



# Socially Irresponsible HRM: Findings from the UK Hotel Sector

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## Abstract

This paper considers the value and extent to which socially responsible HRM enhances understanding of HR practices in the corporate hotel sector. The paper seeks to address two research questions. Firstly, what are the underlying management philosophies guiding models of HRM within the upper market corporate hotel sector? Secondly, how do the resultant HR practices impact the employee experience of work and well-being? Qualitative case studies were conducted in two high end hotels within the UK. Semi structured interviews ( $n = 30$ ) were carried out at various levels of the organisation to gain multiple perspectives, including frontline employees, line managers, senior management and HR practitioners. Investigation of the experiences of frontline employees uncovered evidence of a socially irresponsible approach to HRM in each case study. Hidden and deceptive management philosophies were uncovered that shaped the nature of the HR practices used, and resulted in negative outcomes for the well-being of employees. This paper extends the limited research base which has considered socially irresponsible HRM, and extends the concept by demonstrating the central role that management philosophy plays in determining the responsibility of an HRM approach. The paper also demonstrates the utility of SRHRM models in contexts where practices are rarely socially responsible.

**Keywords** Socially responsible HRM · Well-being · Hospitality

## Introduction

The matter of sustainability within the global hotel sector has attracted significant attention from not only from corporations (Jones et al., 2014), but increasingly from academics and policy makers. Policy initiatives such as the ILO's Decent Work Agenda have brought to the fore issues surrounding low wage and poor-quality work, which arguably sit at the centre of the sustainability agenda, given the myriad of UN Sustainable Development Goals which are underpinned by improved employment conditions (Baum et al., 2016). Reflecting this focus, over the last 20 years scholars had been increasingly interested in models of sustainable HRM (Aust et al., 2020). In particular, the notion of

socially responsible human resource management (SRHRM) has emerged from a body of research which considers how the principles of Corporate & Social Responsibility (CSR) are used to ensure the responsible and ethical treatment of workers (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). While research into SRHRM has been somewhat scattered and fragmented across disciplines, interest in this area has been building, with a notable surge in empirical research papers over the last five years (Aust et al., 2020; Omid & Dal Zotto, 2022; Richards, 2022).

Despite this upsurge, rarely have such models been used to investigate the irresponsibility of HRM practices. Furthermore, within the sustainability discourse, the matter of poor and exploitative employment practices in the hotel sector is often overlooked (Mooney & Baum, 2019). This paper is specifically concerned with HRM practices within the UK hotel sector, which is notorious for the creation of low paid and poor-quality jobs. Given its reliance on employees for service delivery, hospitality businesses should, in theory, be well placed to utilise sophisticated HRM strategies for competitive advantage, making use of a highly skilled workforce to pursue a high-quality strategy (Solnet et al., 2015). However, in practice, hard and cost

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cutting HRM has been the dominant approach, with the sector strongly associated with low pay, precarious work, and poor working conditions (Mooney & Baum, 2019). The use of unethical and irresponsible employment practices is commonplace within the sector, and from the employee perspective, these practices often materialise in the form of low pay, antisocial working hours and shift patterns, breaches of employment regulation, poor work-life balance, limited progression opportunities, informal recruitment methods, and casualisation (Ioannou & Dukes, 2021; Warhurst et al., 2008). The sector remains one of the largest employers of low paid work, second only to retail, with an estimated two thirds of workers paid less than the UK voluntary Living Wage (D'Arcy, 2018). The national minimum wage (NMW) has long since become the accepted norm within the sector for frontline workers, and with a historically loose labour market and lack of union presence, there has been little incentive for employers to increase wages or improve the quality of work (Lloyd et al., 2013). However, the sector is now facing significant challenges with recruitment and retention of staff in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit, and can no longer rely on a regular supply of low-cost migrant labour from Europe, with attendant concerns around worsening labour shortages (CERIC, 2021). Despite these challenges, there are limited signs that the sector has done anything to meaningfully address poor employment practices, and some have speculated that it is likely that these pressures will only serve to amplify the norm for hospitality workers, rather than act as a catalyst to improve job quality (Baum et al., 2020).

Given these ongoing challenges, this paper considers the value of debates about socially responsible or irresponsible HRM to shed light on HR practices in the upper market corporate hotel sector. More specifically, the aim of this research is to explore how SRHRM may add to our understanding of contexts which typically embody irresponsible employment practices. Thus, the paper seeks to address two research questions.

1. What are the underlying management philosophies guiding models of HRM within the upper market corporate hotel sector?
2. How do the resultant HR practices impact the employee experience of work and well-being?

In answering these questions, the paper makes a contribution to the limited body of research concerning socially irresponsible HRM (SIHRM).

### Conceptualising SRHRM

While research considering SRHRM has been somewhat scattered and fragmented across disciplines, several

comprehensive systematic reviews have emerged which have made considerable headway in refining conceptual frameworks (Aust et al., 2020; Omid & Dal Zotto, 2022; Richards, 2022). SRHRM has been conceptualised as a type of sustainable HRM which is more specifically concerned with the embedding of corporate social responsibility and business ethics into the routine practice of HRM (Aust et al., 2020; Richards, 2022). In this approach, the employee is viewed as a legitimate stakeholder who is highly dependent on the success of the organisation, and who invests heavily of themselves in the success of the organisation; therefore, the organisation has a responsibility to address their interests (Greenwood, 2007). Aust et al. (2020) characterise SRHRM as distinct from other categories of sustainable HRM in its purpose. Thus, socially responsible practices are directed at employees and those within their communities, as well as those indirectly employed in the supply chain, with the aim of improving the economic standing of the organisation through the minimisation of business risks and the negative impacts associated with irresponsible practices. Therefore, “for the HRM system to be seen as socially responsible it should address the interests of, and satisfy, both internal and external stakeholders” (Shen & Zhu, 2011, p3021).

One of the earliest models of SRHRM presented by Shen & Zhu (2011) argued that to address the needs of both employees and shareholders, and to ensure short and long term sustainability, three key components were required: legal compliance with labour regulation; employee-centred practices; and, CSR facilitation, where HR practices and policies enable the implementation of general CSR activities. Building on this model in their systematic review, Omid & Dal Zotto (2022) introduce a processual model of SRHRM (see Fig. 1), whereby the adoption of SRHRM practices are influenced by a wide range of external, firm-level and individual-level factors, which vary depending on the context of the organisation. The practices adopted are typically adapted from ‘traditional HRM functions’, in line with Shen and Zhu’s originally proposed ‘employee-centred’ practices, although both authors contend that for the employer’s actions to be considered socially responsible, they must go beyond basic compliance with employment law to offer an enhanced package of HRM, which improves the experience of work, allows employees to fulfil personal goals, and addresses societal concerns.

The adoption of SRHRM practices has then been argued to result in a wide range of societal, firm-level and individual-level outcomes. This paper is concerned with the individual-level outcomes for frontline employees, for which the key outcome of SRHRM is well-being (Richards & Sang, 2019). Despite its common use, well-being remains a complex and contested term, given its multi-dimensional nature and the variety of disciplines and settings in which the term is used (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017). In this study, the

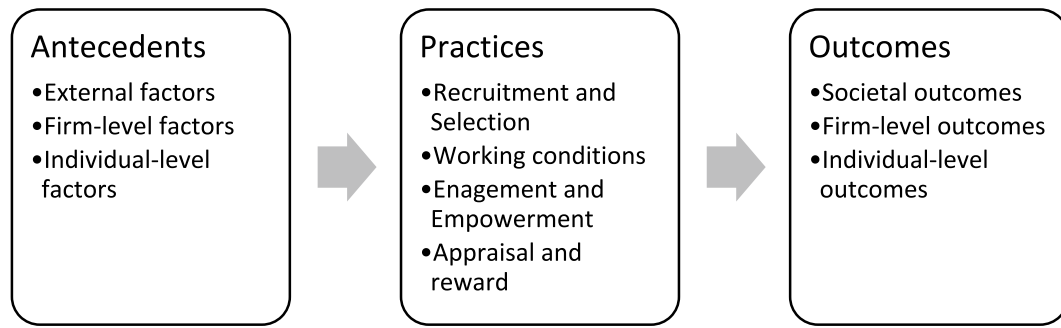


Fig. 1 SRHRM theoretical framework, adapted from Omid *et al.* (2022)

discussion is focused more specifically on employee well-being, which is defined by several authors as the overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work (Grant *et al.*, 2007; Kooij *et al.*, 2013; Warr, 1987).

### Critiques of SRHRM

SRHRM research tends to focus on 'employee-orientated HRM' which includes practices such as flexible working, work-life balance, training and development, voice, involvement and participation; however, these practices alone do not merit a socially responsible approach to HRM (Shen & Zhu, 2011). Numerous other studies have already demonstrated the linkages between HR practices, organisational outcomes and employee well-being (for examples, see Peccei *et al.*, 2013; Peccei & Voorde, 2019). As such, criticisms have been raised as to whether SRHRM offers anything distinctive from other well-established models and perspectives on employment (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). Furthermore, it is also often incorrectly assumed that SRHRM practices will lead to better outcomes for employees. Greenwood (2007) instead argues that the presence of high road HRM practices does not guarantee the ethical or fair treatment of workers, and nor does the absence of such practices necessarily mean that workers will receive poor treatment, because the use of such approaches in the furtherance of corporate objectives can still result in the organisation acting irresponsibly towards its employees. Here, responsibility is considered to be the extent to which the organisation acts in the interests of employees, in comparison to other more powerful stakeholders, such as shareholders. Therefore, it is the philosophy behind such practices and the outcomes for workers, rather than necessarily the practices themselves, which determine the responsibility of an HRM approach.

That said, research in SRHRM has often not managed to put forward a distinctive position with regards to management philosophy. Here, management philosophy refers to the set of beliefs, attitudes and values which shape and direct the decision making within an organisation towards its goals

(Wang, 2011). The management philosophy regarding the role of people in achieving competitive advantage has been a key differentiation between the models of HRM which have emerged since the 1980s. In the Michigan model, or hard HRM, labour is viewed as a resource like any other and as a cost to be minimised, with central importance placed on there being a close fit between HR strategy and business strategy, driven by a cycle of HR practices designed to improve performance (Tichy *et al.*, 1982). On the other hand, the Harvard model, or soft HRM, considers employees to be significant stakeholders in the firm, and as such, strategies are developed alongside the needs of employees. HR policies are designed to foster desirable outcomes, such as commitment, and longer-term consequences including individual, organisational and societal well-being. However, while greater consideration is given to the needs of employees, the soft model is still built around HR practices designed to improve organisational performance (Beer *et al.*, 2015). As such, some scholars are highly sceptical as to whether soft HRM really exists, given that the core philosophy still prioritises profit maximisation and a significant imbalance of power between shareholders and employees remains (Greenwood, 2002; Thompson, 2011).

Sustainable HRM, of which SRHRM is considered a subset, has emerged in the last twenty years, in recognition of the changing global context in which firms now serve multiple stakeholders and pursue various economic, social and environment goals (Aust *et al.*, 2020). Within the current research, three main perspectives on SRHRM emerge. Aust *et al.* (2020) review identified that early research in SRHRM had a strong focus on improving HR practices across the supply chain for the purposes of reducing risks to the business, and so engaged in social purposes in service of economic goals. This echoes a hard HRM philosophy and aligns with what Voegtlin & Greenwood (2016) position as the instrumental perspective, whereby the purpose of the firm remains profit maximisation and the needs of shareholders are prioritised. More recent research has tended to preference unitarist thinking which focuses on achieving improved

organisational outcomes (Omidi & Dal Zotto, 2022), taking a social integrative perspective (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). Such research is based on the assumption that there are mutual gains to be had from the adoption of SRHRM, adopting a business case approach akin to that described as ‘doing well by doing good’; however, the problem with this approach is that overlooks the conflicting interests which exist between employee and shareholder interests, with positive organisational outcomes prioritised at the expense of employees (Beer et al., 2015). These studies are highly utilitarian (Omidi & Dal Zotto, 2022) and regard employees as a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves (Greenwood, 2002).

This utilitarian view stands in contrast to the moral case presented by Guest (2017), which argues that such practices should be adopted simply because they are ‘the right thing to do’ for employees and their well-being, and that the prioritisation of quality employment will then lead to positive outcomes, such as improved firm performance. These competing tensions speak to the very heart of longstanding debates in the shareholder/stakeholder dichotomy in the field of social responsibility. Employees are highly dependent on their employer for their income, in addition to other needs such as social support, personal fulfilment and sense of identity (Greenwood, 2007). However, for firms to exist and provide for these needs, they must be profitable. It is such logic that leads Friedman (1970) to the conclusion that the only social responsibility of a business is to use its resources for profit maximisation, and that to preference any interest or activity would be irresponsible behaviour on the part of the firm, placing livelihoods in jeopardy. Of course, the very treatment of humans as ‘resources’ to be used like any other resource from which profit is extracted based on the justification that shareholders must profit may be seen as a highly unethical and dehumanising (Greenwood, 2002). Even if only taking into account profit maximisation, there are clear financial implications for shareholders when organisations fail to recognise the needs of other stakeholders (Beer et al., 2015). Arguably both the instrumental and social integrative perspectives do not sufficiently address the imbalance of power and conflicting interests that exist between employees and shareholders (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016).

Regardless, the tension outlined by Friedman remains, with significant consequences for how employees are managed. These debates have been discussed extensively by critical scholars from the labour process tradition, who have long argued from a political economy perspective that regimes of financialised capitalism play a significant role in how HRM is operationalised (Thompson, 2011). With a lack of studies which take a more critical stance, there have been calls for more research that utilises labour process theory as an avenue for advancing theory development in SRHRM (Omidi & Dal Zotto, 2022; Richards, 2022). This

perspective is underpinned by critical HRM and political theories of democracy and CSR, where in addition to making a profit, firms have an obligation to society as corporate citizens (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). As such, SRHRM is then focused on employee rights and addressing power imbalances and is underpinned by a unique philosophy based on humanist principles, which enable employee well-being (Richards & Sang, 2019). It is from this political perspective that this paper argues the utility of SRHRM in investigating the irresponsibility of HRM practice, within the realities of financialised capitalism.

## The Hotel Sector

Having outlined political perspective on SRHRM, there are two compelling reasons for investigating the UK hotel sector. Firstly, the hotel sector has been particularly affected by increasing financialisation, yet surprisingly, its influence on HRM is an issue that is rarely raised in the literature. The growing trend since the 1990s among MNCs with global brands has been to divest from their physical hotel assets, growing their business through franchising, management contracts, and outsourcing their services (Mooney & Baum, 2019). Within the UK there is significant financial investment in the hotel sector, with luxury and boutique hotels with four and five star ratings a popular choice for investors and private equity groups. Hotel property attracts large overseas investment, worth approximately £2.5 billion in 2017, with investors attracted by long term fixed-leased hotel assets and a weak pound due to the uncertainty surrounding Brexit (Knight Frank, 2018). This increasingly financialised activity has led to complex ownership configurations in hotels, often with multiple stakeholders. Melissen et al. (2016) identify that the ownership, operation and brand of a hotel may be split across several partners with as many as five stakeholders involved, with the three most common configurations being owner-operated, leased, or management contracts, with the latter being the most popular option among MNCs operating at the upper end of the market. However, as their ownership arrangements diversify, MNCs run the risk of having inconsistent HRM policies and discrepancies in terms of pay and employment conditions for employees across their brands (Mooney & Baum, 2019). The employment of staff and the associated HR practices will normally be an activity of the operator, however that operator may be subject to the demands of more powerful stakeholders within the ownership configuration, and despite claims from the industry that people are the most valued asset, it is highly questionable whether this same philosophy will be at the heart of decision making by all owners, who will likely have conflicting priorities (Melissen et al., 2016). Financialisation therefore strongly influences the practice of HRM, to the point that even where managers want to adopt

employee-orientated HRM, they may be unable to do so due to prevailing financial interests (Thompson, 2011). It is these competing tensions that this paper is primarily concerned with, as to how these tensions may lead to the existence of socially irresponsible HRM.

Secondly, very few studies appear to have explicitly considered pay practices as part of the SRHRM system, or in the context of poor-quality employment. In the hospitality sector there is widespread evidence that a 'low road' approach to HRM is the norm, as highly competitive pressures force businesses to compete on price, fostering a short-term approach and a drive to keep labour costs to a minimum (Kusluvan et al., 2010; Nickson, 2013). Tight numerical control of labour is a strong feature, with employers relying on contingent, part-time and temporary labour (Knox & Walsh, 2005). Casualisation is commonplace, and a high level of flexibility is sought from the workforce, allowing managers to adjust staffing levels quickly in line with the seasonal nature and business demand to keep labour costs down (Davidson et al., 2011). Casual employees are also expected to be multi-skilled and provide functional flexibility, while permanent employees are also expected to provide a certain amount of numerical flexibility by being prepared to work irregular hours week to week (Knox & Walsh, 2005). There is some evidence that more 'high road' practices have emerged in luxury hotels at the higher end of the market, who are more likely to have specialist HR managers, training for line managers in HR matters, formalised and written HR policies, and who seek to adopt more high commitment HRM practices, such as appraisal, training, and team building (Knox & Walsh, 2005). However, often these more sophisticated practices are reserved for full time, permanent employees, and such benefits do not extend to peripheral and casual employees (Zhang et al., 2015). Furthermore, issues such as low pay and non-compliance with basic employment legislation remain even at the luxury end of the market, despite these organisations being profitable (Ioannou & Dukes, 2021; Warhurst et al., 2008).

While these challenges with low pay and poor quality jobs in hospitality are well documented, they have rarely been examined through the lens of SRHRM, despite the potential for this model to unlock unique insights. One study which begins to address some of these issues argues that SRHRM is underpinned by a unique management philosophy, that when enacted through aligned HRM practices will result in a number of positive outcomes for employees, of which the cornerstone is well-being (Richards & Sang, 2019). In their qualitative study of employees experiencing in-work poverty, these authors, instead, found evidence of socially irresponsible HRM (SIHRM), which they argue is underpinned by management philosophies which are unsupportive, unfair, disrespectful, with a lack of transparency and accountability, and which do not seek to develop employees.

The true nature of these management philosophies is often hidden, but employees then become aware of these philosophies through the operationalisation of HR practices. Furthermore, these philosophies promote practices such as minimal compliance with employment regulation, limited avenues for employee voice, active non-compliance with employment law, bullying cultures and limited progression, which lead to long term, negative outcomes for employees at the work-life interface, such as poor well-being, stress, debt and poverty, and which foster the environments that sustains these poor outcomes for employees, potentially for long periods of time. This is where the SRHRM model would appear to have utility in exploring poorer quality jobs, as the model recognises that the presence of HRM practices alone are not sufficient to ensure the fair and ethical treatment of workers, and that external, firm-level and individual factors which precede the practices are crucial determinants in the outcomes for workers. As such, models of SRHRM are useful in exploring both good employment practices and 'the dark side' of HRM.

## Methods

The research questions of this study sought to explore the underlying management philosophies guiding models of HRM within the upper market corporate hotel sector, and how the resultant practices impact the employee experience of work and well-being. A case study approach was adopted to answer these research questions, which allowed for the various aspects of the SRHRM model (antecedents, HR practices and employee outcomes) to be examined within the bounded context of an organisation, where the different viewpoints of management and frontline workers could be explored. Furthermore, as the research questions sought to explore the subjective experiences of participants, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate, which also responds to the calls of several authors for more qualitative research in the field exploring how employees make sense of SRHRM practices (e.g. Omid & Dal Zotto, 2022; Richards, 2022; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). The case study research strategy has been subject to criticism, often viewed as low quality, inferior, and lacking in rigour, as the context dependant nature of the research and small sample sizes do not allow for statistical generalisations to be made (Hyett et al., 2014; Jenson & Rodgers, 2001; Yin, 2003). However, this incorrectly assumes that generalisability is of more value than other kinds of knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006), and while it may not necessarily be possible to make statistical generalisations, the richness of understanding that can be gleaned from a case study can allow for generalisations to be made to theory (Hartley, 2004). It is the richness of

the data collected from this case study that has allowed for a unique contribution to be made to the concept of SIHRM.

Two case study hotels (HotelCo 1 and HotelCo 2) were recruited for the study. Each hotel was of a similar size and based in a city centre location in Scotland, operating at the higher end of the market, with four and five stars respectively. Each hotel was owned by a large MNC, with the parent companies operating in over 100 countries, employing 8000 people in the UK in HotelCo 1, and 9000 in HotelCo 2. Given the size, ownership and market positioning, these cases were more likely to be using more sophisticated HRM practices (Knox & Walsh, 2005), and would therefore serve as interesting cases for exploring SRHRM. Data collection took the form of semi-structured interviews (see Table 1) and occurred at three organisational levels: frontline employees ( $n = 15$ ), line managers ( $n = 8$ ), and senior management and HR ( $n = 7$ ). Although a small sample size, Saunders & Townsend (2016) indicate that a normal participant range of 15–60 is generally considered sufficient for both quality and saturation in qualitative organisational research.

A separate interview guide was developed for each group of participants. With senior management and HR, themes included organisational values, corporate strategy, and HRM policy and practice such as resourcing, well-being, and pay and reward strategies. Questions included, *how would you describe the underlying values and principles that guide management decisions in the organisation? How do these values and principles feed into your HR strategy? What policies do you have for supporting and managing employee well-being?* Interviews with line managers focused more on how these HRM policies and practices were then implemented, and how they managed the well-being of their staff. Key questions around these themes included: *What policies are there to support the well-being of staff and how do they work in practice? How are staff rotas managed? What rewards and benefits are available to staff?* Finally, the themes in the interviews with frontline employees explored how these policies and practices impacted their well-being, and included themes such as workloads, levels of staffing, working hours and pay. All frontline employees were paid below the voluntary Living Wage (£9 per hour at the time of data collection). Questions asked of frontline employees included: *What areas of your job cause you to feel stressed?*

**Table 1** Interview participants

Participant group	HotelCo 1 ( $n = 19$ )	HotelCo 2 ( $n = 11$ )
Frontline employees	9	6
Line management	5	3
Senior management and HR	5	2

*Are you able to secure enough working hours? What benefits are available to you?*

The study was both designed and performed in line with the institution's *Code of Practice on Investigations Involving Human Beings* and granted ethical approval by the Departmental Ethics Committee at the University of Strathclyde prior to the commencement of fieldwork. The researchers had no prior or ongoing relationship with the host organisations. The host organisations were initially invited to participate in the study via email, following an introduction made through the researcher's network of contacts. The individual participants for the study were then nominated by the host organisations. Arguably, this presented a potential source of bias, as the host organisations may have been motivated to select participants that would present them in a favourable light. Furthermore, the participants may also have felt inhibited about providing information which was critical of their employer. To overcome these concerns, participant information sheets and consent forms were distributed to the nominated participants prior to interview. To ensure that genuine informed consent was obtained, the researcher then met with each participant on an individual basis, where the participant information and confidentiality mechanisms of the study was fully explained, and to reassure participants of the independence of the study from the host organisations. Participants were also assured that they could decline to participate, and that this information would also be kept confidential. At this point, two participants from HotelCo 1 declined to take part in the study and those interviews did not proceed. This process allowed an opportunity to build rapport and trust with participants prior to the interview, which assisted in generating rich interview data. Interviews lasted on average 45 min and were recorded. In addition, field notes were taken both during and immediately after each interview. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and were then fully anonymised, including reference to any identifying characteristics (i.e. names, locations), to ensure that no personal data was held.

To ensure that a rigorous and structured analysis of the data was undertaken, the protocol outlined by Gioia et al (2013) was followed in the coding process. Analysis began as an inductive process, where each transcript was initially open coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), often using the words of the participants themselves, and at this stage, field notes were used to assist in interpreting the interview data. This generated a large initial list of codes in each case which were recorded in a code book. The interviews from each organisation were coded in their participant groups, although at times there were overlapping codes and themes between these groups. Multiple readings of the transcripts were required, and memos were made while coding each interview, to record thoughts and reflections about what was being observed in the data and how this might connect to theory.

Throughout this process, as codes emerged, the data was examined for higher level patterns, categories and themes connecting these codes, and this gradually led to a smaller number of second order themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1988). From this process, these themes were condensed into two aggregate dimensions. In these later stages of coding, the analysis become a more abductive, iterative process, where the emergent data themes were compared with the concepts from the literature (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). In line with Gioia et al. (2013), a data structure was produced (see Fig. 2) as a visual representation to document the coding journey and how the researchers moved from the raw data to aggregate dimensions.

### Findings

In this section, the main findings of the study are presented, as per the themes and aggregate dimensions outlined in Fig. 2. The findings will begin by outlining the management perspective and will uncover the philosophies that underpinned models of HRM, by considering first the management philosophy and HR practices. The findings will then move on to detail employee perspectives on how HRM impacted their experience of work and well-being.

## Management Philosophy Shaping SIHRM Practice

### Competing Tensions in the Stakeholder Approach

When discussing organisational strategy, the management in both organisations portrayed a soft, stakeholder approach, which asserted that the workforce was essential for delivering high levels of customer satisfaction, in keeping with what would be expected from hotels marketing themselves as high end providers. Both companies referenced a similar philosophy in terms of their underlying strategy, of driving sales through customer satisfaction, achieved through high levels of customer service, provided by happy employees. As the HR director of HotelCo 2 noted:

The [company] philosophy is if you look after your staff, they'll look after your customer, so your customers will come back and, therefore, look after your business ... Putting people first is the big strapline of the organisation.

In HotelCo 1, a similar strategy was regularly described by senior managers and HR interviewees as a stakeholder approach of "People, Guest, and Owners", where if you ensured that your staff were looked after, they would in turn

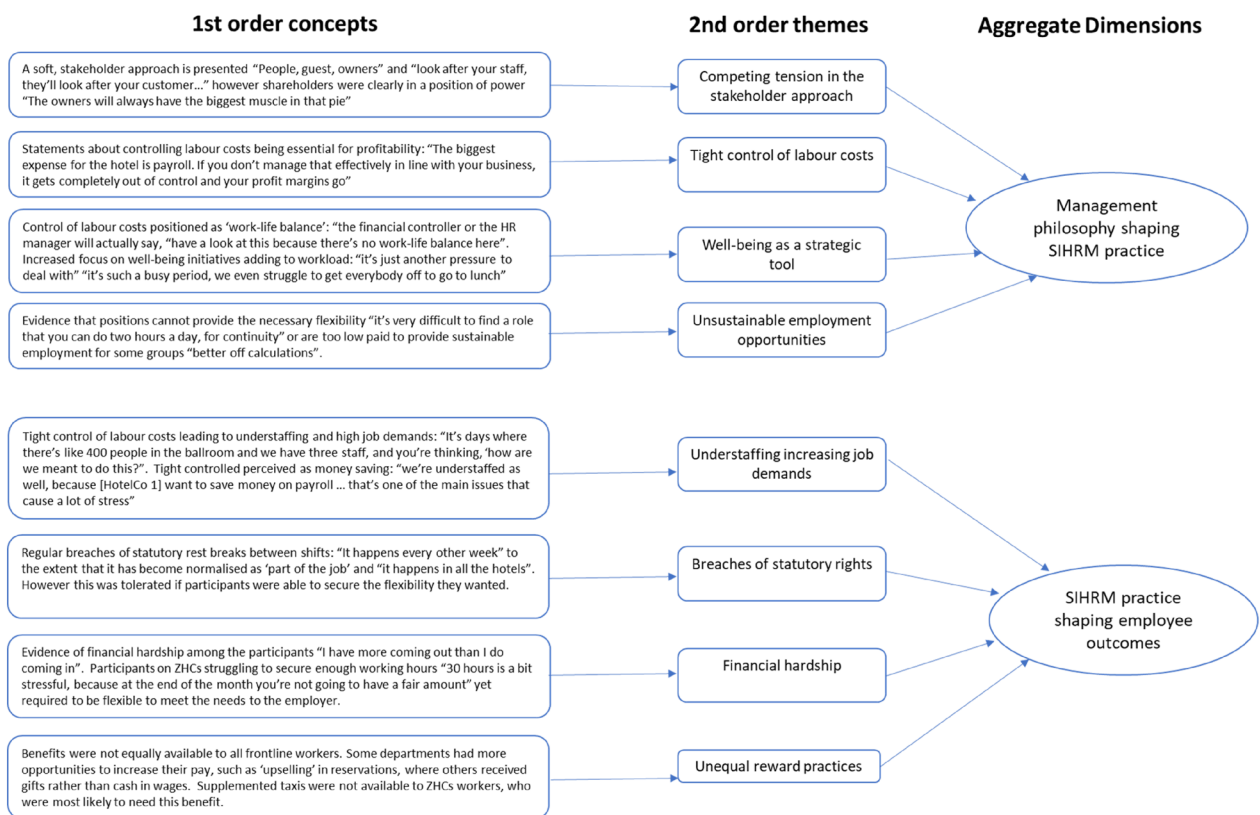


Fig. 2 Data structure for interview data

look after the customers, which then generated the revenues for the owners.

However, senior management in each case were subject to highly financialised pressures, and in the interviews with management and HR, there were some conflicting views as to the power and emphasis placed on each of these stakeholders. It quickly emerged that delivering the required financial performance for the owners was the key priority, as the HR manager in HotelCo 2 described:

The guests have an expectation, so, we need to be looking after the people to be able to deliver that for the guest. But, of course, at the end of the day we're a business. We've got somebody up there who wants us to make X amount of money, so we need to deliver on that because that's what they expect.

Additionally, the general manager (GM) of HotelCo 1 described how the inclusion of staff and customers in this equation was simply a means of achieving the required financial performance:

Ultimately, we're a commercial business and have to make money. The people and the guest bit is about how you do it... The owners will always have the biggest muscle in that pie... To be perfectly honest, if we were hitting our budgets, nobody would ever ask me how things are going with the other two parts of that pie really.

### Tight Control of Labour Costs

A key HRM practice that was used to achieve the required level of financial performance was tight numerical control of labour costs. The GM of HotelCo 1 noted:

The biggest expense for the hotel is payroll. If you don't manage that effectively in line with your business, it gets completely out of control and your profit margins go and you lose your job. It's as simple as that. It's very aggressive.

This control was largely exercised through the use of zero hours contracts (ZHCs), and the number of staff employed on a permanent and casual basis within each hotel was determined using a minimum staffing structure. This involved calculating the number of staff required for the quietest occupancy week of the year for the business (normally the second week of January), which then formed the basis for the numbers of staff that the hotel would employ on a contracted, permanent basis. Any additional staff required to supplement this staffing level were employed on a ZHC. The GM of HotelCo 1 argued that this way of working was viewed as the most viable way to operate and cope with varying

levels of customer demand, and as such was considered an industry norm.

Additionally, labour costs were tightly controlled in each hotel by paying minimum rates of pay with limited benefits. Each hotel paid the governmentally set national living wage (NLW) to employees aged 25, and the national minimum wage (NMW) rate for 21–25 year olds was paid to all staff under the age of 25 (including those aged 18–21) in entry level positions. This rate of pay was considered competitive, as employees under the age of 22 were paid over and above the legislative minimum. Team leaders and supervisory staff were paid slightly more at varying rates, but the differential never exceeded more than £1 per hour. The view from management was that pay was supplemented by high value benefits, such as discounted hotel rates, long service awards, a free staff canteen, and free taxis home at the end of late-night shifts: 'It really is highlighting the benefits to our staff, what else we can do to save them monies, as opposed to just giving them cash' (GM, HotelCo 2). Over and above pay, staff in both hotels had the opportunity to earn 'incentives' for their work. Furthermore, flexibility was also hailed as a key benefit offered by both organisations.

### Well-Being as a Strategic Tool

Senior management and HR in each hotel described employee well-being as a key strategy that was used for the recruitment and retention of staff. HotelCo 1 did not have a formal policy or strategy in place, though both the manager and HR interviewees suggested staff well-being had been a particular focus within the organisation in recent years. Ensuring a work-life balance for employees was heavily emphasised as the main component of their approach, and managers described how this had been a change in culture for the organisation:

When I first started, five years ago, there was people who were working 60, 70 hours a week, even more ... now it's a very rare occasion you got anybody working over 50 hours. And it's usually because it's Christmas or something along those lines. (HR Advisor, HotelCo 1)

This change had been enacted through various staff scheduling policies, which included ensuring that full time staff had two days off together within the week and making sure that staff were given time back in lieu when they worked additional hours. Staff rotas were issued six weeks in advance so that staff would have plenty of notice of their shifts: "gone are the days that you get your rota the day before" (HR Manager, HotelCo 1).

However, the main activity that was highlighted with regards to managing well-being was a payroll meeting which happened once a week, involving the heads of departments,



HR, and the financial controller, to discuss the staffing rotas of each department. At these meetings, the rotas were scrutinised to ensure that the staffing levels in each department were sufficient and that the scheduling policies were followed. This practice was framed by management as a way of ensuring that staff had a work-life balance, which protected their well-being:

If we're having a payroll meeting and if somebody's working too many hours or has not got enough days off, or their days off are separate, the financial controller or the HR manager will actually say, "have a look at this because there's no work-life balance here." (Assistant Manager, HotelCo 1)

In contrast, HotelCo 2 had a long-standing formal well-being programme. This had started informally within the hotel, and later a formal well-being strategy had been launched at a corporate level. This strategy focused on personal well-being, team building and giving back to the community. This initiative was promoted throughout the organisation using their in-house intranet, with resources available to help sites with the delivery of the programme. A certification process had also been developed in association with the programme for individual hotels within the company, with HotelCo 2 having achieved the highest level. In practice, the well-being strategy comprised of various initiatives and activities for staff, such as yoga, fitness activities, and charitable events. The intention was that employees would take ownership of the initiatives in the form of well-being champions. However, the participants highlighted that in reality, the HR department organised most of the activities: "I can guarantee if HR did nothing about it, it wouldn't happen" (GM, HotelCo 2). Managers also discussed how it was difficult to get engagement from staff in these well-being activities, particularly as staff were expected to participate in these activities during their rest breaks so that the needs of the business were not disrupted:

We did have a jogging club at one point and we had a walk at lunchtime, but it's difficult for our team because we only get a half hour break, so to be away from your desk and go for your walk, plus get something to eat, it starts to eat into the working day... for our team, in particular, it's such a busy period, we even struggle to get everybody off to go to lunch. (Line Manager, HotelCo 2)

The demands placed on this manager's team were such that it was difficult just to ensure that staff received their statutory rest break, let alone make time to participate in optional well-being initiatives. As the previous quote demonstrated, participation in these activities was an additional pressure on the time of staff. However, it was also the case that managers involved in organising these activities also

viewed this as an additional demand on their time: "Even when we do Staff Appreciation Week ... They do lots of activities across that week but again, it's during the working day... it's just another pressure to deal with ... We still have our jobs to do as well as all these nice things" (Line Manager, HotelCo 2). As such, there was also a sense in which this well-being strategy was viewed by managers as an activity that had to be done, rather than an approach to looking after their staff or concern for their welfare.

### Unsustainable Employment Opportunities

Within both hotels, activities falling under the banner of corporate and social responsibility lay within the HR remit. The core of this involved organising fundraising and charitable events which were promoted through the HR departments. Further to this, HotelCo 2 had an inclusion strategy, which was a wider organisational initiative, aimed at making employment opportunities available to groups of people who are often excluded from the labour market. At the time of the interviews, this had involved the hotel working with a local family centre that supported single parents. While the partnership was presented positively, the HR director highlighted several difficulties in the reality of enacting this strategy. For example, often the single parents from this group would only have very limited availability for work due to childcare constraints, and despite the image of flexibility portrayed by the organisation, this seemed to cause difficulties in creating employment opportunities to suit this demographic: "It can be quite tricky if someone's available to work between 13:00 and 15:00 for childcare, it's very difficult to find a role that you can do two hours a day, for continuity" (HR manager, HotelCo 2). Furthermore, the HR director highlighted that following a 'better off calculation', it was often not always beneficial for someone to enter employment, as this would reduce benefit entitlement and, in some cases, would leave that person worse off financially. On a similar note, interviewees in both organisations mentioned that they had part time staff who did not want to work over 16 hours per week, as this would affect their benefit entitlement and leave them with less money.

### SIHRM Practices Shaping Employee Outcomes

#### Understaffing Increasing Job Demands

The tight control of labour costs within each organisation had several negative outcomes for the well-being of employees. High workloads and inadequate staffing levels were frequently cited by frontline employees as demands of the job that led to stress. The demands placed on staff due to regular understaffing could be significant: "It's days where there's like 400 people in the ballroom and we have three

staff, and you're thinking, 'how are we meant to do this?'" (Employee, HotelCo 1). It emerged from several interviews that there was the perception that it was a specific strategy of HotelCo 1 to understaff, to keep tight control of the wage bill. As another employee noted, "A lot of the time, we're understaffed as well, because [HotelCo 1] want to save money on payroll ... that's one of the main issues that cause a lot of stress". Rather than viewed as a practice which enhanced well-being, the participants viewed the previously mentioned weekly payroll meeting as a cost cutting measure: "They're very tight with the wages budget, the accounts department watch that like a hawk... they have wages meeting at least once a week too and keep the staff and wages down as much as possible" (Employee, HotelCo 1).

While understaffing was built into the rota, often this was exacerbated by absence at short notice, which was unpredictable. These absences were blamed on the use of ZHCs which resulted in last minute 'sick calls', as these staff were not contractually obliged to attend work. However, it also appeared that the policy of understaffing was fuelling a cycle of sick calls. As one manager observed:

[Casual staff] knew they were going to come in on a Saturday night and we might be short-staffed, so they were calling in sick... I had a chat with them, and a couple of people were really honest, just saying 'It's stressing me out' (Assistant Manager, HotelCo 1).

### Breaches of Statutory Rights

In HotelCo 2, further evidence of irresponsible practices emerged in the working hours of the participants. Several participants regularly did not receive the statutory 11 hour daily rest break between their shifts. One employee described how in his department, early shifts ran from 5:45 to 14:15, and late shifts ran from 13:45 to 22:15, which often led to being asked to work a late shift, followed by an early shift the next morning, giving only a seven hour rest break:

I get home at 23:00 and then I have food. So, I'm in bed maybe about midnight, and then I get up at 03:00 or 04:00, go back to work. Sometimes I can manage, sometimes I get zero sleep... It happens every other week.

Some participants were aware that these working hours infringed on their statutory rights, but were resigned to this being 'part of the job' and an industry norm: "The shifts are absolutely brutal...It happened to me at [a competitor hotel] as well, it happens in all the hotels. It's just hospitality I guess. At the same time, it's extremely illegal" (employee, HotelCo 2). Often this practice was tolerated by participants if they were able to negotiate the flexibility they wanted in exchange. However, the conditions under which

this flexibility was negotiated still significantly benefitted the employer, given that the only way to actually access the 'benefit' of flexibility was to exchange a statutory right, with potentially harmful consequences for the employee.

### Financial Hardship

Pay and reward was a further area where the consequences of socially irresponsible practice was evident. Participants often described situations of financial hardship caused by low wages and irregular working hours, particularly those who were single and living alone or with dependants. Employees tended to describe how they could "just pay their bills" or "get by" on their wages, but it was often clear they struggled financially. As one employee from HotelCo 1 noted:

I have more coming out than I do coming in, being a single parent. I don't get any help with my rent, or anything like that. Pay all council tax and my rent and looking after my 15-year-old takes a lot of money... I couldn't afford a mortgage. I can't afford a car, and I just sort of, get by, just, not even that sometimes. Like, you go into your credit card or your overdraft, and that kind of stuff.

This interviewee was employed on a permanent, full-time contract, demonstrating that even with guaranteed hours, the job did not provide the level of income required to maintain a basic standard of living.

Particular issues were experienced by employees on ZHCs within both organisations, as they usually struggled to get enough working hours each week and talked about how they managed the financial demands that were created when they did not get enough hours. While hired on ZHCs, employees had often been promised that regular, full time hours would be available. However, in reality they found that their weekly working hours would be cut short, creating financial difficulties: "30 hours is a bit stressful, because at the end of month you're not going to have a fair amount. Even with 40 hours a week in this job, you don't get much at the end of the month" (employee, HotelCo 1). When asked how they coped financially when there are insufficient hours, participants stated that they relied heavily on tips: "I need the tips to get by... If I didn't get tips, I'd probably look for another job".

Additionally, participants would usually not get notice of their working hours for the week until the day before that week started, meaning that they could not look at the possibility of a second job to increase their income: "I think it would be quite hard with the hours to [work a second job]. I did work for an agency before this, but they wanted me to confirm a date I could work for them two or three weeks in advance. It's just not possible". Again, flexibility represented

a benefit for the employer, giving them both financial and numerical flexibility, but did not benefit the participant as it restricted the possibility of increasing their income through a second job.

### Unequal Reward and Benefit Practices

Finally, the opportunity to gain from the incentive schemes and access other benefits offered by the organisations did not appear to be equally available to all employees. Staff based in reception seemed to have the greatest opportunity in both organisations to increase their monthly wage through ‘upselling’ (persuading customers at check in to join the corporate reward scheme, purchase breakfast, or upgrade their room) for which staff would receive a cash bonus on their pay. Other departments such as food and beverage would receive gifts such as a free meal, but would seldom have an opportunity to have cash added on to their wage.

One issue that emerged which particularly affected staff employed on ZHCs was the cost of transport home after a late finishing shift. The departments that were most likely to employ ZHC workers needed the flexibility to increase headcount for evening functions, meaning these employees were more likely to finish at a time when public transport would no longer be available for their journey home. However, in HotelCo 2, only contracted staff were eligible to receive a supplement towards the cost of a taxi home and this was not available to staff on ZHCs who were most likely to need this benefit. In HotelCo 1, staff only received £4 towards the cost of a taxi, and so again this cost had to be covered from employees’ minimal wages.

## Discussion and Conclusions

While previous discussions of HRM in the hotel sector have more commonly centred around high and low road models, this study has utilised a processual model of SRHRM (Omidi & Dal Zotto, 2022), to investigate the underlying management philosophies guiding models of HRM within the upper market corporate hotel sector, and how the resultant HR practices impacted the employee experience of work and well-being. To answer these research questions, this study has taken a critical stance by utilising the political perspective of SRHRM, which recognises that even where more responsible practices may appear to be present, the imbalance of power that exists between shareholders and stakeholders can result in organisations behaving irresponsibly towards their employees in the pursuit of corporate objectives (Greenwood, 2007; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016), resulting in SIHRM (Richards & Sang, 2019). In the context of this highly financialised sector and through an exploration of the employee experience, it is argued that a

socially irresponsible approach was evident, stemming from hard HRM philosophies that sought to prioritise profit maximisation for shareholders to the determinant of employee well-being. Two key findings emerge from this study which help to further develop the concept of SIHRM. Firstly, in a SIHRM approach, practices are presented in a way which appears to be employee orientated, but in reality, are actually intended to serve in achieving economic objectives. Secondly, SIHRM appears to rely on practices which are minimally or non-compliant in order to maximise profits; therefore, the nature of practices surrounding pay, security and working time are central in determining the responsible-ness of the HRM approach. The remainder of this section will discuss these key findings in more detail.

The exploration of employee experiences in this study demonstrated how management philosophies within organisations are a key factor in the responsible-ness of HRM in practice. Each organisation claimed a softer, stakeholder approach, where valuing and investing in staff was the key to delivering better customer service, which would improve sales and consequently returns for shareholders. However, investigating the employee experience in these cases exposed a much harder underpinning philosophy, where the true nature and intended goals of HR practices were not always explicit. Of course, a hard HRM philosophy does not necessarily negate an irresponsible approach; it has previously been recognised that SRHRM can still retain a hard underpinning philosophy, where social goals are pursued for the purposes of economic objectives, such as improving employment practices to reduce the risk of negative exposure to the business (Aust et al., 2020; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). That said, what transpired in the exploration of the employee experience of HRM within the case study organisations in this study was an approach that prioritised practices to ensure profit maximisation for shareholders, which often led to deleterious outcomes for employees, particularly in terms of their well-being. Therefore, a key conclusion arising from this study is that in a SIHRM approach, there is a level of deception, whereby practices are presented in way that appears to be employee orientated but which are actually only intended to serve economic objectives.

Such hidden and deceptive philosophies were particularly evident with regards to what the organisations had positioned as well-being practices. Instead of enabling employees to meet personal and professional goals (Omidi & Dal Zotto, 2022), the terms ‘well-being’ or ‘work life balance’ were at times used to brand practices which were being used to control labour costs. For example, management asserted that employee working hours were closely monitored through weekly meetings, to ensure that working hours were not excessive and that employees had two consecutive days off per week. However, examining the employee experience demonstrated that this practice was used by managers

as a way to restrict labour costs to an absolute minimum, and to justify a general approach of understaffing. The true purpose of this practice was profit maximisation, and while positioned as a well-being practice, limited attention was paid to the consequent employee outcomes, which included insecure working hours and work intensification. This echoes the original model of SIHRM set out by Richards & Sang (2019), but further demonstrated that practices may be positioned as employee orientated or well-being related, but are instead only intended to serve the purpose of profit maximisation. Thus, the presence of seemingly high-road HRM practices does not necessarily ensure the responsible, ethical and moral treatment of workers, or result in better outcomes for workers (Greenwood, 2007).

Further to this point, while a SRHRM approach is not achieved through the presence of practices alone (Omidi & Dal Zotto, 2022; Shen & Zhu, 2011), there are clearly some practices which must be present for the avoidance of SIHRM. A notable finding of this study is that in examining the employee outcomes, practices in relation to pay, security and working time shaped the nature of irresponsibility. The case study organisations were ideally placed to offer an enhanced employee experience, as both were part of large, multi-national firms situated at the higher value end of the consumer market (Knox & Walsh, 2005). However, as other research in the sector has found, operating at the higher end of the consumer market did not lead to improved levels of pay or skill for staff (Lloyd et al., 2013). Consistent with other studies of the UK hotel sector (Warhurst et al., 2008), some of the key practices used included minimum wages, minimum staffing structures, and a high dependency on contingent labour to provide numerical flexibility. Neither organisation in this study had a policy of paying a living wage, and instead opted to pay the statutory minimum. Low pay was often rationalised by management who argued that wages were supplemented by other benefits (such as free meals). However, these benefits did not seem to alleviate the hardship experienced by employees. Moreover, the benefits offered were not equally available to all and often unavailable to the most vulnerable employees on ZHCs, and instead only made available to permanent employees (Zhang et al., 2015).

Furthermore, it was a specific management strategy to restrict the volume of labour to the absolute minimum level required, which was a source of stress for the front-line employees both in terms of securing sufficient working hours and in coping with excessive workloads. Employees described the stress associated with not having enough working hours, as this left them struggling to meet their financial demands. Even where they did have enough working hours, participants described their difficulties in keeping up with bills, paying for and arranging childcare, and other day-to-day costs. Additionally, reflecting the findings

of Ioannou & Dukes (2021), at times there was also evidence of deliberate non-compliance with employment legislation, particularly with regards to working time regulations. Thus, SIHRM emerges as a model which relies on minimal or non-compliant practices to maximise profits. A core component of a SRHRM system is employee-orientated practices which go beyond the legal minimum required within local labour laws, to allow for employee's personal and family needs to be met (Shen & Zhu, 2011). This paper argues that pay practices which are only minimally compliant, and which are not in line with the living wage, cannot constitute a socially responsible approach, as this does not allow employees to fulfil their personal goals and is detrimental to their well-being. As such, pay and working conditions which exceed the statutory minimum and which ensure an adequate and livable wage for employees, on their own may not constitute SRHRM, but arguably are a cornerstone practice, and essential for the avoidance of an irresponsible approach.

### Practical Implications for the Hotel Sector

The matter of how to move the hotel sector towards more sustainable and SRHRM remains a considerable challenge. This paper presented a pre-pandemic snapshot of employment practices in the sector, demonstrating the long-standing and unsustainable nature of socially irresponsible HRM, which is reflected in the current recruitment and retention crisis (CERIC, 2021). Considering the role that management philosophy plays in shaping HR practices and employee outcomes, a key challenge here is how to bring about a fundamental shift in management and shareholder perspectives which prioritises the needs of workers to a meaningful extent. The realities of financialised capitalism may mean that organisations are unlikely to turn away from their hard shareholder logic (Thompson, 2011), or from the dominant cost cutting approach (Mooney & Baum, 2019), but perhaps they can be convinced of the value in adopting more employee orientated HRM where genuine pursuit of social goals also serve an economic purpose (Aust et al., 2020). SRHRM provides a model through which organisations can begin to address these pressures in meaningful ways, particularly in sectors where irresponsible practices are very much the norm. Based on the findings of this study, as a starting point, organisations should begin address the core tenants of a SRHRM system, including working conditions, secure and legally compliant working hours, fair and transparent reward practices, and crucially, a liveable wage. Addressing these core practices would make considerable inroads towards improving well-being outcomes for employees.

Of course, the mantra of 'doing well by doing good' often fails to live up to its promise (Beer et al., 2015). Too often, organisations in sectors such as hospitality find themselves in highly competitive markets with tight

profit margins and high shareholder expectations, for which a low cost workforce that is readily available and easily replaceable provides the remedy (Kusluvan et al., 2010). Therefore, it is more than likely that a range of mechanisms are needed to address the imbalance of power between shareholders and workers, if organisations are to be compelled to improve their employment practices and to regard their employees as more than a means to an end (Greenwood, 2002). This is especially challenging in a sector which has extremely low union density and where regulation provides only minimal protections for workers (Lloyd et al., 2013). This study is limited in the recommendations it can make, given the small scope and sample size. However, two major recent reviews of hospitality work in Scotland and the UK respectively (Baum et al., 2023; Stockland et al., 2023) do offer a series of recommendations to ameliorate these poor employment practices. For example, both reviews call for enhanced voice for employees through self-advocacy such that employees can enhance their understanding of fair work and basic employment rights and also through the expansion of voice mechanisms within the organisation, including a potential role for trade unions. Other recommendations include the need for employers' to be more proactive in ensuring their duty of care to employees' health and safety through enhanced support, such as providing realistic transport options for staff working late. The reports, commissioned to consider what fair work might look like in hospitality in a post-Covid and post-Brexit context, by no means offer a panacea but do point to the need for the range of stakeholders, including trade unions, to work together as a basis for incremental and sustainable change to improve poor employment experience suffered by many working in hospitality. The current situation of staff shortages clearly represents a potential window of opportunity to raise employment standards, as hospitality employers seek to recruit and retain more staff, though it remains to be seen whether employers are willing to grasp this opportunity.

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**Data Availability** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, VW, upon reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial conflicts of interest to disclose.

**Ethical Approval** The study was granted ethical approval by the department of Work, Employment and Organisation Departmental Ethics Committee at the University of Strathclyde. The study was performed in line with the institution's *Code of Practice on Investigations Involving Human Beings*.

**Consent to Participate** Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Consent to Publish** Participants signed informed consent regarding the use of quoted material in publications. No identifying information about the participants has been used in the article.

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