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How does sustainable human resource management contribute to managerial well-being?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how sustainable human resource management (HRM) contributes to managerial well-being in the Estonian public sector, addressing the gap that HRM-well-being research remains largely employee-centric and provides limited insight into managers' well-being under high demands. Using a mixed-method design, we combined a 2023 survey of 120 public-sector managers across four sectors (internal security, education, health care, and social services) with 11 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024–2025. The framework integrates sustainable HRM with the job demands-resources (JD-R) model, psychosocial safety climate (PSC) model, and the dynamics of well-being perspective, capturing both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Results indicate substantial job demands (sustained concentration, time pressure, emotional demands, and overtime-related fatigue), yet relatively low stress symptoms and no gender differences in demand ratings. High demands were balanced by resources, corresponding with generally good mental well-being. Interviews showed that stress was pervasive but manageable through deliberate recovery practices and meaning-making tied to societal impact and accomplishment, underscoring the role of eudaimonic well-being, while hedonic restoration was mainly supported through off-job recovery. Overall, the findings suggest that sustainable HRM supports managerial well-being by strengthening job and organizational resources and fostering a psychosocially safer climate that legitimizes participation, support, and recovery, enabling sustainable performance under persistent demands.

1. Introduction

In recent years, leadership has become a central concern in organizational research and practice, particularly in the public sector, where managers operate under escalating complexity, intensified accountability, and continuous change. Public organizations must simultaneously deliver public value, implement reforms, and respond to crises under constraints such as tightening budgets and evolving stakeholder expectations (Spaner et al. 2025). These conditions increase the psychological and relational demands placed on managers. Although the harmful effects of chronic pressure and resource exhaustion on leadership quality and well-being are well established, less is known about how sustainable human resource management (HRM) can actively preserve and regenerate managers' resources in high-demand public-sector contexts. This gap is important because managers are not only responsible for implementing people-centred human resource (HR) practices, but their own well-being is also a precondition for sustaining those practices over time. Accordingly, managerial well-being should be understood not as a secondary or individual concern but as a core condition for organizational sustainability. In order to support healthy leadership, commitment, and sustainable performance, organizations should adopt sustainable HR practices that strengthen managers' proactivity, well-being, and performance over time (Villajos et al. 2019).

Sustainable HRM refers to organizational activities that enable goal attainment while simultaneously renewing the human resource base over the long term and generating positive outcomes for multiple stakeholders (Ehnert 2009). With work patterns transforming and well-being and sustainability becoming central management priorities (Kane 2022), sustainable HRM provides a useful lens for examining how organizations can protect and strengthen the human resources on which sustainable performance depends. From this perspective, managerial well-being is not a soft HR concern but part of the organizational infrastructure required for continuity, resilience, and responsible public-sector leadership. This is particularly

relevant for public-sector middle managers who mediate competing expectations between strategic directives and operational realities (Boureston 2019). The present study examines how sustainable HRM contributes to managerial well-being in the Estonian public sector using a mixed-method design.

2. Sustainable HRM and managerial well-being

Sustainable HRM provides an integrative framework for understanding how organizations can achieve performance objectives while simultaneously preserving and regenerating the human resource base over time. Foundational work argues that employees are limited and vulnerable resources and that excessive work demands, stress, and burnout undermine long-term organizational viability. Accordingly, employee well-being becomes a precondition for sustainability rather than a secondary or ‘soft’ HR outcome (Ehnert 2009; Ehnert et al. 2016). This perspective is reinforced by Kramar (2014), who emphasizes that sustainable HRM requires attention to long-term consequences of HR practices, including well-being and equity. In parallel, well-being-oriented HRM research conceptualizes employee well-being as a central outcome and ethical imperative, highlighting the need to avoid the exploitation of HR for short-term performance gains (Van De Voorde et al. 2012). Employee well-being has been extensively studied through models of job stress, psychological health, burnout, and engagement, with seminal contributions highlighting the role of job design (Karasek 1979), job resources (Demerouti et al. 2001), and leadership (Kelloway and Barling 2010). Empirical syntheses further suggest that sustainable HRM is positively associated with well-being outcomes at work, including for managerial groups, and that practices such as flexibility, ethical leadership, and inclusive cultures can strengthen psychological and emotional well-being (Qamar et al. 2024). More recent conceptual work positions well-being as a core sustainable HRM outcome through the PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment) framework, arguing that HR practices should actively support employees’ emotional, relational, and psychological needs to enable sustainable work performance (Bai 2025).

However, sustainable HRM is often articulated at a normative and system level, whereas the processes through which it becomes meaningful in day-to-day working life are enacted at the operational level. This makes middle managers particularly important: they translate sustainability intentions into concrete practices, routines, and decisions that shape employees’ lived experiences of HRM. At the same time, middle managers themselves are exposed to high demands, especially in public sector contexts characterized by public scrutiny, political influence, and institutional complexity, which makes their own well-being a critical sustainability issue. If sustainable HRM depends on the capacity of managers to implement people-centred practices, then managerial health and resource preservation are not merely outcomes but conditions for sustainable HRM performance. This creates a theoretical need to link sustainable HRM more explicitly to

the mechanisms that explain managerial well-being and leadership behaviour under demanding conditions.

To specify these mechanisms, the study integrates sustainable HRM with job stress and resource theories, starting from the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker and Demerouti 2014). The JD-R model proposes that job characteristics can be grouped into job demands and job resources, offering an overarching framework that applies across occupations. Job demands are aspects of work requiring sustained cognitive and/or emotional effort and are associated with physiological costs. Demands become stressors particularly when high effort is required without adequate recovery. Job resources, in turn, are aspects of the job that help achieve work goals, reduce the costs of demands, and stimulate growth and development. In high-pressure public sector environments, the importance of organizational resource provision becomes especially pronounced: sustainable HRM can be interpreted as a resource-regenerative system that reduces unnecessary depletion and strengthens resource reservoirs (e.g. development opportunities, health-promoting practices, supportive structures).

While JD-R explains how demands and resources translate into strain or motivation, Dollard and McTernan’s psychosocial safety climate (PSC) (Dollard and McTernan 2011) model specifies why some organizations systematically create healthier demand-resource configurations than others. Dollard and McTernan position PSC as a ‘cause of the causes’, arguing that senior management priorities, communication, and participation shape work design and thereby predict demands/resources and downstream outcomes such as psychological health and engagement. PSC is theorized to extend the JD-R logic by functioning as an upstream predictor of job demands and job resources (i.e. causing both the health erosion and motivational paths). In sustainable HRM terms, PSC can be interpreted as a key organizational-level indicator that sustainable HRM is not only present as policy rhetoric but enacted as a psychologically safe, resource-supportive climate through which human resources are preserved and regenerated.

Finally, Sonnentag’s dynamics of well-being (Sonnentag 2015) model strengthens the framework by emphasizing that well-being is not static but changes over time and fluctuates within persons, shaped by job stressors, job resources, personal resources, and the work-home interface. Sonnentag also clarifies that well-being includes both hedonic experience (feeling good) and eudaimonic experience (fulfilment and purpose): a distinction particularly relevant for managers whose work can be simultaneously demanding and meaningful. By treating well-being as dynamic and linked to work experiences and performance, this perspective aligns with sustainable HRM’s long-term orientation: sustainable HRM should not merely reduce immediate strain but support ongoing resource renewal and sustainable functioning over time.

In summary, this integrated framework positions sustainable HRM as the overarching system that (a) shapes the resource architecture of managerial work (JD-R), (b) is enabled or constrained by the organization’s PSC, and (c) influences

managers' hedonic and eudaimonic well-being dynamically over time through work and recovery processes.

This approach also directly supports the study gap: managers should be analysed not only as implementers of HRM but as an important target group whose well-being is both an outcome of sustainable HRM and a condition for sustainable HRM enactment under high public-sector demands.

3. Methods of empirical study

The study utilized a mixed-method approach. A quantitative survey was conducted in 2023. From the total sample, 120 managers responded, including 100 women and 20 men. More than half of all respondents were in the 40–59 age group (59.2%, $n = 71$). Four sectors were selected (internal security, education, health care, and social services) where changes in work organization have occurred in recent years in order to ensure the provision of services to the population in times of major crises. Convenience sampling was used in selected public sector organizations. The questionnaire was based on two established measurement scales. First, the job demands-resources scale (JD-RS) developed by Jackson and Rothmann (2005) was used to assess job demands and resources. Additionally, Galy's (2020) multidimensional scale of job satisfaction, based on the individual-workload-activity (IWA) model, was included. This scale was selected to examine the psychosocial aspects of work satisfaction and professional fulfilment. Lastly, the survey incorporated custom questions designed by the researchers to evaluate workplace conditions, including changes in workload, overtime, remote work, and organizational strategies for maintaining employee well-being. The collected responses were initially coded in Microsoft Excel before being analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29.0.0.0). The statistical analysis included descriptive statistics such as mean, mode, median, and standard deviation calculations.

The qualitative study – in-depth semi-structured interviews with 11 managers (7 female and 4 male) in the public sector – was conducted in 2024–2025. To achieve the representation of information, the selection of interviewees was based on purposive sampling following different organiza-

tions, locations, and managers' age and gender. The emphasis was on the middle-level managers' behaviours and resources. The semi-structured interview themes were inspired by Sonnentag's (2015) dynamics of well-being model, Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) JD-R model, and Dollard and McTernan's (2011) PSC model. The interviewees were selected from all regions of Estonia to consider the differences in working conditions. The length of interviews varied from 46 to 74 minutes. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Coding and data organization were conducted manually by the authors.

4. Results

The quantitative survey showed that managers' primary job demands were associated with the need for sustained concentration, intense time pressure, and emotional demands requiring continuous emotion regulation (see Table 1).

High workload and overtime were identified as the strongest contributors to fatigue, and the broader assumption that managerial roles deplete psychological resources through exposure to psychosocial risk factors was partially supported. More than half of the managers reported experiencing stress at work; however, despite frequent exposure to stressful situations, managers assessed the prevalence of typical stress symptoms – such as nervousness, mood disturbances, concentration difficulties, and physical complaints – as comparatively low. No gender differences emerged in managers' assessments of job demands.

At the same time, the results indicated that high managerial demands were counterbalanced by job-related resources, particularly autonomy, development options, and colleague support and engagement, which coincided with generally good mental well-being at work. From a JD-R perspective embedded in the study design, these patterns suggest that demanding managerial roles in the public sector may remain sustainable when adequate resources are available to buffer strain and support ongoing functioning.

The results of the survey also showed that organizational well-being support for managers is predominantly development-oriented and relies most strongly on competence-

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of job demands and resources

Composite indicator	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Demands					
Emotional situations	120	1.00	5.00	3.69	0.70
Time pressure	120	1.00	5.00	4.01	0.72
Health-related complaints	118	1.00	5.00	3.17	0.74
Concentration problems	120	1.00	5.00	4.58	0.47
Resources					
Immediate supervisor's support	120	2.00	5.00	3.91	0.78
Colleague support	120	2.00	5.00	4.15	0.54
Decent pay	119	1.00	5.00	3.15	1.02
Engagement	117	2.00	5.00	4.07	0.71
Autonomy	117	2.00	5.00	4.02	0.55
Development options	120	2.00	5.00	4.15	0.60
Job security	120	1.00	5.00	3.19	1.08

building interventions. The most frequently reported measure was access to training (reported by 100 respondents; training was also explicitly framed as relevant for well-being maintenance by a large majority), followed by more individualized professional support formats such as supervision ($n = 32$), coaching ($n = 23$), and mentoring ($n = 21$). Less frequently, managers referred to collective and relational measures, including joint events ($n = 6$), peer consultation/co-vision ($n = 5$), and leadership collaboration practices (e.g. leadership meetings), as well as developmental conversations (e.g. appraisal/development discussions) and individualized agreements. A small minority reported that no supportive measures were available or that opportunities were insufficiently communicated. Work-organization practices also emerged as a relevant, but unevenly available, well-being support mechanism. Over half of the managers reported that remote work was not accessible to them, despite expressed interest in occasional use. Where available, remote work was evaluated as beneficial for satisfaction and productivity and showed positive associations with indicators such as perceived job security and social support.

The qualitative interviews provided further insight into the mechanisms underlying the balance between job demands and resources. Managers described stressful situations as pervasive and normalized, reflecting the routine nature of high workload, time pressure, emotional demands, and continuous problem-solving in their roles. Nevertheless, stress was typically framed as manageable rather than incapacitating. Interviewees emphasized the deliberate use of personal recovery and coping resources outside working hours, including spending time in nature, physical activity, long walks, yoga, and meditation. These practices were presented as consciously maintained routines that supported recovery and increased stress resistance, complementing job resources by replenishing depleted personal resources.

Beyond recovery behaviours, managers' accounts highlighted the central role of meaningfulness in sustaining well-being and persistence in demanding roles. Interviewees frequently linked their continued engagement in stressful managerial work to the perceived societal impact of public sector leadership, strong collaboration with teams, managerial competence, and a pronounced sense of mission. Leaders who had developed internally were described as displaying higher self-confidence and being perceived as more trustworthy within organizational hierarchies; moreover, trust and support from top management were portrayed as important foundations for confident decision-making and fulfilling the organization's mission. Additionally, managers described the presence of clear long-term goals and plans as a contextual advantage that supported direction and continuity.

In parallel, managers also identified persistent sources of strain that were largely located in the external environment. The primary tensions were attributed to external instability, compounded by high responsibility and accountability to the public, including challenges related to inter-organizational coordination. In the healthcare and education sectors, workforce shortages were described as a particularly significant structural pressure.

Overall, the findings suggest a consistent pattern: managers operate under substantial job demands, yet report comparatively limited stress symptomatology when supported by a combination of job resources (e.g. autonomy and control), sustainable HRM-related organizational practices (e.g. participation, development, and health-promoting policies), and strong personal recovery resources. In this sense, the results point toward a resource-based mechanism through which sustainable HRM may contribute to managerial well-being by cultivating durable resources and a psychosocially safer climate that helps balance demands and enables sustainable performance.

5. Discussion

Taken together, the mixed-method findings can be interpreted as a resource-based mechanism through which sustainable HRM contributes to managerial well-being under high demands. Based on the theory and our results, we have created an extending conceptual model of sustainable HRM and managerial well-being (Fig. 1).

The survey results suggest that managers experience substantial job demands but relatively low intensity of stress symptoms and overall good mental well-being when job-related resources are available. The interviews deepen this notion by showing how managers actively regulate their well-being over time through recovery routines and meaning-making, consistent with the theoretical framing of the qualitative design (dynamics of well-being, JD-R, PSC). From a JD-R lens, demanding managerial work (time pressure, emotional demands, responsibility) is not inherently detrimental if adequate resources are available and replenished: job resources (e.g. autonomy, participation, support, and development opportunities) facilitate coping and motivation, while personal resources and recovery practices buffer strain and enable sustained performance.

Importantly, the qualitative accounts highlight that eudaimonic well-being, experienced through purpose, contribution, competence, and growth, can convert high-effort episodes into psychologically rewarding experiences, thereby supporting persistence in stressful roles, whereas hedonic well-being operates more strongly through off-job recovery and restoration. Previous research has proved that eudaimonic well-being is shown to be protective against psychopathology and can predict better physical health outcomes, including lower levels of cortisol, a stress hormone (Heller et al. 2013), which means that individuals with higher eudaimonic well-being are better equipped to handle stress. This dual emphasis resonates with sustainable HRM arguments that well-being is not a 'soft' by-product but a prerequisite for long-term viability, requiring HR systems that regenerate (rather than deplete) human resources.

Finally, the PSC perspective usefully explains why some managers can sustain these dynamics: climates characterized by participation, support, and health-promoting priorities likely legitimize recovery, encourage help-seeking, and reduce the hidden costs of stress, thereby protecting both well-being and individual work performance. This is in line with

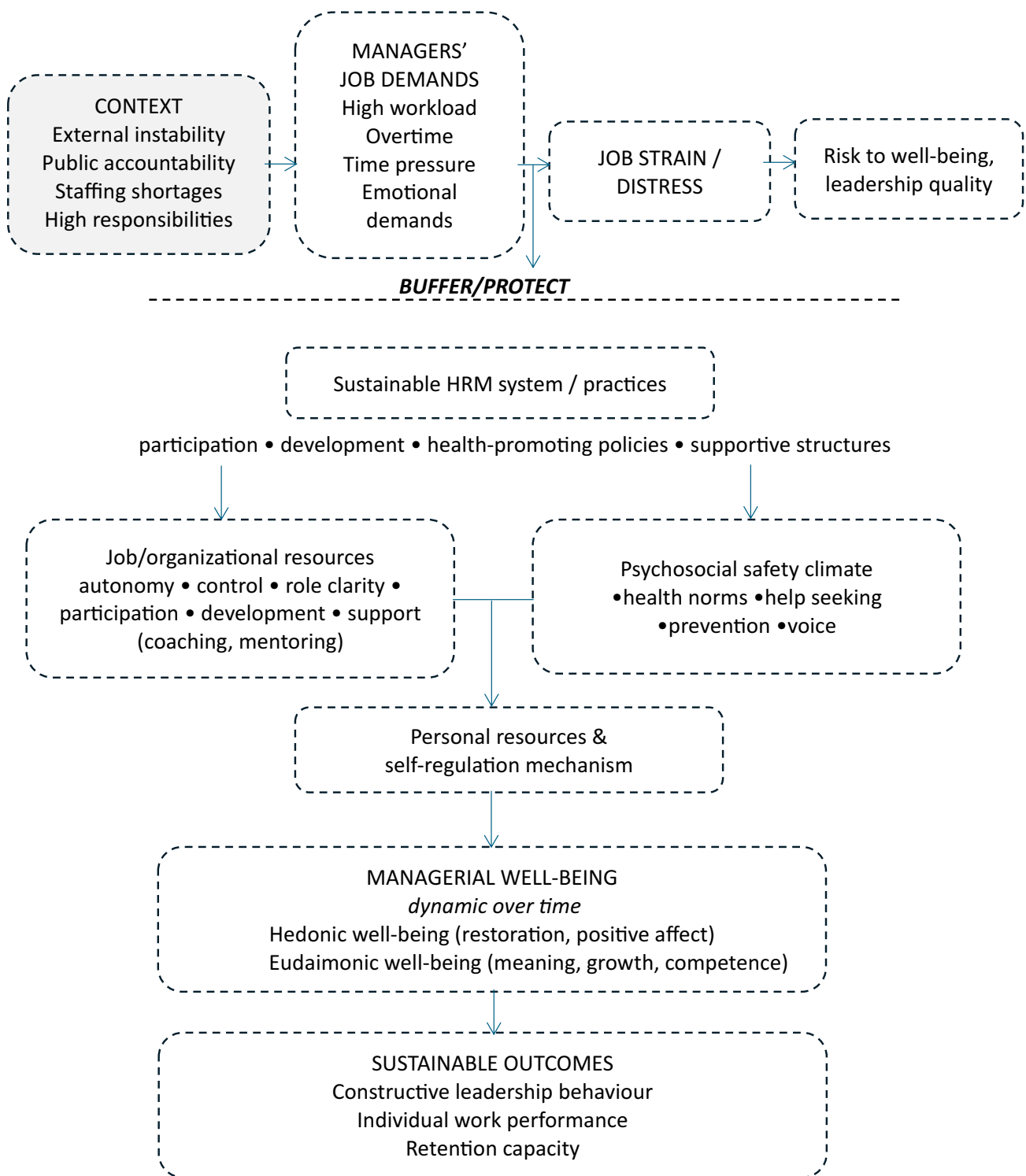


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of sustainable HRM and managerial well-being.

previous research (Biron et al. 2018; Mirza et al. 2022; Ji et al. 2025).

In practical terms, employee well-being should not be understood as a secondary or ‘soft’ HR outcome but as a necessary condition for organizational sustainability. In high-pressure contexts, depleted well-being undermines employees’ capacity to maintain performance, adapt to change, and support long-term organizational functioning. The findings suggest that sustainable HRM can strengthen managerial well-being by simultaneously (a) reducing unnecessary demands where possible, (b) expanding job resources and psychosocial

safety, and (c) enabling recovery and meaning-focused pathways that foster eudaimonic well-being – while acknowledging that hedonic well-being remains crucial for restoration, primarily outside work.

6. Conclusion

The study extends the sustainable HRM literature by shifting attention from a predominantly employee-centric view toward managerial well-being as both an outcome of sustainable HRM and a prerequisite for its implementation.

Practically, the results imply that public-sector organizations seeking sustainable performance should treat managerial well-being as a core sustainability capability: reducing avoidable demands where possible, strengthening autonomy and control, investing in participation and development, and actively building psychosocial safety, so that recovery and help-seeking are normalized rather than stigmatized. As the organizations with a high external pressure context were selected for the study, the results are applicable to all mid-level managers, predicting their situation in more critical conditions.

This study is limited by its cross-sectional survey design and a modest qualitative sample size within one national context. The results enable to frame patterns, but there is potential for additional information from extra interviews. Future research could test the proposed model longitudinally, examine sector-specific pathways, and evaluate which bundles of sustainable HRM practices most effectively enhance managers' resource gain cycles and long-term well-being.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions related to the protection of participant confidentiality.

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Kuidas kestlik inimressursside juhtimine toetab juhtide heaolu?

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Uuring vaatleb, kuidas kestlik inimressursside juhtimine (*human resource management*, HRM) mõjutab juhtide heaolu Eesti avalikus sektoris. Teema on oluline, sest senine HRM-i ja heaolu seost käsitlev teaduskirjandus on olnud pigem töötajakeskne ning juhtide heaolule on vähem tähelepanu pööratud.

Uuringus kasutasime segameetodit: 2023. aastal viisime läbi ankeetküsitluse 120 avaliku sektori keskastmejuhiga neljas sektoris (sisejulgeolek, haridus, tervishoid ja sotsiaalteenused) ning 2024.–2025. aastal tegime juhtidega 11 poolstruktureeritud intervjuud. Analüüs tugineb HRM-i alustele, töö nõudmiste ja ressursside (*job demands-resources*, JD-R) mudelile, psühhosotsiaalse ohutuskliima (*psychosocial safety climate*, PSC) käsitlusele ja heaolu dünaamika vaatele. Käsitletakse nii hedoonilist kui ka eudaimoonilist heaolu.

Tulemused näitavad, et juhtidel on palju tööalaseid nõudmisi. Kõige enam koormavad neid püsiv keskendumise nõue, ajasurve, emotsionaalsed nõudmised ja ületööst tingitud väsimus. Samas olid stressisümp-tomid suhteliselt tagasihoidlikud ning meeste ja naiste hinnangud nõudmistele statistiliselt oluliselt ei erine. Peamiselt aitab negatiivse fooni teket tasakaalustada töö- ja organisatsiooniline ressurss. See omakorda seostub üldiselt hea vaimse heaoluga. Intervjuudest selgus, et stress oli küll levinud, kuid sellega tuldi toime teadliku taastumise ja töö tähenduslikkuse kaudu. Eriti oluline oli ühiskondliku mõju ja saavutuste tajumine. See rõhutab eudaimoonilise heaolu rolli. Hedoonilist heaolu toetas eelkõige töövälise taastumine.

Kokkuvõttes näitavad tulemused, et kestlik HRM toetab ka juhtide heaolu. Seda tehakse töö- ja organisatsiooniliste ressursside tugevdamise ning psühhosotsiaalselt turvalisema kliima kujundamise kaudu. See omakorda soodustab osalemist, toetust ja taastumist ning aitab hoida tulemuslikkust ka püsivate kõrgete nõudmiste korral.
