

## SUSTAINABLE HUMANS: A FRAMEWORK FOR APPLYING SUSTAINABLE HRM PRINCIPLES TO THE EVENTS INDUSTRY

RAPHAELA STADLER,\*  TRUDIE WALTERS,†  AND ALLAN JEPSON‡ 

\*Management Center Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria

†Walters Research and Consulting, Dunedin, New Zealand

‡University of Hertfordshire, Hertfordshire, UK

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Most research into human resource management offers best practice strategies but often assumes that employees and organizations are homogenous. The events industry is fundamentally different: it is a stressful, fast paced, competitive, deadline-driven industry with unsociable working hours. Human resource management (HRM) in events currently adopts a short-term and operational approach, which has led to the industry having high staff turnover, and employees suffering from high levels of stress, poor mental health, and professional burnout. Using an online survey and in-depth semi-structured interviews with event industry employees, this article critically examines sustainable HRM principles with the aim of understanding if, and how, they could be implemented in the events industry as an alternative to reduce employee stress and to achieve longer-term well-being—a state that is beneficial not just to the individual, but to organizations and the industry as a whole. A framework for future research is presented and practical implications discussed.

**Key words: Sustainable human resource management (HRM); Events industry; Stress; Well-being; Employees; Mental health**

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### Introduction

At an individual level, intense workloads, time and role pressures, job insecurity, and work–family–life balance conflicts have been identified as specific stressors for events industry employees (Dashper, 2015; Doppler et al., 2020; Odio et al., 2013; Stadler et al., 2021), creating an unsustainable work environment and potentially leading to professional burnout.

Although a positive and open company culture can support an employee’s mental health, and many companies have some well-being initiatives in place to reduce employee stress, these policies and practices are often perceived as a “tick box” exercise by employees. The wider problem is not acknowledged or tackled, and employees are then left to return to the same issues and in many cases simply told to “get on with it” (Stadler et al., 2021).

Address correspondence to Raphaela Stadler, Management Center Innsbruck, Weiherburggasse 8, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria.  
E-mail: [raphaela.stadler@mci.edu](mailto:raphaela.stadler@mci.edu)

At the organizational level, previous human resource (HR) research has found that a more holistic approach to people management can help organizations develop the necessary human capabilities required to successfully operate in an environment facing not only economic, but also environmental and social pressures (Kramar, 2014). Yet, long-term and sustainable HR planning are held to be major challenges for event organizations, with the dominant reasons being the fast-paced nature of the industry, short-term delivery, and the wide range of stakeholders and complexity involved, such as the pulsating nature of events (Lockstone-Binney et al., 2020; Van der Wagen & White, 2014).

Despite the challenges and opportunities the events industry presents for human resource management (HRM), event studies scholars have largely overlooked recent developments in sustainable HRM through which more effective HRM policies and practices can be developed for the events industry. We discuss the theoretical principles of sustainable HRM in detail in the literature review, but at its heart it seeks to provide employees with a positive working environment where they are able to thrive, and employers with a skilled, healthy, and loyal workforce, while contributing to profitability and the environment (Cohen et al., 2012; De Prins et al., 2014; Ehnert, 2009; Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018, 2019).

This article, working at the nexus of event studies and sustainable HRM, seeks to bridge the divide and contribute to a new, fruitful conversation between the two fields. It responds to recent calls to find better solutions for “improv(ing) work life without reducing productivity or risking individual health” in event studies (Doppler et al., 2020, p. 64), to extend the context in which sustainable HRM is researched and to redirect the focus towards employee perspectives (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017; Van Buren, 2022). It is also timely, given that uncertainties created by the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the stress experienced within the events industry (Coles et al., 2022), exacerbating the need for sustainable HRM practices. Specifically, this article addresses the following two research questions:

1. How do events industry employees perceive their employer’s response (through both policy

and practice) to work-induced stress and poor mental well-being?

2. How can the principles of sustainable HRM be applied to overcome the issues of stress and mental well-being faced by employees?

To answer these questions, a mixed-methods study consisting of an online survey and in-depth semistructured interviews was carried out in 2020–2021 with participants from the UK events industry. To provide the necessary background for this study, we first review the literature on job stress, mental health, and employee well-being, followed by an examination of the specific challenges for HRM in the events industry. Attention is then directed to the concept of sustainable HRM and an explanation of key principles and practices that were used to inform the development of solutions in the current study. After a discussion of the methods used in this study, the findings highlight three key themes. The article culminates in a conceptual framework for sustainable HRM in the events industry that can be used by event organizations and the events industry alike, to create best practice policies and processes that support the development of “sustainable humans” and at the same time ensure the long-term viability of organizations and the industry.

## Literature Review

### *Job Stress, Mental Health, and Employee Well-Being*

Employees experience job stress when they perceive a discrepancy or gap between environmental demands and their capacity to meet these demands in a satisfactory way (European Commission, 2011; Ongori & Agolla, 2008). Individual employees thereby react in different ways to the specific characteristics of the threatening work environment; in some cases, this may (temporarily) improve their performance, but in many cases, it leads to harmful physical or emotional responses (Hu & Cheng, 2010). The stress-related physical, psychological, or social dysfunctions at an individual level can further impact upon the performance of the organization as a whole. Previous research highlights how stress in the workplace can reduce effectiveness and productivity at work (Evans, 2017; Harris

et al., 2006; Litchfield et al., 2016); cause ill health (Newton & Jimmieson, 2009); lead to absenteeism and staff turnover (Chang & Lu, 2009; Noe, 2002); along with complaints and interpersonal conflict (Elovainio & Kivimaki, 2001; Newton & Jimmieson, 2009).

Organizational factors can also cause stress. These include work organization, policies, and processes such as workload, working time arrangements, and the match/mismatch between an employee's skills and knowledge with the requirements of the job (De Clercq et al., 2019; Kim, 2019; Russ-Eft, 2001; Scholarios et al., 2017). Poor communication, such as when work expectations are not clearly communicated with employees (Lait & Wallace, 2002); specific working conditions and environment (Qureshi et al., 2013; Riyadi, 2019); and subjective factors such as a perceived lack of support from managers and/or coworkers (Spielberger et al., 2003), or a tendency to develop workaholic behaviors (Clark et al., 2016; Kim, 2019; Porter, 2001), can be further causes for work stress. These organizational factors are particularly pertinent within the events industry, where time pressures often mean that putting effective processes in place, or communicating with and supporting employees, are not high priorities, and where "being busy" is viewed as a badge of honor (Stadler et al., 2021).

There has been increasing interest in the negative effects of job stress on individual mental health and well-being in recent years. Studies have found that workload is the most common cause for stress (CIPD/SimplyHealth, 2016; Odio et al., 2013; Stadler et al., 2021), and that stress, medical conditions, and mental ill-health in turn cause workplace absence (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017; Litchfield et al., 2016). Although effective HRM policies and practices are crucial in addressing these issues, people-management practices must consider not only the development of social and environmental capital, but also that of human capital (Guerci & Carollo, 2016), and require an integrated approach with workplace well-being at the very center of the company's wider HR strategic agenda (Litchfield et al., 2016). Employees are of course a fundamental element in this, but appropriate HRM practices should also include contractors, consultants, and people on other and/or non-employment contracts

(Kramar, 2014). This is particularly relevant for the events industry, which is characterized by a wide variety of complex employment relationships, contracts, and stakeholders, all of which need to be taken into account in the organization's HRM efforts in order to tackle the issue of job stress at the wider industry level.

### *Challenges for HRM in the Events Industry*

The event management literature coverage of HRM considerations is plentiful, but generally takes a short-term managerial and operational perspective, covering processes and practices for recruitment and selection, induction and training (generic as well as role specific), communication and collaboration, leadership, and motivation and retention (see e.g., Allen et al., 2019; Nickson, 2013; Van der Wagen & White, 2014). Although factors specific to the nature of the events industry are recognized and acknowledged in relation to recruitment and retention (Deery, 2009), or the role of volunteers (Elstad, 2003; Smith et al., 2019), the negative impact of these factors upon employees' stress levels, their mental, psychological, and physiological health and well-being requires further attention (Doppler et al., 2020). Previous research has found no significant differences in stress levels among employees of different event sizes (e.g., mega-events, large-scale, and small-scale events) or types of events (Dashper, 2015; Stadler et al., 2021). Rather, it is the specific job demands within the events industry in general that lead to work stress and burnout, and job resources available therefore need to be used more effectively to meet those demands, and in order to avoid ill health (Doppler et al., 2020). As noted in the previous section, these workplace challenges can have consequences for the long-term viability of an organization through reduced productivity and increased staff turnover, if not managed appropriately (Chang & Lu, 2009; Evans, 2017; Harris et al., 2006; Litchfield et al., 2016; Noe, 2002).

The first events industry specific factor to consider is the project-based, temporary, and "pulsating" (Toffler, 1990) nature of events that leads to different staffing needs at different stages of the event life cycle (before, during, and after the event). Poor planning can result in staff shortages

during crucial times, or an overwhelming sense of losing control if there are too many staff involved. This is particularly the case in mega-events, which expand and contract rather quickly (Holmes et al., 2015; Lockstone-Binney et al., 2020).

Secondly, staff on a variety of contract types need to be managed—for example, there usually are a mix of full- and part-time employees on permanent or fixed-term contracts. Others are self-employed and subcontracted to the organization for one or more events for their specialist skill set, while some may be on zero-hour (casual) contracts and called in at short notice with no certainty of ongoing work. Each of these staff categories needs to be managed differently and, even in a more permanent and well-established event organization, requirements can change from one event to the next (Bladen et al., 2017). Having heterogeneous work teams means that not only individual employees' motivations and job satisfaction will be different (Dashper, 2015; Muskat & Mair, 2020), but the extent and impact of work stress upon their work and family lives may also be different. Although these complexities and challenges negatively impact individual employees in the events industry, they can also have a knock-on effect on other stakeholders upon which any event organization relies. For example, Clark et al. (2017) noted that challenging workload levels are not only an issue for event professionals, but also for event venues and supplier companies.

Thirdly, the events industry often relies on volunteers to deliver a successful event, which brings its own set of unique HRM challenges. For example, volunteers may face uncertainty about promises of postevent options or ongoing employment. This is particularly true for mega-events such as the Olympic Games, where employment and/or volunteering legacies in the host community (through the creation of jobs before/during the event, or through skills development) form part of the bid assessment criteria but where the reality frequently falls short (Ali, 2013; Minnaert, 2014). Community events, on the other hand, usually offer free entry to attendees; they frequently utilize a volunteer workforce in order to keep their costs low and maximize the funding they have secured (Holmes et al., 2015). In addition, the unpaid nature of volunteer positions needs special HRM

consideration, as they are giving up their time to serve alongside paid event staff—event organizers need to develop a different mechanism for demonstrating that volunteers are valued and appreciated (Holmes et al., 2015).

And lastly, on an individual level, Odio et al. (2013) noted that although event professionals are deadline driven, there are differences in how time pressure and workload stress are experienced between those who are full-time employed and those who are simultaneously employed elsewhere, as a result of this difference in employment contract type. Studies have found that event employees frequently work more than 40 hr per week, and in many cases 12–14 hr days to ensure the critical path of the event is followed, and feel they do not get enough sleep and rest (Dashper, 2015; Nizam & Kam, 2018; Odio et al., 2013; Stadler et al., 2021)—all factors that contribute to professional burnout (Pammer, 2014). This is further exacerbated by events industry work predominantly occurring during evenings, weekends, public holidays, and in many cases, there is additional work during the summer months (Clark et al., 2017). This requirement to be “working while others are playing” is hard to maintain for long periods of time (Clark et al., p. 427). Although some employees thrive on the fast-paced, high pressure aspects of their work, for many the long and unsocial hours have a negative impact on their personal and family lives—and can therefore be classified as additional “nonwork stressors” (Dashper, 2015; Odio et al., 2013).

Taking these events industry specific factors into account, it is clear that a new approach to HRM is needed. A longer-term view of employees and their ability to sustain their mental health and well-being is crucial; one in which policies and practices support this in a way that is authentic and meaningful—from the employees' perspective and not just that of the employers. We argue in favor of the principles of sustainable HRM, which may provide the key to such an approach.

### *Sustainable HRM*

Sustainable HRM has been defined in different ways over the last two decades (see Macke & Genari, 2019 for a systematic review of literature;

Aust et al., 2020 for a classification of sustainable HRM types). Hence, the literature on sustainable HRM is fragmented, diverse, and covers multiple theoretical concepts, but a fundamental distinction from strategic HRM is that sustainable HRM emphasizes long-term organizational outcomes, including human and social, not merely financial outcomes. Furthermore, sustainable HRM not only focuses on the *outcomes*, but also acknowledges the *processes* involved when aiming to achieve these outcomes. For example, these can include practices and processes that allow employees to balance their wider commitments (work, family, or other) through flexible work arrangements and job design (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2016).

The key principles of sustainable HRM have been delineated by a number of authors. Although there are some differences there are also commonalities, including: a focus on long-term orientation and approaches to HRM; a contribution to the development of employee skills, knowledge, and

their potential; development of good employee–employer relationships through, for example, trust, openness, flexibility, equality, and fair treatment; and lastly, emphasis on employee care through maintaining and supporting their health and well-being (Table 1).

Recent critiques of sustainable HRM have argued for a more explicit focus on the employee perspective when defining, implementing, and assessing sustainable HRM practices and efforts, ensuring an emphasis on employee-related outcomes rather than simply maximizing benefits for the employer/business (Van Buren, 2022). By adhering to the key principles of sustainable HRM, employers can begin to facilitate a reduction in job stress and therefore enhance employee well-being in the longer term (Pfeffer, 2010; Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2019). Indeed, here we argue that the development of what we have termed “sustainable humans” should be a key element in an employer’s wider sustainability strategy. Furthermore,

Table 1  
Overview of Sustainable HRM Principles

Author(s)	Principles of Sustainable HRM Identified
Ehnert (2009)	Attracting and retaining talent; Being recognized as an “employer of choice”; Maintaining employee health and safety; Investing into the skills of the workforce on a long-term basis (lifelong learning for employees); Supporting employees’ work–life and work–family balance; Managing aging workforces; Creating employee trust and sustained employment relationships; Exhibiting CSR towards employees and communities; Maintaining a high quality of life for employees and communities.
Cohen et al. (2012)	HRM policies and strategies should be designed to: Support the organization’s sustainable development strategy; Emphasize fair treatment, development, and the well-being of employees; Contribute to building the skills, value, and trust of employees and increases their engagement in sustainable development; Focus on the well-being of the internal (employees) and external (all entities interested in the functioning of the organization) stakeholders; and Support environmentally friendly organizational practices.
De Prins et al. (2014)	Respect: renewed focus on respect for the internal stakeholders in the organization (employees); Openness: environmental awareness and outside-in perspective on strategic human resource management; Continuity: a long-term approach, both in economic and societal sustainability terms and with regard to individual employability.
Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė (2018)	Long-term orientation; Care of employees; Care of environment; Profitability; Employee participation and social dialogue; Employee development; External partnership; Flexibility; Compliance beyond labor regulations; Employee cooperation; Fairness and equality.
Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė (2019)	Employee competencies: development of employees’ potential and long-term orientation; Voice and participation of employees; Employee–employer relations: employee as an equal partner, cooperation between employees, and fairness and equal opportunities; Care of employees: preservation of employees and flexibility; Care of the environment: environmental protection.

the way organizations approach their employees' well-being can have a significant impact upon perceptions of the organization's wider sustainability efforts and can help them become an exemplar in the sector as an "employer of choice," enhancing their own long-term viability (Cohen et al., 2012; Ehnert, 2009).

### Methodology

To address the research questions, it was necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of employee perspectives of the issue of stress and well-being in the events industry, and how they perceived their employer's response to it. An inductive and exploratory approach using mixed methods was considered the most appropriate means of exploring stress factors in the events industry and to apply a sustainable HRM lens to this specific context, rather than drawing statistical generalizations without taking the lived experience of industry employees into account (Evans, 2017; Okamoto & Teo, 2012). The use of sequential mixed methods allowed complementarity: we were able to gain a broader, deeper, more comprehensive understanding of this complex social phenomenon by employing methods that examined its different facets and dimensions (Greene, 2007).

### Data Collection

Data were collected using two methods. First, an online survey ( $n = 205$ ) was sent to a convenience sample of event professionals across the UK who were on a database developed by Stress Matters (an organization specializing in workplace well-being for creative businesses). In addition to distributing the survey on our behalf, Stress Matters UK also published a press release with a link to the survey in *Conference News* in February 2021. A short series of demographic questions captured information about age, gender, job level, and industry sector. Respondents were then asked a number of questions centered on the topic of stress, mental health, and well-being in the events industry. Questions were a mix of Likert scale, multiple choice, and free-text responses: they were developed in consultation with Stress Matters UK and supported by the literature (Dashper, 2015; Doppler et al.,

2020; Odio et al., 2013; Stadler et al., 2021). The free-text questions provided an option for participants to respond in their own words and using their own language and terminology (Braun et al., 2020; Toepoel, 2015). Participants were asked to describe their stress levels at work and at home, as well as list any causes of stress. They were also asked to provide examples of how their company supported employee well-being, what their employer did to reduce stress in the work environment, and what they would *like* their employer to do to help reduce stress levels at work. Participants could write as much or as little as they wished, and indeed some provided very detailed examples of workplace well-being initiatives and practices.

The second stage of data collection involved the use of in-depth semistructured interviews. These were designed to further the understanding of issues identified following the survey data analysis. Probing questions were asked to elicit nuanced stories of how participants coped with stress and mental health as employees in the industry, how their employer policies and practices facilitated or constrained their ability to cope, and what changes they would like to see, along with how they felt the events industry as a whole approached the issue of mental health. Interviews were conducted online by members of the Stress Matters team, lasted an average duration of 50 min, and verbatim transcripts were sent to the research team for analysis. Theoretical saturation, the point at which no new information was being captured, was reached after 12 interviews, and the identification of themes and theory was deemed comprehensive, credible, and robust (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guest et al., 2006).

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were subjected to basic descriptive statistical analysis. This was done to provide a broad overview of the background in which the event professionals were working and the levels and types of stress they were experiencing, which in turn allows the reader to contextualize the findings from the qualitative data. Qualitative data from the online survey and interviews were analyzed by the team of researchers as follows: the three researchers each coded the entire data set individually, then compared patterns within and across the two data

Table 2  
Demographic Information: Survey  
Participants' Industry Sector

Conferences and gala dinners	38	19%
Creative agency	31	15%
Venue	29	14%
Exhibitions	25	12%
Corporate hospitality	14	7%
Meetings	11	5%
Production house	10	5%
In-house	10	5%
Festivals and public events	8	4%
Supplier to the industry	6	3%
Incentive travel	4	2%
Other	19	9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>100%</b>

sets to draw out similarities and differences in how participants described their experiences and the meanings attached to them. Using inductive thematic analysis allowed us to explore rich, vivid, and compelling stories and examples from individual participants' responses (Braun et al., 2020). In the final stage of analysis, investigator triangulation was employed whereby the three researchers compared their findings and agreed on the themes identified from the data (Decrop, 2004; Denzin, 1970). These were then related back to existing literature to develop a more critical discussion.

### Findings

A total of 205 participants fully completed the online survey. Demographic questions at the beginning of the survey revealed that participants came from a range of sectors within the events industry (Table 2), and had different roles (Table 3). The 12 interview participants included Consultants, Producers, Operations Managers, and Marketing

Executives, with an average length of industry experience of 17 years.

Analysis of the quantitative data found that 50% of participants rated themselves at 8 or higher when asked to rate their stress level at work on a scale of 1 (*not stressed at all*) to 10 (*extremely stressed*). No significant difference in stress levels was identified during analysis between employees from different sectors of the industry, event sizes, or types of events (e.g., corporate, community driven). In a follow-up question where participants could select all options that applied, the four most common stress factors highlighted were "missing social life" (97 responses), "lack of control" (83 responses), "pure level of workload" (78 responses), and "long hours" (69 responses). It is clear that the level of stress experienced by events industry employees is high, and that lack of work-life balance is a key contributor to that, particularly the level of workload and long hours.

Three key themes were identified through the analysis of qualitative responses from the online survey and interviews: open and inclusive communication and relationships; flexible working; and empathic long-term support and growth. Many participants discussed a lack of these as the main issues having negative impacts upon their stress levels and mental well-being within the workplace. When asked what they would like their employer to do to help, they also suggested specific ways to improve upon them. The findings below describe each of the themes in more depth, and highlight a disconnect between the well-being policies and practices put in place by employers, and the employees' need to sustain their health and well-being over the long term. The discussion section that follows will contextualize these findings, laying out the theoretical framework to demonstrate how the principles of

Table 3  
Demographic Information: Survey Participants' Job Level

Owner/executive/C-level	28	14%
Account director/producer/buyer/sales manager	40	20%
Account manager/event coordinator/account executive	45	22%
Group account director/client services director/executive producer	22	11%
Intern/apprentice/entry level	9	4%
Other	31	15%
Prefer not to say	30	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>100%</b>

sustainable HRM may be applied as a way to overcome this disconnect.

*Theme One: Open and Inclusive Communication and Relationships*

The first and arguably most significant theme across both the survey and interview responses was that of communication based on relationships of trust. Survey participants commented on what they perceived to be a lack of care from their current employers, and explicitly mentioned wanting to feel listened to. In addition to encouraging conversations to happen, many wanted their employer to actively and regularly ask about their employees' mental health and well-being:

[I want them] to care about people a bit more, to treat them as individuals with individual needs and problems. Stop the blame game and actually listen to people.

[I want them to] allow for conversations about stress to be had, actively ask staff if they require help or any changes etc.

The interviews revealed that the underlying reason for this was a work relationship with their line manager that was not conducive to having conversations about stress and mental health. Interview participants commonly indicated they would like to have a more open and collaborative relationship with their manager. In reflecting upon their experience, they provided further thoughts into the details of what they currently get versus what they actually want from their employer:

I did not have a close working relationship with my manager. I spoke to her very little, when she contacted me, those communications were very sort of actions driven, there was no checking on my mental health. I was furloughed [during the COVID-19 pandemic] for 8 weeks, there was absolutely no checking in whatsoever from the day I was furloughed to the day I was told I was going back to work. And that impacted me quite heavily. And then I realized that actually, I was aware of people who were having a much better furlough experience than I did. And therefore, I realized that the relationship I need to have with a manager is one, which is far more collaborative and communicative than I was getting. So, I think that brought that into sharper focus. (Interview 04)

However, for many, it did not need to be a specific question about their mental health, but was rather about creating an open and inclusive environment that made it possible to approach the topic. Some interview participants elaborated on this and were more critical about the kind of relationship they actually wanted with their employer. They specifically highlighted the openness and trust that is necessary in order to develop these relationships, which they are currently lacking:

If you said to some people, right, your boss is going to go around the room and ask you how you are feeling . . . we need to be honest. You know, if I was 2 years into my career, I would probably say I was fine, loving my job, I don't know if I'd have the confidence and guts to say, "actually I'm really struggling." . . . I think companies need to kind of find the right forum and place for that. It would be sad if people just paid lip service to me and said, yeah, we're really into mental health. I think you have to work quite hard to create an environment where people really believe that you care, and that, you know, there is an open-door policy. . . . but I certainly think it should be more open. It has to come from the top and everyone has to buy into it. (Interview 09)

These findings suggest that the application of sustainable HR policies and practices that promote open communication and employee–employer relationships may help employees to feel valued and heard, and that their employer genuinely cares about their well-being.

*Theme Two: Flexible Working*

Participants who listed deadlines, their current workload, and working too many evenings and weekends as specific factors causing them stress and ill-health, identified the ability to work more flexibly as a meaningful HR policy response that their employer could implement. Specific examples from survey participants of what they would like their employer to offer, include:

Allows work to be done when it suits me and is happy for half days or days off if needed.

Allow people to work in a matter that suits their style of work/process best, not expect the same to work for everyone.



Give more freedom to work to your own style, take a proper lunch break, be able to get a walk and some fresh air.

When exploring these more flexible work practices further with interview participants, we found that they were particularly relevant in relation to employees' desire for work–life and work–family balance, and having the opportunity to take time off to be with family when needed:

And whether that's you know, you take a lunch break or you, you know, start later or if it's not easy to be away from a laptop [because of child-care responsibilities], then we need to get more support. (Interview 05)

You need to be able to take a break and go on holiday. And I think people need to be really aware that actually they still need to take a break. So, I had 2 weeks off with my son, paternity leave, and while that was definitely a break, it was obviously quite busy and not for very long. So, I think there's that need to have time off and to take a proper break every now and again. (Interview 02)

Findings from across both datasets clearly highlight the importance of supporting employees' work–life and work–family balance. Through offering more flexibility with regards to work patterns, employers can also demonstrate that they care about their employees as individuals and want to sustain their health and well-being.

### *Theme Three: Empathic Long-Term Support and Growth*

The third theme identified in the responses centered around the lack of empathy across the industry as a whole. Specific examples of the kind of empathic long-term support survey respondents would like, included being more open about the future and demonstrating commitment to long-term care of the employee, such as:

[They could] be more open about the future, understand my workload and know that when I say I can't do any more, then not try and give me more to do!

[They could] be more understanding of the workload and when offering to help, actually help and listen instead of feigning interest.

When further unpacking these responses to what employees want, interview participants agreed that a more long-term approach to support and individual growth was needed, but they acknowledged that this would have to come from within the industry itself:

There's a degree of empathy that has to come, which is this idea as we'll talk about mental health and things like that, there's a specific issue to event organizers that can only be dealt with by people that understand other event organizers. You can never say to an event organizer "Don't worry." Don't do that. It doesn't matter, you can't say to them, you know, you've got to stop, go have a cup of tea. You can't do that, it's unempathetic and actually does worse than it does good. . . . Whatever happens, has to happen from within, we have to solve this from within, . . . basically, someone needs to start executing events specific empathic solutions that don't offend event organizers, that understand where they come from. (Interview 01)

Some employers have indeed started to recognize the problem and are making an effort to help, as expressed by a survey respondent:

[My employer] frequently asks how I am, how I find structuring my time, if there is need for additional support, and even though I said "no," they put a budget in for additional support for me to use should I need it. Just knowing it's there helps, and that they are looking out for me and my future needs.

But with regards to the event-specific empathic solutions mentioned by interview participant 01 above, employees feel that more needs to be done to really tackle the issue. Interviews allowed us to delve deeper into this and specifically look for best practice examples. One such example we found currently being offered by some employers is "support leave," which can be taken as and when needed, demonstrating a level of innovation in how they can go beyond labor regulations with the kind of support they offer to their employees:

Support leave! Where you can take like five days, additional days if you're struggling. Especially at the moment. And you can take them at any time during the year, but it doesn't come out of your annual leave allowance. If you just need a bit of a break from work. I think that's a really nice

thing and I know a lot of people have utilized that.  
(Interview 10)

Although these findings suggest that some employers have started to offer support and want to be known for their long-term care of employees, more empathic solutions are still needed across the industry to create better awareness and understanding, and to address the wider problem in a meaningful way.

### Discussion

It is concerning that events industry employees in the UK experience their workloads, work practices, and relationships as unsustainable. In this section, we discuss the findings from each of the three themes in relation to the key principles of sustainable HRM. We demonstrate how the application of these principles can help overcome the harmful impacts of current HRM practices on employee stress levels, burnout, and ill-health, and to improve organizational outcomes in the long term.

First, it is evident that events industry employees desire open, inclusive communication and collaborative relationships with their employer in order for them to feel valued and heard—indeed, this is perceived as a tangible way of their employer demonstrating care. Key principles of sustainable HRM are a workplace culture based on openness and respect (De Prins et al., 2014), relationships of trust (Ehnert, 2009), emphasizing the voice and participation of employees (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2019), and good employee–employer relations whereby employees are seen as equal partners (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2019). Being personally available and accessible to talk to, as well as more empathic engagement with employees through treating them as individuals with unique needs are key behaviors that can prevent or reduce stress at work (Litchfield et al., 2016). This should also include care for volunteers, contractors, suppliers, and other stakeholders, who are key players in this people-driven industry. Therefore, it is important that organizations understand the direct link between showing genuine care for their employees and the ability to maintain a healthy and productive labor force over time (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018, 2019).

Secondly, in the stressful, fast-paced, and deadline-driven events industry, employees are asking for more flexibility concerning their work—a key principle in the wider debate around sustainable HRM. This includes not only flexible work patterns and schedules, but also job rotation as and when needed, and substitution of employees that matches the interests of employer and employee (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2019). Some go even further and include considerations around work hours, leave, remote work, or vacations as crucial elements of flexible and sustainable HRM (Järlström et al., 2016) that also further support employees' work–life and work–family balance (Ehnert, 2009) and their well-being (Cohen et al., 2012). This was echoed by participants in the study as something they want their employer to consider and offer. However, the very nature of the events industry is often used as an excuse for not being able to achieve this, and thus for not trying to address it.

Finally, events industry professionals feel that the industry overall lacks empathy, awareness, and understanding of the impact of stress, workloads, and deadlines upon their mental health and well-being. They desire a longer-term approach to support and individual growth. Previous research in sustainable HRM shows that taking a long-term view allows employers to develop effective well-being initiatives and policies, and sustain their employees' health over time (Cohen et al., 2012; De Prins et al., 2014; Ehnert, 2009; Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018, 2019). This includes a more proactive approach to managing and communicating existing and future work through listening to employees, providing direction and development opportunities for individuals, and allowing future prioritization and planning (Litchfield et al., 2016). However, the project-based, temporary, and “pulsating” (Toffler, 1990) nature of events is often used to justify short-term approaches and solutions to HRM, and the importance of long-term care of employees is overlooked. By putting additional support in place (such as support leave), employers can demonstrate that they are embracing the principles of sustainable HRM, are going beyond labor regulations, and want to be known as an “employer of choice” (Ehnert, 2009). This good reputation was also recognized in a recent report by Stadler et

al. (2021) on stress and mental health in the events industry, which highlighted that, “The majority of survey participants (81%) said they would be more drawn to a company which had a good reputation for supporting minimizing stress in the industry” (p. 18). Therefore, developing relevant well-being best practices and becoming an employer of choice should be a key aim for event organizations to achieve long-term success.

Drawing together the most important factors discussed in the literature and findings from this article, a conceptual framework has been developed (Fig. 1). Starting in the left lower corner are the needs from an employee perspective as identified from this study: flexibility, open and inclusive communication, collaborative relationships, and empathic long-term support are key principles they want from an event organization. Moving upwards to the employer level of the framework, we argue that recognizing these key principles and having them in place can in turn help organizations further develop best practices and effective well-being initiatives and policies; practices through which they can become an “employer of choice.” With employers becoming more aware of sustainable HRM, a better understanding and long-term orientation to HRM across the events industry as a whole can then be created (see top right corner of the framework, where the sustainable HRM

principles employed at the industry level can then filter back down to individual organizations and hence the employer level on the right-hand side). This allows employers to further emphasize the sustainable HRM principles of caring for employees; maintaining employee health and well-being; openness and trust; voice and participation of employees; and employee–employer relationships within their organizations. These additional HRM principles were less pronounced in our study but we argue they can be achieved when more awareness and understanding across the industry has first been developed (see Table 1). Therefore, this framework will enable employers in the events industry to better understand the value of adopting sustainable HRM principles, and to develop the necessary policies and practices with a long-term orientation and care of employees in mind. The framework can also be used by researchers as a tool for further empirical research at and across the three levels of employee, employer, and industry.

Conclusion

In this article we explored how events industry employees perceive and experience their employer’s response to work-induced stress and poor mental health, and demonstrate how the principles of sustainable HRM can be applied to overcome these

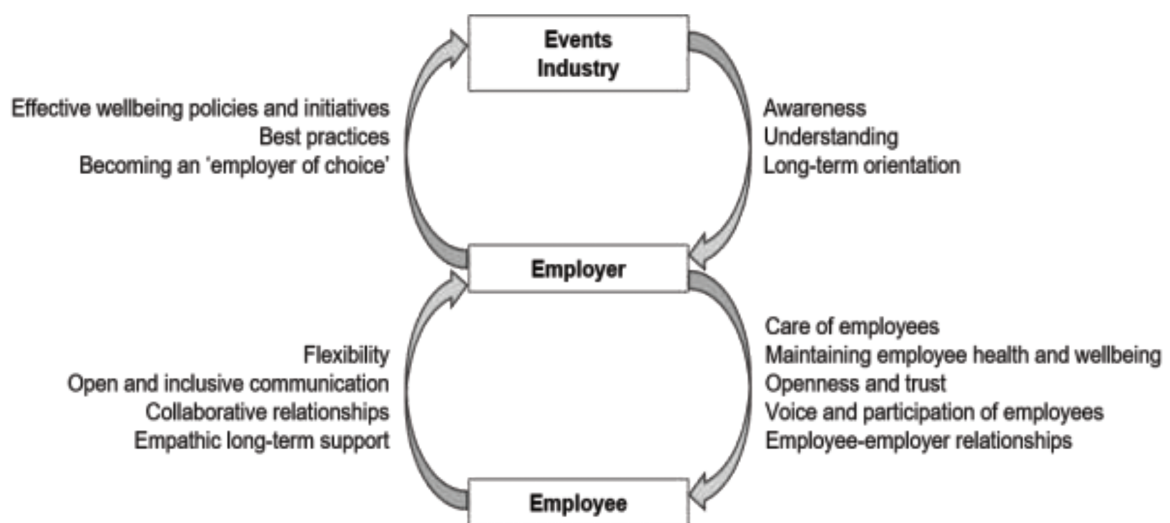


Figure 1. Framework for sustainable HRM in the events industry.

issues. In so doing, we responded to calls in the literature to further examine how working conditions within the events industry can be improved in order to reduce the risks they pose upon individuals' health (Doppler et al., 2020); to broaden the context in which sustainable HRM principles and practices are implemented (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017); and to pay more attention to employees' perspectives (Van Buren, 2022). The events industry is people-centric by nature but inherently very stressful and deadline driven and with a short-term, operational approach to HRM. In this context, we argued, employers are keen to offer well-being policies and practices in their organizations but lack awareness and understanding of how these are perceived by employees, who clearly demand more sustainable HRM practices to maintain their long-term health and well-being. As such, the article makes valuable theoretical and practical contributions.

#### *Theoretical Contribution*

Sustainable HRM is offered here as a theoretical lens to develop well-being policies and practices that not only enhance individual employees' health and personal growth, but can also improve organizational outcomes through reducing the negative impacts of short-term, operational, and deadline-driven HRM practices on employees. Factors such as low pay, unpredictable working times, as well as long and difficult hours have been recognized as key issues in the events industry leading to high levels of employee turnover, which are not sustainable (Baum, 2006). Yet, the central role of people within wider discussions of sustainability and long-term organizational success in the sector is still largely being ignored (Baum, 2018). The conceptual framework presented (Fig. 1) showcases the potential for employers and the events industry as a whole to embrace more sustainable HRM practices to enhance the experience of employees, while at the same time maintaining organizational productivity and profitability—often seen as a paradox in HRM (Kramar, 2014). Through the development of industry HRM best practices and becoming an employer of choice, a better awareness and understanding of mental health across the industry can also be achieved, potentially reducing the issue of employee burnout and high staff turnover. At the

same time, the theoretical framework brings new questions to the field of event studies; for example, to what extent can a more sustainable approach to HRM enhance employee commitment, motivation, and satisfaction; or how can effective well-being policies and practices best be embedded within the existing organizational culture and values.

Although some elements of the framework have previously been acknowledged and discussed in an events industry context to tackle employee stress and burnout (Dashper, 2015; Doppler et al., 2020; Nizam & Kam, 2018; Odio et al., 2013; Stadler et al., 2021), studies have predominantly focused on a reactive, problem-solving approach that emphasizes short-term solutions. Therefore, this article is the first to provide a more proactive, longer-term, and sustainable HRM approach for “pulsating” and people-driven types of organizations. As such, it can also be adapted and applied to other project-based organizations as well as other tourism, leisure, and hospitality contexts.

#### *Practical Implications*

The framework also has value as a tool for employers across the events industry to start the conversation and to cocreate HRM and well-being policies, practices, and initiatives with employees. Through more regular and empathic engagement with employees, and through implementing authentic and meaningful well-being initiatives that are relevant to them, employees will feel valued and listened to. Demonstrating care for employees and their work–life and work–family balance, along with creating good relationships and open communication, are key practices for employers to embrace in order to maintain a healthy workforce over time. In order to reduce the high levels of employee turnover within the events industry (Baum, 2006; Van der Wagen & White, 2014), employers should ultimately aim to develop awareness, understanding, and best practices with a long-term orientation in mind.

We suggest, for instance, that employers could allow employees to work nonstandard hours on more administrative tasks that do not require immediate responses from clients/suppliers. For example, working an hour or 2 before breakfast or after dinner could allow employees to attend to external

commitments during the day. The timing of both lunch breaks and holidays should be explicitly discussed and agreed upon—this will enable employees to plan time out on a daily and annual basis, and provide employers with an indication of the timing of staff absences requiring cover. Where employees do not wish to work every weekend, job-sharing could be a possibility. We acknowledge that creating the flexibility that employees desire will need innovative thinking, and that it may not be achievable in all contexts, but we argue it should form part of the conversation and of the new gold standard “business-as-usual” for the events industry. In this sense, employers can become an “employer of choice” (Ehnert, 2009), develop “sustainable humans” and at the same time ensure the long-term viability of their organization and the industry at large.

#### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

We acknowledge that findings from this research are based on data collected in the UK only. Furthermore, all data were collected in 2020–21 as the UK came out of its third COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. As mentioned in the introduction, this created much uncertainty and job insecurity across the events industry that has brought additional challenges and stressors for employees. Although not a limitation as such, the findings should be interpreted within this wider context.

Moving forward, it is recommended to apply and test the framework across the three levels of employee, employer, and industry. Exploring the connections and relationships between different elements of the framework would also be useful, such as the impact of open and inclusive communication and flexibility upon the development of effective well-being policies and initiatives, or the impact of a more long-term orientation to HRM across the industry upon sustaining employee health and well-being over time. Although no significant differences in terms of employee stress levels with regards to age and level of experience, nor regarding different sizes and types of events were found in this study, it is possible that some elements of the framework are more pronounced in certain age groups or in mega-event organizations compared to small-scale events,

and this should be further investigated and tested. The framework should also be trialed with different types of event organizations, such as festival organizations, conferences and exhibitions, business events, as well as venues, contractors, and suppliers in order to test the complexities and challenges across different sectors of the industry and the knock-on effect of these on other stakeholders. Lastly, researchers should aim to apply the framework to other locations in order to compare internationally and across different cultures, and to engage in longitudinal studies to investigate changes over time.

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#### ORCID

Raphaella Stadler: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3517-8138>  
 Trudie Walters: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0041-7255>  
 Allan Jepson: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1036-6404>

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