

# WOW Leadership

## Key Findings on Wellbeing at Work & Leadership in the Region - Ireland





# Introduction

**What role does leadership play in building healthy, resilient, and innovative organizations?** This question lies at the heart of the WOW Leadership project. We understand leadership as a driving force behind Wellbeing at Work, helping employees, teams, and organizations thrive together. WOW Leadership is about designing and leading work in a way that enables both people and performance to flourish. Across our themes of **WOW Leadership, Innovation Capacity, and Regional Labour Market**, we repeatedly see the same pattern: leaders who take care of their own wellbeing are better equipped to foster healthy, resilient workplaces. Healthy leaders help create healthy organizations and healthy organizations, in turn, support healthy leaders.

As part of this project, the Hanze WOW Leadership Team had the opportunity to visit Dublin and Cork, Ireland, from 12 to 17 June 2026 and engage with a diverse range of organisations, including companies from various sectors, employee organisations, universities, and government institutions. A total of 26 participants shared their experiences, practices, and reflections on Wellbeing at Work through interviews, a research seminar, and a dialogue session with EPS Water and Power of Seven. They discussed what is currently working well, where challenges are being experienced, and how leadership can make a meaningful difference.

This brief report provides a concise **reflection, highlighting key successes and challenges** that stood out across the interviews, the seminar and the dialogue session. Rather than offering a full report, the aim is to surface recognizable patterns and promising practices that emerged from your insights.

To structure these highlights, we use the **IGLOO framework** (Nielsen et al., 2018), which looks at Wellbeing at Work across five interconnected levels: Individual, Group, Leader, Organization, and Overarching Environment. Classifying the insights in this way helps to make visible where strengths already exist within organizations, where tensions or gaps remain, and how leadership interacts with organizational and regional contexts. We hope this overview not only resonates with your own experiences, but also supports continued reflection, dialogue, and collaboration around wellbeing at work in Ireland and beyond.

## Key successes and challenges

### I - Individual

#### Key successes

At the individual level, considerable attention is given to self-leadership, self-awareness, reflection, and personal development. Wellbeing was often described as something that requires people to actively engage in how they work, learn, and respond to challenges. Building confidence, resilience, optimism, and the capacity to navigate setbacks were seen as important aspects of this process. At the same time, personal agencies do not develop in isolation. Coaching, peer learning, and opportunities for reflection were highlighted as valuable ways of supporting individuals in strengthening their wellbeing over time.

💬 *“Leadership starts with yourself... who wants to be led by somebody that cannot manage themselves.”*

### **Key challenges**

Across the conversations, there was a clear recognition that wellbeing cannot be understood solely as an individual responsibility. While personal agency plays an important role, wellbeing challenges are often connected to the way work is organised, the behaviors of leaders, organisational culture, and wider societal pressures. There was a shared concern that an exclusive focus on individual resilience risks overlooking the conditions that shape everyday experiences at work. Wellbeing was therefore consistently described as a shared responsibility: individuals need to engage with their own wellbeing, while organisations have a responsibility to create the circumstances in which wellbeing can genuinely flourish.

☞ *“You've got a problem, fix it... go to the EAP.” (Employee Assistance Programme)*

### **G - Group**

#### **Key successes**

The group level emerged as an important source of belonging, connection, and support. Conversations highlighted the value of sharing experiences, engaging in open dialogue, and creating psychologically safe spaces where people can speak honestly about both successes and challenges. These interactions help people make sense of difficult situations, feel less alone, and learn from one another. In this way, wellbeing becomes more than an individual experience; it is something that is shaped, strengthened, and sustained through relationships and collective sensemaking.

☞ *“To be in a group environment where it's like, hang on, hang on a second. Oh, you have a similar... Oh, yeah. That was quite generative.”*

#### **Key challenges**

Despite its importance, the social dimension of wellbeing was often experienced as vulnerable and not always fully woven into everyday work. Across the conversations, concerns were raised about loneliness, weakening social connections, and a diminishing sense of community, particularly in hybrid and geographically dispersed work environments. When opportunities to connect are less visible or less intentional, support, belonging, and shared learning can become unevenly distributed across teams. As a result, not everyone experiences the same access to the relationships and interactions that help sustain wellbeing at work.

☞ *“That sense of community is missing.”*

### **L - Leader**

#### **Key success**

Leadership was widely recognised as an important contributor to wellbeing at work. Across the conversations, a shift towards more relational forms of leadership became visible, characterised by trust, vulnerability, listening, and support. Leadership was not only associated with providing direction, but also with creating psychologically safe environments in which meaningful conversations can take place and employees feel supported in their development. Coaching, mentoring, and peer support were frequently mentioned as valuable ways of enabling learning and growth.

Several examples illustrated how leaders actively foster psychological capital by helping employees strengthen their confidence, resilience, optimism, and ability to navigate challenges. At EPS Water, for example, the CEO drew on his own positive experience with the Power of Seven programme and translated these insights into organisational practice by making coaching and peer coaching circles available to employees throughout the organisation.

☞ *“The leader should be kind of an anchor of all the individuals that are in the team rather than being at a higher position.”*



## Key challenges

At the same time, a recurring challenge emerged around the translation of intentions into everyday practice. While care for employee wellbeing was clearly present, leaders often found it difficult to turn this commitment into concrete actions and consistent management practices. This created a pattern that could be described as sympathetic inaction: genuine concern for wellbeing existed, yet responding effectively was not always straightforward.

Although organisations are increasingly investing in wellbeing policies and initiatives, their impact often depends on the actions and capabilities of individual leaders, particularly line managers. These leaders are expected to support wellbeing, navigate difficult conversations, and respond to the diverse needs of employees. However, they do not always feel sufficiently equipped, confident, or supported to fulfil this role consistently. As a result, experiences of wellbeing can differ considerably between teams, even within the same organisation.

💬 *"How to have the conversations, how to really have the confidence when things are going wrong."*

## O - Organisation

### Key successes

Organisations increasingly adopt more structured and strategic approaches to wellbeing through frameworks, implementation plans, wellbeing charters, and people-centred policies. Several organisations described efforts to embed wellbeing into their culture rather than treating it as a standalone initiative. At EPS Water, in collaboration with Power of Seven, coaching and peer coaching circles provide structured opportunities for reflection, learning, support, and personal development. Participants reflected on how these initiatives contribute to both individual wellbeing and organisational capability.

💬 *"The CEO got huge benefit from the Power of Seven programme and wanted to pay that forward to us."*

### Key challenges

Despite growing investment in wellbeing, initiatives often remain fragmented and disconnected from core work processes. Conversations repeatedly pointed to a gap between policy and practice: wellbeing policies, EAPs and support programmes may exist, but are not always experienced as accessible, relevant or safe to use. Concerns about stigma, trust and potential career consequences can discourage employees from seeking support. In addition, organisations often focus on wellbeing initiatives without sufficiently addressing underlying issues such as workload, job design, culture and management practices.

💬 *"The existence of the policy is part of the picture, but a limited one."*

## O - Overarching Environment

### Key successes

Across the conversations, there was a clear recognition that wellbeing at work is increasingly being positioned as both an organisational priority and a broader societal concern. Attention to wellbeing was visible not only within organisations, but also in public discussions, professional networks, policy initiatives, and wider societal debates. Wellbeing is no longer solely seen as a matter of individual health; it is increasingly understood as an important contributor to sustainable performance, employee retention, and long-term organisational success. Attractive (green) public spaces with seating encourage staff to go outside during their breaks, allowing them to spend a little time in a different setting. Accessible outdoor areas on company premises also provide an appealing environment for staff to take a break from their work, have lunch, or catch up with colleagues.

## Key challenges

At the same time, organisations do not operate in isolation and are increasingly influenced by pressures that extend beyond their direct control. Conversations pointed to challenges related to housing shortages, access to healthcare, labour market pressures, economic uncertainty, and changing societal expectations. These wider developments shape people's experiences both inside and outside work, making wellbeing a shared concern that cannot be addressed by employers alone. In public spaces, it is often up to the local authority to make them attractive to residents and workers. There is a growing focus on this, particularly in inner-city areas. This is not yet common practice in industrial estates.

Multinational organisations also reflected on tensions that can arise when decisions made by parent organisations do not fully align with local values, needs, or wellbeing priorities. For smaller organisations, another challenge lies in making the business case for wellbeing, particularly when resources are limited and wellbeing is still viewed as a cost rather than an investment. As a result, external pressures can constrain both the capacity and the attention available to support wellbeing in a meaningful and sustained way.

💬 *“Our health system is broken... this makes employer support essential.”*

### From intention to practice: best practice

Structured approaches such as peer-based leadership practices (Power of Seven) demonstrate how this connection can be realised in practice. This illustrates not just what works, but how wellbeing can be systematically embedded into everyday practice.

Power of Seven can be understood as the operational “how” of Wellbeing at Work. Rather than introducing additional initiatives, it embeds wellbeing directly into the flow of work through:

- recurring reflection on self, family, and business
- structured peer dialogue and challenge
- shared accountability and follow-up actions

This creates a rhythm in which individuals continuously evaluate, align, and adjust their behaviour, resulting in:

- stronger self-leadership
- more consistent leadership behaviour
- deeper peer connection and psychological safety

Crucially, Power of Seven connects the IGLOO levels in practice:

- individual reflection is strengthened through peer interaction
- peer interaction shapes leadership behaviour
- leadership behaviour influences organisational culture and daily experience

In this way, it bridges the gap between organisational intention and lived experience, making wellbeing actionable rather than aspirational. This shows that the gap between intention and experience is not inevitable, but can be closed through structured, practice-based approaches.

## Overall conclusion

Wellbeing at work does not emerge from policies, programmes, or individual efforts alone. It is created through leadership that actively shapes the conditions in which people can thrive, connect, develop, and perform. Across all levels, the conversations pointed to the same **challenge**: creating and sustaining harmony between individual needs, group relationships, organisational demands, and the wider realities of life and work.



## Looking ahead

The results presented in this brief report are not an endpoint, but a touchpoint in our shared learning journey. Building on earlier exploratory research conducted in Singapore (late 2025) and Malta (early 2026), the outcomes of the Ireland visit represent the next step towards developing a European learning and exchange platform and network for entrepreneurs, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. Our community has already grown to 92 members, creating opportunities for continued learning, dialogue, and collaboration across countries and sectors. In 2027, the project will continue with research visits to two additional European countries, further expanding the network and deepening our understanding of wellbeing at work and leadership across different contexts.

## Acknowledgements

We sincerely **thank all participants in Ireland for their time, openness, and valuable insights**. We hope you will continue to be part of this growing European network, contributing to shared learning and collaboration around wellbeing at work.

## References

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## Contact

Klaske Veth  
k.n.veth@pl.hanze.nl

Mira Bloemen-Bekx  
w.m.j.m.bloemen-bekx@pl.hanze.nl

Cecile Oosting  
c.l.oosting@pl.hanze.nl

Roland Klarenbeek  
r.j.m.klarenbeek@pl.hanze.nl

Eva Hansen  
e.f.hansen@pl.hanze.nl