

**Answering the Call to Lead:**  
Future Leader Perceptions,  
Motivations, Skills and Needs

October 2024

**ICBE**  
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**LIMERICK**  
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IRISH CENTRE  
FOR BUSINESS  
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# Answering the Call to Lead: Future Leader Perceptions, Motivations, Skills and Needs

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## FOREWORD

In today's rapidly evolving and competitive business landscape, effective leadership is not just important—it is essential for long-term success. A well-thought-out leadership succession plan is critical to sustaining organisational growth and organisational viability.

In January 2023, ICBE Business Excellence Skillnet, in collaboration with the WorkFutures Lab at the Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick, launched a comprehensive research study on Sustainable Leadership for a Post-Digital Age. A key and somewhat unexpected finding from this study was the perceived hesitation among emerging high-potential employees to step into traditional leadership roles. Many in the new generation of leaders desire a more balanced, holistic approach to leadership, viewing the risks associated with today's leadership demands as excessive. Leaders we spoke with voiced their concerns about how to support and develop the next wave of leadership, with many expressing serious apprehension about the lack of effective succession planning in their organisations.

If even a fraction of future leaders are reluctant to step up, organisations face a significant challenge in the years ahead. In response, we sought to explore this issue in greater depth and partnered once again with the WorkFutures Lab for this, our fifth collaboration.

The results of this study are both insightful and thought-provoking. While it highlights the key concerns future leaders have about taking on leadership roles, it also provides actionable recommendations for organisations to address these issues. We found that potential leaders face a complex decision-making process, where factors such as risk, work-life balance, and people management emerge as significant barriers to leadership aspirations.

It is crucial for organisations to listen carefully to how future leaders wish to contribute and to offer them the support they need by removing these barriers. Providing the right tools, training, and showing that work-life balance is achievable in leadership roles are essential steps in cultivating the next generation of leaders.

At ICBE, we are committed to supporting organisations by disseminating the findings of this study and facilitating the development of future leaders.

We are pleased to present this next instalment in our Future of Work research series. We extend our gratitude to Skillnet Ireland for their continued support of ICBE Skillnet research and to our partners at the Kemmy Business School WorkFutures Lab, University of Limerick. A special thanks to Dr. Sarah Kieran, Maeve Toohey and colleagues for their exceptional work on this project.

Commissioned by the ICBE Business Excellence Skillnet, this research was conducted by the WorkFutures Lab at the Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick.

**Vivienne Kiernan** | ICBE Head of Customer Relations

**Grainne Walsh** | ICBE Business Excellence Network Manager

ICBE Business Excellence Skillnet.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The changing landscape of today's business world presents unprecedented challenges for all. Climate change, extreme poverty, scarce resources, cultural conflicts, political instability, human migration-based disruption, and globalisation are some of the most controversial issues facing society today. In organisations, New Ways of Working (NWW), digital transformation, new regulatory accountabilities, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), and environmental and sustainable goals are just some of the people-related challenges confronting Leaders. When one then considers the external business context, with its heightened levels of social, economic, technological & political disruption, the weight of leadership roles today is clear.

Organisations need to better understand the impact of this turbulent and often uncertain environment on current and future Leaders' experience of and performance at work. Furthermore, there is evidence that many individuals in the Extended Leadership Team (XLT), which the organisation has identified as potential Future Leaders, are less inclined to 'Answer the Call' as previously thought. Given the criticality of 'good' leadership, the need to share and distribute leadership across the organisation, the cost of developing Future Leaders, and the impact when leadership roles lie vacant, organisations urgently need to develop new strategies and approaches for developing and supporting Future Leaders, guiding them safely up to the leadership table.

This challenge however is stark when one considers the real-world problems of today. Leadership is a phenomenon that reaches beyond the organisation into economic, political, social, and of course environmental spaces. The people who lead organisations in Ireland have significant potential to influence Ireland's place and purpose from within and outside of their organisation.

Ensuring the right people move up into positions of power and influence, and that they have a positive and sustainable impact is important.

This study is a comprehensive examination of Future Leaders working in Ireland today. In the spring and summer of 2024, the perceptions, motivations, skills and needs of Future Leaders were investigated through a series of focus groups and a survey of 550+ individuals. The over-arching question being:

### WHEN AND IF THE TIME COMES, WILL YOU ANSWER YOUR ORGANISATION'S CALL TO LEAD?

“ Leaders shape our working environments, Leaders shape our organisational culture, and Leaders make a difference. Leadership takes courage, those at the leadership table now need to have the courage to shape organisations for those yet to step up. ”

**Colin Curran, VP of Human Resources,  
Corporate Social Responsibility & EHS**

“ I would encourage Future Leaders to answer the call to lead by demonstrating the personal satisfaction they derive in helping their Team develop individually and collectively. I see my role as a Leader to be a teacher and a coach; helping my Team learn how to effectively collaborate with others. ”

**Kay Shanahan, Plant General Manager,  
Edwards LifeSciences.**

According to this study, overwhelming majorities of Ireland's Future Leaders are highly ambitious and believe they have most of the skills needed for Leadership.

However, they broadly fall into three distinct groups. Approximately one-third do not intend to answer the call to lead, one-third hope to but not for another 2 to 5 years, and one-third are ready and waiting for the call.

**The challenge then for organisations is how to:**

- » Support those that are ready, so they make a successful transition into leadership.
- » Nurture those that are not ready just yet, keeping them on track for a future successful transition.
- » Most importantly, understand and learn from those who do not want to progress at all.

#### At a Glance: Future Leaders in Ireland Today

- » 54% are in their current role at least 6 years.
- » 58% are educated to a Post Graduate level.
- » 57% work between 40 and 50 hours per week....and don't want that to increase.
- » 69% benefit from Working from Home.
- » 50% benefit from FlexiTime.
- » 86% believe they are ready for a leadership role now.
- » Personal Drive & Career Ambition (46%) and Making a Difference (30%) are the key motivators.
- » 27% will never answer the call.
- » 28% are ready to answer the call this year.
- » 45% will answer the call within the next 5 years.
- » 71% believe answering the call to lead is risky.
- » 89% believe answering the call will enhance their reputation.
- » 90% believe they will 'rise or fall' based on their Team's performance.
- » 82% believe Leaders have the power to 'make or break' an organisation.
- » Stepping up to lead is a brave and courageous act.
- » The current business environment presents unprecedented, unrelenting and undefined problems.
- » Future Leaders are most likely to answer the call to lead due to their own personal drive and career ambition, however, they are concerned that they will not be able to lead in the way they want.
- » Work Life Balance is the No.1 reason Future Leaders will not answer the call to lead right now.
- » Work Life Balance is less gendered than it used to be. Men are as concerned about family life, health and wellbeing as women.
- » Answering the call to lead puts Flexible Working Practices at risk.
- » Future Leaders specifically need upskilling in People Management, eLeadership, eNetworking, Technology, Ethics, Navigating Risk and Uncertainty, and more broadly Sustainable Business Leadership and Digital Leadership.
- » Future Leaders find Coaching, Leader Shadowing and Stretch Projects the most impactful learning.
- » Leader Roles are no longer seen as a sign of prestige or social status.
- » Ireland's Leader Roles have fundamentally changed in recent years, growing significantly in scale, span and scope yet most organisations have not fully acknowledged these changes or the impact on those in the roles.
- » 33% experience regular uncivil interactions with their Leaders.
- » Future Leaders believe life at the Senior Leadership Table is unbearably stressful, political, risky, lonely and unhealthy. Current Leaders need to alter misperceptions.....and change realities.

# KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

**Perceptions of Leadership Today** are more negative than positive. While there are positives in terms of potential financial reward, ambition and influence, above all else, Future Leaders in this study see the next step up as a brave and courageous act. Their overwhelming perception is that leadership is difficult, demanding, risky, all-consuming, and highly pressurised. The dynamic environment in which they operate presents unprecedented, unrelenting and undefined business problems. These problems intersect at a multifarious point of digital transformation, sustainable business imperatives, competing global/socio-economic drivers, increasingly protracted value chains, shifting matrix organisational structures, multi-generational workforces, and highly regulated Human Resource (HR) and work practices. Future Leaders therefore sit at a point of paradox. They are called on to step up and tackle these problems. However, the only sustainable way of resolving them is to challenge the way organisations organise, the way they, the Future Leaders, might be expected to lead. Therefore, they make a choice. Step up and challenge, step up and conform, or step out. It is time now for organisations to confront this paradox and decide if they really want their Future Leaders... to lead.

**Motivations to Lead** is critical for new Leader emergence. While financial reward is important, it is not the chief motivator for Future Leaders. This study finds that career ambition and personal drive are key. Future Leaders express their desire to make a positive contribution to the organisation, having an opportunity to make a difference to their Team and those around them, whilst still striving to achieve organisational goals. Critically, ambition is predictive of Leader Emergence. However, these ambitious and driven individuals will not step up if they feel that, in some way, their organisational climate will disable their potential contribution. They will seek out roles inside or outside the organisation where they can better perform and contribute. Organisations need to capitalise on Future Leader ambition by listening carefully to *how* they want to contribute, by accommodating these wishes as best they can, and by supporting Future Leaders on their journey to the SLT. Organisations also need to ensure that organisational barriers do not disable these natural ambitions.

**Work Life Balance** (WLB) continues to be one of the most significant challenges in organisations today and one of the key deterrents to answering the call to lead. This

manifests in a number of ways. Evidence shows that the more senior the role the longer the working day and the pressure to be accessible 24/7. Organisations seriously need to rethink these unwritten expectations. Contrary to commonly held beliefs, working long hours and weekends should not be a norm of leadership. While leadership will have peaks of intensity and pressure points at different times, more reasonable work behaviours should be discussed and role-modelled among the SLT, signalling to Future Leaders that the space is manageable, that having a work life balance is achievable.

**People Management** is increasingly complex. Organisations in Ireland must comply with a range of important employee legislations. They also policy-make for the previously often neglected requirements of, for example, Grievances, Psychological Safety, Bullying and Harassment, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), and most recently the new social norm of Flexible Working Practices (FWPs). Furthermore, many promote contemporary HR strategies such as High-Involvement Work Systems, Shared and Distributed Leadership, Employee Voice etc., as all critical requirements for succeeding in today's challenging business landscape. While the value of the Human-Centric organisation to the bottom line is well evidenced internationally, Future Leaders are not sufficiently supported in their role as People Managers at the critical nexus of the SLT's vision and the organisational reality. Much of the challenge here is around the time and space to manage and coach people rather than control projects/tasks/targets. Critical and continuous support from the Human Resources (HR) function by way of coaching, training and follow-up is a fundamental need. Allowing Future Leaders a more sustainable experience of leading teams not only prepares them for senior leadership roles but well supported, positive experiences of challenging people management situations ensure they are willing to deal with this at a more senior level.

**Risk and the Dark-Side of Leadership** is a significant barrier. Despite the act of leading being regarded as a worthy cause, it is increasingly apparent to Future Leaders that they inherit significant professional, reputational and personal risk when they answer the call. This manifests in a burden of complex problems (as outlined above) and a concern over the unbearable weight placed on a single individual's shoulders, juxtaposed to complex problems tackled by complex teams. While all Future Leaders acknowledge the need for accountability at the top,



organisations need to reorient to new models of shared and distributed leadership. Shared Leadership requires serious and sustained efforts in Employee Participation and Employee Voice, and Distributed Leadership requires new operating models for decision making across multiple stakeholders. Combined, these two approaches are widely considered as the only sustainable way to resolve the VUCA environments highlighted over 50 years ago. This burden of complexity exacerbates Future Leader perceptions of organisational risk, politics and conflict, especially at the leadership table, what we typically refer to as the “dark side of leadership”. These elements can and do act as deterrents to stepping up. For many, they simply do not want the “hassle” associated with leading through these situations so self-select out of leader roles. Leader conflict is not a bad thing per se; conflict ensures sustainable solutions are arrived at. However, politicised, low-trust or mistrust, blame-oriented conflicts are a significant barrier for Future Leaders. Organisations can only resolve this at the level of the SLT where role modelling, indeed living, Sustainable Leadership behaviours and actions is vital. Everything starts at the top.

**Leadership Role Design** is crucial for organisations today but, according to this study, role design appears to be neglected. If roles are not sustainably designed (in line with recommendations here and the KBS WorkFutures Lab report on [Sustainable Leadership for a Post Digital Age](#)) current Leaders will burn out (37% of the SLT already are) and Future Leaders will opt out (27% say they have). Where leadership roles are known to be highly intensive, and demand long working hours and extreme flexibility, the scale, span and scope of these roles should be examined. For example, organisations should engage in Job Analysis to determine if roles have developed over time to a point where they cover a much broader portfolio, wider geographical coverage requiring regular travel to too many locations, or have fewer reporting lines into their role, such that their capacity for delegation is limited. Based on findings in this study, there could be a number of reasons for this such as changes in the business structure through merger and acquisition (M&A) activity. While a significant positive for Ireland Inc., such organisational growth, at times coupled with workforce rightsizing, may lead to increases in the scope of key roles. M&A activity (and realignment of remit in the public sector) also creates organisational uncertainty and can increase a sense of competition for leadership roles. All above combined will indirectly contribute to the development of unsustainable leadership and working practices.

**Future Leader Skill Needs** must be addressed on a continuous basis by the organisation to ensure it has a supply of talent capable of stepping up into senior roles. According to our findings, Future Leaders place significant emphasis on the importance of transversal skills, more commonly referred to as “softer skills”, an indication perhaps that the style of leadership they aspire to is a more holistic and Human-Centric style, where employee wellbeing is prioritised. It is widely acknowledged that softer skills become more critical as one transitions into senior roles. In terms of future development needs, many Future Leaders recognise the positive effect Executive Coaching could potentially play in their leadership development; 67% believe this would be impactful for them if afforded the opportunity. Similarly, leader shadowing (61%) is also highly regarded as being impactful as many recognise the importance of being exposed to the next level to prepare for what lies ahead. In terms of providing organisational support to emerging leaders, this is an area where organisations are perhaps struggling. There is a common misconception that, once appointed, leaders should be capable of “*hitting the ground running*” when transitioning into new roles and therefore are not afforded the same level of support as they would have received in the past. It is imperative that organisations continue to provide support to those Future Leaders when they step up to lead.

**Misconceptions and False Narratives of Leadership** may also prevail. It is important to highlight however that there may be an issue around how Leader roles are portrayed among Future Leaders. Misperceptions and false narratives of what it is to be a Leader could be a factor. Gaps may exist between perception and reality with Future Leaders having preconceived ideas about the lack of WLB or, for example, the politics among and above the SLT, which are incongruent with what the SLT consider it is ‘*really like*’. Where organisations believe that is the case, increasing transparency of Leader working practices and experiences will add great value. Leaders should engage in, for example, Flexible Working Practices (FWPs), and actively talk about and show how they align on the strategic imperatives of the business, collaborate around complex problems, and generally support and trust each other, all hallmarks of Sustainable Leadership. Involving Future Leaders in SLT activities more regularly will allow them witness the positives of leadership. Of course, this has to be the case among the SLT. If it is not, then organisations need to transform the leadership style among the SLT before they can begin to address succession issues among the XLT.



# INTRODUCTION

This important study on the future of leadership in Ireland was commissioned by the ICBE Business Excellence Skillnet and undertaken by the KBS WorkFutures Lab, at the University of Limerick. The study builds on four previous research projects exploring the world of work in a contemporary context: Future of Work Now: The Impact of Digitalisation on Global Business Services (June 2018), Leader Reflections on the Impact of Covid-19 (January 2021), Seeking Safe Spaces: Graduate Transitions into a New World of Work (June 2021), and Sustainable Leadership in a Post-Digital Age (2022).

## The Business Problem

For any organisation to succeed in today's challenging business landscape, effective leadership is essential. Having appropriate leadership succession plans in place to protect the organisation's long-term viability is a crucial factor in ensuring continued growth and success. Yet there is growing recognition amongst industry practitioners/experts that the next 'generation' of Future Leaders are reluctant to step up and answer their organisation's call to lead. This is already having a significant impact on organisations' leadership succession pipelines and their ability to fill key positions. Ensuring the most capable Future Leaders are ready and willing to answer the call to lead is vital for organisations but equally for society and the challenges facing the world today.

## Research Objectives

1. To investigate the reported decline in High-Potential Managers transitioning successfully to Leadership Roles.
2. To develop key recommendations for Organisations on how to ensure successful Leadership Transitions.
3. To devise a Leadership Succession Development Pathway for the contemporary Organisation.

## Envisaged Research Outcome

1. Identification of contemporary Future Leader profiles.
2. Increased understanding of issues in more traditional leadership succession planning pathways.
3. Identification of the enablers and disablers to leadership succession.

To this end, this extensive study on Answering the Call to Lead was conceived. The research encompassed two phases.

**Phase I - Future Leader Perceptions:** Undertaken during the spring of 2024, comprised 30 focus groups with 110 individuals identified by their organisations as being one-step below the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). The aim here was to explore insights and perceptions around these individuals potentially answering the call to lead at some point in their future.

**Phase II - Future Leader Profiles:** Undertaken during the summer of 2024, comprised an online survey of 550+ similar individuals. This phase sought to explore themes emerging from Phase I with a particular emphasis on intentions and motivations to progress (or not) into a senior leadership role, a more generalisable assessment of leader identity, readiness and skills/needs, and any barriers to their potentially answering the call to leadership.



# LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS TO DATE

Prior to engaging with the findings of this study, this section takes a very brief look at existing empirical evidence on some of the core dimensions of Future Leader emergence and leadership succession in organisations.

## The Weight of Leadership

Leadership is often linked to various rewards such as power, status, prestige, and reputation, thereby implying that it should be a highly attractive endeavour. Yet, leadership is difficult. It is demanding, risky, highly pressurised and all consuming. Leaders face high work demands, including time pressure and daily workload, and these high demands lead to strain and health impairments<sup>i</sup>. There is little doubt that being a Leader has become more challenging due to the pace of change and the complexity of challenges today, <sup>ii</sup>where the demands of leadership have led to increased rates of depression and burnout<sup>iii</sup>. A comprehensive study (Sustainable Leadership in a Post digital Age, Jan 2023) undertaken by the KBS shines a spotlight on what it is like to be a Leader today. 35% of the Leaders in this study categorise themselves as suffering from burn out, 77% believe they take on additional risk in stepping up to lead, and 75% see leadership as a personal risk. Leadership spaces are intense in terms of the relentless scrutiny and criticism to which Leaders are subjected. The need to maintain an exemplary reputation so that others trust in your decision-making can be a significant drain on one's psychological resources and can lead to emotional exhaustion and poorer performance over time<sup>iv</sup>. Such findings appear to indicate that the style of leadership practiced today is unsustainable and potentially having a negative impact on the next generations' willingness to step up into leader roles.

## Motivation to Lead

Feeling one knows how to lead is not enough to make one effective, one must also be truly motivated to persist in a leadership role despite the challenges Leaders face in modern organisations<sup>v</sup>. As motivation propels individuals to strive to attain desired outcomes through focusing the direction, intensity, and persistence of their actions, people who are motivated to lead are expected to work harder and longer to obtain leadership roles and more effectively fulfil the role's requirements<sup>vi</sup>. Yet, the literature suggests that the act of leading in itself is fraught with difficulties; leaders are more likely to encounter threats or challenges from both inside and outside their social group. Leadership, therefore, does not appear to be straightforward; yet it is vital for organisations' long-term prosperity to have succession plans in place, particularly for important leadership positions.

## Leadership Emergence & Skills

Leadership Emergence refers to the outcome of being perceived as '*Leaderlike*' by others<sup>vii</sup>. Many studies have attempted to ascertain the critical leadership skills and competencies of Future Leaders. Motivating and inspiring others, showing integrity, solving problems, driving for results, communicating powerfully, and promoting teamwork are essential. More recently, the need for innovative and adaptive thinking, virtual collaboration, social intelligence, and literacy in different types of digital media, computational thinking and analytics has been highlighted<sup>viii</sup>. Yet, research on Leadership Emergence tends to suggest that if individuals have the right characteristics or behavioural tendencies of a Leader, they will emerge as a Leader<sup>ix</sup>. This presumes that people should willingly enter, and be naturally attracted to, a Leader role if they have the relevant personal qualities. However, although leadership is often portrayed as a noble vocation, individuals may not be willing to step up to lead. Some research hints that individuals differ in predispositions such as their motivation to lead or their sense of leader identity. Other research invokes the concept of risk, proposing that the more individuals perceive risk associated with leading, the less likely they will claim a leadership identity<sup>x</sup>. The idea that leadership involves risk is not new and 'stepping up to lead' can incur instrumental, interpersonal and image risks.

**Despite its potential importance for understanding leadership, people's reluctance to lead has been a much-neglected issue both in organisational practice and in academic literature to date.**

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the reported decline in high potential Senior Managers/Junior Leaders transitioning successfully into more senior leadership roles or the SLT itself. These individuals are defined here as Future Leaders. Employees with high potential leadership capabilities, who are currently part of the Extended Leadership Teams (XLT), one-step below the SLT. Data for this study was gathered in two ways, a series of focus groups and an online survey.

Research Method	Participants	Total Participants
30 Small Focus Groups of 3 to 4 Future Leaders each.	Future Leaders identified by organisations as being part of their Extended Leadership Team (XLT).	110 Future Leaders across 14 Organisations in Ireland.
Online Survey issued to all 14 Organisations XLTs and made available publically via LinkedIn.	Targeted at Future Leaders who categorised themselves in Business Unit Leader Roles, Functional Leader Roles, Line Managers, Supervisors or Senior Individual Contributors.	Final responses n574.

### Focus Groups

This first phase of the research was conducted from January to May 2024. These comprised of 30 sessions, of approximately 60 minutes, across 110 Future Leaders (thus making for smaller focus groups with an average of 3 or 4 people each). Participants were drawn from the XLTs of 14 participating organisations. These include private and public sector organisations, ranging from sectors such as Pharma, MedTech, Information Technology, Insurance, Civil Service and Policing. In some cases, participants are already classified as Future Leaders in the organisations' succession plan. The objective of the focus groups was to gain initial insights from Future Leaders on their perceptions of leadership at senior levels, personal motivations to lead, potential barriers, skill requirements, and their general needs/views towards potentially answering the call to lead at some point in their career. Each focus group was facilitated on MS Teams by 2 researchers from the KBS WorkFutures Lab. All were recorded, with participants' consent, and subsequently thematically analysed by a team of 7 researchers.

### Focus Group Questions

1. When you look up at senior leaders in your organisation, tell us what you see.
2. What do you think the job is like?
3. Looking up, what do you think is the style and culture of leadership?
4. When you look at the job of leadership, what are the advantages of being a leader?
5. When you look at the job of leadership, what are the disadvantages of being a leader?
6. Is there a risk in taking that step up into a senior role?
7. If so, what kind of risk?
8. Are the current forms of leadership a factor in terms of influencing others in taking that leap up to a more senior role?
9. Do you think anything needs to change in the style of leadership being practised?
10. What do you feel are the top five skills needed for senior leadership?
11. When we talk about that transition to senior roles, is the pathway to leadership clear?
12. Do you think your organisation supports you in this transition?
13. When you look at others who have transitioned up, to more senior roles, has it been a successful transition?
14. What is it that would drive you to step up and lead?
15. What is it that might prevent you taking that step, even though you might feel you are capable?

#### Online Survey

This second stage of the research involved an online survey, titled *The Call to Lead*. It was conducted during the summer of 2024. The primary purpose was to validate preliminary findings gathered from the focus groups, with a particular emphasis on intentions and motivations to progress (or not) into a senior leadership role, a more generalisable assessment of leader identity, readiness and skills/needs, and any barriers to their potentially answering the call to lead.

The survey was distributed online using Qualtrics Software. The researchers distributed it directly to the 110 individuals who had already participated in the Focus Groups. All 14 organisations distributed the survey link by eMail to all or a sample of their XLTs. The ICBE and the Kemmy Business School WorkFutures Lab also promoted it publically on various social media channels. Over 550 completed survey responses were recorded (n574).

The survey captured a range of demographic questions allowing the examination of data for different cohorts e.g. gender, role, organisational type, sector etc. It also presented a number of questions and options for rating/ranking related to motivations, barriers, skills and needs. The central components of the survey however were tested instruments that measure different aspects of leadership in organisations.

These are detailed here.

#### Survey Tools Examining Leadership Perceptions

Romance of Leadership (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999) measuring perceptions of leadership and its potential impact on a range of organisational outcomes.

Risk in Leadership (Zhang et al, 2020) measuring perceptions of professional, reputational, personal and social risk inherent in leadership.

Leader Identity (Hiller, 2006) measuring perceptions of one's leadership self-identity, as well as perceptions of their leadership identity as seen by peers and subordinates.

Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 1997) measuring perceptions of one's leadership abilities and skills.

Civility (Cortina, Magley, Williams & Langhout 2001) measuring one's experience of workplace climate and interaction with Leaders.

Leadership Skill Assessment based on perceptions of the required and then one's own leadership skills. World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Survey 2023/Global Skills Taxonomy.







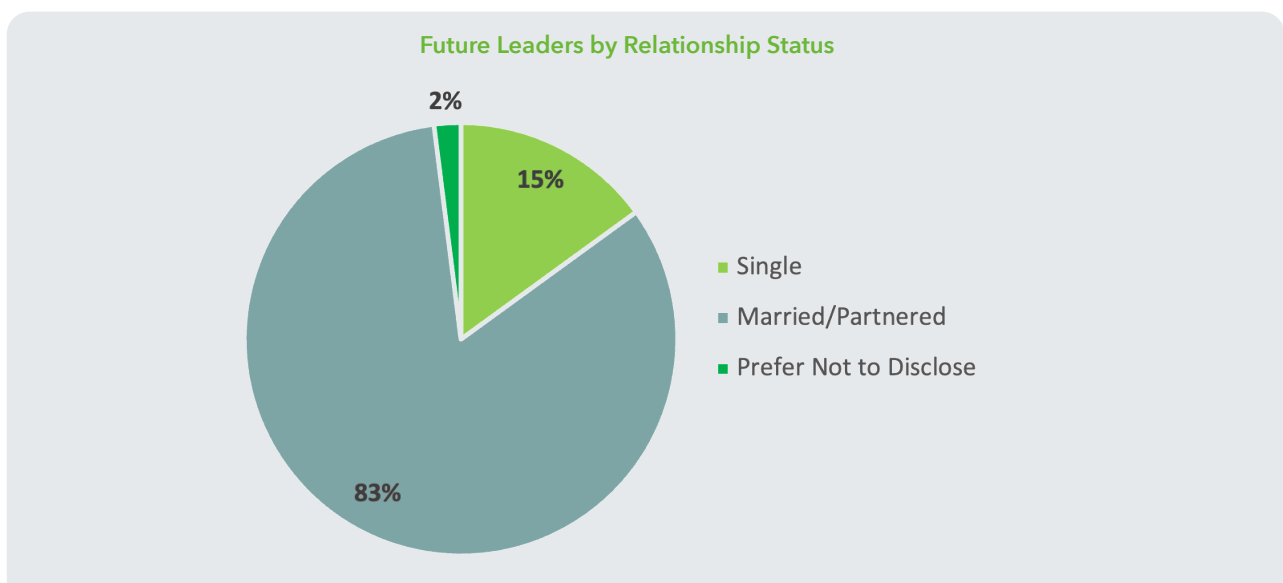
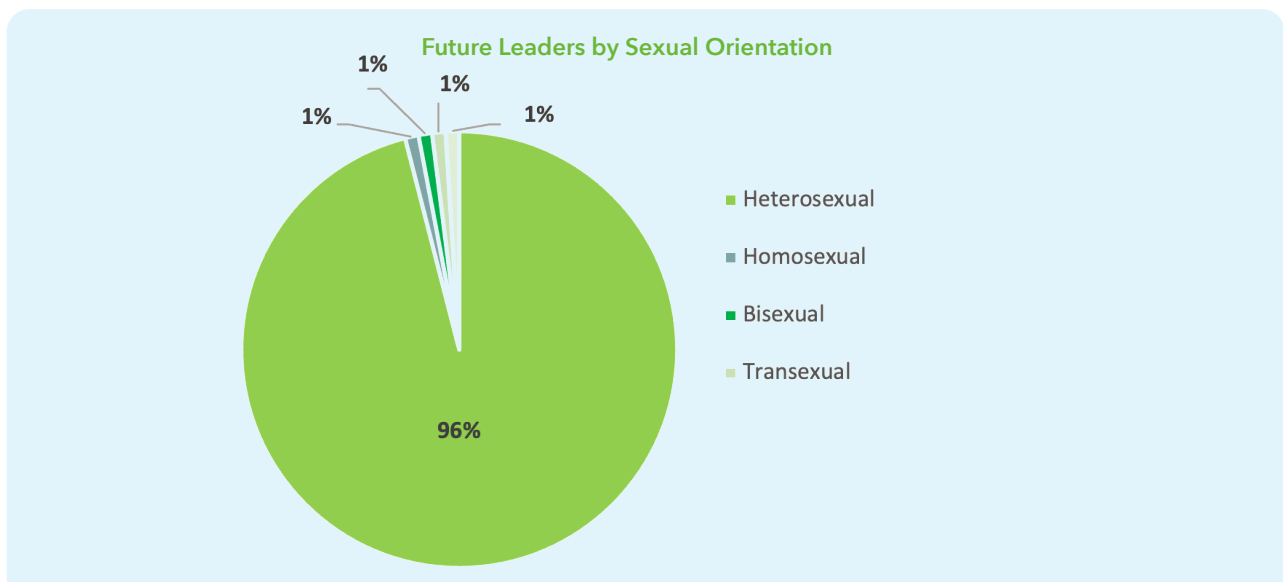
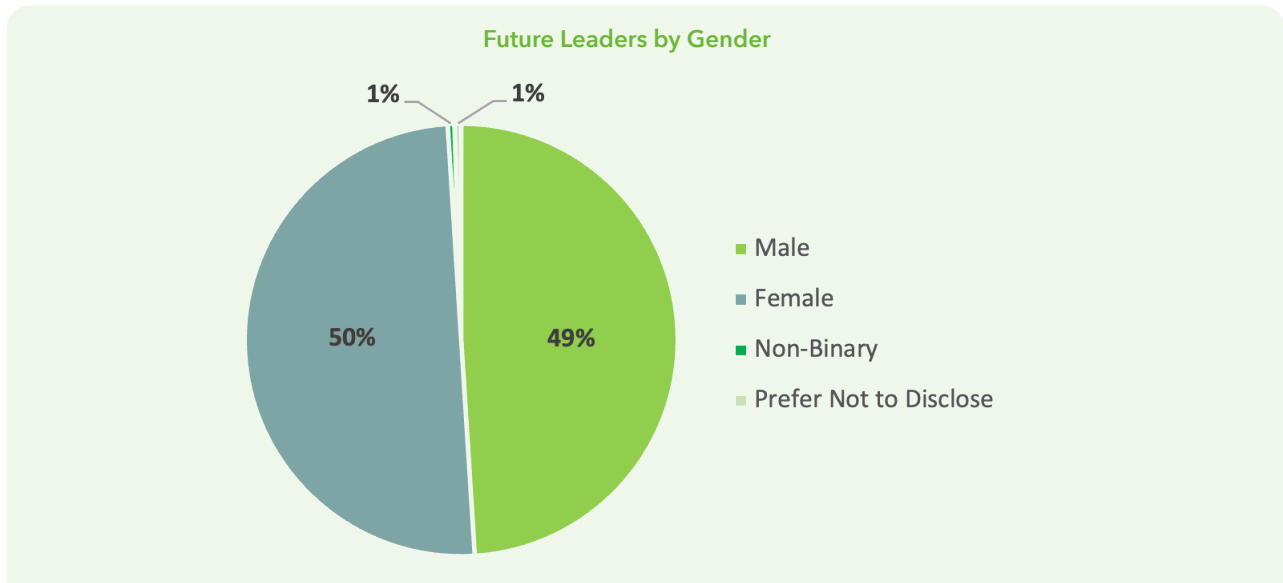
# PROFILING FUTURE LEADERS IN IRELAND TODAY

The following provides a high-level overview of the Future Leaders who engaged in this study with accompanying graphs to represent the data.

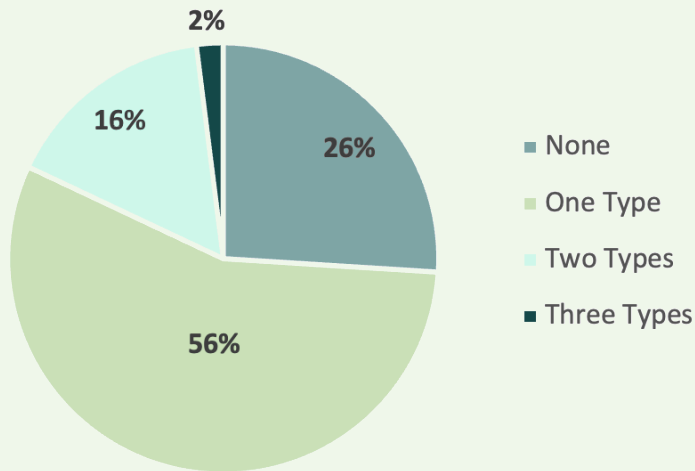
- » There is a strong gender balance among the study sample (M=49%, F=50%). However, the same cannot be said for ethnic diversity as 97% of respondents describe themselves as white.
- » Future Leaders range in age from 24 to 64 years with a median age of 46 years.
- » 83% of Future Leaders describe themselves as partnered. This life stage is reflected by the fact that the majority of Future Leaders have caring responsibilities of some kind.
- » 58% are educated to a Post Graduate level, with a further 30% to degree level. 4% hold PhDs.
- » 60% work in MNCs, 20% in the public sector and the remainder in indigenous Irish firms of varying sizes. The largest sectors represented are Medical Devices/Pharma Chem (42%), Financial Services (17%) and Civil Services (16%). However, there is a sizable representation of a broader number of sectors overall.
- » More than half (54%) describe themselves as Function or Unit Leaders, 10% as Line Managers, 18% as Supervisors or Team Leaders. 18% are Individual Contributors which may mean they are not members of the XLT or that they are experts in this space. Regardless, they were included in the final analysis.
- » The majority (55%) have relatively small teams to manage with less than 20 team members. 18% have up to 100 team members, 5% over 100 and only 1% of the sample with over 500 team members. In line with the data showing 17% are individual contributors, 21% have no team members to manage.
- » The majority are either 5 to 10 years at their current level (43%) or longer (21%) implying they are tenured to the point of being ready to answer the call to lead, if deemed appropriate by their organisation. Of these approximately 64% of respondents, identified as leaders of business units, sites, regions or in global leadership roles. The majority (60%) work in Multi-National Corporations (MNCs), however the public sector, large, medium, and small Irish firms are also represented.

Informed by this demographic data of a generalisable sample of Future Leaders, the research then sought to develop a richer understanding of the perceptions of leadership, motivations to lead and the skills/needs required to transition successfully into a senior leadership role.

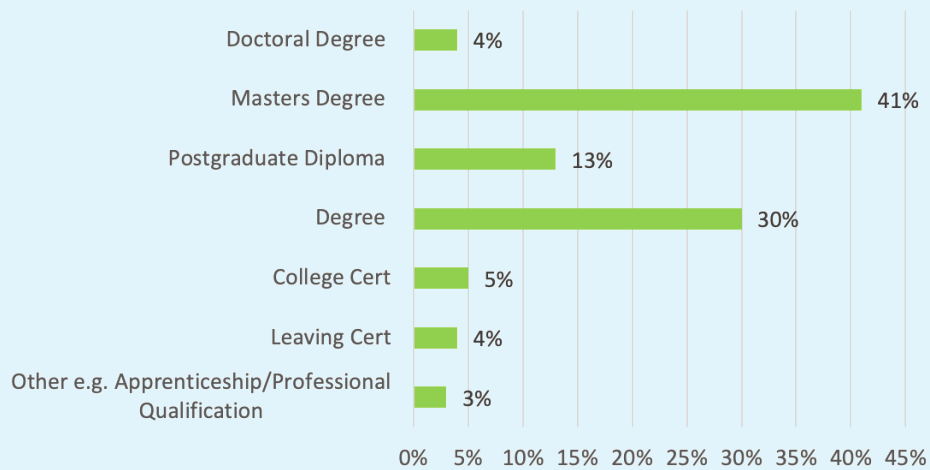
## 4. Profiling Future Leaders In Ireland Today



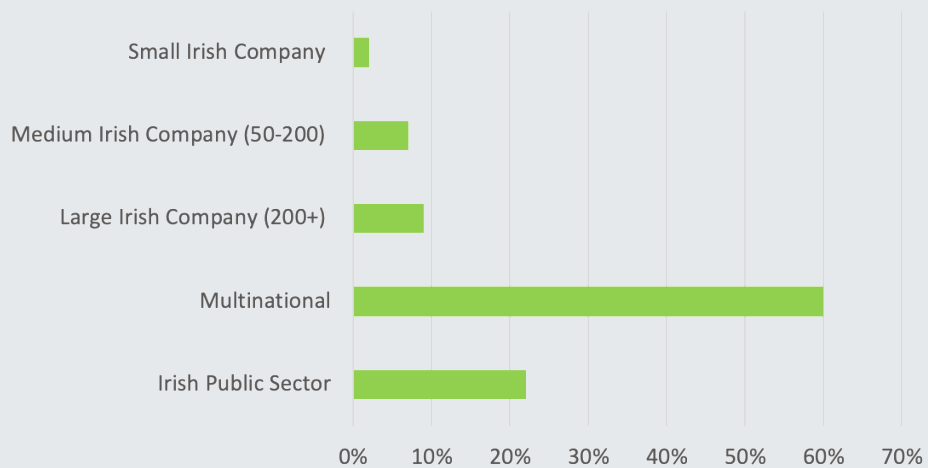
Future Leaders by Caring Responsibilities:  
Younger Children, Older Children, Elderly Parents



Future Leaders by Education Levels

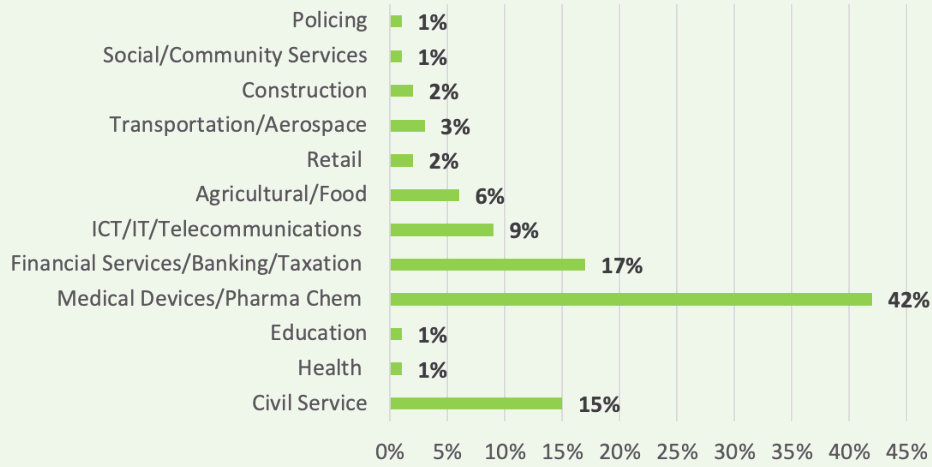


Future Leaders by Organisational Type

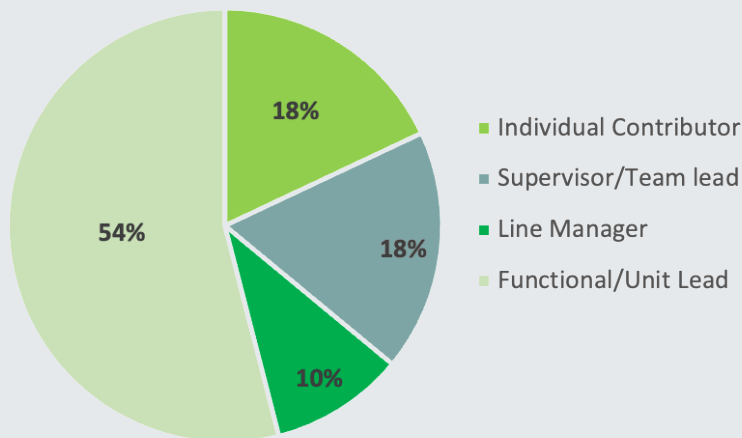


## 4. Profiling Future Leaders In Ireland Today

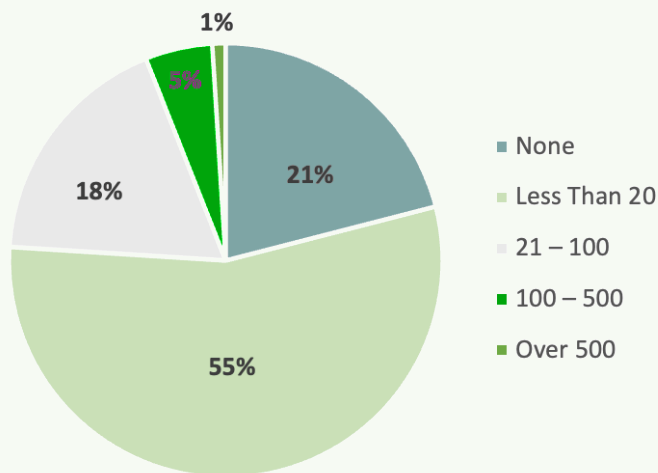
Future Leaders by Sector

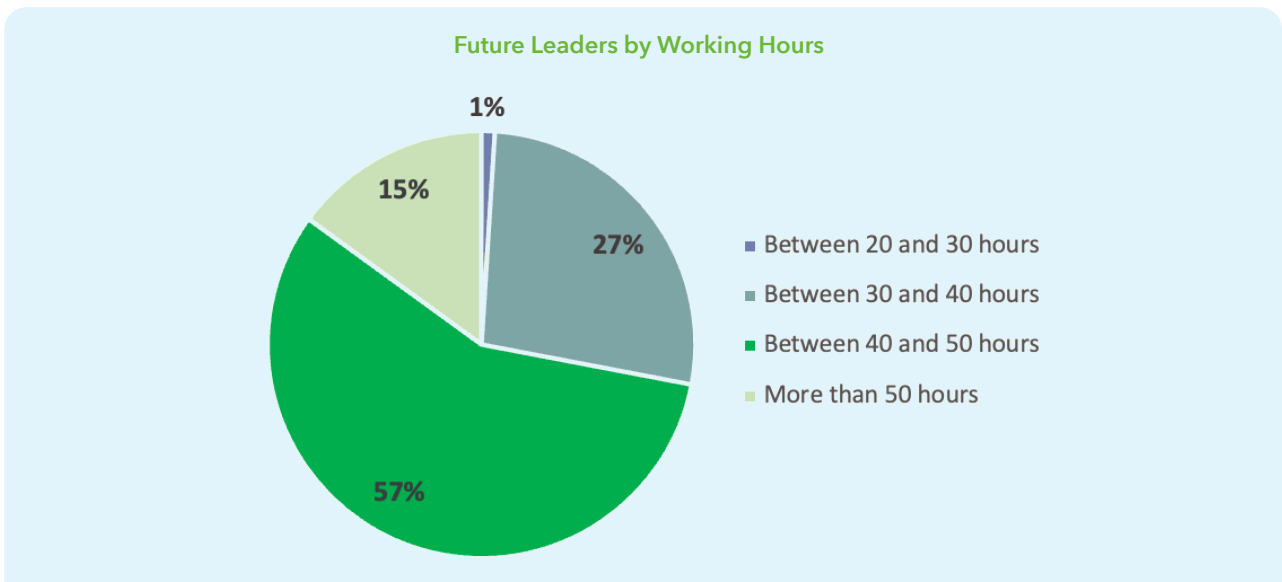
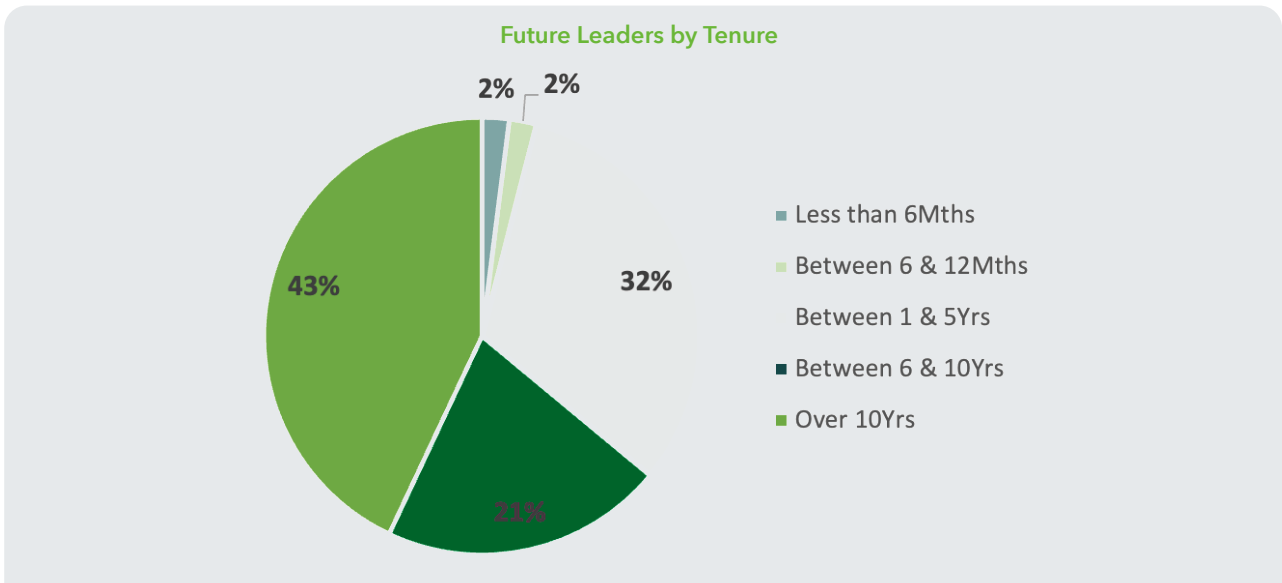


Future Leaders by Role



Future Leaders by Team Size







## ANSWERING THE CALL TO LEAD

The over arching research question guiding this research is 'Will Future Leaders Answer the Call to Lead', when and if it comes from their Organisation. This study finds that just under one third (27%) of Ireland's Future Leaders do not intend to progress into a more senior leadership role. However, a similar number feel they are ready now and may just be waiting for the call (28%). A further one third hope to progress within the next 2 to 3 years (31%) with 14% seeing progression further out, in around 5 years.



The question then for Organisations is firstly around the reasons driving these Future Leaders' plans. More importantly however, the question might be around the preparedness and competence of each group. Feeling ready and planning to progress is not the same as being ready and being called on to progress. Let us first look at Motivations to Lead.

### Leadership Identity & Romance

86% of Future Leaders in this study believe they are ready. Mindful of the fact that the contributing organisations carefully identified participants as those they hope to call on to lead in the future, it is crucial that we understand how they already identify as Leaders (while some do not), why they believe they are ready (when some do not), and whether or not they will actually answer the call when the time comes.

Leadership styles or approaches provide an important lens here as they significantly influence employee performance, indeed the performance of the organisation as whole. Similarly, leadership styles will have a marked influence on those below, that is, those who may be considering progressing to the next level. In this section, we explore the perceptions around leadership as witnessed by Future Leaders. What do they see when then look up?

## 5. Answering The Call To Lead

Something that needs to be considered as observers and participants in the leadership process is a tendency to romanticise and glorify the concept of leadership, known as the Romance of Leadership (RoL). This well-known bias highlights how Future Leaders might tend to over emphasise their internal disposition and underestimate external factors. Similarly, when we evaluate the impact of Leaders, we tend to exaggerate the effect Leaders themselves have on organisational outcomes and underestimate the role of others, environmental factors, legislation and indeed the much-neglected role of luck. People tend to exaggerate and glorify leadership due to the need to make sense of complex organisational phenomena. This tendency is stronger in extreme situations.

Our perceptions of leadership, our level of RoL as such, can influence our motivation to step up to a leadership role and influence our perceptions of risk. If Future Leaders tend to glorify leadership yet question their Leader identity, they will be less likely to step up. RoL affects decision-making, for example, followers with high RoL tend to base their decisions more on the Leader than on alternative factors. That is, people will more likely, for example, accept a decision or take on a project if the Leader is considered credible, even if the situation is unfavourable. Therefore, Leaders should be cognisant that 'Romanticisers', when involved in decision making, tend to neglect situational factors and will potentially make uncalculated risky decisions.

Future Leaders in this study varied in terms of their perceptions of the centrality and 'weight' of leadership. The qualitative, Focus Group findings suggest that Future Leaders do feel the 'weight' of the leadership role and the pressure that this can bring to bear.

“ The air is a lot thinner up there. ”

“ The responsibility at this level is huge. Your decisions have huge consequences. The level of responsibility you have to your employees... there could be 500 jobs at stake if you mess up... your decisions can carry so much weight and that is what keeps you awake at night. ”

There was also a recognition that this perception of the Leader as solely responsible can be a deterrent to leadership. The weight becomes too much to bear, Future Leaders believe they will be alone at the top. This finding also emerged when discussing risk and leadership, the responsibility of risk is exacerbated when RoL is high.

“ An individual themselves may be brilliant, but if they are under so much pressure, I think that can have an impact on how they lead... it doesn't allow them lead. Perhaps if there was less pressure in their role, they may lead in a different way. ”

The Leadership Identity element of the survey also largely highlights a realistic view of leadership when Future Leaders look up. There is an understanding that they may not be the only ones who want to step up to lead (58%). They carry risk (71%) and other potential negative consequences when they step up, they may rise or fall depending on the outcomes they deliver through their team (90%). However, we can also see some romantic elements of leadership highlighted by view that the majority (68%) feel their image will be enhanced, others will have a positive impression of them (86%) and see them in a positive light (89%).

The survey findings also suggest that, overall, the majority of Future Leaders agree that leaders are the single most important influence on the function of an organisation. This suggests high Romance of Leadership. However, as the findings on risk suggest, this is tempered by a perception of the risks involved suggesting a nuanced view of the act of leadership.

### At a Glance - Leadership Identity & Romance

- Leadership Identity is strong among Future Leaders in Ireland today. They recognise the importance and value the impact of leadership roles.
- Many Future Leaders romanticise leadership, feeling those around them will support them and see them in a positive light, believing most of the organisations success is down to its leadership.
- However, Future Leaders also see the personal risk and potential negative consequences answering the call to lead can bring. This tempers their view of leadership being down to one person at the top and opens their thinking up to more practical, contextual and shared models of leadership in the organisation.



The Romance of Leadership: How Future Leaders feel about the Impact of Leadership on the Organisation	Disagree	Agree
When it comes right down to it, the quality of leadership is the single most important influence on the functioning of an organisation.	31%	69%
Anybody who occupies the top-level leadership position in an organisation has the power to make or break the organisation.	18%	82%
The great amount of time and energy devoted to choosing a Leader is justified because of the important influence that person is likely to have.	7%	93%
Sooner or later bad leadership at the top will show up in decreased organisation performance.	7%	93%
High versus low quality leadership has a bigger impact on the firm than a favourable versus unfavourable business environment.	24%	76%
It is impossible for an organisation to do well unless it has high quality leadership at the top.	21%	79%
A company is only as good or as bad as its Leaders.	20%	80%
With a truly excellent Leader, there is almost nothing that an organisation cannot accomplish.	30%	70%
Even in a bad economy, a good Leader can prevent an organisation from doing poorly.	26%	74%
Top-level Leaders make life and death decisions about their organisation.	34%	66%
It's probably a good idea to find something out about the quality of top level Leaders before investing in a firm.	3%	97%
When a company is doing poorly the first place one should look to is its Leaders.	18%	82%
The process by which Leaders are selected is extremely important.	4%	96%
When the top Leaders are good the organisation does well; when the top Leaders are bad the organisation does poorly.	29%	71%
There is nothing as critical to the bottom line performance of an organisation as the quality of its top Leaders.	27%	73%
Leadership qualities are among the most highly prized personal traits I can think of.	24%	76%
No expense should be spared when searching for and selecting a Leader.	28%	72%

Organisation Civility	Disagree	Agree
Some people are frustrated because they also want to lead.	42%	58%
Others in the group sometimes see me as trying to elevate myself above them.	68%	32%
It can create competition within the group.	46%	54%
My relationship with certain group members can suffer.	55%	45%
It can create conflict within the group.	60%	40%
Others in the group sometimes think worse of me.	64%	36%
My image in the group is enhanced.	32%	68%
Others in the group develop a positive impression of me.	14%	86%
People in the group see me in a positive light.	11%	89%
I risk being responsible for potential failure of the group.	25%	75%
There might be negative consequences for me personally should the group be unsuccessful.	32%	68%
When I step up to lead, I take on extra risk due to the uncertainty of the group's outcome.	26%	74%
When I step up to lead I take on personal risk given the uncertainty of the group's work.	29%	71%
When I step up to lead my personal success is tied to how well the group performs.	10%	90%

## 5. Answering The Call To Lead

### Risk in Leadership

While leadership is often seen as a laudable and worthy undertaking, many decide not to step up to leadership position. The idea of leadership risk perceptions is well documented, where individuals perceive the act of stepping up to be risky at an individual, interpersonal and organisational level. The findings in this study support this with many Future Leaders perceiving the act of stepping up to involve a level of risk. Lack of confidence, and fear of accountability and failure are the two overarching themes that emerge around risks of stepping up to leadership.

Even though 72% of Future Leaders surveyed express aspirations to move up now or in the next two to five years, they still have serious reservations about the prospect. The survey shows that 50% associate an increased level of professional risk should they answer the call to lead, 44% see moving up as a potential personal risk, 28% as a reputational risk and 14% as a social risk. In addition, 76% agree that stepping up would mean taking a risk of being responsible for the potential failure of the team. These findings reflect the literature on risk and leadership that highlights how the perception of risk and the need to work through these risks is a key process of leader development. It is a concern therefore that 32% do not believe that any risk is associated with them progressing into a leadership role.

While organisations would want Future Leaders to be able to cope with and navigate risk, it is also desirable that they recognise it as an inherent part of leadership.

#### Perceptions of One or More Types of Risk in Leadership

<b>Professional Risk</b>	Being held accountable for errors that may impact negatively on my career.	50%
<b>Personal Risk</b>	Affecting me and my family, such as loss/reduction of income.	44%
<b>Reputational Risk</b>	Threat or danger to my good name or standing.	28%
<b>Social Risk</b>	Exposure to negative public sentiment.	14%
<b>No Risk</b>	I do not associate any element of risk with progressing as a Leader.	32%

In the Focus Groups, Future Leaders shed some light on their perception of leadership as being *'the higher up you go the more risk you take'*. Taking a top leadership position means that there are no other role alternatives available and if one fails in the job, their career with the organisation 'is over'.

“ I think there is an element of risk in stepping up to a very senior level. At certain levels, you have options of, for example, moving sideways but the higher up you go, these options aren't available... it's out the door ”

In addition, Future Leaders view the top role as requiring high levels of visibility and accountability. If mistakes are made, stakeholders hold the SLT accountable. Therefore, leadership is associated with accountability for success but also for potential failures. Future Leaders see top leadership roles through a binary lens, as either successful or unsuccessful:

“ There is some risk; the person standing up there at the top is the one who is held accountable. If you put yourself out there.....you will either succeed or fail so there is a lot of risk in stepping up.” ”



This view is also explained in terms of the pathway to leadership. Future Leaders in this study view the latter as associated with being visible and perceived as *'in charge, vocal and visible'* in the organisation. When you are vocal and express your opinions you run a risk of saying or doing the wrong thing and ultimately losing your job.

**“ You have to be visible, if you’re not, you are not going to get a promotion. In order to go up, you need to be visible, but that comes with a sense of risk....you are more exposed and when your head is above the parapet, there’s a risk of getting shot at. ”**

Finally, work relationships have a significant impact on the decision to take a high-level position, especially outside of the organisation, or even their current business unit. Future Leaders associate joining another unit or organisation with high levels of uncertainty. In their view, joining a new team at the top level is risky as one can be rejected. The latter can be potentially career endangering and is discouraging Future Leaders from stepping up:

**“ To move into a new organisation at that really senior level is a big risk.....a huge risk. Within your own organisation, you know what you’re dealing with, you have your allies. In a new organisation, you don’t, and if someone on that team who has been there twenty years takes a dislike to you, then you’re in trouble. I don’t know if I’d be prepared to take that risk. ”**



## 5. Answering The Call To Lead

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Overall, the risks highlighted by Future Leaders in this study illustrate their awareness of the characteristics of good Leaders. Fundamentally, they know that good Leaders are aware that what they say or do matters as it not only affects their careers but also all other stakeholders. The latter is underscored in the survey where 94% agree that the significant time and energy devoted to choosing a Leader is justified because of the important influence that person is likely to have on the organisation. However, what is very concerning here is that exactly one third (33%) of Ireland's Future Leaders do not associate any risk in taking on a more senior leadership role. International evidence already emphasises the risk inherent in senior leadership. Not recognising or appreciating risk, might point to either a naivety on the part of these Future Leaders and/or a lack of exposure to and experience of the real risk in leadership today. Organisations must develop Future Leaders accordingly and ensure the one-third who do not see the risks are not the same one-third who are ready to answer the call now.

### Politics in Leadership

Future Leaders are also keenly aware of the power associated with being a Leader. This '*dark side of leadership*' theme highlights their experiences with what Future Leaders label as '*politics of leadership*' which discourages them from even considering stepping up to lead.

“ I don't like the politics at that senior level, I understand the need to do it, but I would find it exhausting... I would have no desire to step up into that world. ”

The theme is directly correlated with risks of leadership as Future Leaders underline that the Leader "*always feels there is a target on your back*", highlighting the potentially precarious nature of the role.

“ I see a lot of competition and almost ruthlessness at senior level and I think why would I step up into that? There is an element of fear that the scythe could come out and I would be "catch of the day" in a few months' time! ”

For some, the leadership space is perceived as a complex, competitive and volatile arena where multiple individual agendas clash and where "*people sometimes think for them to succeed, they need to knock other people*". To be a member of the SLT, according to Future Leaders, requires ambition, a drive for power and ability to calculate the personal costs:

“ One of the negative things I see at senior level, is the power and politics at play; the points scoring, taking cheap shots, public disapproval of others and I think it's one of the reasons why I do not want to move up ”

Power and politics among the SLT acts as a deterrent to stepping up for some and is the fourth most cited factor that deters Future Leaders from answering the call to lead. However, considering two-thirds plan to step up in the future, it means that the political side of leadership is more visible in some contexts, and that in many organisations the element of power and politics in leadership roles is not totally a deterrent to seeking high-level positions. This also reflects the survey data on civility of leadership behaviour with over 75% experiencing positive interactions with their SLT.

### At a Glance - Risk & Politics in Leadership

- Future Leaders perceive stepping up to the top-level positions as potentially risky on personal, interactional and organisational levels.
- The lack of confidence in Future Leaders' own capacities and fear of accountability and failure lead to perceptions of heightened risk associated with stepping up.
- Future Leaders fear that stepping up may harm their reputation and career prospects, cost them their internal-organisational support network, and adversely affect the entire organisational unit.
- Ensuring Future Leaders are aware of risks but still feel competent to navigate them is crucial.
- Professional experiences of highly political and contested environments among the SLT deter Future Leaders from stepping up, as they do not wish to engage in a power struggle that, in their view, frequently necessitates uncivil behaviour.

### The Impact of Technology and Digitisation of Work

The COVID-19 pandemic has catalysed the global adoption of modern technologies, transforming work lifestyles, patterns, and business strategies<sup>xi</sup>. As lockdown measures were implemented, rapid digital transformation was a response to the need for continuity and efficiency in a crisis. Indeed, this transition significantly hastened the deployment of cyber and digital resources, propelling organisations toward a more technology-driven work environment. Moreover, technological practices remain as organisations moved on from the pandemic, emphasising the transition towards a more digital work culture. The survey findings in this study indicate that the vast majority (69%) of Future Leaders currently have access to Working From Home (WFH) at least some days each week, while 50% have access to flexible working hours.

This quantum transformation highlights the impact of digitalisation on Future Leader productivity, well-being and work-life balance. Notably, digitalisation has significantly improved communication, knowledge-sharing, and decision-making, fostering a sense of connection even in remote work settings<sup>xiii</sup>. From the perspective of employee productivity, technology is undeniably beneficial, but it comes with a notable personal cost.

“ The accessibility of meeting at any time and place brings more pressure. You are expected to join regardless. Technology has changed a lot, but so too the expectations (of the organisation). ”

“

The use of technology supports the 'always on' culture

”

Technology has enabled easy connectivity, however, it appears organisations expect high levels of accessibility from Future Leaders. The survey supports the Focus Group discussion, where 'negative impact on work-life balance' and 'increased work stress' are rated as second and third factors that deter Future Leaders from moving up to the next level.

As technology and digitalisation make it easier for the SLT to link and communicate with the XLT, this connection usually conceals the isolation Future Leaders often experience in their roles.



The further up you go, the fewer peers you have, the fewer peers you can trust; allies are few and far between.”



Stepping into a leadership role often leads to fewer peers and allies for many reasons. First, Leaders face intense responsibilities that are unique to their role, including making tough decisions that may be unpopular. Second, leadership positions create power dynamics, which can significantly shift relationships and alter how team members interact with them. It has already been noted in the survey that 45% of Future Leaders agree answering the call to lead would result in relationships with certain group members suffering, while 40% agree it could create conflict. Although Leaders can broaden their professional networks, this frequently results in a limited circle of peers, making it difficult to establish or sustain genuine connections.



You need to be sure you want to move up there - there is a sense of loneliness at the top



### At a Glance - Technology & Digitalisation

- Technology and digitalisation are beneficial as they increase productivity, but they come with a significant personal cost. Technology is perpetuating the “always on” culture, and it is now the norm at most levels but more so the higher up you are in the organisation.
- Leaders can easily connect and communicate. However, this connection often hides the isolation they feel at the top due to their responsibilities and power dynamics. Future Leaders see they can expand their professional networks, but this often leads to a limited circle of peers, making it challenging for them to make meaningful connections.

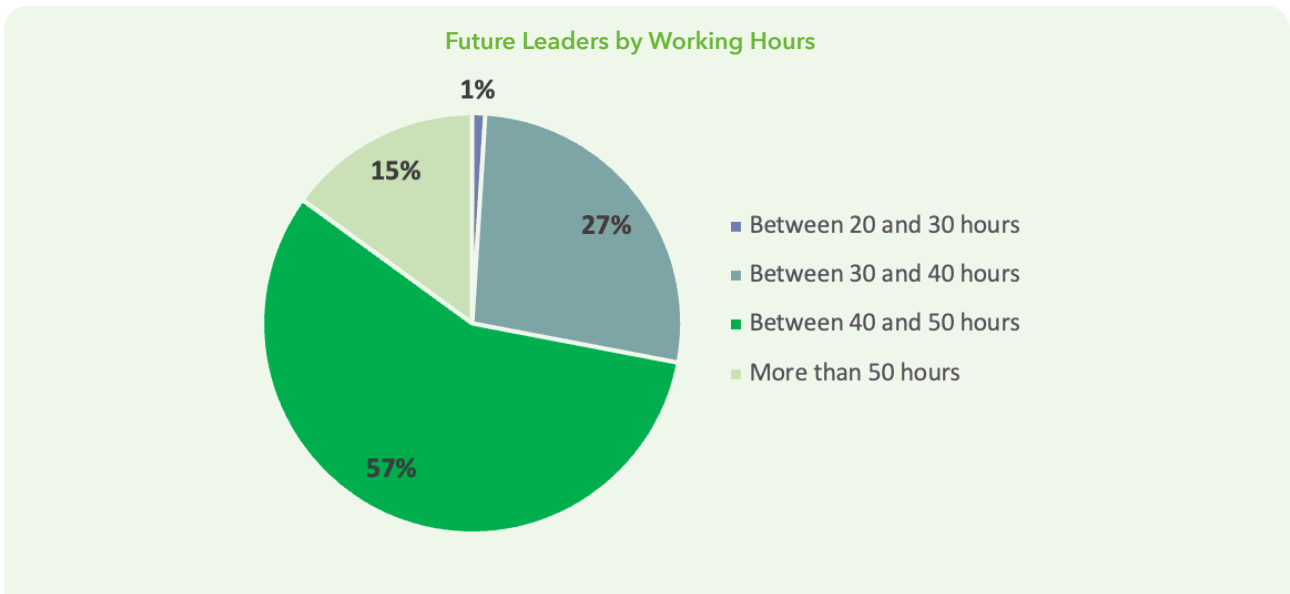
### Work Life Balance

Work Life Balance (WLB) is a multifaceted issue. Many organisations strive to provide working arrangements for Future Leaders that align with contemporary lifestyles and expectations of flexibility<sup>xiii</sup>. However, for those in senior leadership roles, WLB takes on an added dimension whereby Leaders are often expected to personally model positive WLB behaviours for others, in tandem with encouraging such behaviour among their team, while also preserving a strong focus on productivity<sup>xiv</sup>.

Future Leaders shared their understanding of how WLB and SLT roles align. For some, one of the main deterrents to stepping up to a senior leader role relates to the perception of increased demands being made on personal time and the expectation of needing to be available 24/7.

Of those surveyed, more than half described themselves as Functional or Business Unit Leaders. Of this cohort, 54% work between 40-50 hours per week on average. Interestingly, only 22% work more than 50 hours per week; an indication that perhaps many Future Leaders are not interested in working more because they choose to prioritise their WLB over progressing to the next level. In essence, the message here for those Future Leaders is that the more senior you are and the more people you manage, the more hours you work.

This equated to a belief that stepping up to lead may come with a significant cost to their personal life. The phrase “*is the juice worth the squeeze?*” summed up the trade-off between advancing in the organisation and WLB. Therefore, while organisations have increased emphasis on WLB, such policies do not seem to apply to the SLT, and in some cases also to the XLT.



“ I always thought, yes, I will take a step up in 1-2 years but now I think...is that really what I want? I have received a lot of support at this level in terms of balancing family, but I wonder if that support is there at the next level? ”

A growing chasm is perceived to exist between mid-level and senior roles. A chasm, that for many, cannot be compensated for sufficiently by the monetary rewards on offer.

“ It’s the law of diminishing returns; you might get more money, but less personal time. You are losing a lot in terms of work life balance ”

This is a finding supported by a burgeoning number of research reports which draw on intergenerational differences findings that younger employees are willing to sacrifice significant pay increases in favour of better work life balance.<sup>xv</sup>

#### Flexible Working Practices

The survey findings reveal that 50% of Future Leaders currently have flexibility in their working day, while 68% have hybrid working arrangements (working, at least some days each week, from home). This illustrates an overall high level of flexibility from which Future Leaders benefit at their current level. However, when they look up, they feel they are required to show greater discretion around their availability as they advance towards leadership.

“ Even when you’re off, you’re not off. ”

“ The higher up you are in an organisation, the more likely it will impact on weekend and holiday time. If I was to apply for the next level and be successful, I know in advance I would be giving up nearly every weekend and that I would be expected to be available during annual leave. While my current role impacts on weekends at certain times it is not all of the time. ”

## 5. Answering The Call To Lead

	Current Working Practice	Offered but I Do Not Avail	Offered but I Do Not Avail	Not an Option due to Nature of Work
Blended Working	69%	15%	5%	9%
FlexiTime	50%	12%	21%	12%
Compressed Working Week	5%	7%	75%	13%
Part Time Working	5%	32%	39%	25%
Term Time	4%	30%	50%	16%
WFH Full Time	5%	11%	60%	19%
Remote Work Abroad	2%	8%	68%	20%

Leaders are paradoxically expected to show empathy for their own teams' needs in relation to WLB but may well experience low levels of balance themselves.

“ Empathy towards the family dynamic is also important and understanding if the current leadership dynamic may be putting people off applying for leadership jobs. ”

Future Leaders also highlight that leadership should reflect differing circumstances, which would better allow for those in leadership to truly demonstrate how leadership and caring commitments can be balanced.

“ Differing personal circumstances of different leaders (is important) e.g. how increased responsibility can be managed with maintaining Work-Life Balance and caring responsibilities. ”

Critically, while Future Leaders do have some FWP's of which they can avail, it is also important to note that these are confined largely to WFH and FlexiTime. Part-Time Working, Term Time and Compressed Working Weeks are other FWP's that can offer significant value to Future Leaders who would like to answer the call to lead but are struggling with their work life balance at different stages of their career.

The ability to achieve a positive work life balance is also influenced by non job related factors. These include obvious factors such as family and caring status but also less obvious factors such as location and closeness to work. While WFH and more Remote Working opportunities

have increased, there is a sense that location still plays a major factor when it comes to answering the call to lead. Family and caring commitments for example mean that the ability to relocate is not as easy and that this could hinder those in particular sites and locations.

“ The majority of senior leadership positions are in Dublin so for those outside Dublin it is a little more difficult to make the next step up. ”

Site and location factors also emerge in relation to WFH arrangements. The ability to have greater control over working time and location is highly valued by employees<sup>vi</sup>. However, in this research that WFH may be a factor in Future Leaders deciding not to step up further in the organisation.

“ (Working from Home) has impacted on people's desire to progress, that is, people seem happy with their lot and are no longer interested in promotion. The only thing that matters to employees now is the amount of work from home available. ”

### Global Travel

Global Travel and the 'threat' of relocation is a recurring barrier, but widely accepted necessity. Many leadership roles in Ireland today require extensive travel at best and relocation abroad at worst. Travel however will still be a necessity. Financial reward alone will not offset these challenges. Supporting travel logistically, to a very high standard, and allowing Future Leaders counterbalance their time away from home, through time in lieu for example, will ease the travel burden.



One way organisations can offset this barrier is by investing in eLeadership and eNetworking upskilling. This will enable Future Leaders build social capital across the global ecosystem but from within Ireland, opening them up to regional and global roles based in Ireland.

This may require a site-level strategy for the organisation, that is, how entire teams or business units can make their mark globally. Taking time out of the day-to-day to develop globally oriented strategic-plays for Future Leaders is crucial not just for their personal progression but for the Irish site itself. Not enough of this strategy work is happening.

While travelling, many employees significantly increase their daily working hours (on flights, layovers, and waiting in airports) and this should be acknowledged on their return. Rather than, as can often be the case, having to put in extra hours to “catch up” when back in the office. Extra compensations and supports may be required for Future Leaders with families.

Furthermore, organisations are increasingly taking a low-risk approach to filling global roles. While they encourage Future Leaders to spend time abroad this can be for long periods (years) rather than short bursts (months). They also increasingly do not guarantee a specific role on the Future Leader’s return home. More and more, the onus is on the Future Leader to relocate out and back at their own risk. Irish SLTs need acknowledge the changing needs of dual-professional households. Relocation needs to be

more attractive at different life stages and this should be discussed more realistically with Future Leaders. Simultaneously, HR and the SLT need to influence the global organisation to enable the filling of global roles via reasonable accommodations. In turn, this will nurture the Irish site’s strategic position via our diaspora, creating rich connections that can be the lifelines for FDI retention.

### Wellbeing Policy versus Practice

During Focus Groups, Future Leaders highlight their concern that there can be a sense of ‘tokenism’ and ‘lip service’ when it comes to wellbeing in organisations today. Linked with findings on the Impact of Technology and Digitalisation, Future Leaders feel a pressure to respond to eMails or WhatsApp/Texts/Calls outside of working hours, particularly from their Leaders.

“ I feel in terms of work-life balance, do senior leaders really practice what they preach? There is that mantra of “don’t take calls after 5pm”, “don’t log on at weekends” but you see the time eMails were sent by your boss ..9, 10pm at night and over the weekend. ”

There is a sense that even where an eMail indicates that there is no pressure to respond immediately, that that is not in a Future Leaders ‘best interest’.

“ If my boss sends me an eMail at 8pm at night with this at the end of it, I’m still going to reply. it’s in my own best interest! Having these “right to disconnect” messages on eMails is really just lip service. ”

### At a Glance - Work Life Balance

- Work Life Balance is a double-edged sword in relation to leadership progression. While organisations have made significant advances in providing greater opportunities for positive WLB through better working practices and family friendly policies, this may have resulted in widening the chasm between senior and mid-level roles in regards to perceptions of achieving WLB.
- The need to model and encourage positive WLB among their teams may at times be incongruent with the experience of senior leaders themselves.
- Organisations need to strategise at organisational, team and individual levels to develop key ‘plays’ for building Future Leaders social capital across the global ecosystem. This will open opportunities for skill development and potential future roles while simultaneously increasing the bench-strength of the organisation at home and abroad.
- Organisations need to rethink their Expatriate Strategies, which have been eroded in recent years to the point of the Future Leader carrying most of the risk of location out and relocation back into the organisation.
- Irish sites need to develop supporting and accommodating policies to mitigate the strains of international travel on Future Leaders and their families.

## 5. Answering The Call To Lead

### People Management

While the survey highlights that Future Leaders feel their ability to work with others is crucial to leadership and that they felt skilled in this area, the findings of the Focus Groups suggest that the responsibility of managing people is a deterrent for Future Leaders to answer the call to lead.

“ I have a team of seven reporting into me, all very talented, very experienced but not one of them is willing to step up into my role because it would involve managing people. ”

This hesitance to take on people management responsibilities is caused by a number of key factors. The emergence of senior individual contributor roles is one factor. Future Leaders discussed that while getting promoted has historically relied significantly on stepping up to manage teams, this is no longer the case. Those classified by the organisation as Future Leaders, can also successfully advance their careers by focusing on developing and providing their technical expertise, without any pressure to manage teams.

“ Traditionally, career progression involved managing people. However, with more opportunities around individual contributor roles, (there are) more options regarding their career path and as such (some Future Leaders) are opting out of the people management roles. ”

In addition to noting the rise of individual contributors, study findings suggest that for many, managing people is an added stress that they could do without. Many Future Leaders do not feel comfortable managing any potentially difficult conversations or situations that may arise across teams.

“ I think in general individuals don't want what they perceive as the "hassle" of having to manage people. ”

“ There are a lot of aspects of managing people that (Future Leaders) are not comfortable with managing performance, conflict etc. and that is what holds people back from moving up. ”

Some suggest this discomfort stems from fears they will do something wrong.

“ I think managers are slightly afraid now to have certain conversations, for example, talking to my (male) manager about life stages (starting a family) and my career; I felt he was somewhat hesitant to talk about this for fear he would be accused of discriminating against me or treating me differently because I am female. ”

A potential cause of this concern of 'making the wrong move' as a people manager is associated with the HR Governance. With increasing amounts of policies and procedures around managing people, this aspect of the job can get in the way of Future Leaders doing the job they originally signed up for.

The reality is that many Future Leaders enter the world of work and develop their expertise in their own technical field. Thus, progressing through the individual contributor role is attractive for some as they have no desire to manage people. For others, that might not be an option, and they may become 'accidental people managers'. 82% of managers become managers because they are good at their technical area, however, they have no experience or formal training in the people management side of the role<sup>xvi</sup>. This impacts their confidence in their ability to do their job and in their ability to engage with the formal policies and procedures governing HR. It is no different for Future Leaders. People Management is and always will be the most complex element of their job. Interestingly, these findings were not supported in the survey with only 2% of Future Leaders highlighting People Management as a barrier to stepping up to lead. This suggests it might be organisation specific and should be explored more at an organisational level.

“

It is becoming increasingly more difficult to actually do your job now. The world of work is almost too “PC”. We are inundated with policies, procedures, codes of practice- to do some straight talking now is almost a thing of the past.

”



### At a Glance - People Management

- Due to individual contributor roles, people management is no longer a necessity to progress in one's career thereby leading some Future Leaders to step back.
- There is a sense that there are too many policies and procedures, making it more difficult for Future Leaders to do their jobs, again resulting in their not answering the call to lead.
- Future Leaders are hesitant to have difficult conversations with team members due to fears of being accused of treating people unfairly or differently. They know these circumstances would increase were they to step up to the SLT.



## MOTIVATIONS TO LEAD

Leadership is a critical function for any organisation and having capable leaders in the right positions is paramount to ensuring the long-term future of the organisation. Many may have acquired the necessary skills and competencies, however knowing how is not enough to make one effective. To succeed in leadership and be effective, individuals must be motivated for the right reasons. This section examines the perceptions of emerging leaders in relation to motivations to lead.

Much has been written on the topic of leadership and the impact Leaders can have on the overall performance of an organisation. It is widely acknowledged that effective leadership is considered the key to success in today's organisations and is a crucial factor for engaged employees and flourishing organisations. Leadership effectiveness is critically contingent on, and often defined in terms of Leaders' ability to motivate followers toward collective goals or a collective mission or vision. Effective Leaders can drive performance, achieve organisational goals, develop strategy, create a vision for all to follow whilst motivating those around them. However, if we focus the lens on Future Leaders, what motivates them to step up to lead?

When we think about leadership in general, it is very often linked to various rewards such as power, status, prestige and reputation. However, for the Future Leaders surveyed here, it is not the trappings of power that motivates them to step up and lead but rather their own sense of ambition and personal drive. 46% indicate that ambition/personal drive was the main factor that would motivate them to move up to the next level.

“ I think it comes down to your sense of ambition. Feeling that you can make a difference and maybe do things differently.....it is this personal drive that essentially drives you forward. ”

Further analysis of the survey indicates that contributing to the organisation (12%) and making a difference to my team/unit (10%) are two other factors that motivate Future Leaders.

“ What would drive me to step up? To try to initiate change, have some influence on shaping the organisation, to make a difference....they're the things that ultimately would motivate me to move to the next level. ”

With regard to financial reward, it appears it is not the single biggest factor that drives people to lead. 10% indicate money was a motivating factor and, although the significance of this result cannot be discounted, it seems financial gain alone is not the be all and end all.

“ Of course you do factor in the salary associated with the role, and at the end of the year, you like the look of that bonus, but ultimately this is not what drives me personally. What drives me is my team, enabling them to achieve their goals, to allow them to get on with their work. ”

## 6. Motivations To Lead



Finally, factors such as increased power and authority and increased social status scored very low (around 1% each) and therefore cannot be considered as motivating factors in terms of answering the call to lead. This would indicate that Future Leaders are perhaps more likely to believe in adopting a Shared Leadership approach as opposed to the traditional top-down leadership style where influence is derived from a formal position of power and status. Future Leaders then do not respond well to power and authority imposed by the SLT.

The concept of social status also arose during the Focus Groups, mirroring the survey findings (a 0% motivating factor). A number of Future Leaders highlight that, where once a "big job title" was a badge of honour, there was now even a counter-effect socially, perhaps a reverse snobbery related to "taking on too much" and the impact that might have on your family's wellbeing and your own.

“ If you are at a barbecue and someone asks you what you do, you might even get a frown if you say you are a VP for such and such. Socially, finding a good work-life balance and prioritising you own health, and your spouse's or your family's wellbeing is more highly regarded than fancy job titles or bigger pay checks and all the hassle that can bring on you.

### Looking Up from Below

According to Ireland's Future Leaders, the leadership environment in their organisation influences their motivation to step up to the SLT.

“ Do I think the style above me impacts on whether I want to step up? Absolutely. ”

They argue that their SLT's personal characteristics and motivations for coaching Future Leaders and facilitating the pathway to the SLT vary. In their view, when the individual motivations of the SLT to coach are genuine, they are encouraged to engage in the process and to consider answering the call to lead.

“ The best leaders are there for the good of their people, not for their own personal agenda.

However, when they view the organisation's leadership style as politically motivated by individual agendas, refining one's own reputation and gaining credit, the organisational environment is not conducive to stepping up.

“ If you are driven by the right people in the right way, it's nice, you're engaged, but if you are driven because someone is making a career out of their own journey, it's not nice. ”

Accordingly, the participants argued that this type of self-serving managing up can be harmful and is certainly discouraging others from stepping up:

“ There is no one at senior level who is not ambitious... some have their own personal agenda in terms of using their time now to drive their career forward to the next level to the detriment of those underneath them. ”

Some Future Leaders argue that managing up creates a disconnect between themselves and their Leaders, and favoured managing down instead.

“ Politically driven leadership is a bad thing, managing up constantly and not managing down. This is not conducive to encouraging those below you to step up. ”

However, others warned against the conventional style of managing down, arguing that authoritarian leadership style will not encourage those on your team to in turn step up.

“ The style of leadership being practiced by senior leaders can have a big influence on whether you step up to the next level. There are those who have a very dictatorial style ”

of leading. If I did step up, I would end up working for that individual and it would be hell on earth. ”

While the Focus Group findings suggest that what Future Leaders see when they look up influences their decision to step up, the majority report a favourable picture. Accordingly, 66% believe they would receive support from the SLT should they step up. However, this suggests a significant minority believe they would not receive support from their new peers should they step up. This is reflected in the survey findings on uncivil interactions with the SLT.

While the vast majority rarely experience negative interactions, a significant minority report sometimes experiencing certain uncivil interaction. For example, 32% of Future Leaders report experiencing being put down or condescended to, having little attention paid to their comments, or little interest shown in their opinion (35%). Some (35%) Future Leaders felt their judgement has been doubted. These findings highlight the importance of the SLT as role models and catalysts for others to step up, but also indicate how negative perceptions of Leaders can act as a deterrent to others following the leadership trajectory.

Organisation Civility	Never/Rarely	Sometimes/Often
Senior Leaders put you down or were condescending to you.	68%	32%
Senior Leaders paid little attention to your comments or showed little interest in your opinion.	65%	35%
Senior Leaders made demeaning or derogatory remarks about you.	91%	9%
Senior Leaders addressed you in unprofessional terms, either publicly or privately.	89%	11%
Senior Leaders ignored or excluded you from professional camaraderie.	83%	17%
Senior Leaders doubted your judgement on a matter over which you have responsibility.	65%	35%
Senior Leaders made unwanted attempts to draw you into a discussion on personal matters.	94%	6%

**At a Glance - Motivations to Lead, Looking Up from Below**

- Ambition and Personal Drive, coupled with the belief that one can make a difference and potentially influence the direction of the organisation are the key factors that motivate Future Leaders to step up into leadership roles.
- While Financial Reward is still a relative motivator, power, prestige and social status do not motivate Future Leaders to step up.
- Leadership style above directly affects Future Leader motivations below.
- A constructive and genuine leadership environment increases Future Leader motivations to step up.
- Uncivil interactions with the SLT discourages Future Leaders from stepping up.
- Importantly, while most Future Leaders are personally driven and ambitious to answer the call to lead, they want to lead their way and not feel they have to conform to current norms of leadership.



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## BARRIERS TO LEAD

Previous sections have detailed different dimensions of leadership that clearly present concerns for Future Leaders weighing up the pros and cons of answering the call to lead. In this section, these are examined as barriers to leadership progression. Future Leaders in this study speak at length about sustained pressures and an unsustainable workload.

“ The pressure Leaders are under is phenomenal; it's all consuming and is becoming increasingly more difficult to sustain that pace of work. ”

“ The pace of work is relentless, 24/7 now. You can have multiple reports across the globe, so time zones mean nothing per se; meetings and business go ahead regardless. ”

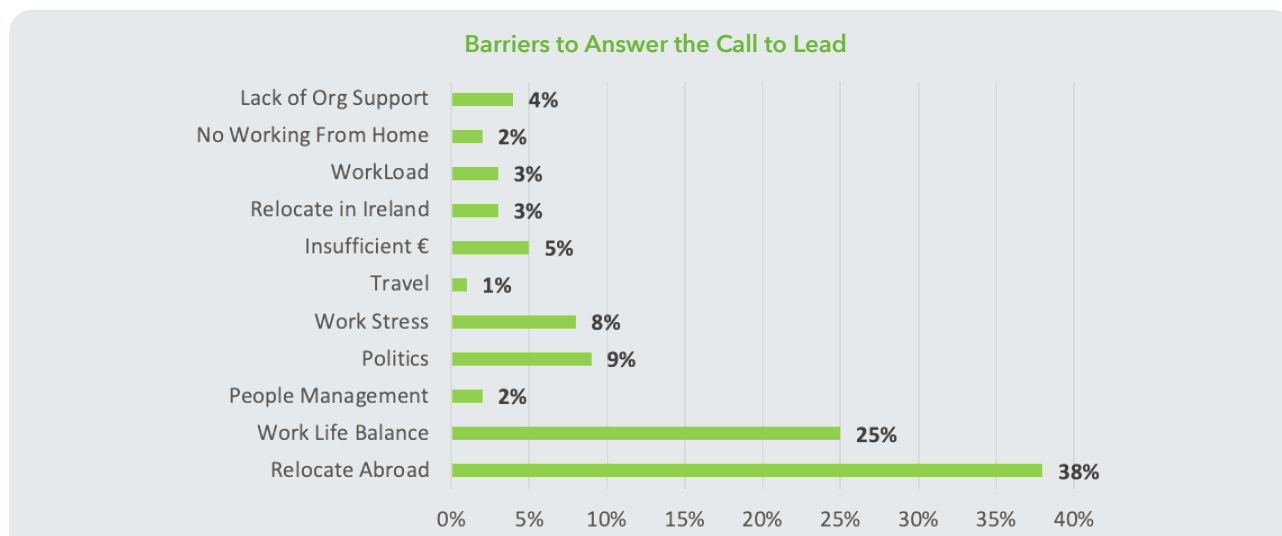
Such findings appear to indicate that the style of leadership practiced today in some organisations is unsustainable. A style of leadership that extorts a significant personal cost on the individual whereby, *“When you step up, you're giving up so much”*.

This is reflected in the over arching data around why Future Leaders may not step up lies in the risk of losing their WLB (25%), Work Stress (8%), coping with Leadership Politics (9%), insufficient financial reward (5%), lack of support from the organisation (4%) and, for MNCs, the need to relocate abroad (38%).

The impact of working at this unsustainable pace is far reaching, not just for the individual but for the wider organisation.

Indeed, when we asked Future Leaders about their career plans, 27% indicate they do not plan to progress further up the organisation. When probed as to what would deter them from stepping up, for many, it is the perceived negative impact on their work life balance coupled with the need to relocate outside of Ireland.





Leadership is vital for organisations' long-term prosperity. Having succession plans in place, particularly for important leadership positions, is crucial. However, leadership is becoming increasingly unsustainable and less attractive than previously thought. What does the future hold? It seems we are at a pivotal moment in challenging the very concept of leadership. Perhaps a change in leadership philosophy is warranted. There is growing recognition amongst Industry Practitioners that Sustainable Leadership approaches might be a potential way forward, possibly mitigating some of the negative factors associated with stepping up into leadership roles, as highlighted by Future Leaders themselves.

### At a Glance - Barriers to Leadership Progression

- The manner of leadership practiced by many of today's SLTs is perceived in a very negative light by the Future Leaders looking up. It is seen as being highly pressurised, all-consuming and ultimately unsustainable in the long term.
- Today's unsustainable leadership approach has a negative impact on the next generation's willingness to lead. Future Leaders are now looking at the personal cost associated with moving to the next level and essentially concluding it is not worth it.



1500 Unit

1000 Unit

750 Unit

500 Unit

250

BLUE

AQUA

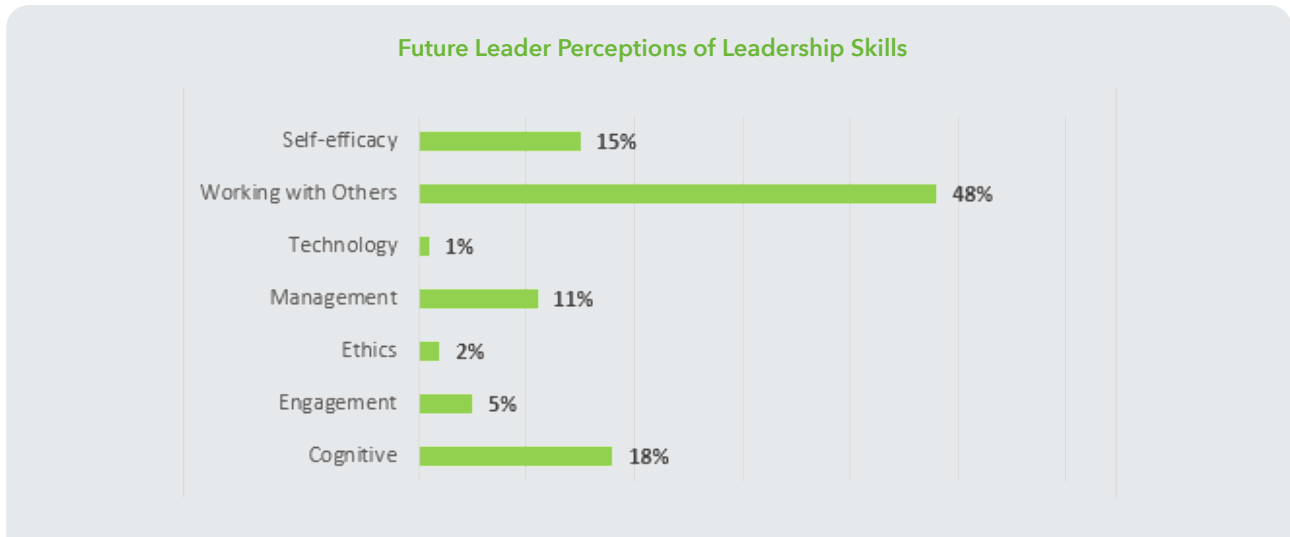
June

60%

20%

## FUTURE LEADER SKILL NEEDS

One challenge SLTs face today is ensuring the organisation is equipped with the appropriate leadership skill set to allow it to adapt to any changes in the dynamic environment in which many operate. In this study, Future Leaders were asked to rank the leadership skills they thought were of most importance.



### Future Leader Perceptions of Leadership Skills

Key Leadership Skills as identified by Future Leaders	
<b>Working with Others</b>	Teaching, mentoring, leadership and social influence, empathy and active listening.
<b>Self- Efficacy</b>	Resilience, Agility, Flexibility, Motivation, Self-Awareness, Curiosity, Learning, Dependability and Attention to Detail.
<b>Cognitive Skills</b>	Analytical thinking, creative thinking, systems thinking, reading, writing, maths, multi-lingualism.
<b>Management Skills</b>	Quality Control, Talent Management, Resource Management & Operations.

**Working with Others** ranks highest (48%) as the most important leadership skill among the Future Leaders surveyed. This reaffirms the widely held belief that "*softer skills*" become increasingly more important as one moves up the leadership chain.

“Your technical skills are important for sure, but it is the softer skills you rely on the more you move up. Having a PhD in software is not going to help inspire or motivate your team!”

Rating Working with Others as the most important leadership skill indicates that Future Leaders are more likely to believe in a more holistic and Human-Centric leadership approach, where significant emphasis is placed on putting people first to lead successfully; a new style that contrasts sharply with the traditional, transactional or autocratic leadership styles of the past.

## 8. Future Leader Skill Needs

Future Leaders have a different set of expectations in terms of how they expect to be led and how they themselves need to lead. Interestingly however, in the Focus Groups, people management is highlighted as a significant reason why Future Leaders may not answer the call to lead. The assumption here is that while Future Leaders recognise the criticality of working with others they particularly struggle with the 'HR Governance' associated with contemporary employment regulations and work practices.

**Leadership Self-Efficacy** (15%) is ranked the second most important leadership skill. It is known to be a key cognitive variable regulating leader functioning in a dynamic environment. This is not surprising given the agile and fast-paced environment in most organisations today. This climate necessitates high levels of resilience and flexibility among all employees, with those being most adept progressing to the XLT domain. Self-Efficacy also encompasses traits such as curiosity and a learning orientation, all vital to today's business challenges. It is a positive indicator that this cohort recognises its criticality at a leadership level.

**Broader Cognitive Skills** (18%) and **Management Skills** (11%) are also rated in the top four skills identified. Although as stated previously, the "softer skills" are acknowledged as being of high importance, the significance of 'hard', more technical skills is not to be discounted. The intersection of cognition and technology is what is most critical today. Future Leaders in this study acknowledge proficiency in these skills is 'a must' for career advancement, but given the value placed on technology skills is so low (1%), it might be perceived as just a base line skill set for leadership roles.

It is fair to say that when ranking skills, something has to go to the bottom of the list. However, there are two points to note here. It falls to the bottom for everyone. In addition, when contrasted with the Leadership skills these Future Leaders feel least capable in, Technology also falls down the list for the majority, with 87% saying their skills here are only average or below average. This is a cause for concern.

As technology advances, particularly AI, the spaces between technologies become increasingly critical. So many decisions are made 'for us' in organisations today, the ability to engage high levels of cognition to probe data-driven decisions, to ask critical questions, to challenge scenarios that are presented as factual is more important than ever before.

### Leadership Skills seen by Future Leaders as Less Critical to Leadership

Engagement	Service Orientation, Customer Service, Marketing and Media.
Ethics	Environmental Stewardship and Global Citizenship.
Technology	Networking, Cybersecurity, AI, Big Data, Programming, Tech Literacy, Design and User Experience.

Additionally, technology can attain an inappropriate level of legitimacy, driving the organisation rather than being led by clearly defined strategies. It is important that Future Leaders receive technology upskilling in terms of tasks specific to the role but also more broadly in terms of increasing general knowledge around the influence of and applicability of emerging technologies to their organisation. At a higher level, given the Future Leader cohort of this study, creating strategies for development of Digital Leadership should be core to all organisational learning strategies.

Worryingly, Ethics is also rated very low (2%) and the majority (65%) again see it as only an average or below average skill, indicating that Future Leaders either do not value or do not feel appropriately skilled in this area. This result appears to be at odds with sustainable leadership approaches, where Sustainable Leaders are typically regarded as open minded,

always acting with integrity and striving to behave ethically in all aspects of their role. It is also a surprising result given the emphasis most organisations are placing on sustainable business practices today. It might indicate a concern that, similar to policies on Work Life Balance, CSR and environmental/sustainability policies are not embedded in organisational practices as of yet.

Ethics here is described as Environmental Stewardship and Global Citizenship, Future Leaders lack of strong skills in this area is of particular concern given the sustainable business and climate imperatives that organisations should be addressing today. It is possible this perception is driven by the fact that these are somewhat still emerging strategies for organisations, or perhaps not as central to business as they should be. The lack of skill, or indeed rating of the skill, in global stewardship is also concerning given the untapped potential of business leaders to impact the world around us.

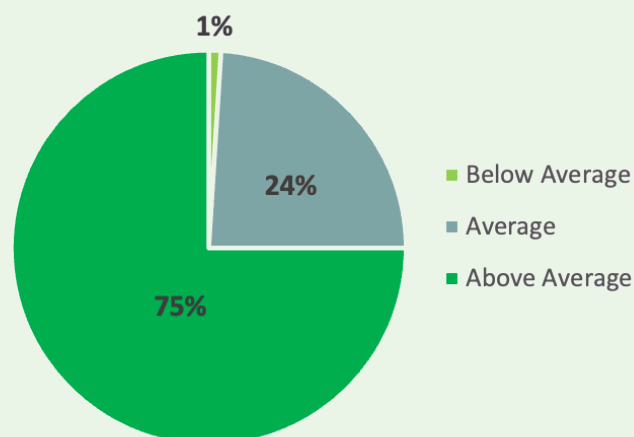
Finally, Engagement also falls towards the bottom of the list of Leadership Skills and scores more in the average and below average categories (65%). The emphasis here is on service, marketing and customer orientation external to the organisation. This might reflect the boundaries of the organisation for Future Leader roles, with many of the sample in this study being in roles that are not customer facing.

### Future Leader Perceptions of their Own Skills

The vast majority of Future Leaders believe they are ready to lead. As with the previous section, softer skills feature prominently again in terms of how Future Leaders rate their level of competency across a variety of skills. For most of the leadership skills that they believe are important, they feel they are already performing to an above average ability level. Interestingly, as highlighted in the previous section, the skills they feel are less important such as Technology and Ethics are the very skills they are more likely to perceive as average or below average.

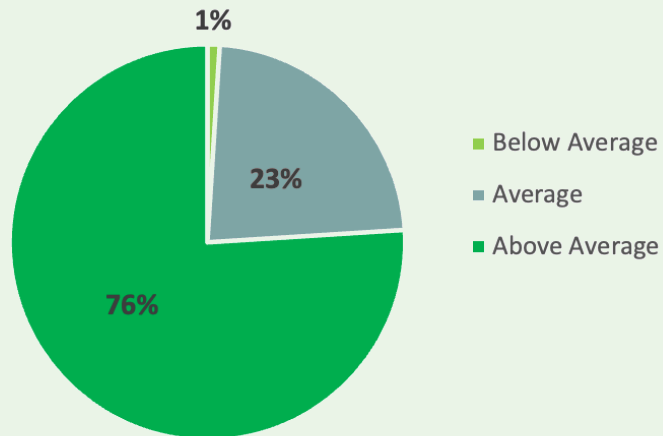
Strength in the key areas of Working with Others, Self-Efficacy, Cognition and Management might suggest that organisations recognise the importance of these skills for leadership roles and are investing substantially in their development.

#### Working with Others: Coaching, Mentoring, Leadership, Social Influence etc.

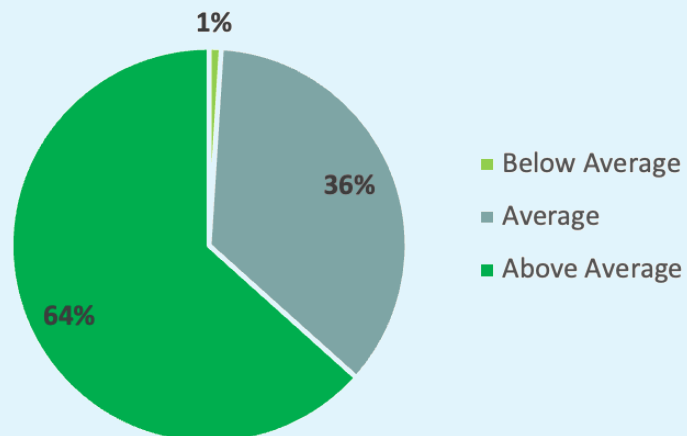


## 8. Future Leader Skill Needs

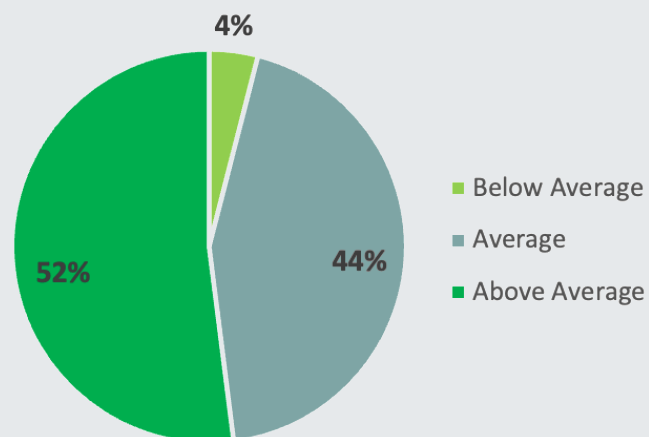
Self-Efficacy: Resilience, Flexibility, Agility, Motivation, Self-Awareness etc.



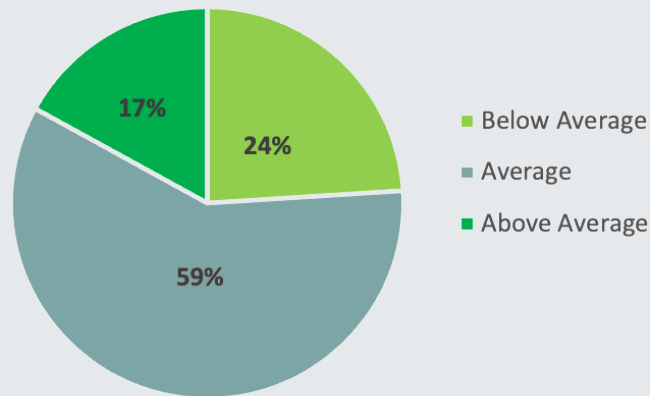
Cognitive Skills: Analytical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Systems Thinking etc.



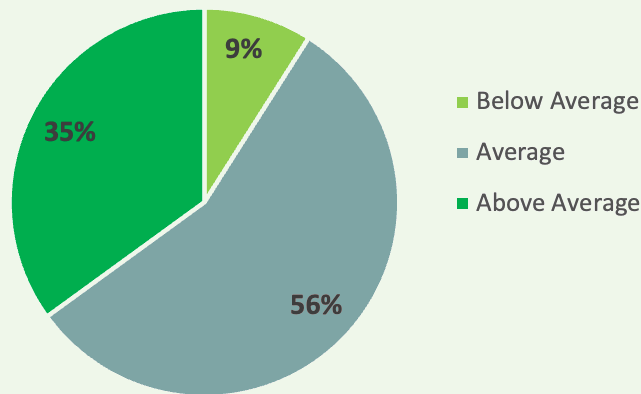
Management Skills: Quality Control, Resource Management, Operations etc.



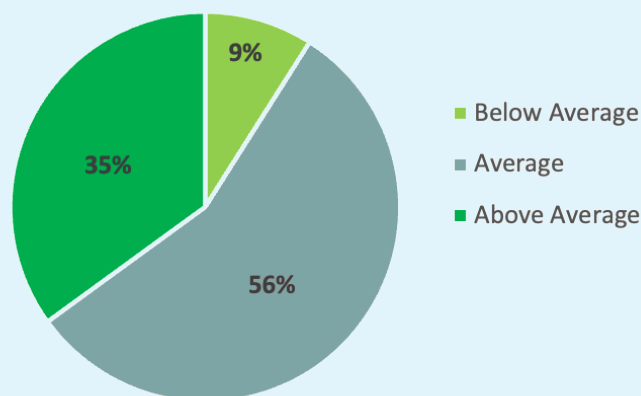
Technology Skills: Networking, Cybersecurity, Big Data, AI etc.



Engagement Skills: Service Orientation, Customer Service, Marketing & Media



Ethics: Environmental Stewardship & Global Citizenship



## 8. Future Leader Skill Needs

Leadership upskilling typically comes in the form of a series of leadership development programmes for the XLT, particularly the high potential Future Leaders identified by organisations for this study. However, Focus Groups highlight issues around how Future Leaders are selected for these programmes.

“ No one comes along and tells you that you have been selected for these leadership programmes, it’s not like there was an open competition, you are just told, this training course is a good fit for you, so go do it. ”

Future Leaders express concerns that, if you are not on a leadership development programme or pathway, you cannot take the opportunity to develop the skills about which you are most concerned. In addition, only around half (56%) feel these formal programmes actually give Future leaders what they need. This suggests they might be a baseline for leadership development only. Furthermore, if Future Leaders cannot openly self-select onto these programmes it is a missed opportunity for organisations in that they are focusing on the development of those individuals on the “FastTrack” at the detriment of those not on this track.

There is growing acknowledgement that organisations should focus on developing the collective leadership capacity of the organisation rather than focus solely on individual development. What do Future Leaders want?

### Future Leader Development Needs

Leader Development is a critical factor in securing the long-term viability of any organisation. Without robust leadership succession plans in place, an organisation is putting its future in jeopardy. When asked about development opportunities, 67% of Future Leaders felt Executive Coaching to be most impactful for them, reinstating the belief the positive impact one to one coaching has on one’s personal and leadership development. Yet only 38% indicate it is currently available to them, highlighting perhaps that formal coaching is typically aimed at Executives, those already occupying senior leader roles.

We stress here the criticality of more regular, Leader to Future Leader coaching in new models of Sustainable Leadership. It is not always something to be outsourced but a weekly activity between the SLT and their direct reports on the XLT.

Leadership Development	Available	Impactful
Internal Leadership Development Programme	76%	53%
Organisation Mentor	59%	55%
Personal Development Planning	68%	49%
Psychometric Profiling	34%	46%
Executive Coaching	38%	67%
Stretch Leadership Projects	42%	52%
Leader Shadowing	24%	61%
Accredited Leadership Education (e.g. PostGrad)	58%	45%
OnLine Leadership Development Courses	73%	36%
External Leadership Development Programme	51%	52%
Conferences/Seminars	67%	44%



**Leader Shadowing** was rated by 61% of Future Leaders as being impactful for them yet only 24% feel they have the opportunity to shadow their SLT members. This is a concern at a number of levels and might indicate a missed opportunity not just for leadership development but also offsetting some of the concerns the XLT have about progressing to more senior roles. Or perhaps, it simply mirrors the fact that the SLT are too busy to fully engage with the XLT?

Many in the Focus Groups spoke at length of the need to have exposure to the upper echelons of power in organisations. Shadowing your Direct Leader provides Future Leaders with key insights as to what the role involves, whilst providing them with an opportunity to “try on leadership” in a safe setting. “Make the role relatable” as it were. It stands to reason then, that if more were afforded the opportunity to shadow their Leaders, it should make the transition into senior roles more fluid and less daunting. Given the positive outcomes associated with this form of development, it is unfortunate then, that Leader Shadowing is only available to 24% of the Future Leaders surveyed.

“ It is so important to have that exposure to the next level, let them (Future Leaders) get comfortable with operating at this level; take away the fear of the unknown. ”

**Mentoring** also ranked highly amongst respondents with 59% saying it was available to them and 53% feeling it is or would be impactful, thus demonstrating that this “hands on” approach to assisting learning in the workplace is constructive. Stretch Leadership projects are also regarded as being impactful with over 50% of Future Leaders indicating so.

Regarding **Internal Leadership Development Programmes**, 76% of Future Leaders surveyed stated that these programmes are widely available and 53% believe they were impactful for them; an indication perhaps that these internal programmes are providing Future Leaders with a solid foundation with respect to their leadership developmental journey. When asked about online development programmes, it is interesting to note that only 36% of Future Leaders regard them as being impactful. This reinforces the point that leadership cannot be compartmentalised into modules of training but is a journey that needs to be nurtured along over a number of years.

In-person learning environments are still the preferred choice for Future Leaders as they provide an opportunity to interact and engage with others in a more personal capacity. They also provide the safe spaces for Future Leaders to share and openly debate, ideally resolve, the more complex and challenging environments in which they reside, as already outlined in this study.

Although most leadership development initiatives are favorably perceived by Future Leaders, albeit more than ever, the level of organisational support offered to Future Leaders must also be taken into consideration.

Organisational Support to Answer the Call to Lead	Disagree	Agree
I would receive a lot of support from my new peers at this level.	34%	55%
I would receive a lot of support from the broader organisation.	42%	58%
I would have access to senior leadership development opportunities.	20%	80%
I would mainly rely on my own support network. <sup>3</sup>	5%	65%
The onus is on me personally to develop my skill set further.	14%	86%

This study investigated the extent to which Future Leaders get support from their organisations when answering the call to lead. The findings show that 66% feel they would receive support from their new peers on the SLT, while 58% would get support from the larger organisation. Regarding accessing leadership opportunities, 81% agree they could participate

## 8. Future Leader Skill Needs

in Leadership Development Programmes. However, when it comes to further personal development, 86% of Future Leaders surveyed believe the onus is on them personally to develop their skill sets; from an organisational learning development perspective, they tend to be overlooked. Future Leaders highlight the perceived lack of support offered by the organisation at senior levels.

Finally, some Future Leaders spoke about their experience of observing others transitioning into senior roles and the challenges associated with it. Many felt support was lacking from the organisation during those initial phases of transitioning. This insight was reflected in the survey, where 65% of Future Leaders indicate they would rely on their own social network for support when stepping up. Clearly, more needs to be done here by the organisation to support Leaders when they step up.

### At a Glance - Future Leader Perceptions of their Own Skills and Needs

- Key Skill deficits among Future Leaders are People Management (Specifically the more challenging/regulated elements of HR/Work Practices), eLeadership, eNetworking, Technology, Ethics, Navigating Risk and Uncertainty, and more broadly Sustainable Business Leadership and Digital Leadership.
- There is a common misconception that, once appointed, Senior Leaders should be capable of “hitting the ground running” when transitioning into new roles and therefore are not afforded the same level of support as they would have received in the past.
- Future Leaders place significant emphasis on the importance of transversal skills, more commonly referred to as “softer skills”, an indication perhaps that the style of leadership they aspire to is a more holistic and human-centric style, where employee wellbeing is prioritised.
- Many Future Leaders recognise the positive effect Executive Coaching could potentially play in their leadership development; 67% believe this would be impactful for them if afforded the opportunity.
- Leader Shadowing is highly regarded by many as being impactful in terms of their leadership development. Being exposed to the next level is key in preparing others for what lies ahead.

### Gender and Leadership

Last but by no means least; it would be neglectful not to take a gender lens to this study.

We already know there are three main reasons why women do not progress to Leadership Roles; gender stereotypes<sup>xviii</sup>, different career socialisations<sup>xix</sup>, and sex discrimination in the organisation<sup>xx</sup>. Stereotypes are essentially cognitive “shortcuts” that categorise people based on characteristics such as gender, race, or age<sup>xxi</sup>, and prevent women from occupying more leadership positions.

When women are stereotyped as mothers and carers, they are less likely to be selected for leadership roles. In turn, the issue of career socialisation arises where women feel they are less capable than men, conditioned to believe that their innate skills do not suit the organisation. In fact, in today’s world many of the cognitive and relational innate skills associated with women are the most needed. These have been discussed in detail in the previous section (Working with Others). The adage that ‘*women take care and men take charge*’<sup>xxii</sup> is relevant here as the former is exactly the Sustainable Leadership and Human-Centric approach organisations need right now.

It is widely argued that there are less women Leaders because men have designed organisations. It is hoped that New Ways of Working will go some way to offsetting these challenges however it is vital that they are promoted and measured across genders to ensure equity. It is also vital that they are role modelled among the SLT.

As part of this study, Future Leaders were asked about progressing to a leadership role and whether individuals felt they were capable. Interestingly there were no differences between men (89%) and women (84%) in terms of their perceptions of their capability to lead. We also posed a question on expected time frames around advancing to the next level. 35%

of women, identified by their organisations as Future Leaders, are not inclined to move to the next level, compared to 18% of men, which does indicate some level of concern. Moreover, 40% of men aim to advance within two to three years, while only 24% of women have the same intention. However, a similar proportion of men (30%) and women (28%) plan to move to the next level within the next 12 months or within the next 5 years (Men = 13%; Women = 13%). These findings overall indicate there are still issues around women progressing to leadership roles.

We have known for some time that the negative aspects of leadership matter more to women. However, in this study we find evidence that men are more attuned to these than previously. Throughout Focus Groups, male Future Leaders expressed as much concern around family dynamics as their female counterparts. This is progress as, when men are as concerned about family work balance as women it shares the mental load. As such, the negative aspects of leadership are slowly becoming less gendered. Not because they are being resolved for women, but because they are also now being recognised by men.

One finding in this study is worth spotlighting. People Management, particularly challenging conversations, is a key area of concern for Future Leaders and one of the areas of upskilling recommended here. However, there is already evidence to show that men find difficult or sensitive conversations with women subordinates particularly challenging as they are fearful of being seen to discriminate, harass or just be perceived as biased in some way<sup>xxiii</sup>. It is positive that men are more attuned to these issues that women have experienced as the norm in many workplaces for years. However, it does highlight that men need specific HR skills training around these issues.

We know also that men are more likely than women to answer the call to lead despite not having the necessary skills and experience associated with the role. Women on the other hand can sometimes have more than the necessary competencies and experience but still not feel ready. <sup>xxiv</sup> The organisational culture and climate are critical here, where all Future Leaders are nurtured and supported towards Leadership. Sometimes the more we know of Leadership the less likely we are to answer the call. The more competent and experiences the more we can weigh up and understand the trade-off which has to be made.

Interestingly, "Highly competent women with more work experience aspire to leadership positions significantly less than men do, and less than women with less experience do, this suggests that these women know something important about leadership that we may not yet fully understand"<sup>xxv</sup>.





## CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### Building a Future for Future Leaders

The Executive Summary has already highlighted the critical high-level findings of this study and associated them with key recommendations for organisations. Here however we want to amplify and magnify the conversation. We present an important set of underpinning principles through which Organisations; their CEOs, SLTs and Shareholders, can truly build sustainable organisations.

The world has changed around us. The way we build financial value, the way we meet consumer needs, the way we need to protect our world for future generations, and the way we can succeed in business has and continues to transform in ways beyond our collective imaginations.

In tandem with this, the way we organise people and work, the way we lead, motivate and engage Human Capital has to transform as much, if not more, simply to stay in the game. Staying ahead of the game will likely require ways of engaging, collaborating and working in creative and innovative ways that we have not yet imagined.

Rethink, Reimagine, Revive, Renew

<p><b>1. Model Sustainable Leadership at the Top Table</b></p>	<p>In alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there is a growing interest in Sustainable Leadership. This concept involves viewing organisations as ‘open systems’ that take into account the context and environment in which they operate. Leaders within these organisations act with integrity and demonstrate ethical behaviour. Having Sustainable Leaders at the top is essential, as they are committed to building capacity and implementing sustainable changes rather than focusing on short-term gains through transactional approaches. Sustainable Leaders also prioritise environmental and social responsibility, enhancing the organisation’s trust and reputation. Importantly however, Sustainable Leaders work hard at sustaining their own performance through self and emotional regulation. They see leadership as a vocation and, coming from a point of humility, recognise the need to share and distribute leadership around the organisation. They do this by supporting and sustaining their peers and putting significant effort into coaching and sustaining their people. They are the lynchpin to creating Human Centric Organisations.</p>
<p><b>2. Build Human-Centric Organisations</b></p>	<p>Creating organisations that prioritise their employees’ well-being, engagement, and productivity is crucial for fostering a positive work environment. Human-Centric Organisations focus on all stakeholders, not just their shareholders and their customers, but also their employees, The SLT and HR continuously strategise to address employee needs, values and experiences. In such organisations, employees feel appreciated, respected, and empowered to voice their opinions and concerns. This results in higher engagement, motivation, and commitment to their work. Critically, this includes the organisational climate and working practices. Human-Centric Organisations actively promote and encourage work-life balance, learning and career development, resulting in lower turnover and an inclusive innovative work environment.</p>
<p><b>3. Lean into New Ways of Working (or New Ways of Thinking)</b></p>	<p>Organisations frequently expect higher and higher levels performance, often simultaneously moving the parameters of business functions, structures and roles. This is known to result in employee stress and burnout. Although the increased use of technology for communication and information sharing has made routine work easier, it has also made non-routine problems more complex and consequently the solutions more multi-faceted and inter-dependent. Added to this complexity, ICT has made it difficult for employees to separate their work and personal lives. As a result, this significantly affects Future Leaders’ willingness to take on leadership roles, as they feel that more and more work is expected at the leadership table. Placing employee well-being at the forefront of the organisation means embracing a broad range of New Ways of Working (NWWs). These include Working from Home, Remote Working, Part-Time Working, Flexi-Time, Compressed Working Weeks, 4-Day Weeks and Term Time. NWW needs to be role-modelled by the SLT and should also be accompanied by policies that underline the importance of work-life balance for sustainable business outcomes. It is vital for the SLT to lead by example in adhering to such policies to reinforce the significance of compliance and accountability.</p>
<p><b>4. Nurture Future Leaders</b></p>	<p>Nurturing Future Leaders ensures an organisation’s sustainability and long-term success. A slow, nurture-based approach necessitates a strategic and systematic method for recognising, cultivating and assisting Emerging Leaders at all levels, not just among the XLT. This is vital not just for Leadership Succession Plans but for the Shared and Distributed models of leadership necessitated by today’s complex business environment. Organisations are generally very familiar with structured leadership development pathways, where high-potential leaders can be trained, mentored and coached on the cognitive, relational and technical skills needed. However, this cannot be rushed. Leadership development is slow and sustained. Organisations also need to accept that one-size does not fit all. Life stage and motivations are critical, so designing specific development plans that align with a person’s career stage, aspirations and limitations is key, especially noting these circumstances will change over time. Finally, and most importantly, a learning culture within the organisation must be actively encouraged, where everyone can access opportunities for professional and leadership development but, more critically, exercise their voice regardless of their role or level. Employee Voice is critical to build a creative and innovative culture, a learning organisation (not just an organisation that runs learning programmes).</p>
<p><b>5. Re-Conceptualise Leadership for a Post-Digital Age</b></p>	<p>In the post-digital age, technology is integrated into every aspect of working life. Digital Transformation has moved quickly beyond capitalising on the Internet of Things, Big Data, SMART Manufacturing and the digitalisation of routine tasks into a world of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning. While some organisations might still be embarking on this journey, society is experiencing and experimenting with the consequences. Some positive and some negative, some intended and some unintended, some known and some as yet unknown consequences. Today’s Business Leaders are key to harnessing future technologies but equally responsible for directing it in sustainable ways for the benefit of all in society. Leadership must adapt to manage intricate and dynamic work situations fundamentally reshaped by technological progress. Therefore, Leaders must be digitally fluent, not only in understanding the use of technology but also in utilising it to promote innovation and creativity. However, post-digital, Sustainable Leaders, must not just meet but transcend their organisation’s interests. For a better world, Sustainable Leaders are compelled to align organisational goals with social responsibility, sustainability, and the ethical use of technology. Organisations should be compelled to find them, nurture them and successfully transition them to the top table.</p>

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The authors would like to acknowledge the support, engagement and enthusiasm of all those who participated in this study through completing the survey and/or giving their time to lengthy focus groups.

Additionally, we would like to thank ICBE Business Excellence Skillnet for their unwavering commitment to, and funding of, the WorkFutures Lab at the Kemmy Business School, UL.



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