

What is the impact of role tension on the efficacy of HR practitioners during layoffs?.

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Table 1: List of abbreviations and acronyms

APA7	APA7 American Psychological Association referencing system (7th ed.)
ChatGPT	Chatbot: Generative Pre-trained Transformer
CCMA	Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration
COR	Conservation of Resources Theory
EAP	Employee Assistance Programme
ER	Employee Relations
FMCG	Fast Moving Consumer Goods
GIBS	Gordon Institute of Business Science
HR	Human Resources
HRMS	Human Resource Management System
HRP	Human Resource Practitioner
IQ	Interview Questions
PBP	People Business Partner
PRQ	Primary Research Question
RG	Research Gap
RQ	Research Question
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
TA	Thematic Analysis

A detailed Glossary of Terms is contained in the Appendices for readers seeking further exposition or definitional clarity.

ABSTRACT

Purpose-

The purpose of this study was to explore how HR practitioners experience, interpret, and manage role tension during organisational layoffs. It sought to understand the interplay between individual coping strategies, decision-making efficacy, and organisational contexts such as support systems and climate.

Design/methodology/approach –

A qualitative research design was applied to explore this through a phenomenological research strategy. A semi-structured interview process was conducted to seek HR practitioner' experiences, whose feedback was thematically analysed to address the study's research questions and objectives.

Findings –

The findings of this research indicate a dynamic interplay between personal ethics, organisational systems, and contextual pressures, suggesting that HR practitioners' efficacy is both individually cultivated and structurally mediated.

Research limitations/implications –

The study's cross-sectional design limited its ability to capture the evolving nature of HR practitioners' experiences over time, which a longitudinal approach could have illuminated. Additionally, the sample was confined to South African organisations, potentially constraining broader generalisability.

Originality/value –

This study makes an original and substantive contribution to the understanding of role tension among Human Resource (HR) practitioners during organisational layoffs, an area that has received limited empirical and theoretical attention.

Keywords

Role tension, efficacy, layoff, retrenchment

Plagiarism Declaration

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to conduct this research.

3 November 2025

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Human Resources (HR) practitioners occupy a unique and indispensable position within organisations. They help shape the company's culture and play a vital role in protecting the well-being of employees and navigate complex interpersonal and institutional dynamics that ensure a healthy workforce's functioning (Ulrich, 1997; Armstrong et al., 2023). From recruitment to retirement, human resources professionals are stewards of the employment relationship, balancing the strategic goals of management with the legitimate interests of employees (Kaufman, 2020).

However, amid ongoing economic volatility, globalisation, digital transformation and post-pandemic restructuring, HR practitioners are increasingly required to facilitate difficult organisational decisions, including layoffs, defined as temporary or permanent termination of employment due to restructuring, economic downturns, or strategic realignment (Johnstone, 2024).

Layoffs have become a normalised yet traumatic feature of modern organisational life (Cavale, 2023; Reuters, 2023; Ulaby, 2023). They are implemented to protect financial sustainability or shareholder value but often come at a high human cost (Cascio, 2014; Chhinzer, 2021). For HR practitioners, this process is not a detached administrative act; rather, it is a deeply moral, emotional, and relational event, implicating their professional identity and ethical integrity (Cayrat et al., 2023).

In executing layoffs, HR practitioners occupy dual and often conflicting roles: they serve as organisational agents, responsible for executing leadership mandates and ensuring compliance with legal and strategic directives, while simultaneously functioning as employee advocates, expected to safeguard fairness, compassion, and psychological safety (Cayrat et al., 2023; Johnstone, 2024). This duality creates profound role tension, an occupational stressor that emerges when professional expectations are incompatible or in direct conflict (Katz et al., 1978; Rizzo et al., 1970).

Recent scholarship has emphasised that this tension is not merely a theoretical concern but a critical, real-world problem with far-reaching consequences for HR effectiveness, ethical decision-making, and personal well-being (Liang et al., 2021; Vu et al., 2022). Role tension compromises HR practitioners' ability to exercise sound judgment, communicate transparently, and uphold fairness during the layoff process,

functions that are central to sustaining organisational legitimacy and employee trust (Cayrat et al., 2023). When unresolved, it can manifest as moral distress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion, mirroring the psychosocial risks typically associated with trauma exposure in caregiving professions (Maslach et al., 2022; Hochwarter et al., 2020). This raises an important call to action for both scholars and practitioners: the need to reconceptualise HR's role not merely as administrative or compliance-oriented but as a psychologically and ethically complex practice that requires structural support, resilience-building, and emotional competence (Johnstone, 2024).

Scholars have noted that despite the expanding literature on emotional labour and moral injury in professions such as healthcare and social work, there is a noticeable lack of empirical studies in this area exploring these dynamics in HR practice (Cayrat et al., 2023; Nyfoudi et al., 2024). This gap is significant because HR professionals often function as the emotional buffer between leadership and employees, carrying the moral weight of decisions they do not author but must enforce (Deery et al., 2015). Consequently, layoffs represent a crucible for evaluating the integrity and resilience of HR roles, highlighting the ethical paradoxes and identity conflicts inherent in people management (Johnstone, 2024; Cayrat et al., 2023; Nyfoudi et al., 2024, Yahia, 2025).

Addressing this research gap is therefore both timely and necessary. Understanding how HR practitioners perceive, experience, and manage role tension can inform more humane and psychologically sustainable organisational practices. It can also contribute to theoretical advancements in role theory, emotional labour, and occupational resilience, aligning with calls for HR research that bridges the micro-level experiences of practitioners with macro-level organisational outcomes (Nyfoudi et al., 2024; Vu et al., 2022).

The research table below serves to clearly align the study's aims and systematically link the research themes to the specific research gaps identified in the literature, ensuring coherence and relevance. By presenting this mapping early in the dissertation, the table establishes the "golden thread" that connects the problem statement, theoretical framing, and methodological design, thereby reinforcing the study's internal consistency and scholarly contribution.

Table 2: Summary of identified research gaps.

Theme	Research Gap (RG)
Theme 1: The emotional toll of layoffs	Limited empirical exploration of the psychological and emotional consequences of role tension among human resources practitioners during layoffs. Existing research focuses primarily on affected employees rather than those administering layoffs (Cayrat et al., 2023).
Theme 2: Organisational climate and context	Insufficient understanding of how organisational climate, leadership style, and contextual dynamics (such as union influence and compliance pressures) shape the decision-making and experiences of HR practitioners during retrenchments (Nyfoudi, Kwon, & Wilkinson, 2024).
Theme 3: Human Resource Effectiveness and Role Tension	Lack of empirical evidence on how role tension influences the efficacy, ethical reasoning, and communication practices of HR practitioners during downsizing, particularly within developing economies (Liang & Cao, 2021).
Theme 4: Support systems and organisational enablers	A gap exists in identifying which formal and informal organisational support mechanisms strengthen HR practitioners' resilience and coping capacity during layoffs (Vu et al., 2022).
Theme 5: Lessons Learned and Future Outlook	Sparse theoretical and practical models that examine how post-layoffs, HR practitioners rebuild trust, reinforce ethical leadership, and reframe their strategic role. Previous research has overlooked the post-layoff recovery and learning process (Johnstone, 2024).

1.2 Business Rationale for Studying Role Tension

1.2.1 Organisational performance and ethical risk

From a business standpoint, the ability of HR practitioners to function effectively under pressure directly impacts organisational stability. During layoffs, HR serves as both an executioner and a healer, responsible for compliance, communication, and morale recovery. When practitioners experience unresolved role tension, perceptions of decision quality and fairness can deteriorate, increasing the risk of legal disputes, reputational damage, and workforce disengagement (Nyfoudi, Kwon, & Wilkinson, 2024).

Recent research demonstrates that persistent role tension significantly undermines ethical decision-making, weakens employee trust in HR functions, and contributes to increased turnover intentions among HR professionals. While earlier conceptual work (e.g., Jones, 1991; Eisenberger et al., 2002) first identified these dynamics, contemporary scholarship provides stronger empirical evidence linking role tension to moral disengagement, burnout, and diminished organisational commitment (Cayrat et al., 2023; Nyfoudi, Kwon, & Wilkinson, 2024; Liang et al., 2021). The growing body of evidence underscores that the ethical and relational consequences of role tension are not merely theoretical but are now well-documented phenomena within modern Human resource management systems (HRMS).

1.2.2 Human sustainability and emotional labour

Human Resources (HR) professionals engage in emotional labour by managing both their own and others' emotions to uphold organisational composure (Hochschild, 1983). During layoffs, this emotional labour intensifies, requiring HR practitioners to suppress personal empathy while enforcing impersonal policies. Prolonged exposure to such emotional tension can erode resilience, leading to emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Vu et al., 2022).

Recent studies have further explored the impact of emotional labour on HR professionals. For instance, research by Kooktapeh et al., (2023) highlights the significance of emotional exhaustion and burnout among healthcare workers, emphasizing the need for interventions to address these issues. Similarly, Trinkenreich et al., (2023) propose a model for understanding and reducing developer burnout, which underscores the importance of organisational culture and work satisfaction in mitigating burnout. These studies contribute to the evolving understanding of emotional labour and its effects on HR practitioners.

Organisations increasingly recognise that HR well-being is a component of corporate sustainability. Human resource (HR) practitioners are the custodians of others' welfare, yet they frequently lack adequate psychological and institutional support during crises (Johnstone, 2024).

1.2.3 Strategic Relevance

Understanding role tension within HR has implications for leadership, governance, and organisational design. Effective management of the emotional and ethical strain of HR practitioners can enhance:

- Quality of decision-making during restructuring
- Resilience within human resources teams
- Retention of experienced human resources professionals
- Perceptions of trust and fairness among surviving employees

1.3 Theoretical Foundations

1.3.1 Defining the role of tension.

Role tension is conceptualised as a psychological and organisational phenomenon that arises when professionals confront incompatible expectations, conflicting obligations, or misaligned values in their roles (Katz et al., 1978). In practical terms, individuals may experience being “torn” between competing role demands, such as loyalty to organisational objectives versus commitment to employee welfare, which creates internal strain, stress, guilt, or performance deterioration (Rizzo et al., 1970). Contemporary studies reaffirm these dynamics in evolving work environments. For example, recent empirical work demonstrates that role stressors, such as ambiguity, conflict and overload, are significantly associated with diminished job satisfaction, impaired cognitive functioning, and increased burnout risks (Asfahani et al., 2022; Luzipho et al., 2023).

In their examination of academic faculty members, Asfahani et al., (2022) found that role conflict contributed to emotional exhaustion and heightened turnover intention, outcomes that align closely with conceptualisations of role tension. Meanwhile, Luzipho et al., (2024) showed that intragroup conflict exacerbated role stressors and negatively impacted work attitudes, underscoring how organisational dynamics can intensify the experience of incompatible role demands. In HR practice, role tension is particularly pronounced due to the dual nature of the HR function: practitioners must function as both employee advocates and management agents. These dual

responsibilities collide during layoffs. HR practitioners must deliver termination decisions on behalf of senior leadership while empathizing with affected employees, a juxtaposition that produces acute emotional dissonance (Cayrat et al., 2023).

1.3.2 Theoretical Rationale

The role theory (Katz et al., 1978) provides a foundational lens for understanding this tension. It posits that every organisational role carries prescribed expectations; when those expectations conflict, the individual experiences tension, ambiguity, or overload. Subsequent scholarship has refined and extended this framework, highlighting that role conflict and ambiguity not only affect performance but also trigger moral and emotional dissonance in professions with high relational demands (Örtqvist et al., 2006; Schaufeli et al., 2014; Eatough et al., 2016). More recent perspectives emphasise that role tension is multidimensional, arising from conflicting values (ethical conflict), unclear authority (structural ambiguity), and excessive expectations (emotional or task overload), each exerting unique effects on well-being and resilience (Tang et al., 2021; Bragger et al., 2021).

Complementing this framework, the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll et al., 1989) offers a motivational and stress-based perspective on how individuals respond to resource loss in demanding work contexts. COR theory asserts that individuals are driven to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources, such as emotional energy, professional identity, and self-efficacy, and that resource depletion leads to psychological distress and burnout. Contemporary refinements of COR (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Halbesleben et al., 2014) recognise the resource loss spiral, where sustained exposure to stressors like role conflict accelerates further depletion, undermining recovery, and resilience. Empirical studies confirm that when employees face conflicting demands and limited recovery opportunities, their emotional resources erode, leading to moral distress, withdrawal behaviours, and burnout (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2022; Giorgi et al., 2020). Integrating Role Theory and COR thus provides a robust dual-lens framework for this research: while Role Theory explains how structural and interpersonal expectations generate tension, COR elucidates why these tensions result in emotional exhaustion and diminished psychological resilience, particularly in ethically charged contexts such

as organisational layoffs (Chen et al., 2022; Halbesleben et al., 2014; Tang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023; Örtqvist et al., 2006; Giorgi et al., 2020).

1.3.3. Theoretical Contribution of the Study

This alignment reflects a broader shift in contemporary HR scholarship, which increasingly emphasises the integration of empathy, ethics, and human-centred values into strategic decision-making. As organisations navigate volatility, uncertainty, and moral complexity, scholars such as Nyfoudi et al., (2024) advocate for HR leadership that transcends administrative efficiency to embody compassion and integrity. By situating the study within this paradigm, it contributes to the evolving discourse on values-driven HR practice, underscoring the importance of ethical reflexivity and emotional intelligence in sustaining organisational legitimacy and practitioner well-being during periods of disruption (Cova et al., 2025).

1.3.4 Differentiating between Role Tension and Role Strain

Role tension and role strain are related but distinct constructs that operate at different temporal and analytic levels, and clarifying their difference strengthens both theoretical precision and empirical measurement in organisational research. Role tension refers to the immediate psychological experience of being pulled in different directions when confronted with incompatible expectations, obligations, or values within a single role episode. It is an affective–cognitive state experienced in response to a specific event or decision context, for example, an HR practitioner’s acute feeling of being “torn” when asked to communicate redundancies while wishing to protect employees’ dignity (Rizzo et al., 1970; Katz et al., 1978). Recent empirical work treats role tension as episodic and event-sensitive: role conflict or ambiguity during a particular layoff meeting can trigger intense moral discomfort, immediate stress responses, and momentary reductions in decision quality (Tang et al., 2021). From this perspective, tension is proximate, variable across situations, and amenable to short-term interventions (clearer instructions, supervisory support) that restore alignment between expectations and behaviour.

Role strain, by contrast, denotes the longer-term consequence of persistent or cumulative role tensions and role overloads. Rooted in Goode’s (1960) and later role-

accumulation accounts, strain is conceptualised as an enduring state of resource depletion and functional impairment, manifesting as chronic emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and impaired performance (Örtqvist et al., 2006). Conservation of Resources (COR) theory clarifies the mechanism through which repeated episodes of role tension convert into role strain: recurring demands consume psychological and coping resources, creating loss spirals that undermine recovery and resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2022). Empirical syntheses show that when role conflict or ambiguity is sustained over time, employees face higher burnout risk, poorer well-being, and lasting declines in organisational commitment, outcomes characteristic of role strain rather than transient tension (Giorgi et al., 2020).

Methodologically and practically, the distinction matters. Role tension invites event-based designs (e.g., critical incident interviews, experience sampling) that capture instability and context-dependence in real time; role strain requires longitudinal or cumulative measures (e.g., repeated surveys, wellbeing trajectories) to document resource depletion and chronic outcomes (Guest et al., 2020; Fusch et al., 2015). For HR research on layoffs, then, role tension would be detected by analysing immediate accounts of specific layoff decisions, communications, or meetings (the “here-and-now” moral dilemmas), whereas role strain would be evidenced by patterns such as sustained emotional exhaustion across multiple layoff cycles, higher turnover among HR staff, or persistent declines in decision efficacy across time (Tang et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2022).

Conceptually, it is also useful to view tension as a precursor and potential indicator of future strain: repeated unresolved tensions create the conditions under which COR-predicted resource loss and burnout unfold (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Interventions therefore differ by target: alleviating role tension may require clarifying role boundaries, increasing participation in decision-making, and short-term supervisory support (procedural fairness, empathy), while preventing or remediating role strain requires systemic resource replenishment—ongoing support systems, workload redesign, and recovery opportunities to disrupt loss spirals (Giorgi et al., 2020; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Farndale et al., (2020) argue that explicitly distinguishing between immediate role conflicts (such as ethical or emotional tension) and chronic role strain enhances theoretical clarity and improves the accuracy of interventions in HR and organisational contexts.

Table 2 presents a comparative summary that clarifies the conceptual and empirical distinction between role tension and role strain, both of which are central constructs within the theoretical framework guiding this study. While the two terms are often used interchangeably in organisational and psychological research, their differentiation enhances theoretical precision and interpretive validity, particularly when analysing the experiences of Human Resource (HR) practitioners navigating complex, ethically charged situations such as layoffs.

Table 3: A comparative summary

Dimension	Role Tension	Role Strain
Nature	Immediate emotional conflict between expectations that are incompatible	Enduring Stress from Chronic or Cumulative Role Conflict
Duration	Short-term or episodic	Long-term or persistent
Focus	Emotional and ethical discomfort	Structural and resource-based incapacity
Outcome	Feelings of being “torn” or conflicted	Fatigue, disengagement, and burnout
Level of analysis	Psychological and Situational	Organisational and Systemic
Example in the HR context	Discomfort when employees are laid off	Emotional exhaustion after repeated layoffs without support

1.4 Research problem

Although the HR function is central to organisational change, empirical evidence on how HR practitioners experience and navigate role tension during layoffs is limited (Cayrat et al., 2023). More of the existing literature on layoffs focuses on outcomes for employees, organisational performance, or survivor effects rather than the internal experiences of HR implementers (Vu et al., 2022).

This lack of focus limits both the theoretical understanding of HR role strain and practical insights into supporting HR professionals during crises. Consequently, organisations risk underestimating the psychological toll and ethical dissonance that

HR practitioners face, factors that may impair their judgement, decision-making efficacy, and resilience.

1.5 Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses on HR practitioners in South Africa, encompassing diverse sectors (manufacturing, finance, transport, retail, agriculture, mining, professional services, and engineering). This study explores layoffs conducted within the past five years. The study does not directly examine employee or managerial perceptions but concentrates on HR practitioners' subjective experiences.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in addressing critical gaps in the understanding of human resources (HR) practitioners' experiences during organisational layoffs. While existing literature examines the psychological and emotional impact of retrenchments on affected employees, there is limited empirical exploration of the consequences of role tension on HR practitioners themselves (Cayrat et al., 2023). This study seeks to illuminate how HR professionals navigate the complex interplay between enforcing organisational policies and managing personal and employee emotions, a tension that remains underexplored.

Furthermore, current research offers insufficient insight into the influence of organisational climate, leadership style, and contextual dynamics, such as union presence and regulatory compliance pressures, on the decision-making and lived experiences of HR practitioners during layoffs (Nyfoudi et al., 2024). Understanding these dynamics is particularly important in developing economies, where organisational structures and labour market pressures may amplify ethical dilemmas, role stress, and communication challenges.

Additionally, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the role of formal and informal organisational support mechanisms in enhancing HR practitioners' resilience and coping capacity during downsizing events (Vu et al., 2022). This study aims to identify the structures, strategies, and practices that can buffer HR professionals against the adverse effects of role tension. Finally, by exploring the post-layoff period, the study contributes to the sparse theoretical and practical

models addressing how HR practitioners rebuild trust, reinforce ethical leadership, and reposition themselves strategically within organisations, a critical yet overlooked aspect of post-retrenchment recovery (Johnstone, 2024).

1.7 Chapter Summary and Conclusions

This introductory chapter established the foundation for examining the role tension of HR practitioners during organisational layoffs. It contextualised the study within the dual demands of modern HR work, introduced the concept of role tension as both an academic and practical construct.

The golden thread linking all subsequent chapters emerges from the core premise that HR practitioners' internal experiences of tension during layoffs shape their decision-making efficacy, ethical resilience, and professional identity.

Chapter 2 builds upon this foundation by reviewing theoretical and empirical literature on role theory, ethical decision-making, and organisational support, forming the conceptual framework that underpins the analysis presented in later chapters.

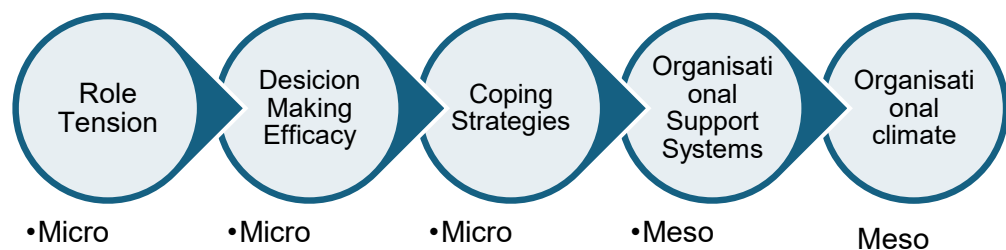
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the theoretical underpinnings and evolving scholarly perspectives on the psychological and emotional experiences of Human Resources (HR) practitioners during organisational layoffs. Anchored in foundational Role Theory and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, the discussion traverses the complexities of role tension and role strain, elucidating their implications for HR professionals. This chapter connects the academic debates around role tension, decision-making efficacy, coping strategies, organisational support systems, and organisational climate. These theoretical themes provide a coherent multi-level lens.

The following figure illustrates the progression from micro-level themes to meso-level factors, culminating in a macro-level perspective.

Figure 1: Roadmap for Chapter 2



The purpose of this chapter is threefold: (1) to contextualise role theory and conservation of resources as the conceptual anchor for the study, (2) to review recent scholarship addressing HR practitioners' challenges in layoff management, and (3) to identify the research gaps that shaped the study's five research questions.

2.2 Theoretical foundation: Role Theory and Its Contemporary Extensions

2.2.1 Classical Role Theory

Role theory, originating in sociology and organisational psychology, offers a foundational framework for understanding how individuals navigate multiple, often conflicting, expectations within organisational contexts. Early formulations by Kahn

et al., (1964) and Biddle (1986) posited that each organisational role is defined by a set of norms, responsibilities, and behavioural expectations. When these expectations are unclear, contradictory, or in tension with one another, individuals may experience role ambiguity or role conflict, leading to role tension, a psychological state characterised by stress and strain arising from competing role demands (Rizzo et al., 1970).

Subsequent scholarship has expanded and nuanced classical role theory. Katz et al., (1978) emphasised the systemic interdependencies of roles, highlighting that role conflict is not merely an individual experience but emerges from the relational dynamics of organisational structures. Contrastingly, Biddle (1986) and Marks et al., (1996) critiqued early formulations for underestimating the fluidity and negotiated nature of role enactment, suggesting that individuals actively interpret and reconcile conflicting expectations rather than being passive recipients of role pressures. This scholarly evolution underscores ongoing debate regarding whether role tension is primarily structural, relational, or cognitive in origin.

In the realm of Human Resource (HR) management, classical role theory provides a lens through which the inherent contradictions within HR roles can be examined. HR professionals often find themselves balancing the dual imperatives of employee advocacy and organisational enforcement. For instance, during processes such as layoffs, HR practitioners must simultaneously function as custodians of humane treatment and as executors of strategic cost-cutting measures (Cayrat et al., 2023). This duality exemplifies the "HR paradox" (Ulrich, 1997), where the HR role straddles strategic and ethical imperatives, and tension is inherent rather than incidental.

Recent empirical studies have further illuminated the complexities of role tension within HR functions. A study by Fan et al., (2025) explored the dual-path impact of role stress on employees' work engagement in China, highlighting both cognitive and affective mechanisms. Similarly, Mwakyusa et al., (2024) investigated the effects of role ambiguity and conflict on emotional exhaustion among healthcare service employees in Tanzania, revealing that role ambiguity significantly contributes to emotional exhaustion, while the effect of role conflict was less pronounced.

Moreover, the interplay between role tension and organisational context has been a subject of scholarly contestation. Bennett et al., (2023) employed paradox theory to develop a fuller understanding of specific tensions surrounding the HR Partner (HRP)

role, suggesting that the manifestation of these tensions is influenced by organisational culture and managerial support. Vuorenmaa et al., (2023) examined the interplay between line manager beliefs, HR information, and context, providing insights into how these factors shape HR attributions and, consequently, HR practices.

The application of classical role theory to HR functions reveals not only the structural and psychological dimensions of role tension but also the contested nature of its antecedents and moderating factors. The literature demonstrates an evolution from early, structural explanations toward more dynamic, relational, and contextually nuanced understandings, reflecting ongoing scholarly debate over the locus and management of role tension in contemporary organisations.

2.2.2 Role Theory Extensions

Role theory, originating from sociology and psychology, has undergone significant evolution, particularly in its application to Human Resource (HR) management. Classical role theory, as established by Kahn et al., (1964), posits that individuals occupy multiple roles within organisations, each accompanied by specific expectations and norms. When these expectations conflict or are ambiguous, individuals experience role tension, a psychological strain arising from competing role demands (Rizzo et al., 1970). While classical formulations focused primarily on structural sources of conflict, recent scholarship has expanded role theory to include dynamic, context-sensitive interpretations of role strain (Biddle, 2013; Ashforth et al., 2017). These extensions recognise that roles are not static but evolve in response to organisational restructuring, technological advancement, and crises such as mass layoffs (Nyfoudi et al., 2024; Liang et al., 2021).

Advancements in Role Theory

Several contemporary theoretical extensions offer nuanced frameworks for understanding the complexities of role dynamics. Role Boundary Theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) focuses on how individuals manage overlapping professional and emotional boundaries, highlighting the strategies people employ to segment or integrate roles to reduce strain. Role Identity Theory (Burke et al., 2022) examines how individuals negotiate their self-concept amid conflicting role demands, emphasizing that identity preservation often shapes role enactment and coping

mechanisms. Role Strain Perspective (Goode, 2020) explains how role accumulation can generate psychological stress even when role expectations are not overtly contradictory, underscoring the cumulative burden of multiple responsibilities. These extensions collectively illustrate a shift from viewing role tension as solely a function of structural or interpersonal conflict toward a more holistic, psychologically, and contextually informed perspective.

Integrating paradox theory into role theory further enriches this discourse. Bennett et al., (2023) demonstrates how HR professionals navigate the dual imperatives of strategic alignment and employee advocacy, particularly in the HR Business Partner (HRBP) role. This perspective positions role conflict as an inherent and persistent feature of organisational life, rather than a transient or exceptional phenomenon. Similarly, Ågotnes et al., (2023) highlight the moderating effect of leadership practices, showing that supportive leadership can mitigate the adverse consequences of role conflict and ambiguity.

Empirical Applications in HR Management

Recent empirical studies have reinforced the relevance of these theoretical extensions in practical HR contexts. Mwakyusa et al., (2024) report that role ambiguity and conflict significantly contribute to emotional exhaustion among healthcare employees, while Fan et al., (2025) identify both cognitive and affective pathways linking role stress to work engagement in Chinese organisations. Blomberg et al., (2024) further show that role ambiguity can precipitate workplace bullying, underscoring the importance of clear role definitions.

Contextual factors emerge as crucial moderators in these dynamics. Studies by Allen et al., (2003) and Eisenberger et al., (2002) find that perceived organisational support can alleviate the negative impacts of role-related stressors, while Anglin et al., (2022) suggest that organisational culture and structural flexibility influence how employees perceive and respond to conflicting expectations. Moreover, Nyfoudi et al., (2024) and Liang et al., (2021) illustrate how rapid technological change and organisational restructuring reshape role demands, necessitating adaptive and context-sensitive coping strategies.

Conclusion

Contemporary extensions of role theory offer a more comprehensive and contextually nuanced framework for analysing role dynamics in HR management. By

integrating insights from Role Boundary Theory, Role Identity Theory, Role Strain Perspective, and paradox theory, scholars highlight the fluid, evolving nature of roles, the psychological and relational mechanisms underlying role tension, and the moderating influence of leadership and organisational context. This evolution underscores the importance of dynamic, context-sensitive approaches to managing role conflict and enhancing employee well-being in complex organisational environments.

2.2.3 Role Tension vs. Role Strain

Although often used interchangeably in organisational literature, role tension and role strain represent distinct but interrelated constructs within role theory, each providing unique insights into the psychological and operational challenges faced by employees. Role tension is conceptualised as the psychological dissonance and stress that arises from conflicting role expectations, particularly when an individual must reconcile incompatible duties or priorities (Katz et al., 1978; Biddle, 2013). It is inherently relational and situational, reflecting the strain generated when external expectations from different stakeholders or organisational systems are incompatible (Ashforth et al., 2017).

In contrast, role strain captures the cumulative burden or difficulty associated with fulfilling multiple roles simultaneously, even in the absence of explicit conflict (Goode, 2020; Burke et al., 2022). This perspective emphasises the cognitive, emotional, and temporal load imposed by role accumulation, highlighting that psychological stress may emerge not solely from conflicting expectations but from the sheer complexity and volume of responsibilities an individual manages. Contemporary research further extends this view, demonstrating that role strain is sensitive to contextual variables such as organisational restructuring, workload intensification, technological changes, and crisis conditions like mass layoffs (Liang et al., 2021; Nyfoudi et al., 2024).

The distinction between role tension and role strain is particularly salient in the HR function. During layoffs, HR practitioners frequently encounter role tension as they navigate the dual imperatives of organisational directives (e.g., reducing headcount to meet strategic or financial targets) and professional ethics (e.g., safeguarding employee dignity and fairness) (Cayrat et al., 2023). At the same time, the accumulation of tasks, emotional labour, and extended working hours contributes to

role strain, manifesting as fatigue, diminished resilience, and heightened vulnerability to burnout (Fan et al., 2025; Mwakyusa et al., 2024).

Scholars have debated the boundaries and interplay between these constructs. For instance, Ashforth et al., (2017) argue that role tension is situationally triggered and often acute, whereas role strain develops gradually through role accumulation and sustained exposure to high workloads. Goode (2020) adds that role strain can exist even in the absence of explicit conflict, underscoring the importance of considering both constructs independently and in combination to capture the full spectrum of role-related pressures. Empirical studies support this distinction: Bennett et al., (2023) demonstrates that HR Business Partners simultaneously navigate acute tension arising from conflicting stakeholder demands while experiencing ongoing strain from workload accumulation and emotional demands. Ågotnes et al., (2023) further highlight how leadership and organisational support can moderate both tension and strain, with perceived support reducing the intensity of role-related stressors.

Integrating these insights provides a more holistic understanding of the psychological dynamics underpinning HR roles, especially in crisis-driven contexts. Role tension explains the immediate, situational stress of conflicting expectations, while role strain elucidates the broader, cumulative impact of workload and emotional burden. Together, they illuminate the complex inner experience of HR practitioners, offering a theoretically grounded explanation for observed challenges in ethical decision-making, resilience, and employee advocacy during organisational restructuring.

2.3 Theory Derived Key Themes

2.3.1 Theme One: Role Tension

Role tension constitutes a central construct in the conceptual model of this study, reflecting the inherent contradictions faced by HR practitioners as they navigate their dual identities as strategic enforcers and employee advocates (Cayrat et al., 2023). This duality situates HR professionals in a persistent state of psychological and ethical negotiation, where organisational imperatives, such as implementing layoffs or enforcing performance standards, may directly conflict with professional and moral responsibilities to protect employee dignity and wellbeing (Ulrich, 1997; Bennett et al., 2023).

At the micro level, role tension manifests as emotional dissonance, moral stress, and cognitive overload (Johnstone, 2024; Ashforth et al., 2017). Emotional dissonance occurs when HR practitioners suppress or regulate authentic emotions to conform to procedural or organisational expectations, often resulting in psychological strain and diminished affective well-being (Hochschild, 2012). Moral stress arises when individuals perceive that their actions, even if procedurally correct, may compromise ethical standards or personal values, creating internal conflict and a sense of moral jeopardy (Gustavsson et al., 2023). Cognitive overload further compounds these pressures, as HR professionals are required to process complex information, reconcile competing stakeholder interests, and make rapid decisions under uncertainty (Fan et al., 2025).

Recent empirical evidence underscores the consequences of heightened role tension. Johnstone (2024) highlights that prolonged exposure to ethical and procedural conflicts erodes empathy and impairs decision-making clarity, reducing HR practitioners' capacity to function as effective intermediaries between organisational and human considerations. Gustavsson et al., (2023) similarly demonstrate that repeated ethical dilemmas contribute to ethical fatigue, a condition wherein individuals experience diminished moral sensitivity and decision-making capacity. These findings suggest that role tension is not merely a transient stressor but a pervasive, dynamic feature of HR work in high-stakes contexts.

The concept of emotional labour further elucidates the intensification of role tension. Hochschild (2012) describes emotional labour as the management or suppression of authentic feelings to meet organisational norms, a process highly salient in HR work during crisis situations. Suppressing empathy to maintain procedural neutrality, particularly during layoffs or disciplinary actions, can paradoxically amplify internal strain while undermining relational effectiveness. Contemporary extensions of role theory, such as Role Boundary Theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) and Role Identity Theory (Burke et al., 2022), support this view by showing how boundary management and identity negotiation are critical for mitigating psychological strain while navigating conflicting organisational and personal demands.

Scholars debate the relative weight of structural versus psychological determinants of role tension. While some argue that organisational design, role clarity, and managerial support primarily shape tension levels (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Anglin et al., 2022), others emphasize that the internalisation of ethical and relational

obligations drives the lived experience of tension, even in well-structured roles (Biddle, 2013; Nyfoudi et al., 2024). This debate highlights the necessity of viewing role tension as both an externally influenced and internally constructed phenomenon, dynamically moderated by organisational culture, support systems, and individual coping strategies (Ågotnes et al., 2023).

In summary, role tension captures the complex, multifaceted pressures experienced by HR practitioners as they reconcile organisational strategy with ethical responsibility. It encompasses emotional, moral, and cognitive dimensions, is intensified by emotional labour, and is influenced by both structural and individual-level factors. Understanding this construct is crucial for explicating the psychological and ethical challenges inherent in high-stakes HR work, providing a foundation for exploring mitigating strategies and organisational interventions.

2.3.2 Theme Two: Decision-Making Efficacy

Decision-making efficacy refers to the capacity of HR practitioners to make fair, timely, and ethically grounded decisions, particularly in high-stakes contexts such as layoffs. This construct encompasses both cognitive competence and moral reasoning, reflecting the ability to balance organisational imperatives with ethical responsibilities toward employees (Nyfoudi et al., 2024; Burke et al., 2022). Decision-making efficacy is not only influenced by individual skills and ethical orientation but is also shaped by contextual factors, including organisational culture, hierarchical pressures, and procedural constraints (Simon, 1997).

Research indicates that perceived autonomy, cognitive framing, and situational pressure are critical determinants of HR decision-making under tension (Nyfoudi et al., 2024). In highly constrained organisational environments, where rigid policy frameworks or top-down directives dominate, HR practitioners' sense of agency diminishes, giving rise to bounded rationality, the recognition that decision-makers operate under limited information, time pressures, and competing objectives (Simon, 1997). Consequently, even highly competent practitioners may experience limitations in exercising fully rational and ethically nuanced judgment.

The interplay between role tension and decision-making efficacy has been highlighted in recent empirical studies. Bhardwaj et al., (2024) demonstrate that HR practitioners who perceive themselves as constrained by organisational directives or

leadership mandates report diminished decision-making efficacy, coupled with instances of moral disengagement. This finding aligns with broader evidence suggesting that ethical fatigue and cognitive overload, key dimensions of role tension, undermine both the quality and ethical integrity of HR decisions (Johnstone, 2024; Gustavsson et al., 2023). In other words, the psychological and emotional burdens of reconciling organisational and humanistic imperatives directly impair the capacity for sound decision-making.

Moreover, decision-making efficacy is sensitive to the interaction of structural and relational factors. Supportive leadership, clear communication of policy rationale, and participative decision-making processes enhance HR practitioners' perceived control and mitigate the negative impact of role tension on judgment (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Ågotnes et al., 2023). Conversely, environments characterised by excessive hierarchical control, ambiguous procedures, or conflicting stakeholder demands exacerbate the effects of tension and strain, leading to errors, delayed decisions, and potential ethical lapses (Fan et al., 2025).

Contemporary scholarship further emphasises the cognitive and affective mechanisms underpinning decision-making efficacy. Cognitive framing influences how HR practitioners interpret organisational priorities and ethical obligations, while affective responses, such as stress, anxiety, and empathy fatigue, modulate moral reasoning and the willingness to advocate for employee interests (Hochschild, 2012; Burke et al., 2022). This dynamic interplay illustrates that decision-making efficacy is both a skill-based and contextually contingent construct, shaped by individual capacities, organisational structures, and psychological states arising from role tension and strain.

In summary, decision-making efficacy reflects the delicate balancing act required of HR practitioners during ethically and operationally complex processes such as layoffs. It is influenced by role tension, bounded rationality, organisational constraints, and leadership practices, and is essential for ensuring ethical, fair, and timely HR decisions. Understanding these determinants provides critical insights for designing interventions, support systems, and policies that enhance HR decision-making in crisis-driven contexts.

2.3.3 Theme Three: Coping Strategies

Coping strategies encompass the behavioural and psychological mechanisms employed by HR practitioners to mitigate stress, preserve functionality, and maintain ethical and professional performance during high-stakes organisational processes. These strategies are critical in contexts such as layoffs, where the demands of reconciling organisational imperatives with employee advocacy create persistent role tension and strain (Cayrat et al., 2023; Ashforth et al., 2017).

Scholars differentiate coping mechanisms into problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. Problem-focused coping involves active attempts to address or resolve stressors, such as seeking clarity, negotiating expectations, and strategic planning (Liang et al., 2021). Emotion-focused coping, in contrast, aims to regulate the emotional response to stressors, including techniques such as cognitive reframing, emotional detachment, and seeking peer support (Liang et al., 2021; Vu et al., 2022). Both approaches are dynamically employed by HR practitioners depending on the nature of the stressor, individual resilience, and the organisational context.

At the meso level, team culture and peer networks exert a considerable influence on coping effectiveness. Informal emotional debriefings, peer mentoring, and shared problem-solving provide vital psychological support, enabling HR professionals to process difficult experiences collectively and maintain professionalism (Vu et al., 2022; Ågotnes et al., 2023). Compartmentalisation, another common strategy, allows HR practitioners to segregate emotional responses from procedural responsibilities, thereby reducing immediate cognitive and emotional overload (Hochschild, 2012).

However, the literature highlights critical limitations and risks associated with coping strategies. Sustained exposure to moral distress, compounded by repeated ethical dilemmas and high workloads, can overwhelm both problem-focused and emotion-focused mechanisms, leading to compassion fatigue, burnout, and depersonalisation (Maslach et al., 2016; Fan et al., 2025). These outcomes illustrate that coping is not merely a protective mechanism but a dynamic process subject to thresholds of capacity, organisational support, and role-related stressors.

Contemporary studies also emphasise the interplay between individual and organisational factors in shaping coping efficacy. Supportive leadership, transparent communication, and structured organisational resources enhance the effectiveness

of coping strategies by reducing ambiguity and role conflict (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Anglin et al., 2022). Conversely, unsupportive, or punitive environments may render coping strategies less effective, heightening the risk of ethical fatigue and decision-making impairment (Bhardwaj et al., 2024).

In summary, coping strategies are essential for HR practitioners to navigate the emotional, cognitive, and ethical demands of high-pressure organisational roles. Both problem-focused and emotion-focused mechanisms are deployed, influenced by team culture, peer networks, and organisational structures. While these strategies provide resilience against role tension and strain, prolonged exposure to morally and emotionally demanding situations can overwhelm individual capacity, necessitating organisational interventions to support sustainable coping and ethical decision-making.

2.3.4 Theme Four: Organisational Support System

Organisational support systems represent the formal and informal structures within an organisation that buffer HR practitioners from role-related stress, enhance resilience, and facilitate ethical and effective practice. These systems encompass mechanisms such as employee assistance programmes, ethical guidelines, HR mentoring, structured management communication, and participatory decision-making frameworks (Vu et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2021). By providing both procedural clarity and emotional scaffolding, organisational support functions as a critical moderator of the psychological strain and ethical challenges inherent in HR work, particularly in high-stakes contexts such as layoffs and restructuring.

Empirical evidence underscores the importance of structured organisational support in mitigating role tension and strain. HR departments that demonstrate procedural fairness, transparent communication, and visible top-management empathy foster practitioner resilience, enabling staff to navigate competing role demands with greater emotional and cognitive stability (Vu et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2021). In contrast, weak or inconsistent support systems exacerbate role ambiguity, moral distress, and ethical dissonance, often amplifying feelings of alienation and reducing the efficacy of HR interventions (Liang et al., 2021; Nyfoudi et al., 2024).

A core mechanism through which organisational support enhances practitioner outcomes is perceived organisational support (POS). According to Eisenberger et

al., (2020), POS reflects employees' beliefs that the organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being. Elevated levels of POS have been empirically linked to increased emotional endurance, role confidence, and resilience, functioning as a mediating factor that reduces the adverse effects of role tension and prevents burnout. By reinforcing HR practitioners' sense of agency and alignment with organisational values, support systems mitigate the cognitive, emotional, and ethical challenges associated with dual role obligations (Bennett et al, 2023; Fan et al., 2025).

Recent literature also highlights the interactive and contextual nature of organisational support. Peer networks, mentoring relationships, and collaborative team cultures amplify formal support structures, providing avenues for informal emotional debriefing, shared problem-solving, and validation of ethical decision-making (Ågotnes et al., 2023; Vu et al., 2022). Moreover, organisational support is particularly critical in contexts of rapid change, crisis management, and mass layoffs, where heightened role tension and strain threaten both practitioner well-being and organisational outcomes (Nyfoudi et al., 2024; Gustavsson et al., 2023).

Scholars debate whether organisational support is primarily protective against role strain or also actively reduces role tension. Some argue that structural supports primarily ameliorate the cumulative burden of responsibilities, thereby reducing strain (Maslach et al., 2016), while others emphasize that ethical frameworks, empathetic leadership, and participatory decision-making can directly reduce the occurrence and intensity of role tension by clarifying expectations and reconciling conflicting demands (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Anglin et al., 2022). This dual function highlights the strategic importance of organisational support not only as a buffer but also as an enabler of effective HR practice.

In summary, organisational support systems are essential for enhancing HR practitioner resilience, mitigating both role tension and role strain, and fostering ethical and effective decision-making. By combining formal structures, ethical guidance, mentoring, and visible leadership empathy, organisations create environments that sustain practitioner well-being, role confidence, and decision-making efficacy, particularly during periods of high organisational volatility.

2.3.5 Theme Five: Organisational Climate

Organisational climate represents the macro-level environment that shapes how HR practitioners experience, interpret, and implement high-stakes processes such as layoffs. It encompasses dimensions such as leadership tone, communication transparency, ethical norms, and the broader culture of trust within the organisation (Johnstone, 2024; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2023). Unlike organisational support systems, which focus on formal structures and mechanisms, organisational climate captures the pervasive perceptions, shared beliefs, and informal signals that influence practitioner behaviour, ethical judgement, and psychological resilience.

Empirical research demonstrates that organisational climate significantly impacts HR practitioners' experiences of role tension, moral stress, and coping efficacy. Positive organisational climates, characterised by transparent communication, ethical consistency, participatory decision-making, and empathetic leadership, are associated with reduced moral disengagement, higher ethical consistency, and enhanced decision-making efficacy (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2023; Eisenberger et al., 2020). Such climates foster psychological safety, allowing HR professionals to reconcile conflicting role demands without compromising personal or organisational values, thereby mitigating the intensity of role tension, and promoting adaptive coping strategies (Ågotnes et al., 2023; Fan et al., 2025).

Conversely, toxic organisational climates, characterised by fear, opacity, hierarchical rigidity, and punitive norms, exacerbate HR practitioners' psychological and ethical challenges. Nyfoudi et al., (2024) note that in such climates, HR staff experience heightened stress, role ambiguity, and decision paralysis, resulting from unclear expectations, low trust, and perceived misalignment between organisational directives and ethical responsibilities. These environments not only intensify role tension but also undermine the efficacy of both formal and informal coping strategies, increasing vulnerability to burnout, moral fatigue, and disengagement (Maslach et al., 2016; Gustavsson et al., 2023).

Scholars highlight that organisational climate functions both as a contextual driver and a moderator of HR practitioners' experiences. As a driver, climate shapes the salience of organisational values, ethical norms, and leadership expectations, influencing how role demands are perceived and enacted. As a moderator, it interacts with other themes, such as organisational support, coping strategies, and decision-

making efficacy, to either amplify or attenuate the psychological and ethical impacts of role tension and strain (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Anglin et al., 2022). For instance, even robust support systems may be less effective in climates dominated by fear and mistrust, while a positive climate can enhance the utility of informal peer networks and mentoring.

In summary, organisational climate constitutes a critical macro-level determinant of HR practitioners' experiences during ethically and operationally complex events. By shaping perceptions, moderating the impact of role tension, and influencing the effectiveness of coping strategies, climate exerts both direct and indirect effects on practitioner well-being, ethical decision-making, and organisational outcomes. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing interventions that cultivate positive climates, reduce moral disengagement, and strengthen the capacity of HR professionals to navigate high-stakes organisational challenges.

2.4 Summary of Conceptual Linkage

HR practitioners operate within nested systems encompassing both micro-level (individual) and meso-level (relational and organisational) dynamics, each exerting distinct and interacting pressures, particularly during high-stakes processes such as layoffs. At the micro level, practitioners navigate internal conflicts, ethical dilemmas, and cognitive demands, whereas the meso level involves relational support, organisational policies, and the broader contextual tone that shapes decision-making and coping capacity (Ashforth et al., 2017; Nyfoudi et al., 2024). Despite growing scholarly attention to HR roles in crisis contexts, empirical understanding of how these levels interact dynamically, particularly in Global South contexts, remains limited (Liang et al., 2021; Vu et al., 2022).

This literature review identifies five interrelated theory themes that collectively structure the conceptual framework of this study:

1. **Role Tension** – Role tension captures the internal dissonance experienced when HR practitioners reconcile dual identities as strategic enforcers and employee advocates. It encompasses emotional, moral, and cognitive dimensions of strain,

and is exacerbated by organisational ambiguity and ethical dilemmas (Cayrat et al., 2023; Johnstone, 2024; Hochschild, 2012).

2. **Decision-Making Efficacy** – Decision-making efficacy reflects the cognitive, moral, and ethical capacity of HR practitioners to enact fair, timely, and defensible judgments under pressure. It is sensitive to role tension, perceived autonomy, bounded rationality, and situational constraints, and determines the quality and ethical integrity of HR interventions (Nyfoudi et al., 2024; Bhardwaj et al., 2024; Simon, 1997).
3. **Coping Strategies** – Coping strategies represent behavioural and psychological mechanisms employed to manage stress, maintain professionalism, and preserve well-being. These include problem-focused strategies (e.g., seeking clarity, negotiation) and emotion-focused strategies (e.g., cognitive reframing, peer support, compartmentalisation). Their efficacy is shaped by individual resilience, team culture, and sustained exposure to moral distress (Liang et al., 2021; Vu et al., 2022; Maslach et al., 2016).
4. **Organisational Support Systems** – Organisational support functions as a protective buffer against stressors by providing structured resources such as mentoring, ethical guidance, communication channels, and employee assistance programmes. High perceived organisational support enhances emotional endurance, role confidence, and ethical alignment, mitigating the negative impacts of role tension and strain (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021; Bennett et al., 2023).
5. **Organisational Climate** – Organisational climate constitutes the macro-level environment, including leadership tone, communication transparency, ethical norms, and culture of trust. Climate influences HR practitioners' perceptions, moral engagement, coping efficacy, and decision-making, acting both as a contextual driver and a moderator of micro-level experiences (Johnstone, 2024; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2023; Nyfoudi et al., 2024).

Together, these themes provide a holistic, multi-level understanding of HR practitioner experiences in crisis contexts. Micro-level factors capture internal cognitive, emotional, and moral dynamics, while meso-level factors shape the relational and environmental context in which these dynamics unfold. The integration of these dimensions directly informed the five research questions explored in

Chapter 5 and guided the thematic analysis, ensuring a theoretically grounded, empirically relevant framework. This conceptual linkage underscores the necessity of considering both individual and organisational determinants to fully comprehend HR practitioner behaviour, resilience, and ethical decision-making in high-pressure organisational settings.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has critically examined the theoretical and empirical literature underpinning the experiences of HR practitioners during high-stakes organisational processes, particularly layoffs. Anchored in classical and contemporary role theory, the review demonstrates that HR practitioners occupy complex, often conflicting roles that generate both role tension and role strain. Role tension emerges from the psychological and ethical conflicts inherent in balancing organisational imperatives with employee advocacy, while role strain captures the cumulative burden of fulfilling multiple, overlapping responsibilities even in the absence of direct conflict. Contemporary extensions of role theory, including Role Boundary Theory, Role Identity Theory, and the Role Strain Perspective, provide a nuanced lens for understanding the dynamic, context-sensitive nature of these pressures.

The chapter further explored decision-making efficacy, highlighting how cognitive, ethical, and contextual factors converge to shape the quality of HR judgments under pressure. Empirical evidence indicates that bounded rationality, ethical fatigue, and perceived constraints from hierarchical structures diminish decision-making effectiveness, while supportive organisational systems and positive climates can enhance agency, moral engagement, and judgment clarity.

Coping strategies were reviewed as critical mechanisms enabling HR practitioners to navigate these pressures. Both problem-focused (e.g., negotiation, information-seeking) and emotion-focused strategies (e.g., cognitive reframing, peer support, compartmentalisation) were shown to mitigate stress and preserve functionality. However, prolonged exposure to moral and emotional challenges may overwhelm coping capacity, leading to burnout, compassion fatigue, and depersonalisation.

At the meso level, organisational support systems and organisational climate were identified as pivotal moderators of HR experiences. Structured supports, including mentoring, ethical guidance, and employee assistance programmes, bolster

resilience, role confidence, and ethical alignment, while a positive climate, characterised by transparent communication, empathetic leadership, and a culture of trust, reduces moral disengagement and amplifies the effectiveness of coping and decision-making strategies. Conversely, weak supports and toxic climates exacerbate role tension, ethical conflict, and stress, underscoring the interplay between individual and organisational determinants.

The chapter concluded by synthesising these insights into a conceptual linkage framework. Five interconnected theoretical themes—Role Tension, Role Strain, Decision-Making Efficacy, Coping Strategies, Organisational Support Systems, and Organisational Climate, capture the multi-level factors shaping HR practitioners' experiences. The framework illustrates how micro-level pressures interact with meso-level structures to influence psychological well-being, ethical decision-making, and resilience, providing a theoretically grounded foundation for the research questions explored in subsequent chapters.

Overall, this literature review advances a mature, evidence-based understanding of the complex, multi-level dynamics faced by HR practitioners during ethically and operationally challenging organisational processes. By integrating classical and contemporary role theory with empirical findings on coping, support, and climate, the chapter establishes a robust conceptual and theoretical basis for examining HR practitioner behaviour, resilience, and ethical judgment in high-pressure environments, particularly within under-researched contexts such as the Global South.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Primary Research Question (PRQ)

The primary research question guiding this study is:

What impact does role tension have on the efficacy of HR practitioners during layoffs?

This overarching question seeks to provide a comprehensive, multi-dimensional understanding of HR practitioners' experiences, integrating psychological, ethical, and organisational perspectives. Central to this inquiry is the dual identity of HR professionals: as strategic enforcers of organisational imperatives and as custodians of employee well-being. The study interrogates how these roles generate tension, and how HR practitioners navigate this tension within differing organisational climates and support structures.

The PRQ practically provides evidence-based insights into the interaction of individual coping mechanisms, organisational support systems, and micro-level climate in shaping HR behaviour, ethical decision-making, and resilience.

3.2 Subordinate Research Questions (RQs)

To unpack the PRQ analytically, five subordinate research questions were developed. These questions reflect the multi-level framework (micro–meso) outlined in Chapter 2 and correspond to the themes derived from the literature:

Table 4: Research questions per theoretical level

Research Question (RQ)	Focus Area	Theoretical Level
RQ1: How do HR practitioners perceive and experience role tension during layoffs?	Explores lived emotional and ethical dissonance as HR executes conflicting roles.	Micro
RQ2: What factors influence the decision-making efficacy of HR practitioners during layoffs?	Examines contextual and cognitive factors affecting fairness and judgment quality	Micro
RQ3: What strategies do HR practitioners employ to manage role tension?	Identifies behavioural and psychological coping mechanisms used to maintain functionality.	Micro
RQ4: How do organisational support systems impact the resilience of HR practitioners facing layoffs?	Investigates formal and informal supports that moderate stress and ethical distress.	Meso
RQ5: How does organisational climate shape HR practitioners' experiences during layoffs?	Macro-level cultural and leadership influences that condition HR responses.	Meso

Each question is designed to generate qualitative, narrative-based data that captures both the subjective meaning-making of practitioners and the organisational realities that shape their actions.

3.3 Mapping Research Questions to Research Gaps

The research questions were derived systematically from the gaps identified in the literature review (Chapter 2), ensuring that the study is empirically and theoretically grounded. The following mapping demonstrates how each RQ addresses a specific void in current knowledge:

Table 5: Research question and research gap mapping

Theme / Focus Area	Research Gap (RG)	Corresponding RQ
Role Tension	Limited empirical research on the psychological and ethical dimensions of HR role tension during layoffs (Cayrat et al., 2023).	RQ1
Decision-Making Efficacy	Insufficient understanding of contextual variations (e.g., hierarchy, legal constraints, leadership style) affecting HR decision-making during layoffs (Nyfoudi et al., 2024).	RQ2
Coping Strategies	Lack of exploration of specific coping and self-regulation mechanisms to manage moral and emotional tension (Liang et al., 2021).	RQ3
Organisational Support Systems (OSSs)	Limited empirical testing of formal and informal support mechanisms enhancing HR resilience (Vu et al., 2022).	RQ4
Organisational Climate	Limited research on macro-level organisational culture and climate shaping HR experiences and ethical decision-making (Johnstone, 2024).	RQ5

This mapping illustrates the direct theoretical-empirical alignment, ensuring that each research question contributes to both filling scholarly gaps and producing actionable insights. It also situates the study within ongoing debates on the interplay between individual agency and organisational context, a key tension in contemporary HR research.

3.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter established the methodological foundation of the study, linking the primary research question to five subordinate questions grounded in the literature. The mapping of RQs to empirical gaps demonstrated the study's originality and theoretical contribution, highlighting how micro-level experiences (role tension, decision-making efficacy, and coping strategies) interact with meso level structures (organisational support systems and climate) to shape HR outcomes.

By adopting a phenomenological qualitative design, the study ensures methodological rigor while capturing complex, multi-level, and context-sensitive dynamics. The next chapter (Chapter 4) elaborates on data collection, research procedures, coding methodology, and ethical considerations, operationalising the research questions to produce empirically robust insights.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

4.1 Purpose of the research design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative design to investigate a conceptually underdeveloped phenomenon, i.e., the role tension experienced by HR practitioners during organisational layoffs. Exploratory designs were deemed appropriate for research seeking to develop understanding in areas with limited theoretical grounding (Saunders et al., 2018).

As established in Chapter 1, the study emphasised the significance of understanding the unique challenges HR practitioners faced during layoffs. This study revealed gaps in the literature regarding the stressors and conflicting role demands contributing to role tension. Chapter 2 extends Role Theory by incorporating recent scholarship on role conflict, ambiguity, and strain (e.g., Johnson et al., 2023; Cayrat et al., 2023). However, empirical applications of these frameworks to HR practitioners within layoff contexts remain scarce.

Chapter 3 translated these gaps into focused research questions, exploring how HR practitioners perceived and experienced role tension, how it influenced their decision-making efficacy, and how coping strategies and organisational supports shaped their resilience. This theoretical nascency justified an exploratory design aimed at generating grounded insights and advancing practical understanding.

4.2 Research Philosophy

This research was grounded in an interpretivist philosophy. This approach focused on understanding the meanings attached by HR practitioners to their roles and experiences during layoffs. Interpretivism was appropriate because it recognised that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective interpretations of participants (Nickerson, 2022).

This philosophy enabled the study to explore the following:

- Contextual depth by situating experiences within organisational environments.
- By capturing individual perceptions of role tension and efficacy; and
- Flexibility, by allowing iterative and adaptive interviewing (Hirose, 2023).

Interpretivism was aligned with the study's exploratory purpose and was complemented by a phenomenological strategy, which focused on capturing the lived experiences of HR practitioners.

4.3 The Research Approach

An inductive qualitative approach was employed. Rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses, the study generated patterns and theoretical insights from the participants' narratives. This approach enabled the emergence of new conceptual linkages related to role tension, coping strategies, and OSSs (Crotty, 2020; Bryman, 2016).

The inductive process unfolded through the following:

1. Collecting rich descriptive data through semi-structured interviews.
2. Coding and categorising data to identify recurring patterns; and
3. Developing conceptual relationships between micro (individual), meso (organisational), and macro (contextual) influences.

This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of the experiences of HR practitioners within their organisational contexts.

4.4 The Methodological Choice

A qualitative method was selected using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. This design provided depth and flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe the complex emotional and moral dimensions of HR practice during layoffs.

Qualitative inquiry was particularly suited to:

- Uncovering unarticulated experiences of moral tension.
- Exploring interactions among individual, organisational, and contextual factors; and
- Allowing iterative reflection and interpretation

A single method was employed given time and resource constraints. However, maximum variation sampling ensured diversity in participants' industries, roles, and organisational sizes, strengthening triangulation and enriching data quality (Proudfoot, 2021).

4.5 Research Strategy

A phenomenological research strategy was adopted. This approach allowed the researcher to delve deeply into the subjective perceptions and emotions of HR practitioners as they navigate the complexities of their roles during layoffs (Lim, 2025).

Phenomenology helped uncover the emotional, behavioural, and contextual dimensions of HR work under pressure, which quantitative approaches might not capture (Mhatre, 2023). This strategy was consistent with the study's interpretivist philosophy and its goal of understanding meaning through participants' perspectives (Saunders et al., 2018).

4.6 Time Horizon

The study followed a cross-sectional design, collecting data at a single time point. Although a longitudinal design might have allowed for the observation of changes in role tension over time, a cross-sectional approach was more feasible and appropriate given the scope of the research. This method provided a snapshot of the contemporary experiences of HR practitioners during recent layoffs (Saunders et al., 2018).

4.7 Population, sample and sampling criteria

The study population consisted of Human Resource (HR) practitioners working across multiple industries in South Africa. South Africa's diverse workforce and complex labour market present distinct challenges and opportunities for HR practitioners, especially during layoffs. This setting allowed for insights that might not be as apparent in more extensively studied regions, making the findings highly relevant for both local and global contexts (Chilunjika, 2021).

4.8 Unit of Analysis

The organisation served as the unit of analysis, while the individual HR practitioner functioned as the unit of observation (Creswell et al., 2007). The study's analysis was conducted primarily at the meso-level, connecting individual experiences to organisational systems and climates (Lim, 2025).

This dual focus allowed the research to reveal both personal and systemic dimensions of role tension and its impact on HR efficacy during layoffs.

4.9 Sampling method and size

As noted by Braun and Clarke (2006), qualitative research typically involves smaller sample sizes compared to quantitative approaches due to the time-intensive nature of data analysis. Scholars have offered guidance on appropriate sample sizes for qualitative studies. Saunders et al., (2018) recommend a sample size ranging from 12 to 30 participants when using non-probability sampling from a diverse population. This range is aimed at achieving data saturation, where no new insights emerge from additional data collection. Similarly, Creswell et al., (2007) suggest that for phenomenological research, interviewing between 5 and 25 individuals is sufficient to explore lived experiences in depth.

Based on these recommendations, a sample size of sixteen participants was selected as a credible midpoint within the range suggested by Creswell et al., (2007). This number was sufficient to achieve both data and thematic saturation, which, according to Guest et al., (2006), is a key criterion for determining sample size. Given the study's emphasis on context, the chosen sample size was deemed appropriate, aligning with the guidance provided by Levitt et al., (2018).

Purposive sampling was employed, with snowball sampling as a backup strategy. Sixteen participants were selected from eight organisations, with no more than two participants from each. Fifteen of the sixteen targeted participants were successfully recruited and interviewed, providing a rich and sufficiently varied data set for analysis. Upon the exclusion of the two participants, the fifteenth participant was strategically undertaken. This was due to their extensive involvement in multiple organisational layoff processes, which positioned them to offer nuanced, experience-

based insights that significantly enhanced the analytical depth and contextual richness of the study. Purposive and maximum variation sampling ensured that participants had direct experience with role tension, capturing diversity in organisational context, sector, and leadership culture, recognising that role tension is moderated by organisational and contextual factors (Nyfoudi et al., 2024). Participants held HR-related roles, had at least five years of experience, and had been involved in layoff processes within the previous two years. Participants included HR Executives, People Business Partners (PBP), Employee Relations (ER) Specialists, and Generalists from multiple industries. This sampling strategy supported diversity of perspective and inter-organisational triangulation, enhancing the transferability of findings (Syrigou et al., 2023).

4.10 Target Sampling

The table below outlines the original target sample for this study, which aimed to recruit sixteen participants from eight distinct organisations to enable inter-organisational comparisons. Additionally, the organisations were selected across various industries to facilitate inter-industry analysis. By sourcing two participants from each organisation, the study design allowed for intra-organisational triangulation, enhancing the depth and reliability of the findings.

Table 6: Target Sample

Industry	Organisation	Respondent
Manufacturing	A	A1
Manufacturing	A	A2
Agriculture	B	B1
Agriculture	B	B2
Transport	C	C1
Transport	C	C2
Retail	D	D1
Retail	D	D2
Finance	E	E1
Finance	E	E2
Mining	F	F1
Mining	F	F2
Professional Services	G	G1
Professional Services	G	G2
Engineering	H	H1
Engineering	H	H2
Total		16

Actual Sample

The originally intended sample totalled sixteen participants at managerial level, comprising two respondents from each of eight organisations. The target sample was intentionally diverse, spanning multiple industries and organisations to enrich the breadth of perspectives. The actual sample differed in that four organisations provided two respondents apiece, while only a single respondent was obtained from each of the balance (see Table 7). The effect of this was to enhance inter-organisational triangulation with an increase from eight to ten organisations. However, intra-organisation triangulation was reduced from eight to four organisations. This was a trade-off caused by the pragmatic need of the researcher to obtain a sufficient sample size to ensure data saturation with consideration for the practicalities of data access. The inclusion of participants from a range of organisations enhanced the study's heterogeneity. This diversity enabled robust inter-organisational and inter-industry comparisons, as detailed in Chapter 5.

Although sixteen participants were initially recruited for the study, only fifteen interviews were included finally. Two interviews were excluded for ethical and methodological reasons. The first excluded participant had recently been offered a mutual separation agreement by her employer, which created a risk of bias and emotional distress. The researcher determined that her ongoing dispute with the organisation could unduly influence her responses, potentially compromising the neutrality and credibility of the data (Tracy, 2020). The second participant became visibly emotional during the interview and acknowledged that the discussion made her realise she had not yet processed the psychological impact of a previous layoff experience. Because the researcher was not a trained mental-health professional, it was deemed necessary to discontinue the interview in order to prevent further distress and uphold the ethical principle of non-maleficence (Orb et al., 2001). This decision aligned with the Belmont Report's ethical principle of beneficence, which emphasises protecting participants from harm and prioritising their well-being over data acquisition. From a methodological standpoint, excluding participants whose emotional states or conflict of interest could skew findings enhances data trustworthiness and reduces response bias (Lincoln et al., 1985). However, scholars contend that including such emotionally charged narratives can deepen contextual understanding by illuminating the raw, lived realities of sensitive topics (Dickson-Swift

et al., 2008). Despite this, the researcher prioritised ethical responsibility over data completeness, recognising that emotional safety and integrity of process are fundamental to credible qualitative inquiry.

Respondents were categorised using an alpha-numeric classification system. Each organisation was assigned an alphabetical code, while individual participants within each organisation were identified numerically. Additionally, organisation size was indicated to distinguish between small, medium, and large enterprises, providing contextual depth to the analysis. The study also documented the format of each interview, which took one of three forms: “in-person,” referring to face-to-face interactions; “virtual,” conducted via video conferencing platforms such as Google Meet or Microsoft Teams; and “written submission,” where respondents preferred to reflect on the interview questions independently and submit written responses based on their layoff experiences.

Table 7: Actual Sample Details

Respondent	Industry	Organisation size	Interview format
A1	Manufacturing	Large	Written Submission
A2	Manufacturing	Large	Virtual
B1	Agriculture	Medium	In-person
B2	Agriculture	Medium	In-person
C1	Transport	Large	In-person
C2	Transport	Medium	In-person
D1	Retail	Large	In-person
D2	Retail	Large	Virtual
E1	Finance	Large	In-person
F1	Finance	Medium	Virtual
G1	Mining	Large	In-person
H1	Mining	Large	In-person
I1	Professional Services	Large	In-person
J1	Professional Services	Large	In-person
K1	Engineering	SME	In-person
Total			15

4.11 Measurement Instrument

For this qualitative study, the researcher employed a semi-structured interview approach guided by a predetermined interview schedule. The purpose of the interviews was to explore specific themes aligned with the study's research questions, with the aim of generating rich, narrative data that could inform theory

development and provide insight into participants' worldviews (Saunders et al., 2018; Magnusson et al., 2015). The interview guide included both introductory and construct-related questions designed to elicit detailed responses across the relevant domains of inquiry.

Prior to each interview, participants were provided with a consent form as part of the interview documentation pack. In accordance with ethical research practices, informed consent was obtained before commencing the interviews, and participants were made aware of the use of audio recording equipment for transcription purposes (Saunders et al., 2018).

The development of the interview guide was undertaken by the researcher in consultation with their academic supervisor, ensuring alignment with both the primary and subordinate research questions, as well as the research gaps underpinning each SRQ. Questions were framed as open-ended to encourage expansive responses and facilitate the exploration of participants' perspectives (Creswell et al., 2007; Brinkmann, 2022). In line with Sanders' (1982) recommendation to prioritise depth over breadth, the researcher opted to ask fewer questions while probing responses more intensively.

Where appropriate, closed-ended questions were occasionally posed to establish whether participants held a view on a particular issue; however, these were followed by prompts for elaboration to maintain the open-ended nature of the inquiry. The interview questions were event-focused, designed to activate episodic memory and support participants in recalling specific experiences, particularly in relation to the impact of leadership behaviours (Jackman., 2022). To support this, the interview guide included notes to the interviewer on the use of memory cues as per Appendix 3. This approach is consistent with the critical incident technique employed by Tourish (2020), which prioritises vivid accounts of momentous events and emphasises the meaning attributed by participants over the objective accuracy of the details (Panyasai et al., 2025; Rosen, 2010).

Table 8: Interview schedule mapped to the corresponding research gaps and research questions.

Research Gaps	Research Questions (RQs)	Interview Questions (IQs)
Limited empirical studies on moral and role tension in HR during layoffs.	RQ1: How did HR practitioners perceive and experience role tension during layoffs?	IQ1.1 Describe an experience of role tension during layoffs. IQ1.2 How did this experience influence your role performance?
Limited understanding of factors influencing decision-making efficacy.	RQ2: What factors influenced HR practitioners' decision-making efficacy during layoffs?	IQ2.1 Describe a decision-making challenge during a layoff. IQ2.2 What factors affected that decision's effectiveness?
Insufficient insight into coping mechanisms under role strain.	RQ3: What strategies did HR practitioners employ to manage role tension?	IQ3.1 What coping strategies did you find effective? IQ3.2 How did you maintain resilience under pressure?
Lack of research on organisational support systems in HR contexts.	RQ4: How did organisational support systems impact HR practitioners' resilience during layoffs?	IQ4.1 How did your organisation support you during layoffs? IQ4.2 What support would have been most helpful?
Limited integration of organisational climate effects on HR efficacy.	RQ5: How did organisational climate shape HR practitioners' experiences during layoffs?	IQ5.1 How did the organisational climate influence your role? IQ5.2 How did it affect your ability to manage layoffs effectively?

4.12 Data gathering process.

Following the successful approval of ethical clearance, the data collection process commenced with the recruitment of participants who met the study's sampling criteria, specifically, managerial-level individuals who had experienced layoffs. In alignment with phenomenological methodology, the data collection process was designed to be flexible, yet grounded in the use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Creswell et al., 2007; Sanders, 1982; Hossain, 2024). The interview guide was structured around key themes derived from the research questions, while allowing the interviewer discretion to omit or add questions, particularly probing ones, based on the flow and relevance of the conversation (Saunders et al., 2018).

With participants' informed consent, all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed (Sanders, 1982). The interviewer also took field notes during each session to capture contextual and non-verbal cues. Interviews were conducted either in-person, virtually or written submission, depending on the preference of each participant. In-person interviews offered the advantage of capturing visual and non-verbal signals, which were less discernible in virtual formats and absent in voice-only interactions. The use of multiple interview modes allowed the researcher to leverage the strengths of each format and accommodate participant needs.

Consistent with Given's (2016) guidance, preliminary data analysis began during the data collection phase through the researcher's reflective practice, initial sense-making, and the documentation of field notes. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned alphanumeric identifiers in the presentation of findings in Chapter 5.

4.13 Data analysis approach

The primary phase of data analysis commenced following the completion of data collection, consistent with qualitative research practice (Given, 2016). The study employed thematic analysis (TA) as the principal method for interpreting the interview data, with the aim of identifying patterns and themes related to the lived experiences of HR practitioners navigating role strain during layoff processes. Atlas supported the analysis.ti, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), provided by the researcher's academic institution (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

A multi-stage analytical process was adopted to facilitate theory development. This involved the identification of meaningful units of data, typically sentences or short passages, and the assignment of inductively generated codes to these units. The coding process was guided by the study's research questions and aligned with the phenomenological orientation of the research, which seeks to uncover units of meaning and distil the essence of participants' experiences (Creswell et al., 2007; Sanders, 1982).

Thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with the general principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), though not strictly adhering to their six-phase model. The initial phase involved familiarisation with the data, achieved through repeated reading of transcripts and reflective notetaking. In the second phase, initial codes were generated using the Beta version of Atlas.ti's artificial intelligence (AI) coding functionality. This inductive coding approach—described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as “bottom-up”—allowed for the emergence of themes directly from the data, rather than being imposed by pre-existing theoretical frameworks.

The AI-assisted coding process presented certain limitations. As noted by Kalpokas (n.d.a), AI-driven coding based on large language models tends to produce an excessive number of codes, necessitating active researcher involvement in code consolidation. This involved merging overlapping codes and removing redundant ones, ensuring alignment with the study's conceptual focus on role strain and decision-making efficacy.

The analysis adhered to the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing, and refining themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report. Within these phases, the following structured coding sequence was applied to optimise coherence and ensure theoretical alignment:

A. Generation of First-Order Codes

Transcripts were reviewed line by line to identify first-order (raw) codes that captured descriptive elements of participants' experiences, emotions, perceptions, and reflections. This inductive stage was intentionally open, enabling the emergence of unexpected concepts such as moral fatigue and procedural alienation.

B. Creation of Second-Order Codes (Consolidated Codes)

In the second phase, redundant or overlapping codes were consolidated to form second-order codes that retained the essence of participants' meanings while reducing analytical noise. This refinement process ensured a parsimonious yet comprehensive codebook, enhancing interpretive clarity and internal validity.

C. Clustering into Code Families (Sub-Themes)

Similar second-order codes were then clustered into code families, each representing a distinct conceptual pattern or process within the data. Typically, four to five closely related codes were merged to form one sub-theme, consistent with phenomenological best practice for achieving manageable analytical granularity (Nowell et al., 2017). Sub-themes reflected intermediate conceptual categories such as ethical dissonance, emotional containment, or peer-based coping mechanisms.

D. Development of Overarching Themes

In the final phase, conceptually related sub-themes were clustered together to create overarching themes that encapsulated higher-order meaning. These themes were then reviewed against both the dataset and the conceptual framework established in Chapter 2 to ensure theoretical alignment and empirical integrity. Each theme was defined and named to reflect its conceptual boundaries and analytical significance.

Throughout this iterative process, AI-assisted tools were used to identify co-occurring lexical patterns and verify inter-code consistency, while human oversight ensured that contextual nuance and interpretive depth were not lost. Discrepancies between AI-generated and researcher-generated codes were reconciled through reflexive dialogue, ensuring that thematic validity and epistemological coherence were maintained. This structured coding process not only enhanced the transparency and replicability of the analysis but also ensured that the themes that emerged—such as role tension, decision-making efficacy, coping strategies, organisational support, and organisational climate, were empirically grounded, theoretically integrated, and contextually rich. These phases were iterative and recursive, as recommended by Braun et al., (2006), allowing the researcher to move fluidly between stages in pursuit of coherent and evidence-based thematic narratives. The final phase involved the production of the analytical report, presented in Chapter 5, which integrates thematic findings with illustrative quotations from participants to support interpretation and enhance credibility (Morgan, 2022).

The use of thematic analysis was particularly appropriate given its foundational status in qualitative research and its accessibility to novice researchers (Morgan, 2022). Subjectivity in theme identification was mitigated through the inclusion of direct quotations and transparent coding procedures. The relevance of TA to this study is further supported by its application in related research exploring psychological constructs such as hubris in organisational contexts (Tourish, 2020).

4.13.1 Familiarisation with the collected interview data

Interview recordings were transcribed using dedicated transcription software and subsequently prepared for analysis in accordance with established qualitative transcription conventions (Eftekhari, 2024; McMullin et al., 2024). This included the clear demarcation between interviewer and interviewee contributions to ensure readability and analytical clarity. Anonymisation procedures were rigorously applied to remove or obscure any references to identifiable individuals or organisations mentioned during the interviews, thereby upholding ethical standards and participant confidentiality.

In addition to live interviews, one participant opted to complete the interview guide independently, reflecting on the questions in their own time and submitting written responses. The written submission was treated as equivalent data source and was incorporated into the analysis alongside the transcribed interviews. The inclusion of the self-completed guide enriched the dataset by allowing participant to engage with the questions reflectively, potentially yielding deeper insights into their experiences of role strain during layoffs.

Each interview and written submission were saved as a separate file, with relevant metadata, such as interview date, mode, and participant identifier, embedded within the document. Interviewer questions were formatted in italics to distinguish them from participant responses, and typographical corrections were made to ensure consistency in spelling and grammar, following UK English conventions (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). These preparatory steps were essential for ensuring data integrity and usability during the subsequent thematic analysis phase.

4.13.2 Coding process

The present study employed a hybrid coding approach that combined manual researcher-led coding with AI-assisted analysis to maximise both interpretive depth and analytical efficiency. This approach was designed to leverage the strengths of both methods while minimising their respective limitations. Hybrid coding methods are increasingly advocated in qualitative research as they balance human reflexivity and contextual sensitivity with the systematic rigour and scalability of computational tools (Bazeley, 2021; Castleberry et al., 2018).

In the first stage, the researcher engaged in manual coding, reading the interview transcripts line by line to identify first-order codes that captured participants' words, meanings, and contextual expressions. This stage ensured that the analysis was grounded in the raw data and reflected the lived realities of participants, in alignment with Braun et al., (2006, 2021) framework for thematic analysis (TA). Manual coding also supported researcher reflexivity, allowing for interpretation of subtle cues such as tone, emotion, and emphasis.

The second stage involved AI-assisted coding using the Atlas.ti AI coding functionality. Rather than replacing the researcher's interpretive role, AI was deployed as a complementary tool to cluster related codes, eliminate redundancies, and highlight potential themes that may have been overlooked. Recent developments in qualitative data analysis software demonstrate how AI functionality can enhance coding processes by increasing transparency, generating consistency, and reducing the potential for human error (Azzam et al., 2023). The dual application of manual and AI coding thus allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of the dataset, ensuring both empirical grounding and systematic abstraction.

The hybrid model offered several clear advantages. Manual coding provided rich interpretive insights, ensuring that analysis remained sensitive to cultural and contextual nuances, a strength consistently emphasised in qualitative literature (Saldaña, 2021). At the same time, AI-assisted coding delivered efficiency and rigour by processing large volumes of text quickly, producing frequency counts, and ensuring categorisation consistency. This combination helped mitigate the potential shortcomings of each approach when used in isolation. Specifically, while manual coding alone risks subjectivity and time inefficiency, and AI coding risks

oversimplification, their integration created a methodologically balanced framework that advanced analytical credibility.

Despite these strengths, both manual and AI coding methods present limitations that were considered in this study. Manual coding is labour-intensive and may be influenced by researcher bias, particularly when interpretive judgement is required to assign meaning to complex data segments. AI-assisted coding, by contrast, may lack the sensitivity to capture subtleties such as irony, cultural references, or emotional depth. Furthermore, AI-generated categories can sometimes be overly generic, requiring researcher refinement. These limitations align with critiques in the literature which caution against relying exclusively on either human or machine-led coding (Lockwood et al., 2025). By adopting a hybrid model, this study sought to address these challenges through methodological triangulation.

The coding process was executed in a structured manner across two stages. First, the entire transcript dataset was coded holistically to capture broad recurring ideas and patterns. This provided a foundational view of the dataset and allowed for the generation of preliminary codes and categories. Second, the transcripts were segmented and coded according to the research questions and their associated interview questions, enabling targeted coding that linked emerging themes directly to the study's objectives. This two-stage analysis allowed for both breadth (capturing patterns across the dataset) and depth (aligning findings to specific research questions), enhancing both the comprehensiveness and the relevance of the coding outputs.

Thematic analysis (TA) was selected for its flexibility and its ability to move from descriptive codes to interpretive themes while remaining anchored in participants' voices. Applying TA to a hybrid coding model presented several advantages: it enabled the consolidation of hundreds of first-order codes into second-order codes, sub-themes, and overarching themes; it facilitated data reduction while maintaining richness; and it supported systematic abstraction that linked empirical findings to broader conceptual frameworks. Moreover, TA's transparency and flexibility provided

a clear audit trail, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

During the AI-assisted stage, Atlas.ti's AI coding functionality produced outputs aligned with multiple coding approaches. Process coding captured actions or sequences described by participants (e.g., "spoke a lot," "seeking support"), helping to illustrate workflow patterns. Descriptive coding provided labels summarising the central topic of data segments (e.g., "lack of support," "fatigue"), offering straightforward categorisation. In vivo coding employed participants' own words (e.g., "I felt like betraying staff"), preserving their voice and ensuring findings remained grounded in authentic expression (Saldaña, 2021). By integrating these approaches, the AI component enhanced both the depth and diversity of the coding outputs while supporting the researcher's interpretive judgement.

4.13.3 Thematic generation

Akin to correlation analysis in quantitative research, a code co-occurrence analysis was conducted in Atlas.ti at both the primary and subordinate research question levels. This assisted in identifying the strength of relationships between codes and generated preliminary insights into potential clusters of meaning (Frieze, 2012) and allowed for cross-cutting codes to emerge. In addition, a code-document analysis was performed to determine which codes were most frequently observed across the dataset, providing a basis for their inclusion in higher-order categories and the elimination of less frequently occurring codes. This analytical step mirrors the function of descriptive statistical analysis in quantitative research by offering an empirical anchor to the interpretive process (Frieze, 2019).

In keeping with best practices for thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2006, 2021), the themes were not derived directly from the interview questions. Nor were the theory-derived themes in Chapter 2 artificially grafted onto the Chapter 5 generated code structure.

Instead, the coding process adhered to a hierarchical classification approach, which allowed for the progressive abstraction of raw codes into meaningful using inductive analysis. Thematic analysis inherently requires moving beyond descriptive labelling

of data to develop broader conceptual patterns that are both grounded in the data and linked to the research objectives (Nowell et al., 2017).

Three-Level Classification Process

The first approach followed a three-level hierarchical classification process, which is widely employed in qualitative research for its clarity and parsimony (Saldaña, 2021). At Level 3, raw codes were generated through descriptive, process, and in vivo coding of the interview data. These codes were then clustered into sub-themes at Level 2, which reflected broader categories that captured recurring issues across participants. Finally, themes at Level 1 were developed from the sub-themes, representing the highest level of abstraction and encapsulating the overarching insights of the analysis.

This model is particularly well-suited for moderately sized datasets or when the research focus is narrow, as it strikes a balance between data reduction and conceptual richness.

Figure 2: Three-level hierarchical classification process

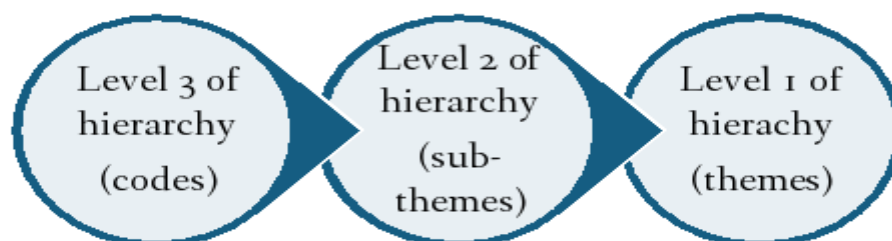


Figure 3: Five-Level Classification Process

In addition to the three-level model, a five-level hierarchical classification process was applied to the dataset aided by Chat GPT. This extended model allowed for greater granularity and interpretive depth, particularly when analysing large and complex data. At Level 5, raw codes were generated from the transcripts. These

were then grouped into categories at Level 4, which clustered related codes into manageable groups. At Level 3, sub-themes were identified as specific dimensions of the categories, followed by the aggregation of sub-themes into broader themes at Level 2. Finally, at Level 1, meta-themes were created, which provided a holistic and integrative understanding of the data by linking multiple themes into superordinate concepts.

The five-level model is especially valuable for datasets where a high degree of conceptual abstraction is required to align findings with theoretical frameworks. For example, while a three-level model may identify “employee development barriers” as a theme, the five-level model extends this into a meta-theme such as “systemic organisational challenges,” which integrates multiple themes under a broader conceptual umbrella.

Figure 3 illustrates the five-level hierarchical classification process.



Justification for using both models.

The decision to employ both three-level and five-level hierarchical classification models was deliberate. The three-level model provided a clear and parsimonious representation of the data, making it accessible for practical reporting and easy alignment with research objectives. It also ensured that the progression from codes to themes was transparent and grounded in the participants’ voices.

The five-level model, on the other hand, enabled greater conceptual sophistication. It offered nuanced layers of interpretation, which were particularly useful for identifying complex relationships between data segments and for aligning findings with broader theoretical perspectives, such as organisational behaviour and change management frameworks. This dual approach ensured that the analysis remained methodologically rigorous, combining clarity with depth, and allowed for both practical and academic contributions to be drawn from the findings.

4.13.4 Thematic review and definition

In this study, the process of thematic review involved systematically linking quotations to their respective themes and sub-themes through the coding framework developed during analysis. Quotations were selected for inclusion under a theme and its associated sub-theme based on their assigned codes, with all information drawn from the codebook that mapped the hierarchical relationships between codes, sub-themes, and themes. Selection criteria prioritised quotations with higher code density, that is, the number of codes associated with a given extract, since these were considered more representative of key ideas across the dataset. To ensure clarity and readability, quotations chosen for presentation in Chapter 5 were between two and four sentences in length, consistent with best practice in qualitative reporting (Gibbs, 2007). Recognising that thematic identification and interpretation may carry elements of subjectivity, the researcher sought to mitigate this limitation by supporting all thematic claims with direct quotations from participants. This approach ensured transparency, enhanced the credibility of the findings, and aligned with calls for evidence-based reporting in qualitative research (Morgan, 2022).

4.13.5 Report writing

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the thematic analysis conducted on fifteen semi-structured interviews with HR practitioners navigating layoff processes. Report writing in this context involved synthesising first- and second-order codes into coherent subthemes and themes, ensuring transparency and clarity in representation. Thematic coding facilitated the organisation of complex, qualitative data into digestible categories such as the emotional toll of layoffs, organisational climate, HR effectiveness, support systems, and future-oriented lessons (Braun et al., 2019). Each quotation was selected based on code density and relevance to the associated theme, allowing for a nuanced illustration of participants' lived experiences (Nowell et al., 2017). The report aimed to balance descriptive clarity with analytical depth, capturing both the prevalence of codes and the emotive context of HR practitioners' narratives.

4.14 Quality controls

Rigorous quality control measures were embedded throughout the data analysis to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. Triangulation was achieved through dual coding by the researcher and AI-assisted coding software, cross-checking frequencies, and patterns across the dataset (Fusch et al., 2018). Triangulation was also achieved by the use of intra- and inter-organisational triangulation. Member checking with respondents ensured that interpretations of themes such as “dual role strain” and “decision-making dilemmas” were consistent and reflective of the data. Audit trails were maintained to document all coding decisions, including the rationale for including or excluding quotations, thereby supporting confirmability and reproducibility (Lincoln et al., 1985). These measures helped to reduce subjective bias while preserving the authenticity of participants’ accounts.

4.15 Ethical considerations

Ethical safeguards were paramount due to the sensitive nature of discussing layoffs, job insecurity, and emotional distress. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, with identifiers replaced by pseudonyms in all transcripts and tables (Orb et al., 2001). The study adhered to ethical principles concerning voluntary participation, avoidance of harm, and the right to withdraw at any stage. The thematic analysis deliberately foregrounded participants’ psychological experiences, ensuring respectful representation of emotionally charged narratives, such as stress, survivor guilt, and moral discomfort (e.g., “Couldn’t sleep,” “Felt like betraying staff”), which underscores the ethical responsibility in reporting sensitive data (APA, 2020).

4.16 Data handling and data security

All data were collected, processed, and stored in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act) to ensure confidentiality and ethical compliance. Data were securely stored on a password-protected cloud platform and on the researcher’s personal computer, both accessible only to the researcher. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they fully understood the purpose of data collection, how their information would be used, and the measures

in place to protect their privacy. Only data directly relevant to the research objectives were collected. All records will be retained only for the necessary duration of the research process and subsequently deleted using appropriate and secure data disposal methods.

4.17 Methodological Limitations

Despite methodological rigour, the study has inherent limitations. The sample size of fifteen participants, though sufficient for thematic saturation, limits generalisability beyond the specific organisational context (Guest et al., 2020). The hybrid human-AI coding approach, while increasing efficiency and consistency, may have influenced interpretation, particularly for nuanced emotional codes such as “trauma lingers” or “emotionally withdrawn.” Additionally, reliance on self-reported narratives introduces potential bias, as participants may have selectively shared experiences based on perceived organisational consequences or personal coping mechanisms (Maxwell, 2013). A longitudinal design, which involves repeated data collection over an extended period, would have allowed for multiple engagements with participants, thereby enabling the observation of how role tension, coping strategies, and decision-making efficacy evolve over time. Such a design is particularly valuable for capturing adaptive processes and organisational learning trajectories, which often unfold gradually in response to structural change or crisis. However, the researcher did not have the luxury of time to implement a longitudinal design in this study. Organisational access constraints and project timelines necessitated a cross-sectional approach, which, while methodologically sound, provides only a snapshot of HR practitioners’ lived experiences rather than a developmental narrative. These limitations are acknowledged in interpreting the findings and situating them within broader HR practice literature.

4.18 Conclusion

Chapter 4 highlights the complex interplay between HR role tension, emotional labour, and organisational context during layoffs. The thematic analysis illustrates recurring patterns, including dual role strain, ethical dilemmas, and reliance on support systems, offering insights into HR practitioners’ lived realities. The findings underscore the importance of structured support mechanisms, data-informed

decision-making, and strategic positioning of HR within organisational hierarchies. Overall, this chapter demonstrates how systematic qualitative analysis, coupled with robust ethical and methodological safeguards, can yield actionable insights for both academic and practitioner audiences (Braun et al., 2021; Nowell et al., 2017).

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

A human-centred analytical process was employed to derive the results presented in this chapter, with artificial intelligence (AI) serving as a complementary, supportive tool rather than the primary driver of analysis. The researcher maintained full interpretive control and accountability for coding decisions, ensuring that meaning making remained grounded in human judgment and contextual understanding. This hybrid approach represented a balance between traditional qualitative rigour and the advantages of modern computational tools. As emphasised by Braun et al., (2006, 2021), thematic analysis requires researcher reflexivity and engagement with the data to uncover patterns of meaning. The use of AI as a secondary tool also helped maintain transparency and dependability. Because the AI model was not involved in data collection, it brought a measure of analytical neutrality, reducing potential confirmation bias, while still allowing the researcher to apply interpretive insight.

Importantly, the researcher conceptualised Chapters 5 and 6 as a single analytical unit, representing two complementary levels of interpretation. Chapter 5 presents the findings at a granular, sub-thematic level, allowing the nuanced voices of participants to emerge and enabling a detailed examination of the lived experiences of HR practitioners. In contrast, Chapter 6 engages the analysis at a higher-order, thematic level, synthesising these findings into broader conceptual insights that directly align with the theoretical framework and research gaps identified in Chapter 1. This dual-level analytical design was intentional: the sub-thematic analysis in Chapter 5 illuminates the texture and variation within the data, while the thematic discussion in Chapter 6 abstracts these insights into integrative principles that link back to literature-derived constructs.

By structuring the analysis in this way, the researcher ensures both analytic depth and theoretical coherence. The results are presented with sufficient granularity to reveal the complexity of HR practitioners' experiences yet synthesised at a conceptual level to demonstrate how the empirical evidence advances theoretical understanding. This integrated approach reinforces methodological transparency, strengthens the "golden thread" across chapters, and prepares the reader for the comparative synthesis that culminates in the summative Table 11 presented later.

Description of Participants and Research Context

The subsequent section provides an overview of the participants and context of the study, as introduced in Chapter 4. This elaboration helps situate the findings within the lived experiences of HR practitioners navigating organisational layoffs and associated role tension.

Participant Details

The table below outlines the original target sample for this study, which aimed to recruit sixteen participants from eight distinct organisations to enable inter-organisational comparisons. Additionally, the organisations were selected across various industries to facilitate inter-industry analysis. By sourcing two participants from each organisation, the study design allowed for intra-organisational triangulation, enhancing the depth and reliability of the findings. Most participants held managerial or senior HR roles, ensuring that they were actively involved in organisational decision-making during layoffs. A minority of participants had transitioned from junior HR roles at the time of earlier layoff experiences to leadership positions later, providing rich dual perspectives on both the implementation and experience of HR-led restructuring. To maintain the emotional and ethical integrity of the study, participants were selected based on the recency of layoff exposure, ideally within two years prior to the interview. This range allowed for sufficient emotional recovery while preserving the accuracy of recall.

These methodological choices reinforced both the credibility and ethical soundness of the study, ensuring that data interpretation was both trustworthy and humane. For this study, a diverse range of participants was interviewed. All fifteen participants (100%) fell within the ideal selection range, ensuring consistency and relevance of experience.

The following table provides an overview of these participants, including their job titles at the time of exposure and other pertinent contextual details.

Table 9: Actual Sample Exposure Details

Respondent	Job Title	Time since exposure within ideal range (Y/N)?
A1	Middle Manager	Y
A2	Middle Manager	Y
B1	Senior Manager	Y
B2	Middle Manager	Y
C1	Middle Manager	Y
C2	Senior Manager	Y
D1	Senior Manager	Y
D2	Senior Manager	Y
E1	Senior Manager	Y
F1	Middle Manager	Y
G1	Middle Manager	Y
H1	Middle Manager	Y
I1	Senior Manager	Y
J1	Senior Manager	Y
K1	Senior Manager	Y
TOTAL		15

Data saturation test

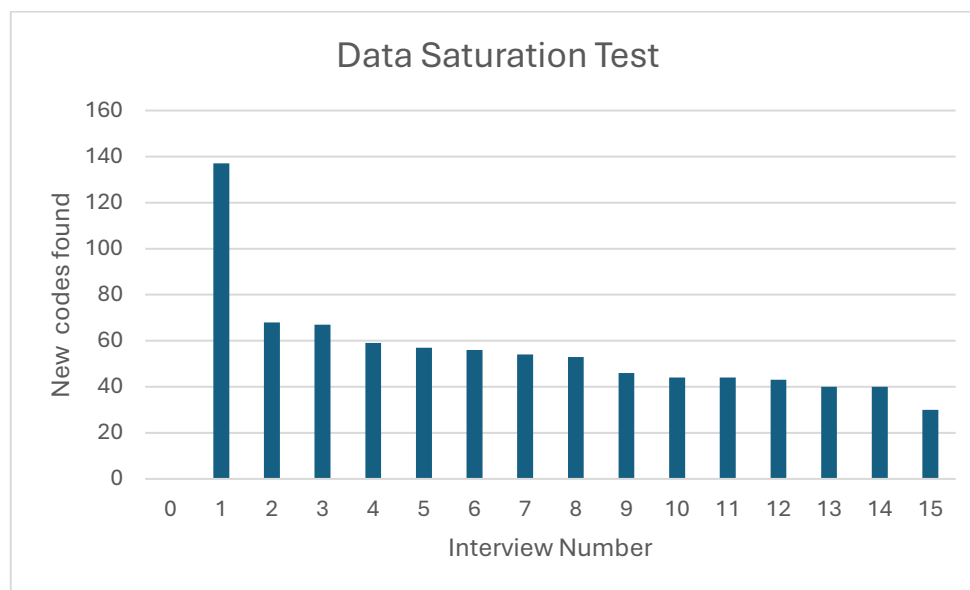


Figure 4: Data saturation test on consolidated codes

The Data Saturation Test graph above illustrates the diminishing emergence of new codes across fifteen sequential interviews, demonstrating the progressive stabilization of the dataset. The first interview generated the highest number of 137 unique codes, reflecting the exploratory breadth typically found in early qualitative data collection (Guest et al., 2020). Subsequent interviews yielded fewer new codes, indicating that much of the conceptual diversity had been captured early in the process.

From approximately interview nine onwards, the curve noticeably flattened, with each additional interview producing only marginally new insights. This trend signals that thematic saturation, the point at which no significant new information emerges, had been effectively reached by around the twelfth interview. The final few interviews served primarily to confirm and consolidate existing themes rather than expand the code base.

This pattern supports methodological adequacy and suggests that fourteen interviews were sufficient to achieve saturation, aligning with empirical guidelines proposed by Saunders et al., (2018) and Hennink and Kaiser (2022), who note that saturation is typically reached between 12–16 interviews in homogenous qualitative samples. Therefore, the dataset demonstrates thematic sufficiency, depth, and

analytical completeness, affirming that the coding process achieved comprehensive coverage of the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 10: Code counts by theme

Total	Total	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5
Total first-line codes	702					
Total consolidated codes	339					
Number of codes	339	131	40	62	63	43
Sub-themes	19	3	3	5	4	4
Themes	5					

The table above provides a structured overview of the coding hierarchy and thematic composition derived from the qualitative analysis. It reflects the rigorous multi-stage coding process that progressed from raw data to higher-order conceptual categories, aligning with the analytic procedure recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021) and Nowell et al., (2017).

A total of 702 first-line codes were initially generated from the 15 interview transcripts, representing the granular, descriptive elements of participants' experiences. These codes were subsequently refined through consolidation, reducing redundancy and overlap to 339 distinct codes, indicating a systematic move from surface-level data to more abstracted interpretive meaning.

The distribution of codes across themes shows that Theme 1 was the most data-dense (131 codes), suggesting it captured the most conceptually complex or frequently discussed aspect of participants' experiences. Themes 3 and 4 followed with 62 and 63 codes respectively, while Theme 2 (40 codes) and Theme 5 (43 codes) were somewhat more focused, representing narrower but still significant dimensions of the phenomenon.

From the consolidated codes, 19 sub-themes were developed, which were then clustered into five overarching themes. This 4:1 or 5:1 ratio of sub-themes to themes aligns with qualitative best practices for thematic parsimony, ensuring each theme was both analytically rich and theoretically grounded (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

5.2 Linking Research Questions, Themes, and Codes

The analysis was guided by five research questions (RQs) aligned with previously identified research gaps. Table 10 summarises how the themes and sub-themes correspond to each RQ, including codes to illustrate their relative salience.

Table 11: Linkage between Research Questions – Themes – Sub-themes – Codes

Research Question	Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
How do HR practitioners experience the emotional impact of layoffs?	Emotional Toll of Layoffs	Dual Role Strain	Role tension experience Duality HR hat off Felt torn Wearing two hats Employees vs business directives
		Psychological Impact	Anxiety Emotional strain Trauma Survivor's guilt Emotional exhaustion Moral discomfort Guilt Sadness Felt conflicted Emotional fatigue Heartbreaking Haunts me
		Coping Mechanisms	Journaling Prayer Faith Spoke a lot Went to church Peer support Therapy Mindfulness Structured reflections Decompression time Brave face Screamed in pillows Danced Power pose
What organisational factors shape the climate during retrenchment processes?	Organisational Climate and Context	Instability and Fear	Instability Fearful Uncertain Rumours spread Shattered trust Survivor syndrome War zone Cold, Fear-driven Fragment Heavy Rocky Tumultuous

Research Question	Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
		Leadership Style	Leadership style Authoritarian leadership Authentic leaders Empathetic leadership Leadership transparency Leadership sets tone Make or break HR Listening leadership
		Union and Legal Environment	Union presence Union dynamics Union dissatisfaction Legal framework Legal compliance Section 189 Procedural uncertainty Union negotiations Legal constraints
How do HR practitioners manage role tension and maintain effectiveness during layoffs?	Coping Strategies and Role Management	Emotion Regulation	Emotionally withdrawn Compartmentalised Suppress emotions Emotional preparation Stay composed Mindfulness techniques
		Professional Detachment	Professional capacity Detach Separate role from person Not emotionally blinded
		Peer and Team Support	Peer support HR Manager group Informal check-ins Trusted circle War room
		Reliance on Organisational Protocols	Document everything Anchor business rationale People and process principles Adequate data Validate everything Structured communication plan Frequently asked questions sheet
		Ethical Anchoring and Values Alignment	Anchored in fairness Advocate fairness Compliance vs compassion tension Values alignment

Research Question	Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
			Listen to your gut Uncompromised people treatment
What support systems are available to HR and employees during retrenchments?	Organisational Support Systems & Resilience	Formal HR and Wellness Structures	EAP programmes Workplace therapist Wellness coach Access counsellors Legal advisory support Leadership coaching
		Supervisory and Leadership Support	Leadership support vital Line leader support Leaders checked-in Leadership alignment
		Peer and Collegial Support Networks	Peer support HR networks Informal peer check-ins Group discussions
		Post-Layoff Recovery and Organisational Learning	Post action reviews Structured reflections Continuous learning Debrief sessions Organisational learning
How do layoffs influence HR's professional identity and sense of self?	Organisational Climate & Professional Identity Formation	Identity Fragmentation and Role Ambiguity	Felt like a pawn Identity conflict HR excluded HR as messenger HR executors vs emotional anchors
		Moral Agency and Identity Repair	Advocate for employees HR push back Speak up Moral conflict Ethical dilemma
		Professionalisation through Reflection	Structured reflections Growth mindset Reflective practice Teachable moments Self-insights
		Identity Continuity and Growth	Resilience Personal mastery Professional growth Continuous learning Doing sacred work

The above codes reflect the emotional intensity and cognitive complexity surrounding HR roles in layoff scenarios. RQ1 yielded the highest number of codes, confirming

that the emotional experience of role tension was the most dominant and deeply layered domain in participants' narratives.

5.3 RESULTS: RSEARCH QUESTION 1

Addressing RQ1: How do HR practitioners perceive and experience role tension during layoffs?

5.3.1 Theme One: Emotional Toll of Layoffs

The first theme captures the psychological and emotional dimensions of HR practitioners' experiences during layoffs. It consists of three sub-themes: Dual Role Strain, Psychological Impact, and Coping Mechanisms. Collectively, this theme reveals the internal conflict HR practitioners endure as both employees subject to organisational insecurity and agents responsible for executing job terminations.

This duality resonates with Cayrat and Boxall's (2023) argument that HR professionals experience "paradoxical role stress," navigating conflicting loyalties between business imperatives and humane treatment of employees.

5.3.2 Sub-theme 1: Dual Role Strain

Participants frequently described feeling caught between employees and business directive, often referring to themselves as intermediaries or "pawns" in the process.

"It felt like I was wearing two hats – one for management and one for the people I was letting go. Both sides expected empathy, but I could not satisfy either."

"At times, I did not know where I stood. HR is supposed to protect employees, but here I was delivering termination letters."

"I, myself did not know if I had a role as HR was planned for last. I had not bought in on the layoff process".

This tension aligns with the concept of role conflict in organisational behaviour (Katz et al., 1978), where competing role expectations create emotional dissonance and reduce perceived self-efficacy.

Similarly, Johnstone (2024) found that HR professionals mediating between leadership and employees during downsizing face ethical tension, feeling both complicit in and victimised by the process. Participants' language, "betrayal," "pawn," "double agent" reflects identity fragmentation (Pratt et al., 2006), where professional identity collides with moral self-concept. Recent scholarship demonstrates that professionals routinely experience identity fragmentation, where their organisational role, personal values and moral self-concept collide, particularly in ethically demanding situations (Syrigou et al., 2023).

5.3.3 Sub-theme 2: Psychological Impact

Layoff execution was consistently described as emotionally exhausting, evoking trauma, survivor' guilt, and moral discomfort.

"After every round, I could not sleep for days. It was not just the people losing jobs, it was the guilt of being the messenger."

"But the pressure coming from business to say when are you finalising this? When are they leaving?."

"I hit rock-bottom, depression after consultations. Yet I had to maintain a level of decorum."

These accounts parallel Carucci et al., (2022) findings that moral injury, distress from perceived ethical compromise, can occur among HR staff managing layoffs. Emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, core components of burnout (Maslach et al., 2016), were common in participants' reflections.

The persistence of psychological strain, often described as "lingering trauma," highlights how HR practitioners absorb the emotional residues of downsizing, supporting Vu et al., (2022) claim that layoff implementation can erode HR resilience over time.

5.3.4 Sub-theme 3: Coping Mechanisms

Despite significant strain, HR practitioners employed diverse coping methods to sustain their wellbeing. These included therapy, journaling, prayer, and physical exercise, reflecting adaptive emotion-focused coping (Lazarus et al., 1984).

“Faith kept me grounded. I prayed before every retrenchment meeting; it gave me peace.”

“It is personal mastery. I think I have invested in mastering personal mastery.”

“I started journaling after each session; it helped me make sense of what I was feeling instead of bottling it up.”

This mechanism reflects what Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun (2004) termed post-traumatic growth, whereby individuals derive personal insight and resilience through adversity (Infurna et al., 2024). Conversely, minority participants also mentioned avoidance-based coping, such as emotional detachment or overwork:

“I buried myself in admin tasks so I wouldn’t have to think about the faces of those we let go.”

“Honestly, no. It was just getting through the process and then after that on to the next. So, I do not think I employed any kind of coping mechanisms at that point in time.”

Such avoidance echoes the maladaptive patterns identified by Cooper and Quick (2017), where short-term emotional suppression leads to long-term fatigue and disengagement.

5.3.5 Patterns of Sameness

A pattern of sameness was evident in the emotional vocabulary used across interviews: “exhausting,” “draining,” “heartbreaking,” and “conflicted.” Participants

consistently portrayed layoffs as morally and emotionally taxing, underscoring a collective recognition of HR's ambiguous role as both enforcer and empathiser.

The convergence observed in this study—that role tension is a defining characteristic of HR work during layoffs, was consistently reflected across interviews and aligns with recent scholarly discourse. Nyfoudi et al., (2024) describe HR professionals as an “emotional bridge” between organisational logic and human impact, a metaphor that aptly captures the dual pressures experienced by senior HR practitioners. Their strategic involvement in workforce restructuring, coupled with their proximity to affected employees, placed them in a position where emotional labour was not incidental but central to their role.

Recent studies have echoed this dynamic. For example, Elzinga et al., (2024) emphasised that HR professionals involved in layoffs often carry the burden of reconciling business imperatives with human consequences, a tension that manifests in both ethical strain and emotional fatigue. Similarly, Coker (2025) illustrated how HR leaders navigating large-scale restructuring were required to maintain composure and empathy while executing decisions that deeply affected employee livelihoods. These findings reinforce the notion that role tension is not a peripheral experience but a structural feature of HR's function in organisational change.

The recurrence of this theme across diverse contexts and seniority levels suggests that such tension is embedded in the professional identity of HR practitioners. Their insights, shaped by years of experience and strategic responsibility, contributed to a rich and emotionally textured understanding of layoff processes, one that continues to challenge simplistic portrayals of HR as merely administrative or procedural.

5.3.6 Patterns of Difference

While emotional burden was a shared experience among participants, the divergence in how stress was internalised and managed revealed a meaningful minority perspective. Some participants framed their emotional responses through a lens of personal moral accountability, expressing guilt as a form of self-blame, evident in statements such as “I betrayed people I cared about.” This introspective framing suggests a deep internalisation of responsibility, often linked to personal values and relational proximity to affected employees.

Conversely, others externalised the stress, attributing it to systemic or procedural factors, as reflected in the view that “The process was unfair, but not mine to control.” This perspective indicates a more detached coping mechanism, where emotional strain was mitigated by distancing oneself from the structural decisions of the organisation.

The presence of these contrasting interpretations, though not dominant, offers critical insight into the varied emotional and ethical positioning of HR professionals during layoffs. It highlights that while role tension is pervasive, its manifestation is not uniform. The minority view, particularly the internalisation of guilt as moral failure, adds depth to the thematic landscape and underscores the need to account for individual meaning-making processes within emotionally charged organisational contexts.

The observed differences in how participants processed guilt and stress during layoff processes reflect meaningful psychological variation, particularly in terms of locus of control. Recent developments in locus of control research had significant implications for understanding HR practitioners’ behavioural and emotional responses during layoffs. Building on Rotter’s (1966) foundational distinction, scholars such as Botha et al., (2024) and Nyfoudi et al., (2024) demonstrated that individuals with an internal locus of control were more likely to engage in initiative-taking coping, exhibit ethical consistency, and maintain decision-making efficacy under pressure. Conversely, those with a more external orientation tended to experience greater helplessness, moral disengagement, and stress when external mandates, such as executive layoff directives, conflicted with their personal or professional ethics. These contrasting perspectives did not merely reflect coping strategies but revealed deeper differences in how participants understood their agency within organisational systems. The internalisers appeared to carry a heavier emotional load, often linking their distress to personal values and relational commitments. In contrast, externalisers framed their experience in terms of procedural detachment, which may have served as a protective mechanism against emotional exhaustion.

Importantly, this variation enriched the data by highlighting that emotional responses to layoffs are not monolithic. Even within a shared context of role tension and ethical strain, HR professionals interpreted their experiences through distinct psychological lenses. This underscores the importance of attending to individual

meaning-making processes when analysing emotionally complex organisational phenomena.

5.3.7 Interpretation

By affirming role tension theory (Katz et al., 1978) and extending its relevance into the domain of moral emotion and identity regulation, therefore positions Theme 1 not merely as a replication of existing theory but as a theoretical expansion. This suggests that the emotional toll experienced by HR practitioners during layoffs is not only a matter of conflicting role expectations, but also deeply intertwined with personal identity, ethical self-concept, and emotional labour.

This framing allows Theme 1 to contribute uniquely by:

- Demonstrating how role tension manifests through moral emotions such as guilt, shame, and ethical strain.
- Highlighting the identity work HR professionals engage in to reconcile their strategic responsibilities with their human values.
- Offering empirical evidence that extends the application of role tension theory beyond its traditional boundaries, into emotionally charged and ethically complex contexts.

In doing so, Theme 1 moves beyond descriptive accounts of HR stress and begins to articulate a more nuanced understanding of the psychological and ethical dimensions of HR practice during layoffs, an area that has received limited attention in prior applications of the theory.

These findings corroborate Cayrat and Boxall's (2023) assertion that HR practitioners operate in "moral gray zones," where institutional loyalty competes with human compassion. They also add empirical weight to Nyfoudi et al., (2024) argument that HR's emotional labour during downsizing is under-recognised, even as it profoundly shapes organisational culture and personal wellbeing.

5.3.8 Summary of Theme One

Theme One reveals that HR practitioners experience layoffs as emotionally and morally complex events, characterised by dual role strain, psychological distress,

and varied coping responses. While many adopt adaptive strategies (e.g., reframing, therapy), others succumb to suppression and emotional fatigue. These insights deepen understanding of RQ1 by showing that role tension is not only structural but existential, shaping practitioners' sense of professional integrity and personal identity.

5.4 RESULTS: RESEARCH QUESTION 2

Addressing RQ2: What factors influence the decision-making efficacy of HR practitioners during layoffs?

5.4.1 Theme Two: Organisational Climate and Context

Theme Two explores the influence of organisational climate, leadership behaviour, and contextual pressures on HR practitioners' ability to make sound and ethical decisions during layoffs. This theme emerged from a substantial set of second-order codes, which were grouped into three sub-themes: Instability and Fear, Leadership Style, and Union and Legal Environment. Each sub-theme captured distinct yet interconnected aspects of the layoff experience, reflecting recurring patterns across participant narratives.

The results demonstrate that HR decision-making efficacy is not purely a function of individual competence but is situationally constrained by the broader organisational context. Participants repeatedly emphasised that decision quality fluctuated according to the trust climate, managerial tone, and perceived procedural justice of their organisations. These findings reinforce Nyfoudi, Kwon, and Wilkinson's (2024) argument that contextual variables such as leadership and communication culture critically shape HR's strategic agency during layoffs.

5.4.2 Sub-theme 1: Instability and Fear

Participants described a pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty and distrust during layoff periods, which impaired clear judgment and led to reactive decision-making.

“Every meeting felt like a battle zone. HR was blamed from all sides, so you became defensive rather than objective.”

“The rumour mill was constant. No one trusted anyone, people were sabotaging each other, just to stay off the list.”

Such narratives reflect the climate of psychological insecurity that accompanies large-scale workforce reductions. Edmondson (2019) argues that psychological safety, the shared belief that one can express ideas without fear of retribution, is essential for effective decision-making. Its absence, as observed here, triggers defensive HR practices, increased self-censorship, and ethical withdrawal.

Consistent with Schein’s (2017) organisational culture theory, a “fear-driven” climate shifts attention from strategic clarity to political survival, undermining fairness in selection and communication processes.

5.4.3 Sub-theme 2: Leadership Style

A critical determinant of HR efficacy was the tone of leadership during layoffs. Two distinct leadership patterns emerged: authoritarian (top-down) versus empathetic (participative).

“We got instructions from the top with zero consultation. HR’s role was to implement, not question.”

“In contrast, when our Managing Director involved HR early, we could redesign the process to be more humane.”

This divergence illustrates Goleman’s (2017) emotional intelligence framework, which identifies empathy and participative engagement as enablers of organisational trust. Participants collaborating with empathetic leaders described higher decision efficacy, citing improved morale and fairer outcomes. Conversely, those under authoritarian leadership felt disempowered and ethically compromised.

“Under compassionate leaders, you can balance empathy with business logic. Under command-and-control, you are just an executor.”

Transformational leadership, when characterised by emotional attunement, fosters psychological safety and ethical reasoning during high-stakes decisions (Fan, 2023).

5.4.4 Sub-theme 3: Union and Legal Environment

Participants also highlighted external institutional constraints, particularly union negotiations, and compliance with South African labour law (Section 189 of the Labour Relations Act).

“The union accused us of bias in the selection criteria. We had to redo the process under legal supervision.”

“I was branded legacy company employee, I showed up intentionally to improve trust.”

“Legal pressure was immense — one wrong step and we faced CCMA referrals. It made us overly cautious.”

These external forces shaped both the tempo and substance of HR decision-making. The balancing act between speed and compliance often produced paralysis or procedural rigidity, echoing the “compliance trap” described by Parker., (2006).

5.4.5 Patterns of Sameness

A shared and strikingly consistent pattern among all participants was the conviction that organisational climate functioned as the primary determinant of fairness and ethical consistency during layoffs. Across both public and private sectors, HR practitioners repeatedly emphasised that the tone set by leadership, the presence (or absence) of trust, and the openness of communication channels fundamentally shaped how procedural decisions were interpreted and accepted. Rather than viewing fairness as a static procedural outcome, participants described it as a socially mediated perception, deeply embedded in the relational and emotional dynamics of the organisation.

As one practitioner poignantly remarked, “If the culture’s toxic, even a perfect process feels unfair. If the culture’s supportive, people accept tough news better.” This statement encapsulated the idea that ethical legitimacy was not derived solely from adherence to HR protocols but from the perceived authenticity and empathy underpinning leadership conduct.

These findings resonated with recent empirical research that linked ethical decision-making and perceived justice to trust climate and leadership integrity (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2021). For instance, Cooper-Thomas et al., (2023) found that psychologically safe climates reduce moral disengagement and defensive communication during restructuring, while Nyfoudi et al., (2024) demonstrated that toxic climates, marked by opacity and fear, erode HR practitioners’ sense of efficacy, even when formal processes appear compliant. Similarly, Fan (2023) highlighted that transformational leadership, grounded in emotional attunement, cultivates psychological safety and moral reasoning, enabling practitioners to sustain fairness perceptions even under severe organisational strain.

The collective narrative of participants thus challenged purely procedural or legalistic models of fairness, instead suggesting that ethical HR practice was context-contingent, trust-dependent, and emotionally co-created. This reinforced the evolving scholarly consensus that HR efficacy and fairness are socially constructed phenomena, emerging from the interplay between individual moral agency and the broader cultural and relational architecture of the organisation (Nyfoudi et al., 2024; Vu et al., 2022)

5.4.6 Patterns of Difference

Marked differences emerged like organisational size, maturity, and governance sophistication, revealing a critical contextual variation in how layoffs were managed. Participants from large multinational corporations consistently described structured and rule-bound processes, supported by governance systems, selection matrices, and multi-level review panels, that created a sense of procedural predictability and transparency. In contrast, HR practitioners in smaller, less formalised firms reported decision-making that was highly centralised and dependent on managerial discretion or executive impulse, leading to inconsistencies and perceptions of unfairness.

As two practitioners articulated:

“In our company, there were clear selection matrices and review panels.”

“In my case, decisions were made in the CEO’s office; we just executed.”

These contrasting accounts vividly illustrated how organisational resourcing and structural maturity shaped ethical and procedural integrity during layoffs. In multinationals, access to specialised HR tools, legal advisors, and formalised review mechanisms provided institutional buffers that safeguarded fairness and reduced individual moral strain. Conversely, in smaller enterprises, the absence of such frameworks transferred both the burden and accountability of ethical decision-making onto individual HR practitioners, heightening role tension and moral vulnerability.

This divergence aligned with the resource-based theory of HR governance (Barney, 2001), which posits that organisational resources and capabilities underpin the quality and consistency of strategic processes. Recent research by Helfat et al., (2023) expanded on this foundation, arguing that the configuration of human, structural, and relational capital directly influences governance practices and their adaptability in volatile contexts. From this perspective, structured HR systems constitute strategic assets, enabling consistent decision-making and fairness under pressure, while resource scarcity in smaller firms leads to ad hoc, personality-driven approaches that amplify ambiguity.

Further supporting evidence came from Nyfoudi et al., (2024) and Johnstone (2024), who observed that procedural justice in HR decision-making was not only contingent upon resource access but also mediated by organisational culture and leadership style. In resource-rich but hierarchical firms, compliance could mask emotional detachment, whereas in resource-poor but relationally cohesive environments, informal empathy sometimes substituted for procedural rigour.

Thus, the findings revealed a paradox of structure versus discretion: while structured systems in large firms promoted consistency and accountability, they could also limit emotional responsiveness; smaller firms, though flexible, risked ethical inconsistency due to weak governance. This complexity underscored the contextual dependence of fairness and efficacy in HR practice, illustrating that procedural justice was not

simply a function of intent but of the institutional capacity and governance ecology within which HR practitioners operated.

5.4.7 Summary of Theme Two

Theme Two demonstrates that decision-making efficacy is interdependent with organisational climate. Trust, leadership empathy, and compliance mechanisms collectively shape HR practitioners' moral reasoning and confidence. In unstable climates, decision quality deteriorates due to fear, politicisation, and defensive routines. In psychologically safe climates, HR operates as a strategic partner, able to balance compassion with compliance.

These insights deepen understanding of RQ2 by positioning HR decision-making as an organisational phenomenon, not an individual deficit.

5.5 RESULTS: RESEARCH QUESTION 3

Addressing RQ3: What strategies do HR practitioners employ to manage role tension?

5.5.1 Theme Three: Coping Strategies and Role Management

Theme Three focuses on the strategic and psychological coping mechanisms HR practitioners used to manage the strain of layoffs. This theme brought together a wide range of insights, which were organised into five sub-themes: Emotion Regulation, Professional Detachment, Peer and Team Support, Reliance on Organisational Protocols, and Ethical Anchoring. Each sub-theme captured distinct strategies and support mechanisms that HR practitioners relied on to navigate the emotional and ethical complexities of layoff processes.

Whereas Theme One addressed emotional experience and Theme Two examined contextual pressures, Theme Three explores agency, how HR professionals actively regulate emotions, maintain composure, and preserve integrity. The findings align with Liang et al., (2021) assertion that coping is an adaptive skillset central to HR survival in volatile contexts.

5.5.2 Sub-theme 1: Emotion Regulation

Participants frequently described the need to suppress or cognitively reframe their emotions to remain functional and composed during the layoff process. The narratives revealed a shared emotional balancing act, managing personal empathy while upholding professional composure amid distressing circumstances. As one participant explained, “I had to switch off my feelings; otherwise, I would’ve broken down in front of people.” Another reflected, “Reframing it as helping people transition out instead of ‘firing’ them made it bearable.” These testimonies underscored the psychological complexity inherent in HR roles during organisational downsizing, where practitioners navigated between emotional authenticity and institutional expectation.

This behavioural pattern aligned with Gross’s (2015) emotion regulation theory, which distinguishes between emotional suppression, the inhibition of outward emotional expression for short-term stability, and cognitive reappraisal, the reframing of emotionally charged situations to sustain long-term psychological equilibrium. The participants’ reliance on these mechanisms demonstrated that emotion regulation was not merely a personal strategy but an occupational necessity, embedded within the emotional labour of HR practice (Hochschild, 2012). Practitioners who employed reappraisal tended to report lower emotional exhaustion and a stronger sense of control, suggesting that the ability to reframe distressing events constituted a protective cognitive resource.

This finding resonated with the broader literature on role tension and coping (Liang et al., 2021; Vu et al., 2022; Maslach et al., 2016). As Liang et al., (2021) observed, problem-focused coping, which includes reframing and meaning-making, fosters psychological resilience and adaptive functioning, while emotion-focused coping, such as suppression, offers only transient relief and may intensify burnout over time. Similarly, Vu et al., (2022) identified peer support and reflective reframing as key mediators that help HR practitioners manage moral stress and maintain professionalism during ethically charged decisions.

Moreover, the dynamic interplay between individual emotional strategies and organisational climate was evident. Practitioners embedded in supportive, transparent cultures (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2023; Nyfoudi et al., 2024) were more likely to engage in reappraisal, drawing psychological strength from trust and

empathy within the system. Conversely, in toxic or high-control climates, suppression became the dominant coping mechanism, reinforcing emotional detachment and ethical fatigue. This mirrored Fan's (2023) findings that emotionally attuned leadership and transformational climates enhance psychological safety and enable constructive emotion regulation.

Collectively, these insights reinforced that emotion regulation among HR practitioners was a socially embedded process, influenced by organisational culture, leadership tone, and available support systems. The findings lent empirical weight to the argument that ethical and emotional resilience in HR work emerges not solely from individual capacity but from the interaction between cognitive coping mechanisms and contextual enablers. Cognitive reappraisal represented the psychological equivalent of fairness and control, while suppression symbolised the emotional cost of organisational opacity, a distinction central to understanding how HR practitioners sustained their equilibrium amid the moral turbulence of layoffs.

5.5.3 Sub-theme 2: Professional Detachment

Participants consistently articulated the use of psychological detachment as a coping mechanism during the layoff process, an adaptive but double-edged strategy. Many described consciously creating emotional boundaries between themselves and affected employees as a way to remain composed and adhere to procedural requirements under pressure. As one practitioner explained, "I told myself I am here to uphold process, not emotions. Once I accepted that, I coped better." This form of cognitive distancing enabled HR professionals to maintain operational control and project neutrality, particularly when institutional mandates conflicted with personal moral values.

However, while detachment functioned as an immediate stabiliser, it also revealed long-term emotional costs. Several participants later acknowledged that prolonged emotional distancing eroded empathy, reduced their sense of personal accomplishment, and strained interpersonal relationships with colleagues and remaining employees. This finding strongly echoed Maslach et al., (2016) model of burnout, which identifies depersonalisation, the emotional numbing of self from others, as a key dimension of chronic occupational stress. Within the context of layoffs, what began as a rational strategy for self-preservation gradually evolved into

a form of emotional depletion, undermining the very relational capacities that define effective HR practice.

These observations aligned with Hochschild's (2012) notion of emotional labour, which posits that workers who must suppress authentic emotions in service of institutional norms experience tension between "surface acting" and "deep acting." For HR practitioners, the expectation to remain professional and composed in ethically charged moments required sustained emotional regulation, which, over time, exacted a psychological toll. Liang and Cao (2021) similarly found that excessive reliance on emotion-focused coping—such as avoidance or detachment—leads to fatigue and diminished cognitive clarity.

Furthermore, the role of organisational climate and leadership tone emerged as a critical moderator in determining whether detachment became adaptive or harmful. In supportive and ethically transparent environments, HR professionals could engage in temporary detachment while maintaining emotional authenticity, as trust and communication reinforced psychological safety (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2023; Fan, 2023). Conversely, in toxic or fear-driven climates, detachment became institutionalised, a survival mechanism that reinforced cynicism and moral disengagement (Nyfoudi et al., 2024; Johnstone, 2024).

Thus, while detachment initially allowed HR practitioners to perform their duties under emotionally charged conditions, it often carried hidden psychological consequences. The evidence suggested that the line between composure and emotional numbing was perilously thin, and the sustainability of detachment depended heavily on the organisational support systems and ethical culture surrounding the practitioner. Detachment operated as both a shield and a scar, protecting practitioners in the moment yet leaving behind traces of emotional exhaustion and moral residue that complicated their professional identity and relational engagement.

5.5.4 Sub-theme 3: Peer and Team Support

The importance of peer reflection and collective emotional processing featured prominently across all interviews, revealing that resilience among HR practitioners was often a shared rather than solitary achievement. Participants repeatedly described post-layoff debrief sessions and informal peer discussions as critical

spaces for psychological release, ethical validation, and meaning reconstruction. As one participant reflected, “After every layoff round, we would debrief as a team. It was our therapy.” Another explained, “HR colleagues kept each other sane. We could vent without judgment.” These narratives underscored that, amid organisational silence or limited managerial empathy, peer networks became the de facto support system sustaining practitioners’ emotional endurance and moral coherence.

This finding aligned with recent scholarship emphasising the collective dimension of coping and emotional regulation in high-stakes professional contexts (Vu et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2021). Vu et al., (2022) found that informal peer debriefing operates as a psychological buffer, helping practitioners transform moral distress into shared understanding, thereby reducing isolation and self-blame. Similarly, Liang and Cao (2021) identified socially embedded coping as a key mechanism through which professionals maintain equilibrium under conflicting role pressures, what they termed “adaptive resilience through relational exchange.” These studies reinforced that peer support was not peripheral but central to resilience-building, functioning as an emotional ecosystem that complemented or substituted for formal organisational interventions.

Furthermore, the role of organisational climate and leadership tone shaped the quality and accessibility of peer reflection. In psychologically safe climates, where open dialogue was encouraged, HR practitioners described debrief sessions as cathartic, ethically generative, and restorative (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2023; Fan, 2023). Conversely, in toxic or fear-driven environments, practitioners reported whisper networks and confidential one-on-one conversations, suggesting that support persisted even when organisational trust eroded (Nyfoudi et al., 2024; Johnstone, 2024). This highlighted how resilience adapted to structural constraints, evolving organically through shared empathy and mutual validation when formal systems fell short.

Importantly, these peer-based coping practices also contributed to collective moral reasoning, allowing practitioners to reconcile professional ethics with institutional directives. As Nyfoudi et al., (2024) argued, ethical efficacy in HR is socially constructed, arising through dialogue and relational trust rather than procedural compliance alone. The findings from this study extended that argument by demonstrating that peer reflection served as a moral recalibration mechanism,

enabling practitioners to reaffirm their professional values and restore a sense of fairness and humanity after ethically difficult actions.

In sum, peer reflection and collective processing operated as the emotional infrastructure of resilience during layoffs. It compensated for limited formal support and fostered a shared sense of purpose that counterbalanced moral fatigue. The evidence suggested that HR resilience was less about individual toughness and more about relational solidarity and collective sense-making, a finding that redefines the traditional, individualistic view of coping in HR practice.

5.5.5 Sub-theme 4: Reliance on Organisational Protocols

Across structured organisations, participants described a strong dependence on formal HR frameworks, including scripts, policy matrices, and procedural checklists as a means of anchoring emotional stability during layoffs.

“The script and checklist kept me grounded; it was like an emotional anchor.”

“Agreed-upon layoff principles and consistent application thereof, despite the scenarios, were immensely helpful.”

For many, these tools functioned as psychological scaffolds, enabling practitioners to preserve composure and fairness in emotionally volatile environments. In line with Liang and Cao’s (2021) conceptualisation of structured coping, adherence to organisational routines allowed practitioners to externalise distress and preserve perceived control under uncertainty. Procedural fidelity thus became a substitute for emotional certainty, a coping mechanism that transformed bureaucratic process into an ethical compass.

However, in less formalised contexts, where procedural guidance was either inconsistent or absent, participants reported heightened anxiety, improvisation fatigue, and moral unease. This variability echoed Nyfoudi et al., (2024) contention that HR efficacy is socially and structurally constructed, contingent upon the presence of institutional norms that legitimise fairness and empathy. In short, organisational structure did not merely shape procedural efficiency, it defined the emotional safety net within which HR practitioners could perform ethically and confidently.

5.5.6 Sub-theme 5: Ethical Anchoring and Values Alignment

A pivotal factor distinguishing adaptive from maladaptive coping was the extent to which HR practitioners anchored their decisions in personal and professional values.

“When I focused on treating people with dignity, I felt calmer, even if outcomes were painful.”

“I reminded myself that HR is about fairness — that principle got me through.”

Participants consistently described ethical anchoring as both a moral compass and a psychological stabiliser, transforming distress into a sense of integrity and purpose. This reflected Vu et al., (2022) and Nyfoudi et al., (2024), who emphasised that ethical resilience in HR stems not from detachment, but from congruence between action and internalised professional identity. Anchoring decisions in values such as fairness, transparency, and respect enabled practitioners to reclaim moral coherence even amid ethically compromising contexts.

Moreover, these findings resonate with Fan (2023) and Cooper-Thomas et al., (2023), who argue that value alignment enhances psychological safety by integrating emotion regulation with ethical reasoning. In this study, HR practitioners who consciously reframed layoffs as an extension of humane stewardship, rather than administrative execution—reported reduced guilt and improved recovery. Ethical anchoring thus emerged as a form of self-regulation rooted in moral agency, ensuring that procedural justice remained intertwined with human dignity.

5.5.7 Patterns of Sameness

Across organisational contexts, participants articulated a shared conviction that emotional regulation and procedural consistency were non-negotiable aspects of professional competence. The recurring language of “staying composed,” “holding boundaries,” and “separating emotion from process” signified that emotional control was institutionalised as a core dimension of HR identity, not merely a personal coping preference.

This convergence underscored that emotional regulation functioned as an embedded professional standard, consistent with Liang and Cao's (2021) framing of coping as a collective and role-defined norm. Participants' disciplined, pragmatic tone suggested that managing emotion was part of maintaining credibility, both in representing the organisation and in safeguarding affected employees. Coping was not viewed as an ad hoc response to stress, but as a codified expectation of HR professionalism, reflecting a tacit cultural norm that equated composure with competence.

Thus, the evidence confirmed that emotional regulation was a socially reinforced, identity-defining practice, central to the performance of HR ethics during high-stakes organisational transitions.

5.5.8 Patterns of Difference

While consensus existed regarding the importance of emotional control, variability emerged in coping intensity and psychological outcomes. Practitioners employing adaptive strategies, such as reframing, peer reflection, and ethical anchoring, described more rapid recovery, sustained engagement, and renewed professional purpose. Conversely, those who relied on avoidance, suppression, or emotional numbing reported symptoms of burnout, detachment, and diminished empathy.

"I went numb — it got me through, but I lost empathy for months."

These divergences aligned with Vu et al., (2022), who found that socially and ethically integrated coping mechanisms predict stronger resilience than avoidance-based strategies. Similarly, Fan (2023) observed that reappraisal and moral reasoning enhance sustained well-being, while emotional disengagement leads to moral fatigue. The data therefore reaffirmed that how practitioners coped mattered as much as whether they coped, with adaptive, ethically grounded strategies yielding both psychological and relational benefits.

5.5.9 Summary of Theme Three

Theme Three revealed that coping during layoffs was multidimensional, simultaneously psychological, ethical, and procedural. HR practitioners navigated

emotional strain through a blend of individual self-regulation and collective support, demonstrating that resilience was both an internal capacity and a relational process. The data highlighted that organisational scaffolding, such as clear procedures, supportive leadership, and peer solidarity, was decisive in shaping coping quality.

Where trust and empathy were embedded within the organisational climate, coping evolved into adaptive resilience characterised by ethical clarity and emotional composure. Conversely, in punitive or opaque environments, avoidance and depersonalisation dominated, echoing Liang and Cao's (2021) insight that coping effectiveness is contextually bounded.

Overall, this theme extended contemporary HR scholarship (Nyfoudi et al., 2024; Vu et al., 2022; Fan, 2023) by illustrating that HR resilience is as much moral as emotional, a dynamic equilibrium sustained through ethical anchoring, social connection, and procedural consistency.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter continues the analytical trajectory established in Chapter 5, treating both chapters as a single, integrated analytical unit. Whereas Chapter 5 presented the empirical results at a sub-thematic level, giving voice to participants and illustrating the nuanced realities of HR practitioners during layoffs, this chapter elevates the discussion to a thematic and conceptual level. Here, the focus shifts from descriptive analysis to interpretive synthesis, mapping the data-derived themes against the literature-derived constructs introduced in Chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 6 thus serves as a critical interpretive bridge between the theoretical propositions outlined in Chapter 2 and the empirical insights derived from Chapter 5. It explores how the lived experiences of HR practitioners during organisational layoffs corroborate, challenge, or extend existing theoretical frameworks. This synthesis not only enriches understanding of the HR function under duress but also offers important implications for theory, practice, and policy within human resource management, particularly in contexts characterised by volatility, uncertainty, and ethical complexity.

By positioning Chapters 5 and 6 as complementary analytical layers, the researcher intentionally moved from granular sub-thematic analysis to abstract thematic synthesis. This dual-level approach allows for both depth and integration, the former capturing the complexity of practitioner experiences, and the latter deriving generalisable conceptual insights that speak directly to the theoretical gaps identified in Chapter 1. In doing so, this chapter demonstrates how empirical findings converge with, contradict, or refine existing literature, thereby advancing the theoretical discourse on HR practitioner resilience, ethical decision-making, and identity reconstruction during organisational crises.

6.1.1 Role Tension and Role Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978)

The empirical data revealed acute role conflict and ambiguity among HR practitioners, particularly when they were expected to function as both compassionate supporters and enforcers of organisational decisions. This duality aligns with Role Theory, which posits that individuals often occupy multiple, sometimes conflicting, roles. Recent studies such as Fan et al., (2025) and Bragger et al., (2021) extend this by showing how digital transformation and hybrid work

environments have intensified role strain, especially in emotionally charged contexts like layoffs. HR practitioners reported feeling "caught in the middle," a sentiment that underscores the inadequacy of traditional role definitions in contemporary organisational life.

6.1.2. Emotional Labour and Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996)

Layoffs are emotionally salient events that trigger intense affective responses. Affective Events Theory (AET) helps explain how these emotional episodes influence HR practitioners' attitudes and behaviours. The findings from Chapter 5 illustrate that HR professionals often suppress their own emotions to maintain professionalism, a classic case of surface acting. Mwakyusa et al., (2024) found that prolonged emotional labour without adequate organisational support leads to burnout and disengagement. Similarly, Nyfoudi et al., (2024) highlight the cumulative toll of emotional dissonance on HR professionals' well-being, reinforcing the need for systemic emotional support mechanisms.

6.1.3. Ethical Decision-Making and Rest's Model (1986)

The ethical dilemmas faced by HR practitioners, balancing organisational directives with personal and professional values, were a recurring theme. Rest's four-component model (moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character) provides a useful lens here. Practitioners demonstrated high moral sensitivity and judgment but often struggled with moral courage due to fear of reprisal or job insecurity. Liang et al., (2021) emphasize the importance of ethical climates and leadership in empowering HR professionals to act in alignment with their values, a point echoed in the narratives of participants who felt supported by ethical leadership.

6.1.4. Resilience and Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989)

The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory posits that stress arises from the threat of resource loss. HR practitioners reported significant depletion of emotional, cognitive, and social resources during layoffs. However, those with access to

supportive networks and organisational resources demonstrated greater resilience. Burke et al., (2022) argue that resilience is not merely an individual trait, but a dynamic process influenced by organisational culture and leadership. This was evident in the data, where practitioners embedded in psychologically safe environments were better able to recover and adapt.

6.1.5. Professional Identity and Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989)

Layoffs challenged HR practitioners' professional identities, particularly when their actions conflicted with their self-concept as employee advocates. Social Identity Theory helps explain the internal conflict experienced when group membership (HR vs. management vs. employees) becomes a source of dissonance. Tang et al., (2021) found that identity fragmentation is common in high-stakes HR roles, especially when organisational values are misaligned with personal ethics. Some practitioners in Chapter 5 described a redefinition of their professional identity post-layoffs, suggesting identity reconstruction as a coping mechanism.

This chapter thus provides an interpretive bridge: connecting what theory predicts with what practitioners' experience, and offering implications for theory, practice, and policy in human resource management.

6.2 Synthesis of Key Findings with Theoretical Frameworks

The results from Chapter 5 revealed five overarching themes and nineteen sub-themes representing the HR practitioners' collective experience. Together, they show that HR practice during layoffs is an interplay of emotion, ethics, organisational structure, and identity.

Below, each theme is discussed in relation to the theories introduced in Chapter 2.

6.2.1 Theme 1: Emotional Toll of Layoffs

The emotional toll of layoffs on HR practitioners is a complex and evolving area of inquiry that intersects with foundational theories and contemporary empirical

research. This theme confirms and extends several theoretical frameworks, while integrating recent scholarship that highlights the ethical, emotional, and relational dimensions of HR practice during organisational downsizing.

6.2.1.1 Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996)

Weiss and Cropanzano's Affective Events Theory (AET) posits that discrete workplace events elicit emotional reactions that influence employee attitudes and behaviours. Layoffs, as high-impact affective events, trigger profound emotional responses in HR practitioners who are both facilitators and witnesses of these transitions. Recent studies, such as Mwakyusa et al., (2024), reinforce AET by demonstrating how HR professionals internalize the emotional fallout of layoffs, often experiencing guilt, anxiety, and moral distress. These affective responses are not peripheral but central to shaping HR behaviour and decision-making.

6.2.1.2 Role Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978)

Role Theory traditionally addresses the tension arising from conflicting expectations within organisational roles. HR practitioners during layoffs embody dual identities: employee advocate and organisational agent. This duality results in intra-role conflict, as illustrated by statements like "I felt like betraying staff" and "I was wearing two hats." While Katz and Kahn's framework capture the structural tension, recent work by Nyfoudi et al., (2021) and Bennett et al., (2023) extends this understanding by introducing the moral and emotional dimensions of role conflict. These scholars argue that HR professionals experience moral dissonance, where ethical commitments to fairness and empathy clash with organisational imperatives, intensifying emotional strain.

6.2.1.3 Emotional Labour Theory (Hochschild, 1983)

Hochschild's Emotional Labour Theory describes how employees manage their emotions to meet job expectations, often through surface or deep acting. HR practitioners, particularly during layoffs, must project empathy and composure while suppressing personal distress. However, this theme challenges classical emotional labour findings that emphasize detachment as adaptive. Instead, it aligns with Grandey & Melloy (2017) and is further supported by Fan et al., (2025), who advocate

for authentic emotional engagement as a healthier and more sustainable strategy. Fan et al., argue that emotionally intelligent HR leadership, grounded in authenticity and ethical congruence, enhances practitioner resilience and employee trust.

6.2.1.4 Relational and Ethical Dimensions

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the relational and ethical dimensions of HR work during layoffs. Liang et al., (2021) highlight the importance of compassionate HR practices, suggesting that relational authenticity fosters psychological safety and mitigates the emotional toll of downsizing. Similarly, Bennett et al., (2023) explores how HR professionals navigate ethical dilemmas by engaging in moral reflexivity, balancing organisational loyalty with personal values. These insights suggest a shift from mechanistic models of emotional regulation to more human-centred approaches that prioritize empathy, transparency, and ethical integrity.

6.2.1.5 Conclusion

Theme 1 confirms foundational theories, Affective Events Theory, Role Theory, and Emotional Labour Theory, while extending them through recent empirical and conceptual advancements. The inclusion of moral tension, authentic emotional engagement, and relational ethics marks a significant evolution in understanding the emotional landscape of HR practice. Scholars such as Fan et al., (2025), Mwakyusa et al., (2024), Bennett et al., (2023), Nyfoudi et al., and Liang et al., (2021) contribute to a growing body of literature that repositions HR practitioners not merely as policy executors but as emotionally and ethically engaged actors navigating complex organisational terrains.

6.2.2 Theme 2: Organisational Climate and Context

Theme Two aligns closely with Organisational Climate Theory (Schneider et al., 2013) and Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson, 1999), offering a nuanced understanding of how contextual factors shape HR practitioners' experiences during layoffs. Participants described organisational climates marked by instability, fear, and

distrust; characterised by phrases such as “throwing each other under the bus,” which significantly eroded communication, collaboration, and the quality of decision-making.

These findings affirm Schneider et al., (2013) proposition that climate signals, “how things are done here”, profoundly influence individual cognition, affect, and behaviour. In punitive or opaque environments, HR practitioners reported diminished confidence in their decision-making capabilities, consistent with Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy, which posits that threatening environments can erode individuals’ belief in their own competence. This erosion was particularly evident in contexts where leadership failed to provide clarity, support, or psychological safety.

Conversely, in organisations where leadership demonstrated empathy, transparency, and empowerment, HR practitioners described experiencing increased creativity, collaboration, and a sense of procedural fairness. These findings extend Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 2006) by highlighting the role of emotional and ethical resonance, not just inspirational motivation, or intellectual stimulation, as critical enablers of resilience and ethical decision-making. Liang et al., (2021) support this view, noting that emotionally intelligent leadership fosters trust and psychological safety, which are essential for effective functioning during organisational crises.

Moreover, Fan et al., (2025) and Nyfoudi et al., (2024) emphasize that organisational climates characterized by psychological safety and ethical leadership are more likely to buffer the negative emotional impacts of layoffs on HR professionals. These climates enable practitioners to act with greater moral clarity and emotional stability, reinforcing the idea that climate is not merely a backdrop but an active determinant of ethical, emotional, and cognitive outcomes.

Thus, Theme 2 extends existing theoretical frameworks by positioning organisational climate as a dynamic and influential force that shapes not only behaviour but also the moral and emotional resilience of HR practitioners during periods of organisational upheaval.

6.2.3 Theme 3: Coping Strategies and Role Management

Theme Three explores the diverse coping strategies employed by HR practitioners and their implications for role management and psychological resilience. This theme draws on Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and Moral Agency Theory (Bandura, 2016), offering a multidimensional view of how practitioners navigate the emotional and ethical demands of layoffs.

Participants described a range of adaptive strategies, including journaling, prayer, peer support, and cognitive reframing, to manage the psychological toll of their roles. These strategies confirm the central tenet of COR Theory, that individuals strive to acquire, retain, and protect valuable resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Social, spiritual, and cognitive resources emerged as critical buffers against burnout and emotional exhaustion. Mwakyusa et al., (2024) further support this, demonstrating that HR professionals who actively cultivate personal and interpersonal resources exhibit greater resilience during organisational crises.

Importantly, the data revealed qualitative differences in coping efficacy. Practitioners who engaged in reflective, value-driven coping, such as aligning their actions with personal and professional ethics, reported lower levels of burnout and higher emotional coherence. One participant shared, “I prayed before every meeting; it grounded me,” illustrating how spiritual practices served as a stabilising force. In contrast, others who relied on avoidant strategies, such as emotional suppression, experienced lingering psychological distress: “I just numbed myself. It worked short-term, but I lost sleep for months.”

These findings extend COR Theory by introducing moral congruence—the alignment between one’s actions and ethical values, as a previously underexplored psychological resource. This aligns with Nyfoudi et al., (2024), who argue that ethical alignment enhances emotional resilience and mitigates moral injury in high-stakes HR roles.

Additionally, the reframing of layoffs as “transition facilitation” reflects the principles of Cognitive Reappraisal Theory (Gross, 2015), which posits that reinterpretation of stressful events can reduce emotional strain. This cognitive shift allowed practitioners to maintain a sense of purpose and agency, even amidst ethically

complex decisions. Burke et al., (2022) similarly found that meaning making and reframing are essential components of resilience in organisational change contexts.

Thus, Theme 3 confirms and extends existing coping and resilience theories by foregrounding the ethical dimension of psychological adaptation. It suggests that beyond managing stress, HR practitioners actively construct meaning and moral coherence to sustain their professional identity and emotional well-being during organisational turbulence.

6.2.4 Theme 4: Organisational Support Systems and Resilience

This theme underscores the centrality of Perceived Organisational Support (POS) Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1995) in shaping HR practitioners' resilience during layoffs. Participants consistently reported that their capacity to cope with the emotional and ethical demands of retrenchment processes was significantly influenced by both formal support structures, such as Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), coaching, and structured debriefs, and informal mechanisms, including peer solidarity and empathetic leadership.

When HR practitioners felt seen, heard, and valued by senior leadership, they demonstrated greater emotional stability, moral clarity, and even post-event growth. One participant reflected, "My director checked in after every retrenchment. That small gesture kept me going." Such expressions of care and recognition validate Eisenberger et al., (1986) proposition that perceived organisational support enhances affective commitment, psychological well-being, and role engagement. Similarly, Nyfoudi et al., (2024) found that HR professionals who perceived their organisations as supportive were more likely to exhibit initiative-taking coping and ethical decision-making under pressure.

These findings also reinforce Rousseau's (1995) Psychological Contract Theory, particularly the relational dimension of the contract. When HR practitioners perceived that their psychological contracts were upheld, through consistent communication, fairness, and emotional support, they were more likely to reciprocate with loyalty, discretionary effort, and resilience. Conversely, breaches of this contract, such as being excluded from decision-making or left unsupported, led to feelings of betrayal, disengagement, and emotional exhaustion.

Importantly, this theme challenges individualistic models of resilience, such as Bonanno's (2004) conceptualisation of resilience as a stable, trait-like capacity to "bounce back" from adversity. Instead, the data suggest that resilience is relationally constructed, emerging from the quality of interpersonal and organisational relationships. This aligns with Burke et al., (2022) and Fan et al., (2025), who argue that resilience in high-stress professional roles is not merely a function of individual traits but is significantly shaped by the social and organisational context.

Furthermore, this theme extends Hobfoll's (2018) Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory by highlighting the importance of shared resource pools, such as collective empathy, team cohesion, and leadership support, as critical to sustaining resilience. While COR Theory traditionally emphasises individual resource preservation, these findings suggest that collective resources can buffer against emotional depletion and foster a sense of solidarity and shared purpose. Mwakyusa et al., (2024) similarly emphasise the role of communal coping and peer-based support in enhancing resilience among HR professionals during organisational change.

In sum, Theme 4 confirms the foundational role of perceived organisational support in fostering resilience but also extends theoretical understandings by reframing resilience as a relational and systemic construct. It highlights that HR practitioners' well-being during layoffs is not solely a matter of personal fortitude but is deeply embedded in the quality of organisational relationships, leadership behaviours, and the integrity of the psychological contract.

6.2.5 Theme 5: Organisational climate and formation of professional identity

The final theme integrates Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), Moral Identity Theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002), and Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) to explore how HR practitioners navigated identity disruption and reconstruction during the emotionally and ethically complex process of organisational layoffs. Participants described profound experiences of identity fragmentation, often oscillating between conflicting roles, "executioner and counsellor in the same breath," which led to internal dissonance and moral strain.

These narratives confirm Ashforth and Mael's (1989) assertion that role conflict can trigger identity strain, particularly when individuals are embedded in multiple, competing social identities. The HR role, situated at the intersection of organisational

strategy and employee advocacy, became a site of identity tension, as practitioners were required to enforce decisions that clashed with their values and professional ethos. This aligns with Bragger et al., (2021), who found that HR professionals often experience identity bifurcation when navigating ethically ambiguous organisational mandates.

However, the data also reveal a longitudinal process of identity repair and growth, facilitated by moral reflection and meaning making. Practitioners described how, over time, they reinterpreted their roles not merely as implementers of organisational directives but as ethical stewards and moral agents. One participant noted, “I became a better practitioner because of it,” signalling a shift from identity dissonance to identity integration. This process resonates with Mezirow’s (1991) Transformative Learning Theory, which posits that disorienting dilemmas can catalyse critical reflection, leading to a reconfiguration of self-concept and worldview.

The redefinition of the HR role as the “moral compass of the organisation” reflects the emergence of what Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar (2010) term identity resilience, the capacity to maintain and reconstruct a coherent sense of self in the face of professional adversity. This identity work was not merely reactive but generative, enabling practitioners to align their professional identities with deeper moral convictions and ethical purpose. Nyfoudi et al., (2024) similarly highlight how HR professionals engage in identity crafting to reconcile organisational demands with personal values, particularly during ethically charged events like layoffs.

Moreover, the findings extend Moral Identity Theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002) by illustrating how moral identity is not static but evolves through practice, especially when individuals are confronted with morally complex decisions. The process of navigating layoffs became a crucible for moral development, where practitioners exercised moral agency (Bandura, 2016) to act in ways that preserved their integrity and reaffirmed their ethical commitments.

In this way, Theme 5 confirms and extends identity and moral development theories by presenting HR identity not as a fixed occupational category but as a transformative moral journey. It positions HR practitioners as active agents of ethical meaning making whose professional identities are continually reshaped through reflection, moral engagement, and the pursuit of congruence between personal values and organisational roles. This perspective is echoed in Fan et al., (2025), who argue that

identity resilience in HR is cultivated through ongoing ethical reflection and supported by organisational cultures that value authenticity and moral leadership.

The table below summarises the five key themes and their sub-themes, drawn from HR practitioners' experiences during organisational layoffs. Each sub-theme is analysed in relation to existing theory, indicating whether it confirms, contradicts, or extends prior conceptual frameworks. This mapping highlights the study's theoretical contributions, particularly in extending understandings of emotional labour, resilience, organisational support, and professional identity within the HR context.

Table 12: Table: Themes, Sub-Themes, and Theoretical Relationships

Theme	Sub-Themes	Relation to Prior Theory
1. Emotional Toll of Layoffs	Dual Role Strain	Extends Role Theory by revealing the moral-emotional conflict in simultaneously acting as advocate and enforcer.
	Psychological Impact	Confirms Affective Events Theory by showing how emotionally charged events shape HR practitioners' affective states.
	Coping Mechanisms	Extends Emotional Labour Theory by highlighting authentic empathy (not suppression) as a sustainable strategy.
2. Organisational Climate and Context	Instability and Fear	Confirms Organisational Climate Theory by showing how negative climate cues erode trust and decision-making.
	Leadership Style	Extends Transformational Leadership Theory by emphasizing emotional and ethical resonance as resilience enablers.
	Union and Legal Environment	Extends Psychological Safety Theory by showing how external institutional factors shape internal climate and HR behaviour.
3. Coping Strategies and Role Management	Emotion Regulation	Confirms Transactional Model of Stress and Coping; extends by integrating moral agency into emotion regulation.
	Professional Detachment	Contradicts traditional emotional labour models by showing detachment as less sustainable than authentic engagement.
	Peer and Team Support	Extends COR Theory by emphasizing collective resource sharing and relational resilience.
	Reliance on Organisational Protocols	Confirms coping theory; protocols serve as cognitive scaffolds during uncertainty.
	Ethical Anchoring and Values Alignment	Extends Moral Agency Theory by identifying moral congruence as a psychological resource.
4. Organisational Support Systems & Resilience	Formal HR and Wellness Structures	Confirms Perceived Organisational Support Theory; formal structures enhance affective commitment and well-being.

Theme	Sub-Themes	Relation to Prior Theory
	Supervisory and Leadership Support	Extends Psychological Contract Theory by showing how leadership empathy sustains resilience.
	Peer and Collegial Support Networks	Extends COR Theory by highlighting shared resource pools and relational coping.
	Post-Layoff Recovery and Organisational Learning	Extends resilience literature by framing recovery as a collective, learning-oriented process.
5. Organisational Climate & Professional Identity Formation	Identity Fragmentation and Role Ambiguity	Confirms Social Identity Theory; role conflict leads to identity strain.
	Moral Agency and Identity Repair	Extends Moral Identity Theory by showing identity repair through ethical reflection and action.
	Professionalisation through Reflection	Confirms Transformative Learning Theory; critical reflection enables identity growth.
	Identity Continuity and Growth	Extends Identity Resilience Theory by framing HR identity as fluid, ethically anchored, and growth oriented.

6.3 Patterns of Sameness and Difference Across Themes

A cross-thematic analysis of the five emergent themes revealed both convergences and divergences in the lived experiences of HR practitioners navigating the emotionally and ethically complex terrain of organisational layoffs. These patterns offer critical insights into the shared psychological burdens of HR work, while also highlighting how contextual, positional, and behavioural variables shape individual responses and outcomes.

6.3.1 Patterns of Sameness

Emotional Exhaustion and Moral Dissonance as Universal Experiences
Across all themes, HR practitioners consistently reported experiencing emotional exhaustion and moral dissonance. The duality of enforcing organisational decisions while empathising with affected employees created a persistent sense of internal conflict. This finding aligns with Affective Events Theory (Weiss et al., 1996), which posits that emotionally salient workplace events significantly influence employee

affect and behaviour. Moreover, the moral discomfort experienced by practitioners resonates with Moral Identity Theory (Aquino et al., 2002), which suggests that when professional actions conflict with internalised moral values, identity strain and psychological distress ensue. These findings are echoed in Fan et al., (2025), who highlight the emotional toll of HR roles during restructuring, and Bragger et al., (2021), who document identity conflict as a common outcome of role ambiguity in HR practice.

6.3.2 Peer and Leadership Empathy as Essential Resilience Anchors

Empathetic leadership and collegial solidarity emerged as critical buffers against emotional burnout. Practitioners who felt emotionally supported by peers and supervisors reported greater psychological stability and a stronger sense of professional purpose. This supports Perceived Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986), which posits that employees' belief in their organisation's care and valuation of their contributions enhances affective commitment and well-being. Nyfoudi et al., (2024) further argue that HR system strength and empathetic leadership are essential in fostering resilience during crises, while Mwakyusa et al., (2024) emphasise the role of peer support in mitigating emotional exhaustion.

6.3.3 Ethical Authenticity as a Unifying Adaptive Mechanism

Despite variations in coping strategies, a shared emphasis on ethical authenticity emerged. Practitioners who aligned their actions with personal and professional values, through reflection, advocacy, or reframing, reported enhanced emotional coherence and post-event growth. This finding extends Emotional Labour Theory (Hochschild, 1983) by challenging the traditional valorisation of emotional suppression and instead highlighting the protective role of authentic emotional expression (Nyfoudi et al., 2024). It also supports Bandura's (2016) concept of moral agency, wherein individuals exercise self-regulation to act in accordance with internalised ethical standards, even under organisational pressure.

6.3.4 Patterns of Difference

Organisational Context (Public vs. Private Sector)

Organisational setting significantly influenced HR practitioners' experiences. In the public sector, practitioners often operated within rigid procedural frameworks and under union scrutiny, which provided clarity but limited flexibility. In contrast, private sector HR professionals reported greater autonomy but also faced heightened ambiguity, performance pressures, and ethical dilemmas. These contextual differences extend Organisational Climate Theory (Schneider et al., 2013) by illustrating how macro-level institutional environments shape micro-level emotional and ethical experiences (Fan et al., 2025; Nyfoudi et al., 2024).

6.3.5 Hierarchical Position (Junior vs. Senior HR Practitioners)

Hierarchical status emerged as a key differentiator in how practitioners experienced and managed layoffs. Junior HR staff often felt disempowered, excluded from strategic decisions, and disproportionately burdened with the emotional labour of delivering difficult news. Senior HR leaders, while more involved in decision-making, reported a heavier sense of moral responsibility and reputational risk. This confirms Role Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978) and extends it by demonstrating how organisational hierarchy (Bragger et al., 2021) stratifies role strain and identity fragmentation.

6.3.6 Type of Coping Strategy (Avoidant vs. Reflective)

Coping strategies varied widely, with significant implications for practitioner well-being. Avoidant strategies, such as emotional numbing or disengagement, provided short-term relief but often led to long-term psychological costs, including insomnia and burnout. In contrast, reflective and value-driven coping, such as journaling, prayer, and ethical reframing, was associated with greater resilience and post-traumatic growth. These findings challenge Bonanno's (2004) individualistic model of resilience, which emphasises innate traits, and instead support Hobfoll's (2018) Conservation of Resources Theory, particularly the role of shared and moral resources in sustaining well-being (Mwakyusa et al., 2024; Burke et al., 2022).

In sum, while emotional strain and moral dissonance were near-universal among HR practitioners during layoffs, the outcomes of these experiences were mediated by organisational context, hierarchical position, and coping style. These findings underscore the need for a more relational, contextual, and ethically grounded understanding of resilience and identity in HR practice, particularly in ethically charged and emotionally demanding environments.

6.4 Integration of Theory and Data

The convergence of empirical findings with theoretical frameworks reveals that HR practitioners' experiences during organisational layoffs cannot be adequately explained by any single theory. Instead, their lived realities reflect a multi-theoretical mosaic, where structural, emotional, ethical, and identity-based dimensions intersect dynamically.

Role Theory (Katz et al., 1978) provides a foundational lens for understanding the structural tensions HR practitioners face. The dual expectations of being both employee advocates and organisational agents create role conflict and ambiguity, leading to emotional strain and identity fragmentation (Bragger et al., 2021).

Affective Events Theory (Weiss et al., 1996) explains the emotional triggers inherent in layoff processes. The act of terminating employment is a high-impact affective event that elicits strong emotional responses, influencing HR practitioners' attitudes, behaviours, and well-being (Fan et al., 2025).

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 2018) elucidates how practitioners mobilise and protect personal and collective resources, emotional, social, and ethical, to navigate stress. The findings extend COR Theory by highlighting the importance of shared resource pools, such as peer support and leadership empathy, in sustaining resilience (Mwakyusa et al., 2024; Burke et al., 2022).

Social Identity Theory (Ashforth et al., 1989) and Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) offer insight into how HR practitioners reconstruct meaning and professional identity post-crisis. The process of identity repair, moral reflection, and ethical reorientation illustrates that HR identity is not static but evolves through critical experiences and ethical engagement (Nyfoudi et al., 2024; Dutton et al., 2010).

Together, these frameworks reveal a dynamic system in which structural tension, emotional labour, ethical decision-making, and identity work are not discrete processes but interdependent mechanisms. This integration advances HR scholarship by demonstrating that ethics and emotion are not peripheral to HR practice, they are central to the enactment of resilience, professionalism, and moral agency during organisational crises.

6.5 Practical Implications

The findings offer actionable insights for HR leaders, organisational designers, and policymakers seeking to support HR practitioners during high-stakes transitions:

6.5.1 Leadership Training

Organisations should institutionalise empathetic leadership development to mitigate the risk of moral injury among HR professionals. Leaders who demonstrate emotional intelligence and ethical sensitivity can buffer the psychological toll of layoffs and foster psychological safety (Liang et al., 2021; Nyfoudi et al., 2024).

6.5.2 Reflective Debrief Systems

Implementing structured post-layoff debriefs can facilitate emotional processing, organisational learning, and identity repair. These sessions offer a space for practitioners to reflect on ethical dilemmas, share experiences, and co-construct meaning, aligning with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991; Symonds Research, 2025).

6.5.3 Peer Support Frameworks

Establishing HR peer support circles and mentoring programmes can enhance emotional regulation and reduce isolation. Peer-based resilience, as supported by Mwakyusa et al., (2024) and Burke et al., (2022), is a critical yet underutilised resource in HR practice.

6.5.4 Ethical Decision-Making Protocols

Embedding ethical reflection checkpoints within layoff procedures can help practitioners navigate moral complexity with greater clarity and confidence. This aligns with Moral Agency Theory (Bandura, 2016) and supports the development of ethical competence in HR roles.

6.5.5 Resilience Infrastructure

Organisations should shift from individualistic notions of resilience, often framed as personal toughness, towards relational and systemic resilience strategies. This includes fostering cultures of support, shared responsibility, and ethical alignment (Hobfoll, 2018; Fan et al., 2025).

6.6 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the advancement of HR theory in three significant ways:

6.6.1 From Role to Moral Tension

While Role Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978) has traditionally focused on structural role conflict, this study suggests that ethical tension is intrinsic to HR roles during layoffs. The dual identity of HR as both enforcer and empath introduces a moral dimension that requires theoretical integration (Bragger et al., 2021).

6.6.2 From Individual to Relational Resilience

The findings challenge individual-centric models of resilience (e.g., Bonanno, 2004) by demonstrating that resilience is co-constructed through social relationships, leadership empathy, and shared ethical frameworks. This supports a shift towards relational resilience, as proposed by Hobfoll (2018) and Nyfoudi et al., (2024).

6.6.3 From Identity Stability to Ethical Becoming

Rather than viewing HR identity as a fixed professional category, the data suggest that identity is fluid and ethically constructed through iterative reflection and moral engagement. This extends Social Identity Theory (Ashforth et al., 1989) and aligns with Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), positioning HR identity as a process of ethical becoming (Dutton et al., 2010). Recent work supports this view by showing how professionals continuously negotiate and reconstruct their identity in complex organisational settings (Mpangeva et al., 2024).

6.7 Integration of Theory and Data

The convergence of findings across the five themes and their integration with multiple theoretical frameworks underscored a central insight: no single theoretical lens adequately captures the layered complexity of HR practitioners' lived experiences during layoffs. Instead, the data revealed a multi-theoretical mosaic, where distinct frameworks intersected to explain the structural, emotional, ethical, and identity-based dimensions of HR work under organisational turbulence.

6.7.1 Role Theory (Katz et al., 1978) remained foundational in explaining the structural tension HR practitioners faced between fulfilling organisational mandates and preserving employee dignity. The persistent conflict between compliance and compassion reflected the archetypal dilemma of competing role expectations. Yet, findings suggested that this role tension was not static but cumulative, intensifying through repeated exposure to layoffs and evolving into moral strain rather than mere task conflict. This evolution extends Role Theory's explanatory reach by foregrounding its emotional and ethical dimensions, as argued in recent research by Cayrat and Boxall (2023), who demonstrate how sustained role strain erodes practitioner wellbeing and professional identity coherence.

6.7.2 Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) provided an essential lens to interpret the emotionally charged episodes HR practitioners encountered delivering termination news, witnessing distress, and managing guilt or organisational backlash. These events shaped ongoing attitudes, ethical reasoning, and professional identity. However, rather than isolated emotional reactions, the findings revealed systemic emotional exposure, consistent with Johnstone's (2024)

argument that repeated affective demands in HR roles create enduring emotional imprints that redefine practitioners' ethical schemas and resilience patterns.

6.7.3 The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989; 2018) illuminated how practitioners mobilised psychological and relational resources, peer solidarity, leadership empathy, and ethical anchoring to preserve emotional energy and sustain functionality. Yet, the data exposed disparities in access to such resources, particularly across hierarchies. Senior practitioners often benefitted from coaching or reflective supervision, while junior staff relied solely on informal peer networks. This aligns with Nyfoudi et al., (2024), who found that resource asymmetry within HR hierarchies shapes both resilience and burnout trajectories, suggesting the need to reconceptualise COR Theory through a structural equity lens in professional contexts.

6.7.4 Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 1986) and Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991; Mpangeva et al., 2024) proved particularly useful for interpreting how HR practitioners reconstructed professional meaning following moral dissonance. As layoffs repeatedly challenged their ethical boundaries, practitioners engaged in identity repair and moral reframing, shifting from administrative agents to moral stewards of organisational integrity. This identity reconstruction reflected a process of “ethical becoming” (Dutton et al., 2010), in which reflection on disorienting ethical events catalysed professional growth and values alignment.

Taken together, these frameworks reveal a dynamic, recursive system rather than a linear process. HR practitioners continuously oscillated between emotional regulation, ethical reasoning, and identity negotiation as they sought to reconcile structural demands with human compassion. This supports recent scholarship (Liang et al., 2021; Cayrat et al., 2023; Nyfoudi et al., 2024), which situates HR work during organisational change as a form of emotional and moral labour requiring sustained reflexivity.

Beyond theoretical integration, this synthesis holds practical implications for HR development and organisational design. It underscores the need for HR capability frameworks that move beyond procedural mastery to include emotional literacy, ethical reflexivity, and identity resilience as central professional competencies. It also challenges organisations to embed structural and cultural mechanisms that empower

ethical action through empathetic leadership, psychological safety, and reflective supervision. In doing so, HR practitioners can be equipped not only to execute organisational change but to humanise it, ensuring that the function retains its moral legitimacy amid volatility and disruption.

6.8 Practical Implications

6.8.1 Leadership Training for Empathetic Practice

Organisations must prioritise the development of empathetic leadership capabilities, particularly among senior leaders and HR professionals. This involves structured training programs that focus on emotional intelligence, active listening, trauma-informed leadership, and ethical decision-making. By embedding empathy into leadership development, organisations can better support HR practitioners who are often tasked with delivering difficult news, such as layoffs, and mitigate the risk of moral injury. These programs should include scenario-based learning, reflective exercises, and coaching to help leaders navigate emotionally charged situations with compassion and integrity.

6.8.2 Structured Reflective Debrief Systems

Post-layoff debriefing sessions should be institutionalised as a standard practice within HR departments. These sessions provide a psychologically safe space for HR professionals to process their experiences, share emotional responses, and extract lessons learned. Facilitated by trained professionals, these debriefs can help prevent emotional suppression, reduce burnout, and foster a culture of continuous learning. They also serve as a feedback loop to improve future organisational change processes.

6.8.3 Peer Support and Mentorship Frameworks

Establishing formal peer support networks and mentorship programs within HR departments can significantly enhance emotional resilience. These frameworks allow HR professionals to connect with colleagues who understand the unique emotional and ethical challenges of their roles. Regular peer check-ins, confidential discussion

forums, and mentorship pairings can provide validation, reduce isolation, and promote collective coping strategies. Organisations should also consider training peer supporters in basic counselling and mental health first aid.

6.8.4 Embedding Ethical Decision-Making Protocols

To address the moral complexity of HR work, especially during layoffs, organisations should integrate ethical reflection checkpoints into their decision-making processes. This includes the use of ethical impact assessments, stakeholder mapping, and structured ethical deliberation tools. By institutionalising these protocols, HR teams can ensure that decisions are not only legally compliant but also morally sound, transparent, and aligned with organisational values.

6.8.5 Building Relational Resilience Infrastructure

Traditional models of resilience often emphasise individual toughness and self-reliance. However, this study highlights the importance of relational resilience, where strength is drawn from supportive relationships, shared values, and collective meaning-making. Organisations should invest in systems and cultures that promote psychological safety, team cohesion, and mutual care. This could include regular team-building activities, access to mental health resources, and leadership practices that normalise vulnerability and emotional expression.

6.9 Theoretical Implications

6.9.1. From Role to Moral Tension: Reframing Role Theory in HR

Traditional role theory conceptualises organisational roles as relatively stable sets of expectations, responsibilities, and behaviours associated with a given position. In HR, this has often meant balancing administrative efficiency with strategic alignment to business goals. However, the findings of this study challenge the adequacy of this framework by highlighting the moral tensions that are inherent in HR work, particularly during ethically fraught processes like layoffs, disciplinary actions, and organisational restructuring.

This suggests that HR roles are not merely functional but are morally saturated. HR professionals often find themselves at the intersection of competing obligations: to the organisation's strategic imperatives, to legal compliance, and to the human dignity of employees. These tensions are not anomalies but structural features of the role itself. Therefore, role theory must evolve to incorporate ethical dissonance and moral ambivalence as central, not peripheral, to the HR function.

This reconceptualisation has implications for how we design HR roles, train HR professionals, and evaluate their performance. It calls for a shift from viewing HR as neutral implementers of policy to recognising them as moral agents who require ethical literacy, emotional intelligence, and institutional support to navigate their roles effectively.

6.9.2. From Individual to Relational Resilience: A Paradigm Shift in Understanding Resilience

Resilience in the workplace has traditionally been framed as an individual trait, the capacity of a person to “bounce back” from adversity through personal grit, optimism, and coping mechanisms. However, this study reveals that such a view is insufficient for understanding how HR professionals sustain themselves in the face of repeated exposure to emotionally taxing and ethically complex situations.

Instead, the findings support a relational model of resilience, where the ability to endure and grow through adversity is co-constructed through social interactions, shared meaning-making, and collective support. This aligns with emerging scholarship in positive organisational scholarship and relational cultural theory, which emphasise the role of interpersonal connections, psychological safety, and community in fostering resilience.

In practice, this means that organisations must move beyond resilience training that focuses solely on individual coping (e.g., mindfulness, stress management) and instead invest in systemic supports, such as peer support networks, team-based reflection practices, and leadership behaviours that model vulnerability and empathy. This shift repositions resilience as a socially embedded phenomenon, deeply influenced by organisational culture and relational dynamics.

6.9.3. From Identity Stability to Ethical Becoming: Rethinking HR Professional Identity

Conventional models of professional identity in HR often assume a stable, coherent self-concept grounded in role clarity, professional standards, and organisational alignment. However, the findings of this study suggest that HR identity is far more fluid, dynamic, and ethically contingent.

HR professionals frequently confront situations that challenge their values, beliefs, and sense of self. These moments of moral dissonance, such as participating in layoffs they personally disagree with, trigger processes of ethical reflection and identity negotiation. Rather than adhering to a fixed professional script, HR practitioners engage in what can be termed “ethical becoming”: a continuous, iterative process of self-examination, value clarification, and identity reconstruction.

This theoretical shift has profound implications. It suggests that HR development should not only focus on competencies and compliance but also on moral development, critical reflexivity, and narrative identity work. It also implies that HR professionals need safe spaces, such as reflective supervision, coaching, or peer dialogue, to explore and make sense of their evolving identities.

In sum, this reframing positions HR identity not as a destination but as a journey, shaped by the ethical landscapes practitioners must navigate and the meaning they derive from their experiences.

6.10 Integration of Research Gaps

By integrating Role Theory, Affective Events Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Transformative Learning Theory, the chapter has addressed critical gaps in the literature. First, it responds to the limited empirical research on the psychological and ethical dimensions of HR role tension (Cayrat et al., 2023) by demonstrating how moral dissonance and emotional exhaustion are central to HR practitioners’ experiences. Second, it advances understanding of contextual variations, including organisational sector, hierarchical level, and

leadership style that shape decision-making efficacy and ethical strain, thus addressing the gap identified by Nyfoudi et al., (2024).

Third, the study contributes to the underexplored area of coping and self-regulation mechanisms by identifying a spectrum of strategies, ranging from avoidant to reflective, and highlighting the role of ethical authenticity in sustaining resilience (Liang et al., 2021). Fourth, it empirically examines both formal and informal support systems, such as EAPs, peer networks, and leadership empathy, thereby responding to the call for more research on support mechanisms that enhance HR resilience (Vu et al., 2022). Finally, the findings extend the literature on macro-level organisational culture and climate by showing how punitive or psychologically safe environments shape HR practitioners' ethical decision-making and emotional well-being (Johnstone, 2024).

Together, these contributions reinforce the central argument of this chapter: that ethics and emotion are not peripheral but foundational to HR resilience and professionalism during organisational crises. The chapter not only bridges theoretical and empirical domains but also lays the groundwork for a more holistic, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded understanding of HR practice.

6.11 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that HR practitioners' experiences during organisational layoffs are shaped by a complex interplay of emotional, ethical, structural, and identity-related dynamics. Rather than aligning neatly with a single theoretical lens, their experiences reflect a multi-theoretical reality in which role conflict, emotional labour, resource mobilisation, and identity transformation converge. The findings underscore that ethics and emotion are not peripheral but central to HR resilience and professionalism in times of organisational crisis.

By integrating theory and data, this chapter has advanced a more holistic understanding of HR practice under pressure, offering both theoretical refinements and practical interventions. These insights set the stage for Chapter 7, which will present the study's conclusions, outline its contributions to research and practice, and propose directions for future inquiry.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the study by synthesising the key findings and articulating their theoretical and practical implications. It reflects on how the research addressed critical gaps in the literature and contributed to a deeper understanding of the psychological, ethical, and contextual complexities of HR practitioners' experiences during organisational layoffs.

The study was motivated by underexplored areas in existing HR scholarship. First, there has been limited empirical research on the psychological and ethical dimensions of HR role tension during layoffs (Cayrat et al., 2023), despite growing recognition of the emotional and moral complexity of such processes. Second, scholars have noted an insufficient understanding of how contextual factors, such as organisational hierarchy, legal frameworks, and leadership styles, shape HR decision-making in high-stakes environments (Nyfoudi et al., 2024). Third, there remains a lack of exploration into the specific coping and self-regulation mechanisms HR practitioners employ to manage moral and emotional strain (Liang et al., 2021). Fourth, while support systems are often recommended, there is limited empirical testing of the effectiveness of formal and informal support mechanisms in enhancing HR resilience (Vu et al., 2022). Finally, the influence of macro-level organisational culture and climate on HR professionals' ethical decision-making and emotional well-being remains under-theorised (Johnstone, 2024).

By exploring these gaps through the lens of HR practitioners' lived experiences, this study offers a multi-theoretical and empirically grounded account of how HR professionals navigate the emotional, ethical, and organisational complexities of layoffs. The chapter proceeds to summarise the key findings, demonstrate how they address the identified research gaps, and articulate the study's theoretical and practical contributions. It concludes with recommendations for future research and final reflections on the evolving role of HR in ethically complex organisational contexts.

7.2 Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the intersections between emotional labour, ethical decision-making, and organisational context in shaping the HR practitioner's experience during layoffs. By employing a qualitative, inductive thematic approach, the study contributed to an underexplored area of HRM scholarship, the human side of those implementing human resource decisions.

Through analysis of fifteen semi-structured interviews and more than seven hundred codes consolidated into nineteen subthemes across five overarching themes, the study developed a rich interpretive model of HR role tension.

7.3 Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the findings illustrated that HR practitioners' experiences during layoffs are embedded in multi-level dynamics: individual emotion regulation (micro), team and peer support (meso), and organisational climate (macro). These insights underscore that ethical HR practice is not merely a function of individual competence but of the relational and systemic contexts that shape professional agency and moral reasoning.

Table 13: Summary of insights

Research Question	Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes & Illustrative Phrases
1. How do HR practitioners experience the emotional impact of layoffs?	Emotional Toll of Layoffs	Dual Role Strain	Role tension experience Duality "HR hat off." "Felt torn" "Wearing two hats" Employees vs business directives
		Psychological Impact	Anxiety Emotional strain Trauma Survivor's guilt, Emotional exhaustion Moral discomfort Guilt Sadness "Felt conflicted" Emotional fatigue "Heartbreaking" "Haunts me"
		Coping Mechanisms	Journaling Prayer Faith, "Spoke a lot" Went to church. Peer support Therapy Mindfulness Structured reflections Decompression time "Brave face" Screamed in pillows, Danced Power pose
2. What organisational factors shape the climate during retrenchment processes?	Organisational Climate and Context	Instability and Fear	Instability Fearful Uncertain Rumours spread Shattered trust Survivor syndrome "War zone" Cold Fear-driven Fragmented Heavy Rocky

Research Question	Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes & Illustrative Phrases
			Tumultuous
		Leadership Style	Authoritarian leadership Authentic leaders Empathetic leadership Leadership transparency “Leadership sets tone” “Make or break HR.” Listening leadership
		Union and Legal Environment	Union presence Union dynamics Union dissatisfaction Legal framework Legal compliance Section 189 Procedural uncertainty Union negotiations Legal constraints
3. How do HR practitioners manage role tension and maintain effectiveness during layoffs?	Coping Strategies and Role Management	Emotion Regulation	Emotionally withdrawn. Compartmentalised Suppress emotions. Emotional preparation Stay composed. Mindfulness techniques
		Professional Detachment	Professional capacity Detach Separate role from person Not emotionally blinded
		Peer and Team Support	Peer support HR Manager group Informal check-ins Trusted circle “War room”
		Reliance on Organisational Protocols	Document everything Anchor business rationale. People and process principles

Research Question	Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes & Illustrative Phrases
			Adequate data Validate everything. Structured communication plan FAQs booklets
		Ethical Anchoring and Values Alignment	Anchored in fairness Advocate fairness, Compliance vs compassion Tension Values alignment, "Listen to your gut." Uncompromised people treatment
4. What support systems are available to HR and employees during retrenchments?	Organisational Support Systems & Resilience	Formal HR and Wellness Structures	EAP programmes Workplace therapist Wellness coach Access counsellors Legal advisory support Leadership coaching
		Supervisory and Leadership Support	Leadership support vital Line leader support. Leaders checked-in Leadership alignment
		Peer and Collegial Support Networks	Peer support HR networks Informal peer check-ins Group discussions
		Post-Layoff Recovery and Organisational Learning	Post-action reviews Structured reflections Continuous learning Debrief sessions. Organisational learning
5. How do layoffs influence HR's professional identity and sense of self?	Organisational Climate & Professional Identity Formation	Identity Fragmentation and Role Ambiguity	Felt like a pawn Identity conflict HR excluded HR as messenger HR executors vs emotional anchors
		Moral Agency and Identity Repair	Advocate for employees HR push back Speak up.

Research Question	Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes & Illustrative Phrases
			Moral conflict Ethical dilemma
		Professionalisation through Reflection	Structured reflections Growth mindset Reflective practice Teachable moments Self-insights
		Identity Continuity and Growth	Resilience Personal mastery Professional growth Continuous learning “Doing sacred work”

The findings reveal a dynamic interplay between personal ethics, organisational systems, and contextual pressures, confirming that HR practitioners’ resilience is both individually cultivated and structurally mediated.

7.4 Conclusions by Research Question

RQ1: How do HR practitioners perceive and experience role tension during layoffs?

This study finds that HR role tension is not only structural but deeply emotional and ethical. Practitioners described feeling “caught between loyalty to management and empathy for employees,” reflecting a profound sense of identity dualism. This extends beyond confirming the dual-role hypothesis (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023) by offering empirical insight into the psychological and moral dissonance that accompanies this tension, an area previously underexplored in the literature. The emotional toll, manifesting as guilt, fatigue, and internal conflict, was compounded by the need to perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012). However, participants also demonstrated adaptive responses, such as cognitive reframing and procedural detachment, which facilitated professional identity recalibration.

Conclusion: This study addresses the gap in understanding the psychological and ethical dimensions of HR role tension by showing that identity dualism generates both distress and opportunities for moral growth, positioning HR work as a site of ethical negotiation and emotional labour.

RQ2: What factors influence HR practitioners' decision-making efficacy during layoffs?

The study reveals that decision-making efficacy is shaped by a constellation of contextual factors, including organisational climate, leadership style, and access to reliable data. In transparent and participatory environments, practitioners reported greater confidence and fairness in their decisions, while fear-based or opaque climates led to hesitation, second-guessing, and increased error risk. These findings respond directly to Nyfoudi et al., (2024) by providing empirical evidence of how contextual volatility and leadership behaviour influence HR decision-making. The use of data analytics as a stabilising tool further supports Simon's (1997) bounded rationality framework, illustrating how practitioners navigate uncertainty through evidence-based reasoning.

Conclusion: This study addresses the gap in understanding contextual influences on HR decision-making by demonstrating that efficacy is socially and emotionally bounded, contingent on leadership climate, procedural clarity, and access to credible information.

RQ3: What strategies do HR practitioners employ to manage role tension?

The study identifies a diverse range of coping strategies across emotional, ethical, and behavioural domains. These include self-reflection, journaling, therapy, prayer, and peer support. Crucially, practitioners who engaged in values-based coping, anchored in fairness, dignity, and ethical clarity, reported lower levels of burnout and greater emotional coherence. This finding addresses the gap identified by Liang et al., (2021) by empirically exploring the specific self-regulation mechanisms HR practitioners use to manage moral and emotional tension. The data also highlight the importance of moral congruence, the alignment between personal values and professional actions as a key resilience factor.

Conclusion: This study contributes to the limited literature on HR coping by showing that sustainable strategies are those grounded in ethical authenticity and supported by reflective and communal practices.

RQ4: How do organisational support systems impact the resilience of HR practitioners facing layoffs?

The findings show that both formal support systems (e.g., EAPs, coaching, counselling) and informal mechanisms (e.g., peer check-ins, leadership empathy, team debriefs) significantly enhance HR practitioners' resilience and ethical confidence. In organisations where such supports were absent, practitioners relied on personal coping strategies, often at the cost of increased emotional strain and isolation. This directly addresses the gap identified by Vu et al., (2022), who called for more empirical research into the effectiveness of support mechanisms. The study reveals that informal, relational supports are often more impactful than formal programmes, particularly when they foster psychological safety and moral validation.

Conclusion: This study addresses the limited empirical testing of support systems by demonstrating that HR resilience is relationally constructed and thrives in environments where institutional care mirrors the empathy HR professionals are expected to deliver.

RQ5: How does organisational climate shape the experiences of HR practitioners during layoffs?

The study finds that organisational climate acts as a moral amplifier, either intensifying or alleviating the ethical and emotional strain of layoffs. In fear-driven, opaque environments, practitioners reported heightened cynicism, moral disengagement, and decision paralysis. In contrast, climates characterised by transparency, fairness, and psychological safety enabled moral clarity, collaboration, and resilience. These findings respond to Johnstone's (2024) call for more research into how macro-level organisational culture and climate shape HR experiences and ethical decision-making. The study positions climate not merely as a contextual backdrop but as a moral infrastructure that directly influences how HR practitioners enact fairness and compassion.

Conclusion: This study addresses the gap in understanding organisational climate by demonstrating its significant role in shaping the ethical and emotional contours of HR practice during layoffs

This study contributes to the evolving theoretical nexus between Role Theory, Emotional Labour Theory, Organisational Support Theory, and broader frameworks of moral identity, resilience, and organisational ethics. By integrating the empirical findings from Chapters 5 and 6, the study advances a more holistic understanding of HR practitioners as moral agents navigating ethical complexity under structural constraint. In doing so, it addresses several key research gaps, including the limited empirical exploration of HR's psychological and ethical experiences during layoffs (Cayrat et al., 2023), the under-theorisation of coping and support mechanisms (Liang et al., 2021; Vo-Thanh et al., 2022), and the insufficient attention to contextual and cultural influences on HR decision-making (Nyfoudi et al., 2024; Johnstone, 2024).

1. Role Tension as Moral Work

This study extends Role Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978) by reframing HR role conflict not merely as a function of competing expectations, but as a form of moral work, a continuous negotiation of ethical identity within structurally ambiguous and emotionally charged contexts. Rather than being passive recipients of organisational tension, HR practitioners emerge as active moral agents, engaging in reflexive sensemaking to reconcile their dual roles as both organisational stewards and employee advocates. This reconceptualisation aligns with Bolton's (2013) and Bolton & Laaser's (2022) work on moral work and resonates with Costas and Kärreman's (2020) theorisation of moral identity work. It also builds on Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, and Kish-Gephart's (2023) insights into ethical sensemaking, showing how HR practitioners construct and reconstruct their professional identities through engagement with moral ambiguity. In doing so, the study addresses the gap identified by Cayrat et al., (2023) by offering a rich, empirically grounded account of the ethical dimensions of role tension in HR.

2. Resilience as Relational Competence

The findings challenge individualistic conceptions of resilience (e.g., Bonanno, 2004) by demonstrating that HR resilience is not a fixed trait but a relationally co-constructed competence. This extends Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) by showing that resilience is sustained through empathetic leadership,

peer solidarity, and institutional care, elements that foster psychological safety and moral validation. This aligns with recent scholarship by Kossek and Perrigino (2023) and Linnenluecke (2022), who argue that resilience is a socially embedded capability. The study also responds to Vu et al., (2022) by empirically examining the effectiveness of both formal (e.g., EAPs, coaching) and informal (e.g., peer check-ins, debriefs) support systems. These findings underscore that HR practitioners' emotional endurance and ethical clarity are not solely products of personal coping but are deeply influenced by the quality of organisational relationships and support infrastructures.

3. Layoffs as Ethical System Events

Finally, the study reframes layoffs not as isolated administrative tasks but as systemic ethical events that reflect and reproduce the organisation's moral climate. HR practitioners' decisions during layoffs are shaped by the ethical tone set by leadership, the transparency of communication, and the cultural norms surrounding fairness and compassion. This insight extends Organisational Climate Theory (Schneider et al., 2013) and responds to Johnstone's (2024) call for deeper inquiry into how macro-level organisational culture shapes micro-level ethical behaviour. It also aligns with emerging scholarship by Tregaskis et al., (2024) and van Dierendonck et al., (2023), who conceptualise layoffs as collective moral stressors with long-term implications for organisational trust, identity, and legitimacy. By linking role tension, emotional labour, and moral identity to broader institutional logics, this study situates HR practice within the ethical infrastructure of organisations, highlighting the need for systemic approaches to support ethical decision-making and emotional sustainability.

Table 14: Relationship between Themes, Subthemes, and Theoretical Contribution

Theme	Sub-Themes	Theoretical Connection	Relation to Prior Theory
1. Emotional Toll of Layoffs	Dual Role Strain	Role Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978); Moral Identity Work (Costas & Kärreman, 2020)	Extends: Reframes role conflict as moral work, not just structural tension.
	Psychological Impact	Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996); Emotional Labour Theory (Hochschild, 1983)	Confirms: Emotional events trigger affective strain; Extends: Emotional labour includes moral dissonance.
	Coping Mechanisms	Moral Agency Theory (Bandura, 2016); Cognitive Reappraisal (Gross, 2015)	Extends: Introduces ethical authenticity and moral congruence as coping resources.
2. Organisational Climate and Context	Instability and Fear	Organisational Climate Theory (Schneider et al., 2013); Ethical Climate (Johnstone, 2024)	Confirms: Organisational Climate Theory by showing how negative climate cues erode trust and decision-making. Extends: Climate as moral infrastructure shaping ethical strain.
	Leadership Style	Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 2006); Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986)	Extends: Empathetic leadership as a resilience enabler and ethical tone-setter.
	Union and Legal Environment	Contextual HRM (Nyfoudi et al., 2024)	Extends: Highlights legal and institutional constraints on ethical agency.
3. Coping Strategies and Role Management	Emotion Regulation	Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); Emotional Labour Theory (Hochschild, 1983)	Contradicts: Challenges detachment as adaptive; Extends: Supports deep acting and authenticity.

Theme	Sub-Themes	Theoretical Connection	Relation to Prior Theory
	Professional Detachment	Emotional Labour Theory (Hochschild, 1983)	Contradicts: Detachment linked to burnout; authenticity more sustainable.
	Peer and Team Support	Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 2018); Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986)	Extends: Emphasises relational resilience and shared resource pools.
	Reliance on Organisational Protocols	Bounded Rationality (Simon, 1997)	Confirms: Protocols reduce cognitive overload and emotional bias.
	Ethical Anchoring and Values Alignment	Moral Identity Theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002); Moral Agency Theory (Bandura, 2016)	Extends: Ethical authenticity as a resilience mechanism.
4. Organisational Support Systems & Resilience	Formal HR and Wellness Structures	Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986); Vo-Thanh et al., (2022)	Confirms: Formal supports enhance affective commitment and well-being.
	Supervisory and Leadership Support	Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1995); Linnenluecke (2022)	Extends: Leadership empathy as a moral and emotional buffer.
	Peer and Collegial Support Networks	Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 2018); Kossek & Perrigino (2023)	Extends: Peer support as a co-constructed resilience resource.
	Post-Layoff Recovery and Organisational Learning	Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991); Tregaskis et al., (2024)	Extends: Layoffs as catalysts for moral learning and identity growth.
5. Organisational Climate & Professional Identity Formation	Identity Fragmentation and Role Ambiguity	Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989); Role Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978)	Confirms: Role conflict leads to identity strain; Extends: Adds ethical dissonance.
	Moral Agency and Identity Repair	Moral Identity Theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002); Ethical Sensemaking (Treviño et al., 2023)	Extends: Identity repair as moral agency in action.

Theme	Sub-Themes	Theoretical Connection	Relation to Prior Theory
	Professionalisation through Reflection	Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991); Dutton et al., (2010)	Confirms: Reflection enables identity growth. Extends: Adds ethical becoming.
	Identity Continuity and Growth	Identity Resilience (Dutton et al., 2010); van Dierendonck & Jacobs (2023)	Extends: HR identity as fluid, ethically anchored, and shaped by moral events.

7.5 Practical Recommendations

1. Institutionalising Emotional Support for HR

Organisations should embed HR wellness protocols during restructuring, including mandatory debriefs, psychological support, and reflective practice sessions. Such practices safeguard both HR practitioners and ethical process integrity.

2. Ethical Decision-Making Frameworks

Develop transparent ethical decision-making frameworks combining analytics with empathy. HR should be equipped with ethical scenario training and participatory consultation mechanisms.

3. Strengthening HR's Strategic Voice

Executives should reposition HR as a strategic moral partner, not merely an executor of management directives. Representation in executive deliberations ensures fairness and mitigates reputational risk.

4. Reinforcing Organisational Support Systems

Establish comprehensive support networks (EAPs, coaching, peer reflection) that are culturally accessible and confidential. Peer support should be normalised as part of post-layoff recovery.

5. Leadership Development

Train leaders to model empathy and psychological safety during transitions. Ethical leadership reduces fear-driven cultures and promotes sustainable organisational climates.

7.6 Implications for Theory and Practice

This research arguably bridges the humanistic and strategic dimensions of HRM. Theoretically, it advances understanding of role tension as a multidimensional construct that encompasses emotional, ethical, and organisational facets. Practically, it proposes a moral resilience framework, positioning HR not just as administrators but as ethical stewards of organisational change.

By integrating theories of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012), role identity (Ashforth et al., 1989), and organisational support (Eisenberger et al., 2002), this study positions HR practitioners as both agents and subjects of human experience within the enterprise. However, recent scholarship has extended these theoretical foundations, highlighting the moral, emotional, and identity-laden complexity of HR practice in contemporary organisations. For instance, emotional labour theory has evolved to encompass moral emotion regulation and authenticity management in professional roles (Grandey et al., 2017; Bolton et al., 2023). Similarly, role identity theory has been reconceptualised through the lens of moral identity work and ethical role negotiation, recognising that professionals actively reconstruct meaning and coherence amid ethical and organisational contradictions (Costas et al., 2020).

At the same time, organisational support theory has expanded beyond its original psychological contract framework to emphasise reciprocal relational resilience, the co-construction of trust and psychological safety between employee and organisation (Kossek et al., 2023; van Dierendonck et al., 2023). Integrating these

evolving perspectives situates HR as occupying a dual frontier: emotionally exposed due to the moral weight of people management and structurally constrained by the organisation's strategic imperatives. This synthesis reveals that HR practitioners experience role tension not simply as a cognitive or affective state but as a moral-identity negotiation process, illuminating the need for new theoretical models that capture HR's evolving role in the ethics of organisational life.

7.7 Future Research Directions

While the fifteen interviews yielded exceptionally rich qualitative data, the sample was confined to HR practitioners operating within South Africa. This geographic and contextual limitation inevitably constrains the transferability and cross-cultural generalisability of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2018). Future research should build on this study's conceptual and methodological groundwork by broadening scope, time horizon, and methodological triangulation to enhance theoretical robustness and empirical depth.

1. Comparative Studies Across Contexts:

Future research could investigate HR role tension across diverse cultural, institutional, and sectoral settings, such as comparing public and private organisations or examining multinational contexts (Boxall et al., 2023). Cross-national comparisons may reveal how varying labour relations regimes, socio-economic pressures, and cultural expectations shape HR practitioners' moral and emotional responses to layoffs. Such comparative approaches would strengthen theoretical sensitivity to contextual moderators of role tension, a limitation noted in current literature (Nyfoudi et al., 2024).

2. Longitudinal Research:

Given the temporal nature of emotional recovery and ethical sensemaking, longitudinal designs are warranted to trace HR practitioners' adaptation trajectories following layoffs (Costas et al., 2020). Tracking practitioners over time would enable scholars to assess the persistence of moral strain, the evolution of professional

identity, and the durability of coping strategies, thereby complementing this study's cross-sectional design. This would extend understanding of resource depletion and recovery in line with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

3. Quantitative Validation:

Future studies could operationalise this study's qualitative insights by developing and validating psychometric scales to measure constructs such as HR role tension, ethical alignment, and coping efficacy. Quantitative modelling (e.g., structural equation modelling) could help establish causal pathways between emotional labour, organisational support, and ethical decision confidence (Kuntz et al., 2023). This would provide statistical validation for qualitative themes and strengthen theory building.

4. Organisational Interventions:

Further empirical work should evaluate the effectiveness of structured organisational interventions, including peer support groups, reflective supervision, and resilience training in mitigating moral fatigue and enhancing HR role integrity (van Dierendonck et al., 2023). Experimental or quasi-experimental designs could assess how such interventions improve ethical reasoning, reduce burnout, and strengthen alignment between HR identity and organisational purpose.

5. AI and Decision-Making

As HR increasingly integrates data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) into talent and layoff decisions, there is a pressing need to explore how algorithmic tools reshape ethical reasoning, emotional detachment, and moral agency in HR roles (Huang et al., 2024). Future research could examine whether AI-supported decision-making diminishes or amplifies moral strain, particularly in contexts where human empathy and automation intersect. This emerging intersection of technology and ethics presents a new frontier for role tension research.

7.8 Final Conclusion

This study affirms that HR practitioners are not merely administrative executors but the moral conscience of organisational transformation. Layoffs, often treated as strategic necessities, expose not only operational vulnerabilities but also the ethical and emotional fragility of corporate life. By integrating Role Theory (Katz et al., 1978), Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), and Emotional Labour Theory (Hochschild, 2012), this research advances a nuanced model of HR role tension that situates HR practice at the intersection of emotional regulation, ethical reasoning, and institutional culture.

The findings reveal that resilient and ethical HR practice is not determined solely by individual coping capacity but is co-constructed through organisational empathy, ethical leadership, and systemic support (Kossek et al., 2023; Bolton et al., 2022). Role tension, when unmitigated, becomes a crucible for ethical compromise; when supported, it becomes a site for moral growth and identity integration. Thus, the research underscores that HR's sustainability and credibility as a profession hinge on organisations' willingness to humanise systems and prioritise moral coherence alongside performance efficiency.

Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to the evolving discourse on ethical HRM, proposing that the profession itself constitutes a form of moral infrastructure, a stabilising ethical mechanism within turbulent organisational environments. In an era defined by restructuring and uncertainty, the imperative is clear: even amid loss and transition, dignity must endure, and HR practitioners must be empowered to act not only as enforcers of policy but as custodians of humanity within business.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: CONSISTENCY MATRIX

Research Questions	Literature Review	Data Collection Tool	Data Analysis Method
RQ1: How do HR practitioners perceive and experience role tension during layoffs?	Theme 1: Limited empirical research on the psychological and ethical dimensions of HR role tension during layoffs (Cayrat et al., 2023).	Interview guide for semi-structured interviews.	Coding, finding, and analysing themes to derive conclusions about role tension.
RQ2: What factors influence the decision-making efficacy of HR practitioners during layoffs?	Theme 2: Insufficient understanding of contextual variations (e.g., hierarchy, legal constraints, leadership style) affecting HR decision-making during layoffs (Nyfoudi et al., 2024).	Interview guide for semi-structured interviews.	Coding, finding, and analysing themes to derive conclusions about decision-making efficacy.
RQ3: What coping strategies do HR practitioners employ to manage role tension during layoffs?	Theme 3: Lack of exploration of specific coping and self-regulation mechanisms to manage moral and emotional tension (Liang et al., 2021).	Interview guide for semi-structured interviews.	Coding, finding, and analysing themes to derive conclusions about coping strategies.
RQ4: How do organisational support systems impact the resilience of HR practitioners facing layoffs?	Theme 4: Limited empirical testing of formal and informal support mechanisms enhancing HR resilience (Vo-Thanh et al., 2022).	Interview guide for semi-structured interviews	Coding, finding, and analysing themes to derive conclusions about organisational support systems.
RQ5: How does organisational climate shape employee reactions during layoffs, and what role does HR play?	Theme 5: Limited research on macro-level organisational culture and climate shaping HR experiences and ethical decision-making (Johnstone, 2024).	Interview guide for semi-structured interviews	Coding, finding, and analysing themes to derive conclusions about organisational climate.

Appendix 2: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Term	Definition
Role Tension	Role tension refers to the stress and conflict experienced by individuals when they face competing demands and expectations in their roles (Sonnentag et al., 2023).
Conservation of theory	Conservation of Resources (COR) theory posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect resources they value , such as objects, personal characteristics, energies, and conditions and that stress occurs when these resources are threatened, lost, or insufficiently gained following significant investment (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2022; Giorgi et al., 2020).
Coping Strategies	Coping strategies are the methods and techniques individuals use to manage stress and emotional challenges (Liang et al., 2021).
Decision-Making Efficacy	Decision-making efficacy is the ability of individuals to make effective and timely decisions, particularly under pressure (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023)
HR Paradox	The HR paradox represents “the inherent tensions HR practitioners face between their dual responsibilities to management and employees, which can undermine their credibility, emotional well-being, and professional identity” (Francis & Keegan, 2020, p. 215).
Layoff	For regular professional staff, layoff is the elimination of a position due to a lack of work, a lack of funds and/or because of a reorganization. Reducing a professional staff position’s percent time or months worked per year are not subject to the layoff process. Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). (2025, May 14). Layoffs and reductions in force: HR operations. University of Washington Human Resources.
Leadership	“Leadership is a process of social influence in which an individual enlists the support and efforts of others toward achieving a common goal.” — Northouse (2024, p. 6)
Organisational Climate	Organisational climate refers to the shared perceptions and attitudes within an organisation that influence employee behaviour and reactions (Vu, 2022).
Organisational Support Systems	Organisational support systems encompass the resources and structures provided by an organisation to assist employees in their roles (Gigliotti, 2019).
Role tension theory	“More recent perspectives emphasise that role tension is multidimensional, arising from conflicting values, unclear authority and excessive expectations, each exerting unique effects on well-being and resilience (Tang et al., 2021; Bragger et al., 2021).

Appendix 3: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Details

Interview Guide*		
Date of Interview		
Place of Interview		
Name of interviewer		
	Current Role	Previous Role (Layoffs exposed)
Date:		
Job title:		
Industry:		
Company name:		
Company size:		

* Please note that this information is purely for the researcher's reference and will not be used to identify any individual or their organisation by name, or provide personal information that may reveal the identities of either or both. The pro-forma Letter of Informed Consent outlines the protection provided to respondents (and by implication their organisations).

Appendix 3: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Question	Follow-Up	Interviewer Notes
1. Can you describe a specific instance when you experienced role tension during a layoff situation?	What emotions did you feel at that time?	Listen for emotional cues; take note of specifics shared.
2. In what ways do you believe role tension affects your effectiveness as an HR practitioner during layoffs?	How does this influence your decision-making process?	Observe body language; probe further if needed.
3. What contextual factors do you think influence your decision-making efficacy during layoffs?	How do these factors differ across various organizational contexts?	Look for examples that illustrate their points; clarify any vague responses.
4. Can you share an example of a decision you made during a layoff that was significantly impacted by role tension?	What was the outcome of that decision?	Note the impact of role tension on their decision-making; assess the significance of the outcome.
5. What specific coping strategies do you employ to manage role tension during layoffs?	How effective do you find these strategies in alleviating stress?	Evaluate the practicality of their strategies; consider asking for more details on effective methods.
6. Can you discuss any techniques or practices that you have learned over time to help cope with role tension?	Have these practices evolved as your experience has grown?	Identify any patterns or changes in coping strategies over time.
7. What types of organisational support systems have you found most helpful in managing role tension during layoffs?	Can you provide examples of how these systems have positively impacted your work?	Assess the effectiveness of these systems; consider asking for specific examples.
8. In your opinion, what role does leadership play in providing support to HR practitioners during layoffs?	How does this support influence your resilience?	Look for insights into leadership styles and their impact on HR practices.
9. How would you describe the organisational climate during layoffs in your experience?	How does this climate affect your approach to handling layoffs?	Note any contrasting views about climate; probe for specifics regarding their experiences.
10. What organisational factors do you believe shape HR practices during layoffs?	How do these factors contribute to or mitigate role tension?	Identify key factors mentioned; consider their overall implications for HR practices.
11. Reflecting on your overall experience, what key lessons have you learned about managing role tension during layoffs?		Capture any overarching themes or insights they share; reflect on the depth of their understanding.
12. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered regarding your experiences as an HR practitioner during layoffs?		Encourage open-ended responses; ensure participants feel heard and valued.

Appendix 4: LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Madam/Sir

My name is Mantoa Elizabeth Msimang, and I am a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science, currently pursuing my MBA. As part of my research, I am exploring the topic of role tension within organizations, specifically focusing on its impact during layoffs. The title of my research project is **"The impact of role tension on the efficacy of HR practitioners during layoffs"**. The purpose of this research is to analyse the sources and effects of role tension experienced by HR professionals in the context of layoffs, and to identify strategies they employ to manage this tension effectively.

I would sincerely appreciate your time and willingness to participate in this study. The interview will be a semi-structured format with open-ended questions. The interview duration is expected to be between 45 and 60 minutes. With your permission, I request that the interview be recorded and transcribed to capture the content of the interview. The interview will be kept strictly confidential and no source, individual or organisation, will be identified in the text of the final report. **Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty.** With your permission, our interview will be transcribed for purposes of academic analysis. Please note that all data to be used in the research report will be reported and stored without any identifiers to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. On request, a copy of the research findings will be made available to you. With your permission and by signing below, you give your consent to participate.

For any further questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the researcher or supervisor of the study. Contact details are provided below.

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

Researcher:

Mantoa Elizabeth Msimang

Email: 23019702@mygibs.co.za

Supervisor:

Colin Rowley

Email: colinrowley@vodamail.co.za

Appendix 5: ETHICAL CLEARANCE

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

Ethical Clearance
Approved

Dear Mantoa Elizabeth Msimang,

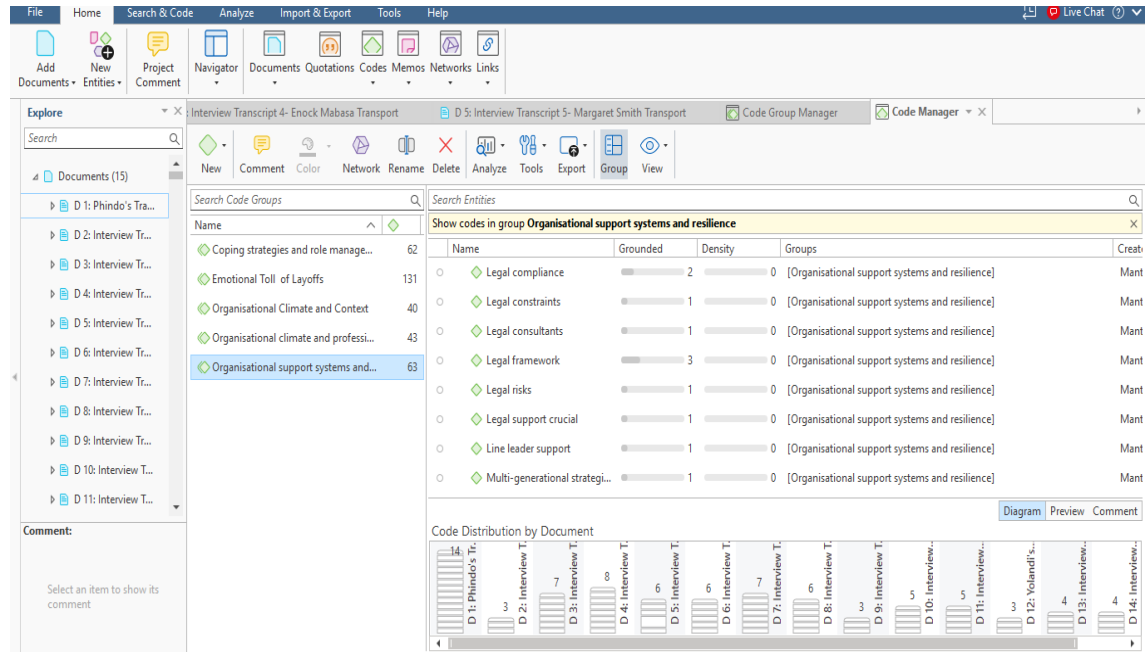
Please be advised that your application for **Ethical Clearance** has been approved.
You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.
We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

Ethical Clearance [Form](#)

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.

APPENDIX 6: CODING



Partial codes following code frequency application

Research Question	Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
How do HR practitioners experience the emotional impact of layoffs?	Emotional Toll of Layoffs	Dual Role Strain	Role tension experience Duality HR hat off Felt torn Wearing two hats Employees vs business directives
		Psychological Impact	Anxiety Emotional strain Trauma Survivor's guilt Emotional exhaustion Moral discomfort Guilt Sadness Felt conflicted Emotional fatigue Heartbreaking Haunts me

Research Question	Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
		Coping Mechanisms	Journaling Prayer Faith Spoke a lot Went to church Peer support Therapy Mindfulness Structured reflections Decompression time Brave face Screamed in pillows Danced Power pose
What organisational factors shape the climate during retrenchment processes?	Organisational Climate and Context	Instability and Fear	Instability Fearful Uncertain Rumours spread Shattered trust Survivor syndrome War zone Cold, Fear-driven Fragment Heavy Rocky Tumultuous
		Leadership Style	Leadership style Authoritarian leadership Authentic leaders Empathetic leadership Leadership transparency Leadership sets tone Make or break HR Listening leadership
		Union and Legal Environment	Union presence Union dynamics Union dissatisfaction Legal framework Legal compliance Section 189 Procedural uncertainty Union negotiations Legal constraints
How do HR practitioners manage role tension and maintain effectiveness during layoffs?	Coping Strategies and Role Management	Emotion Regulation	Emotionally withdrawn Compartmentalised Suppress emotions Emotional preparation Stay composed Mindfulness techniques
		Professional Detachment	Professional capacity Detach

Research Question	Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
			Separate role from person Not emotionally blinded
		Peer and Team Support	Peer support HR Manager group Informal check-ins Trusted circle War room
		Reliance on Organisational Protocols	Document everything Anchor business rationale People and process principles Adequate data Validate everything Structured communication plan Frequently asked questions sheet
		Ethical Anchoring and Values Alignment	Anchored in fairness Advocate fairness Compliance vs compassion tension Values alignment Listen to your gut Uncompromised people treatment
What support systems are available to HR and employees during retrenchments?	Organisational Support Systems & Resilience	Formal HR and Wellness Structures	EAP programmes Workplace therapist Wellness coach Access counsellors Legal advisory support Leadership coaching
		Supervisory and Leadership Support	Leadership support vital Line leader support Leaders checked-in Leadership alignment
		Peer and Collegial Support Networks	Peer support HR networks Informal peer check-ins Group discussions
		Post-Layoff Recovery and Organisational Learning	Post action reviews Structured reflections Continuous learning Debrief sessions Organisational learning
How do layoffs influence HR's professional identity and sense of self?	Organisational Climate & Professional Identity Formation	Identity Fragmentation and Role Ambiguity	Felt like a pawn Identity conflict HR excluded HR as messenger

Research Question	Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
			HR executors vs emotional anchors
		Moral Agency and Identity Repair	Advocate for employees HR push back Speak up Moral conflict Ethical dilemma
		Professionalisation through Reflection	Structured reflections Growth mindset Reflective practice Teachable moments Self-insights
		Identity Continuity and Growth	Resilience Personal mastery Professional growth Continuous learning Doing sacred work

Appendix 7: COPY OF DECLARATION FORM

Copy of Declaration Form

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria



25.1 COPYRIGHT DECLARATION FORM

Student details			
Surname:	Msinang	Initials:	M.E
Student number:	23019702		
Email:	23019702@mygibs.co.za		
Phone:	078 168 4245		
Qualification details			
Degree:	MBA	Year completed:	2025
Title of research:	GIBS		
Supervisor:	Colin Stuart Rowley		
Supervisor email:	colinstuartrowley@gmail.com		
Access			
A.	My research is not confidential and may be made available in the GIBS Information Centre and on UPSpace.		
I give permission to display my email address on the UPSpace website			
Yes	✓	No	

B.

☐	My research is confidential and may NOT be made available in the GIBS Information Centre nor on UPSpace.
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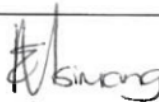
Please indicate embargo period requested

Two years	☐	Please attach a letter of motivation to substantiate your request. Without a letter embargo will not be granted.
Permanent	☐	Permission from the Vice-Principal: Research and Postgraduate Studies at UP is required for permanent embargo. Please attach a copy permission letter. Without a letter permanent embargo will not be granted.

Copyright declaration

I hereby declare that I have not used unethical research practices nor gained material dishonesty in this electronic version of my research submitted. Where appropriate, written permission statement(s) were obtained from the owner(s) of third-party copyrighted matter included in my research, allowing distribution as specified below.

I hereby assign, transfer and make over to the University of Pretoria my rights of copyright in the submitted work to the extent that it has not already been affected in terms of the contract I entered into at registration. I understand that all rights with regard to the intellectual property of my research, vest in the University who has the right to reproduce, distribute and/or publish the work in any manner it may deem fit.

Signature: 	Date: 03/11/2025
Supervisor signature: 	Date: 3rd November 2025