Sustainable Leadership for a Post-Digital Age

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UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK IRELAND | Kemmy Business School

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UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK IRELAND | Kemmy Business School

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FOREWORD

This ICBE Skillnet study, the fourth collaboration with the WorkFutures Lab at the Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick, provides a clear picture of the importance of the leader's role in steering an organisation in an uncertain environment, but most importantly we get to hear what leaders themselves have to say about being a leader in Ireland today.

The research encompassed two phases. The first phase was a broad-scale survey capturing data on leaders experiences of work. The second phase was a more in-depth analysis into these experiences. The methodology was very powerful - consisting of a series of forums followed by person-to-person interviews, where the focus was on the leaders themselves, how they developed leadership skills and personal reflections on their path to becoming a leader. Many spoke afterwards about the unburdening effect of the group session. Hearing from peers that they had similar concerns, fears and challenges was described by participants as insightful and empowering. The insights and learnings shared, point to a need for a safe environment for leaders to learn from each other. This is an outcome on which the ICBE Business Excellence Skillnet is currently collaborating with the Kemmy Business School and will be realised in 2023.

This study shows that fundamental changes are occurring in the way leaders now lead. A more holistic, human-centred perspective is prevailing, showing all the hallmarks of a new era of sustainable leadership emerging in Irish organisations. Clearly, new skills need to be developed to embed that change. Digital transformation, organisational culture, employee diversity, as well as global concerns, such as climate, energy and the economy, are challenges facing leaders today. It is not surprising then, to see that leaders acknowledge the hard work and personal risk associated with leadership roles and the potential negative as well as positive outcomes it can bring. Sustaining current leaders and succession planning for the future are a key concern.

On a positive note, new opportunities have arisen in this post-covid environment. Leaders can be located anywhere in the world, and therefore, Irish leaders can position themselves to take leading roles globally. Ensuring leaders are ready to position both themselves and the Irish organisation globally requires significant collaboration and the ability to skillfully narrate successes. Strong technology and data literacy skills have become the norm for leaders today. However, this research highlights the need for skills around self-regulation, emotional regulation, reflective practice, harnessing social capital and the ability to connect in a hybrid world. It also explains how being a leader is very challenging and that leadership development must start early in an employee's career and never ends. Leadership is a journey, not a destination.

We are delighted with this further advancement of our Future of Work research series and would like to acknowledge our partnership with Skillnet Ireland and thank them for their continued support and commitment to ICBE Skillnet research.

We also wish to thank the research team particularly, Dr Sarah Kieran who has tirelessly led this research series in the Kemmy Business School WorkFutures Lab, UL.

Professor Eamonn Murphy (Emeritus) | Managing Director
Vivienne Kiernan | ICBE Customer Relations Manager
Irish Centre for Business Excellence (ICBE)

Commissioned by the ICBE Business Excellence Skillnet, this research was undertaken by the Kemmy Business School Work Futures Lab, University of Limerick.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When it comes to the forces that shift and shape the business landscape and contemporary organisation, we are witnessing many new dimensions and uncertainties. Advancing technologies are moving beyond discussion on the need for digital transformation, to conversations on the metaverse and our steady progression towards a post-digital age. We no longer talk about Industry 4.0 but grapple with the broader, richer concept of Society 5.0 [1, 2]. This 'super smart' endeavour seeks to strike a new balance of technology, economies and society through a complete integration of cyber and physical spaces. A complete transformation of our way of life into a better, more sustainable world is envisioned. A world that finally overcomes 'chronic social challenges' by leveraging Industry 4.0 for the benefit of us all; our needs and our wants [1].

However, how can we consider a post-digital world of tomorrow when we are still grappling with the, still frequently pre-digitalised, problems of today? Which organisations will survive? **Which organisations will make a real difference? Most importantly, who will be leading these organisations?**

WHO IS GOING TO LEAD US **SAFELY** INTO OUR SHARED **FUTURE**?

Whom do we trust to create our future?

While we cannot predict the future, we can move forward by developing our understanding of the realities of leadership in Ireland today. **This study critically examines the perceptions and practices of Ireland's leaders, so that we can learn from their experiences and sustain them in their roles.** Furthermore, with their collective wisdom, we can better form Ireland's next generation of leaders.

Key Findings

The Context of Leadership:

Post pandemic, **the business landscape has fundamentally changed**. Leaders are contending with increasingly distributed and fragmented organisational structures, accelerated globalisation, increased movement within and across organisations, multi-generational workforces and other, exaggerated dimensions to well-known technological, economic, environmental and socio-political forces. The need to maintain competitiveness and efficiency remains a key priority. **Ensuring sites remain strategically relevant amidst the growing trend of de-globalisation is of particular concern.** Hybrid work post-pandemic is having mixed results. It can lead to increased inclusivity and connectivity for leaders based in Ireland but it can also prove harder to influence and negotiate with reduced opportunities to sell an idea or secure investment.

Leader Identity, Impact and Risk:

Leader identity in Ireland is very strong. Leaders place great emphasis on the criticality of their role; vital to the bottom line, key to overcoming economic challenges, and even more impactful than external business forces. However, today's leaders believe we do not fully understand how leadership is practiced, either for aspiring leaders or for those already in leadership roles seeking to better their skills. Furthermore, they feel increasingly under scrutiny. While the position of leadership always came with scrutiny and a need for transparency, **leaders feel that in a digital world, they are constantly in the public eye and the consequences of their actions are under inspection in a more far-reaching way, resulting in leadership becoming increasingly risky.**

Leading Sustainably:

Leaders point to a need at an organisational level to re-examine the very concept of what leadership means. This is in part due to the pandemic, through which leaders witnessed extremes of change over a short period. Leaders find that the expectations of younger generations contrast significantly with older generations. The perception is that the mind-set of some leaders, 'what worked for us, will work for them' is redundant. Newer generations are reluctant to 'claim' leadership roles in the traditional sense and expect a more balanced and holistic way of leading. However, what new style to embrace is unclear. **Many refer to older 'transactional' or 'autocratic' styles of leadership, as being replaced with a more holistic, human-centric approach where the wellbeing of employees has become more central. This type of leadership can be referred to as Sustainable Leadership.**

Leading Hybrid Organisations:

Leaders believe that no organisation is exempt from making decisions on the time or place of work. Hybrid work is no longer confined to virtual-global work but is now inherently a local phenomenon. Leaders express high levels of satisfaction with hybrid working, which creates a more sustainable working environment with greater flexibility and improved work life balance. However, **leaders feel the essence of leadership is being visible to those around you and as such, having to lead virtually negatively impacts on one's ability to lead effectively. Leaders are struggling to operationalise Flexible Working Practices (FWPs) in their organisations.** There is no clear 'definition' of what they consist of, what they look like, or why they are needed. Adopting a 'one size fits all' approach to FWPs will not suffice but a sense of structure is required. Furthermore, as spatial and temporal boundaries within organisations dissolve, leadership has become more fluid and dynamic and less constrained by formal hierarchies. Leaders recognise and call on their organisations for a shift to a **more distributed and horizontal form of leadership.** As boundaries around time, space and hierarchies become more fluid, it can be a catalyst for creativity, innovation and growth – but it can also create challenges including maintaining a culture of connectivity and balancing the need for flexibility with the demands of the organisation.

Future Skills for Leaders:

Sustainable leadership requires a central focus on cognitive and relational skills, often referred to as human-power skills. There is a significant emphasis on the need for **compassion and empathy.** Putting people first is the most successful way to lead organisations into the future. Thus, there is an emphasis on developing humility as a leader and the realisation that, even if you are the CEO, you need the assistance of others to succeed. Therefore, **one's ability to build trust, to connect and to coach is critical.** To achieve this type of shared leadership, emotional regulation is key. Maintaining perspective and self-reflection skills helps here, but self-regulation to ensure the time and space for both is important, especially in the context of hybrid work where online working can prove quite demanding and draining.

Developing Future Leaders:

All of these skills need to operate in an interconnected manner if they are to result in a high level of leader performance. Leaders feel these skills cannot be 'taught' but are cultivated through one's leadership journey, as much through the failures as the successes. **Experiential leader formation, ideally among peers is critical. Leaders stress the importance of having a strong support network particularly in adverse times;** a network of like-minded people devoid of personalised, 'power-based' or 'organisationally political' criticism. Sponsorship, mentoring and coaching is critical to leader formation. Timing is crucial, too early in a leader's career and one might be too immature to recognise its significance, too late, and an important opportunity for development is missed. Self-awareness and 'identity work' through personality profiling and critical feedback is similar and again the timing is important through different stages of development. **The need to experiment and 'try on' different leadership styles in a safe space is very impactful.**

Key Recommendations

Seek Organisational Awareness: Organisations need to increase their understanding of the hard work of leadership as complex, uncertain and risky. Leaders are under constant scrutiny, working to excess and many at risk of burnout. These issues require urgent attention in order to increase the next generation of leaders' willingness to step up to lead.

Acknowledge the Paradigm Shift to Sustainable Leadership: Sustainable Leadership is a more holistic, human-centred approach that always places people first. While many organisations espouse this philosophy it is not always practiced and, while many leaders espouse this philosophy, they fail to deliver. Organisations need to develop new strategies to build a culture of sustainable leadership.

Sustainability or Stand Aside: It's important that organisations identify those with a natural affinity, the skills for, and belief in the concept of Sustainable Leadership. We are currently on the crest of a wave of new thinking and, given the challenges current leaders highlight, it is critical that it is not allowed wane. These new leaders must be allowed engage as they deem appropriate and more transactional leaders must stand aside.

Leadership is a Journey of Formation: Organisations need to build a culture of leader and leadership formation. This formation is protracted and cannot be accelerated. The destination is not always to move up the organisation's hierarchy, much of today's leadership is shared. However, leading sustainably is self-perpetuating - Sustainable Leaders beget sustainable leadership capability across the organisation.

Leader Formation is Experiential and Sponsored: The development of Sustainable Leaders is experiential. It is practiced over time but there are specific things HR can do to support this formation. Mentoring and coaching is key, with a number of mentors and coaches needed for different growth-stages and job situations but sponsorship is particularly powerful in ensuring emerging leaders step-up to lead. A more formal sponsorship relationship, centred on loyalty to the individual being developed, advocacy for their endeavours (successes and failures), and seeking out opportunities for them to experience new activities and try out new behaviours is required.

Leader Networks Sustain Leaders: One of the most impactful methods of leader formation is through peer-based experiences. Critical feedback from peers and organisational behaviour or subject matter experts is important. Experiences removed from the bias of organisational norms, politics and power can have a particular impact in both forming and maintaining leaders.

Build Frames around Hybrid and Flexible Working Practices: Diversity and inclusion continues to be an issue in Irish organisations. It is suggested here that organisations consider 'frames' for FWPs and Hybrid Working to ensure as much equity as different types of jobs and situations allow. It is more challenging to lead in a flexible and hybrid world of work. Such frames are critical for leaders to allow them act sustainably for all, including themselves given the demanding nature of virtual work and leadership in a virtual workplace.

Section

2

Introduction

2. INTRODUCTION

This important study on the future of leadership in Ireland was commissioned by the ICBE Business Excellence Skillnet and undertaken by the KBS WorkFutures Lab, at the University of Limerick.

The study builds on three previous research projects exploring the world of work in a contemporary context:
• Future of Work Now: The Impact of Digitalisation on Global Business Services (June 2018),
• Leader Reflections on the Impact of Covid-19 (January 2021),
• Seeking Safe Spaces: Graduate Transitions into a New World of Work (June 2021).

Throughout this research journey, the criticality of the leader role in guiding organisations through strategic change and business uncertainty, and the need for increased leadership capacity across the organisation, emerge as important issues in need of further exploration. **Previous studies highlight how many leaders in Ireland struggle to understand what their role should be into the future.** There is clear evidence that leaders need to be better supported. Furthermore, leaders express concern as to how they can in turn support and develop the next generation of leaders, with many conveying serious disquiet around their organisation's lack of leadership succession.

"The challenge is, what's worked in the past, is not necessarily going to work in the future. Now we have more questions than answers regarding what the last two years has uncovered."

James Herbert, Global Operations Strategy Director, Boston Scientific

"I thought, I am in charge here, this is what leadership is about. It's not just the good times; it's the hard, tough days, when you always feel you're a little bit on your own."

Mary Ann Fleming, President, PennEngineering Europe

"What do you have to be to be a leader now? You have to be comfortable with not following the path of previous leaders. In fact, you need to figure out what you need to break. Understanding that you don't have to do it that way anymore and in fact you will be a better leader for it and the leaders of the future will be better leaders too."

Carolan Lennon, Country Lead, Salesforce Ireland.

To this end, this extensive study on Sustainable Leadership for a Post-Digital Age was conceived; **Table I** outlines the Research Objectives and Outcomes.

The research encompassed **two phases.**

1 **Phase I - Profiling Leaders in Ireland,** undertaken during the summer of 2021, sought to investigate the profile of leaders and form an understanding of their role and career perceptions in this age of digital transformation. It was conducted through an online survey comparing 299 leader responses within a larger group of 1035 people working in Ireland.

2 **Phase II - Understanding Leaders and Leadership in Ireland,** undertaken from late 2021 to mid-2022, comprised 8 focus groups with 72 leaders and then follow-up, in-depth interviews with 55 leaders. This phase sought to explore the themes emerging from Phase I with a particular emphasis on the journey into leadership, perceptions of future leadership skills, experiences of leadership development, and thoughts on new approaches to leader development into the future.

The Business Problem

We need to rethink leadership.
Due to continued and increased pressure on climate, technological, economic, political and social fronts, the way we have led in the past is not necessarily future fit.

Covid-19 has accelerated the trend for digitally enabled virtual/dispersed business models started by advancing globalisation and digitisation; therefore we need to understand the 'what and how' of leadership in Ireland today.

How do leaders **'connect and learn'** to create the environment for teams and individuals across the organisation to 'connect and learn' in order to build the organisational capabilities necessitated by this digital age and what comes next?

Research Objectives

1. **Understand** the nature and context of leadership through digital disruption.

2. **Identify** critical leadership styles & skills that best fit this context.

3. **Explore** embedding strategies for new leadership styles & skills.

4. **Understand** the impact of virtual global and hybrid work models on broader organisational learning.

5. **Identify learning** potential and preferences across formal/structured and informal/experiential learning approaches at leadership and team levels.

Envisaged Research Outcomes

1. **New insights** into what it is like to lead in Ireland today.

2. A view 'beyond' the Covid-19 pandemic, better understanding its **longer-term impact on digital transformation**, work design and work policy.

3. Clear **understanding of critical leader skills required** in current and future contexts.

4. Some understanding of the **learning approaches needed** to develop these skills.

5. New insights into the **breadth and depth of learning potential** in contemporary organisations across learning events, activities, technologies and preferences.

6. Specific understanding of the **opportunities presented by virtual/hybrid work** models e.g. building dynamic organisational capabilities through global networks and learning events, technology-enhanced learning, learning as curation and co-creation.

7. Specific **understanding of the challenges presented by virtual/hybrid work** models e.g. managing dispersed teams, mirroring/maintaining experiential learning strategies, nurturing social dynamics, ensuring inclusion.

Research Objectives and Outcomes

Leaders need to understand the impact of virtual global and hybrid work models on organisational learning

Section

3

**Leaders And
Leadership:
Summary
Insights To Date**

The role of the leader and broader leadership capability is one of the most critical yet often most elusive success factors for an organisation. Until recently the study of leadership resided within hierarchical and formal structures where decision making was centralised and leadership was conceptualised in individualistic terms - leaders possessed certain traits that classified them as great leaders. The idea that leadership exists within one individual no longer resonates with the realities of today's work environments and a revised, more integrative perspective of leadership has emerged. As leadership theory has grown, it has become evident that there are many appropriate and effective ways to lead, and the multitude of theories including transformational, authentic, servant and distributive leadership theories reflect the broad and extensive work that has emerged in this area. One of the most current leadership theories to challenge the traditional paradigm is to view leadership as a social process where leadership occurs as a 'community of practice' where all members play an active role in leadership. This view aligns with the idea that "the most appropriate leader is one who can lead others to lead themselves" [3]. Thus, leadership exists within each individual, and is not confined to the limits of formal position or hierarchy. At the heart of this definition of leadership is that for leaders to be most successful, they need to facilitate each individual in the process of leading himself or herself.

Contemporary Perspectives of Leadership

Authentic Leadership:

One of the more recent conceptualisations of leadership is that of being one's true self as a leader [4, 5]. The authentic leader focuses on universal values, addresses real threats, and develops followers into leaders [6]. **Authentic leaders lead with self-awareness, transparency, honesty, a strong moral core and an outlook that encourages similar authenticity in their followers.** This authenticity emphasises owning one's personal experiences, preferences and beliefs, thoughts and emotions, needs, and wants, being accountable to oneself and one's followers [7, 8].

Ethical Leadership:

A style related to authentic leadership, though less focussed on being one's true self, is that of ethical leadership [9]. Ethical leadership centres on normatively appropriate organisational and personal behaviour in one's actions and relationships and the **promotion of ethical conduct through transparent, two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making.** Some argue this is a truer representation of leadership given the challenge in measuring exactly how authentic a leader is being. It is possible to 'perform' authenticity to manipulate followers on the one hand and then, on the other, some would purport there is little space to be one's true self in many contemporary organisations [10] .

Positive leadership "recipes" offer hope and inspiration in terms of idealized role models in the midst of what is often a messy and ambiguous practitioner daily work life [10] .

Servant Leadership:

Servant leaders seek to empower and develop their followers, providing direction from a place of humility, acceptance, stewardship and service. Unlike authentic leadership however, their motivation is deeper than being true to oneself but a desire to be self-aware and able to self-regulate in order to serve others from a place of altruism. Servant leaders are authentic not for authenticity's sake, but rather because they have a higher calling to serve and make a positive difference for others [13].

Shared Leadership:

This perspective positions the value of organisational sense making as an effort to understand the organisational leadership capabilities that can define success and failure, and sees leadership as a shared activity [14]. **It is an interactive process of influence and developing shared understandings between individuals and groups as they strive to lead one another to achieve organisational goals** [15]. This approach is juxtaposed to traditional top-down leadership where influence is derived from a formal position of power and status [16].

Sustainable Leadership:

There is an increasing interest in the concept of sustainable leadership [18] where organisations are open systems, acknowledging the context and environment in which they operate, in particular in relation to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. **Sustainable leaders seek to improve the lives of all stakeholders while still creating present and future profits [19]; the triple bottom line of planet, people and profit if you will.** They believe in capacity building and creating sustainable change to ensure successful outcomes into the longer-term, as opposed to the more transactional approach to short-term gains [20]. Sustainable leaders are typically open-minded, they act with integrity, communicate transparently, genuinely care for organisational members and demonstrate ethical behaviour in all things [21, 22].

It is important to move management theory beyond the principles of agency theory—with its assumption of the homo economicus who is individualistic, opportunistic, and self-serving— to governance based on viewing individuals as pro-organisational, self-actualising, and trustworthy [17].

The greater issue arguably is 'not which leadership theory or model is "right" (which may never be settled definitively), but how to develop leaders and leadership as effectively and efficiently as possible [23].

Leadership Development:

Leader development is a multi-layered, complex and dynamic process that involves a broad range of activities and interactions consistently over a protracted timeframe. Evidence shows that it takes 10 years of dedicated practice to become expert in anything [24], consequently leadership development is better positioned as a leadership formation. Believing oneself to have leadership qualities and having a desire to apply them is key in developing new leaders [25]. However, stepping up to lead can incur instrumental, interpersonal and image risks [26]. Therefore, existing leaders need to acknowledge these risks while also providing the developmental space and personal support needed for future leaders to engage.

To that end, the advice sought and offered, the relationships nurtured, the positives and negatives experienced, the reflections deliberated, and the meanings made on a day-to-day basis are even more impactful in forming leaders than the formal development activities designed by the organisation. However, we do not fully understand how leadership is practiced in organisations, for aspiring leaders, for succession planning or for those already in leadership roles seeking to better their skills. Given the challenges leaders are facing into the future, this practicing and experiencing of leadership is where the 'crux of development really resides' [23].

The Future for Leaders

Leadership succession is the last challenge of leadership. It is the challenge of letting go, moving on, and planning for one's own obsolescence. Sustainable improvements are not fleeting changes that disappear when their champions have left. Sustainable leadership is not achieved by charismatic leaders whose shoes are too big to fill. Instead, it spreads beyond individuals in chains of influence that connect the actions of leaders to their predecessors and successors [27].

Today, we are grappling with business transformations and uncertainties on an almost daily basis. Given the global challenges of poverty, migration and displacement, climate change, digital disruption, economic pressures, global conflict and new social paradigms around the role of work and the impact of large corporations on their environment, it is hard to know what the future holds.

Yet these challenges are not entirely new. The accelerated pace of change, its impact on the role of leadership, and the need to respond to fundamental shifts in how we perceive employees, work and organisations has been predicted since the turn of this century [28, 29]. A new style of leadership for the 21st century is thought to require a clear vision due to increasingly uncertain business environments, higher levels of empathy to address changing stakeholder needs, and humility.

There is a view leadership will move towards the acknowledgement of one's vulnerability and humanity, with the making of mistakes an important part of the process of leading [30].

A range of studies have sought to identify leader skills for the future [31-34]. These include an increased adaptability and flexibility, a high tolerance for ambiguity, deep integrity, a sense of ethics to guide the organisation through uncertainty, and strong conceptual and strategic thinking skills. Highly collaborative with powerful communication skills, strong technology and data literacy skills are also vital as leaders now need to be able to lead increasingly diverse and dispersed teams. As such, social intelligence and inter-disciplinary knowledge is crucial. These 21st century skills need to be underpinned by deep self-awareness and learning as leaders need to be able to surface issues across divergent teams and frame strategic options, being able to risk experimentation by reframing mistakes as learning opportunities. As such, self-regulation, risk taking and a high tolerance for ambiguity is important. This shopping list of skills lays bare the stark challenge of contemporary leadership!

Then of course, the COVID 19 pandemic that peaked during 2020/22 challenged leaders in new ways. For many it highlighted the paradox inherent in leadership work. Leaders need to be resilient in the face of a number of apparent contradictions such as the balancing of rationality with empathy, stability with flexibility, the present with the future, local with global, autonomy with control, and above all have to balance the needs of the individual with the collective [35].

The realm of Working from Home and eLeadership, while not new, became a new normal. It is clear that hybrid working and other flexible working practices are here to stay.

This virtual work environment brings new challenges. In particular, issues of trust among local and dispersed virtual teams [36], changing culture and organisational behaviour necessitating new strategies [37], managing blurred work/life boundaries [38] and well-being [39]. All set against a backdrop of 'new work' known as digi-housekeeping [40] that leaders did not have to contend with previously.

At a Glance | Contemporary Perspectives of Leadership

- The role of the leader and broader leadership capability is one of the most critical yet often most elusive success factors for an organisation. Our overly-romanticised view of leadership belongs in the past and organisations need to face the reality of today's leadership challenge.

- The world of work beyond the pandemic has brought new spatial and temporal norms of work. These new work practices, when conflated with increased global and social pressures, necessitate alternative leadership styles and practices.

- Given the times we are living in, this new way of leadership needs to be sustainable in and of itself. However, it also needs to lead to more sustainable business outcomes, far exceeding those to which organisations have committed to in previous decades.

- The style and skills that brought today's leaders to the top of the organisation will not sustain them or the organisation into the future.

Collaborative and powerful communication skills, and strong technology and data literacy skills are vital as leaders now need to be able to lead increasingly diverse and dispersed teams. As such, social intelligence and inter-disciplinary knowledge is crucial.

Section

4

Research
Methodology

4.1 Survey

In the first instance, this research sought to understand the profile and role of leaders in Ireland as we emerged from the Covid 19 pandemic. A survey titled **Creating Work Futures** was conducted in June 2021 as part of a broader effort to understand the work perspectives, experiences and expectations of people working in Ireland.

The central survey instrument was Karasek's Job Content Questionnaire , which investigates critical dimensions of work characteristics and relationships such as a respondent's general perceptions of their organisation, the nature of their job, psychological demands, decision latitude, organisation supports, and relationships with their manager, colleagues and team. Critical to the global context of digital transformation and the research objectives, it also includes measures relating to technology in the workplace and perceptions of individual skill capability.

The JCQ instrument was supplemented with an indicator to identify the respondent's role. Where respondents self-identified as a leader (defined here as leading a business unit, a site, a region or leading in a global role) they were also presented with a range of questions specific to their leadership experience. Finally, a number of contextual questions were added relating to the COVID 19 pandemic and the current social and political focus on flexible working practices and future expectations of the world of work. The survey was approximately 20 minutes in length. Table I provides an overview of the key areas covered. The survey was distributed online using Qualtrics Software and promoted by the ICBE, members of the Kemmy Business School WorkFutures Lab, and across various social media channels.

Table I: Creating Work Futures Survey

Tell us about You?	Tell us about Your Job?	Tell us about Your Boss?	Tell us about Your Co-Workers	Tell us about Digital Transformation?	Tell us about Your Career?
Personal Demographics relating to Age. Gender, Sexual Orientation, Ethnicity, Caring Responsibilities, Special Needs, Education, Location, Time in Organisation, Industry Sector & Role.	Type of Work, Pace of Work, Job Motivation & Satisfaction, Task Identity & Variety, Sense of Purpose, Level of Autonomy & Influence etc.	Support, Level of Feedback, Listening, Understanding, Level of Prioritisation, Removal of Barriers to Work etc.	Support, Level of Feedback, Listening, Understanding, Level of Collaboration, Removal of Barriers to Work etc.	Advantages & Disadvantages for Work Activities & Processes, Pace of Transformation, Technology Performance Quality, Technology Skills etc.	Skill Gaps, Future Plans, Job Security, Organisational Support etc.

Perceptions of the Leadership Experience

Flexible Working Practices & The Future of Work

[1] Karasek, R., Brisson, C., Kawakami, N., Houtman, I., Bongers, P. and Amick, B., 1998. The Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ): an instrument for internationally comparative assessments of psychosocial job characteristics. Journal of occupational health psychology, 3(4), p.322. Survey Instrument available on request.

> **Informed by these survey results, the research then sought to develop a richer understanding of the experience of leadership.** Specifically, the business context, personal reflections on the journey to becoming a leader, and how leadership skills are best developed along the way.

4.2. Focus Groups

The focus groups were conducted in February and March 2022. The key objective was to gain initial insights on the experience of leading in Ireland today, to identify the longer-term impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic on digital transformation, work design and work policy, and to gain an understanding of the critical skills and learning approaches required to navigate through this new world of work. Each focus group was facilitated online by two researchers from the KBS WorkFutures Lab and consisted of 3-4 participants each. Discussions lasted approximately one hour on MS Teams. Focus groups were recorded and thematically analysed [41] across 4 researchers and a research assistant.

4.3. In-Depth Interviews

Interviews were semi structured in nature. The objective of semi-structured interviews is to enable the researcher to gather data to effectively address the research objectives whilst still allowing for some opportunity for the participant to share additional insights relevant to their personal experience.

The key objective was to gain new insights into what it is like to be a leader in Ireland today. A central focus being to identify critical skills and relevant learning approaches required for current and future leaders.

Each interview was conducted virtually via MS Teams with a researcher from the KBS WorkFutures Lab.
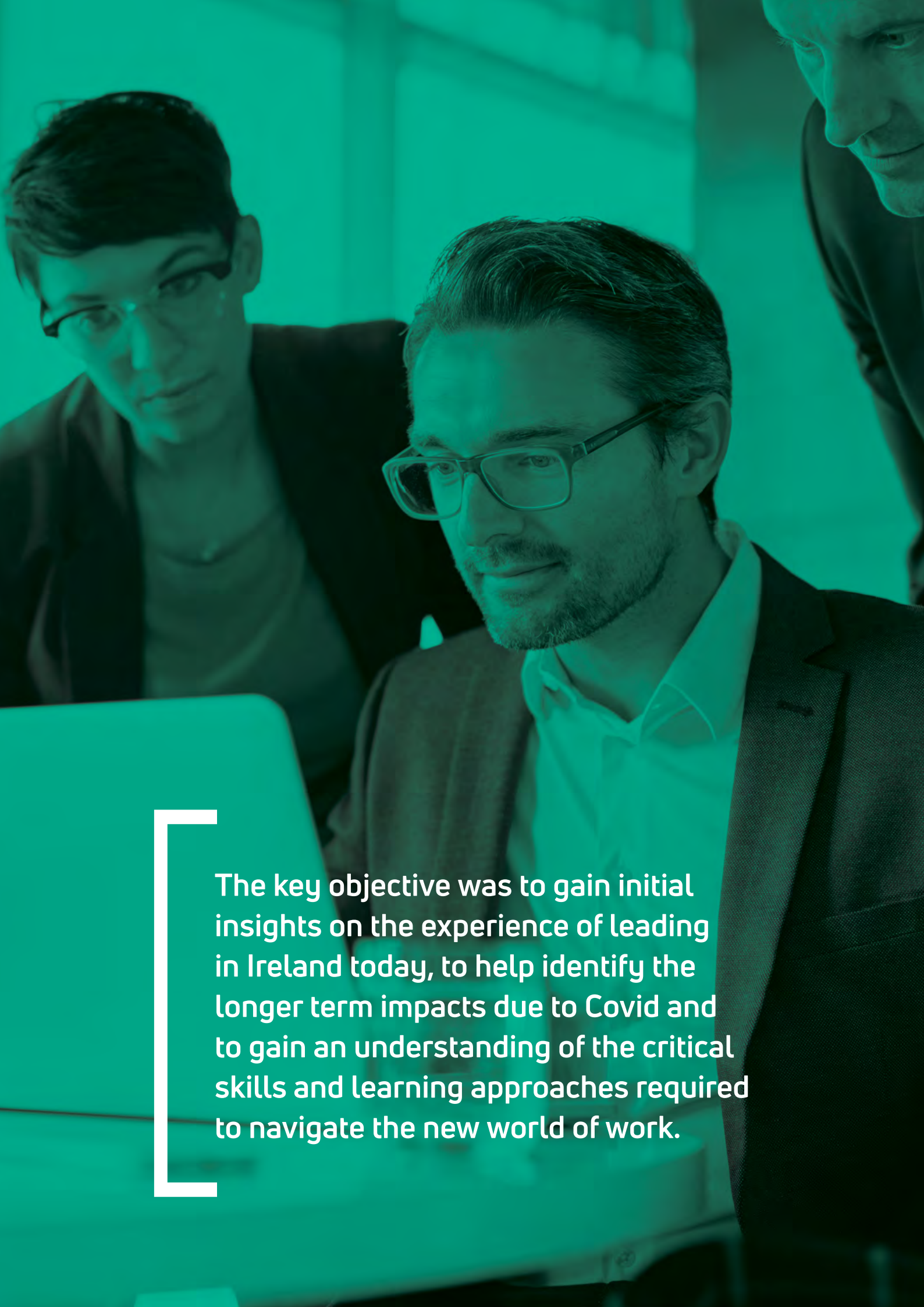
Lasting approximately 70 minutes on average, they took place between the months of March and May 2022. Interviews were recorded and thematically analysed [41] across 4 researchers and a research assistant.

The full list of questions that guided both focus groups and interviews can be found in the Appendix.

4.4. Leader Profiles

Survey Profile: Following an initial cleaning of the data the survey produced 1035 completed responses. Of these approximately 29%, 299 respondents, identified as leaders of business units, sites, regions or in global leadership roles. The breakdown of this response set is shown in Figure 1. The majority worked in Multi-National Corporations (MNCs), however the public sector, large, medium and in particular, small Irish firms are also represented in the sample as shown in Figure 2. The gender balance among the sample was largely even, however, we see a decline in the number of females in more senior leader roles, with only 39% of site, 42% of regional and 28% of global roles held by females where the while is more even at business unit levels of leadership as shown in Figure 3. Results show it is the norm (87%) for leaders to be educated to degree level. Over 58% hold post-graduate qualifications and approximately 4% hold PhDs. Furthermore, the level of education does not necessarily increase as the leadership role advances.

Focus Group/Interview Leader Profile: From an original group of 82 leaders who volunteered to participate, a final sample of 72 engaged in focus groups and, of these, 55 progressed to an in-depth interview. A significant effort was made to ensure gender diversity in the sample. However, the best that could be achieved was 64% male and 36% female. All participants identified their ethnicity as White Irish. Approximately one-third of the leader participants lead business units, one third hold site and regional lead roles, and one-third hold global roles. The majority hold leadership roles in MNCs within the MedTech, ICT and PharmaChem sectors and are working with Ireland as their home base, though commuting to an EU base was the norm for around 6%. Again, in line with the survey results, the vast majority are educated to a post-graduate level with 67% holding a graduate diploma or masters and 7% holding a PhD.

The key objective was to gain initial insights on the experience of leading in Ireland today, to help identify the longer term impacts due to Covid and to gain an understanding of the critical skills and learning approaches required to navigate the new world of work.

Figure 1: Number of Leader Respondents by Role

| Unit | Site | Region | Global |
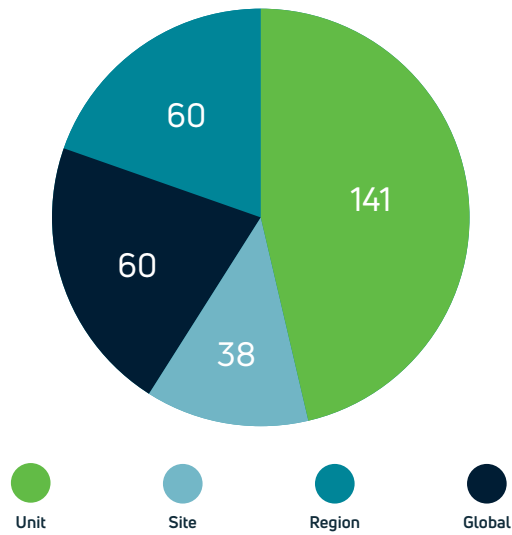
Figure 2: Leader Level by Organisational Type

| Unit | Site | Region | Global |
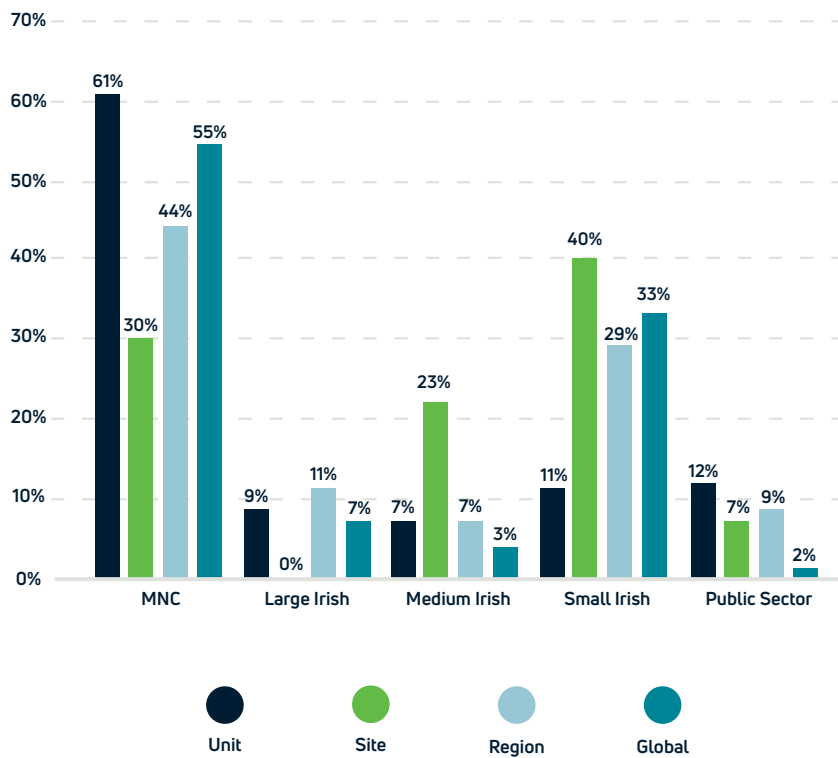
Figure 3: Leader Level by Gender

Legend: ● M ● F ● NB
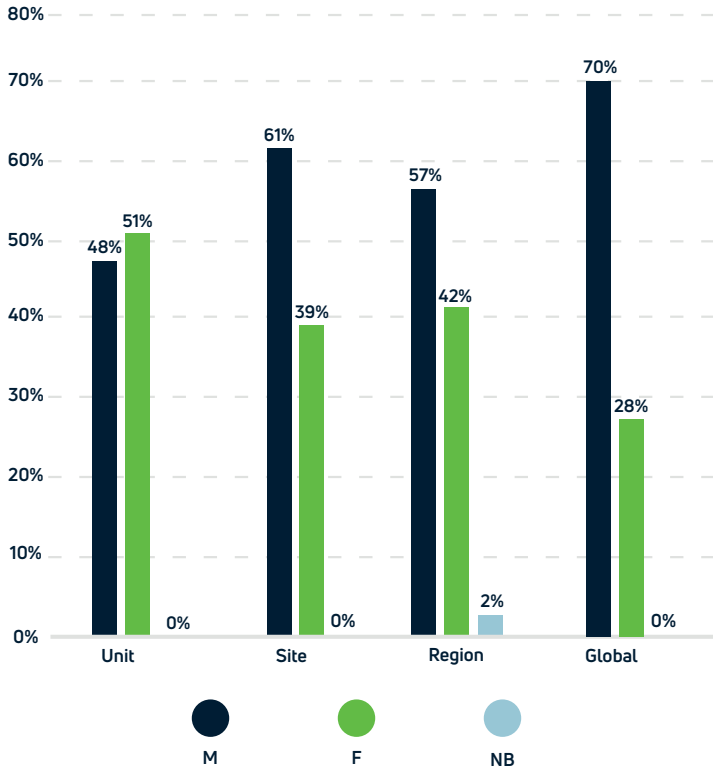
Figure 4: Leaders by Industry Sector

Legend: ● Health ● Education ● MedDev ● PharmaChem ● Finance ● ICT ● Consultancy ● Other
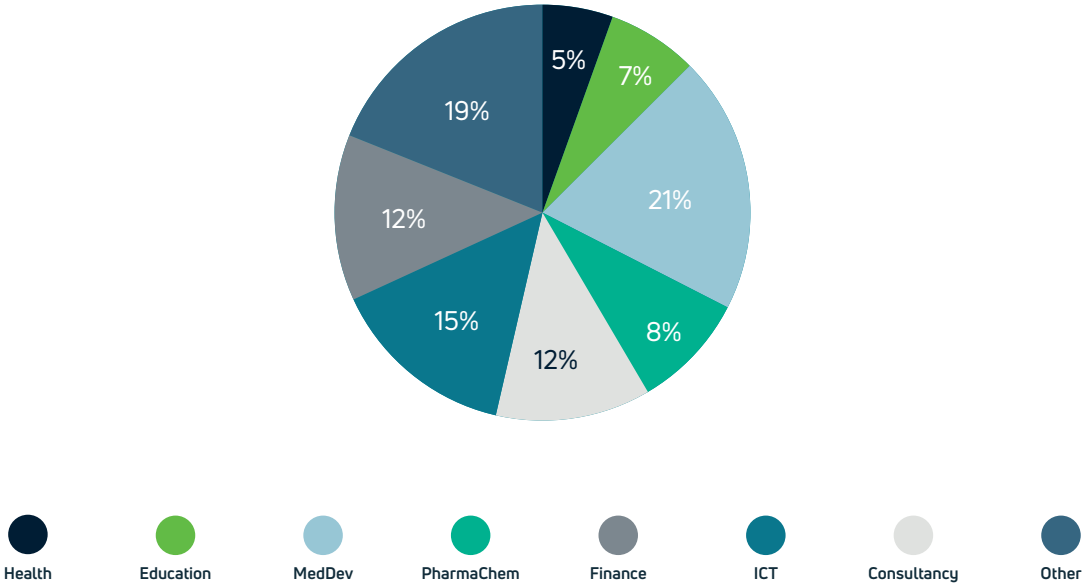
Section

5

Profiling Leaders
In Ireland Today

As we now consider the research findings, in this section we employ the survey results **to provide a high-level picture of leader experiences of work in Ireland today.**

5.1. Leader Working Hours

Leaders typically work between 40-50 hours per week with 21% working between 50-60 hours and 5% working greater than 60 hours per week. When we look at hours worked across different organisational sectors we find that some sectors are more likely to stretch their leaders with Health, Education, Medical Devices, Pharma Chem, Finance, ICT and Retail all requiring the majority of their leaders to work over the legislated 40 hour working week. Of the 21% working between 50 and 60 hours per week, the Education sector is the highest at 31%. In Retail, this becomes exceptionally high with 60% of leaders working over 60 hours per week. Men in leadership roles tend to work marginally longer hours each week than women, see Figure 5.

Figure 5: Leader Hours Worked

<20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60
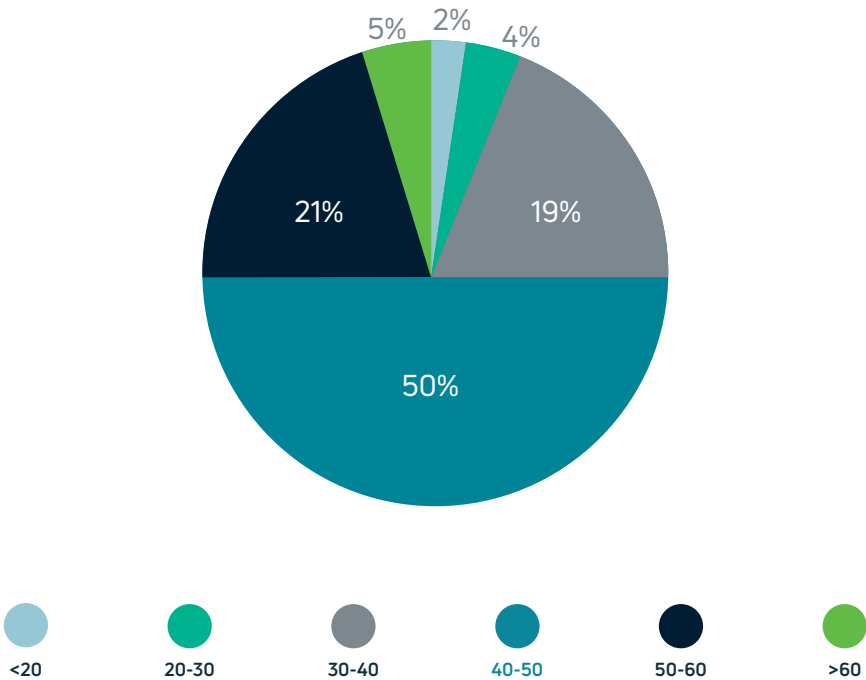
Figure 6: Hours Worked by Gender
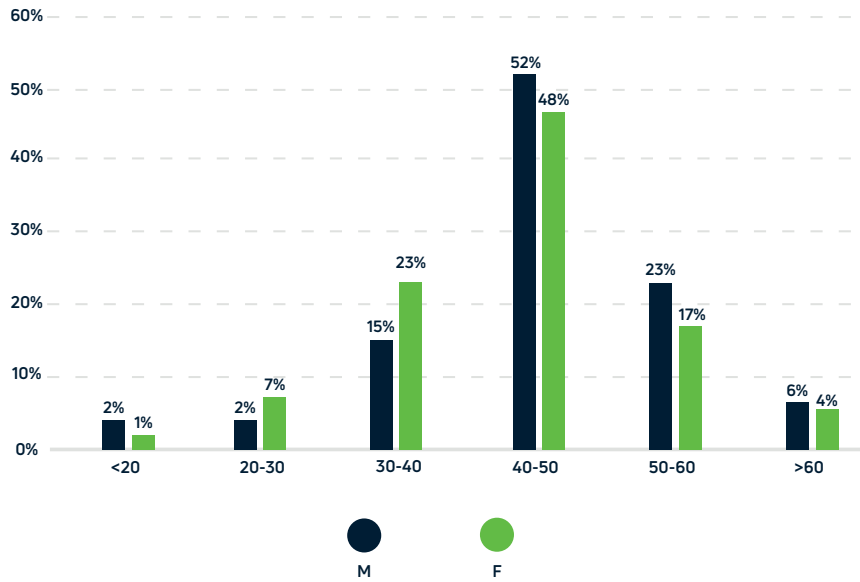
Figure 7: Hours by Key Organisational Sectors
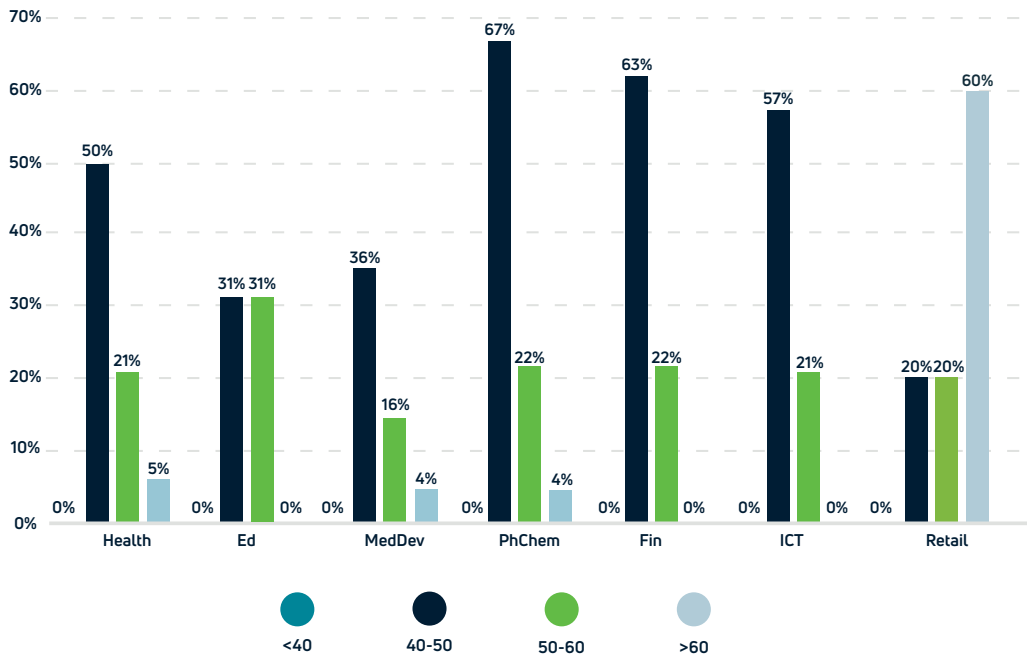
Table II: Creating Work Futures: Survey Highlights

Leader Experiences of their Jobs

Statement	Leaders (%)	Other (%)
My job requires that I learn new things.	95	78
My job requires me to be creative.	85	59
My job allows me to make a lot of decisions on my own.	93	64
I get to do a variety of different things in my job.	93	84
My job security is good.	84	82
I feel burned out from work.	35	41
I am able to make sense of what is required of me in my job.	94	93
I get satisfaction from my job.	82	77
My job requires a high level of skill	60	63

Leaders and their Career

Statement	Leaders (%)	Other (%)
I have some chance that my ideas/work concerns will be considered.	88	78
My prospects for career development and promotion are good.	67	66
In 5 years my skills will still be valuable.	94	72
I am appropriately respected and rewarded by my organisation for my work.	84	76
My future careers lies outside of my organisation	33	54

Leader Experiences of their Supervisor

Statement	Leaders (%)	Other (%)
My supervisor is concerned about the welfare of those under him/her.	88	84
My supervisor pays attention to what I am saying.	91	87
My supervisor is helpful in getting the job done.	88	85
I get feedback/information from my supervisor about how well I do my job.	70	72
My supervisor makes time for our team to make sense of things.	68	70
I have some chance that my ideas/concerns will be considered.	93	78

Leader Experiences of their Co-Workers

Statement	Leaders (%)	Other (%)
My team size is appropriate.	74	71
My team makes decisions democratically.	76	71
I get information/feedback from my co-workers about how I do my job.	72	67
My co-workers are competent in doing their jobs.	93	91
My co-workers are friendly.	97	96
My team makes an important contribution to society.	85	80
My skills and abilities are vital to my team.	99	82

5.2. The Role of Leadership

Leaders were asked to rate statements about aspects of their job, career, supervisor and co-workers using a four-point scale; strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. For the purpose of this analysis, percentages presenting agreement from leader respondents are a combination of those who chose strongly agree and agree.

The first statements look at job characteristics that include the requirement to learn new things, creativity, decision-making, job security and job satisfaction. We then **examine leaders' experience of their boss**, referred to here as their supervisor, likely more senior leaders in the organisation, the CEO or members of the board. We also **examine certain aspects of leadership teamwork** such as team size and decision-making, as well as the peer dynamic within leadership teams (their co-workers). **We examine leader career prospects** such as how leaders feel they are respected in their organisation, as well as their prospects for career development and whether or not their future careers were likely to be with the same organisation they were in at the time of responding. Table II shows some highlights taken from the survey.

Interestingly, **we find that while the challenge of leadership might appear to be quite removed from other roles in the organisation, the experience of leaders is largely similar to all other employees.** Leaders are generally as satisfied as all other employees with their job, feel able to perform well, are motivated, and feel supported by their organisation – all of which is very positive for organisations operating in Ireland today. **Unsurprisingly, leaders feel they have a greater opportunity to be creative, take responsibility for their decisions and have their ideas or concerns considered by their organisation** than those in positions at lowers levels of the organisation.

It is **important to note however that 35% of leaders reported being burnt out** from their role and 33% believe their future career lies outside of the organisation. This is relatively similar to the views of all other employees but with 41% reporting burn out and 54% feeling their future lies elsewhere.

5.3. Leadership Skills

When it comes to leadership skills, 99% feel their skills and abilities are vital to their team (versus 82% of other employees). 94% of leaders surveyed believe these skills will still be valuable in 5 years' time (versus 72%), and 95% (versus 78%) report the need to learn new things to perform in their roles. Yet, leaders are on a par with other employees with only 60% (versus 63%) believing their role requires a high level of skill.

5.4 Leadership and Digital Transformation

Again, leader experiences of technology is very similar to those of all other employees with some highlights shown in Table II. Leaders feel their organisations' technology is reliable, they feel comfortable with its purpose and appropriately skilled and supported to use it to perform their jobs (91% of leaders versus 92% for all other employees). Importantly, they also feel these tech-skills are transferrable. However, **46% acknowledge their organisation's technology cannot handle special circumstances (confirmed by 42% of all other employees) and 30% of leaders believe their organisation is not tech-ready to meet future demands.** Other employees report higher levels of surveillance through their work with technology at 34% (versus only 19% of leaders).

Table III: Leader experiences of digital transformation

Statement	Leaders (%)	Other (%)
It is easy to learn how to use the technology I work with.	83	85
Using technology requires using complicated language/procedures	30	25
I can control the pace of my work when I use our technology	81	78
I often have to wait long intervals for the technology to process work	11	23
The technology tracks the speed and accuracy of my work	19	34
Our technology often cannot handle special circumstances	46	42
Our technology rarely breaks down or stops	73	62
Our technology is rarely overloaded	65	60
It keeps me constantly busy with little chance for pauses	45	52
I feel appropriately skilled to work with the technology I need	91	92
If I switched company, I could still apply techno logical knowledge	93	86
I believe my organisation is tech-ready for what the future holds	70	61

5.5. Flexible Working Practices

There are only marginal differences between leaders and all other employees in their experiences of FWPs prior to the pandemic. Excluding the leader roles that require a full-time presence on site for operational reasons, findings show that, prior to the pandemic, 47% of leaders engaged in Hybrid Working; a blend of onsite and working from home (WFH). This level of hybrid likely reflects the nature of the survey sample, which was largely MNCs. Many of these leader roles are global in nature where they are working in virtual teams and travelling, thereby more able to work from home as much as the office. 51% availed of FlexiTime (flexible start and finish times). Only 12% could WFH on a full-time basis.

However, a further 18% (Hybrid), 21% (FlexiTime) and 12% (WFH) of leaders, who were not curtailed by operational requirements, wished to avail of FWPs but they were not available in their organisations. Furthermore, the options of Part-Time Work and Compressed Working Weeks (working 5 days' hours in 4 days) were not available to approximately half the leaders surveyed. Interestingly, across all FWPs, there is only a small difference of around 5-10% between male and female leaders, with both sexes expressing similar levels of interest around the different options but with female leaders typically expressing a slightly higher interest.

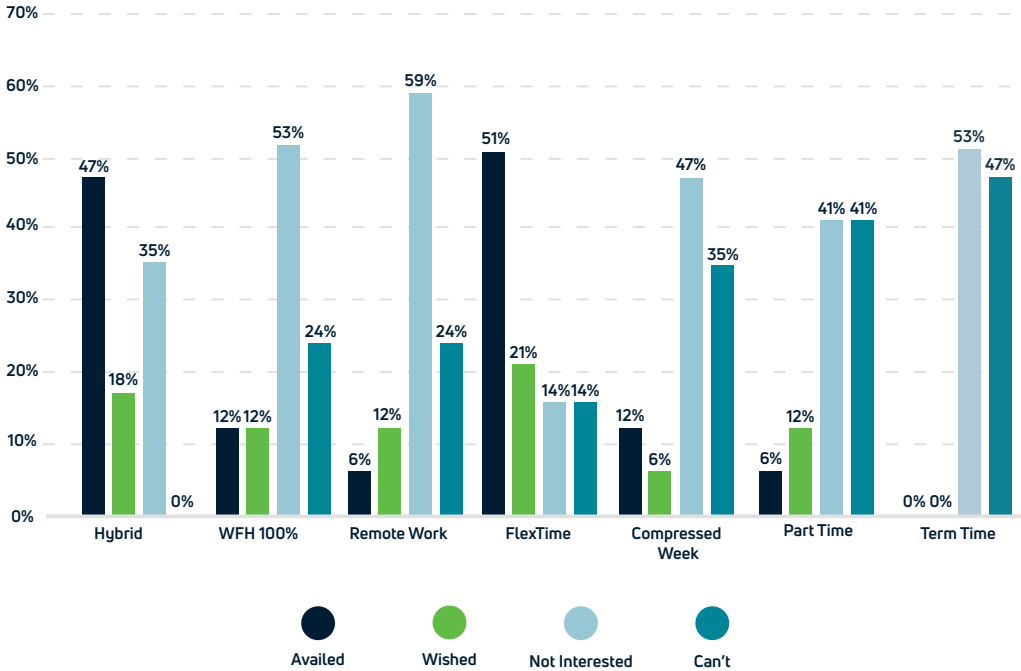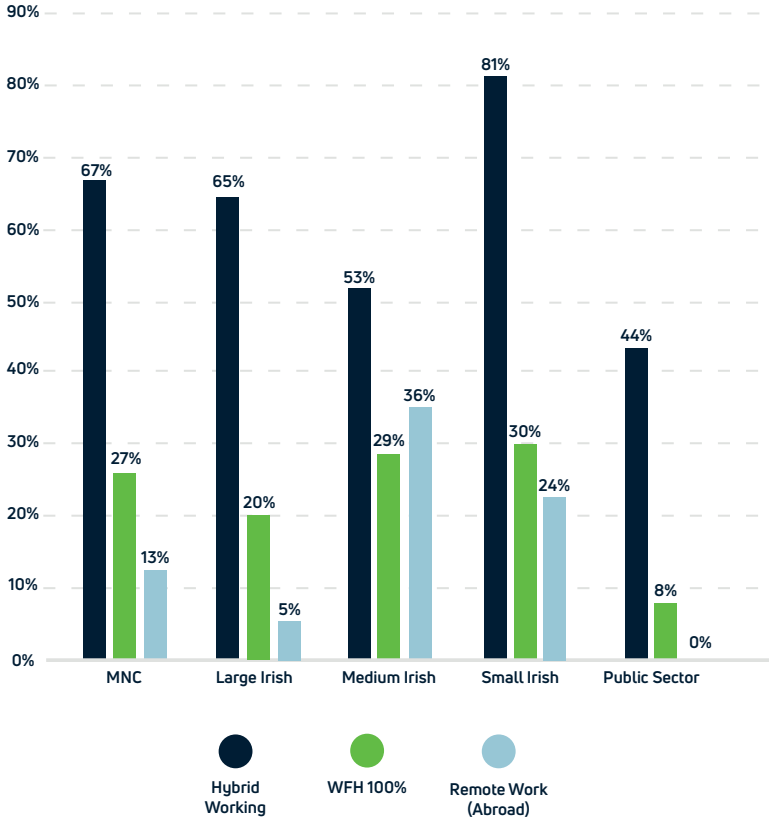**Figure 8: Leader Experiences of Flexible Working Practices Pre-Pandemic**

Legend: Availed, Wished, Not Interested, Can't

Figure 9: Leader Preferences for Flexible Working Practices Post-Pandemic

Legend: Hybrid Working, WFH 100%, Remote Work (Abroad)

Of course, the Covid 19 pandemic accelerated all organisations' use of technology to facilitate Working from Home (WFH) as a matter of necessity. **This survey investigated how leaders felt about their future working practices and whether or not they would like to engage in different types of flexible working in the 'new world of work'** which was reportedly emerging on the back of the pandemic 'pivot' to WFH. Into the future, the most desired FWP is Hybrid and it is also the one considered easiest to access. Global leaders feel FWPs will be largely easy to access (80%), while only 38% of Site leaders consider it easy to access such options.

5.6. Leader Identity

Once survey respondents identified themselves as a business unit, site, regional or global leader, they were **further prompted to respond to a range of statements that investigated their perceptions of leadership** in general and their own leadership identity.

It is clear from the results that **leaders place great emphasis on the criticality of their role in determining the success of an organisation.** As shown in Figure 10, the vast majority believe leadership is vital to the bottom line, can overcome poor economic environments and even has a greater impact than forces within the business environment. **They believe poor leadership will have a detrimental effect on an organisation's performance** to the point of it being deemed impossible for an organisation to do well unless there is good leadership at the top.

However, leaders also recognise the weight of leadership with the vast majority acknowledging the risk associated with leadership roles and the potential negative personal consequences when their teams underperform, as shown in Figure 10. Leader identity in Ireland is very strong with over 90% believing, seeing themselves as, and wanting to be seen by others as a leader. However, only 70% describe themselves to others as a leader, see Figure 11.

The vast majority of people believe leadership is vital to the bottom line and can overcome poor economic environments

Figure 10: The Impact of Leadership on the Organisation

There's nothing as critical to the bottom line performance of an organisation as the quality of its Top Leader
28%
72%

Even in a bad economy a good Leader can prevent an organisation from doing poorly
21%
79%

It is impossible for an organisation to do well unless it has high quality Leadership at the top
28%
72%

High versus low quality Leadership has a bigger impact on the firm than a favorable versus unfavorable business environment
19%
81%

Sooner or later bad Leadership at the top will show up in decreased organisation performance
3%
97%

When a company is doing poorly the first place one should look to is its Leaders
19%
81%

With a truly excellent Leader there is almost nothing that an organisation can't accomplish
25%
75%

When it comes right down to it, the quality of Leadership is the single most important influence on the functioning of an organisation
33%
67%

A company is only as good or as bad as its Leaders
25%
75%

Top Level Leaders make life and death decisions about their organisation
23%
77%

Anybody who occupies the Top Level Leadership position in an organisation has the power to make or break the organisation
19%
81%

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

● Disagree   ● Agree

Leader identity is strong in Ireland with 90% seeing themselves as leaders, however only 70% describe themselves as leaders to others.
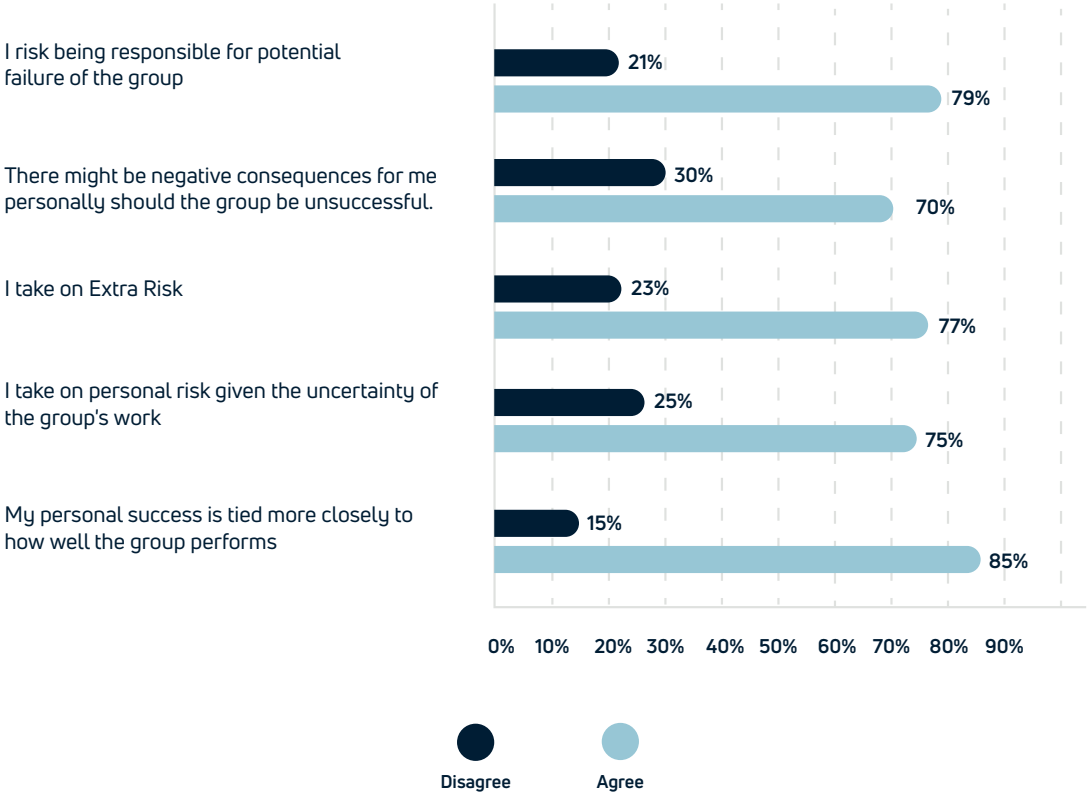
Figure 11: The Risk in Leadership

I risk being responsible for potential failure of the group
- Disagree: 21%
- Agree: 79%

There might be negative consequences for me personally should the group be unsuccessful.
- Disagree: 30%
- Agree: 70%

I take on Extra Risk
- Disagree: 23%
- Agree: 77%

I take on personal risk given the uncertainty of the group's work
- Disagree: 25%
- Agree: 75%

My personal success is tied more closely to how well the group performs
- Disagree: 15%
- Agree: 85%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90%

● Disagree ● Agree

Figure 12: Leader Identity in Ireland

- I am a Leader: 93%
- I see myself as a Leaader: 93%
- I describe myself as a Leader: 70%
- I like to be seen as a Leader: 92%
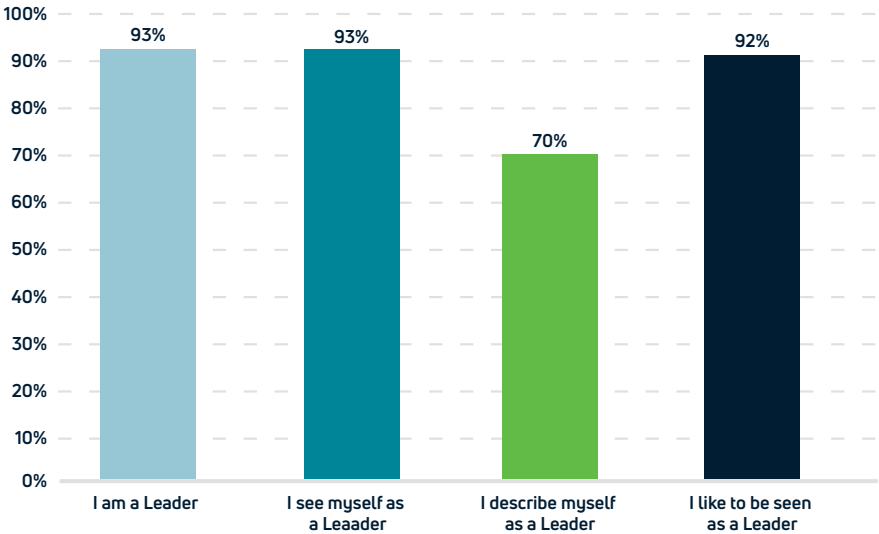
At a Glance | Profiling Leaders in Ireland Today

- **Senior leadership identity in Ireland is very strong** with over 90% believing, seeing themselves as, and wanting to be seen by others as a leader. However, only 70% describe themselves to others as a leader.

- Leaders **place great emphasis on the criticality of their role,** seeing leadership as vital to the bottom line, key to overcoming economic challenges, and even more impactful than external business forces.

- There is a **decline in the number of females in more senior leader roles,** with only 39% of site, 42% of regional and 28% of global roles held by females where the ratio is more even at business unit levels of leadership

- Leaders in Ireland today **typically work between 40-50 hours per week** with 21% working between 50-60 hours and 5% working greater than 60 hours per week.

- Despite largely showing strong satisfaction with their roles, **35% of the leaders here report being burnt out** and 33% believe their future career lies outside of the organisation.

- Leaders **expect to engage in hybrid work alongside their teams** with both genders expressing similar levels of interest around the different options but with female leaders typically expressing a slightly higher interest.

- Global leaders feel **FWPs will be largely easy to access** (80%), while only 38% of Site leaders agree.

- Nearly half of those surveyed **(46%) feel their organisation's technology cannot handle special circumstances** (confirmed by 42% of all other employees) and 30% believe their organisation is not tech-ready to meet future demands.

30% of **leaders believe their organisation is not tech-ready** to meet future demands

Section

6

Understanding Leaders And Leadership In Ireland Today

6.1. Beyond the Pandemic

> *"COVID wasn't a remote working experiment but a global experiment in crisis management."*
>
> *"Digitally minded people will say COVID was a big shift in terms of technology, I would say it was a big shift in the way we think"*

This research confirms that since the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, widespread disruption was experienced with organisations radically changing the way they worked almost overnight. **Leaders report how they had never witnessed such dramatic change over such a short period.**

With digital transformation, many organisations had embraced new ways of working; adopting new technology, digitising business processes and engaging in flexible working practices to cater for a dispersed workforce. However, the global pandemic **accelerated the need for immediate adaption** of such practices. Leaders report that throughout the pandemic, many organisations were operating in survival mode. Leaders describe significant personal effort and stress during this period that has yet to fully abate.

Post pandemic, the landscape has fundamentally changed. **Work practices experienced a definite shift towards hybrid working wherever business operations allow.** Leaders acknowledge that no organisation is exempt from making decisions on 'how we work and where we work' into the future. **They feel this new world of work is also shaping their leadership style.** Many refer to older 'transactional' or 'autocratic' styles of leadership, as **being replaced with a more holistic, human-centric approach where the wellbeing of employees has become more central because of the experience of the pandemic.**

6.2. The Human Connection

Many leaders acknowledge the **difficulties they experience first-hand in working remotely,** particularly the need to **maintain personal connections** with colleagues, teams and functional departments. Lack of human interaction led to challenges in engaging individuals, forming teams, and developing and maintaining relationships. For many leaders, the essence of leadership is being visible to those around you and as such, **having to lead virtually they feel impacts negatively on their ability to lead effectively.**

> *"I struggled as a leader during the pandemic. Where I found it tough was the connection piece. I always liked being part of a group, feeling connected, being visible as a leader and I found not being able to do that was hard."*

Leaders report that throughout the pandemic, many organisations were operating in survival mode. **Leaders describe significant personal effort and stress during this period that has yet to fully abate.**

Leaders find that the expectations of younger generations, for example millennials, contrast significantly with older generations. The perception is that the mind-set of some leaders - 'what worked for us, will work for them' is redundant.

6.3. Inequities between Operational and Knowledge Workers

Findings suggest inequity amongst workers depending on their function in the organisation. Many frontline **operational workers have gained very little in terms of flexible work practices in comparison to knowledge workers who have acquired significant opportunities to increase their flexibility.** Leaders acknowledge the challenge of addressing this inequity and raise concerns about how to bring a sense of parity to diverse groups of employees.

6.4. Generational Differences

In today's world, many leaders face the challenge of engaging five different generations with varying needs and expectations. Leaders find that the expectations of younger generations, for example millennials, contrast significantly with older generations. The perception is that the mind-set of some leaders - 'what worked for us, will work for them' is redundant.

Many leaders feel there is a **need at an organisational level to re-examine the very concept of what leadership means.** They feel now is the time to consider new philosophies and styles of leadership – but what new style to embrace is unclear to many.

6.5. Social Capital

Leaders stressed the importance of having a strong support network particularly in adverse times; a network of like-minded people to connect with in a safe space. A safe space is one that is devoid of personalised, 'power-based' or 'organisationally political' criticism. Instead, leader networks should

"We need to consider how we help or motivate our front-line workers with flexibility or different work practices."

"All the old leaders did it that way, but actually, we see now that was not a great way. So we are going to break it and do it this way – what is that thing? Is there something there we can break and everyone will go, that's broken now, I don't have to do that, actually I'm a better leader for it and the leaders of the future will be better leaders. Leadership is a learned behaviour, you are looking at other leaders and how they behave, there are things that are built into it that aren't always right. What are those things we could break and start again with?"

offer challenging but constructive criticism, a means of experimenting with new approaches to leadership with peers, and an opportunity for growth. Whilst working virtually, there is a sense it is becoming increasingly challenging to expand, build and maintain these networks deemed an essential leader support mechanism.

6.6. Hybrid Work Structures

For many organisations, very significant numbers of **employees are dispersed globally,** operating across different time zones and immersed in different cultures and languages. This structure is commonplace, yet with the introduction of more local hybrid work practices, navigating through this new world of global and local hybridity **comes with both challenges and opportunities** which most leaders are still struggling to navigate.

Although, leaders experience many challenges on this front, the findings mirror survey results as leaders acknowledge developing hybrid work practices and **integrating them into organisational life is essential.** It ensures a balance between employee wellbeing and organisational performance whilst helping to future proof the organisation. **Leaders believe that adopting a 'one size fits all' approach will not suffice.** They recognise the need to create a sense of structure in this new world of flexible work. Leaders are currently trying to figure out how to create policies that combine choice and flexibility with operational realities. Some leaders recognise the **need to identify "meaningful or purposeful moments"** where a physical presence is required on

> *"One of the most important things is your network and to build a close network, it needs to be built in person. I think it's very important so that you don't ever feel isolated."*

site for significant meetings or events. Some highlight how clearly identifying these meaningful moments will negate the need for even leaders to be on site full time, thus empowering others to follow suit.

Regarding their own work practices, some leaders expressed high levels of satisfaction with hybrid working as it enabled them create a more sustainable working environment on an individual level. Many have experienced greater flexibility and improved work life balance which previous work practices would not have afforded them.

6.7. Online Fatigue & Burnout

Leaders in this study realise that the current unpredictable and often extreme business environment is strongly influencing employees causing uncertainty, fatigue and in some cases anxiety, disconnection and burnout. **With significant amounts of work conducted virtually, there is a real sense of online fatigue creeping into the workplace,** leaving leaders physically and mentally drained. These reflect survey results indicating **excessive working hours and leader burnout.** Many highlight increasingly limited, if any, time for self-reflection or pause for thought.

> *"Regarding flexible working, if we don't compete and create that honest flexible environment, then we're dead in the water."*
>
> *"We have to lead a digital revolution now so it's not all about the office, so leadership in that environment is going to have to change and we will have to think differently"*

Leaders feel these prolonged spells of working virtually is negatively affecting their ability to engage in self-reflection, a skill that is widely acknowledged as essential for leader development, ensuring perspective, and generally helping leaders stay well-adjusted and balanced.

6.8. Re-conceptualising the Workplace

The research suggests leaders are struggling with identifying what a hybrid world entails and how to implement it. While the need to move to hybrid working is recognised, also reported in the survey results, they feel there is no clear 'definition' of what it consists of, what it looks like, or why it's needed. They are seeking clarity around what is physically and operationally necessary to facilitate hybrid working, for example, the creation of dedicated hybrid meeting spaces. They are also struggling with the rationale for hybrid working and being able to communicate why employees should be on site, albeit part-time, as some employees indicate a preference to work from home on a full-time basis. Thus, it is clear the traditional approach to work design has shifted. While many welcome it, most are struggling to operationalise it in their organisations.

Leaders are seeking clarity around what is physically and operationally necessary to facilitate hybrid working, for example, the creation of dedicated hybrid meeting spaces.

6.9. A Level Playing Field

The concept of "levelling the playing field" in terms of virtual working was discussed with two trains of thought emerging. The first recognises the benefit of virtual working in terms of inclusivity with respect to site location. Increased levels of connectivity, means geographical constraints no longer apply as leaders can now connect regardless of location.

"Prior to the pandemic, the culture wasn't there to have a Teams meeting especially as 90% of the population were in one location so people not on site were an afterthought. So, it has levelled the playing field in that regard in terms of inclusivity".

The second theme emerging sees virtual working as levelling the playing field in a negative way. By meeting virtually, some leaders felt it was now harder to influence, harder to negotiate; less opportunity to sell an idea or secure investment as opposed to the traditional approach of engaging people physically, which many acknowledge was far more powerful and rewarding.

"I think it's much harder to influence now, being remote. I think what it does is, it levels the playing field. You had an opportunity when you brought someone to Ireland…… you have to try to pull them in now."

6.10. Site Relevance

This shift in work practices post-pandemic has led to a significant growth in the level of 'leader business' being conducted virtually. **There is an understanding amongst leaders that the ability to influence globally may be somewhat diluted as a result.** Ensuring sites remain strategically relevant amidst the growing trend of de-globalisation is of particular concern for leaders in Ireland.

"I think it's much harder to influence now, being remote. I can see an element of de-globalisation creeping back in, where some roles are going back to the US"

"I think there is huge risk. There are risks every day, in every decision you make. You need to have the backbone and the guts as well as the talent to make the right calls."

At a Glance | Understanding Leaders and Leadership Today

- The world of work has shifted dramatically with new (hybrid) work practices now front and centre. A re-conception and re design of the workplace is required to **facilitate hybrid working in order to meet the demands of a dispersed global workforce.**

- Strong **support mechanisms in the form of social networks are essential** for continuous personal and professional development. With unprecedented economic and social challenges afoot, having a safe space to connect and problem share with like-minded individuals is critical for today's leaders to stay well-adjusted and balanced.

- Faced with the challenge of managing generational differences and associated expectations, **the need to re-evaluate the concept of leadership and the necessary skill set is understood**, yet the scope and depth of this revaluation is unclear.

- Global and **local hybridity is the new norm** yet leaders are still not clear on how to operationalise it locally and are **personally struggling with virtual working.**

Having a safe space to connect and problem share with like-minded individuals is critical for today's leaders to stay well adjusted and balanced

Section

7

Leadership In
A Post Digital Age

The context of leadership is radically altering as we progress beyond an age of digital transformation. Leaders are contending with increasingly distributed and fragmented organisational structures, accelerated globalisation, increased movement within and across organisations, multi-generational workforces and other, newer and exaggerated dimensions to well-known technological, economic, environmental and socio-political forces. Leaders are identifying patterns that are reshaping the organisational context as we know it.

Findings highlight how digitalisation has transformed the nature of work and the structure and context of organisations. This has considerable implications for leadership practice and the skills and abilities necessary to navigate this change. The shift from the physical workplace to homes has provided leaders with a unique opportunity to see their people in a more holistic way and heightened awareness of employees' needs.

7.1. Human-Centric Leadership

The findings highlight that this shift has heightened **the importance of a human centric approach** to leadership and the need to transition from the traditional autocratic style of leadership towards a collaborative, compassionate and collective leadership philosophy.

> *"Organisations are changing- I think they are becoming more human. The whole people piece, the diversity piece has really taken hold. Values are becoming really important."*

7.2. Multi-level Leadership

As spatial and temporal boundaries within organisations dissolve, **leadership too has become more fluid and dynamic and less constrained by formal hierarchies.** Leaders recognise and call on their organisations for a shift to a more distributed and horizontal form of leadership.

> *"The challenge is, what's worked in the past, is not necessarily going to work in the future. Now we have more questions than answers regarding what the last two years has uncovered."*

The findings suggest that leaders view leadership as a process that takes place at all levels of the organisation and **see themselves as facilitators and enablers** who are responsible for creating an environment for others to lead and succeed. This divergence from hierarchical barriers enables leadership to also be multi directional – for example, reverse mentoring where senior leaders learn from younger generations.

> *"Sometimes as leaders, our role is to get out of the way of good people."*

7.3. Results-Oriented Leadership through People

The need to maintain competitiveness and efficiency remains a key priority for these leaders – however, they recognise the achievement of **results is through** people and not at the expense of the employee experience, thus reinforcing the shift towards supportive and shared leadership.

> *"Leadership for me is about how I position myself, the things I do to bring my team on the journey with me and to allow them the autonomy to develop their own strengths; my job is to help make them shine or provide a platform for them to shine"*

7.4. Leadership as a Journey

This shift in leadership perspective from an individual level to a more collective level reflects the senior level of the participants. Many of the respondents highlighted the importance of experience (and learning from failure) in making this transition. This experience (of both success and failure) promotes the critical **combination of confidence and humility required for the shift towards a more collaborative mind set** and an awareness that one is always 'becoming' a leader. This supports previous leadership research that found leadership abilities and skills may differ depending on the stage of the leadership journey one occupies. Leadership skills tend to be more individualistic and inward-looking at the early leadership stages and, with increasing experience, they become more collective in outlook and skilled in developing other employees [42].

> *"I've always been a risk taker naturally. Risk in leadership? For me, it was all about having something new, double-digit growth, where you could try loads of things, fail quick, do it again, do something different, it was about that challenge of knowing nothing, sinking or swimming. I wanted to see if I could be a CEO in a different environment."*
>
> ———————————
>
> *"The biggest learnings for me were learnings from not getting promoted. In retrospect, it was a positive that I didn't land those opportunities and instead using that opportunity for regrowth, renewed focus."*

7.5. Dissolving Boundaries

Leaders find themselves situated in a context where boundaries around time, space and hierarchies are dissolving and becoming more fluid. This can be a **catalyst for creativity, innovation and growth** – but it can also create challenges including maintaining a culture of connectivity and balancing the need for flexibility with the return to the workplace. Many leaders acknowledge a growing sense of inequity between those required to work within the traditional boundaries of time and space and those who do not and recognise the need to restore a sense of parity to the workplace. **Digitalisation has also blurred boundaries** between work **and** non-work with many employees now living in their place of work - it is therefore increasingly important to establish suitable boundaries between work and non-work.

7.6. Increased Scrutiny

Findings indicate that leaders feel they are increasingly under scrutiny. While the position of leadership comes with scrutiny and a need for transparency, leaders feel that in a digital world, they are constantly in the public eye and the consequences of their actions are under scrutiny in a more far-reaching way, resulting in leadership becoming increasingly risky. These findings are further supported by the survey results reporting levels of risk perception in leadership.

> *"Leadership is now more open to scrutiny. Leaders are being talked about at every level. To be a leader now is a brave decision. Now anyone can comment on you."*
>
> ———————————
>
> *"I think there is huge risk. There are risks every day, in every decision you make. You need to have the backbone and the guts as well as the talent to make the right calls".*

7.7. Willingness to Lead

There was general agreement that leadership **needs to evolve in order to lead newer generations** and to entice them to take up the leadership mantel.

> *"There have been times when I thought, I'm not comfortable with this risk. From time to time that sense of doubt or vulnerability might just sit on my shoulder and talk to me and say you're not good enough to do this."*

Leaders identified a generational shift in employee expectations of what it is to lead. Findings suggest that newer generations are reluctant to 'claim' leadership roles in the traditional sense and that they expect a more balanced and holistic way of leading, **where technology is embraced and used to enable people to work more 'smartly' and flexibly.**

> *"Newer generations have very different expectations in terms of work. For example, they won't necessarily work weekends because they're too busy climbing a mountain. But maybe while they're doing that, they're thinking about how to solve that work related problem?!"*

The leaders own willingness to lead and management of their exposure to risk is critical in enabling their teams to step-up to lead. **Supporting teams and role-modelling a blame-free culture is critical here**, risks do exist, but it is the fear of failure and a culture of blame which can be the real issue discouraging those with leadership potential.

> *"Taking over a new role which I had no background in, three weeks into the role, an important meeting with the MD on a serious issue, I could easily have said the issue was not mine, but I stood up for my team. My CFO came over afterwards and said, "you have them forever now". That was a leadership moment. "*

Leaders recognise the paradigm shift in their roles. They see the necessity to respond to societal demands for more equitable and rewarding work experiences on the one hand, and organisational strategies and activities that minimise negative outcomes for the environment and society as a whole on the other. **They know these aspects of leadership are as important as meeting business targets.**

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At a Glance | Leadership in a Post Digital Age

- Leadership is recognised as being an extremely challenging role and significant effort is required to meet key organisational deliverables against a backdrop of global shifts, uncertainty and evolving organisational structures.

- Leaders have never been more scrutinised; on their performance and impact on organisational deliverables from above and how they engage with people to achieve them from below.

- This is causing leaders to reflect on their roles, seeing leadership as a personal journey of development but also as a collective experience where leadership capability and mind-sets need to be grown throughout the organisation.

- Increasingly, leaders recognise that leadership needs to be shared across the organisation in order to lead to successful business outcomes. This sharing of leadership is multi-directional with those at the top appreciating they have much to learn from those down through the organisation.

- Consequently, leadership has become more holistic, more human-centred. Faced with these challenges, leaders are reflecting more deeply on making the right choice for their people as much as their organisation.

- Leaders recognise this paradigm shift in their roles. They see the necessity to respond to societal demands for more equitable and rewarding work experiences on the one hand, and organisational strategies and activities that minimise negative outcomes for the environment and society as a whole on the other. They know these aspects of leadership are as important as meeting business targets.

- Leaders believe that this new direction in leadership, essentially a Sustainable Leadership Philosophy, is vital to developing and engaging the next generation of Ireland's leaders. Evolving organisational design and job design to embrace this new, shared leadership approach, in the context of a more hybrid world of work will be challenging but vital for Ireland to remain competitive globally.

Section

8

**Future
Leader Skills**

Much has been written about the key skills a leader needs to possess in order to be successful. Essentially, when we talk about **leadership skills it is the set of skills needed to inspire a team to achieve goals.** These skills include traditional skills such as **planning, analysis, problem-solving, influencing, team building, strong conceptual and strategic thinking skills and communication.** More contemporary skills include **creative thinking, idea evaluation, wisdom and sensemaking, an increased adaptability and flexibility, a high tolerance for ambiguity, deep integrity and a sense of ethics to guide organisation through uncertainty.** The need to be highly collaborative with powerful communication skills, strong technology and data literacy skills are also vital, as leaders now need to be able to lead increasingly diverse and dispersed teams. As such, social intelligence and inter-disciplinary knowledge is crucial. Regardless of the list of key skills identified, it is clear that leadership skills operate in an interconnected manner leading to high level of leader performance [43].

Building on our existing knowledge of this wide array of leadership skills, what do leaders in Ireland today believe are the most critical as we face into the future?

8.1. Human-Power Skills

The overriding conversation amongst all leaders was that the more you progress in an organisation **the more essential, what are often erroneously referred to as 'soft' skills, become.** They believe these skills cannot be taught; they are cultivated over the period of time the leadership journey takes.

"I base a lot of my leadership learning through people - all my interactions with good people, which has really helped me. It's not just about what you learn in college but rather who you learn it from."

"The expectation is you need to be agile, flexible, diverse; you need to be all things to all people. Leaders need to be more diverse; you need to be able to turn it on in a Quality function, in an Engineering function, in a cultural function"

There was a significant emphasis on the need for **compassion and empathy in both current and future leaders.** This was linked to their leadership experience as a result of the pandemic.
The pivot to remote working provided leaders with a window into team members' lives, their anxieties and personal challenges. This was two-way glass in that leaders' lives also became visible. Leaders' personal situations became known across the organisation through online meetings, bringing them close to their people in a way never previously imagined.

"I am very much a people-based person, but I think I became a lot more sensitive to people, recognising people's vulnerability and giving them a lot more flexibility"

"The exercise that was COVID got us thinking about the impact on people's whole lives as opposed to what companies might only have known about their employees from 9-5..... especially when you saw kids online. I remember one colleague saying, "just so you know I have a baby on my knee here to keep him quiet while I'm at this meeting" and he had three kids, two under the age of 18 months and twins on the way! So those types of conversations became a bigger part which wasn't a bad thing."

8.2. Humility

It was this conflux of accessibility that leaders identified as critical to the realisation that **putting people first was the most successful way to lead** organisations into the future. As a result, there is now an emphasis on developing humility as a leader and the realisation that even if you are the CEO, you need the assistance of others to succeed. Covid-19 also created a situation where there was a lack of control experienced by everyone in the organisation including the most senior leaders. As one leader explained, **'I am confident now to be vulnerable'.**

"I think humility is important. The more I have developed as a leader, the more I realise that I don't know all the answers"

"There is an innate humility in Irish people. We are authentic, we talk to everyone, this comes naturally to us, and it benefits us in our influencing and negotiating."

8.3. Emotional Regulation

The umbrella term emotional intelligence [44] is useful in encompassing critical interpersonal skills. Importantly however, it was **self-emotional regulation that was most often identified as a critical skill for future leaders.** The American Psychological Association (APA) defines self-regulation as "the control of one's behaviour through self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement." **People who have good self-regulation skills are able to assess whether their behaviour is appropriate and can redirect themselves as needed.** The pandemic provided the catalyst for a focus on self-regulation. The context they referred to was having to create emotional connections in the hybrid working world we find ourselves in.

There was a general acknowledgement of the importance of this skill for those holding senior level positions.

"Self-awareness and continuous learning are two skills that can set apart certain leaders from others"

8.4. Self-Reflection

Leaders talked about the need to set time aside to self-reflect and learn and then put that learning into practice.

"As a leader, people look to you for guidance, you can't do that if your eyes or ears aren't open. You have to be greedy; you have to give yourself some time because you will be a better leader for it"

Linked to this point is the feeling that organisations need to create spaces to enable meaningful conversations to take place – both virtual and physical.

"Be in tune with the nuances that exist within the team and you have to play the party political line but at an individual level I need to influence them and understand how they are making decisions....giving the right steer....knowing your team and what they need to know and organisations don't see that, they just see how it plays out later."

8.5. Perspective

Self-Reflection as a skill leads to a discussion around the importance of having perspective about the work-life balance conundrum. Interestingly more female leaders talked about this than male leaders. Leaders talked about being able 'to tune into the now' and making time for others. The pandemic created a situation where they had to reassess their lives in terms of the creep of work into evening and weekends. They noted the need to set boundaries and that the role of the leader is to enable those boundaries to exist for their employees - as a result they need to role-model that boundary setting behaviour. The leaders acknowledged that being secure in yourself is the key to abide by these boundaries in the face of unrelenting pressure that exists for many.

> *"I'm paid for perspective-so you need to check in with what's going on in the world.....Getting outside your own company is always good to get a different perspective in life"*

8.6. Self-Regulation

Of interest was that those who worked for US multi-nationals indicated colleagues abroad often failed to acknowledge the time difference leading to an expectation of being 'always on'.

> *"At a certain level, working long hours and into the evening, it's the norm especially if you are working with a US company. I don't think they get the time difference, or they just don't acknowledge it".*

Many leaders spoke about the link between physical health and mental health and the need for them to look after both. Leaders were grateful for the fact that the pandemic forced them to have robust conversations around their and their employees' well-being

8.7. Coaching

Coaching was revealed as a critically important skill for all leaders. The majority talked about both peer-to-peer coaching and leader-follower coaching. They recognised the positive impact of coaching on both their personal and leadership development. It enabled them to better understand themselves and their strengths and limits. Coaching developed their skill set to reflect on failures and decide how to move forward. Some leaders noted that it might not be naturally provided but needed to be asked for given its value. Many questioned when is the optimal point in a career to start coaching? If it's too early in your career you may be too immature to recognise its significance and if it's too late, have you missed an earlier opportunity for development? **Engaging with a personal coach was linked to developing the leaders' perspective on life, on strengths, skills, and what motivates you as a leader.** Identifying future leaders and giving them opportunities for exposure, offering support and guidance, providing stretch opportunities to them was a common theme.

> *"To have someone focusing on your north star while you're distracted with your day job, is really helpful and really powerful".*
>
> *"I would always be looking out for it (talent). I would identify potential CEO'S, and I would have told them that. I would tell them, here's what will hold you back, here's what you need to work on, here's what I can help you with."*

At a Glance | Future Leader Skills

- Leaders highlight **human and power skills as being the most critical in leadership today.** That is the cognitive and relational part of the job. It is as much about developing one's own, as developing these skills in others.

- **Humility emerges** as one of the drivers of a more sustainable leadership approach, the humility to realise you cannot lead on your own.

- Given the complex context of leadership today, **emotional regulation is vital** to engaging people around uncertain and evolving challenges.

- **Self-Regulation is critical** to emotional regulation. Furthermore, it enables leaders cope with the stress and demands of the role and ensure they maintain a critical perspective.

- **Self-Reflection is a key enabler** to leading sustainably. It allows leaders learn 'as they go' and becomes a tool through which they gain perspective while also acting as a reminder that leadership development never ends.

Self reflection is a key enabler to leading sustainably. It allows leaders to learn as they go, and becomes a tool through which they can gain perspective whilst also acting as a reminder that leadership development never ends.

Section

9

A Call For New Approaches To Leader Formation

Research findings suggest that as organisations continue to face rapid and intense change the effective and sustainable formation of leaders who can face into these complexities is crucial. How then can organisations respond? In this section of the report, **we share the view of leaders as they reflect on their own formation and call for changes in how future leaders are developed.**

9.1. Understand the Context of Leadership

Leaders emphasise the importance of the organisational **culture in the recruitment, development, formation and ultimately retention of leaders.** They outline that a culture that promotes collaborative and collective leadership, where psychological safety is high, is essential to support leader growth and effectiveness. They call for organisations to provide an environment where leaders are allowed to take risks and learn without repercussions.

"Obviously if I was taking a risk, it would be calculated risk. I would be far more comfortable in my role now taking a risk because of the company culture; it wouldn't be seen as big failure if things went south."

9.2. Increased Drive for Diversity and Inclusion

Leaders **call on organisations to recognise that there is a diversity and generational shift occurring** which is creating the need for a new type of organisation and leader based on employee expectations. They emphasise that a culture that recognises and promotes each employees' unique needs and potential should be encouraged. Leaders suggest that the organisation culture needs to be designed to foster leadership based on a collective, collaborative, team-based ideology that is considerate, compassionate and open to meet these shifting employee needs.

9.3. Human-Power Skills through Peer-Based Experiences

Leaders **call for development opportunities targeted at developing the 'soft' skills of leadership but see these more as critical 'human-power' skills.** Leaders believe they can only be learned experientially and ideally in a peer-based setting. Only other leaders can really understand the nuances of different skills and how they need to be 'brought together', interconnected if you will, to manage the challenge of contemporary leadership.

"Only other leaders actually get it, the pace, the risk, the complexity of how you manage every decision and how every moment is a learning in how you have handled that moment."

9.4. Building Leader Networks

Related to the above building of human-power skills, leaders call for the **development of peer networks within and outside the organisation.** They see how leaders need to be encouraged and provided with the space and resources to build and maintain their networks as a way of increasing both their knowledge base and social capital.

"One of the most powerful things is your network. I would have built good relationships and I would have turned to them in times of pressure."

"Post pandemic, we now have a better mix of people, it's great. For us Irish, you have to get away from the rashers and sausages in the morning, you have to be more conscious of eating the breakfast of different people!"

9.5. Creating Coaching Webs

Leaders significantly emphasise the importance of investing in coaching and mentoring structures to provide safe spaces where a leader can be open and honest about the challenges they face. These opportunities allow leaders take the time to reflect and learn from failure without risk. Coaching, which is more short-term in nature, should be used to help focus leaders on the development and communication of their vision and the attainment of goals with their team. Mentoring then should focus on creating more long-term mentee-mentor relationships between individuals both internally and externally across multi-levels and across multiple domains as a way of developing a more holistic leader.

Given the challenges leaders are facing into the future, this practicing and experiencing of leadership is where the 'crux of development really resides' [32].

9.6. Leader Sponsorship

Leaders believe one of the most powerful formation supports is that of sponsorship, **more widely known in terms of supporting women in leadership but noted here as applying to anyone with leadership potential.** Their best experiences of sponsorship encompassed being nominated to new roles with a sponsor guiding their way, supporting them through the transition on a public stage, and generally 'having your back', especially when you are not in the room.

"Being pushed to.......move from a plant facilities role to a global role. My boss says here's what's going to happen to you; it's going to take you a year to adjust. Your mind must think about how you are going to shape the organisation in 5 years' time, not what you're going to tell someone to do by lunch time."

"Being told you're ready, its time, and I will have your back."

"That form of support (coaching) from the organisation has been the most impactful development I feel like I've ever had in the organisation, far beyond any skills development programmes"

9.7. Identity Work

Leaders call on organisations to **afford potential leaders the time and resources to develop an understanding of their leadership style** and their authentic self through identity work. Identity work helps leaders understand who they are in the moment as well as the opportunity to develop potential selves or to 'try on leadership styles' in a safe environment as a form of development.

"The most powerful thing I ever did was spend time being profiled and learning more about my own leadership style and how I react to things and perceive things. I wish I had done that years earlier. I wish I could do it more often, take that time out to understand myself and get some professional explanations of why I am who I am, think what I think and do what I do."

9.8. Global Capabilities

Leaders emphasise the criticality for leaders in Ireland to develop their global and European **leadership capability through stretch opportunities as a development necessity vital to enhancing Ireland's social and economic capital globally.**

However, leaders reveal that once these roles are attained, acting in these roles causes significant pressure in terms of managing multiple time zones and multiple organisational requirements across their team.

> *"I would then spend a lot of time mentoring them (younger leaders), giving them stretch opportunities to excel and build their profile and help them recognise the importance of building a network in the US"*

They call for support that recognises this contribution and acknowledges the need for bespoke support systems based on these types of roles within the organisation.

At a Glance | The Call for New Approaches to Leader Formation

- Organisational culture that **fosters distributed and shared approaches to leadership** is vital to nurturing a Sustainable Leadership approach. This allows leaders engage people in new, more collective and collaborative ways of working, creating the environment of trust required to solve today's complex organisational problems.

- This shift in leadership is driven by significant changes in organisational populations. New generations with more diverse and inclusive mind-sets **demand new ways of leading and new experiences of work.**

- For leaders, the **most impactful learning occurs in experiential and peer-based settings.** These experiences and mix of peers needs to be challenging and diverse, drawing on different backgrounds and perspectives that challenge leadership norms.

- **Identity work is core** to developing many of the skills highlighted in this study. For leaders to evolve they need to create spaces for deep reflection, exploration and experimentation with different leadership selves.

- The need for individual critical feedback and reflection is heightened by the complex problems of today. **Coaching is central to this leadership development** but different types of coaches with different experiences and perspectives, longer-term mentoring relationships, and internal organisational sponsors throughout one's career are all required.

- All of these skills need to consider the global reach of some organisations. Leaders need to work hard to build global social capital and invite or seek out key opportunities to engage in global work with diverse actors across the organisation.

Section 10

Recommendations & Conclusion

In responding directly to this leadership call, we now make the following recommendations around new reskilling/upskilling requirements for the formation of leaders themselves and for the organisational actors such as HR who support their formation.

→ Design Interventions that Build Awareness on the Leadership Context/Challenge

In the first instance, organisations, HR and other critical actors in leader formation need to increase their understanding of the hard work of leadership. Increasingly complex, uncertain and risky, the challenge of leading organisations today is profound. It is incumbent on Boards, CEOs and Chief People Officers to work with HR to understand their own leadership context in deep and meaningful ways.

→ Acknowledge the Paradigm Shift towards Sustainable Leadership

Similarly, these same actors need to become more knowledgeable on the paradigm shift towards new, sustainable conceptualisations of leadership. Sustainable Leadership is a more holistic, human-centred approach that always places people first. While grounded in ethical principals and cognisant of environmental issues, Sustainable Leadership centres on leaders making the right choices, taking the right decisions for the long-term success of both the organisation and its people. Sustainable Leaders are reflective, self-aware, humble, collaborative and highly trustworthy. They act with consideration and integrity, grounding their behaviours and actions in sustainable management principles; the triple bottom line. Above all, they see employees as pro-organisational, self-actualising, and trustworthy [26]. While many organisations espouse this philosophy it is not always practiced. While many leaders espouse this philosophy, they fail to deliver.

→ Devise new Parameters for Identifying Future Leaders

It is critical that HR is able to identify those with a natural affinity, the skills for, and belief in the concept of Sustainable Leadership. The core skills are cognitive and relational, but some differentiating skills are humility, emotional regulation, self-reflection, critical perspectives and self-regulation. Some leaders are born this way, it is simply who they are. For others a sustainable leadership style can emerge with the wisdom of years of experience. However, the pandemic crisis has brought about a great realisation for those who previously employed more transactional or autocratic approaches. We are currently on the crest of a wave of new thinking and, given the challenges current leaders highlight, it is critical that it is not allowed wane. It is vital that organisations recognise this new drive, emerging form their own leaders, to engage and nurture this new style of sustainable leadership.

→ Develop new HR Policies that address Leader Workloads

There is an urgent need to deal with excessive leader working patterns (particularly in MNCs and global roles) and the issue of leader burnout. Many leaders at the top of organisations today progressed the hard way, excessive working hours are probably what got them to the top. Nevertheless, that does not mean they should be expected to damage their health and well-being to stay there. New generations will not tolerate this pace of work and stress and, because of what they observe today, are less willing to transition into leadership roles. The only way to encourage the next generation of leaders to step-up is to fully and finally deal with the excessive working patterns of those there currently. This is a new role for HR and the leaders themselves and critical interventions around the design and development of such policies are practices are vital.

→ Upskill HR and Learning Professionals on Leadership Formation Strategies and Approaches

Organisations and HR need to reconsider their culture of leader and leadership formation and the misplaced thinking that leadership can be 'accelerated'. Leader formation is a protracted process, a journey without a destination. It starts early in an employee's career and it never ends, even when they reach global roles. However, the destination is not always to move up the organisation's hierarchy. Much of today's leadership is shared, distributed around the organisation. As such, the culture that supports sustainable leadership capabilities is critical. A Sustainable Leadership approach within the hierarchy will support that. Thus, leading sustainably is self-perpetuating - Sustainable Leaders beget sustainable leadership capability across the organisation. They ensure a culture of self-actualisation, allow for risk-taking and see failures as learnings. They advocate for their teams and see their role as creating an environment for growth.

→ **Devise more Experiential Formation Programmes supported by Coaching, Mentoring and Sponsorship**

The development of Sustainable Leaders is experiential. It needs to be practiced over time, smaller learnings and experiences being supported until bigger leadership opportunities arise. However, there are specific things HR can do to support this formation. Mentoring and coaching is key, with a number of mentors and coaches needed for different growth-stages and job situations but sponsorship is particularly powerful in ensuring emerging leaders step-up to lead. While high-potentials are often identified and informally sponsored in organisations, a more formal sponsorship relationship, centred on loyalty to the individual being developed, advocacy for their endeavours (successes and failures), and seeking out opportunities for them to experience new activities and try out new behaviours is required. This experience promotes the critical combination of confidence and humility required for the shift towards a more collaborative mind set and an awareness that one is always 'becoming' a leader. Development approaches that address the risks inherent in leading and providing support in managing such risks may be crucial for the development of leaders.

→ **Build Leader Networks**

One of the most impactful methods of leader formation is through peer-based experiences. Whether in the early stages of leadership or at the top of the organisation, leaders need to be sustained in their roles through peer networks. Critical feedback from peers and organisational behaviour or subject matter experts is important. Experiences removed from the bias of organisational norms, politics and power can have a particular impact in both forming and maintaining leaders. While internal networks are important, particularly in developing Irish sites in global organisations, external networks are likely the most powerful in terms of leader formation through the creation of the strategic networks and alliances necessitated by today's uncertain business environment and wicked problems.

→ **Learn how to Build Frames around Hybrid and Flexible Working Practices**

Diversity and inclusion continues to be an issue in Irish organisations. Furthermore, new generations see the world with different eyes, they will not settle for anything less than a new world of work. In progressive workplaces, diversity is embraced, employee self-efficacy and well-being is paramount, and Hybrid Work and other FWPs are a given. We know all three elements are inter-related and inter-dependent.

However, while flexibility is key, it needs to be 'framed' by basic principles, some rules that are respected by all. To be able to lead, leaders need to work with HR to create these equitable structures. They are not particularly complex but will require some figuring-out for each organisations context and needs. For example, if it is flexi-time, should it be time bound? If it is a 4-day working week, should it be a set 4 days?

Similarly, with hybrid work, there needs to be 'frames' to support equity and inclusion across time and space. Regular meetings should be reviewed and determined to be in-person, online or hybrid according to their participants and objectives. There is a need to search for the meaning of each meeting and assign the format accordingly. More critical and creating meetings, such as that required by strategy work and innovation will be far more effective in-person. Then, if a meeting is hybrid, participants should declare in advance, who will attend in person. If the majority intend attending in-person or online, then it should be changed completely to one or the other. It is important to take the time to develop these Frames for Flexibility but also for organisations to acknowledge the time-consuming, digi-housekeeping that occurs in this new world of work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of the leader and broader leadership capability is one of the most critical yet often most elusive success factors for an organisation. As we sit now, somewhere between a pre and post digital age, our often overly romanticised view of leadership belongs in the past. Leadership is very hard work and the particular challenges facing leaders today are immense as they navigate the juxtaposition that is the contemporary organisations. They must be local and global, fast thinking and reflective, resilient and agile, humble and confident, decisive and inclusive, responsive an strategic - to mention but a few of the leadership paradoxes they face.

> **It is critical that organisations face the reality of today's leadership challenge and acknowledge that the style and skills that brought today's leaders to the top of the organisation will not sustain them or the organisation into the future.**

Not only do newer generations in these post-pandemic times demand a new world of work, but it is also clear organisations need a new, more human-centred, sustainable type of leadership to create a better world. We need leaders who think and act sustainably, in the broadest sense of the word. Leaders who see organisational members as key stakeholders alongside Boards, Shareholders and CEOS. Leaders who will challenge norms and work tirelessly to re-think and re-evaluate the role of organisations in creating new synergies between our fast-emerging cyber space and the physical place, the planet in which we live. Sustainable Leaders not only build better organisations but a better future.

Appendix

Focus Group Questions

1. What is it like being a Leader in Ireland today?

2. How did you learn to be a Leader? What learning experiences have had the most impact on your development do you think?

3. Can you tell me what you did differently in terms of leadership because of the pandemic?

4. How has your idea of leadership changed since the pandemic?

5. Specifically, what do you feel you need to learn now given the new context of hybrid work onsite but also globally?

6. What elements of Leadership energise/drain you?

7. Who supports you most in your role as a Leader?

8. Over your career, what supports had the most impact on your progression?

9. Is it different being a female/male leader in your organisation? How?

10. Do you perceive a risk in stepping up to lead? What type of risk? Examples?

In-Depth Interview Questions

1. How would you describe yourself as a leader/your philosophy as such?

2. Do you feel you can lead according to your values?

3. When did you first identify as a leader – what critical incident or trigger brought this about?

4. Would you be comfortable describing yourself as a leader to others? Why? Why not?

5. Do you think others recognise you as a leader? Why? What about among your leadership peer group or those leading above you?

6. What are the most critical learning experiences you have had that you believe shaped you as the leader you are today?

7. What are the most critical skills on which you draw in your role as a leader?

8. How do you see leadership changing given social trends, digital transformation, the pandemic, new ways of working?

9. What did you learn about yourself and being a leader because of the pandemic?

10. We are interested in how your organisation supports you and your learning – has this evolved over the years? Did it change because of the pandemic?

11. How will the learning/support need to change into the future? Do you feel supported in terms of succession planning?

12. Where do you draw your supports from as a leader? Do you think your organisation constrains how you lead? In what ways?

13. Self-regulation is seen as important in leading in a virtual world, would you agree? How do you self-regulate? How do you encourage others to?

14. Do you perceive a risk in stepping up to lead? What type of risk? Examples?

15. Were there times in the past where this risk has impacted on your decision to lead? You stepped away...

16. Are there examples where you decided to lead despite clear risk? Examples.

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