

# Survey provides window into HR practice & thinking in a time of crisis

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**“Remote working and responding to the impact of Covid-19 are the top two priorities facing HR for the coming two years,” according to a new comprehensive survey on HR practices in Ireland. Meanwhile, 46% of HR respondents believe that employees should have a statutory right to request remote working.**

The latest survey on HR Practices in Ireland, conducted by the CIPD in conjunction with the Kemmy Business School, provides an important picture of the central issues facing the HR profession at this time of crisis.

The survey recorded 426 responses, 65% from the private sector, 28% from public sector organisations, with the remaining from the not-for-profit sector.

*46% of HR professionals agree that employees should have a statutory right to request remote working*

The findings provide indicators of key issues emerging for HR, most notably in regard to the impact of Covid-19, such as the emergence of remote working and longer term workforce planning. Decisions on these sorts of issues have to be made in the context of economic uncertainty, associated not just with Covid-19 but also as result of Brexit.

The highest organisational priorities were found to be responding to the impact of Covid-19 (45%), responding to economic uncertainty (34%), and remote working (29%). “Interestingly, there tended to be little variation in these priorities, irrespective of organisational size, revealing perhaps convergence in the issues facing organisations in today’s marketplace”, the survey report says.

But it says these priorities “contrast starkly with the priorities recorded in previous years”, which tended to focus far more on aspects of leadership development, talent management and employee engagement. This indicates a shift from a long-term to more short-term focus due to the upheaval brought about by Covid-19.

Meanwhile, CIPD says that in terms of organisational performance, “we would expect to see a strong link between organisational priorities and HR’s own priority areas”. The results indicate this is the case.

## **FLEXIBLE & REMOTE**

Almost half (47%) of all respondent organisations have between 71% and 100% of employees working remotely. “There now appears to be an acceptance of the ability of employees to work remotely, with over one quarter (26%) ... indicating that they expect their employees to continue working remotely in the long term and 17% indicating a reduction in office space usage in the future”, the survey finds.

A majority indicated they will use a blended approach, with some on-site element combined included.

Asked if employees should have a statutory right to request remote working, a significant number (46%) indicated that employees should have such a statutory right. "Taken together this all indicates a likely shift in the way organisations will work in the future", it says.

## **48% - PRODUCTIVITY BOOST**

Regarding a concern previously expressed about the possible negative impact of remote working on productivity, the figures "allay this concern in that overall respondent organisations indicated that productivity either increased (48%) or remained steady at pre-pandemic levels (21%)".

"Given the demands of Covid-19 on the management of people in a remote environment", on-line training tools recorded the highest increase in usage (41%) across organisations of all sizes, with on-line mental health programmes (37%) and on-line employee assistance programmes (32%) also showing substantial increases.

But CIPD cautions there are challenges associated with remote working, such as supporting employee wellbeing (71%) teamwork and collaboration (53%) and innovation (51%).

## **POLICIES DEFICIT**

Given the numbers working remotely, however, CIPD says it is surprising that over one third of respondents have not developed a policy on remote working (36%).

Additionally, almost half state their line managers are not supported/trained to manage remote workers. These would both seem to be critical steps for HR to take to ensure employees can work effectively while working remotely.

To enable remote working, 89% provided essential IT equipment such as laptops, while only one third provided non-essential IT equipment such as printers. Just under 50% provided office equipment such as desks.

45% indicated that they conducted health and safety assessments of remote working stations. Only a minority provided financial support for working from home (9%) and of those that did, €3.20 per day was the most common amount.

Respondents indicated that their organisations plan to adopt blended remote/on-site working in the long term, with no significant difference between public and private sector.

## **"CULTURE" IMPACTED**

"Organisational culture" is one area that may have been impacted by the move to remote working. Some 37% of respondents indicated that this was negatively impacted and 30% indicated there has been no change. However, almost one-third have reported a positive change.

Did respondents actively maintain or embed organizational culture since the start of Covid-19? The majority indicated that they have increased all types of communication, with many recording an investment in wellbeing initiatives.

Childcare and caring responsibilities emerged as a key issue, with 79% agreeing that this caused problems for people working remotely and 64% indicating that caring responsibilities were posing obstacles for people returning to work onsite.

Meanwhile, 52% indicated that this had affected productivity and 50% reported that supervisors/managers had to redistribute work among staff to facilitate caring responsibilities. The childcare issue affected female workers to a greater extent, with 48% expressing the view that females were more negatively affected than men.

Moreover, 19% indicated that there had been a significant increase in female workers taking leave to fulfil caring responsibilities, with 44% indicating there had been a small increase. 40% indicated that there had been a small increase in men taking leave in this regard.

Asked if caring responsibilities would affect career advancement, the results indicated a split between those who felt it would (45%) and those who feel it wouldn't (52%).

Lack of visibility/exposure as a result of remote working emerged as a "significant issue", with 64% of respondents agreeing that this 'definitely/ probably' would affect career advancement. 63% identified a lack of mentoring opportunities as significant and 59% indicated "a lack of opportunity" due to the current situation.

The results are more positive for graduates, with more respondents indicating that graduate intake will likely not be affected (52%) than those that indicate it will (40%). But the latter is a sizeable proportion.

## **DIVERSITY & INCLUSION**

"As with the 2020 report", the survey report says, the 2021 results indicate that organisations go beyond a compliance approach (adhering to legislative requirements) to diversity and inclusion. A majority of the respondents say they actively work to create inclusive organisation cultures and incorporate diversity/inclusion into recruitment and retention strategies. Encouragingly, 23% of respondents have appointed a diversity officer - up 5% on last year.

While it presents challenges in terms of wellbeing, remote working emerged as something that is seen to facilitate diversity and inclusion. It is a form of work that can be "conducive to increasing access to work for people with disabilities and for people with caring responsibilities".

Thus while remote working "may have been thrust of organisations", it has resulted in some positive outcomes. "Less positive is the continuing low percentage of respondents who indicate that they engage in diversity oriented management development at the most senior levels ... and less than half provide training and support for line managers in this regard", the CIPD cautions. Respondents indicated that diversity and inclusion awareness and training was continuing through the use of online apps, and webinars.

## **WELLBEING**

Stress and mental health emerge as a concern, issues that were also highlighted in the their 2020 survey. But CIPDS says it is perhaps a positive sign that employees feel that they can report mental health issues and feel supported.

The figures for absenteeism are said to be "somewhat surprising", given the pandemic situation and "the pressure that many employees are under". Comparing this year's survey with the

previous two years “reveals that reported absenteeism has remained broadly stable with a slight decrease towards lower levels”.

43% of organisations reported that absenteeism had decreased during the Covid-19 period. Where it is occurring, a major cited cause of certified absenteeism is Covid-19 related illness (54%), followed by mental health issues (37%) acute medical conditions and stress related illness.

Regarding statutory sick pay – the government is planning its introduction - the vast majority of respondents already had a scheme in place that covers at least two weeks that provides some top up pay.

## **ADDING VALUE?**

When it comes to HR and organisational issues, the issue of HR’s ‘Ability to Add Value to the Business’ was examined.

Areas identified include: championing diversity (87%); enhances the employee experience (84%); contributes to the strategic direction of the organisation (84%); provided evidence-based insights for decision making (81%); and leads change effectively (80%).

These results are based on respondents who either agreed or strongly agreed.

The highest level of disagreement with where HR can add value was found in how HR can influence a people centred approach to technology (over 29% disagreed that this was being achieved). CIPD observes that experts advocate for a human-in-command approach to technology, to enhance work rather than be controlled by it.

CIPD comments that it is “of concern to see leadership development appear so low in the list as this will likely have significant consequences for the organisations’ future development and ability to deal with the challenges posed as a result of the pandemic”.

## **LINE MANAGERS**

Meanwhile, the survey indicates that a trend has continued that line managers do not appear to have enough available time to carry out the people management aspect of their role. The devolvement of HR to this group “is not working as well as it could”.

“Issues with line managers ability/willingness to implement key HR policies also appears later in this report with respect to the management of remote working, diversity and organisational well-being initiatives”, CIPD says.

## **BREXIT ISSUES**

Other highlights include:

- On-line training tools recorded the highest increase in usage (41%) across organisations of all sizes, with on-line mental health programmes (37%) and on-line employee assistance programmes (32%) also showing substantial increases.

- There has also been an increase in the use of HR analytics tools (40%) and automated HR processes (40%).
- Regarding Brexit, the highest number of responses (50%) was in regards to concerns around the transfer of personal data outside of the EU, with free movement of labour between Ireland and the UK the second highest concern.
- The future of UK employees in Ireland, and challenges of attracting talent from the UK were also identified as issues. 7% of respondents identified other issues of concern, in particular issues around procurement of goods and services, and importation was raised.
- Some indicated have established a Brexit management committee where HR is represented by senior HR Leaders.