pandemic.

“There was a lot of signposting to “This is our LinkedIn learning”, “These are our toolkits”... Maybe I expect too much, but what I find from HR in [the institution] is that you reach out and they're like “Oh, use these forms””. There's never a case of “Let's work together to find a solution for this to help you as a manager”. You're always scoping out your own response, your own path. They don't join you on that journey, and that is completely unique to [the institution]” - Participant 7

4.4.1. Sub-theme: Training

As the majority of LMs in this study reported that they had only ever worked in the HEI as an LM, training has been designated as a sub-theme of Theme 4: *HR Support and Guidance*.

Participants were asked about any training they had received prior to the pandemic and in response to the pandemic. As discussed under *Theme 2: Pivoting to Enforced Remote Working*, the majority of participants did not perceive training to manage their teams in a remote setting. Most participants could not identify any training that they have had in relation to implementing their devolved HR responsibilities either before or during the pandemic.

“I don't remember anything specifically on managing the HR side of things ...I mean it was often me just looking at policies on the HR website.” – Participant 3

“I think this is where there could have been a bit more guidance and leadership coming through from HR. At no point were we given any kind of training on how to adjust to doing this in a hybrid environment when we were fully remote” – Participant 5

Only one participant was able to advise that they had received targeted HR implementation training, noting that this was in a different workplace and prior to the pandemic:

“Pre [the institution] I had a significant amount of training ... around interview and selection, performance management and developing effective work plans that support KPI development, which was all related to HR training. It was quite limited in [the institution] ...” – Participant 7

However, there is some suggestion that the HEI is moving to provide more training opportunities for LMs.

“[The institution] are making steps for people managers ... it looks like they're making good steps in training courses for people managers but it's very recent thing as far as I can tell you.” - Participant 6

However, with reference to the same training programme, another participant noted that the programme is not addressing the “mechanics” of HR implementation.

“The program is all about leadership and managing people. But it doesn't get into the mechanics of this is what you need to do from an HR perspective. The areas that we don't have which I would welcome is around the dealing with the difficult situations and the underperformance. There is nothing around it.” – Participant 7

This participant further expressed there was a distinct absence of training support for implementation from a remote working perspective and perceived that LMs were expected to have the competences to manage in this context:

“When COVID hit there was a huge expectation of staff to be able to manage their own team and that managers would have the trust in staff to work and train their own team in from an HR perspective.” – Participant 7

4.5. Theme 5: Perceived Effectiveness

This theme directly addresses the research question: *How do LMs view their implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities in light of the five constraining factors and the potential challenges associated with working from home?* As such, this theme draws together participants' views on their overall perceived effectiveness in light of their assessments of perceived constraints across the five factors and the potential challenges associated with working from home.

Following discussion of all these factors, including constraining factors relative to working from home (i.e. well-being, work life balance, adaptations to HR responsibility implementation), 75% of participants perceived that their implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities in an enforced remote working context during the COVID-19 pandemic as effective. Interestingly, all participants perceived their implementation as effective pre-pandemic.

Participants who perceived their implementation as effective during the pandemic in their responses all reflected on various achievements such as: improved efficiency in managing their teams, satisfaction that they made strong efforts to support their teams, that they came through the that period in time with good relationships with their teams even if HR matters were deprioritised. These participants did not reflect on the perceived constraints that they had raised relative to the five factors constraining HR implementation or factors that may constrain implementation relative to working from home.

“I would say it was positive. I'd say you know I became more effective because of Zoom and because I would have had more regular meeting times with the people who I was

line managing during the pandemic, so I really didn't miss that in-person experience with them” - Participant 4

“I think I tried to give time to everybody to make sure they were supported. Like I was definitely making sure that people knew that they were part of a team, they were supported, and you know our sense of purpose was still there and so I think I did it okay.” - Participant 6

“We kind of got through this as colleagues, as people, who you know really respect and support one another... the bottom line is that that we're all well and we've come through this and been able to do our jobs and so in terms of the bigger picture I'm very happy about that...even if some of the team management has been a bit hit and miss. - Participant 8

When asked how they perceived their overall implementation effectiveness, the 25% of participants who did not view their implementation as effective all commented: “I did my best”. As part of their responses, these participants reflected on challenging HR implementation with respect to new staff members. There was no reflection on HR support and procedures or issues relative to well-being and work life balance. Albeit one participant perceived that their competences could be improved in order for improved implementation. There was recognition among these participants that workload and the nature of not being able to interact with staff members in person were particularly constraining.

“I can say that I definitely tried my best. I didn't not try to address issues with the staff member, I just don't think that I resolved it. It didn't end with him becoming employee of the month, or anything like that. He just moved on to another organization, where

I felt like I was transferring the issue to someone else...It knocked my confidence as a people manager.” - Participant 1

“I think I did the best if I'm being kind to myself... there's definitely areas that could have been done better...since returning to the office, with working side by side I figured out very quickly that the pace of work was probably not where it needed to be...and some issues with the quality of work....I don't think I've learned from my experiences managing in COVID to be able to say “I can effectively manage a team in a hybrid environment “ because it was that in the trenches approach, it was getting through until things get back to normal. - Participant 2

Chapter 5: Discussion

5. Introduction

This study sought to explore and analyse LMs' perceived implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities. Five themes were identified through the thematic analysis of eight semi-structured interviews. The themes were as follows: i) Devolved HR Responsibilities ii) Pivoting to Enforced Remote Working iii) Implementing devolved HR responsibilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic; iv) HR Support; and v) Perceived Effectiveness.

The foregoing chapter outlined a series of findings that addressed each research question. In terms of the first research question, *How do LMs perceive the five factors constraining HR implementation on their HR implementation effectiveness?, Policy and Practices* were perceived as not constraining HR implementation, while perceived *Desire* bore somewhat mixed results. Meanwhile *HR Support, Capacity and Competences* were perceived as *constraining HR implementation in a remote working context*.

For the second research question, *How do LMs perceive the potential challenges associated with working from home as constraining effective HR implementation?, Capacity* was perceived by 75% of participants as being constrained by increased workload during the period of enforced remote working. As a result, this impacted the *Desire* factor which saw 75% of participants deprioritise some or all of their HR responsibilities for a period of time in order to handle their functional areas of responsibility. With regard to well-being, 50% perceived well-being issues during the pandemic. However, there was limited evidence to suggest that this factor was perceived as constraining LMs' *Desire* to implement their

devolved HR responsibilities. There was also limited evidence to suggest that work life balance issues were perceived as constraining *Desire* to implement devolved HR responsibilities. In terms of competences, many participants (62.5%) perceived challenges adapting their approach to implementation. Just one participant perceived training in managing teams remotely, while no participants received any training in how to implement their devolved HR responsibilities in a remote work context. To support implementation in a remote working context, *HR Supports* from HR Specialists were perceived as constraining and *Policies and Practices* were perceived as effective in supporting HR implementation.

Finally, with respect to the third research question, *How do LMs view their implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities in light of the five constraining factors and the potential challenges associated with working from home?*, the majority of participants (75%) perceived their implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities in an enforced remote working context during the COVID-19 pandemic as effective.

In this chapter, the research findings will be discussed in greater detail relative to the studies outlined in the literature review to explore and analyse their implications in light of the research aim and objectives. The discussion will follow Bos-Nehles' (2010) five factors constraining HR implementation and will reflect on Role Theory as a framework of theoretical analysis.

5.1. Capacity

Capacity was perceived as a major constraint on HR implementation during the period of enforced remote working by the majority of participants. Consistent with Geary and Belizon (2022), 87.5% of participants perceived increased productivity. Yet there was some indication of work intensification as a result of the increased productivity in line with Green *et al.* (2022).

As such, *Capacity* was perceived by 75% of participants as being negatively impacted by increased workload during the period of enforced remote working. This finding is consistent with Bos-Nehles (2010) who found that notwithstanding largely positive perceptions among LMs of their implementation effectiveness across all five factors, this was the only factor in her study that presented a degree of challenge to HR implementation. The resultant increased workload perceived by the majority of participants was attributed to the sudden pivot to remote work in terms of meeting changed operational needs and requirements during the pandemic. This finding broadly supports the work of McGovern *et al.*, (1997) and McConville (2006) in relation to LMs having insufficient capacity to dedicate to both operational and HR responsibilities, where some LMs reported postponement or non-implementation of some responsibilities. As such, these finding may be indicative that LMs experienced a degree of role overload during the pandemic. Furthermore, as highlighted by Op de Beeck *et al.* (2018), the wider leadership literature comments on the different roles managers in the public sector are expected perform cf. coach, leader, entrepreneur, bureaucrat, and steward. If indeed the case, the competing demands of being a public sector manager coupled with increased operational demands may be indicative of the presence of role conflict with regard to capacity.

5.2. Desire

While many scholars have found that LMs lack the desire to implement their devolved HR responsibilities (Cunningham and Hyman, 1995; Kulick and Bainbridge, 2006), the findings of this factor yielded somewhat mixed results. On one hand, 75% of participants see the value of implementing their devolved HR responsibilities particularly with respect to training and development which were perceived in a highly favourable light relative to the drive to develop

and support their staff members in growing their careers. This finding contradicts Thornhill and Saunders' (1998) view that LMs do not recognise the value of HR practices.

On the other hand, there was a distinct perception among many participants (75%) that their devolved HR responsibilities were an "add-on" to their operational responsibilities. This is potentially signalled to LMs indirectly through non-formalization of these responsibilities in job descriptions or in inductions. As such, and in line with Whittaker and Marchington's (2003) findings, it is unsurprising that LMs' tended to prioritize operational responsibilities over HR responsibilities pre-pandemic on occasion. However, when the pivot to remote work triggered a set of new work-related challenges that increased workload, 75% of participants deprioritised some or all of their HR responsibilities for a period of time in order to dedicate more time to their functional areas of responsibility. In essence, there was a short-term focus on operational responsibilities at the expense of HR responsibilities as described by Cunningham and Hyman (1999), Brewster and Larsen (2000), Whittaker and Marchington (2003). Again, the prioritization of operational activities at the expense of HR responsibilities may also reflect a degree of role ambiguity among LMs relative to their HR responsibilities but ultimately may lead to fragmented and less effective people management (Bond and Wise, 2003).

Finally, it is widely reported in the literature that working from home for long periods can impact well-being and work life balance (De Klerk *et al.*, 2021). While 50% of participants reported some well-being issues during the pandemic, there is limited evidence to suggest that this factor was perceived as impacting LMs' *Desire* to implement their devolved HR responsibilities. There was also limited evidence to suggest that work life balance issues were perceived as impacting *Desire* to implementation of devolved HR responsibilities. Participants

discussed coping strategies such as exercise which may have potentially mitigated any negative impacts.

5.3. Competences

Participants implemented many HR responsibilities (cf. training, onboarding, performance management) that they would normally be implemented in an onsite working context, yet many (62.5%) perceived challenges adapting their approach to a remote working context. Difficulty adapting their approach to implementation may be partially explained by an absence of training in implementing HR related competences and training in managing in a remote working context. Just one participant perceived training in managing teams remotely, while no participants received any training in how to implement their devolved HR responsibilities in a remote work context. This finding is consistent with Brewster and Larsen's (2000) finding that many organisations tend not to offer concerted training for LMs in implementing HR. It is also consistent with McCarthy *et al.*'s (2022) survey of Irish workers in which 45% perceived no training provided by their organization to manage a team remotely. This absence of training may be explained by another of McCarthy *et al.*'s (2022) findings in which they note that a reasonably split opinion in their survey among 2,184 LMs in which 47% perceived no difference in managing a team remotely compared to 44% who perceived it is difficult to manage a team remotely. However, this finding does not outline experience levels of participants. As such, it is interesting to note that some participants relied on varying their management style which was an interesting insight and unexpected finding to delivery training for a new staff member. As such, it might be inferred from this that LMs' experience in their capacity as LMs and other broader management-related training that they may have acquired in the course of their careers was a key tool relative to implementation effectiveness

in this instance, contrasting with McGovern *et al.*'s (1997) claim that LM possess limited people management skills.

5.4. HR Support

In contrast with Bos-Nehles' (2010) findings, 62.5% of participants perceived that *HR Support* was ineffective in supporting implementation during the pandemic. This was mainly attributed to the perception that HR Support is not accessible in terms of making contact with HR Specialists for guidance and advice, upholding the findings of Nehles *et al.*, (2006) that HR specialists are not available when required to provide guidance. Some LMs were particularly concerned relative to receiving guidance for more complex HR matters directly arising from the pandemic. LMs' accounts imply that the relationship between HR specialists and LMs is not a partnership as recommended by Whittaker and Marchington (2003) and suggestive of a degree of distance between both parties (McGuire, McGuire and Sanderson, 2011). A weak relationship with HR may be contributing to role ambiguity among LMs (Bos-Nehles, 2010) as concern was raised among participants with regard to the level of support LMs should receive from the HR function. To remedy role ambiguity between LMs and HR specialists, Bos-Nehles (2010) notes the need for a clear division of responsibilities between LMs and HR specialists in terms of what their responsibilities are, and expectation management of the HR function.

Another consequence of poor support from the HR function is that there are some accounts that LMs would seek guidance from their direct LMs for HR matters and may be indicative that more senior LMs are playing a role in HR support and guidance. In these instances, participants expressed limited effectiveness of this support; these accounts may also suggest that more senior LMs are attempting to fill a gap in access to HR support and guidance at the

HEI. Bos-Nehles (2010) notes that this approach may lead to ineffective support with incorrect guidance provided to LMs.

It could be suggested that increased workload on the part of HR function arising from the switch to online work impacted service delivery. However, there is some suggestion in the findings that this issue of access to HR support pre-dates the pandemic.

5.5. Policy and Practices

All participants perceived policy and practices as effective. Participants pointed to a large bank of policies, forms and some toolkits to support them in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities which had been developed for working onsite and indicated that they were largely satisfied with these as a support with implementation. This finding aligns with Bowen and Ostroff (2004) and McConville (2006) in terms of the need for clear policies and procedures to implement devolved HR responsibilities effectively. However, one participant perceived that there was an overreliance on these among HR specialists in place of engaging directly with LMs to provide practical support.

The uniformly positive perception of *Policy and Practices* is surprising considering that many LMs found that the pivot to remote work necessitated adaptations to be made to the implementation of certain responsibilities with regard to implementation and with particular regard to new staff members i.e. onboarding and training. Participants who reported making their own adaptations to implement these tasks in a remote working context did so on a trial and error basis, noting that there was no guidance available in terms of implementation of onboarding and training in a remote working context. This “idiosyncratic” approach to implementation as proposed by Bowen and Ostroff (2004) was perceived as constraining implementation effectiveness as the procedures for implementing training and onboarding

had to be developed in the first instance and then redeveloped in light of its ineffectiveness. The development of a set guidelines at the local unit level, independent of the HR function evidences no support with procedures in a remote working context relative to implementation. It also potentially evidences role ambiguity relative to the delineation of responsibility between HR and local units. The findings suggest that LMs at the HEI are highly autonomous in terms of their implementation of devolved HR responsibilities, relying mainly on information on the HR website cf. policies and forms to guide implementation but as such and particularly in the context of remote working, LMs' implementation may have varied in quality and consistency (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013).

5.6. Role Theory

With regard to Role Theory, the findings indicate a high degree of role ambiguity, some role overload and limited evidence of role conflict. However, many of the issues that LMs' shared pre-date the pandemic with regard to role ambiguity, role overload and role conflict, and did not all necessarily arise as a direct result of enforced remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is a high degree of role ambiguity that can be identified across all five factors as detailed above, with few details concerning HR responsibilities in job descriptions, no inductions provided in HR-related responsibilities, and notwithstanding recently implemented training programmes, limited competences in implementing devolved HR responsibilities. Perceived limited support from the HR function has also given rise to further role ambiguity that questions the efficacy of HR Devolution at the HEI if some participants are unsure of the level of support that they would receive in case of a serious HR matter. Role ambiguity may well have a negative impact on performance outcomes of the HEI (Maxwell and Watson, 2006, cited in Evans, 2017).

Role overload, however, is a feature of the factors concerning *Desire* and *Capacity*. The findings suggest that role overload was perceived by the majority of LMs in a remote working capacity as a result of increased workload and reprioritisation of HR responsibilities. Similarly, while there is some limited evidence of role conflict, the presence of role conflict could be associated with LMs in their public sector management capacity. But additional workload directly arising from the pandemic, may have added to role conflict. Limited perceptions of role conflict aligns with the finding that well-being was not perceived as a constraining factor among LMs in carrying out their role for the majority of participants (Tubre and Collins, 2000, cited in Gilbert *et al.*, 2015).

5.7. Perceived Effectiveness

Bos-Nehles (2010) found that when the majority of LMs perceive few constraints across the five factors constraining effective HR implementation, they will perceive that they are effective in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities. In this study, the majority of participants (75%) perceived their implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities in an enforced remote working context during the COVID-19 pandemic as effective. However, the findings across the five factors are somewhat mixed: *HR Support*, *Capacity* and *Competences* are perceived as constraining implementation. Interestingly, there is evidence of a degree of ambivalence with regard to implementation both in a remote working context as well as in an onsite working context among participants concerning the *Desire* factor which may in fact render this factor as constraining implementation. Finally, *Policy and Practices* is the only factor not perceived as constraining HR implementation in a remote working context. As such, when we consider Bos-Nehles' (2010) earlier stated proposition and the mostly constraining factors impacting HR implementation in a remote working context as perceived by

participants in this study, then the majority of participants in this study should perceive their implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities as ineffective.

Consideration will now be given to the possible reasons for the difference between the participants' positive overall perceptions of their implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities and their perceptions of the constraints across *HR Support, Capacity, Competences and Desire*. Drilling down into participants' accounts, there were few differences between those who perceived implementation effectiveness and those who did not perceive implementation effectiveness. Across both cohorts, participants reported some well-being and work life balance issues, and challenges implementing HR responsibilities remotely that required adaptations including new staff members joining during the pandemic that requiring alternative approaches to implementation in a remote working context and that they did not perceive training for implementation in a remote working context. Additionally, common to both cohorts was increased workload that led to a prioritization of operational matters at the expense of HR matters during the period of enforced remote working, but this was also potentially an occurrence pre-pandemic, as well as difficulty accessing *HR Support*. One potential explanation is that as HR responsibilities are mostly perceived as an "add-on" for the majority of participants, the participants might not reflect often on their HR implementation effectiveness (Renwick, 2003). Therefore, participants might not immediately perceive a link between their HR implementation and the perceived constraining factors particularly if there are perceived uncertainties with regard to the delineation of HR responsibilities between the HR function and LMs at the HEI and may feel on one hand a sense of autonomy with regard to their HR implementation but on the other an absence of incentivisation to implement their HR responsibilities. This may be evidenced in implementation guidelines for onboarding in a remote working context developed by a unit

independently of the HR function at the HEI, some evidence of participants' seeking HR implementation advice from their supervisors rather than HR specialists during the pandemic, and limited details of HR responsibilities in job descriptions. As previously referenced, implementation of HR responsibilities may take a secondary position to operational responsibilities for participants. This may also contribute to participants giving less consideration to the effectiveness of their implementation. Alternatively, the participants may have overstated their effectiveness in spite of the perceived constraints as a result of self-report bias (Bos-Nehles, 2010).

From the perspective of the participants that perceived poor implementation, these participants perceived a high degree of disruption to their team operations due to difficulties implementing training in one instance and absence management in another; both participants perceived that the situation could have been avoided in an "in-office" environment, where the mere fact of not being able to pick up on issues through observation was perceived as constraining implementation.

5.8. Implications

The findings raise some questions concerning the effectiveness of HR implementation and HR Devolution in the HEI during the COVID-19 pandemic in an enforced remote working context but also in an onsite working capacity more broadly. The implications of this study are outlined as follows:

Generally, LMs at the HEI are highly autonomous with respect to implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities. However, the adaptations to HR practices (e.g. onboarding and training) to a remote working context may well have resulted in inconsistent or partial

implementation of these responsibilities resulting in ineffective implementation. Inconsistent application of these practices may not result in eliciting the intended employee behaviours thus leading to a negative impact on organisational success (Wright and Nishii, 2013; Woodrow and Guest, 2014). There is a possibility that with respect to new staff there is risk that less effective onboarding arising from ad hoc adaptations to remote work setting may prolong the period of induction, resulting in staff experiencing difficulties absorbing the organisational culture and rendering them less effective in their roles and/or potentially leading to staff turnover early in their tenure.

If it is the intension of the HEI's HR Devolution strategy to have autonomous LMs with greater ownership of people management thereby facilitating HR's strategic integration (Bainbridge, 2015), not only is guidance in the form of policies and procedures to support adaptation to remote work needed, these must be underpinned by greater access to HR support to develop strong working relationship between HR specialists and LMs (Whittaker and Marchington, 2003), as well as concerted development of HR competences to handle implementation in both remote and onsite working contexts. Without adequate HR support and competence building among LMs, there is risk to the effectiveness of HR Devolution in the HEI.

The secondary status of HR responsibilities with respect to operational responsibilities also constrained implementation during the pandemic. Without an organisational climate that supports or incentivises HR implementation, efforts to implement HR will be limited (Sikora and Ferris, 2014) and may result in fragmented and less effective people management (Bond and Wise, 2003). This is especially relevant to the case of the sudden pivot to remote work which saw the non-implementation of some HR responsibilities.

5.9. Limitations

The findings and implications of this study must be tempered in light of following limitations:

This study centres on LMs in only one Irish HEI and as such the findings may not be representative of other HEIs or organisations in Ireland.

Scholars of qualitative research have long debated sample size (Vasileiou *et al.*, 2021). The sample for this study was indeed small. Yet the eight participants provided in-depth and rich information during the interviews, owing in part to the design of the interview in terms of the open-ended nature of many of the interview questions. Furthermore, recurrent accounts and information appeared very early on in the interviewing process among interview participants which may indicate data saturation was reached (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in Bowen, 2008).

Creswell (2016) discourages researchers from conducting a study in one's own organisation due to issues that may arise in relation one's role and the roles of people with whom one works. Questions concerning the personal experience of working from home relative to well-being while working from home may have led to participants not wishing to answer questions as openly as they might with a researcher with no relationship to the organisation and may have viewed the researcher more as a colleague thereby constraining discussion around the impact of working from home on well-being and implementation effectiveness. However, this may have been mitigated to some extent by a pre-existing positive working relationship between the researcher and the interview participants which may have facilitated candid responses during the interviews in all other respects.

Another issue that may have been influential in some of the responses is self-report bias. Bos-Nehles (2010) posits in her study concerning LMs' perceptions of effectiveness in

implementing their HR responsibilities that LMs may have a tendency to over-state their effectiveness. This was mitigated in Bos-Nehles through a survey of LMs' employees' perceptions of their effectiveness. However, due to the timing limitations of this study, it was not possible to widen the scope of this study to include the perspectives of participants line reports.

Finally, the nature of the study itself entails participants reflecting on a set period of time in the past. As such, this may give rise to recall bias where participants may omit detail or not have an accurate memory of how events and activities transpired.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

This chapter will conclude the dissertation by summarising the key findings relative to the research aim, objectives and questions. It will then proceed to discuss the relevance and contributions of the study, as well as reflecting on the limitations of the study and propose opportunities for future research.

This study aimed to explore LMs' perceived implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities in an Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in the context of enforced remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative approach was adopted, undertaking semi-structured interviews with eight participants with line management responsibilities who had worked from home for a large Irish HEI during the COVID-19 pandemic. In-depth interviews were undertaken and, following thematic analysis, yielded rich information as to the participants' subjective experiences in terms of the broad research aim, research objectives and questions.

The research objectives and questions were all framed in the context of an enforced remote working context during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings are summarised as follows:

With respect to Objective 1, *explore and analyse the five factors constraining effective implementation of devolved HR responsibilities*, this objective sought to explore the research question: *i) How do LMs perceive the five factors constraining HR implementation on their HR implementation effectiveness? As such, i) Desire; ii) Capacity; iii) Competences; iv) HR Support and v) Policy & Practices* (Bos-Nehles, 2010) were explored. *Policies & Practices* were perceived as not constraining HR implementation, while perceived *Desire* bore somewhat mixed results. Meanwhile, *HR Support*, *Capacity* and *Competences* were perceived as constraining HR implementation in a remote working context.

In terms of Objective 2, *explore and analyse the extent to which the potential challenges associated with working from home may have impacted the five factors constraining effective HR implementation*, this objective sought to answer the research question: *How do LMs perceive the potential challenges associated with working from home as constraining effective HR implementation?* As such, exploration of this question was guided by challenges identified in the literature by Geary and Belizon (2022) who identified that increased workload and productivity impacted well-being and work life balance for employees working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also guided by McCarthy *et al.*'s (2021) study that found that there was limited provision of training in managing teams remotely during the pandemic. Meanwhile, as there is limited research on the adaptations necessitated to implement devolved HR responsibilities, this area of challenge was also explored. Capacity was perceived by 75% of participants as being constrained by increased workload during the period of enforced remote working. As a result, this impacted the *Desire* factor which saw 75% of participants deprioritise some or all of their HR responsibilities for a period of time in order to handle their functional areas of responsibility. With regard to well-being, 50% perceived well-being issues during the pandemic. However, there was limited evidence to suggest that this factor was perceived as constraining LMs' *Desire* to implement their devolved HR responsibilities. There was also limited evidence to suggest that work life balance issues were perceived as constraining *Desire* to implement devolved HR responsibilities. In terms of competences, many participants (62.5%) perceived challenges adapting their approach to implementation. Just one participant perceived training in managing teams remotely, while all participants perceived no training in how to implement their devolved HR responsibilities in a remote work context. To support implementation in a remote working context, *HR Supports* from HR Specialists were perceived as constraining due to access

difficulties both pre-pandemic as well as during the pandemic. *Policy and Practices* were however, perceived as effective in supporting HR implementation.

Finally, with respect to Objective 3, *explore and analyse how LMs perceive their implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities with regard to the five factors that constrain HR implementation and the potential challenges associated with working from home*, this objective sought to answer the research question: *How do LMs perceive the potential challenges associated with working from home as constraining effective HR implementation?* In light of the findings under Objectives 1 and 2 above, this objective reflects on LMs' overall perceived effectiveness. According to Bos-Nehles (2010), LMs who perceive few constraints will perceive that they are effective in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities. As such, LMs' broad perceptions of their implementation effectiveness were explored in light of their assessments of perceived constraints across the five factors and the potential challenges associated with working from home (i.e. well-being, work life balance, adaptations to HR responsibility implementation). The majority of participants (75%) perceived their implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities in an enforced remote working context during the COVID-19 pandemic as effective. This was an unexpected finding. One potential explanation for this finding is that as HR responsibilities are mostly perceived as an "add-on" for the majority of participants, the participants might not reflect often on their HR implementation effectiveness (Renwick, 2003). Therefore, participants might not immediately perceive a link between their HR implementation and the perceived constraining factors particularly if there are perceived uncertainties with regard to the delineation of HR responsibilities between the HR function and LMs at the HEI and may feel a sense of autonomy with regard to their HR implementation but also absence of incentivisation to implement their HR responsibilities. Implementation of HR responsibilities may have taken a

secondary position to operational responsibilities for participants during the pandemic due to increased workload but may have also occurred pre-pandemic due to an organisational culture that may not incentivise HR implementation. As such, these reasons may contribute to participants giving less consideration to the effectiveness of their implementation.

These findings were permeated by role overload during the period of enforced remote working due to increased workload and hours, but also a high degree of role ambiguity more broadly which raises some questions concerning the effectiveness of HR implementation and HR Devolution in the HEI during the COVID-19 pandemic in an enforced remote working context but also in an onsite working capacity more broadly. Adaptions to HR practices (e.g. onboarding and training) in a remote working were ad hoc and unsupported by the HR function in so far as there were no perceived training, policies, practices perceived among the majority of participants. As such, this may well have resulted in inconsistent or partial implementation of these responsibilities leading to ineffective implementation and thereby impacting organisational success (Wright and Nishii, 2013; Woodrow and Guest, 2014) and could potentially have led to staff turnover. The organisational culture may benefit from incentives to HR implementation to increase motivation to prioritise implementation of devolved HR responsibilities, elevating it to equal status alongside operational responsibilities to improve people management at the HEI (Bond and Wise, 2003).

LMs' effective implementation of their devolved HR responsibilities are of critical importance to HRM effectiveness in organizations (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013) with respect to guiding employee behavior and performance and organizational success more broadly (Gilbert *et al.*, 2015). Without greater access to HR support to develop strong working relationships between HR specialists and LMs, as well as concerted development of HR competences to handle

implementation in both remote and onsite working contexts, and clear delineation of LM and HR specialist roles, there is risk to the effectiveness of the HR Devolution at the HEI.

This study has explored an area of research that has yet to be fully explored among the wider research community with respect to HR Devolution in light of the sudden pivot to remote work in March 2020 arising from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also responds to Bos-Nehles' (2010) call to explore implementation of devolved HR responsibilities from the perspective of LMs and offers a unique context of Irish HEIs which are underexplored in both bodies of literature concerning Working from Home and HR Devolution. As Ireland moves forward into a 'new normal' of remote and hybrid work (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020), it is hoped that the findings of this study have highlighted how LMs might be best supported in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities in a remote working context from a best practice perspective. Recommendations for the HEI are outlined in Chapter 7.

In consideration of the findings and implications of this study, it must be borne in mind that the study is based on a small sample of LMs in only one Irish HEI and as such the findings are not generalisable and may not be representative of other HEIs or organisations in Ireland. However, the sample did yield in-depth information and insights having achieved data saturation from early in the interviewing process. The findings may have been influenced by a degree of recall bias and self-report bias leading participants to potentially recall the period of enforced remote working from a more optimistic perspective as well as over-stating their perceived implementation effectiveness, in addition to the the workplace relationship between the researcher and participants which may have elicited some more positive accounts of the period of enforced remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic with respect to feelings of well-being and work life balance.

6.1. Suggestions for Future Research

There were some interesting findings in this study that were not within the scope of the research that may merit further exploration:

Many LMs in this study discussed their learnings from the adaptations they made to their implementation of devolved HR responsibilities in a remote working context during the COVID-19 pandemic. As this was not the central focus of this study, it would be beneficial to the bodies of literature concerning HR Devolution and Working from Home, to explore this area further and analyse how *HR Support, Policies & Practices* and *Competences* factored into the approaches and decision-making processes in developing adaptations, and their outcomes relative to the implementation gap from a quality and consistency perspective.

As there is a paucity of research concerning development of training to manage teams remotely and implement devolved HR responsibilities remotely, this would be an area of great interest in terms of how such training may be perceived by LMs' relative to their HR competence development. Such a study could also explore how LMs' direct line reports perceive implementation effectiveness as result of these improved competences.

Chapter 7: CIPD Requirements

To satisfy membership requirements of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD), recommendations and as a statement of personal development are outlined in this Chapter.

7.1. Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed in support of effective HR Devolution and implementation at the HEI both in an onsite and remote working context:

1. HR Partner Support

HR Devolution is built on a close working relationship between HR Partners and LMs (Ulrich, 1997). The findings of the study suggest that HR Partners are not accessible to LMs seeking guidance and support with complex HR matters and that more senior LMs may be taking the place of HR Partners in guiding their LMs under their remit in handling challenging HR matters. This difficulty accessing HR Partners could be attributed to a high workload on the part of HR Partners. As the HR Partner model is core tenet of the Ulrich (1997) model of a devolved organization, the size of the remit of HR Partners relative to the number of LMs that they provide service to would need to be assessed. As such, a risk assessment of the ratio of LMs to HR Partners should be undertaken. Following the outcome of that assessment it would need to be considered if further investment in additional HR Partners is required, if the duties of HR Partners need to be reassessed and if roles need to be redesigned, or if greater administrative support is required for HR Partners. The risk assessment using current staff resources possibly from among the HR function or through an internal Auditing Team. The cost would therefore be in terms of time dedicated to this activity through current staff,

potentially 0.2 (FTE) of the role of current employee. The risk assessment could take approximately up to three months.

2. Elevation of Devolved HR Responsibilities

The findings of this study highlight that devolved HR responsibilities can at times be viewed as an “add-on” potentially leading to it not being prioritized particularly during periods of increased workload. In addition, there is some ambiguity around the scale and scope of LMs’ responsibilities and the scale and scope of HR specialist support. It is therefore recommended that the HEI take the following two steps to resolve this issue to facilitate more effective people management as follows:

- i) Devolved HR responsibilities to be outlined in more detail in job descriptions and inductions to be developed for new LMs to highlight their areas of responsibility and what they can expect in terms of support and guidance from their relationship with HR specialists to mitigate role ambiguity.
- ii) Inclusion of HR responsibilities in LMs’ performance management objectives to facilitate an organisational climate that incentivises implementation of devolved HR responsibilities.

Current resources from the HR function could lead this project not only to action the above steps but also to develop communications to the wider HEI community in support of driving this change. In addition, local champions could be nominated throughout the HEI to build support for greater prioritisation of implementation of devolved HR responsibilities. The initial realisation of these changes could take one year from the time of scoping the project, developing plans, and implementation. The embedding period could take another year to two years in terms of winning heart and minds, to raise the profile of implementation of HR

responsibilities among LMs. In terms of resourcing costs, 0.4 (FTE) of the role of a current employee could be dedicated to lead this project.

3. Procedures for Implementation of HR Responsibilities in a Remote Context

Procedures, guidelines and toolkits should be developed for implementation of HR responsibilities in a remote working context. These would be used for implementing HR responsibilities should there be future crises that require full remote working over an extended period of time with particular regard to onboarding and training new staff as well as managing conflict and difficult performance conversations in a remote context. However, they could also be useful for implementation in a hybrid working context. As such, there may be a more pressing need to develop such resources. Therefore, a small project team of potentially three staff members within the HR function dedicating 0.5 (FTE) of their working week to accelerate development of these resources within a twelve week period. An additional 6 to 12 months will be needed to pilot the procedures and accompanying resources.

4. Training Programmes

For the HEI to have competent and capable LMs, a concerted training programme to develop HR-related competences is required. There is suggestion that the HEI is investing in training programmes to build people management competences; as such, modules dedicated to implementing devolved HR responsibilities could be developed and incorporated into the new programme that would provide practical learning in how to implement areas such as handling performance conversations, conflict management and onboarding. Modules would develop competences in these areas for both onsite and remote working contexts. Based on staff members working in the HR function developing approximately three modules, allocating

three 0.5 FTE, development could take approximately 16 weeks. Piloting the modules could potentially take three to six months.

7.2. Statement of Personal Development

Undertaking this dissertation has been an invaluable learning experience from both professional and personal perspectives. It has supported my growth and development as a Human Resources professional and represents fulfilling a personal goal of attaining a Masters level education which has resulted in developing my HR-related knowledge and skills in project management, qualitative research and improved writing skills. In addition, through this study, I feel I have acquired an in-depth understanding of the issues surrounding HR Devolution in a large institution and the challenges to HR implementation in a remote work setting which will inform my professional practice going forward.

From a research perspective, the exploratory nature of this study was both challenging and rewarding. Once the initial research problem and research objectives had been established, and following drafting the literature review, the data collection process proved to be a more reflective and engaging experience than anticipated relative to the findings that were emerging from early in the interviewing process. The relatively open-ended nature of the interview questions coupled with their strong basis in the literature elicited responses from participants that forced me to re-examine and refine the research problem and objectives to facilitate a more authentic exploration of the participants' experiences.

While a small sample, thematic analysis was challenging from the perspective that the interviews were very in-depth and yielded a lot of data. Collating and distilling this data into themes to form a cohesive narrative that aligned with the objectives of the research was immensely challenging. Embracing the iterative nature of thematic analysis and dedicating

more time to the analysis was required. I feel that this experience will serve me well in drafting reports in my current role that will be based on qualitative research.

Finally, a significant challenge throughout the development of the dissertation has been managing a high degree of workload alongside, coming through an extended period of illness due to COVID-19 and taking care of family affairs. This led to falling behind schedule in meeting certain milestones in the development of the dissertation. However, these have made completion of the dissertation all the more rewarding.

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Appendix 1 Interview Protocol

Introduction and Overview of Research

I would like to begin by thanking you for agreeing to participate in this study. As you are already aware, I am carrying out this interview as part of a dissertation for a Masters in Human Resource Management at National College of Ireland.

The working title of this study is: “How do line managers perceive their effectiveness implementing their devolved HR responsibilities in an enforced remote working context during the COVID-19 pandemic?”. As such, this study seeks to understand the subjective perspectives of individual line managers who were employed in a line management capacity working remotely for this Higher Education Institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of an enforced remote working environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, the objectives are to explore and analyse:

- line managers’ perceptions of their HR implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities;
- the individual factors that line managers perceived as supportive or barriers to effectively implementing their devolved HR responsibilities;
- the extent to which individual factors unique to enforced remote working impacted line managers’ perceptions of their performance in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities.

The interview will take 45 minutes to one hour. The first part of the interview will focus on questions concerning your role and experience. The second part will focus on questions concerning your HR responsibilities before the pandemic. The third part will focus on the

context of working from home and then the fourth part will explore implementing your HR responsibilities during the pandemic. The fifth part of the interview will be our close out of the discussion where you will have an opportunity to ask me any questions you have in relation to this study and you will have the opportunity to add anything further that was not covered by the questions during the course of the interview.

Your information will be anonymised and for your assurance, a complete transcript of the interview will be made available to you after the interview and a copy of the final dissertation should you wish to receive these. However, if at any stage during the interview you wish to stop and withdraw, please note that you are free to do so.

Before we begin, have you had an opportunity to review and sign the consent form? Do you have any questions?

Part 1: Context questions

1. Please briefly explain your role and how long you have worked here.
2. How long have you been in a line management position here?
3. How many direct line reports do you have?
4. How long did you fully work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Part 2: Implementing devolved HR responsibilities before the pandemic

1. Looking back to pre-enforced remote working arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, can you tell me about your HR responsibilities before the pandemic?
2. How did you feel about those responsibilities?
3. How clearly defined were your HR responsibilities?

4. Did you have all the information you needed to carry out your role relative to your HR responsibilities?
5. Overall, how did you perceive your effectiveness in implementing your HR responsibilities before the COVID-19 pandemic?
6. Can you tell me about any training you had received in relation to your HR responsibilities?
7. What factors motivated you to implement or not implement your HR responsibilities?
8. Was it always possible to carry out all of your HR responsibilities before the COVID-19 pandemic?

Part 3: Working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic

1. Can you tell me about how you felt about remote work pre-pandemic?
2. Would you have had any team members work remotely?
3. How prepared were you to make the sudden transition to working from home?
4. On the job front, with regard to your role, how did you find working from home?
 - In broad terms, how do you view your job performance at that time?
5. Can you tell me about your experience managing your team during the period of enforced remote working?
6. How did you know your team were working?
7. On the home front, can you tell me about your experience working from home during the period of enforced remote working? (i.e. how did it impact you on an individual level? Can you tell me about working from home on the how working from home

Part 4: Implementing devolved HR responsibilities during the pandemic

1. Moving on to the period of enforced remote work arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, can you tell me about your HR responsibilities during the pandemic?

2. How did your HR responsibilities change, if at all?
3. What are the main differences, if any, between how you view your HR responsibilities before COVID-19 enforced working from home and during the COVID-19 pandemic when you were working from home?
4. Overall, how do you perceive your effectiveness in implementing your HR responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. From an individual perspective, to what extent was the implementation of your HR responsibilities impacted by enforced working from home?
6. What modifications did you need to make to your overall approach to your people management responsibilities when you worked remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic? Can you give an example?
7. Can you tell me about any factors that played a role in implementing your HR responsibilities at that time? Please describe supports and barriers.
8. What practices did you adapt? How did you decide?
9. What practices did you not implement? How did you decide? What factors came into play in making that decision?
10. How did working from home impact your prioritisation if at all to your operational duties and your HR duties?
11. Can you give an example of a HR practice/responsibility that you modified in order to implement while working from home during the pandemic that you would have normally implemented in a working onsite context? What was the outcome? Was it successful?
12. Do you feel that your modifications or approach to implementation under these circumstances was effective? How did you know it was effective?

13. Can you tell me about any training you received in relation to carrying out your HR responsibilities in a remote working environment?
14. Was it always possible to carry out all of your HR responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic? Please describe supports and barriers.
15. What factors impacted your motivation to implement your HR responsibilities while working from home the COVID-19 pandemic?
16. Is there recognition for performance effective implementation of HR duties?

Part 5: Interview Wrap-up

Thank you so much for your time today and for sharing those insights into your experience.

Your participation is greatly appreciated. Before we finish:

1. Would you like to add anything or have any comments about the topics that we have discussed today?
2. Do you have any questions before we end the interview?
3. Are you interested in receiving the transcript of the interview?

Appendix 2 Email Invitation to Participate in Research

Dear X,

I am undertaking a dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements of an MA in Human Resource Management at National College of Ireland (NCI).

The topic chosen for my dissertation concerns HR Devolution in an enforced remote working context. HR Devolution refers to the delegation of HR practices such as hiring, onboarding, training, development and performance management to line managers where these HR practices had been traditionally undertaken by HR Specialists.

In the context of an enforced remote working environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, the aims of this study are to explore and analyse:

- line managers' perceptions of their HR implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities;
- the individual factors that line managers perceived as supportive or barriers to effectively implementing their devolved HR responsibilities;
- the extent to which individual factors unique to enforced remote working impacted line managers' perceptions of their performance in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities.

To inform this research, I will be carrying out semi-structured interviews with line managers who worked fully remotely during the period of enforced remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, I would be delighted if you might consider participating in this study. Please note there is no obligation for you to participate. However, should you choose to

participate, you can be assured of complete confidentiality of the information you provide during the course of the interview and that the institution will not be identified.

Further details on the aims of the research, your potential involvement and matters concerning confidentiality and data storage are detailed in the attached participant information sheet and consent form.

If you would like to participate in this study or would like further information, please contact me by return to this email address or you can contact me on my mobile number 083-897-1513.

Many thanks and kind regards,

Roslyn Reddy

Tel: 083-897-1513

Email: x16107152@student.ncirl.ie

Appendix 3 Information Sheet for Research Participants

How do line managers perceive their implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic? Insights from an Irish Higher Education

Institution

Participant information sheet

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study as part of a master's dissertation in Human Resource Management. To help you decide if you would like to participate or not to participate in this study, an overview of the purpose of the research, your potential involvement and matters concerning confidentiality and data storage are detailed as follows:

Who I am and what this study is about

My name is Roslyn Reddy, and I am undertaking research for a dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a MA in Human Resource Management at National College of Ireland.

This study concerns HR Devolution in an enforced remote working context. HR Devolution refers to the delegation of HR practices such as hiring, onboarding, training, development and performance management to line managers where these HR practices had been traditionally undertaken by HR Specialists. In the context of an enforced remote working environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, the objectives of this study are to:

- Explore and analyse line managers' perceptions of their HR implementation effectiveness of their devolved HR responsibilities;
- Explore and analyse the individual factors that line managers perceived as supportive or barriers to effectively implementing their devolved HR responsibilities;

- Explore and analyse the extent to which individual factors unique to enforced remote working impacted line managers' perceptions of their performance in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities.

What will taking part involve?

You will be invited to take part in a semi-structured interview lasting between 45 minutes to one hour via Zoom. However, an in-person interview can also be arranged for your convenience. Your permission to record the audio of the interview will be sought to support transcription of the interview. You may decline to answer any questions for any reason and you may stop the interview and withdraw from the interview at any stage.

The interviews will cover an array of topics to address the research aims such as your perceptions of your role and your HR related responsibilities; your competencies, motivation and opportunity to implement their devolved HR responsibilities; individual factors unique to the COVID-19 pandemic; your views on your devolved HR responsibilities, your views on your effectiveness in implementing your devolved HR responsibilities while working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why have you been invited to take part?

This study seeks to understand the subjective perspectives of individual line managers who were employed in a line management capacity working remotely for this Higher Education Institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. A convenience sampling approach has been applied by contacting colleagues known to the researcher who meet the criteria for participation.

Do you have to take part?

Participating in this research is voluntary. You have the right to refuse participation, refuse to answer any question and withdraw at any time without any consequence.

What are the possible benefits and risks of taking part?

The aspiration for this study is to contribute to best practice and guidance for managing future crises impacting the workforce (such as further government mandated enforced working from home arising from outbreaks of disease, potential fuel crises or other disruptive events) potentially informing organisational factors in support of effective implementation of devolved HR responsibilities in such a context and extend the HR Devolution literature on HR implementation in a remote working context.

While not the central objective of this study, the study will touch on personal feelings of motivation in relation to line managers' perceptions of their implementation effectiveness of their HR responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, it is recognised that the period of government mandated lockdowns arising from the COVID-19 pandemic was a very challenging and difficult time for individuals from a variety of perspectives cf. feelings of loneliness, depression, anxiety and grief. As such, reflecting on the period of enforced remote working may potentially lead to the resurfacing of emotions arising from that period in time. It may also cause discomfort for participants to share potentially difficult experiences in the workplace, albeit in a remote working context.

The researcher will remain cognisant of these factors during the interview process and will monitor for any signs of distress and will stop the interview if a participant becomes distressed.

The researcher will follow up with all participants following the interview to debrief following the interview. If in the event that the discussion that took place during the semi-structured

interviews negatively impacted any participant's well-being, the researcher will work with the participant to seek professional support.

Will taking part be confidential?

The HEI will not be identified in the study. Information shared by participants during the interviews will remain confidential. No personal or identifiable information will be included in the dissertation.

However, if during the interview process information is disclosed that the researcher strongly believes may pose a serious risk of harm or danger to either the participant or another individual (e.g., physical, emotional or sexual abuse, concerns for child protection, rape, self-harm, suicidal intent or criminal activity) or if a serious crime has been committed, it will be reported to the relevant authorities.

How will information you provide be recorded, stored and protected?

Permission will be sought from participants to record the interview. Signed consent forms and audio recordings of the interview recordings will be retained in password protected files on the researcher's personal laptop; no other individuals will have access to the computer or the files. These data will be retained until the exam board confirms the results of the dissertation in October 2022.

All identifying information in transcripts of interviews will be anonymised. This data will be stored using identification codes and placed in a password protected file on the researcher's personal laptop computer; no other individuals will have access to the computer or the files. This data will be retained for two years after the exam board has taken place confirming the

award of this degree. Under freedom of information legalisation, you are entitled to access the information you have provided at any time.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of this research will be incorporated into the dissertation as described in this information sheet and which will be submitted to National College of Ireland in partial fulfilment of the requirements of an MA in Human Resource Management.

Who should you contact for further information?

Should you wish to receive any additional information or ask any question concerning this research, please contact me through my National College of Ireland email address at x16107152@student.ncirl.ie or by 083-897-1513. Alternatively, you may contact my dissertation supervisor, Rachel Doherty: rachel.doherty@ncirl.ie.

Thank you for your time.

Roslyn Reddy

Appendix 4 Consent form
Consent to participate 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 taking part in a semi-structured interview lasting between 45 minutes to one hour via Zoom or at the convenience of the participant, in-person. Participants will be asked a number of questions concerning their perceived effectiveness in implementing their devolved HR responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 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 reporting the results of this research in the dissertation, 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 the resultant dissertation for this study. Such extracts will not appear in published papers or conference presentations.

- 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 protected files on the researcher's personal laptop. Only the researcher will have access to the laptop and the files. These data will be retained until the exam board confirms the results of the dissertation in October 2022.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years after the exam board has taken place confirming the award of this degree.
- I understand that under freedom of information legislation, 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.

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

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

Signature of researcher

Date

Roslyn Reddy, MA HRM Dissertation Researcher

Tel: 083-897-1513

Email: x16107152@student.ncirl.ie

Rachel Doherty, Dissertation Supervisor, National College of Ireland

Email: rachel.doherty@ncirl.ie