



## **Self-leadership in remote work**

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## Abstract

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<p>This thesis is a research-based study, and the main topic of the thesis is self-leadership skills and how employees use them during remote work, when external leadership is potentially at a lower level than in an ordinary office setting. Self-leadership during the pandemic, COVID-19, has become a more current topic than ever. Employees all around the world are working from home more than ever before, having less physical contact with their peers, managers and high-level executives in the organisation. In addition to how current this topic is, in the future it will become the norm to work from home more, making the insights in this thesis useful for the future.</p> <p>Self-leadership is based on various theoretical backgrounds. Many of these theories suggest that self-leadership is the basis for all leadership, which acts as a great generator for the need to understand the importance of self-leadership, as well as how it can be implemented and supported in organisations. The theoretical background to self-leadership shows that self-leadership is within every individual, but how individuals recognise, utilise and develop these skills can vary quite a bit.</p> <p>The objective of the thesis is to find out how employees utilise their self-leadership skills and how the switch to remote work has changed the need for these skills. It has also considered whether organisations should support and actively train their employees to have better self-leadership skills, to prepare them better for extraordinary circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>The research was conducted between 7-22 December 2020 with four individuals, in semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study show that while participants have self-leadership skills, they are often unaware of these skills, which causes self-leading throughout their days to be at a lower level than it would be if they were more aware of self-leadership tools. The research also recognises that employees feel a bigger need for self-leadership during remote work than they did before, when working at an office, and that the need for support from organisations has also increased. While organisations might offer training of self-leadership skills, the practical side of helping employees can easily be forgotten, and therefore such training can easily become invalid.</p> <p>The proposed solutions for the research findings are for organisations to not only offer more information and training of employees' self-leadership knowledge and skills, but to also create a strategic plan for self-leadership implementation and integrate self-leadership into the organisational culture. This can be seen as one of the organisation's values that effectively helps employees to self-lead, not only in office-setting work situations and remote work, but also in future crisis situations.</p>
<b>Keywords</b> Self-leadership, remote work, self-leadership strategies, leadership

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## 1 Introduction

In the year 2020, remote work is a more current topic than perhaps ever before. In May 2020, according to research, 60-76 percent of all employed Finns are working remotely, and Finland holds the highest percentage of remote work within the European Union (Nikkilä-Kiipula 11 May 2020; Pantsu 5 April 2020). Remote work brings new challenges to both organisations and individuals in them, when the ways of working must be reinvented and the lack of physical contact with co-workers is constant and for many, a completely new situation. While the traditional management and leadership might decrease during this time, employees' self-leadership is crucial to keep the work efficient, effective, and meaningful (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 3-11; Norris 2018, 44).

The topic of this thesis, self-leadership in remote work, was chosen due to my personal interest in the subject, as well as how current the topic of remote work is. Remote work is highly topical for many countries, organisations and individuals caused by the global pandemic SARS-CoV-2, or later referred as COVID-19 or pandemic, that during the spring of 2020 began to storm around the globe. The pandemic is greatly affecting working life not only in Finland, but globally as well. On 13 August 2020, the Finnish Government gave a recommendation for remote work due to the pandemic. In the Government's press release, a recommendation for extensive remote work is given when possible until further notice. (Finnish Government 2020.) Earlier on 12 March 2020, the Finnish Government gave a recommendation for remote work, which however was removed starting from 1 August 2020 but put on effect again on 13 August (Gullichsen & Kallionpää 31 July 2020). These two recommendations alone are not only unforeseen in Finland, but only the tip of the iceberg of the pandemic's consequences.

While there are plenty of organisations who have already before the pandemic allowed remote work for their employees, the majority of Finns have not worked remotely before for longer periods of time, but rather single days, or not at all (Sutela 2020). In addition, a survey conducted to map out the effects of the pandemic explains that many employees had to change their regular office work to remote work in a very short amount of time, which did not allow organisations or employees to prepare for remote work, resulting in a crisis in many workplaces and reduction of individuals' well-being (Ahrendt, Cabrita, Clerici, Hurley, Leoncikas, Mascherini, Riso & Sándor 2020).

The changes remote work causes can be seen on every level of organisations, from the lowest to the highest level of organisations (Ahrendt & al. 2020). There are very few business fields where the effects of COVID-19 are not visible, and my own interest in the topic

comes from the severity and magnitude of COVID-19 consequences, and whether remote work compared to work at an office or organisation's normal working space requires different set of skills and knowledge of self-leadership, and whether it poses drastically different ways of working for employees. I have gained personal experience of remote work during the pandemic and found out that working alone from home took a lot more self-leadership, especially in the form of time management, prioritising tasks and motivation as well as finding purpose in the job.

Additionally, Norris (2018, 43-44) argues, that organisations nowadays need to evolve from the traditional control-and-command leadership style, where managers and executives order the ways of working and dictate many things within the organisation towards shared- and self-leadership and give employees more power to lead themselves. While the pandemic has caused stress, uncertainty and pressure in organisations, the knowledge organisations have gained during the pandemic might help forming the future of work life and prepare the organisations to answer to employees' changing needs in working life, giving individuals more freedom to dictate their own way of working.

For instance, in an article by McKinsey, the writers are predicting that moving forward from the pandemic will force organisations to find new ways to ensure employee well-being and productivity. The article also brings up research, where 80 percent of employees say they enjoy working from home, while 41 percent say they are more productive at home and 28 percent saying they are as productive at home as in the office. (Boland, De Smet, Palter & Sanghvi 8.6.2020.) With this research in mind, it can be argued that remote work suits many employees and majority of participants enjoy working from home, which might require organisations to let employees work more from home or another space than the normal office space to keep employees satisfied, happy and motivated.

In this thesis, the main topics examined are self-leadership and moreover how and which self-leadership skills employees utilise when working remotely without physical contact to colleagues, supervisors, or others in the organisation, which might result to less direct support and external leadership. Researching these topics will provide knowledge for the future of work, as seeing how employees cope with working from home with their own self-leadership skills can shed light into how in the future employees wish to work, and on the other hand, what can be done differently in the future, if another global or local crisis would create a change as huge in working life as the one created by COVID-19. This thesis is widely based on theory and research, and the most important theories applied are different self-leadership strategies including behaviour-focused strategies, natural reward-

focused strategies and constructive thought-focused strategies, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs and theory of leadership in relation to self-leadership.

## **1.1 Background**

Self-leadership is a wide topic with a variety of things yet to be discovered. My interest rose when taking a course about leadership and noticing how little self-leadership was discussed, yet, subjectively speaking, in organisations it seems to be a current topic, and from personal experience, various companies still rely on up-down management and leadership rather than self-leading employees. The need for self-leadership has naturally risen during the year of 2020 due to COVID-19 and remote work, but it has still existed before this, even if it has not received a lot of attention. While leadership, agile organisations and shared leadership are widely discussed topics, self-leadership seems to be a more forgotten field, which can also be noticed in the amount of literature written about the topic.

Even though team spirit and environment at the workplace affect performance, individuals have a great responsibility in their own success and performance. Separation and individuality from the group – for example, a team at work - are part of work life and to survive these situations in remote work an employee must possess certain self-leadership skills in order to manage their work, since the group support is only received through video calls and messages. (Holbeche 2018, 232-239.) The interest for this topic originates widely from this: organisations do not seem to pay enough attention to self-leadership skills, and even more so, the work environment and workplace culture do not seem to encourage self-leadership.

## **1.2 Objective and delimitation of the study**

The objective of the thesis is to find out how do assistants utilise their self-leadership skills in remote work, how the change into remote work has influenced the need for these skills as well as how organisations are supporting self-leadership in remote work. The purpose of the thesis is to enable companies to improve their performance through employees' self-leadership skills, especially during remote work or other extraordinary circumstances. Enhancing the performance through improved self-leadership skills can be done through training, but also practical implementation, and these methods are discussed later in chapter 6.1, where conclusions of the research are presented.

By recognising which self-leadership skills are the most applied and useful for assistants and how the need for these skills has shifted during the pandemic, it is hopefully possible to increase job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and the level on preparation of assistants and other employees in case another crisis, such as the pandemic, should ever occur again.

This thesis focuses on assistants' self-leadership skills, and therefore does not offer research analysis about employees in other roles. Assistants' work is often very administrative, and therefore it is notable that other type of work or other employees with different job descriptions are not being analysed in this thesis. All research participants work within the field of business and administration, and therefore the research does not provide information from assistants in other fields, such as medical or media assistants. Moreover, the research participants include only young professionals with five or less years of work experience, and therefore does not offer a view from a perspective of a more experienced professional. While these young professionals do arguably have wide knowledge and skills, the answers from more experienced professional could vary from the answers now gathered in the research

Self-leadership exists in everyone all the time, but this thesis does not research what self-leadership skills does private life or working at the usual office setting require, as it is solely focused on remote work self-leadership. In addition, this thesis does not include employees who have continuously been working remotely before COVID-19, as these employees' experiences might drastically differ from those who are experiencing remote work for the first time.

### **1.3 Thesis type and research methods**

This thesis is a qualitative research. The research method used is semi-structured interviews, and the data was collected by interviewing assistants working in different organisations in Helsinki, Finland. In these interviews, assistants in entry- or intermediate level positions were interviewed to get a broad view on how working remotely has influenced participants' need for self-leadership skills. The research sample – the participants – was chosen to limit the collection of data to young professionals in assistant roles to ensure trustworthy research results, and to avoid receiving data from various different occupational groups.

Interviews were conducted in a video call via Microsoft Teams, a telecommunications tool. Four interviews in total were conducted, and afterwards results were carefully and thematically analysed to find a clear outcome from the research. Semi-structured interviews were used as a research method, since it offers a clear structure for the interviews and provides an opportunity to gather wide knowledge from the interviewees, but does not remove the change of additional, deepening questions. The topic also requires looking into subjective perspective, since different individuals might experience the demands of remote work differently.

The result of the research is thought to help especially human resource management, employee wellbeing personnel and managements in organisations – but also individuals. To fully understand the research conducted, the theoretical background of self-leadership is explored and explained, and remote work concept is defined.

#### **1.4 Structure of thesis**

This thesis is comprised of six main chapters (figure 1). The first chapter of thesis is the introductory to the study, explaining the background, the research problem and the objective as well as introducing the research method and the thesis type. In the second chapter the introduction of theoretical framework begins, introducing leadership and self-leadership as concepts as well as the origins and the base of both concepts. Chapter two also discusses self-leadership's importance in organisations and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, explaining how it is related to self-leadership. In the third chapter, which is a continuation of the theoretical framework, the different self-leadership strategies and theoretical views related to self-leadership, motivation, and behavioural needs are discussed. The self-leadership strategies are the paramount factor in the research and how the interviews are constructed, as well as in the analysis of the interviews.

The fourth chapter introduces the empirical part of the study, and further explains the methodology and theory of the research conducted for this thesis. Furthermore, the fourth chapter presents the research and data collection methods in detail. In the fifth chapter the main findings and conclusions of the research are presented reflecting on theories introduced in chapter two and three. Lastly, chapter six discusses conclusions and recommendation based on the research, as well as evaluates the validity and reliability of the research. The final chapter ends with self-evaluation where the whole thesis writing process is evaluated, and learning experiences are discussed.

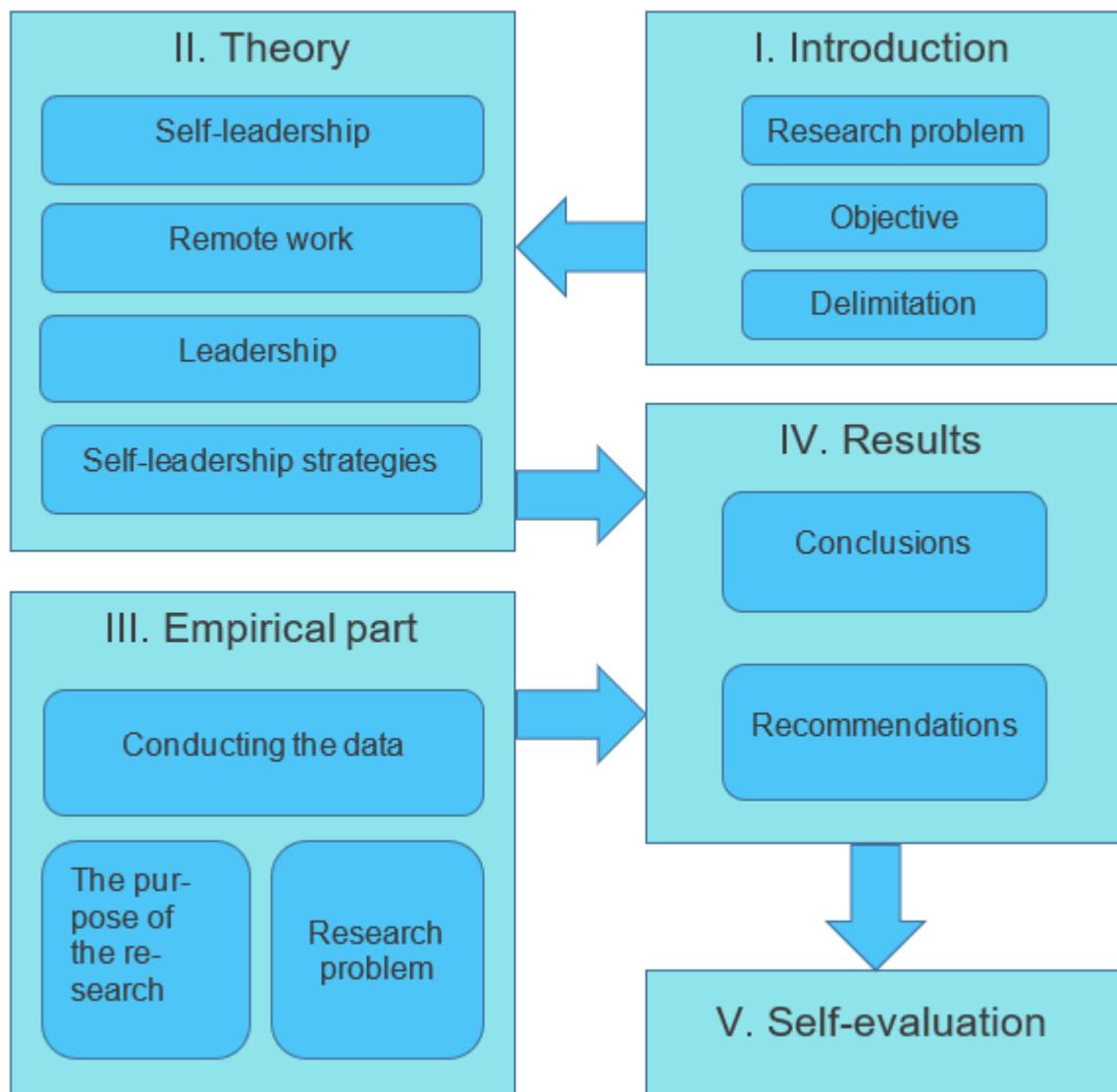


Figure 1. The structure of the thesis

After the final main chapter (chapter 6) of the thesis, the references used in the thesis are presented, as well as appendices consisting of the interview guide used in the research interviews and an infographic provided to the research participants are provided.

## 2 Self-leadership – base to all leadership

To understand what self-leadership is and how it can be utilised, practiced, and applied in real life, the understanding of leadership is crucial, since self-leadership is the base of all leadership, as presented in figure 2 on page 9. Self-leadership supports all other leadership, and practicing self-leaders usually have a higher self-efficacy rate and act as better leaders to others. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 5.) While according to self-leadership theories, actively self-leading individuals can lead others better, many employees do not have a leadership role in their workplace, but they still lead themselves. In fact, all individuals lead themselves in some ways. For instance, Franko (2018) explains that self-leadership exists in everyone, but if and how one chooses to practice it creates the difference between a great self-leader and a person who does not actively develop and practice their self-leadership skills. For these reasons, understanding the basics of leadership is important, giving a broader image of what self-leadership includes, as well as why individuals should practice and apply active self-leadership at work, and why it should be supported in organisations.

Self-leadership is a constant process and happens quite unnoticeably (Ross 2014, 299-302). A simple example of self-leadership is choosing in the morning whether to drive or bike to work. Consequently, self-leadership is an internal process, unlike leadership, that is usually more visible to both leaders and followers as well as outsiders, and even the smallest decision can be considered as leading oneself. More external signs of self-leadership are time management and organising one's daily tasks, choosing a physical place where to work, or when it is time to take breaks. Organisations that build their human resource strategies more towards shared and self-leadership instead of traditional control-and-command leadership style are usually more agile and therefore more capable of change and development. (Holbeche 2018, 295-301.)

There are challenges that many organisations have to face with the ongoing pandemic: how to adapt to a new concept of remote work and still keep the quality of work high, but more vitally how to provide support for employees in this new, challenging situation. From individual's point of view the challenges of remote work are such as lack of traditional leadership – manager-subordinate or up-down leadership –, adapting to working alone and taking more responsibility of one's work. In these circumstances, self-leadership takes presence.

## 2.1 Leadership in organisations

To understand self-leadership, it is important to create a distinguishable difference between self-leadership and leadership and to acknowledge how they not only differ from one another, but in which ways are they similar and how they overlap. In essence, self-leadership is an internal process where individuals guide themselves through various decisions, whereas leadership is affecting others and their decisions, thought and actions (Western 2019, 27; Neck, Manz & Houghton 2020, 7-8.).

There is a vast collection of options and definitions for defining leadership. Dugan (2017, 26-27) introduces an abnormal way of looking at leadership; a complete lack of leadership and what happens if there is no leadership in organisations, as this will most likely result in less structure and guidance at the workplace. To completely remove leadership from employees means no directions and support for employees. Nonetheless, the simplest way to define leadership is a singular or series of actions to affect others' actions, thoughts, words, or interactions with others.

However, traditional leadership is often understood to be guidance and influence from others – oftentimes the leaders – towards followers, but leadership is not limited to only leader-follower type of leadership, but it can also occur between peers. (Neck & al. 2020, 2; Western 2019, 39-40.) While the traditional way of thinking leadership is to automatically consider people in higher positions, such as managers and executive boards, as leaders, leadership can also appear as self-leadership or situational leadership, which instead of occurring in the traditional manager-subordinate setting, occurs based on a situation, task, or objective or as mentioned, between peers when a situation requires leadership without a predominantly named leader (The Center for Leadership Studies 2020; Western 2019, 38-40). The more traditional way of thinking leadership is somewhat similar to management; these two might get confused with one another, but they are, however, not synonyms as management refers more to operational side of the organisation (Western 2019, 32-33). While leadership is a common phenomenon in organisations, in situations with high alert or stress, self-leadership can emerge in an unseen way, and gives the skills to take control over one's life, and therefore it might be even more important that leadership (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 5).

As mentioned, leadership can be confused with management, and even considered as synonyms. While management is a necessary element within organisations, it is often hierarchical, authoritarian, and mainly focused on effectiveness and monetary results, and alone not enough for the organisation to keep up with multiple and often complex socio-

political and scientific issues. Leadership is a necessary element to support management as it is often supportive, growth-ambitious and aims for adaptation, unlike management. When management and leadership are both applied, together they create a profound way to manage and lead organisations. (Dugan 2017, 41.)

According to Bryant and Kazan (2013, 2-3), the base of all adequate and efficient leadership is self-leadership. This theory is presented below in figure 2. Bryant and Kazan suggest that leaders and strategic leadership require effective thinking, congruent behaviour, and empathetic ability to relate to another person's experience; the theory proposes that to achieve these elements self-leadership is a mandatory base for these actions. Figure 2 presents self-leadership as a starting point to other forms of leadership. Concepts listed in each green block are different leadership types, and self-leadership acts as a base to all of these types of leadership. According to this theory, a person must have sufficient self-leadership skills in order to successfully lead others.

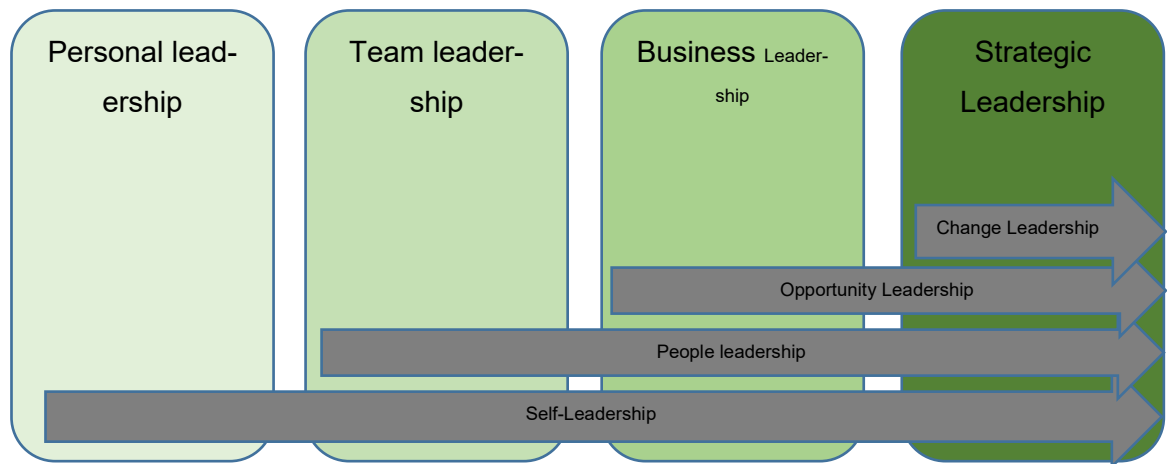


Figure 2. Self-leadership as a base to all leadership (adapted from Bryant & Kazan 2013, 2)

In addition, theories suggest that leadership is a socially constructed concept, which means that without humans setting it up purposefully, it would not exist in a similar way it now exists. To understand socially constructed concepts, Dugan (2017, 31-32) gives a great example to compare leadership to: money. Without humans and our culture, a single piece of paper with a number has no value, and therefore the value money holds is eventually made up by humans and is a socially constructed concept. Leadership can be viewed to work the same way as it is bound to time, culture, and context. What is now considered good leadership, will in one hundred years perhaps be considered the complete opposite. In similar fashion, what is considered socially and culturally acceptable leadership in North-Korea, is deemed unacceptable and even illegal in Finland. The na-

ture of leadership and how it is dependent on outside factors can be applied to self-leadership as well, especially considering that fifty years ago the concept and theory of self-leadership did not really exist yet. Therefore, predicting what self-leadership could look like in fifty years from today is practically impossible. Leadership and self-leadership change continuously depending on the beforementioned factors – time, culture, and context. (Dugan 2017, 31-32.)

As presented on page 9 in figure 2, self-leadership acts as the base for all leadership and therefore, can be considered as an important asset to organisations. Below in figure 3 organisational leadership is presented according to Sydänmaanlakka (2017, 6). In his theory Sydänmaanlakka suggests, that in the core of intelligent organisational leadership is self-leadership, which also supports the theory presented above in figure 2. While not all individuals are leaders at work and this study is not focused on supervisor-level employees or leader-follower relationships, understanding of importance of self-leadership for leadership is crucial for wider understanding of self-leadership.

In addition, Sydänmaanlakka suggests that intelligent leadership does not originate only from rational intelligence, but rather from emotional and mental intelligence. Intelligent leadership is best executed when leaders and followers have constant dialogue with shared vision. However, leadership in organisations is everyone's responsibility, and therefore it is believed that good self-leadership skills are necessary to understand the process of leadership. (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 6-7.) Therefore, while the traditional idea of leadership is based on supervisors and their actions towards followers – or at a workplace, employees – these theories suggest the significance of lower-level employees' self-leadership is higher than maybe traditionally thought.



Figure 3. Leadership in organisations (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 7)

Previously presented figure 2 and figure 3 above have some similarities; in figure 2 change and strategic leadership have same qualities as leadership of results and intelligent organisation in figure 3; additionally, team and organisational leadership can be found in both figures as leadership types, and they are both based on self-leadership. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, self-leadership is the base in both theories and figures, providing support to all other leadership. Consequently, the same leadership elements can be found in different theories that support the importance of self-leadership in organisations.

## 2.2 Defining self-leadership

Self-leadership is leadership where individuals guide themselves towards specific goals. A very simple way to describe self-leadership is “the process of influencing oneself”. (Neck & al. 2020, 7-8.) Nevertheless, this definition is quite narrow and does not offer additional information or other point of view into the concept of self-leadership.

Self-leadership includes specific strategies aimed towards better individual performance. These strategies are based on many theoretical backgrounds, such as self-regulation, self-control, intrinsic motivation theory and social cognitive theory. (Houghton, Dawley &

DiLiello 2012, 217.) Other theoretical backgrounds to self-leadership are self-evaluation and self-influence, which are fields where an individual aims towards specific goal, thought or action in order to enhance performance. These are key components to leading oneself. (Houghton & Neck 2006, 271.) The definition of self-leadership is often misunderstood, and for example talkative and opinionated people are often misidentified as self-leaders. This, however, is not correct since self-leadership is not measured by factors such as talkativeness and does not require this type of behaviour. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 7.) Self-leadership is ultimately a process of influencing oneself and one's actions, body, thoughts, emotions, and values through self-reflection. The aim of self-leadership is to gain wider, deeper knowledge and reflection about oneself, and to enhance performance. (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 297.)

More broadly described, self-leadership can be defined as purposefully influencing one's way of acting, feeling and thinking in order to achieve specific and predetermined objectives (Andrew Bryant Self Leadership). According to Bryant and Kazan (2013, 24) "self-leadership is a process of self-knowledge, self-influence and self-guidance". Therefore, we lead ourselves towards some specific goal, whether it is to win a Nobel price or to finish workday on time; the goals and objectives vary on size, but self-leadership is still behind it all.

Nevertheless, every individual is a self-leader, but not all self-leaders are good at that – or leading others (Andrew Bryant Self-Leadership). All leadership, including self-leadership, is a large concept of guiding behaviour towards a goal set earlier (Neck & al. 2020, 2-4). It is impossible for one specific field of science to define self-leadership, which makes it a hard field to understand. Current science has, however, concluded that self-leadership is the base and requirement for all leadership, as mentioned in chapter 2. (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 27-28.)

### **2.2.1 Aspects of self-leadership**

Sydänmaanlakka (2017, 282-283) suggests that the most important factor in self-leadership is renewing yourself by reflecting your own actions. In organisations, renewing employees' skills might often be achieved with training sessions, seminars, and lectures, but these methods might often be more focused on substance topics related to the field of business the organisation operates in rather than self-leadership or personal renewal. Renewing oneself and one's skills does not happen automatically as it requires self-confidence, self-knowledge, and self-reflection. (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 33-34). Intelligent organisations, as presented earlier in figure 3, have intelligent self-leadership as the core of the organisational leadership. For a person to have successful self-leadership within

themselves, they have to have many different sectors of their well-being taken care of to guarantee a good base for the development and growth of self-leadership. These parts are physical, financial, mental, social, and professional well-being, as presented below in figure 4. (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 29; Salmimies 2008, 59.)

Having these different sectors of well-being fulfilled provides a base where to build successful self-leadership. On the other hand, making well thought-out decisions towards personal goals – self-leading – brings a person closer to having all these five qualities well balanced. (Salmimies 2008, 59-61.) Therefore, it can be argued that a person's well-being has a great role is self-leadership, and while keeping in mind the factors of well-being, it can also be argued that the organisational culture, personal life, financial situation, and social relationships all have a significant effect on self-leadership. Therefore, self-leadership cannot be only learnt in theory, and it requires multiple other factors to support it in addition to theoretical knowledge.



Figure 4. Sectors of well-being (adapted from Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 29; Salmimies 2008, 59)

Additionally, different other elements supporting self-leadership can be identified. Franko (2018) suggests that self-leadership has five core factors that are:

1. Enthusiasm for learning
2. Goals for life and business
3. Willingness to let go
4. Plans and schedules
5. Focus and discipline

These factors create a base for active practicing self-leadership. Enthusiasm for learning is a key factor to develop and to know oneself, which is a common thing amongst active self-leaders and knowing oneself is a base for all personal development. This enthusiasm also creates a pathway to create and achieve goals in life. Plans and schedules as well as focus and discipline are a way to achieve these goals. Willingness to let go can also be tied with other four factors, since efficient self-leaders know where and when to use their energy, time, and other resources, and know when to let something go. Plans and schedules are a key factor to self-leadership, as they are a big part of time management which is a crucial part of self-leadership. (Franko 2018.)

Furthermore, there are two point of views of where self-leadership can be observed from: how do employees lead themselves in an organisation and how can an individual guide and control their own lives. These aspects can be found in the following list by Sydänmaanlakka (2017, 35), who suggests self-leadership consists of different aspects:

- Leading thoughts into self-leadership
- Control of work into control of life
- From motivation into empowerment
- Realization about the power of positive thinking
- From logical thinking into comprehensive thinking
- Aiming towards happiness and bliss
- Self-leadership as a part of organisation's comprehensive leadership system
- From leading people into leading oneself (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 35.)

Closely relating to self-leadership is self-management. Self-management is based on psychological concepts such as coherence, meaningfulness, solidarity, and autonomy. Out of these concepts, autonomy and coherence are very close to self-leadership as well (Ala-Mutka 2019, 40-43.) Self-management will not, however, be a topic of this thesis, but it is important for the concepts to be separated from one another and to understand, that self-leadership does not equal self-management.

### **2.2.2 Origin and foundation of self-leadership**

The concept and term of self-leadership are relatively new, less than forty years old: self-leadership was first mentioned in Charles Manz's work in 1983 and 1986 (Andrew Bryant Self-Leadership; Houghton & Neck 2006, 273). The concept of self-leadership was developed and evolved from self-management (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 14). While self-management focuses more on individual's ability to maintain managerial aspects of their work and offers an alternative to traditional leader-lead work while creating an opportunity to evolve beyond traditional work description and tasks, self-leadership widens the perspective bringing in concepts such as intrinsic motivation, encompassing internal processes, self-direction, and self-motivation (Bligh, Pearce & Kohles 2006, 299). Manz was the first one to create a definition of self-leadership. According to him, self-leadership is "a journey to

self-discovery and self-satisfaction, a method of self-influence, a technique for self-efficacy, a source of behavioural control, and even a process of self-fulfilment". (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 15-16.) Self-efficacy and self-leadership have a positive and quite significant correlation to each other, and they oftentimes work together. Both, when utilised effectively, have a positive effect on effectiveness of work. (Norris 2018, 50-51.)

The conceptual base of self-leadership is drawn from several psychological theories and concepts. The two main theories are social cognitive theory and intrinsic motivation theory, or more distinctively, self-determination theory. Self-leadership and its theory lean heavily on these two theoretical foundations. (Norris 2018, 45-49.) Other theories and concepts self-leadership is based on are self-regulation theory, self-management, and positive psychology. While self-leadership draws from these theories and concepts, it offers a possibility for a higher individual self-influence than these theories and concepts alone. (Neck & al. 2020, 9-22.) These theories and concepts and how they relate to self-leadership are better presented below in figure 5.

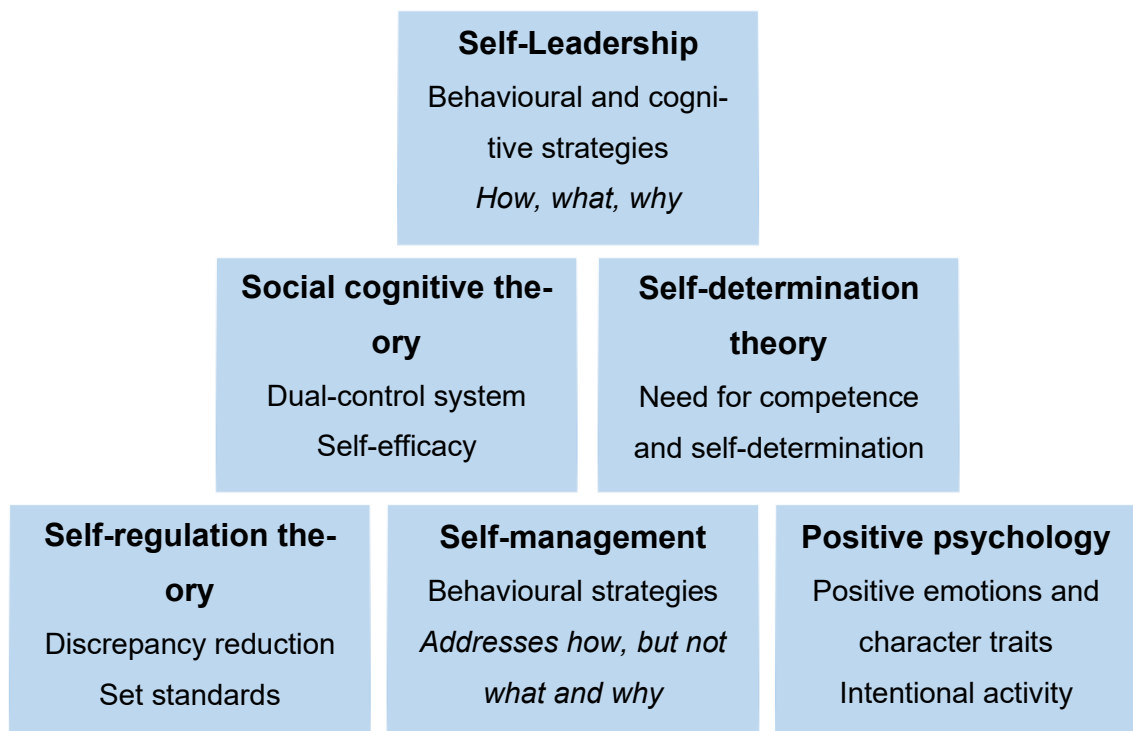


Figure 5. Conceptual base of self-leadership (Neck & al. 2020, 19)

Self-regulation theory, self-management and positive psychology are the conceptual building blocks of self-leadership. The field of self-regulation is wide, which brings up a challenge of defining it (Boekaerts, Pintrich & Zeidner 2005, 13-14). According to self-regulation theory, individuals modify their behaviour in accordance with current environment, or a wanted result or state, but it is unclear where the desired goals are derived from (Neck & al. 2020, 16). Self-regulation can be viewed from different perspectives, such as social

cognitive perspective, which is a common perspective to look at self-regulation from. The social cognitive perspective offers a triadic definition: self-regulation is a combination of personal, behavioural, and environmental processes. In this perspective, self-regulation is a combination of thoughts, emotions, and actions, generated by an individual. This perspective relies on individual's beliefs and goals. The "process" point of view explains why an individual might be able to regulate one action or decision, but not another one. (Boekaerts & al. 2005, 13-14.)

Positive psychology examines the positive emotions in people, such as happiness, gratitude, and fulfilment, as well as positive characteristics, such as optimism, resilience, and characteristic strengths. A large part of happiness comes from intentionally planned activities, which would point that planning, shaping one's actions and thoughts and changing attitudes and beliefs is an important part towards happiness. (Neck & al. 2020, 18.) Self-leadership strategies introduced in chapters 3.1 to 3.3 examines better how self-leadership's purpose is to change and rebuild individual's beliefs, attitudes, and actions.

The two main theoretical areas are, as mentioned, social cognitive theory and self-determination theory. Albert Bandura (1925-) first came up with the concepts of social learning theory (1977) and social cognitive theory (1986). Much like self-regulation, social cognitive theory also introduces self-regulatory system with self-monitoring and behavioural reactions. In addition to these, social cognitive theory incorporates discrepancy production and discrepancy reduction. The social cognitive theory is based on a belief that individuals can affect greatly their own performance based on previous experiences. (Neck & al. 2020, 15-16.) Additionally, Sydänmaanlakka (2017, 69) suggests, that an actively self-leading individual's ultimate goal is meaningfulness, self-actualization, and good life. These elements tie together with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and this perspective will be explained more in chapter 2.5. Additionally, these elements are highly visible in the three self-leadership strategies which are more thoroughly discussed in chapters 3.1-3.3.

Self-determination theory, on the other hand, suggests that to grow intrinsic motivation derived from tasks or activity, one must have a need for capability and self-determination, which includes the feel of freedom. Additionally, the theory suggests that individuals tend to look for challenging tasks to overcome them to have the feeling of self-competence. (Neck & al. 2020, 18; Boekaerts & al. 2005, 13-14.) From this perspective, self-determination ties together with natural reward strategies, which will be more thoroughly explained in chapter 3.2.

### 2.2.3 Benefits of self-leadership in organisations

According to Bryant and Kazan (2013, 14), the benefits of self-leadership can be versatile and benefit both individuals and organisations, as seen below in Table 1. Individual benefits, such as increased happiness, self-awareness and finding purpose and meaning are also a part of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and considerably important for human's psychological needs. In addition, factors like increased happiness and decreased stress as well as better relationships arguably have a positive effect on the quality of life. Self-awareness alongside with self-confidence might also have a beneficial effect on individual's attitude and motivation towards work. (Bligh & al. 2006, 300-302.)

Employees who have qualities such as a need for autonomy and self-efficiency take more responsibility and implement more self-leadership strategies. (Norris 2018, 43-44.) Sydänmaanlakka (2017, 43-44) suggests that good self-leadership skills often equal to more effectiveness and efficiency within both personal and professional life. Naturally, more effective employees have an effect on an organisation's result. Higher self-leadership skills throughout the entire organisation also reduces the need for management, and teams within organisations thrive with self-leading individuals in them: self-leading individuals take control of their own actions towards the team's mutual goals. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 143-144.)

Organisational benefits have both team-level and organisational-level benefits. Organisational level benefits include engaged and empowered workforce, improved goal setting and results as well as faster, better decision making. Team-level benefits include increased creativity, reduced conflicts, and collaborative team efforts. While these factors can be divided into organisational and team level benefits, they all still have cross-function effects and can benefit both the team and the organisation. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 13-15.) High level of self-leadership also has a positive effect on trust, potency, and commitment in organisations (Bligh & al. 2006, 300-304). Additionally, organisations with self-leaders tend to have higher sales, motivation, and eagerness within their employees (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 141). Therefore, higher level of efficient self-leadership does not only benefit the individual but organisations as well on operational, cultural, and financial level.

Table 1. Benefits of self-leadership (Bryant &amp; Kazan 2013, 14)

<b>Personal Benefits</b>	<b>Organisational benefits</b>
Self-awareness	Engaged and empowered workforce
Self-confidence	Improved goal setting and results
Finding meaning and purpose	Faster and better decision making
Decreased stress	More creativity
Increased happiness	Reduced conflicts
Better relationships	Collaborative team efforts

Additionally, besides from monetary, efficiency and effectiveness perspectives, multiple studies have shown that self-leading individuals have a positive effect on the work environment, as well as on their co-workers and can greatly affect the whole organisation's environment. (Stewart, Courtright & Manz 2011, 196). It can also be argued that since, as presented in figures 2 and 3, self-leadership acts as a base to all leadership in organisations, effective self-leadership benefits the whole organisation, as efficient and practicing self-leaders make better leaders to others and are part of creating a well-balanced workplace culture.

### **2.3 External and internal factors of self-leadership**

Elements influencing self-leadership can be divided into external and internal elements. The external factors of self-leadership, which come from outside stimuli, consist of experiences, behaviour of others that humans react to and other external stimuli. In addition, different laws, regulations, and social norms guide behaviour and therefore affect daily thinking and decision making. Humans naturally respond and react to different experiences in different ways. For instance, receiving either a reward or a punishment will later in the future influence decisions based on the response a person has received in the past. While humans can to a certain point alter the world around them, there are certain factors that no one can remove or alter, such as the fluctuation between night and day, or the weather. These factors are continuously occurring and can affect behaviour, but they cannot be changed. (Neck & al. 2020, 20-22; 25.)

Internal factors, as the name tells, come from within the person themselves. They are factors that influence thinking and behaving, such as our own values, attitudes – or the “how and why” of actions and thoughts. These factors guide the internal decision-making process in each decision. Every person is unique, and therefore every person's internal factors are different. Internal factors are mental and physical factors that can affect person's self-leadership, and they can both affect the person's behaviour both before the behaviour occurs and during it. While these factors do affect behaviour, humans are intelligent creatures and have always the opportunity to choose behaviour in a moment. Humans are not

forced to act a certain way, yet sometimes changing a learnt behaviour or thought patterns can be challenging, or even quite impossible. (Neck & al. 2020, 22-25.)

## 2.4 Oy “I” Ab

As presented, all leadership starts from good self-leadership that individuals in the organisations have. Self-leadership, however, is built on certain factors that create a solid base for self-leadership. Below in figure 5 “Oy Minä Ab” is a model by Sydänmaanlakka (2017, 29), that provides a theory of how different key factors of well-being: physical, cognitive, social, mental, and professional all affect self-leadership. In this model a theory of how leading oneself is the combination of control of both body and mind is provided. Additionally, as presented previously in figure 4, the different sectors of well-being are important for self-leading, but also efficient self-leading can enhance each of these sectors. The model also presents how awareness can be considered as the “CEO” of a person and it guides the five “departments” below it. A person’s awareness is the base for self-leadership and other internal processes, as well as developing oneself. (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 29-32.)

At the bottom of the model is the department of renewal, which is one of the core elements of self-leadership, since developing oneself is quite usually a desired outcome in self-leadership. Renewing oneself, according to the model, is comprised of self-knowledge, self-confidence, and reflection. The model suggests that self-knowledge is the key to any self-leadership; the same way as a supervisor – a leader – has to know their subordinates, a self-leader has to know themselves in order to affect themselves effectively and towards desired goals. In addition, to renew oneself, a person sometimes has to step out of their comfort zone, which requires self-confidence that provides the courage to do so. Lastly in the department of renewal is reflection. Reflecting one’s actions and thoughts requires altering one’s patterns of actions and thoughts, which also ties together with one of the three main self-leadership strategies: constructive thought-focused strategy, which will be introduced more in depth in chapter 3.3. Self-reflection is a required element for a self-leader since it is a way to evaluate oneself, and also thoughts and actions towards themselves as well as others. (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 29-34.)

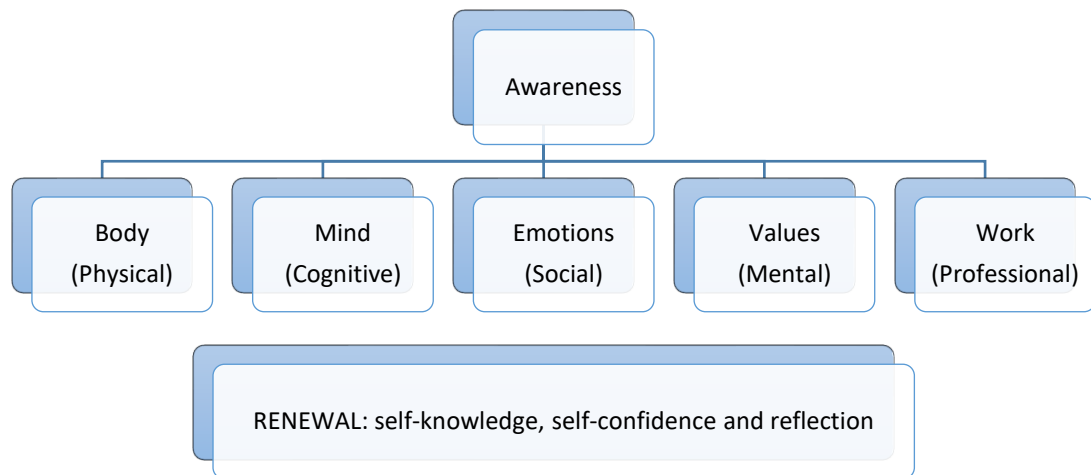


Figure 6. Oy Minä Ab (adapted from Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 29)

## 2.5 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow's (1908-1970) theory of hierarchy of needs introduces the different stages of basic human needs (picture 1). At the bottom of the pyramid are the most basic needs of humans, the basic requirements for staying alive. Above the lowest level are the psychological needs and finally, on the top of the pyramid self-fulfilment needs. Maslow divided these needs in the pyramid into deficiency needs, which are the first four stages, and being – or growth – needs, on the top level of the pyramid. The part of self-actualization is where, for example, self-leadership is. In chapter 3.1.2, peaking with purpose and finding purpose of life are introduced as self-leadership strategies, and how they fit into self-actualisation needs of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Maslow introduces that humans need to fulfil the lower-level needs before they can focus on the self-fulfilment needs, and once the lower-level needs have been fulfilled at least to a satisfactory level, humans naturally start to focus more on the self-actualisation needs. These self-actualisation needs include needs such as seeking the full potential, personal growth, and peak experiences. (McLeod 2020.) As explained in chapter 2.2, these are elements that can be found in self-leadership.

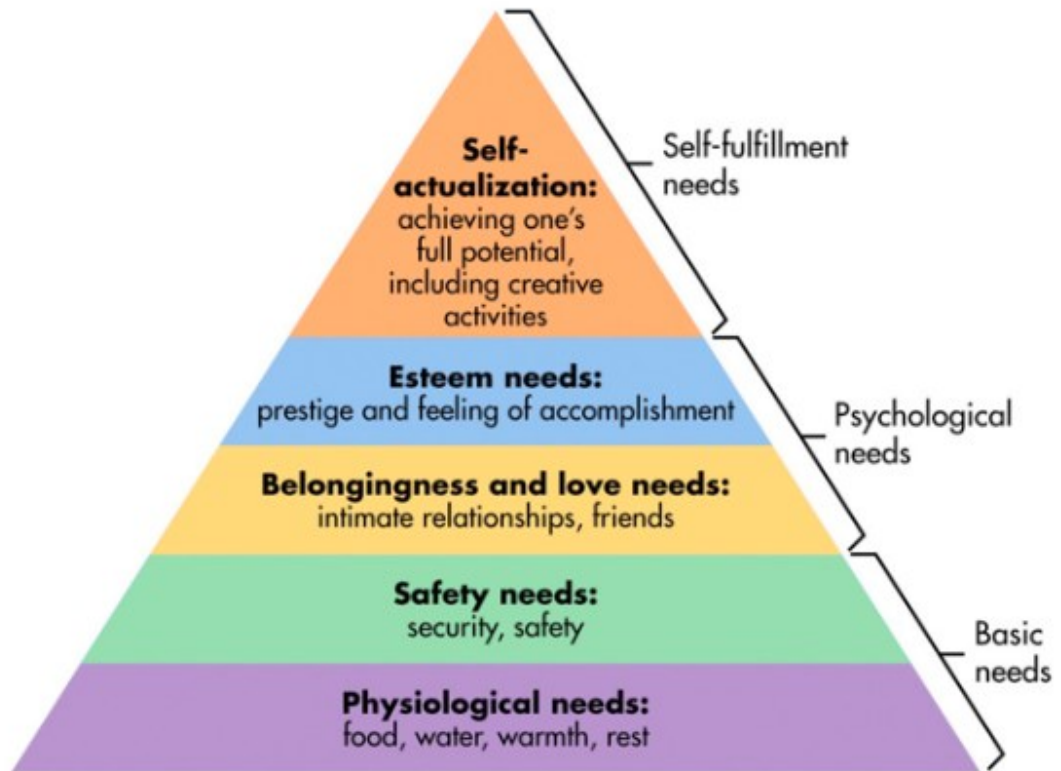


Figure 7. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Simply Psychology 2020)

In addition, as mentioned earlier, actively self-leading individual's ultimate goal is meaningfulness, self-actualization and good life, and these elements are similar to the ones found in the self-actualisation needs -category of the pyramid. As self-leadership is guiding oneself towards specific goals, it strongly relates to self-fulfilment needs, as Maslow has said "What man can be, he must be". Self-fulfilment needs can be associated with different self-leadership strategies and elements within these strategies, such as peaking and finding purpose, self-rewards, and positive thought patterns.

## 2.6 Remote work

Cambridge Dictionary defines remote work as an employee of an organisation working not at the office but at home, or some other location that is not the organisation's usual place of work. In this thesis this definition is applied and thereupon, remote work means work that in a normal situation would occur in an office environment with co-workers, managers, and other employees in the organisation around but has changed into working from home or other location due to COVID-19. This results to less contact with co-workers and supervisors and can cause the structure of a workday to decrease. This is the definition used with the term remote work in this thesis.

### 3 Self-leadership strategies

As the chapter 2 introduces the theoretical and conceptual base of self-leadership, this chapter provides the more concrete side of self-leadership – the three main self-leadership strategies that individuals can utilise. The three main cognitive and behavioural self-leadership strategies are behaviour-focused, natural reward-focused and constructive thought-focused strategies, and all these strategies include a specific set of actions, thoughts, and patterns (Norris 2018, 45; Neck & al. 2020, 17-18; Carmeli, Meitar & Weisber 2006, 76-77). These strategies can be combined, or an individual can recognise one strategy as their strength and use this strategy and the concrete tools of this strategy in their daily lives as a practicing self-leader (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 110-111).

Additionally, these strategies help individuals understand the process of self-influence and the questions why, what, and how of self-leadership (Neck & al. 2020, 7-8). These three main self-leadership strategies explain how self-leading individuals think and act based on cognitive, motivational, and behavioural strategies (Yun, Cox & Sims 2006, 374-388). These strategies are based on theories of self-regulation, self-control, and self-management. The most important objective of all these three theories is improvement of self-efficacy. (Bligh & al. 2006, 300-303.)

In the next subchapters 3.1 through 3.3 these strategies are introduced, assessed, and explained. Furthermore, ways to implement these strategies into remote work are explained with concrete examples, drawing theoretical background from multiple sources. These three strategies are the main base for the research of this thesis, as they include concrete and practical elements of how self-leadership is applied in real life.

#### 3.1 Behaviour-focused strategies

First of the three main self-leadership strategies introduced is behaviour-focused strategies. These strategies concentrate on self-leadership that leads an individual towards mandatory but undesirable tasks as well as replacing unproductive behavioural patterns with productive patterns (Houghton & al. 2012, 218). For instance, the least favourite routine task at work can feel very unattractive to complete but nonetheless, has to be completed. Behavioural strategies of self-leadership aim to find a solution for these situations and how to motivate oneself with tasks such as this. (Neck & al. 2020, 32.) These strategies usually aim to develop and sharpen a person's self-awareness to execute behavioural management on oneself. Goals that are challenging and specified can highly affect individual's performance levels towards better. (Houghton & Neck 2006, 276-278.)

Implementing these strategies often increases self-awareness and stimulates personal behavioural management with concrete methods such as:

1. self-goal setting,
2. self-reward,
3. self-punishment,
4. self-observation; and
5. cues management (Houghton & Neck 2006, 271-272; Bryant & Kazan 2013, 126).

Behaviour-focused strategies can be divided into two categories: world-altering strategies and self-imposed strategies. The following subchapters introduce these two types of behavioural-focused strategies as well as concrete tools within these strategies.

### **3.1.1 World-altering behaviour-focused strategies**

World-altering behaviour-focused strategies focus on changing the world around oneself and improving the surroundings for better results. This means the strategy is more external measures rather than internal processes, even though it does have an effect of individual's inner thought patterns as well. Different world-altering behaviour-focused strategies are:

- Removing negative cues
- Increasing positive cues
  - Using reminders and attention focusers (Neck & al. 2020, 36-41.)

Cue management aims at using different outside stimuli, such as reminders and attention focusers to recognise significant phases and moments in tasks and workdays. These moments are called benchmarks. Cue management helps with keeping focus on a certain task. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 133-134.) While negative cues are unwanted, adding positive cues increases the efficiency of focus (Neck & al. 2020, 36-38). Negative cues can also severely distract an individual from their goals and disrupt their work, whereas positive cues are personal for every individual and different cues work for different people. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 133-134.)

These cues guide individuals towards positive and wanted behaviour, for example focusing more on the work at hand. Positive cues are, for instance, similar to-do lists every day or meeting up with pleasant colleagues, as they can also act as positive cues for a person, if colleagues are pleasant to be around and share similar values. These can also be combined to a coffee break with colleagues, which themselves can affect motivation and efficiency. (Neck & al. 2020, 36-38.) In remote work, colleagues might not see each other as often, which means these positive cues are unavailable and employees have to come up with other cues to help with their work.

As seen from the examples above, cues can be quite simple things, such as to-do lists, phone reminders or wall hangings. These tools work as attention focusers simultaneously as they decrease unwanted behaviour and guide it towards desired behaviour. (Houghton & al. 2012, 218.) Identifying and developing cues can also enhance the self-efficacy of a person (Neck & al. 2020, 38).

As mentioned, using reminders and attention focusers can be as simple as setting up a reminder on one's phone to remind a task that has to be completed. Other techniques are lists, notes and screensavers, to name a few (Houghton & Neck 2006, 277). Removing negative cues and increasing positive cues go hand-in-hand. Negative cues are stimuli that could affect one's behaviour in a negative way. Humans are constantly surrounded by these physical stimuli, such as computers, televisions, and smartphones. For example, having a smartphone on the desk while working might be a distraction for many and therefore affects the efficiency of working. Putting the phone in a drawer instead guides focus back to the work itself instead of the negative cue, the smartphone. (Neck & al. 2020, 36-37.) In remote work, negative cues can also be different distractions at home, such as dirty dishes, children making noise, or other personal things.

### **3.1.2 Self-imposed behaviour-focused strategies**

Compared to world-altering behaviour-focused strategies, self-imposed strategies focus more on the internal processes and what an individual can do to have better self-control by using the knowledge we possess about ourselves (Neck & al. 2020, 40). Self-imposed behaviour-focused strategies include:

- Self-observation
- Self-goal setting
- Peaking with purpose and the importance of having purpose
- The search for purpose
- The importance of having purpose of life
- Self-reward and self-punishment (Neck & al. 2020, 40-60.)

Self-observation is in the very core of humanity, and self-leadership begins with self-observation, when an individual starts to recognise their thought or behavioural patterns (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 127). Observing oneself aims to answer the question of why a certain behaviour occurred in a certain situation. Self-observation can operate in situations where an individual loses their temper and gets upset, situations where failure has occurred or situations as simple as reflecting the past workday and how the individual managed their workday. (Neck & al. 2020, 40.) The purpose of self-observation is not only to identify unwanted behavioural patterns, but also positive behavioural patterns, along with modifying, enhancing, or deleting unwanted behavioural patterns. (Houghton & al. 2012,

218.) Especially in remote work, where face-to-face contact is often lacking, self-observation is even more important to reflect on the work that has been done. The downside of self-observation is self-judging, and oftentimes humans tend to be cruel to and judge themselves, which is not a desired behavioural pattern. In fact, within self-leadership, self-observation is a way to identify our true selves as well as the world and judging oneself can stand in the way of this process. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 126-128.)

Self-goal setting oftentimes comes together with self-observation. It motivates individuals to evolve and implement specific goals into their lives, such as peaking with certain behavioural patterns. (Houghton & al. 2012, 218.) When noticing a fault in one's work, an individual can set up a goal to avoid similar instances in the future. This goal can be, for example, "I will learn how to calculate probabilities better". However, very often goal setting is simpler than that; in work life, it can be as simple as setting a goal of things to execute within a time limit. In order to succeed in working life, both long- and short-term goals are needed, as both give direction to everyday life as well as the bigger picture of work. (Neck & al. 2020, 42-43.) In remote work, when employees might have more control over the structure of their days, goals can be set for instance by deciding which things must be done before the weekend.

Self-reward and self-punishment are tools that usually endorse behaviour, and they can help an individual to focus on their inner thoughts rather than taking feedback from others (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 132). For example, after a hectic but successful day at work, a person might reward themselves with good food, a movie or chocolate. (Neck & al. 2020, 52-56.) Self-reward can also happen by just positive thinking and mental processes (Houghton & al. 2012, 218). On the other hand, if something goes wrong and an individual is not satisfied of their own actions, thoughts or execution of things, self-punishment can happen. Self-punishment also goes by another name, self-correction, which is a gentler way of managing unwished behaviour. Concrete examples of self-correction could be such as not taking a day off before a certain project is finished, delaying fun, social events, or negative self-talk. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 132; Houghton & al. 2012, 218.)

However, self-punishment is not the most efficient way of self-leadership, since it can easily be avoided and therefore it does not endorse the message needed, compared to punishment from others (Neck & al. 2020, 55). Overly strict self-correction can lead to guilt and a feeling of insufficiency, which can lead to decreased motivation and decreased effectiveness at work (Houghton & al. 2012, 218).

The search and importance of purpose as well as peaking with purpose scratch the surface of purpose and what does it mean. Purpose is “why you do something or why something exists” (Cambridge Dictionary). It gives humans a sense of direction. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), the inventor of the hierarchy of needs, stated “What man can be, he must be”. This statement is connected to the hierarchy of needs presented in chapter 2.5, and more specifically, to the self-fulfilment needs, where purpose of life is also thought to be located in. Purpose guides people in everyday life and the lack of purpose might result to a sense of being lost in life. (Neck & al. 2020, 44-48).

Connected to purpose is the search of purpose and the importance of having purpose in one’s life. Finding purpose in life might take decades, but once it is found, purpose can have an immense positive effect on the quality of life and can therefore work as a primary motivator in one’s life. Purpose can guide people on how to use their own resources, such as time and energy, and can help a person to manage through workday. For instance, if the person’s purpose is to succeed in the current job even when working remotely, it can significantly boost motivation and effectiveness on the job. (Neck & al. 2020, 44-48).

Practice is the last of self-imposed behaviour-focused strategies. Practice can be applied together with self-reward in order to be more motivated. Practice makes humans better in various things and practicing for example a speech before giving it is considered self-leadership. Practice happens in daily life, in everything an individual does, but it differs whether all practice is meaningful or not. Practicing self-leaders apply practice in their life effectively. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 132-134.)

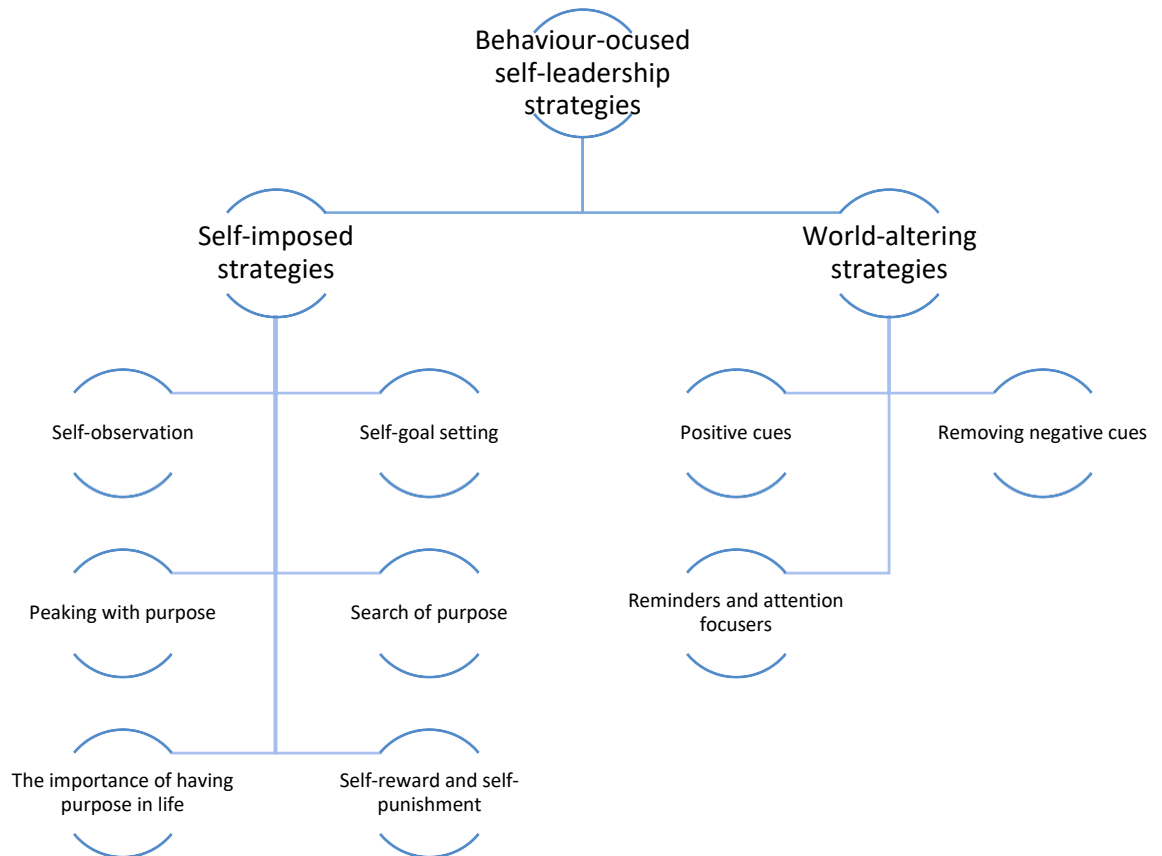


Figure 8. Behaviour-focused self-leadership strategies (adapted from Neck & al. 2020, 31-60)

### 3.2 Natural reward-focused strategies

Natural reward, or cognitive, strategies can assist individuals to increase pleasant and desired aspects into their daily lives so that tasks, such as work tasks, become naturally rewarding (Neck & al. 2020, 66-68) with aspects that for the person are meaningful and positively stimulating (Carmeli & al. 2006, 77). Natural reward strategies add one's inner motivation, and the feeling of competence (Houghton & Neck 2006, 272). Additionally, finding elements that are naturally rewarding increases self-determination and feeling of accomplishment (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 134-135). Natural, or intrinsic, rewards are different to external rewards – while external rewards can be such as a monetary bonus from the company individual work in, or additional holiday days, intrinsic rewards come from within the individual's own actions presented next (Neck & al. 2020, 66-68).

The basic concept behind natural reward-focused self-leadership strategies are things that a person finds natural for themselves and are therefore naturally rewarding. Two different types of natural rewards exist: external and internal rewards. Both types of rewards complement each other, are equally as important and can be applied together. Finding a

pleasant physical location for work and building in pleasant activities into workdays are examples of external rewards. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 134-135.) Naturally rewarding activities can also be such as taking a 10-minute break from working to exercise if that makes an individual feel accomplished and rewarded. This is an example of an internal natural reward. (Neck & al. 2020, 66-68.)

Feelings of competence usually come from liked activities: the activities that we like, we are usually good at as well. Liked activities can also contribute to the feeling of success and competence (Neck & al. 2020, 69.) Feeling of self-control usually comes with pleasant activities. Work tasks should be enjoyable and gratifying, and these tasks increase performance. (Carmeli & al. 2006, 77.) There are multiple ways to increase the natural rewards of tasks, such as the following:

- Finding out physical locations where tasks feel more pleasant
- Building rewarding tasks and redesigning everyday tasks
- Recognising pleasant parts of tasks
- Advance the habit of defining pleasant aspects (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 135).

In addition to feelings of competence and self-control, feelings of purpose are an important factor to naturally rewarding activities. As discussed earlier in chapter 3.1.2, purpose guides humans through life and gives meaning. Oftentimes, selfless actions and helping of others give people a sense on purpose. Altruism, which can be defined as selflessly helping others, even when there might be a cost, physical or abstract, to oneself (Psychology Today 2020). Altruism is often connected with purpose in one's life.

As seen in the different natural reward tools, they are quite easily recognisable as everyday elements in one's daily life. While the natural rewards strategy's tools might be harder to name, the tools can, in fact, be found in individual's behavioural patterns quite often. (Carmeli & al. 2006, 77.)

### **3.3 Constructive thought-focused strategies**

Constructive thought-focused, or mental, strategies aim to cause positive thinking patterns and to replace negative thinking patterns with positive patterns (Houghton & Neck 2006, 272-273; Bryant & Kazan 2013, 111). These constructive thought patterns can have a great impact on a person's thinking patterns and have a way of creating positive outcome expectations (Boss & Sims 2008, 144). Constructive thought-focused strategies are planned for simplifying thinking patterns (Houghton & Neck 2006, 272) and replacing negative patterns with positive ones (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 111-112). Constructively altering psychological world can be self-fulfilling and have a positive effect on self-leadership (Neck & al. 2020, 96).

Constructive thought-focused strategies focus more on a person's inner, psychological world and what stimuli a person receives and focuses on daily, rather than external factors. Every person's psychological world is different, since receiving and interpretation of stimuli is a very subjective experience. (Neck & al. 2020, 90-91.) The number of stimuli that a person receives daily is oftentimes too much to process, and therefore there must be a choice made of which stimuli to pay attention to – especially with smart phones and computers at present taking a huge part of people's daily lives. There are four ways to acquire a stable presence of constructive thoughts:

- Improving one's inner belief system
- Using imagination to gain wanted performance
- Self-talk
- Practicing new and upgraded scripts within one's mind (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 112.)

In order to succeed in changing these thought patterns, certain techniques and tools need to be applied. Using self-talk can increase our alertness with negative thoughts. When trying to reduce negative thinking patterns, active self-talk works as a coaching element towards better patterns (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 119-120). While self-talk might be unnoticeable at times, it can affect self-influence and self-efficacy positively (Carmeli & al. 2006, 77). Improving beliefs can be world-altering as beliefs can be rooted in a person since a very young age. For example, religious beliefs are oftentimes very deeply rooted in people and therefore very hard to alter. These beliefs alter people's behaviour- and thought patterns. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 112.) Negative thinking patterns can be such as extreme thinking, labelling and mislabelling things and use of "should" statements, for instance "I should be a better employee". Constructive altering of thoughts can help a person to get rid of these negative thoughts and turn them more into positive and constructive thoughts. In order to do so, a person must identify the negative patterns, and then mentally work their way into more positive patterns. (Neck & al. 2020, 103-104). In remote work, changing thought patterns might be very crucial, as being alone and without social contact could result in more negative thought patterns, and have an offsetting repercussion on mental well-being, which as stated in chapter 2.2.1 has significance in self-leadership.

Additionally, very common beliefs in the work life are "I am too old" or "I do not have enough experience". If a person behaves according to these beliefs, they might miss the opportunity to get their dream job. Alternatively, in remote work, if a person believes they do not have the discipline to work alone and believes their productivity will drop in remote work, it might happen. Negatively affecting beliefs are often repetitive, and abovementioned example "I do not have enough experience" might, for instance, prevent a person from applying to several jobs. Therefore, these beliefs can affect behaviour negatively for a long period of time. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 113-115.)

Using imagination for better performance can also be described as visualisation. A commonly used strategy by athletes before performance works, because the human body remembers situations where performance was excellent, and can imitate that performance, creating better results. (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 117-118.) Learning new scripts and improving existing ones comes after a person is aware of their own self-talk. With self-talk, a person can recognise negative patterns, and reprogram existing scripts. Creating new patterns affect the person's thought-patterns. Many of these patterns are subconscious and therefore more challenging to change. Oftentimes these thought patterns are also repetitive. (Neck & al. 2020, 112-120.)

### **3.4 Implementation of self-leadership strategies in remote work**

The importance of self-leadership becomes more crucial in remote work since direct contact with others is significantly decreased. Those leaders, who effectively implement self-leadership in remote work, are better than average leaders themselves to others (Get Abstract, 2020). A study made in 2019 suggests that employees who work periodically in both the office and at home might need more self-leadership skills than an employee who works solely at the office. Employees implemented more self-goal setting, self-rewards, and visualisation of performance on remote working days than on the days working at the office. On the other hand, the study shows no correlation between working location and self-punishment and self-cueing. This could suggest that self-punishment and cues management are either important in both remote and office work, or that participants in this study did not find these tools to be very crucial in their work in general. (Müller & Niessen 2019, 883-893.)

The study also brings light onto the future of remote work as well: both employees and organisations must be aware that remote working requires the implementation of different skills – self-leadership skills – than days at the office. (Müller & Niessen 2019, 883-893.) However, it is not mentioned whether remote work in the future could pose a risk to the traditional leadership but makes it clear that self-leadership must be applied more efficiently into everyday working life.

As the self-leadership strategies – behavioural-focused, natural reward-focused and constructive thought-focused strategies – explain, there are various ways to implement self-leadership skills in practice. In remote work it might be easier to apply different methods, since working alone means less interruptions and more control over the structure of the day, the working environment, and other factors within the workday. Therefore, employees have a control on how they would concretely implement self-leadership strategies and singular self-leadership tools. Furthermore, as discussed in chapter 2, every individual does

have self-leadership skills, but implementing those skills in practice and more importantly, doing it effectively, is more challenging, but even so, a necessary element in remote work.

### **3.4.1 Developing and supporting self-leadership in organisations**

Working life is constantly changing, and these changes might require organisations to re-define their leadership methods and give more freedom to individuals (Norris 2018, 67). While organisations may have many rules, norms, and customs, following them with a purpose of positive employee development might even hurt self-leadership (Ho & Nesbit 2014, 389-415). Houghton & Neck (2006, 273) introduce two areas, where self-leadership is used. These are self-leading teams and empowering leadership. Having self-leading and -managing teams reduces the need of leadership from others and can be created by empowering employees and giving more freedom. (Houghton & Neck 2006, 273-274.)

Organisations with self-leaders tend to have higher sales, motivation, and eagerness within their employees (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 141). Therefore, developing and creating a healthy environment for self-leadership to grow would be financially beneficial for organisations. The weakness of many organisations, according to Bryant and Kazan (2013, 141) seems to be short-sightedness towards the organisational goals; many organisations aim for high revenue and profit, and in an environment where tangible results are the main goal, developing self-leadership skills might be forgotten. Based on these theories, developing employees' self-leadership would result in better functioning workplaces, better monetary results, and increased well-being of employees.

### **3.4.2 Leaders' support to employees towards self-leadership**

The purpose of explaining leadership and how it works is to understand how leaders, for example supervisors, chief executives and managers can support employees' self-leadership and help them grow and learn. While the traditional perspective to leadership is leader-follower, or in other words, top-down leadership, self-leadership is a rising trend which means organisations must pay more attention to shared- and self-leadership. Using the three abovementioned self-leadership strategies have a proven positive effect on employees' success rates and employees who actively implement self-leadership strategies have more positive association of their supervisors. Therefore, modern organisations who want their employees to stay satisfied and motivated at work must apply substantial effort to amplify self-leadership inside the organisation. For example, financial rewards and job tenure have a proven effect to a person's individual innovation, which positively correlates with self-leadership. (Carmeli & al. 2006, 76-79; 85-86.)

Additionally, organisational self-leadership leads not only to better well-being of employees, but more committed, effective, and collaborative employees (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 2-11). This alone is a great beneficial factor for organisations to support self-leadership. It is suggested that effectively self-leading managers will set an example for employees and create an encouraging environment for employees to start actively self-leading (Steiner, 2020.) In her master's thesis Steiner (2020) found that leaders can help employees grow their self-leadership skills by being responsive, supporting self-reflection, focusing on personal concerns when setting goals and putting these goals in writing as well as enabling change within the organisations (Steiner 2020). With this study in mind, it can be argued that managements' and leaders' active support and participation in employees' workdays enhance their self-leadership skills, making them more prepared for challenges, such as sudden remote work and the challenges that come with it.

## 4 Conducting the research

This chapter presents the research of the thesis, and moreover, the research type, methodology, objective of the research and data analysis methods. The research for this thesis is conducted with a qualitative research method, semi-structured interviews to achieve high quality answer, and to truly find out how employees experience self-leadership in remote work. To support the theoretical background of the study, qualitative research was conducted to answer the objective and to solve the research problem.

### 4.1 Qualitative research as data analysis method

Empirical research is often divided within two main research types: quantitative and qualitative research. In this thesis, qualitative research is applied, as it answers the questions of why, how, and what kind, and as the topic is self-leadership, understanding the reasoning behind answers (the why) and the descriptive answering (how and what kind) is key. Qualitative research provides an opportunity to gather data and understand a phenomenon with its all perspectives (Tilastokeskus). Qualitative research is based on the quality of the data collection and analysis, rather than amount of data. Planning of the data collection must be clear, explicit, and based on the objectives clearly for the collected data to correspond to the quality required. It is also notable to choose a research method that qualifies to the research problem at hand. (Flick 2007, 61-64.)

Qualitative research was chosen as a research type in this thesis to understand the participants' views and experiences as well as possible, and qualitative research method is used to gain more knowledge of a previously unknown or little-known topic (Ojasalo, Moilanen & Ritalahti 2015, 105). Qualitative research inserts the researcher into the world they are researching, and changes the world into series of interpretation, such as interviews, conversations, recordings, or observations (Flick 2007, 2). Different qualitative research methods are such as observation, open-ended surveys, content analysis and interviews, which is the method utilised in this study (Crossman 2020). Qualitative research is focused on a small group of research subject, opposite to quantitative methods. The objective of qualitative research is to understand and analyse the thought and behavioural patterns of research subjects (Heikkilä 2014, 15-17).

Qualitative methods can be applied together with quantitative methods (Flick 2007, 3). While in this thesis that is not the case, it is notable that qualitative and quantitative research methods do not exclude one another but can be used together. However, qualitative method was chosen for this research because of the nature of the objective, where the goal is to find out how individuals response to and experience a situation and how

their own background and thought patterns can affect their performance and utilisation of self-leadership skills.

Having four qualitative interviewees requires meticulous analysis of the interview responses, as there is no extensive quantitative, numeric data collected, making the analysis of the interview answers is paramount. The interview participants must be given enough time as well as background knowledge for them to give answers that are relevant for the research, and the quality of the interviews must remain high to gather reliable and valid data.

## **4.2 Research type and methodology**

The research is conducted with a qualitative research method, semi-structured interviews. The objective of semi-structured interviews is to identify subjective beliefs, emotions, experiences and interpretation with structured and open-ended questions (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2020). Relying heavily on the theoretical background is crucial in semi-structured interviews and their analysis to gain reliable research data (Flick 2007, 101-103). Semi-structured interviews give the benefit of gaining comprehensive understanding of individual's experiences as well as identifying the context of the answers in individuals' lives. In addition, it identifies very personal experiences, compared to quantitative methods, where participants are often shown as numbers. (Hennink & al. 2020.) In order to fully understand the significance, purpose, and importance self-leadership skills have had in participants' lives during remote work, semi-structured interview is used as a research method in this thesis.

These interviews offer a deep look into participants' experience rather than just scratching the surface and gives understanding to participants' subjective experience about remote work and their self-leadership skills. Semi-structured interviews offer the possibility of adding deepening questions within and during the interview when it is needed to gain more information about topic at hand.

In semi-structured interviews, interviewees answer to open-ended and constructed questions that have been for the most part, pre-set. This research method can be applied in individual or group interviews. The interviews are conducted once, and the duration might vary between 30 minutes to around 90 minutes. Core questions guide the structure of the interview, and deepening questions are asked to offer more insight on the matter at hand. (Jamshed 2014, 87). The interviews are planned in advance and constructed with an interview guide that the writer creates, although, in semi-structured interviews, the questions might vary from the actual interview guide during the interviews (Cohen & Crabtree 2006).

Interview guide is a representational list of questions and they have been set and evaluated by the interviewer, and its purpose is to keep the interviewer more focused on the questions without getting side-tracked. The interviews are also usually recorded to get reliable results and to avoid forgetting to write down certain parts of the participants' answers and missing perhaps key findings, as this is a threat for semi-structured interviews. (Jamshed 2014, 87-88.)

The advantage of semi-structured interviews is the combined advantages from structured and unstructured interviews. With a semi-structured interview, the interviewer can gather the background data of the interviewees, but at the same time have open-ended questions to gather insightful and meaningful data from the interviewees. Semi-structured interviews also allow adding deepening questions to the interview if the answers of the interviewee allow, deepening the answer and minimizing the risk of misunderstanding (Smith 2019). On the other hand, the disadvantage in-depth interviews, such as semi-structured interviews, have is that they only offer perceptions from the number of people interviewed, so the research result has to be meticulously analysed in order to understand and interpret the results correctly (Hennink & al. 2020).

In addition, semi-structured interviews can be time-consuming and require excellent communication between the interviewer and interviewee to increase the credibility of the research (Smith 2019). Furthermore, research questions are not the same as interview questions. While the research question may be vague and not very conceptualized, interview questions are meant to be very precise and leaving little to no room for interpretation. This ensures higher reliability in results, and semi-structured interviews offer a good viewpoint into more concrete questions and therefore concrete answers. (Hennink & al. 2020.)

### **4.3 Objective of research**

The objective of the research is to find out how do assistants utilise their self-leadership skills in remote work, how the change into remote work has changed the need for these skills as well as how organisations are supporting self-leadership in remote work. Therefore, the main research question is to find out how and which self-leading skills assistants use in their daily remote work. The main research question also brings up additional sub-questions:

1. How do employees manage their well-being during remote work, as well-being is a base for self-leadership?
2. How has the need for self-leadership changed during remote work since the COVID-19 pandemic started?
3. How are organisations supporting employees with their self-leadership skills during remote work?

The intend with the research is that both employees and organisations can utilize this knowledge moving forward and giving individuals tools to lead themselves better if a new, extraordinary situation such as the current pandemic, occurs. The focus is especially on how the new, unexpected situation of remote work is affecting individuals. Additionally, the information this research provides can be utilized in organizations when planning instructions for remote work or other surprising situations. The author is also motivated to re-research this topic and to see and analyse the answers from the interviews, since the topic is extremely current and affects millions of employees globally. The research result is also aimed to give employees themselves tools and ideas on how to lead themselves better, and how to remain effective even in crisis.

#### **4.4 Collection and analysis of data**

The research is targeted to provide an answer to the objective described above. To ensure this, measures described in this chapter were taken. Before conducting the research, the interview questions were drafted using an online mind-map tool Flinga to create a well-balanced interview guide, and for the interview to be thematically well distributed and not too heavily based on one part and most importantly, to ensure obtaining answers to the research objective.

With this method, the interview questions were divided thematically into categories, the interview guide (Appendix 1) was created, and the interview guide was created and constructed of three main parts: background information; working conditions and environmental factors as well as participant's well-being; and the utilisation of the self-leadership skills and the three self-leadership strategies explained in chapters 3.1-3.3, which is perhaps the most important part of the interview guide. Additionally, the writer conducted a test interview with a person who works in a similar assistant position as the participants to ensure the interview guide works, the questions are understandable and that the interview guide serves the objective of the research. After the test interview the actual interviews were held.

All participants voluntarily participated in the research and were also able to choose their own interview date and time as to avoid participants from feeling rushed or tired at the moment of the interview. As all participants' native language is Finnish, all interviews were conducted in Finnish to get as valid and profound answers as possible, and to avoid any language barrier. Four interviews in total were conducted on 7<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2020 via Microsoft Teams video call feature, as due to COVID-19 they could not be conducted in person. All interviews were conducted one-on-one, and the results are presented anonymously in this thesis to protect the identities of the participants.

In the beginning of each interview, the writer explained the basic terminology and concepts of self-leadership to the participants for them to answer questions with the quality needed. This information was provided to avoid confusion with other similar terms, such as self-managing or shared leadership. As explained in chapter 4.2, semi-structured interviews themselves require meticulous analysis of data, but in addition, participants' misunderstanding the basic concepts of the interviews could cause issues with reliability, which is why the participants were all explained what self-leadership means and how it can be applied, as well as the tools of self-leadership were introduced. Infographic providing the information the applicants' received can be found as Appendix 2.

The need for this infographic became clear with the test interview, as the concept of self-leadership was unknown for the test interview participant, and the participants misunderstood some questions because of the lack of knowledge they had about the topic. Therefore, it became crucial to explain the participants what self-leadership means and how it can be utilised. The participants also got to ask questions about the topic before starting the interviews, if they had any.

The participants all work in assistant positions within their respective organisations and have been working at least half of their working days remotely starting from April 2020 until the point of the interviews. This sample of participants is used to understand specifically how assistants experience self-leadership and how they utilise their self-leadership skills, as it is not the most traditional external leadership role.

Additionally, all interviews were recorded with a consent from participants to later transcribe interviews into a written format and to use these transcribed versions for analysing the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. This ensures no points or answers are forgotten from the interviews and going through the interview answers as many times as needed is possible. The recordings of the interviews were destroyed once they were no longer needed.

As the research is conducted in a semi-structured interview format, all participants were asked the same questions from the interview guide, but some answers in the interviews sparked follow-up questions that were asked to better understand the answer and to minimize the risk on misunderstanding. The interview guide can be found in this thesis as Appendix 1.

## 5 Results of research

The results of the research interviews are presented anonymously and to separate the interviews from one another without compromising the participants' identities, each interview is independently referenced as I1, I2, I3, and I4 referring to interview 1, interview 2, interview 3 and interview 4. All participants work in assistant roles; this aspect is noteworthy, since assistant roles are not usually the most typical leadership roles, and therefore implementing self-leadership in their work might differ of the ones who are leaders themselves.

In addition, all participants have all been working at least 80 percent remotely since April 2020, meaning that on average four out of five workdays are done from home or some other setting other than their organisation's office. The interviews were held on 7<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 2020.

### 5.1 Background information of participants

A general background information of the participants is introduced to strengthen the validity of the research – to shed light onto the possible factors affecting the answers of participants. Of the participants, I1 has worked in her current work for one year and four months at the time of interview and evaluates about 95 % of her work to have been remote work since beginning of April 2020. She has in total of five years of working experience within her own field. I2 has worked at her current job for three months and has around five years of work experience. She has worked remotely practically 100 % of her workdays since starting her job. I3 has worked at her current job since August 2019. In total, she has worked two years and three months in roles such as the current one at the moment of the interview. She has been working remotely since mid-March 2020, estimating 95 % of work to have been remote since that. I4 has at the time of the interview worked for two years and two months in her current job, since October 2018, in her current work and has in total three years of experience within her field of work. She evaluates, that since April 2020, she has worked around 90 % remotely, only going to the office on few occasions.

It is notable that none of the interviewees have significant leadership or self-leadership studies prior to the interviews, such as extensive courses, theoretical studies or work experience as supervisor or a manager, which are traditional leadership roles. Thus, none of the participants have gained significant training within the topic of the research that could benefit them with their self-leadership.

## 5.2 Analysis of the interviews

The main findings of the interviews can be divided into three categories: changes in work life since moving into remote work instead working at an office setting and how that affects the need for self-leadership; implementation and benefits of different self-leadership skills; and support of self-leadership from organisations and managers, and how this affects employees.

The results of the interviews were analysed thematically to quadrate with the research objectives. These themes are changes in work life; how and what self-leadership skills are applied; and how do organisations support employees' self-leadership skills development. These themes are divided into the next three subchapters.

The responses to the questions align with the theoretical background of the thesis. Well-being as described by Sydänmaanlakka (2017, 29) is considered to have shifted during remote work, and an unbalanced well-being has its effect on participants' self-leadership. All participants recognised elements of the three self-leadership strategies in themselves, but implementation was somewhat different with every participant, aligning to self-leadership strategies theories throughout the literature by Neck and al. (2020), as well as Bryant and Kazan (2013). Additionally, different organisations have drastically different attitudes towards supporting self-leadership, starting from no support at all to empowering employees and greatly encouraging self-leadership.

### 5.2.1 Remote work and its effects on self-leadership

Remote work has changed ways of working drastically. Within this topic, the lack of social contact and its consequences are the top issues that occurred in the research. All four participants mentioned how the balance of well-being has shifted, and professional well-being is now taking more foothold than before, while social and mental well-being are more challenging to keep on the same level as before remote work started. Decreased social well-being is a constant factor in remote work. I1 and I3 also spoke about the increased workload during remote work, and how they are increasingly often asked to complete work tasks after hours, and sometimes even during the weekend. This unavoidably puts more emphasis on work than other life, disrupting the balance of well-being, which acts as a base for good self-leadership, as described by Salmimies (2008, 59-61). The increased emphasis in professional well-being is due to remote work being out of ordinary and requiring different things compared to office work, as described by I3 below.

” Remote work feels completely different compared to being at the office, and it requires paying attention differently compared to work at the office, because working there is so normal.”

(“Kyllä etätyö tuntuu ihan erilaiselta kuin toimistolla oleminen, siihen pitää kiinnittää ihan eri tavalla huomiota, kuin toimistolla olemiseen, koska siellä oleminen on tosi normaalia.”)

While the impacts on social and mental well-being are not surprising, it is noteworthy how much participants seem to have been affected by these impacts, and for instance, I3 additionally describes really struggling with remote work in general, and describes her mental well-being deteriorating over time.

Moreover, the pandemic has not abundantly affected participants’ financial and physical well-being, since they have all kept their jobs and stayed healthy, but the mental and social impacts are more visible. I4 described the lack of social contact affecting mental well-being, causing a decrease in her motivation and general feeling of purpose, both of which are a part of behaviour-focused self-leadership strategies, as described by Neck and al. (2020, 40-60). The decrease of these elements might have severe impacts on a person’s self-leadership, resulting in decreasing self-leadership, or contrastingly, in more immense need of self-leadership. These findings point towards the relationship between well-being and self-leadership introduced by Sydänmaanlakka (2017, 29-34) and Salmimies (2008, 59-61).

All participants explain that not seeing their colleagues decreases the meaningfulness of their work. As suggested by Neck and al. (2020, 36-38), colleagues can act as positive cues at work and create a more pleasant environment to work in. Removing these cues ties together with Sydänmaanlakka’s (2017, 33-34) theory of balanced well-being, as colleagues are seen as crucial part of work, and having less to no face-to-face contact with colleagues points towards both cues management in behaviour-focused strategies as described by Neck and al. (2020, 36-41) as well as balanced well-being by Sydänmaanlakka (2017, 33-34). These findings point out that the balance of well-being has shifted in remote work compared to office work, creating an unbalanced well-being, which can cause decreased self-leadership, as pointed out by Salmimies (2008, 59-61).

I1, I3 and I4 all spoke about decreased communication within their organisations since remote work started and described how having less “low effort communication”, such as casual feedback, coffee breaks and lunches with colleagues and managers has affected them, causing a feeling of lacking purpose and motivation, and sense of detachment from the work community. This nudges towards one of the successful self-leadership aspects, having focus and discipline, as described by Franko (2018). Furthermore, I4 explained

that she must put more effort into focusing on work at home, compared to office work. Additionally, I3 described having to take more initiative in remote work to keep track of things, and as explained by Franko (2018), this acts as one of the aspects of self-leadership.

Reasons for abovementioned decreased motivation, feeling of purpose and sense of detachment as described by I1, I3 and I4 are caused by general lack of communication and social contact, and not seeing the value their work has the same way they would at the office. The reduced social contacts seem to have substantial effects on mental, social, and even physical well-being, which could result in a risk of longer-term issues. However, all participants seem to be getting used to the “new normal” and the need for social contact is not as strong anymore, compared to the beginning of the pandemic. Additionally, I1, I2 and I4 explain that they have paid additional effort towards their comprehensive well-being, recognising the risks the pandemic situation brings to one’s well-being, not only to its physical aspect, but rather to mental and social aspects. The quote below from I3 demonstrate some emotions remote work causes quite well.

“Working at home is sometimes super challenging because I just can’t focus. At the office it is easier to focus, maybe because there I get this drive on and I have a better attitude than at home. Sometimes at home it feels like nothing really matters.”

(“Kotona töiden tekeminen on välillä super hankalaa, koska en vaan voi keskittyä. Toimistolla on helpompi keskittyä, ehkä siksi, että siellä tulee sellainen draivi päälle ja parempi asenne, kuin kotona. Kotona tuntuu välillä, että millään ei ole mitään väliä.”)

Additionally, spending more time at home increases the temptation to open the work computer after a workday, hence increasing the working time on a weekly level from the normal 37,5 hours. While the workload has not risen with all participants, it was mentioned in interviews that employees feel like they must be always available, since they are at home – this was mentioned by I3 and I4. Even though compared to the start of the pandemic in March 2020 to the moment of the interviews in December 2020, the balance between personal and work life has shifted more towards the pre-pandemic situation, work seems to still have a bigger foothold in life compared to pre-remote work time. Having less social contact, more work and an unbalanced well-being affects employees’ ability to be efficient and motivated at work, and therefore also having a great effect on managing one’s workload. These issues disturb self-leadership and perhaps create a bigger need for it, since in order for a person to efficiently self-lead, they need motivation and a good well-being.

All participants consider that they still receive support from managers or supervisors, however, the type of support has changed. I2 and I4 in particular brought up how their supervisors encourage them on a daily basis to take initiative and support their own ways of working. These findings can be reflected to Steiner's (2020) findings about supporting self-leadership in organisations, and measures leaders can take to support subordinates' self-leadership – with tools such as mentioned by I2 and I4.

It seems that managers still support, guide, and lead their employees, but the “everyday” support seems to be lesser than earlier. This creates a need for employees themselves to look after oneself, and make sure their work is done, their professional and mental well-being remains good during a workday, and to stay on top of things. It also seems like remote work has made communication more challenging, as there is no face-to-face communication, and the threshold to contact a person might be higher when doing so via email or call rather than in person.

Finally, as the ways of communication have changed, the participants felt especially in the first few months of the pandemic and remote work, that they had to implement self-leadership more than before. I3 and I4 explained that due to decreased communication especially self-talk, self-observation and self-goal setting were crucial self-leadership tools for them. These elements are part of constructive thought-focused and self-imposed behaviour-focused strategies as described by Bryant and Kazan (2013, 112; 127).

Participants evaluate that a crisis situation, such as a pandemic, would require more self-leadership no matter what the crisis is. It is difficult to evaluate whether this specific crisis would require more self-leadership than some other type of crisis, but the interviews make clear that just coping with all the changes during the first few months of the pandemic was challenging and required a change of thought-patterns and self-talk as well as using cues management, the elements that can be found in self-leadership strategies as explained by Bryant and Kazan (2013). Developing one's skills and keeping motivation up are crucial in remote work based on the participants' experiences.

### **5.2.2 Implementation and benefits of self-leadership skills**

All participants considered themselves to be using all three different self-leadership strategies to some extent, but there are variations between participants regarding which strategies are the most utilised. Overall, the most common self-leadership strategies that appeared in the interviews that participants find more significant in remote work compared to work at the office are behaviour-focused strategies – elements from these strategies were most mentioned by research participants.

I2 and I3 expressed using self-rewards after a successful day or a week at work is crucial for them, and they use different types of self-rewards depending on the situation. On the other hand, I1 spoke about using self-punishment rather than self-rewards, and explained that she does not use self-rewards. I1 describes herself as a person who is very critical towards her own work performance and does not reward herself in her personal life either. She often finds herself criticising her own work, and while the self-punishment is not a visible process, she goes through her mistakes in her mind very critically and think what could have been done better. However, self-punishment is not the most efficient way of self-leadership, since it can easily be avoided and therefore it does not endorse the message needed, compared to punishment from others (Neck & al. 2020, 55). Overly strict self-correction can lead to guilt and a feeling of insufficiency, which can lead to decreased motivation and decreased effectiveness at work.

Being overly critical towards own performance can also cause negative thought patterns. Even though, as according to Houghton and Neck (2006, 272-273), changing thought patterns are part of self-leadership, the purpose is to change negative patterns into positive ones. I1 spoke about criticising her own work, which could be interpreted as negative thought patterns according to Bryant and Kazan (2013, 111-112). She also mentioned that she has tried to learn to be more merciful towards herself but has so far not been very successful.

I3 and I4 spoke about self-observation and giving feedback to oneself more in remote work than at the office. I4 brought up that for her the decrease in feedback in the beginning of the pandemic was not too obvious, but slowly she realised that she was not receiving as much feedback from others in remote work as she did in the office. She knowingly started taking measures and started reflecting on her work more during the summer 2020. She explained having these reflections regularly, and for instance, writing notes about completed projects helps her evaluate her own work performance and reflect back on how she has felt during or after a certain project, in order to build her self-efficacy. This points towards theory by Houghton and Neck (2006, 271-273), suggesting that self-observation is an important part of self-leadership. Furthermore, Norris (2018, 50-51), suggests that self-efficacy and self-leadership have a positive correlation together and oftentimes work simultaneously and when utilised effectively, have a positive effect on effectiveness of work.

One of the aspects of abovementioned behaviour-focused strategies is also self-goal setting. While participants explained that as an assistant it is not very easy to set goals project-wise, I3 did mention that she usually sets goals on a monthly level as seen in the quote below.

“Usually on the first day of the month I write a ten-point list, where I put ten things I want to achieve that month. I also do this in my private life. I got the tip to do this from my colleague, and it helps noticing what I can achieve, no matter how small things.”

(“Yleensä kuun ensimmäisenä päivänä kirjoitan kymmenen kohdan listan, johon lisään sen kuun tavoitteita. Teen tätä myös yksityiselämässä. Sain vinkin tähän kolttegalta, ja se auttaa huomaamaan, mitä kaikkea voi saavuttaa, vaikka ne asiat olisivatkin tosi pieniä.”)

One of the most commonly mentioned self-leadership strategies were management of external cues by setting reminders, to do -lists and alerts – all participants spoke about using external cues in their work. Structuring workdays in remote work appears to be more challenging at home, and it is very easy to get caught up in work tasks without taking breaks or eating lunch, since there are less distractions at home, and for example, no colleagues asking to go for lunch. External cue management has been a very useful tool for structuring workdays and to remember to take breaks, but also to complete tasks. Additionally, I2 and I4 also mentioned that having a clean home as a working environment helps them focus a lot during work, and therefore they make a conscious choice every day to take some time to clean, since they know it positively helps them with their focus. These findings go alongside with behaviour-focused strategies and identifying and developing cues can also enhance the self-efficacy of a person (Neck & al. 2020, 38).

“I had never thought about this, but I cannot work, if my apartment is messy, or if I have not made my bed. If I do not make my bed in the morning, at some point it will start to annoy and distract me, and then I just have to make it.”

(“Enpä ollutkaan koskaan ajatellut asiaa näin, mutta mä en voi tehdä töitä, jos on sotkuista, tai vaikka jos on sänky petaamatta. Jos vaikka aamulla en petaa sänkyä, jossain vaiheessa päivää se alkaa ärsyttämään ja häiritsemään keskittymistä ja siten on vaan pakko pedata.”)

I1 talked about constructing her workdays around her breaks; she takes a lunch break around midday, and a coffee break in the afternoon, and aims for dividing her tasks in three timeslots: before lunch, between lunch and coffee break and after coffee break. She specifies that constructing her days this way forces her to take breaks, as otherwise she might get caught up in work and continue working until late afternoon without breaks. As explained by Houghton and Neck (2006, 272), natural-reward self-leadership strategies include constructing workdays in a way that for an individual feels naturally rewarding. Additionally, Franko (2018) suggests that schedules are a key factor in self-leadership.

I2 also spoke about procrastinating non-urgent, unpleasant tasks, and prioritising pleasant tasks, which nods towards natural-reward focused strategies, as building pleasant activities into workdays is part of these strategies, according to Bryant and Kazan (2013, 134-135). Additionally, she mentioned that she builds naturally rewarding elements into her work by working from her bed or couch, as these are comfortable locations for her, which is also part of natural reward-focused strategies according to Neck and al. (2020, 66-68).

As natural reward-focused strategies add inner motivation, the feeling of competence and makes working more pleasant (Houghton & Neck 2006, 272), comments from I2, I3 and I4 about the ergonomics, scheduling and work location being an important part of their remote work, and for instance, working from a couch or bed might feel nicer compared to an office chair tie together with this theory.

I4 spoke about using self-talk after a project, as her work is very project-oriented and her role in these projects is usually quite significant. She mentioned that in her organisation, debriefings with the project team after a project are very common, but they do not generally focus on individual performance, but rather team effort and overall project management feedback. Therefore, she likes to use self-talk as a way to recognise her strengths and weaknesses, which coincides with constructive thought-focused strategies (Bryant & Kazan 2013, 112).

However, constructive thought-focused strategies were the least mentioned self-leadership strategies in the interviews, and participants found these strategies to be more abstract than the other strategies. I2 describes that as in the moment of the interview, she was quite new at her workplace, she sometimes uses constructive thought-focused strategies to try to simplify thought patterns in her head, as she sometimes feels like there is an overflow of information, being a new employee. This point towards effective usage of these strategies, as constructive thought-focused strategies are planned for simplifying thinking patterns (Houghton & Neck 2006, 272).

As seen from the results of the research, the participants use a variety of self-leadership tools in their remote work. The most commonly mentioned were management of external cues by setting reminders, to do -lists and alerts. Structuring workdays in remote work appears to be more challenging at home, and it is very easy to get caught up in work tasks without taking breaks or eating lunch, since there are less distractions at home, and for example, no colleagues asking to go for lunch. External cues management has been a very useful tool for structuring workdays and to remember to take breaks, but also do

complete tasks. Additionally, two participants also mentioned that having a clean home as a working environment helps them focus a lot during work, and therefore they make a conscious choice every day to take some time to clean, since they know it positively helps them with their focus.

External cues are a very easy and effortless way to self-lead workdays, and they reduce stress. Reminders, to do-lists and alerts take care of remembering different tasks. In fact, the sheer number of tasks rose as one of the biggest challenges in the interviews, as assistants many times have multiple people they must help simultaneously, and therefore several tasks to take care of. These tools help not only to remember, but also manage time better and make sure work is done with care and nothing is forgotten. Cues management is part of the behaviour-focused strategies, as well as self-observation and self-reward and punishment. It seems that these elements often go together, added also together with self-talk. These tools were recognised for especially as project management self-leadership tools, and participants explained how after a project has been successfully finished, they tend to go through some self-assessment, such as self-observation and self-talk figuring out what went well in the project and what could have been done better.

One very important tool participants recognised is self-goal setting and how it affects their performance and focus. In one of the interviews, participant explained how their daily work at home feels unorganised and without structure at worst, and how setting up daily goals helps them achieve needed results. Tools for these measures are, for instance, mixing to-do lists with goals by categorising tasks to do before lunch, and after lunch, but before workday ends. The participant explained how this helps to remain focused and not let themselves slack off when working. Moreover, it seems that the missing structure that working at the office provides with physical meetings, coffee breaks and lunches with colleagues sets up challenges, and creates less structured days. Setting daily goals helps and benefits tremendously, and in a bigger picture prevents employees from falling behind with their tasks.

Finally, the participants mentioned that they construct their days so that pleasant tasks are done either first or last, depending on the participant. However, timing pleasant tasks, which can be considered as part of the natural reward-focused strategies, was not a very conscious self-leadership method, and participants appeared to categorise it with procrastination. While it could be discussed if leaving unpleasant tasks last is procrastination or a self-leadership method, blaming oneself for procrastination creates negative thought-patterns. With self-talk and constructive thought-focused strategies, such as improving inner belief system and practicing inner thought scripts, these issues could be fixed, and the

process might result in more effective workdays. Constructive thought-focused strategies were the least mentioned strategies in the interviews, and while they are somewhat abstract, it could be reasoned that training employees in organisation's to create positive thought patterns could help them with handling their daily tasks. Chapter 6.1 and 6.2 discuss future recommendations based on interviews more thoroughly.

### **5.2.3 Support received from organisation**

Employees who work in organisations where self-leadership has been supported already before the pandemic have had easier time adjusting to remote work compared to those whose organisations do not support leadership, but rather utilise the more traditional "control-and-command" -leadership type. I1 and I2 both mentioned that in their organisations self-leadership has been very encouraged and emphasized even before the pandemic and taking initiative has been a requirement in their organisations. They both also considered the shift from office work to remote being relatively easy, as they both described it being not so much different from office work and felt like they got used to remote work within a month. This points towards theory by Bryant and Kazan (2013, 13-15) suggesting employees that apply self-leadership actively into their workdays are more engaged and have improved goal setting and faster results and decision making. Additionally, as suggested by Carmeli and al. (2006, 76-79), effective usage of self-leadership strategies makes employees more successful in their work.

Contrastingly, I3, who describes her organisation's culture being more top-down leadership rather than encouraging in self-leadership, described still struggling with remote work until late autumn of 2020 – much longer than I1 or I2. As Bryant and Kazan (2013, 14) explain, self-leadership benefits both individuals and organisations, and self-leading individuals have less stress and more confidence in themselves, giving them a solid base for surviving extraordinary circumstances. This finding nods towards the benefits of organisational and individual benefits of self-leadership. Moreover, I3 explained that in addition to her organisation not encouraging self-leadership, she also described remote work to be much more challenging compared to office work, as she at times feels without guidance and sense of direction. Additionally, she also mentioned that she feels like her managers expect her to manage her job with little to no support or self-leadership skills.

These findings support the theory as explained by Neck and al. (2020, 2-4) how self-leading individuals can manage themselves better, and it seems that organisations at least in this case benefit widely from self-leading employees, as in the beginning of the pandemic, self-leading individuals felt like they were managing their work well, and on the other hand, I3 whose organisations is not as supportive with self-leadership experienced more

difficulties with adjusting to remote work. The quote below from I3 is very descriptive, describing the challenges she faced in the beginning of remote work.

“In the beginning I felt like I was completely lost. Somehow I felt like I had just managed to become a part of the community at work and then we had to start working remotely and...somehow I felt like, even though I could still do my tasks, but it did not have any meaning, because I never got to see other’s reaction to my work.”

(“Musta tuntui aluksi siltä, että olin aivan hukassa. Jotenkin tuntui, että oli juuri ehtinyt päästä osaksi työyhteisöä, ja sitten jouduttiin etätöihin ja...jotenkin tuntui, että vaikka pystyi yhä tekemään töitä, niin tuntui ettei omalla työllä ollut mitään merkitystä, kun ei ikinä nähnyt muiden reaktioita omaan työhön.”)

I3 who works in top-down leadership -type organisation recognised huge challenges in her work after starting to work remotely. These challenges include sense of lost direction, intense stress, and difficulty to manage their workload. This participant described that staying home alone suddenly drastically changed her ways of working and brought her many challenges, and she did not feel like her managers knew what to do either. As researched by Steiner (2020), leaders can support employee’ self-leadership with various ways, such as supporting self-reflection, focusing on employees’ goal-setting and by being responsive. In I3’s organisation, these measures might not have been taken by leaders, which significantly seems to have affected I3’s self-leading in remote work.

As Steiner (2020) brought up, leaders (such as managers) can encourage employees to utilise self-leadership, and they will have more effective and happy employees – this is also visible in the research answers. I1 and I2 mentioned that during the pandemic, their organisations have encouraged employees to take more ownership and responsibility in their work, and given their employees trust to execute their work tasks without any extensive up-down leading. This has raised trust between the organisations and the employees and had a positive effect on their motivation and sense on purpose. However, as I3 brought up, the situation is not the same in every organisation, and in some organisations for example the screen time is recorded in order to monitor that employees are really working. This has had a drastic, negative effect on the participant’s motivation and self-esteem, and reduced the opportunity for them to self-lead.

As explained in chapter 2.5, according to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, a human will first satisfy needs that are necessary for staying alive, and only after satisfying these needs can a person move onto the two highest levels of the hierarchy: the esteem and self-actualisation needs. In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, when participants moved to remote work, they struggled with feelings like loneliness, job insecurity and fear for both their health and their job security. While these findings are not themselves self-leadership, it is considerable how aforementioned feelings might affect their

own self-leadership, as balanced well-being is considered a base to self-leadership (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 33-34). The focus they had to put into just coping and successfully completing their daily work has arguably taken time and energy out of efficient self-leadership. While these two are not mutually exclusive and for example completing tasks takes self-leadership, the time and energy left for efficient and appropriate has reduced. As described by Holbeche (2018, 295-301), organisations that build their human resource strategies more towards shared and self-leadership instead of traditional control-and-command leadership are usually more agile and therefore more capable of change and development, which might be a useful element for organisations during remote work.

In their theory, Bryant and Kazan (2013, 141) explained how organisations can be short-sighted, and they focus on monetary benefits rather than investing resources in self-leadership's implementation. When asked in the interviews, both I1 and I2 spoke about their organisations supporting self-leadership. However, both participants explained how self-leadership is encouraged, but it is not visibly implemented in the organisations' strategies or culture. Therefore, they described dissatisfaction on the concrete measures their organisations have taken in order to support self-leadership, as there are ideas about how to implement self-leadership, but not actual, concrete methods.

## 6 Discussion and evaluation

The results of the research align with the self-leadership theory and self-leadership strategies, and participants all recognised self-leadership skills within themselves. While all participants have a different set of skills, and as Neck and al. (2020, 2-5) explained, everyone has self-leadership skills, but it varies which skills each individual possesses. Additionally, the effect remote work has on people's well-being and general motivation is substantial. The next subchapters discuss the research findings and how these results could be applied in organisations in the future.

### 6.1 Conclusions

The objective of this study is to find out what self-leadership skills employees have and how they benefit from those skills in remote work. Leadership and support, while decreasing during remote work, seems to be still enough and available when needed. It seems that leaders might occasionally forget employees at home need direction and support, and leaders need to be reminded of that, but nevertheless, leadership and support are still available in the remote work era as well. However, the lack of face-to-face meetings reduces the amount of everyday talk and support, creating a challenge for employees to manage smaller issues at work.

Participants spoke about having to take care of their mental and professional well-being more when working remotely for long periods of time than they would if they worked at an office setting. Being alone at home with only video call meetings significantly reduces the amount of peer support, as participants mentioned in the interviews. This creates more emphasis on self-leadership and how employees must take care of themselves more in remote work. This coincides with findings by Müller and Niessen (2019, 883-893), who in their research found that in remote work employees implement more self-leadership skills, such as self-goal setting, self-rewards, and visualisation of performance than on the days when work is done from the office.

The participants expressed that since they started working remotely, the need for self-leadership has, in their experience increased, and working alone from home does require different focus, thought-patterns, and daily management skills, such as structuring the days or achieving goals – all of which can be found within the three self-leadership strategies presented by Neck and al. (2020) and Bryant and Kazan (2013). The change between office work and remote work was notable as suddenly employees are more in charge of their own daily schedules, work, and results. While different telecommunications

tools, such as Skype, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams, exist and make remote work remarkably more effortless, the research findings suggest that working remotely still brings challenges and requires employees to take care of themselves more, therefore more efficient implementation of self-leadership skills is required.

When questioning the basic well-being of the interviewees, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic rose as a significant factor. The current world situation has limited the options and chances of normal social and physical well-being, restricting social contacts to non-existent at worst, as well as limiting the chances of physical activities, such as exercising. The research found this to result in unbalanced well-being, agreeing with Sydänmaanlakka's (2017, 29) and Salmimies' (2008, 59) theory of self-leadership's relation to well-being, and to the importance of well-being.

The interview findings present how remote work affects the interviewees' well-being constantly and therefore might affect their motivation and energy at work, which can result in less self-leadership at work, since according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a person will first take care of basic needs and only after that, psychological and self-fulfilment needs (McLeod 2020). During the pandemic, staying healthy and fulfilling other basic needs have become more significant factors than before, and the higher level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs such as personal fulfilment and having purpose, have, perhaps, got less attention when the basic needs are threatened.

Leading oneself has become more important in remote work, but employees still lack some tools to properly lead themselves. While elements of self-leadership exist in everyone and all employees in some ways lead themselves as described by Franko (2018), recognising these tools seems to be more challenging, which results in low level of utilisation of self-leadership skills. The study found that while training is still being organised in workplaces, which for development perspective is excellent, it is not focused on self-leadership or other similar skills that employees could utilise in remote work. Therefore, perhaps training should be in these times focused more on how to stay motivated, effective, and healthy rather than focusing on so-called "hard skills", such as IT, accounting, or programming skills. While these types of trainings are still important, perhaps employees could benefit from self-leadership trainings more now than ever.

Participants admitted that the biggest challenges during remote work have been the lack of structure as well as social contact, which have greatly affected their motivation and efficiency at work. The situation has had drastic effects on the participant's mental well-being, resulting in questioning their own purpose in their work. Finding purpose is a significant

factor, and part of self-imposed behaviour-focused strategies (Neck & al. 2020, 40-60). While increasing physical social contacts is not possible, and organisation's having to adjust to the COVID-19 situation, it is notable that there are still tools and ways for employees to connect with one another, for example through video calls and outdoor activities.

One of the most interesting findings in the interviews is that the answers of the interviewees are highly compatible with the theoretical background introduced earlier – participants recognised the effect of well-being into their general performance at work, and multiple self-leadership skills they utilise in their daily work. This can be interpreted as a good interview guide that is supported by theoretical background and these do not eliminate nor delimitate one another. While in the beginning of the interviews the interviewees were worried whether they have self-leadership skills, after explaining what self-leadership is, in each interview many aspects of self-leadership became familiar, and the interviewees recognised themselves having a variety of self-leadership skills. Due to this, rising the knowledge of self-leadership could be considerably important, as it could significantly help employees to cope with remote work, if they knew these tools exist and could proactively implement them in their work.

Finally, almost all issues seem to culminate while being alone; there is less structure, feedback, and guidance, less or no peer support from colleagues, less feeling of purpose in workdays due to being in a “bubble” at home; not noticing the time pass and less exchange of experience with project management or good ways of working. It seems like employees' issues would look different, if there was more social contact – while this would not remove the need for self-leadership, this study has provided information on how important colleagues – peers and managers – are to have around oneself in order to stay motivated, focused and to retain sense of purpose at work.

## **6.2 Recommendations**

The interviewees' mentions of increased need for self-leadership skills has played a significant role in their work life during remote work and forced them to find new ways of working efficiently and effectively while maintaining their own well-being and their work life balance. Additionally, organisations have big differences with how self-leadership is implemented and encouraged in the organisational culture. Based on these, the recommendations are divided in two categories: individual and organisational recommendations.

Active development of self-leadership during remote work, such as self-reflection, alternating thought patterns and rewarding oneself as well as gathering knowledge about self-leadership could benefit individuals massively. While it is clear that remote work poses

challenges for the interviewees' motivation and well-being, active managing and developing one's self-leadership skills are highly encouraged. This way, in the future, individuals are better prepared for unknown and surprising situations. Developing self-leadership skills can, in addition to abovementioned, be done through self-leading itself; reflection, self-talk, self-reward and changing negative thought patterns into positive ones are great tools to develop oneself. Therefore, the writer recommends for employees to really consider these tools and how with their own strengths these could help building a strong self-leadership toolkit.

Certainly, based on the research, many companies have a long way to go in supporting their employees' self-leadership skills and development of such skills. Investing time, money, and other resources into the development of self-leadership skills might, in the future, significantly enhance both employees' work performance, as well as organisation's sales, culture, and effectiveness, as described by Bligh and al. (2006, 300-304). Taking the financial and temporal hits now could in the future be hugely beneficial for organisations, especially if a new crisis such as COVID-19 should ever occur.

On both individual and organisational level, it could be a huge gain to re-evaluate the strengths of employees, and to empower them to create their own ways of working. As Bryant and Kazan (2013, 14) described, there are many benefits from self-leadership on both levels. Therefore, self-reflection is strongly recommended to find self-leadership that works for each individual, and organisations are encouraged to support these processes.

As a conclusion, it is recommended that the companies and employees observe, analyse, and develop the following aspects:

- Doing self-analysis of strengths and weaknesses, modifying workdays according to these
  - Recognising the biggest strengths and utilising these every day
- Daily active implementation of self-leadership skills after recognising strengths
- Self-reflection to keep self-leadership up to date
- Creating an organisational culture where employees are encouraged to take initiative to self-lead
- Giving employees tools to affect their actions through training, which will make employees more efficient self-leaders
- Rise the alertness in organisations to notice employees who need more support
- Offer training regarding self-leadership and how employees themselves can take ownership in their work during remote work, not just the substance of the work but their own effort, well-being, motivation, and purpose

### 6.3 Validity, ethics, and reliability of the research

Qualitative research has its risks – as does all research. Compared to quantitative research, qualitative research and especially interviews, have the risk of misunderstanding and researcher's own bias to the topic, and the reliability and validity are widely based on the researcher's own interpretation of the empirical data. (Leung 2015.)

The validity of the research measures whether the tools, processes, and data applied are appropriate for that specific research. It also measures if the research problem and results align and are consistent with each other. (Leung 2015.) It is suggested that validity in qualitative research depends on the researcher's own perception and analysis of the research (Golafshani 2003, 602). This poses a challenge for the research analysis in this research, as the results can vary depending on the writer's analysis. The data collected in this research was analysed during multiple hours of meticulous analysis of the research data, reflecting it on the theoretical background in order to avoid any personal assumptions or biases within the analysis.

In addition, to answer the research objective of which and how self-leadership skills are applied in remote work, it is necessary to dive in deep into the participants' experiences, making interviews a valid tool for this research, as interviews offer an in-depth look into the participants' thoughts and experiences. (Hennink & al. 2020.) Additionally, having only four qualitative interviewees might pose a risk to the reliability of the research and makes analysis of interviews crucial.

Moreover, self-leadership has received criticism due to very limited number of valid research made about the topic. The reliability of self-leadership research has also been questioned, since the research has mostly been empirical data collecting research, and the research lacks extensive collection of data. (Houghton & Neck 2006, 274.) Finding relevant, up-to-date, and academically trustworthy data has turned out to be a big challenge with the topic of this thesis, but nevertheless, successfully completed.

All research has some form of ethical issues. With qualitative research, three main points of ethical issues can be identified: codes and consent; confidentiality; and trust (Silverman, 2011). Codes and consent mainly include "informed consent", meaning the research subjects, or in this research the interviewees, have the information of being researched and how the information they provide will be used. All interview data used in this thesis has been handled with utmost security, keeping the participants' identities unrecognisable and deleting interview recordings as soon as they are no longer needed in the writing process, to keep confidentiality and trust.

Additionally, all participants have given their consent to be interviewed and for the interviews to be recorded, as well as their answers to be used in this thesis. They all have been informed about the handling of their data and that the interview recordings are deleted once the data is no longer needed. The author is the only person who has had access to interview recordings.

While in quantitative research the data is collected by numbers or otherwise objective data, in qualitative research the data is based on subjective experience and the description of these experiences. Reliability in qualitative research indicates how well can the results of the research be replicated if the research is carried out again. (Leung 2015.) The author has experience from working remotely within a similar role as the participants and has recognised similar skills in herself as the participants. However, as remote work becomes “the new normal”, it could be argued that obtaining the same research result in March 2020 and March 2021 would be unlikely, as employees get more familiar with working from home, and they develop their own ways of self-leading more and more every day. While identical research outcome might be impossible to gain with another identical research, it is also noteworthy that in this research the result is more about the subjective experience of the participants rather than duplicability of the data.

#### **6.4 Assessment of thesis process and own learning**

I originally started the project of the thesis in May 2020. However, due to some time schedule changes, work and studies, the thesis process was postponed, and the thesis was truly started in August 2020, and the main workload was done during September to December 2020. While the original plan was to write this thesis during spring and summer of 2020, I am quite happy about the time schedule changes and how the final schedule turned out to be. While the original plan was to finish the thesis by the end of 2020, I felt like it was too rushed and wanted to take additional time to deepen my knowledge and the research. Even though this decision postponed the completion of the thesis, I am satisfied with the changed schedule and outcome of this thesis. The topic had been one of the options for me since the beginning of thesis process, and my own remote working experience during the summer 2020 made the topic more interesting and it seemed to be a very current issue for many.

It is safe to say that for me the overall process of research and writing has been very positive. The learning process and the challenges along the way have taught a lot, and it is astonishing how much this process has benefitted my academic understanding towards

the topic as well as other publications. Meticulous research of existing theoretical background was very important to make the study better aimed at finding out required aspects in the research. Nevertheless, completing this project has given me a wider understanding of a human mind, how self-leadership works, and how even the smallest decisions affect daily lives. All this knits together in the big picture: understanding how humans work when they are their own leader is, in my opinion, a key component to understanding organisations, since employees are the most important asset in any organisation.

Additionally, it is my hope that this research will help employees to recognise their own strengths and the self-leadership they hold inside of them for them to work more efficiently and survive better in surprising conditions. Overall, the project and all its phases have been an important experience for me. High interest in the subject of self-leadership and the current world situation have been great factors to the process of this study. However, finding relevant, current, and trustworthy literature on the topic of self-leadership turned out to be quite a challenge, as self-leadership is not the most researched area. This posed a challenge during the whole writing process and made it more challenging to make sure all used references are reliable and valid. Additionally, finding participants for the research was one of the most challenging and time-consuming parts of the process, and caused some time schedule changes.

Finally, despite some challenges along the way, I am happy with the result of the thesis and how the research process turned out to be. The result of the research provides answers to the objective and research problem of the thesis and I believe it to be useful for organisations, human resource departments, but individuals as well, who are looking for enhancing their own set of skills and making their workdays more structured and pleasant. I recognise that I have learnt a lot during the writing process from both self-leadership but a general research work as well and I believe this knowledge to be very useful in the future.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview guide

<b>Section 1 Background information</b>	
1.	How long have you been working remotely? (Cumulatively and since when?)
2.	When did you start working at the company and the position you work now?
3.	How many working years do you have behind you all together?
4.	Have you ever studied self-leadership or leadership, or do you have work experience as a leader / manager? If yes, what kind of experience and when?
<b>Section 2 Work environment</b>	
5.	How would you describe the balance of different sectors of well-being? (Professional, social, physical, financial, and mental well-being)
6.	How do you feel the support, guidance and leadership from your supervisor(s) is in remote work compared to regular face-to-face office work?
7.	How do you take care of developing your skills at remote work?
8.	What things motivate you the most in general and at remote work? How do they motivate you?
<b>Section 3 Self-leadership</b>	
9.	How would you describe your self-leadership skills?
10.	In which concrete ways and how do you lead yourself during work?
11.	Do you seek out pleasant tasks rather than challenging, unpleasant tasks? If yes, can you explain why? Do you procrastinate unpleasant tasks?
12.	How do you lead your time management?
13.	What things do you do in order to achieve the day's goals, and how do you execute them? (e.g., get a to do-list done, get a project finished etc.)
14.	Do you feel like you need to use your self-leadership skills more now when remotely working? For example, using self-talk, using rewards, changing your thought patterns.
15.	How do you feel like your employer / supervisor support your self-leadership and development of those skills?
16.	How do you recognise un-motivating tasks, and get those done?
17.	During remote working, what have you found to be the most challenging thing? How would you / how have you fixed the issue?

## Appendix 2. Interview infographic

- Pleasant physical locations
- Build in rewarding tasks
- Recognising pleasant tasks
- Defining pleasant aspects



- Improving inner belief system
- Imagining the wanted performance
- Self-talk
- Creating and practicing inner scripts

- Goal-setting
- Self-reward
- Self-punishment
- Self-observation
- Cues management