

REPORT | *October 2021*

People Profession 2021

UK and Ireland survey report



The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 160,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

Workday is a leading provider of enterprise cloud applications for finance and human resources, helping customers adapt and thrive in a changing world. Workday applications for financial management, human resources, planning, spend management, and analytics have been adopted by thousands of organisations around the world and across industries – from medium-sized businesses to more than 50% of the Fortune 500. For more information about Workday, visit www.workday.com

Report

People Profession 2021: UK and Ireland survey report

Contents

Foreword from the CIPD	3
Foreword from Workday	4
Executive summary	5
Introduction	6
What impact does the COVID-19 context have on people professionals' work?	6
How do people professionals contribute to their organisation?	17
What are the opinions of people professionals on their career progression?	21
What matters most to people professionals in doing their work?	25
Conclusions	29
References	31
Appendix	33
Endnotes	36

Acknowledgements

We thank all our people professional respondents and the whole team behind this report, including Halah E. Alattas, Lecturer in Economics, King Abdulaziz University KAU, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia for the statistical analysis. We would also like to thank Ian Neale and Phil Newbold at YouGov for their ongoing support throughout this research project.

Author profiles

Dr Gill Maxwell is the author of the report, with Mel Green. Both are CIPD research advisers.

Tables and figures

- Table 1: [Digital transformation is driving organisational change](#)
- Table 2: [Top three drivers of organisational change \(2020\)](#)
- Table 3: [People professionals' upskilling and reskilling](#)
- Table 4: [Priorities in improving organisational HR capability](#)
- Table 5: [Practices in people decisions](#)
- Table 6: [Achieved survey samples](#)
- Table 7: [Profile of survey respondents](#)
- Figure 1: [External drivers plus digital and technological transformation are changing organisations](#)
- Figure 2: [Supporting employees' mental health has become more difficult](#)
- Figure 3: [Internal change is driven most by digital transformation](#)
- Figure 4: [High levels of change in HR skills have occurred](#)
- Figure 5: [The third sector has seen the greatest upskilling \(UK\)](#)
- Figure 6: [Upskilling has occurred in organisations of all sizes \(UK\)](#)
- Figure 7: [Skills have increased in all HR roles \(UK\)](#)
- Figure 8: [More female people professionals have upskilled \(UK\)](#)
- Figure 9: [People professionals in Ireland see their standing increase in organisations](#)
- Figure 10: [Professional standing has increased in organisations in the UK](#)
- Figure 11: [Agreement on the importance of people functions spans UK sectors](#)
- Figure 12: [Agreement on the importance of people functions increases by role seniority in the UK](#)
- Figure 13: [More female people professionals in the UK agree on the importance of the people function](#)
- Figure 14: [People functions are focusing more on organisational outcomes](#)
- Figure 15: [Career progression is exceeding expectations](#)
- Figure 16: [Skills development is helping career advancement the most](#)
- Figure 17: [More practitioners believe the people profession offers a meaningful career and good career prospects](#)
- Figure 18: [Online conferences/webinars are the top source of learning and development](#)
- Figure 19: [Application of learning remains the top development action](#)
- Figure 20: [Over three-quarters of practitioners understand how they gain personal meaning from work](#)
- Figure 21: [Most people professionals are unlikely to compromise their principles](#)
- Figure 22: [Level of HR role contribution](#)
- Figure 23: [UK respondents' areas of people profession work](#)
- Figure 24: [Ireland respondents' areas of people profession work](#)

1 Foreword from the CIPD

The period between surveying the people profession for last year's report and for this one was one year, yet they are worlds apart. In that time, the COVID-19 context has changed the landscape of work – and life – in the UK and Ireland, as elsewhere in the world. For millions of people, the 'work at home where possible' edict brought about the most rapid and reactive changes to work locations and working practices in at least a generation. As a result, work from home, and its variants such as hybrid and remote working, have become the new normal for more employees than ever before, and work in workplaces has become highly health and safety-compliant to control the virus spread. Also, national job retention schemes meant that work ceased for many employees who have now re-entered work. Throughout this year's report, we can see what phenomenal changes such as these mean for people professionals.

On a personal level, working life will have changed for many practitioners, not only in the challenges they had to deal with being at the front and centre of how organisations responded, but also to their own patterns of work. As for so many, working from home saw positive benefits of work-life balance or integration and even productivity, but also the issues of blurring of work and non-work boundaries. Dealing with work and family roles including even children's educational responsibilities, particularly and notably for women in the people profession, brought other pressures. But the changes in work brought about by the pandemic has taught us many things, and is acting as a catalyst for wider change for the future, particularly in more flexible ways of working and how we can maintain relationships and cultures even when working more remotely. There is still much to learn, but these will be as profound a set of changes as we have seen in a generation.

Our survey of the profession and the *People Profession* report for the UK and Ireland this year is therefore particularly timely and relevant. People issues are front and centre of the business agenda and this has led to greater demand on what we do, and how we step up. That is good for the positioning of the people profession for the future, and the role of the profession in shaping the future of work and the opportunity to drive positive changes in organisations to bring about better work and working lives for all.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Cheese". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Peter Cheese
CEO, CIPD

2 Foreword from Workday

This is the fifth year that Workday has partnered with the CIPD as sponsors of the *People Profession* report. The study aligns with our commitment to helping our customers improve the quality of their people decisions through better data and insights, and supporting those in the people profession so they can derive greater value from their work.

As we reflect on events over the last two years, it's clear that the COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturn and social justice movement will all have profound, long-term consequences for the future of work. The rapidly evolving nature of our economies and societies – accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis in particular – has changed how and where we work, how workplaces and workforces are organised, and redefined the employee–employer relationship.

Companies have a rare opportunity to rethink their organisational and workplace structures. It is a defining leadership moment and people leaders have a responsibility to build on what they've learned from the immediate response to the crisis and lead the way towards better and more human-centric workplaces.

The last year has taught us that the ability for organisations to renew themselves, adapt quickly and succeed in fast-changing environments is paramount. Technology that enhances, elevates and extends expertise of the workforce is important so you can quickly and effectively manage change and make sure your employees aren't left behind.

At Workday, we strive to make the world of work and business better – and empower others to do the same. Our technology is an investment in building a culture of agility, data-driven decision-making, and automation so leaders can apply their focus and energy towards moving the organisation and its people forward.

Those organisations who are best placed to lead the recovery from the effects of the last two years understand the importance of bringing together financial, people and operational data so they can continuously see the whole enterprise picture. It helps them to stay ahead of the accelerated pace of change and anticipate multiple scenarios – leading to better-informed decisions and fewer surprises.

We hope the insights from this research will help the people profession to plan for the unexpected and discover new meaning in the important work that it does.



Michael Douroux
**Global Vice President,
Northern Europe and South Africa, Workday**

3 Executive summary

In the unparalleled and unforeseen context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings of our latest *People Profession* survey are exceptional. This report reveals how practitioners have responded to changes and challenges while maintaining their level of professionalism. The findings also point to a conspicuous opportunity for people professionals to consolidate and build on their recently enhanced organisational position.

The purpose of our annual survey is to provide an evidence-based, contemporary insight into important dimensions of the work and opinions of people professionals, both in-house and independent. Our achieved sample comprises 1,504 professionals in the UK and 168 professionals in Ireland. The survey was conducted online with YouGov during May and June 2021.

Key findings

External factors and digital transformation are driving organisational change

The majority of our respondents report that external drivers and disruptors are creating change within their organisations, most likely centring on the precipitous shift to home (or remote) working that was brought about by COVID-19 for many employees. Evolving digital technologies and digital transformation are also bringing about change within organisations and people functions.

Working from home makes key aspects of people professionals' work more challenging

Supporting employees' mental health and wellbeing is the biggest challenge for most people professionals. This became a more difficult aspect of their work due to COVID-19 lockdowns, which necessitated working from home. Building organisational culture and values and managing performance have also become more difficult.

People professionals are upping their skills and standing

Around half of the surveyed professionals have had to upskill, extending their skills, as a result of their organisation's response to COVID-19. Combined with those professionals who have had to reskill, around two-thirds have upped their skills. Sizeable proportions of our respondents agree that the standing of people professionals in their organisation has increased because of the pandemic.

Organisational strategy and success are the focus of people profession functions

The majority of our respondents state that the people function plays a vital role in influencing organisational strategy and direction. Key links exist between human resource practices and business outcomes. People professionals have a clear understanding of what success looks like in terms of organisational outcomes. They work collaboratively across business functions to meet business needs.

People professionals are positive and proactive in their career progression

Career progression has either exceeded or met the expectations of a substantial majority of our informant people professionals, mainly due to their skills development and managers' support. The profession offers a meaningful career for a large majority of practitioners. Nearly all respondents participated in some type of learning and development in the last 12 months, mostly via virtual conferences/webinars and online learning.

Purpose and principles are very important in people professionals' work

For a very high percentage of our surveyed people professionals, work provides personal meaning and connects to what they think is important in life and to the larger social good of their community. Work makes them happy and energises them too. A high majority are unlikely to compromise their principles under any circumstance.

4 Introduction

This report provides a contemporary insight into important dimensions of the work and opinions of a sample of in-house and independent people professionals in the UK and Ireland in 2021.¹ Our achieved sample this year comprises 1,504 professionals in the UK and 168 professionals in Ireland. We report on each country separately throughout the report. The CIPD surveys people professionals annually to maintain an up-to-date, evidence-based picture of their perceptions and experiences of the profession and its challenges.

The previous *People Profession* survey was carried out between January and March 2020. Since then, the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a defining characteristic of the context of work for very large numbers of employees in the UK and Ireland, including people professionals. The impact of COVID-19 on work is therefore a very important consideration in this report. In addition, we investigate people professionals' organisational contributions and career progression, as well as what matters most to them in doing their work.

These are addressed through four overarching questions:

- What impact does the COVID-19 context have on people professionals' work? (**Section 5**)
- How do people professionals contribute to their organisation? (**Section 6**)
- What are the opinions of people professionals on their career progression? (**Section 7**)
- What matters most to people professionals in doing their work? (**Section 8**)

We incorporate several quotes from people professionals to add texture to our survey findings. These come from our focus group research earlier this year on workplace trends and cross-functional collaboration. Also, we compare our main findings with those of our survey last year in order to track changes across 2020 and 2021, mainly in **Sections 7** and **8**. Finally, we draw key conclusions and call on people professionals to capitalise on their newly elevated organisational position and, moving forward, contribute to the future shape of work and the profession (**Section 9**).

The report is based on annual survey research, which is an integral part of the CIPD work on [the people profession now and for the future](#). In this work, we aim to inspire, equip and support people professionals to position themselves at the heart of business to drive positive change so that there is [good work](#) and [job quality](#) for all. Our commitment is to [support a global profession](#).

5 What impact does the COVID-19 context have on people professionals' work?

5.1 External forces of change

In short

- External drivers and disruptors are creating change within organisations, 63% of our UK and 51% of our Ireland respondents tell us. COVID-19 and societal change are the main forces.
- Digital and technological transformation is generating change too, according to 63% and 60% of UK and Ireland practitioners respectively.

In detail**COVID-19 and societal change**

Most people professionals in our survey reported that change is being created, first and foremost, by external drivers and disruptors, such as COVID-19 and societal change. Specifically, 63% of UK and 51% of Ireland respondents identified this trend. In the UK, this is the case for the clear majority of smaller and large organisations in the private and public sectors, and slightly more (71%) in the third sector. In Ireland, around half of practitioners in smaller and large organisations in the private and public sectors report external drivers and disruptors as the main trend creating change for them. (Note: we use the terms ‘people professionals’ and ‘practitioners’ interchangeably.)

The root of these results is highly likely to be the initial COVID-19-induced lockdowns in late March 2020 in both the UK and Ireland. However, well over a year later, our survey results show that the consequences are still being experienced by people professionals in their work. HR practitioners are recognised as being at the heart of organisational responses to the pandemic (Collings et al 2021). In Ireland in particular, responding to the pandemic and related economic uncertainty is a top priority for people professionals this year and for 2022, as explained in the CIPD [HR Practices in Ireland 2021](#) report.

Directly related to the COVID-19 context is the continuation of working from home for many employees, a large-scale work and societal change. Homeworking was a sudden switch of workplace in March 2020, in the UK and Ireland alike. The Office for National Statistics (ONS 2021) in the UK flags that *‘the proportion of working adults who did any work from home in 2020 increased to 37% on average from 27% in 2019 with workers in London the most likely to homework’*. The Economic and Social Research Institute in Ireland states that, pre-COVID-19, 14% of employees worked from home and that extending homeworking in the future will protect jobs and help limit further COVID-19 outbreaks (Redmond and McGuinness 2020).

‘[COVID-19] has probably helped us accelerate the likes of hybrid and remote working quite substantially over the last 18 months. I think it’s brought us forward about 4 or 5 years.’

**People professional participating in workplace trends and cross-functional collaboration
CIPD research, 2021**

Working from home has now become an established type of working, as has remote working, for large numbers of employees (ONS 2021). However, the majority of employees have not worked from home in the past year or so, but they too have been affected by the COVID-19 context, albeit in different ways. For example, health and safety concerns alongside operational complexity have been workplace impacts. People professionals have been involved in dealing with these workplace issues too. These issues may have been heightened in key workers’ organisations. Another factor affecting millions of jobs has been work furlough, namely the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme in the UK (Gov.UK 2021) and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme in Ireland (Revenue, Irish Tax and Customs 2021).

People professionals are central to this initially compulsory workplace change, having supported and managed non-workplace employment for their organisations’ employees. Simultaneously, many converted to working in this way themselves, so homeworking has had a double impact. Added to the double impact is the disproportionate effect of homeworking on women in increasing their domestic workload (Adisa et al 2021).

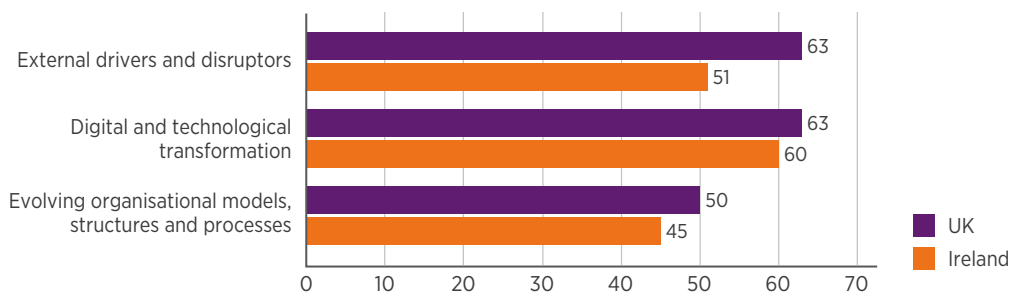
According to our [People Profession in Numbers](#) data, 60% of those working in the profession are female, so this is noteworthy. In the UK, 72% of our respondents are female and in Ireland 63%.

‘COVID-19’s impacts on workers and workplaces across the globe have been dramatic’ (Whillans et al 2020, p1). Hence, we shouldn’t underestimate the compounded pressure people professionals have been under, in particular women. This applies not only in their work but also in their daily lives, when higher levels of COVID-19-related anxiety were prevalent in society (Shevlin et al 2020). Relaxation of pandemic restrictions in the UK and Ireland over the summer of 2021 may have relieved some societal pressure, as previous lifting of lockdown measures has been found to do (The Health Foundation 2020).

Digital and technological transformation

The second main trend we find is that digital and technological transformation has created change in organisations and enabled the switch to large-scale home and remote working. It’s estimated that, in late 2019, a little more than 5% of employees regularly worked remotely (Leonardi 2020). Reflecting the enormous movement to off-site working in March 2020, daily active users of Microsoft Teams more than doubled between November 2019 and March 2020 (ibid). In our survey, the trend of digital and technological transformation was indicated by 63% and 60% of UK and Ireland practitioners respectively, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1: External drivers plus digital and technological transformation are changing organisations
Top three trends creating change (%)



Base: UK: n=1,504; Ireland: n=168
 (Question: ‘Which of the following trends, if any, are creating change within your organisation? Tick all that apply.’)

‘There’s no doubt that the global pandemic has altered the reality for millions [of people] and redefined where we work and how work gets done. I think the rise of ... what used to be called artificial intelligence is just now called digital. It’s not optional. Digital is here and the collaboration tools and all of that are here to stay.’

People professional participating in workplace trends and cross-functional collaboration
CIPD research, 2021

Work intensification – that is, a greater amount of work effort – can be intrinsic to digital work (Shankar et al 2021), signalling another potential pressure point for people professionals.

Evolving organisational models, structures and processes

The third change creator is evolving organisational models, structures and processes, most likely connected and consequential to the other two trends. It is apparent from our findings here that organisations are continuing to reconfigure and restructure, principally as a response to COVID-19. People professionals are very likely to be involved in managing ongoing change, such as back-to-workplace transitions, to support new organisational forms. We'll continue to investigate trends in the ever-changing world of work.

5.2 Effects of change in organisations

In short

- 55% of people professionals in the UK, and 50% of those in Ireland, agree that supporting employees' mental health and wellbeing has become more difficult due to employees working from home.
- For 45–48% of all of our respondents, building organisational culture and values, and managing performance, have also become more difficult.

In detail

Supporting employees' mental health and wellbeing

Recognising the enduring impact of the pandemic, we asked people professionals to indicate how aspects of their work have changed due to COVID-19-induced homeworking. First, supporting employees' mental health and wellbeing is found to have become more difficult for most people professionals (55% of respondents in the UK and 50% in Ireland). This applies across organisations of different size and sector, with the exception of one result from Ireland. Here, a rather higher proportion (48%) of responses is found in organisations of 250 employees or more than the responses (41%) in smaller organisations.

In Ireland, there is evidence that the psychological wellbeing of working mothers in particular has been negatively impacted by COVID-19, as they took on additional and disproportionate caring responsibilities on top of their work (Clark et al 2020). In a similar vein, in England, the harder impact of the pressures of remote working on women has been commented on (Ferber and Swindells 2021).

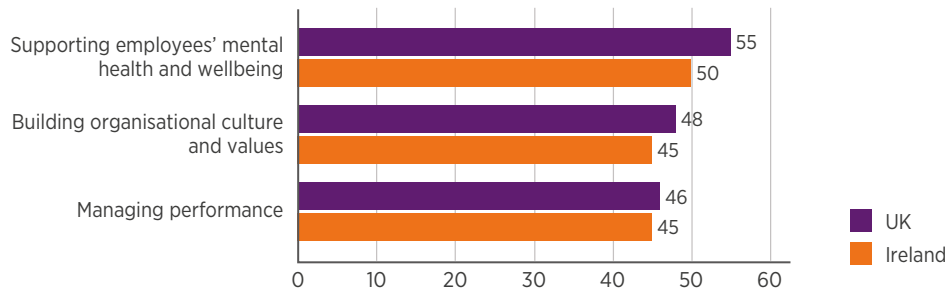
Supporting employees' mental health and wellbeing calls up the 2021 CIPD review on [Mental Wellbeing and Digital Work](#). Pressure on HR functions in organisational responses to COVID-19 may have affected the work-related mental health and wellbeing of people professionals.

Building organisational culture and values

The second biggest difficulty is building organisational culture and values (for 48% of UK practitioners and 45% of Ireland people practitioners across organisation sizes and sectors, with one exception). In the UK, the increased difficulty in the third sector is a little more pronounced (49% of respondents in this sector) than in the private and public sectors (at 42% and 44% respectively). The third biggest difficulty is managing performance, for 46% of UK and 45% of Ireland respondents, irrespective of organisation size or sector.

Figure 2 depicts the three most challenging, and most changed, aspects of people professionals' work in the UK and Ireland due to COVID-19.

Figure 2: Supporting employees' mental health has become more difficult
Top three difficulties in people professionals' work (% of respondents to each aspect of work)



Rebased to exclude 'Not applicable to my role' responses: Mental health and wellbeing: UK: n=1,355; Ireland: n=149; Organisational culture and values: UK: n=1,356; Ireland: n=150; Managing performance: UK: n=1,313; Ireland: n=154 (Question: 'Please indicate from the list below how aspects of your work as an HR/people professional have changed due to employees working from home because of COVID-19 lockdowns: Has become more difficult/No change/Has become less difficult')

Other challenges

Additionally, 45% of UK practitioners recorded that supporting line managers in managing their teams more effectively has become more difficult.

'We've really had to think differently about how we were helping and supporting our teams across the world in the last 18 months. ... I think a big thing for me [to realise] was the playing field is levelled across the globe. So everybody became virtual no matter what role they were in.'

People professional participating in workplace trends and cross-functional collaboration
CIPD research, 2021

Investing in learning, upskilling and professional development was also noted as more difficult by 41% of people professionals in the UK. In Ireland, the corresponding highest percentages show that 48% of respondents see no change in line manager support in managing their teams and 33% see no change in investing in learning, upskilling and professional development.

Although the difficulties detailed here were generated by lockdowns, they are very likely to persist as home and remote working continue, alongside hybrid working. Thus they present ongoing challenges in people professionals' work.

5.3 Drivers of change in organisations

In short

- Digital transformation technologies are the main driver of internal change, especially in large organisations. 65% of UK people practitioners and 62% of practitioners in Ireland report this.
- Demands for flexible working is the second biggest driver of internal change, according to 41% of UK and 35% of Ireland respondents.

In detail

Digital transformation

Reflecting the external forces of change covered in **Section 5.1**, our finding is that digital transformation is the main driver of change within organisations. The highest

proportion of responses among the three allowed to the question on this are across digital transformation and mobile technologies, as Table 1 details.

Table 1: Digital transformation is driving organisational change

Question: 'Which of the following are drivers of change in your organisation, if any?' (by highest percentage responses to the maximum of three allowed)	UK (%)	Ireland (%)
Digital transformation	37	36
Mobile technologies	28	26
Total digital transformation technologies	65	62

Base: UK: n=1,504; Ireland: n=168

Further, mapping technology – combining digital transformation and mobile technologies – and organisational size exposes that 41% of people professionals in large organisations in the UK consider that technology is a driver of change in their organisation. This is one of two statistically significant relationships on technology:

- 1 There is a significant relationship between organisation size and technology.² This means there is a statistical link between organisational size and the extent to which digital technology is driving change. In large UK organisations, 41% of practitioners consider technology is a change-driver. People professionals in larger organisations (250 or more employees) are more likely to see digital transformation as a driver of change than those in smaller organisations (43% compared with 25% of all survey respondents). In Ireland, 47% of all respondents in large organisations note technology as a driver compared with 26% in smaller organisations.
- 2 A second significant relationship is found in the UK between work sector and technology.³ There are comparable responses from respondents in private and public sectors (23% and 22% respectively) who believe that technology is an organisational driver of change. In Ireland, 35% of all private sector people professionals and 38% of public sector professionals believe that digital transformation is a change driver in their organisations.

Demands for flexible working

Demands for flexible working, specifically flexibility in time and place of work, is the second main driver of organisational change. In the UK, 41% of respondents note this, as well as 35% in Ireland. Such demands occur slightly more in large than smaller organisations in the UK (at 43% and 39% respectively) than in Ireland (40% and 28% respectively). Two significant relationships are found with flexible working:

- 1 The demand for flexible working and work sector relationship is significant.⁴ In the UK, 19% of practitioners in the private sector and 17% in the public sector consider that the demand for flexible working is an organisational driver of change.
- 2 Furthermore, in the UK, there is a statistically significant relationship⁵ between demand for flexible working and sex. Thirty-one per cent of female practitioners, and only 10% of male practitioners, state that demand for flexible working is an internal change driver. Most employees who worked flexibly pre-COVID-19 were women (Nicks et al 2019). Post-pandemic, however, flexible working may expand to span sexes due to home, remote and hybrid working arrangements (Chung et al 2021).

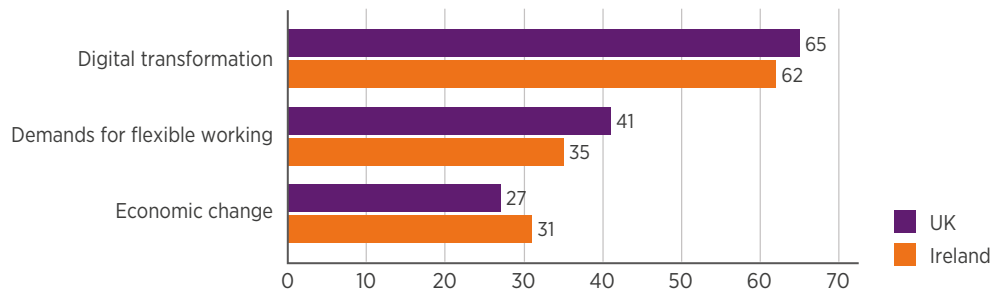
Economic change

The third highest driver of change in organisations, again in both Ireland (for 31% of respondent people practitioners) and the UK (27%), is economic change. In light of the

drastic disruption to the economies of Ireland and the UK brought about by the COVID-19 context, this is unsurprising. There is some optimism about the recovery of the Irish economy (McQuinn et al 2021), while forecasters are more cautious about how the UK economy will emerge from COVID-19 (Küçük et al 2021).

Figure 3 illustrates the findings on the top three drivers of change.

Figure 3: Internal change is driven most by digital transformation
Top three drivers of organisational change (% of respondents to each driver)



Base: UK: n=1,504; Ireland: n=168
 (Question: 'Which of the following, if any, are drivers of change in your organisation?' (maximum of three responses))

In contrast, our 2020 survey found that economic change was the primary driver of organisational change, as Table 2 details. Digital transformation alongside industrial change and organisational agility were the two other main drivers of change. Notably, the response rates (37% and 40%) on digital transformation in 2020 are markedly less than the rates (65% and 62%) in 2021, as shown in Figure 3.

Table 2: Top three drivers of organisational change (2020)

In-house professionals (%) (UK and Ireland)		Independent professionals (%)	
Economic change	40	Economic change	45
Digital transformation	37	Industrial change and organisational agility	40
Industrial change and organisational agility	34	Digital transformation	32

Base: in-house: n=1,368; independent sample: n=204
 (Question: 'Which of the following, if any, are drivers of change in your organisation?' (maximum of three responses))

In light of the findings in this section overall, it is unsurprising that 53% of our respondents in Ireland either agreed or strongly agreed that the role of the HR/people function is changing significantly in their organisation, irrespective of size and sector. The comparable UK figure is 40%. Though not a majority finding, it still signals a notable amount of change in the role of people functions represented by our UK respondents. (Only 19% of UK respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that there is significant change in their people function.)

5.4 Upskilling and professional standing of people professionals

In short

- Due to organisational responses to COVID-19, 50% of professionals in the UK and 49% of professionals in Ireland report that they have had to upskill. Factoring in the need to reskill, 61% and 67% in the UK and Ireland respectively have extended and added to their HR skills.
- In the UK there are statistically significant relationships between upskilling and work sector, organisation size, type of HR role in organisation and sex.
- The standing of people professionals has increased, according to 48% of respondents in Ireland and 43% in the UK.

In detail

Adding to HR skills

We asked practitioners about their HR skills changes as a result of our respondents' organisational response to COVID-19. Our 2020 survey found, around the time of the initial lockdowns in the UK and Ireland, that 83% of practitioners believed that their skills (then) corresponded well with their duties and that they had the skills to cope with more demanding duties. However, we anticipated that people professionals may have had to step up in their skills given the exigencies of the pandemic. The resultant responses are indeed revealing. Fifty per cent of our UK and 49% of our Ireland respondents stated that they have indeed had to upskill, deepening or extending their existing HR skills in their usual area of work. Also, 11% of UK and 18% of Ireland respondents have had to reskill (learn entirely new HR skills in a different area of work). Taken together, 61% of practitioners in the UK and 67% of practitioners in Ireland have had to change their skills vertically or horizontally, as shown in Table 3.

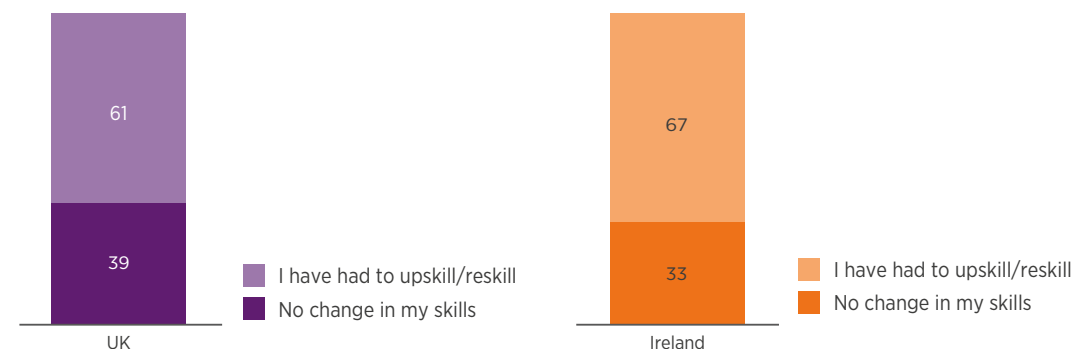
Table 3: People professionals' upskilling and reskilling

Question: 'Which of the following statements best describes how your HR skills have changed, if at all, as a result of your organisation's response to COVID-19? I have had to upskill/I have had to reskill/There has been no change in my skills.'	UK (%)	Ireland (%)
I have had to upskill	50	49
I have had to reskill	11	18
Total upskilling and reskilling	61	67

Base: UK: n=1,504; Ireland: n=168

We include the total of upskilling and reskilling in Figure 4 to highlight that roughly twice as many respondents have had HR skills change compared with no change in HR skills.

Figure 4: High levels of change in HR skills have occurred
People professionals' skills change (%)

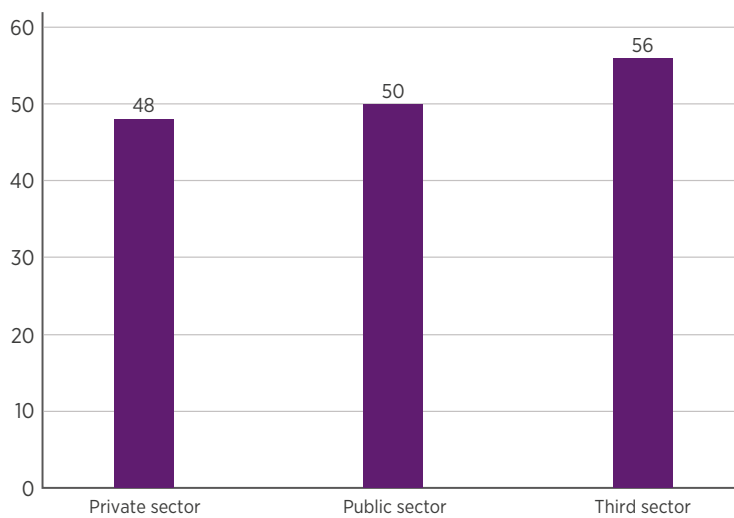


Base: UK: n=1,504; Ireland: n=168

The upskilling responses are particularly significant in the UK. We find significant relationships, statistically speaking, in work sector,⁶ organisation size,⁷ type of people practitioner role⁸ and sex.⁹ One by one, we delineate the descriptive statistics – distribution of percentage responses – which are associated with each of the significant relationships:

- 1 By work sector crossed with upskilling, 24% of private sector and 19% of public sector practitioners state that they have had to upskill. Across the survey results in their entirety, there is a broadly even spread of total responses across private, public and third sector people professionals, as portrayed in Figure 5, ranging from 48% in the private sector to 56% in the third sector.

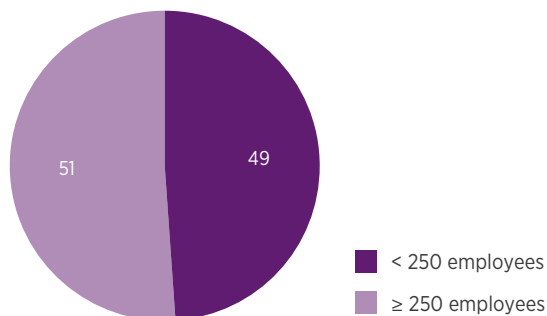
Figure 5: The third sector has seen the greatest upskilling (UK)
Upskilling across sectors in the UK (%)



Base: UK: n=1,504

- 2 In organisation size (Figure 6), there is a nearly equal spread of upskilling responses of all practitioners stating that they have had to upskill in large (250 employees or more) and smaller organisations (fewer than 250 employees). The cross-tabulation yields a figure of 34% of practitioners noting the need for them to upskill.

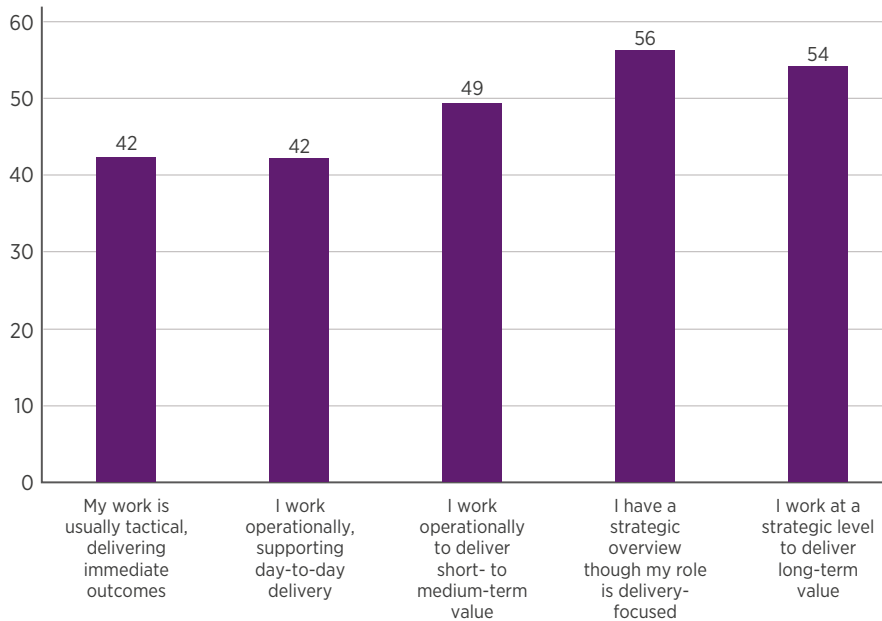
Figure 6: Upskilling has occurred in organisations of all sizes (UK)
Upskilling in UK larger and smaller organisations (% of respondents)



Base: UK: n=1,504

3 In upskilling and type/level of HR role, there is a wide distribution of total responses in our survey across all roles (see Figure 7). The range is from 42% in both tactical and day-to-day operational roles to 56% in the delivery-focused, strategic overview role. In the cross-tabulation analysis, 19% of people professionals with a strategic overview, delivery-focused role have had to upskill.

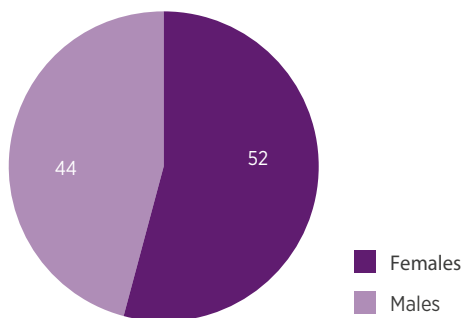
Figure 7: Skills have increased in all HR roles (UK)
Upskilling by type of role in the UK (% of respondents in each HR role)



Base: UK: n=1,504

4 Last but not least, in relation to the sex variable, in the total survey responses, the proportion of all female respondents telling us that they have upskilled is higher (at 52%) than the proportion of males (at 44%), as shown in Figure 8. Cross-tabulating the upskilling variable by sex reveals that 37% of female practitioners and 12% of male practitioners have upskilled.

Figure 8: More female people professionals have upskilled (UK)
Females' and males' upskilling in the UK (% of respondents)

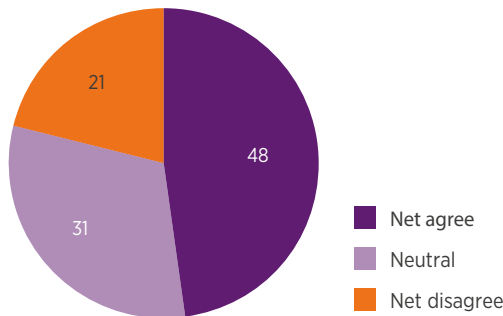


Base: UK: n=1,504

Increased standing of people professionals

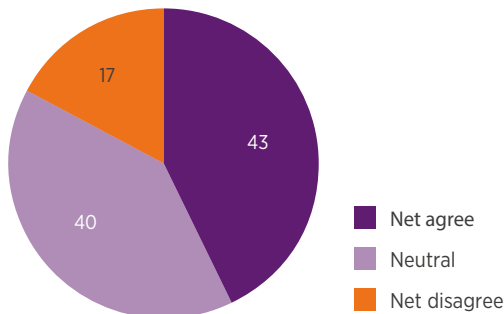
In addition, 48% of surveyed people professionals in Ireland agree/strongly agree that the standing of HR/people professionals has increased in their organisation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, opinions are more divided among UK professionals, with 43% agreeing/strongly agreeing and 40% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Figures 9 and 10 represent the percentage net agree, neutral and net disagree responses for each country.

Figure 9: People professionals in Ireland see their standing increase in organisations
Increased organisational standing in Ireland (%)



Base: Ireland: n=168
 Net agree = Agree and Strongly agree responses; Neutral = Neither agree nor disagree responses;
 Net disagree = Disagree and Strongly disagree responses

Figure 10: Professional standing has increased in organisations in the UK
Increased organisational standing in the UK (%)



Base: UK: n=1,504
 Net agree = Agree and Strongly agree responses; Neutral = Neither agree nor disagree responses;
 Net disagree = Disagree and Strongly disagree responses

In the UK, the cross-tabulation of the increase in organisational standing question and type of HR role in the organisation demonstrates that 17% of people professionals who have a delivery-focused, strategic overview role agree or strongly agree that their standing has risen. This is another significant relationship.¹⁰ In the overall survey responses, 30% of males and 34% of females hold a delivery-focused, strategic overview role. (There are also five 'Other'/'Prefer not to say' responses.)

A further significant relationship, this time with sex,¹¹ is found with the increased standing question in the UK. Here, 33% of female people professionals, though only 10% of male professionals, agree or strongly agree that their organisational standing has risen because of the pandemic. In the results as a whole, 46% of females and 37% of males either agree or strongly agree that people professionals' standing has increased in their organisation due to COVID-19.

6 How do people professionals contribute to their organisation?

6.1 Dimensions of the vital role of people functions

In short

- The HR/people function plays a vital role in influencing organisational strategy and direction, report 62% of people professionals in Ireland and 57% in the UK.

In detail

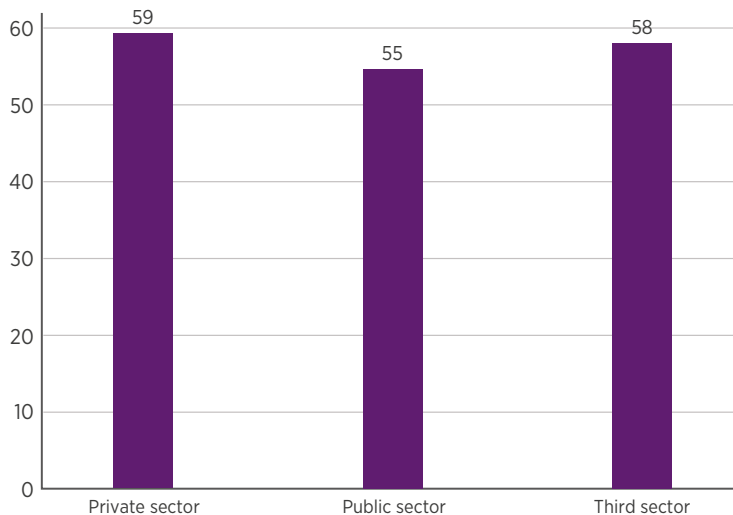
Influencing organisational strategy and direction

Sixty-two per cent of our respondents in Ireland and 57% in the UK affirm that the HR/people function plays a vital role in influencing organisational strategy and direction. It is apparent, then, that people professionals contribute to their organisations at a very high level in influencing strategy and direction. This is in keeping with practitioners' significantly enhanced HR skills and organisational standing, as explained in **Section 5.4**.

Moreover, we find three inter-relationships on the vital role of people functions in our UK survey data:

- 1 The first of these significant relationships is between the vital role and working sector.¹² In the cross-tabulation, 29% of practitioners in the private sector and 21% in the public sector agree/strongly agree with the statement that 'the HR/people function plays a vital role in influencing organisational strategy and direction in my organisation'. In our whole survey, the broadly similar percentages of agreement in the private, public and third sectors is specified in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Agreement on the importance of people functions spans UK sectors
The vital role of people functions in UK sectors ('net agree' %)

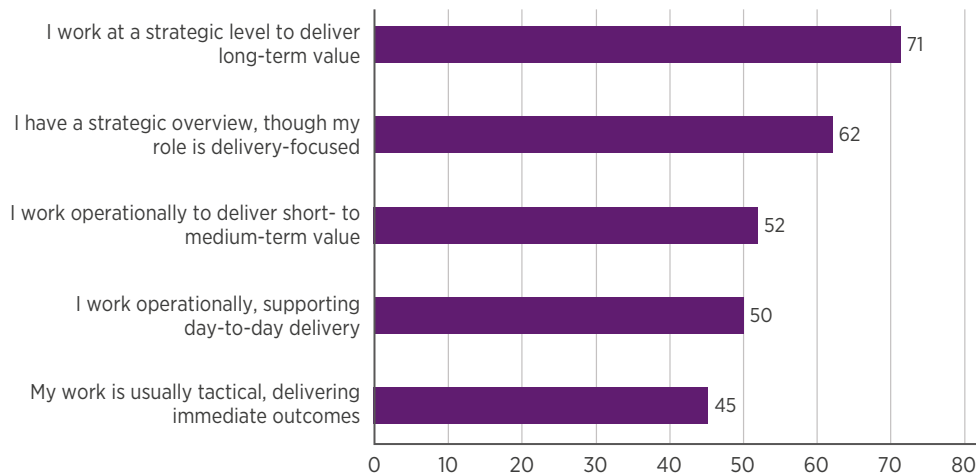


Base: UK: n=1,504
Net agree = Agree and Strongly agree responses

- 2 The second significant relationship lies between the vital role of the people function and UK respondents' organisational role.¹³ In this statistical relationship, 22% of practitioners who have a strategic overview, delivery-focused position agree or strongly agree that

the function plays a vital role in influencing organisational strategy and direction in their organisation. Figure 12 portrays the full range of survey findings for this question by percentage of net agree respondents in each HR role level. Interestingly, the higher the people profession role, the higher the percentage of agreement that the role of people functions is vital.

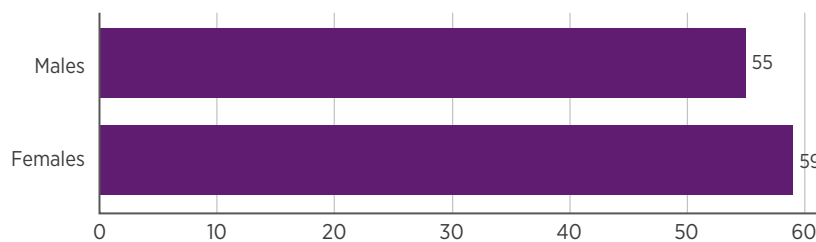
Figure 12: Agreement on the importance of people functions increases by role seniority in the UK
The vital role of people functions across levels of HR roles (UK) ('net agree' %)



Base: UK: n=1,504
 Net agree = Agree and Strongly agree responses

3 The third significant relationship is between the vital role of the people function and UK respondents' sex.¹⁴ Forty-two per cent of females and 15% of males agree or strongly agree with the statement on the people function vital role. In Figure 13, we visualise the net agree responses by sex for all of our UK respondents.

Figure 13: More female people professionals in the UK agree on the importance of the people function
The vital role of people profession functions by sex (UK) ('net agree' % by sex)



Base: UK: n=1,504; 'Other'/'Prefer not to say': n=5
 Net agree = Agree and Strongly agree responses

'How do we build on [positive changes to the HR function through COVID] ... and continue the evolution of HR?'

People professional participating in workplace trends and cross-functional collaboration
 CIPD research, 2021

6.2 Dimensions of the organisational contributions of people functions

In short

- In Ireland 67% of practitioners and in the UK 52% recognise key links between HR practices and business outcomes that are agreed across their organisation.
- Most respondents note that their HR/people function has a clear understanding of what success looks like in organisational outcomes; that is, 65% of respondent practitioners in Ireland and 58% in the UK.
- Most people practitioners have clear and agreed performance measures of success for organisational outcomes, specifically 63% of our respondents in Ireland and 51% in the UK.
- In the UK, 52% of our respondents consider that they add financial value to their organisation by supporting organisational effectiveness.
- Working collaboratively across business functions to meet business needs is reported by 73% of UK practitioners, particularly those with more experience and seniority. It's reported by 64% of Ireland practitioners.

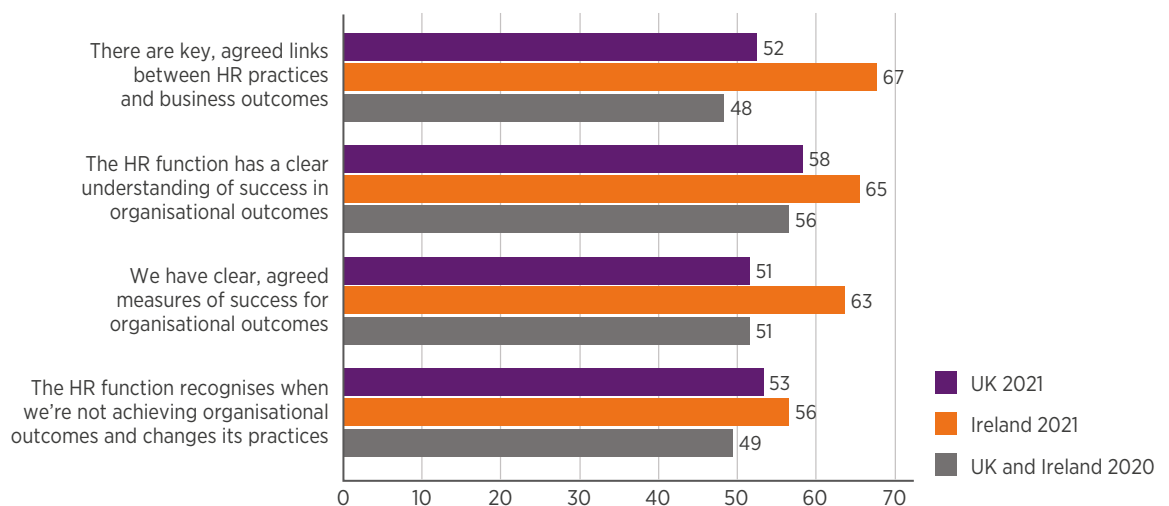
In detail

Focusing on organisational strategy and success

That people functions are focused on organisational strategy and success is evidenced by four more dimensions, which are detailed in Figure 14. The dimensions are on HR practices and business outcomes, understanding and measures of success in organisational outcomes, then changes to HR practices to achieve organisational outcomes.

We draw attention in Figure 14 to the higher levels of agreement among our respondents in 2021 compared with last year, and also to the higher proportion of agree or strongly agree in Ireland overall. The results here complement our findings in **Section 5.4** on the increase in people professionals' skills and organisational standing, underlining the enhanced organisational position of practitioners in general.

Figure 14: People functions are focusing more on organisational outcomes
Key aspects of organisational outcomes and success ('net agree' %)



Base: UK: 2021 n=1,504; Ireland: 2021 n=168; UK and Ireland 2020: n=1,368
 Net agree = Agree and Strongly agree responses

Adding financial value

Just over half (52%) of UK people professionals say they add financial value to their organisation by supporting organisational effectiveness. This is particularly the case for the majority of respondents with 6–15 years of experience in the profession (53%) and those with 16 or more years of experience (62%). In Ireland, 43% of people practitioners note this, a sizeable though not majority proportion.

Working collaboratively

In addition, 73% of UK professionals agree or strongly agree that their people function works collaboratively across business functions to meet business needs. The agreement stretches across business size, sector and types of HR role. However, it is especially so for those with more years of experience in the profession and for those with more seniority. For example, 78% of professionals with 16 years of experience or more and 85% of professionals working at a strategic level to deliver long-term organisational value are in agreement on their people functions working collaboratively.

In Ireland, 64% of our respondent professionals agree or strongly agree that their people function works collaboratively across business functions to meet business needs. There is a spread of responses by organisation and respondent characteristics. The combined UK and Ireland responses in 2020 yield a net agreement of 63%, very close to Ireland’s 64% this year but less than the UK’s 73% this year.

‘And although the world has become virtual, communication has definitely strengthened. ... We put in place additional touch points to allow that communication and collaboration to strengthen.’

**People professional participating in workplace trends and cross-functional collaboration
CIPD research, 2021**

Improving HR capability in organisations

Relatedly, working collaboratively features in the current priority areas for improvement across the HR capability in our respondents’ organisations in both the UK and Ireland. We show these in Table 4 to locate collaborative work as the top priority in Ireland, whereas it’s the fourth priority in the UK, by a very narrow margin (1%).

Table 4: Priorities in improving organisational HR capability

Question: ‘Which of the following, if any, are priority areas for improvement across the HR capability in your organisation?’ (by highest percentage responses to the maximum of three allowed)	UK (%)	Ireland (%)
Supporting line managers in their people management	41	29
Facilitating more flexible people operations across the business (eg hybrid work)	28	25
Organisational development and change management	25	n/a
Working collaboratively with colleagues throughout the organisation	24	30

Base: UK: n=1,504; Ireland: n=168

7 What are the opinions of people professionals on their career progression?

7.1 Career expectations and offerings

In short

- The expectations of 79% respondent people professionals in the UK and 78% in Ireland on their career progression have either been met or exceeded; this is up from 2020.
- Manager support and then skills development are the biggest aids to achieving career progression, for 61% and 55% respectively of UK people professionals in our survey.
- Skills development followed by manager support are the biggest aids to attaining career progression, for 62% and 45% respectively of people professionals in Ireland.
- The profession offers a meaningful career for 86% of UK and 79% of Ireland people professionals. In the UK, this is more than the 80% last year and significant in practitioner’s level of organisational role and sex.

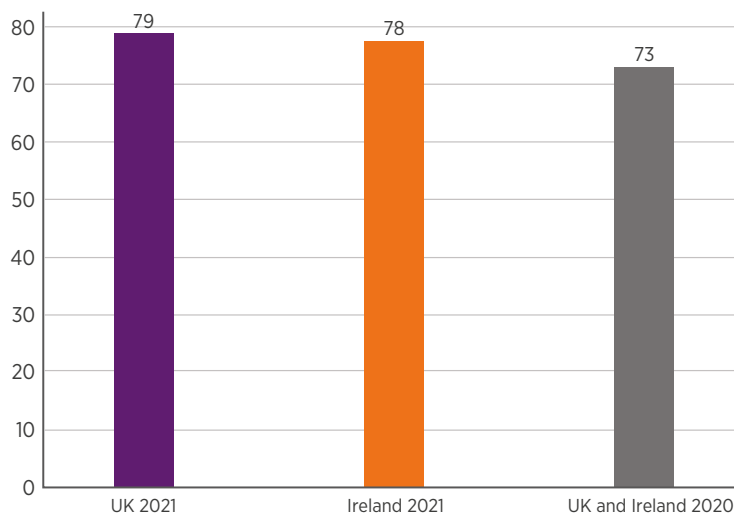
In detail

Expectations and supports of career progression

A large majority of people professionals in both the UK and Ireland (79% and 78%, in turn) state that their expectations have either been met or exceeded, as Figure 15 illustrates. Comparing the responses from 2020 with 2021, it’s notable that this very high level of agreement is slightly greater than the 2020 level of 73%.

Figure 15: Career progression is exceeding expectations

Attainment of career progression expectations: Met or exceeded career progression expectations (% of respondents)



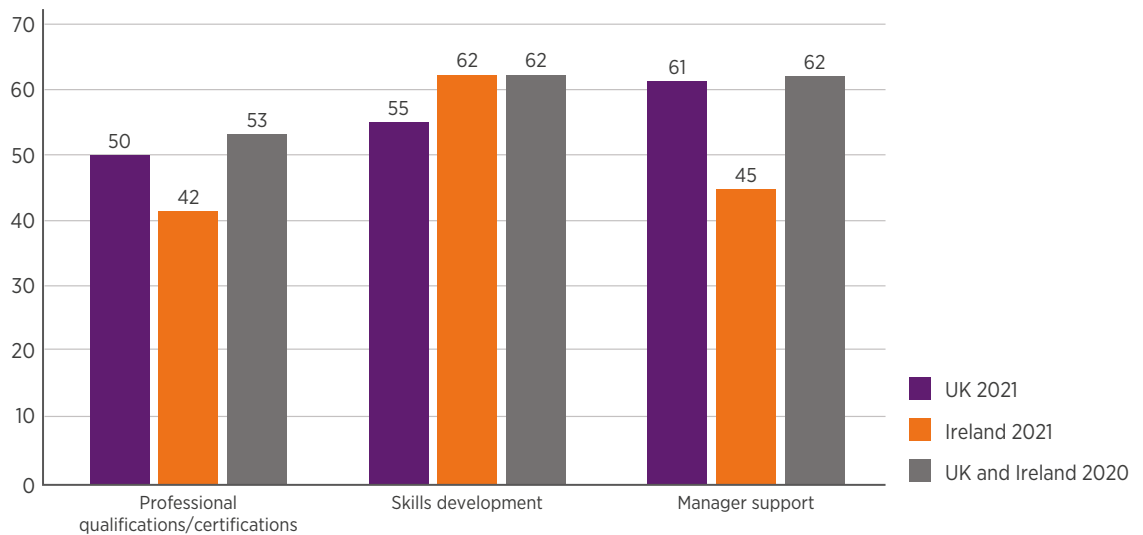
Rebased for 'I have no career expectations' responses: UK 2021: n=1,360; Ireland 2021: n=158; UK and Ireland 2020: n=1,264

Net expectations = Met and Exceeded expectations responses

(Question: 'Has your career progression to date met, exceeded or failed to meet your expectations?')

Principally, UK people professionals consider that manager support, skills development and then professional qualifications most enabled their career advancement, as set out in Figure 16. However, in the UK, the number of professionals in agreement on this has dipped fractionally in each enabler compared with last year, while in Ireland they have dipped in manager support and professional qualifications. Skills development is the top enabler in Ireland and overall in both Ireland and the UK.

Figure 16: Skills development is helping career advancement the most
Top three enablers of career advancement (% of respondents)



Base: UK 2021: n=1,504; Ireland 2021: n=168; UK and Ireland 2020: n=1,368
 (Question: 'If your career progression to date has met or exceeded your expectations, which of the following, if any, has helped you achieve career advancement? Tick all that apply.')

In contrast, the biggest barrier to career progression, like last year, is lack of personal confidence. This is a generally consistent finding across the UK and Ireland:

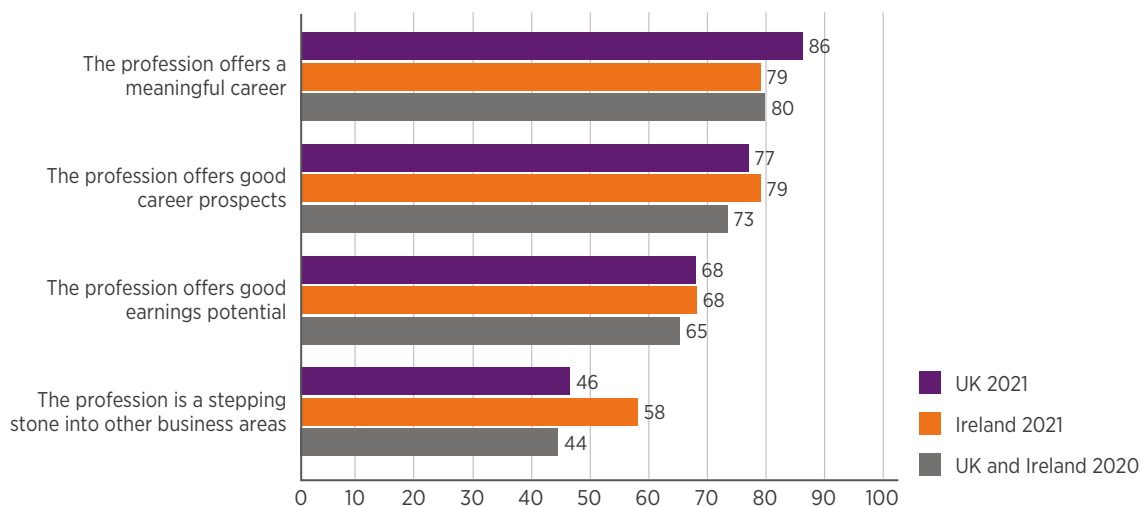
- UK in 2021: 19%
- Ireland in 2021: 20%
- UK and Ireland in 2020: 21%.

(Question: 'Which one of the following, if any, has been the single biggest barrier to advancing your career to date? Tick one only.')

Despite the lack of confidence barrier, high proportions of people professionals have positive opinions on what their profession offers. Figure 17 shows that, above all, the profession offers a meaningful career. This year in the UK, 86% of practitioners agree or strongly agree with this statement, which is more than the 80% of UK and Ireland practitioners last year and fractionally more than the 79% of Ireland practitioners this year. Most respondents are in agreement in 2021 and 2020 that the profession also offers good career prospects and earnings potential.

Figure 17: More practitioners believe the people profession offers a meaningful career and good career prospects

Positive opinions on offerings of the people profession ('net agree' %)



Base: UK 2021: n=1,504; Ireland 2021: n=168; UK and Ireland 2020: n=1,368
 Net agree = Agree and Strongly agree responses
 (Question: 'To what extent do you agree with the following statements?')

Moreover, we find two significant relationships on the profession offering a meaningful career in the UK:

- 1 Practitioners' level of organisational role and the meaningfulness of the profession is a significant relationship.¹⁵ Nearly a third (32%) of people professionals who have a strategic overview, delivery-focused role are in agreement.
- 2 Sex and the meaningfulness of the profession is another significant relationship.¹⁶ While 22% of males are in agreement, nearly three times as many females (64%) are in agreement that the profession offers a meaningful career.

Our analysis in this section highlights that very high opinions are held by practitioners, especially in the profession offering a meaningful career. Achievement of career expectations is very high too. Clearly, these are both very positive views and outcomes.

7.2 Actions in learning and development

In short

- In Ireland, 96% of our people professional respondents have taken part in learning and development activity in the last 12 months, mostly via virtual conferences and webinars (48%).
- In the UK, 89% of UK respondents have participated in learning and development activity – again, mostly via virtual conferences and webinars (58%).
- In both Ireland and the UK, a majority of practitioners have applied their learning in their work (74% and 64%, respectively) and reflected on what they have learned (51% and 52%, respectively).

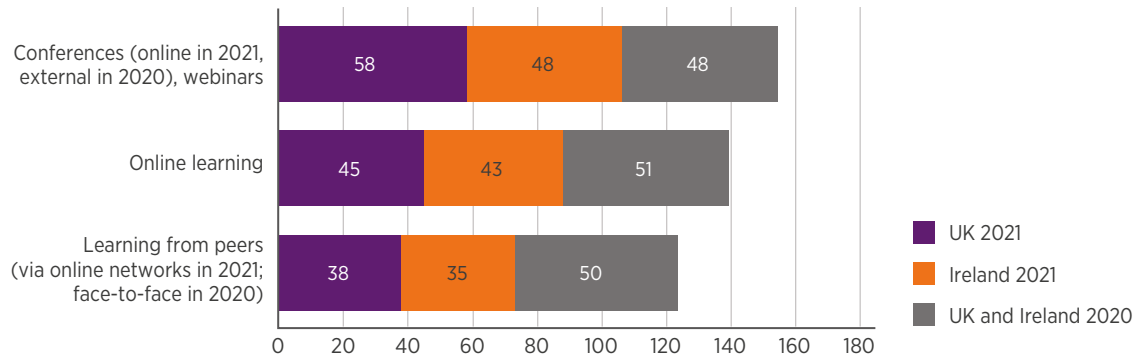
In detail

Learning and development activities

Nearly all the people professional respondents in Ireland, a remarkable 96%, tell us that they have undertaken some type of learning and development (L&D) in the past year.

In the UK, the percentage is very high as well at 89%. These activities again link to the upskilling and reskilling of people professionals as detailed in **Section 5.4**. Figure 18 gives a visual of the three main L&D activities undertaken by people practitioners in 2021 and 2020. Conspicuously, all of the activities this year are based on digital technologies, which is a driver and enabler of organisation change (**Section 5.1**) in the COVID-19 context.

Figure 18: Online conferences/webinars are the top source of learning and development
Top three learning and development activities (% of respondents)



Base: UK 2021: n=1,504; Ireland 2021: n=168; UK and Ireland 2020: n=1,368
(Question: 'In the last 12 months which, if any, of the following types of learning and development have you received? Tick all that apply.')

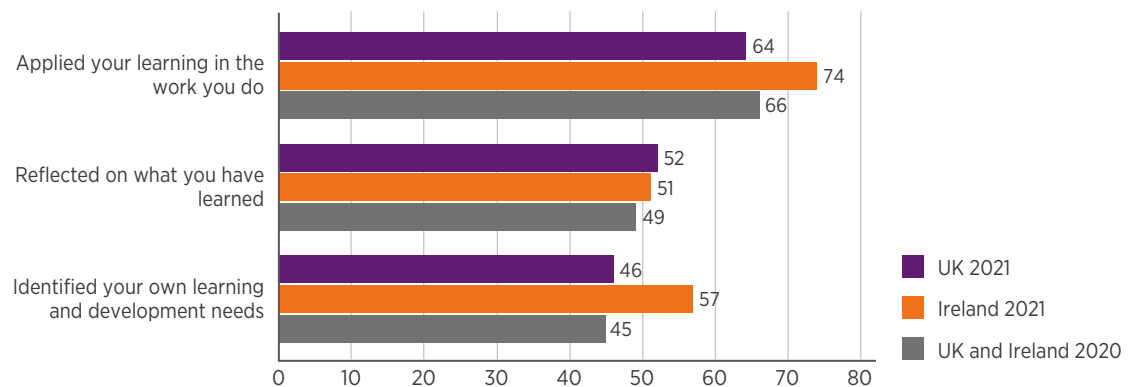
Professional development activities

We asked about the recency and frequency of practitioners' professional development actions. Our finding is that, in the past six months, they engaged in three principal actions often or very often. In Ireland and the UK, respectively, these are:

- application of their learning in their work (74% and 64%)
- reflection on their learning (51% and 52%)
- identification of their L&D needs (57% and 46%).

Each of these three actions, except application of learning in the UK, was undertaken more frequently than in 2020 in both countries but especially in Ireland. The application of learning in people professionals' work is the most frequent factor (74%) in Ireland, possibly because the largest group of respondents (42%) have five years of experience or less. (In the UK, 41% of respondents have 16 years of experience or more.) Figure 19 represents these findings.

Figure 19: Application of learning remains the top development action
Top three professional development actions (% of respondents)



Base: UK 2021: n=1,504; Ireland 2021: n=168; UK and Ireland 2020: n=1,368
(Question: 'Thinking about your own professional development in the past six months, how often have you done any of the following, if at all? Tick all that apply.')

Net 'Often' and 'Very often' responses

Another point of note here is that 70% of UK respondents who apply their learning in their work are CIPD members, whereas 58% of those who aren't CIPD members apply their learning in their work. In relation to learning and professional development on the whole, it's evident that people professionals in our survey are very proactive, which underpins their career progression. Their high level of activity is creditable in the COVID-19 context with the changes and challenges it has presented to practitioners, as discussed in **Section 5**.

It may also be an expression of their commitment to organisational outcomes and success (**Section 6.2**) and their belief in the vital role of the people function (**Section 6.1**). Our [Learning and Skills at Work Survey 2021](#) discusses the pressure on L&D budgets and the sudden change in L&D strategy because of the pandemic. Further, our report on the [Impact of COVID-19 on the L&D Profession 2021](#) surfaces the challenges and barriers that independent L&D practitioners have faced. These reports underline how commendably well people professionals in our survey have done to maintain their learning and professional development over the past year.

8 What matters most to people professionals in doing their work?

8.1 Personal purpose and meaning

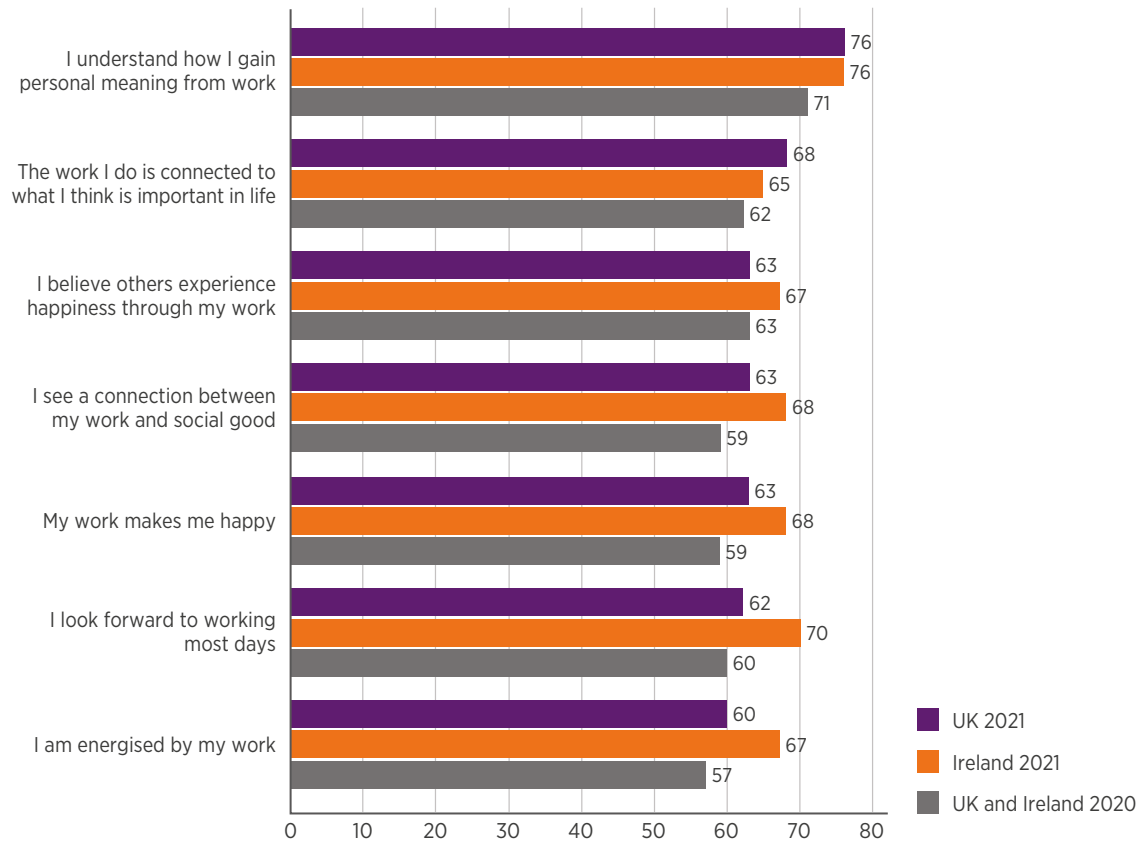
In short

- In the UK and Ireland, 76% of respondents gain personal meaning from their work, more than in 2020.
- In the UK for 68% and in Ireland for 65% of our respondents, the work of people professionals connects to what they think is important in life, an increase on last year.
- A connection between practitioners' work and the larger social good of their communities is reported by 68% of people professionals in Ireland and 63% in the UK, up on last year.
- Professionals in Ireland derive happiness (68%) and energy (67%) from their work, more than in 2020.
- Work makes 63% of professionals in the UK happy and energises 60% of them, more than last year.
- Practitioners consider that they contribute to improving people's job quality and working lives in the UK (65%) and in Ireland (63%).

In detail

The standout finding in personal meaning is that 76% of people professionals in our survey, in the UK and Ireland alike, agree on their understanding of how they gain personal meaning from work (a 5% increase on last year). We find more increases in the survey results from last year in every aspect of personal meaning derived from work that we enquired about, except for the belief, among UK respondents, that others experience happiness through their work. The measure here is static at 63% in the UK and Ireland in 2020, and 63% in the UK in 2021. Figure 20 charts our findings in seven dimensions of meaning within people professionals' work.

Figure 20: Over three-quarters of practitioners understand how they gain personal meaning from work
Personal meaning in work ('net agree' %)



Base: UK 2021: n=1,504; Ireland 2021: n=168; UK and Ireland 2020: n=1,368
 Net agree = Agree and Strongly agree responses
 (Question: 'To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?')

Work as a source of happiness (for 68% in Ireland and 63% in the UK) and energy (for 67% in Ireland and 60% in the UK) is also a little higher than we found for practitioners last year. Similarly, 70% of people professionals in Ireland and 62% of professionals in the UK look forward to working most days, which is more than in 2020 (60%).

Additionally, we discover that practitioners consider that they contribute to improving people’s job quality and working lives in the UK (65% of respondents) and in Ireland (63%). (This question was not posed in 2020.) In this finding and the others covered earlier in this section, work is therefore meaningful across a number of dimensions for most of our respondents. Possibly, because most people professionals believe in the vital role (**Section 6.1**) and organisational contributions (**Section 6.2**) of the profession, their work has become more purposeful for them.

8.2 Personal principles

In short

- Among UK practitioners, 83% are unlikely or very unlikely to compromise their principles when they affect their ability and progress, and 76% when pressurised by their line managers.
- In Ireland, 66% of people professionals are unlikely or very unlikely to compromise their principles when they affect their ability and progress.

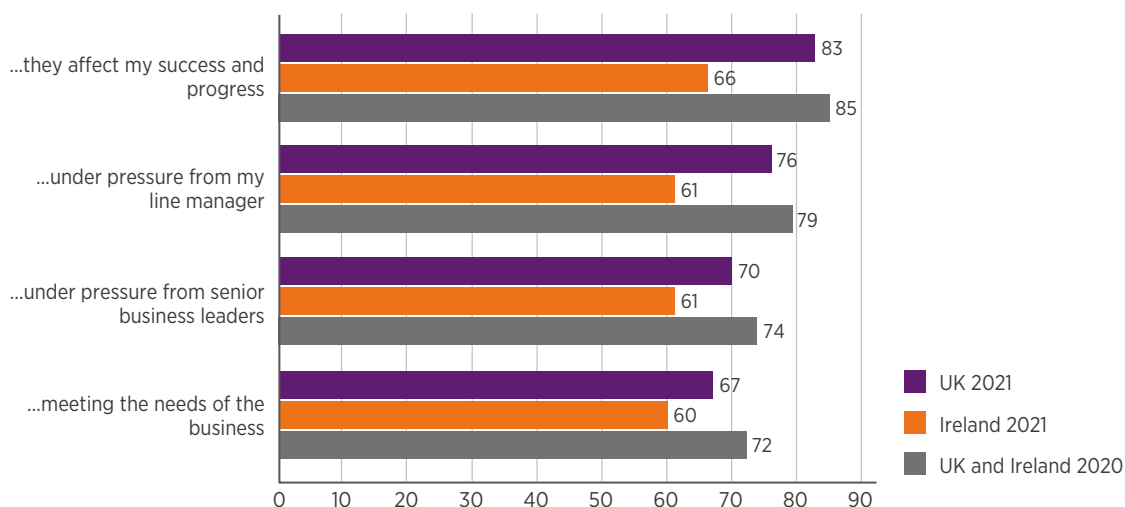
In detail

While the majority of people professionals are unlikely or very unlikely to compromise their personal principles, the percentages are slightly less than last year in the UK. In Ireland, the differences between this year and last are wider. Nonetheless, at least 60% of all respondents are unlikely or very unlikely to compromise their principles when they or the needs of the business are affected, or when under line manager and business leader pressure. Figure 21 shows these findings, with their small changes over the past two years, in detail.

Figure 21: Most people professionals are unlikely to compromise their principles

Personal commitment to principles

I compromise my principles when... ('net unlikely' % of respondents)



Base: UK 2021: n=1,504; Ireland 2021: n=168; UK and Ireland 2020: n=1,368

Net unlikely = Unlikely and Very unlikely responses

(Question: 'How likely or unlikely are you to compromise your principles in each of the following scenarios?')

Overall, it's apparent that people professionals remain personally committed to their principles, according to our survey. A further expression of their commitment this year could, possibly, be reflected in most reporting that there has been no change in addressing inequality and discrimination due to COVID-19. This is the case for 61% of UK respondents and 60% of Ireland respondents.

Our finding that most practitioners are uncompromising in their personal principles may, once more, reflect their belief in the vital role (**Section 6.1**) and organisational contributions (**Section 6.2**) of the profession. It may also reflect the centrality of principles in good practice HR work, to which the CIPD is committed.

8.3 People decisions

In short

- In the UK, 78% of our respondent practitioners exercise their professional experience and judgement a lot when making people decisions.
- In Ireland, 69% of people professionals draw on their professional experience and judgement a lot in their people decisions.
- Organisational/internal data is the second most frequently used source of evidence in people decisions in both the UK (63% of practitioners) and Ireland (56% of practitioners).

- The use of people data and analytics in the UK in 2021 is greater than in 2020, in being managed by the people function (49% compared with 33%) and in providing regular reports (46% compared with 33%).

In detail

The main source of evidence used by people practitioners in the UK and Ireland alike is professional experience and judgement. This evidentiary base is used a lot by 78% of UK respondents and 69% of Ireland respondents. Mostly, practitioners at a strategic level or with a strategic overview report this. We find that:

- In the UK, 89% of our respondents who work at a strategic level to deliver long-term value and 85% who have a strategic overview, delivery-focused role rely mainly on their professional experience and judgement in their people decisions.
- In Ireland, 77% of people professionals working at a strategic level and 81% of practitioners with a strategic overview role base their people decisions on their professional experience and judgement.

The second most commonly used source of evidence also applies to the majority of our respondents. Organisational/internal data is used a lot by 63% of UK and 56% of Ireland practitioners in making people decisions. A closer analysis of this finding reveals several more informative points:

- In the UK, a higher proportion of practitioners with a strategic element in their role use organisational data in people decisions than those with operational or tactical-level HR roles. This is so for 77% of those working at a strategic level and 70% of those with a strategic overview, delivery-focused role. Further, two-thirds (67%) of respondents who have had to upskill use organisational data a lot in their people decisions.
- In Ireland, the highest proportion of respondents (73%) who use organisational data in people decisions have a strategic overview, delivery-focused role. Further, 61% of people professionals who have had to upskill use this type of data a lot when making people decisions.

Table 5 illustrates two more dimensions of people decisions. More so than in 2020 (60% of respondents), the majority of people professionals (73% in Ireland, 68% in the UK) indicate that their people team focuses on defining the problem or issue before reaching a solution. Especially in Ireland (64%), though also in the UK (54%), HR leaders consult data evidence when faced with changes or challenges. As we discuss in **Section 5**, people professionals face continual changes and challenges.

Table 5: Practices in people decisions

Question: 'To what extent do you agree with the following statements?' (% of respondents)	UK 2021 (%)	Ireland 2021 (%)	UK and Ireland 2020 (%)
To inform decision-making, the people team focuses on defining the problem or issue before selecting or recommending a solution	68	73	60
When the organisation faces changes or challenges, our HR leader consults any relevant evidence and data insights we have on the issue to inform our future practice and possible solutions	54	64	54

Base: UK 2021: n=1,504; Ireland 2021: n=168; UK and Ireland 2020: n=1,368
Net agree = Agree and Strongly agree responses

Even so, we find there is potential for greater utilisation of people data and analytics. This assertion is supported by the following findings:

- 49% of UK practitioners and 34% of Ireland practitioners state that people data is managed by the people function, responding to management requests. However, this is more than the 33% for the UK and Ireland in 2020.
- 46% of professionals in the UK and 31% in Ireland state that their people function provides regular people data reports for their business (compared with 33% for both countries combined in 2020).

Conversely, a very positive interpretation of these findings is that the use of people data and analytics in the UK has increased notably since 2020. Nearly half (49%) of practitioners now say that data is being managed by the people function and 46% that the function is providing regular people data reports. In 2020, 33% of the combined UK and Ireland respondents reported using people data and analytics in these ways. Therefore, we draw attention to signs of greater use and reflection on the value of people data in practitioners' decision-making. Both are professional behaviours.

'What data do we need? What [data] do our leaders need? And actually, what does [the] HR function need?'

**People professional participating in workplace trends and cross-functional collaboration
CIPD research, 2021**

9 Conclusions

Our core conclusion is that the pandemic crisis context has had a substantial and sustained impact on people professionals' work in the UK and Ireland, as it disrupted the rhythm and regularity of our working lives. Practitioners have evidently worked in extenuating and exacting circumstances, founded on their resilience. Yet they have worked effectively and responsively, at the hub of organisational reactions to the shock event of COVID-19, according to our survey findings. In sum, our respondent people professionals have stepped up to extraordinary changes and challenges, while maintaining their principled professionalism.

Changes

We find significant evidence that people professionals have reacted commendably well to the effects of the COVID-19 context in managing a raft of changes. This includes adapting to the acceleration of digital transformation, which is recognised by a majority of our respondent practitioners as an internal driver of change. The uptick in digital work is likely to be a part of people professionals' upskilling. Most significantly, our findings show that most practitioners have upskilled – deepened and extended their HR skills – to contribute to organisational changes. Importantly, many report that they have increased their professional standing and that their people function now plays a vital role in influencing organisational strategy and direction. More than last year, practitioners consider that their people function focuses on organisational outcomes and success.

The pace of overall change has reduced recently, leaving space for more proactive changes. We believe that people professionals have the potential to be at the forefront and on the front foot in managing future changes. Practitioners tell us that their priorities

include supporting line managers in their people management, and working collaboratively with colleagues and business functions throughout their organisation to meet business needs. Therefore, there's potential for a higher level of business partnering for the people profession. At the same time, we encourage people professionals to stay alert to new changes and future trends, both externally and internally. Horizon-scanning is then integral to their work, not least to consolidate and build on their strategic perspective and organisational contributions.

Challenges

Our 2021 survey identifies specific aspects of the work of people professionals that have become more difficult due to the COVID-19 context. Supporting mental health and wellbeing is the most challenging aspect, as signalled by just over half of our respondents. The heightened awareness of, and need for, assisting mental wellbeing related to work is likely to have enduring effects and consequently remains a priority consideration for practitioners. This assertion is underlined by the sharp rise in digital work, which can both enhance and undermine work-related mental wellbeing. The conflicted relationship between mental wellbeing and digital work is influenced by work-related factors such as job control, working hours and work relationships, including workplace bullying, for example. People professionals have responsibilities in all of these areas, and they are therefore key to supporting employees' mental health.

We also find that people professionals recognise that building organisational culture and values, and managing performance, have become more challenging due to working from home. More remote working, physically and digitally, makes it harder to instil formal organisational culture and to manage individuals' performance. While building organisational culture and managing performance are established areas of people professionals' work, they are now more multifaceted due to the emergent workscapes. Hybrid, remote and hub-and-spoke (Walters 2020) forms of teleworking all potentially add complexity in managing work models. They are likely to become the new normal for large numbers of employees, who may be increasingly vocal about their preferences for places and types of flexible work. Alongside these specific challenges, more generally, people professionals continue to have a range of people management responsibilities. This presents a further challenge.

Attitudes towards work may have altered too since pre-pandemic times. More employees may be inclined to change their job, or leave work altogether for a period of time, if their psychological contract has reset. The potential for large numbers to quit their employment has been dubbed the '*turnover tsunami*' (Mullen 2021) and the '*great resignation*' (Morgan 2021). As a result, employee retention and talent planning may be upcoming challenges for some people professionals. Unpredicted challenges may also arise; however, practitioners have proved their capability and capacity to deal with these. Again, horizon-scanning may help in identification of, and planning for, future challenges.

Commitments

Reinforcing the ability of people professionals to continue to navigate changes and rise to challenges is, arguably, their professional commitment. A large majority of our respondents gain personal meaning from their work. In addition, most state that their work makes them happy and energises them. Given the context and nature of their work since March 2020, this is perhaps an unexpected finding. It implies a high level of personal and professional commitment.

We also find expressions of commitment to learning and professional development. The majority of people professionals recorded in their survey responses that they have identified their learning and development needs, reflected on what they have learned

– mostly online – and applied their learning in their work. Despite or because of the COVID-19 context, these professional development activities are generally similar to the level of activity found last year. Further, we find that the majority of people professionals are unlikely to compromise their principles in any circumstance we asked about. This professional behaviour includes when under pressure from line managers or business leaders and when meeting the needs of the business, even though they are more outcomes-driven. Lastly, a high percentage of practitioners exercise their professional experience and judgement a lot when making people decisions.

Organisational data is the second most used source of evidence for the majority of our respondents in people decision-making. Also, we find indications that people data and analytics are being utilised more this year than last, so evidence-based practice is increasing, albeit modestly. There is potential for greater development in this area, and we encourage people professionals to embrace evidence-based practice more. Still, it is clear that many people professionals are engaging with the CIPD values of being principles-led, evidence-based and outcomes-driven. These are the values we advocate in our [Profession Map](#), which sets the international benchmark for our profession.

In closing, we assert that our 2021 *People Profession* survey findings signal that the profession continues to be on the rise. We call on practitioners to maintain the recently generated momentum. People professionals are now well positioned to shape the future of the profession more strategically than previously. Focusing on longer-term technological transformations such as the use and impacts of artificial intelligence, robots and automation is very important, not least to alleviate workloads and provide data to inform people decisions. We urge people professionals to upskill on an ongoing basis and especially in improving capabilities in data analytics. The CIPD is here to support practitioners in making the profession future-fit with our cutting-edge [tools and resources](#).

10 References

Adisa, T.A., Aiyenitaju, O. and Adekoya, O.D. (2021) The work-family balance of British working women during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Work-Applied Management*. ISSN: 2205-2062.

Clark, S., McGrane, A., Boyle, N., Joksimovic, N., Burke, L., Rock, N. and O’Sullivan, K. (2020) ‘You’re a teacher, you’re a mother, you’re a worker’: gender inequality during COVID-19 in Ireland. *Gender, Work & Organisation*. Vol 28, No 4. pp1352-62.

Chung, H., Birkett, H. and Forbes, S. (2021) COVID-19, flexible working, and implications for gender equality in the United Kingdom. *Gender & Society*. Vol 35, No 2. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08912432211001304> [Accessed 28 September 2021].

Collings, D.G., McMackin, J., Nyberg, A.J. and Wright, P.M. (2021) Strategic human resource management and COVID-19: emerging challenges and research opportunities. *Journal of Management Studies*. Vol 58, No 5. pp1378-82.

Ferber, A. and Swindells, K. (2021) Inside COVID-19’s ‘lost year’ for women at work. *New Statesman*. 8 March.

Gov.UK (2021) Official statistics: Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: 1 July 2021. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-1-july-2021/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-1-july-2021 [Accessed 28 September 2021].

- Küçük, H., Lenoel, C. and MacQueen, R. (2021) UK economic outlook: emerging from the shadow of COVID-19. *National Institute UK Economic Outlook – Summer 2021*. Series A, No 3. pp6–22.
- Leonardi, P.M. (2020) COVID-19 and the new technologies of organising: digital exhaust, digital footprints, and artificial intelligence in the wake of remote work. *Journal of Management Studies*. Vol 58, No 1. pp249–53.
- McQuinn, K., O’Toole, C., Kostarakos, I. and Coffey, C. (2021) *Quarterly economic commentary, spring 2021* [Ireland]. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.
- Morgan, K. (2021) The great resignation: how employers drove workers to quit. *BBC*. Available at: www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210629-the-great-resignation-how-employers-drove-workers-to-quit [Accessed 28 September 2021].
- Mullen, C. (2021) A ‘turnover tsunami’ won’t hit every company. *Forbes*. 2 August. Available at: www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2021/08/02/a-turnover-tsunami-wont-hit-every-company/ [Accessed 28 September 2021].
- Nicks, L., Burd, H. and Barnes, J. (2019) *Flexible working qualitative analysis: organisations’ experiences of flexible working arrangements*. London: Government Equalities Office.
- Office for National Statistics. (2021) *Business and individual attitudes towards the future of homeworking, UK: April to May 2021*. London: ONS. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/businessandindividualattitudestowardsthefutureofhomeworkinguk/apriltomay2021 [Accessed 28 September 2021].
- Redmond, P. and McGuinness, S. (2020) Who can work from home in Ireland? *Economic & Social Research Institute: Survey and Statistical Report Series*. No 87.
- Revenue, Irish Tax and Customs. (2021) *Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme*. Available at: www.revenue.ie/en/employing-people/documents/ewss/guidelines-on-eligibility-for-ewss.pdf [Accessed 28 September 2021].
- Shankar, K., Phelan, D., Suri, V.R., Watermeyer, R., Knight, C. and Crick, T. (2021) ‘The COVID-19 crisis is not the core problem’: experiences, challenges, and concerns of Irish academia during the pandemic. *Irish Educational Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2021.1932550> [Accessed 28 September 2021].
- Shevlin, M., McBride, O., Murphy, J., Gibson Miller, J., Hartman, T.K. and Levita, L. (2020) Anxiety, depression, traumatic stress and COVID-19-related anxiety in the UK general population during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BJPsych Open*. Vol 6, No 6. www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bjpsych-open/article/anxiety-depression-traumatic-stress-and-covid19related-anxiety-in-the-uk-general-population-during-the-covid19-pandemic/50A4F50EF32B5D75C531B77FB913D53A [Accessed 28 September 2021].
- The Health Foundation. (2020) *Emerging evidence of COVID-19’s impact on mental health and health inequalities*. London: The Health Foundation. Available at: www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/emerging-evidence-on-covid-19s-impact-on-mental-health-and-health [Accessed 28 September 2021].
- Walters, R. (2020) *The future of work in UK and Ireland: futureproofing careers and workforces*. London: Robert Walters.
- Whillans, A., et al (2020) COVID-19 and the workplace: implications, issues, and insights for future research and action. *Working Knowledge – Business Research for Business Leaders*. Harvard Business School Working Paper No 20-127.

11 Appendix

Survey method

The CIPD now does an annual survey with in-house and independent people professionals. The purpose is to develop an evidence-based, contemporary insight into important dimensions of their work and opinions each year. The inaugural survey was carried out in 2018, the second survey in 2020 and the third now in 2021. (Previously, the CIPD conducted an *HR Outlook* survey biennially.)

We conducted the online 2021 *People Profession* survey in association with Workday. The dynamic content of the survey meant that, for the first time, in-house and independent professionals used the same weblink to complete the survey. The question wording was attuned to independents as appropriate through the survey, though we present the findings in the wording of the in-house respondents, as the number of them is much greater in our achieved sample (Table 6).

We derived the survey items mainly from the 2020 survey. Where the 2021 survey questions are the same as those in last year's survey, we are able to compare the results, selectively, in this report in line with our main findings. However, due to a low response rate from Ireland, the UK and Ireland results were combined in 2020 and they did not include independent practitioners. In our 2021 report, the results for the two countries are separate and they both include independent people practitioners, albeit in modest numbers in our achieved sample (Table 6).

For our 2021 survey we devised new, COVID-19-specific questions and responses in order to delve into the impact of the extraordinary pandemic context on people professionals. New questions on trends and sources of evidence were also included this year, informed principally by our People Profession 2030 report on future trends, published at the end of 2020. The survey was administered by YouGov in the UK from 17 May to 7 June 2021 and in Ireland from 17 May to 14 June 2021. The data collection period in Ireland was extended by a week to increase the number of respondents. The achieved samples are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6: Achieved survey samples

	Total	In-house	Independents
UK people professionals	1,504	1,418 (94%)	86 (6%)
Ireland people professionals	168	139 (83%)	29 (17%)

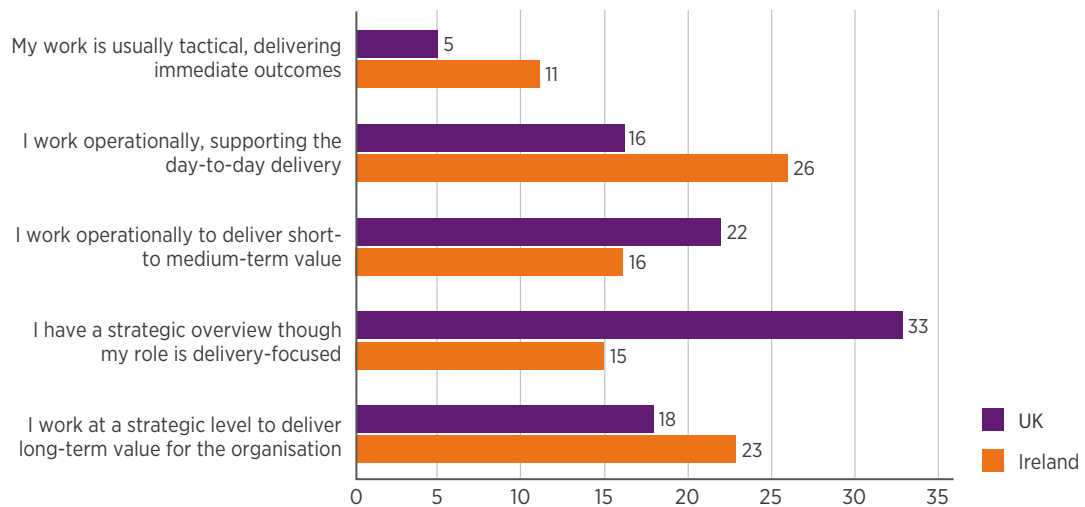
Due to the relatively low numbers of independent respondents, the results from in-house and independent respondents are combined this year. This was done after checking there were no substantial differences in the findings across the two groups. Data from the CIPD People Profession in Numbers indicates that 11% of people professionals work independently. The principal features of the largest groups of the respondents are delineated in Table 7.

Table 7: Profile of survey respondents

	Sex	Age	Years of experience in the people profession
UK (n=1,504)	72% female 28% male (5 'Other' or 'Prefer not to say')	53% 45+ years old	41% ≥ 16 years
Ireland (n=168)	63% female 36% male (1 'Other' or 'Prefer not to say')	43% 45+ years old	42% ≤ 5 years

It's notable that the UK and Ireland respondents' profiles above differ in years of experience in the profession. The largest group (at 41% of all respondents) of UK people professionals has 16 years' experience or more, whereas the corresponding group in Ireland has five years' experience or less. The other difference in the UK and Ireland respondents is in level/type of role contribution, as exhibited in Figure 22. The highest proportion (33%) of UK respondents work in a strategic overview and delivery-focused role, while the highest proportion (26%) of Ireland respondents work operationally. This reflects the UK respondents having more years of experience in the profession.

Figure 22: Level of HR role contribution
(% of respondents excluding 'None of the above'/'Other' responses)



Base: UK: n=1,504; Ireland: n=168

We represent the HR/people profession areas of our respondents in the UK and Ireland in Figures 23 and 24. Throughout this report, we use the terms 'people professional' and 'practitioner' interchangeably.

Figure 23: UK respondents' areas of people profession work (%)

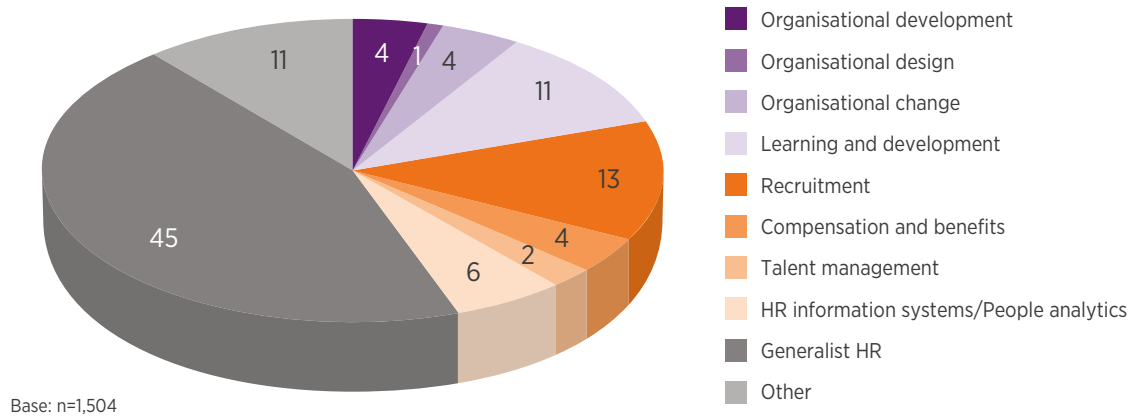
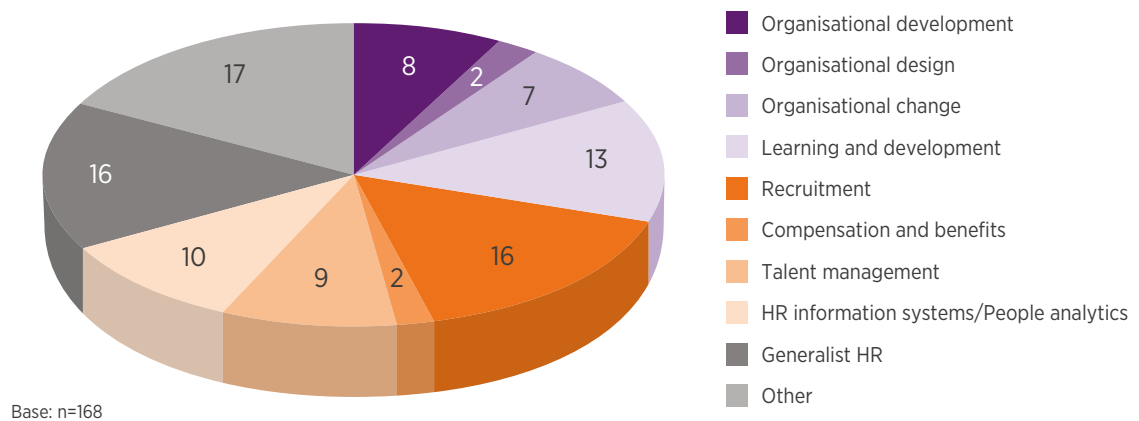


Figure 24: Ireland respondents' areas of people profession work (%)



Our analysis of the survey results includes descriptive statistics, where percentages are rounded to whole numbers. A few totals may be marginally less than 100% because of this rounding. Additionally, we ran Pearson chi-square tests on the UK data and, with its more modest response rate, Fisher's exact test on the Ireland data in order to identify statistically significant relationships. We cross-tabulated five variables with five key questions.

The variables are:

- management level
- work sector
- organisation size (<250 employees, ≥250 employees)
- type/level of HR role
- sex.

The key questions are on:

- upskilling
- drivers of change (digital transformation technologies and demands for flexible working)
- the standing of HR/people professionals
- the role of the HR/people function in influencing organisational strategy and direction
- the HR/people profession offering a meaningful career.

Fifteen significant relationships are found in the UK data, and none in the Ireland data. The absence of statistically significant difference in the Ireland data may be due, at least partly, to the relatively small achieved sample size and number of options in the questions.

12 Endnotes

¹ The demographic profiles of our achieved samples are summarised in the Appendix.

² Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 39.576$, $df = 3$, $sig = 0.000 < 0.05$).

³ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 21.550$, $df = 2$, $sig = 0.000 < 0.05$).

⁴ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 8.035$, $df = 2$, $sig = 0.018 < 0.05$).

⁵ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 5.050$, $df = 1$, $sig = 0.025 < 0.05$).

⁶ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 12.772$, $df = 4$, $sig = 0.012 < 0.05$).

⁷ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 24.131$, $df = 8$, $sig = 0.002 < 0.05$).

⁸ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 30.007$, $df = 12$, $sig = 0.003 < 0.05$).

⁹ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 7.417$, $df = 2$, $sig = 0.025 < 0.05$).

¹⁰ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 45.380$, $df = 16$, $sig = 0.000 < 0.05$).

¹¹ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 15.368$, $df = 4$, $sig = 0.004 < 0.05$).

¹² Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 18.229$, $df = 8$, $sig = 0.020 < 0.05$).

¹³ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 86.967$, $df = 16$, $sig = 0.000 < 0.05$).

¹⁴ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 16.728$, $df = 4$, $sig = 0.002 < 0.05$).

¹⁵ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 64.962$, $df = 16$, $sig = 0.000 < 0.05$).

¹⁶ Pearson chi-square ($X^2 = 23.663$, $df = 4$, $sig = 0.000 < 0.05$).

CIPD

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ United Kingdom
T +44 (0)20 8612 6200 **F** +44 (0)20 8612 6201
E cipd@cipd.co.uk **W** cipd.co.uk

Incorporated by Royal Charter
Registered as a charity in England and Wales (1079797)
and Scotland (SC045154)

Issued: October 2021 Reference: 8172 © CIPD 2021

