



Impact of Covid-19 on Employment Relations in the NHS

Research Overview

This research explored the impact of the **first wave** of the Covid-19 pandemic on Employment Relations within the NHS

The research comprised of 3 main stages:

- i) Review of previous relevant research*
- ii) Online survey of 235 respondents from varying roles within the NHS*
- iii) 20 semi-structured interviews delving deeper into the themes uncovered by the survey*



Employment Relations before Covid-19.

“The organisation felt very hopeful, and it felt busy and efficient, and we as an organisation knew the journey and the direction of travel”

Responses painted a relatively positive picture of pre-pandemic employment relations

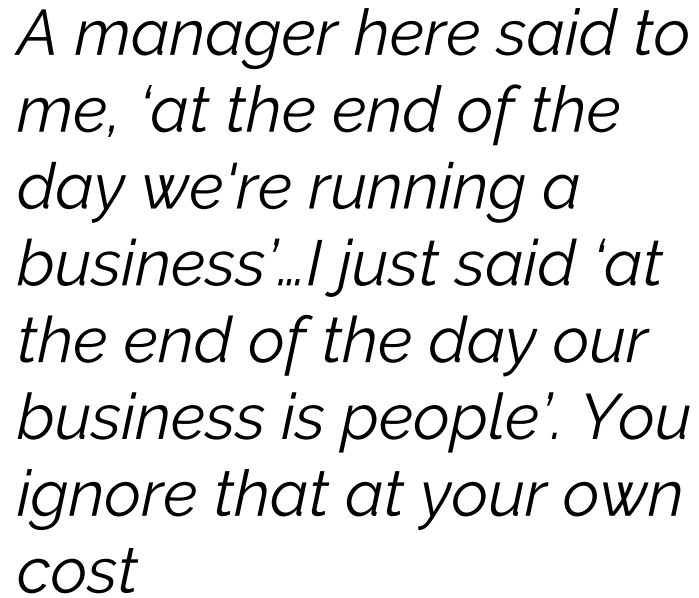
Most organisations had a focus on developing a partnership approach with trade unions

Positive relationships underpinned informal and creative approaches to conflict resolution

Good relationships with senior management not always reflected 'on the ground'



Three-quarters of respondents rated relationships between unions and management as good or very good.



A manager here said to me, 'at the end of the day we're running a business'...I just said 'at the end of the day our business is people'. You ignore that at your own cost

8/10 respondents to our survey agreed that they *"always work closely with staff and unions to resolve conflict informally"*

Evidence of innovation through Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, the development of Just and Learning Cultures and the extension of Workplace Mediation

BUT, the majority of respondents felt that issues were still often bogged down in formal processes and lengthy procedures.

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**Only 38% of
survey
respondents
agreed that
line managers
were well
equipped to
resolve
difficult issues**

The research exposed concerns around the role of line managers in handling employee relations issues and conflicts

Key causes...

Intense operational pressures

People skills undervalued in recruitment and progression

Lack of focus on core people skills in training and development




The impact of Covid-19 on Employee Relationships.

“We’re all people aren’t we, so you absolutely had clinical teams forget their normal boundaries, pulling together, we created new teams, from all over the place”

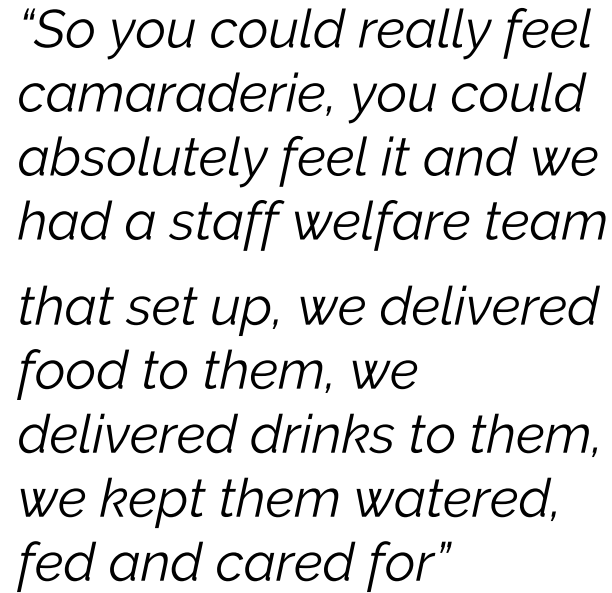
Clear sense of camaraderie and solidarity during the pandemic

People seemed to put their differences to one side and come together for “the greater good”

Close partnership working between trade unions and HR departments to monitor and communicate any growing issues and concerns



3/4 survey respondents agreed that working through the first-wave of the pandemic had a positive impact on team working



“So you could really feel camaraderie, you could absolutely feel it and we had a staff welfare team that set up, we delivered food to them, we delivered drinks to them, we kept them watered, fed and cared for”

Respondents reported improved communication between senior leaders and staff helped by the use of technology

HR functions were extremely agile in adapting to new resourcing demands, providing support to managers and developing resources to monitor and strengthen wellbeing

Sense that value and contribution of HR was increasingly recognised

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Clear evidence of significant negative impact on emotional wellbeing of frontline workers

Respondents talked of an overwhelming sense of fatigue among staff

Serious concerns over long-term effects of trauma

Two-thirds of respondents reported increasing referrals to occupational health and 57% reported increased stress-related absence

“The word I hear most is fatigue. Staff are fatigued and yet, continue to be asked to do more”




Responding to the pandemic.

“We did work together and we did share, and that’s great, because in a crisis you have to do that or you won’t survive. But it’s about trying to harness that crisis activity and make it more sustainable”

The research suggested a renewed focus on well-being - using channels of employee voice to monitor wellbeing and the extension of support

Greater emphasis on equality and diversity in response to the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on BAME staff and patients

In some organisations, HR and people management issues have become increasingly seen as a priority



“I think, what we did was to show that actually workforce is fundamental to your business and without workforce you haven't got a business”

Respondents expressed concern that the 'Command and Control' approach, which was necessary to keep up with the ever changing regulations and advice, could have negative impacts on behaviours if sustained

Need to develop line manager capability – both in terms of improved training and development but supported by coaching from HR and senior management

Need for a more collaborative and cohesive approach across NHS in England

“Decisions are being made at speed but not always with a lot of evaluation”

“People do their own things, they develop their own policies, they commission their own resources...competition is quite prominent, and that is often to the detriment of patients”


Conclusion

The golden thread between staff wellbeing and patient care has been brought into sharp focus by Covid-19

The development and maintenance of positive employment relationships needs to be a key strategic priority

Importance of embedding the value of good people skills and promoting cultures that emphasise fairness and justice

Concern whether focus on people would be sustained in medium and longer-term



“My concern is that we are just going to go back into a whole load of organisational changes all over the place unless we can really grab that common purpose about what we’re after and what our objectives are”