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THE IMPACT OF REMOTE WORK ON ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explored how remote and hybrid work affect organizational culture within LähiTapiola Capital Area Corporate Customer Service unit. The aim was to understand how organizational culture is experienced and sustained in a remote setting and to provide concrete development proposals that support cultural continuity and cohesion.

A qualitative case study approach was used, focusing on one corporate customer service team. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with employees. Inductive content analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and interpret employee experiences in relation to organizational culture and remote work practices.

Key findings highlighted the central role of communication, leadership, trust, and onboarding in shaping organizational culture in remote and hybrid environments. Challenges included information overload, difficulty accessing colleagues, and reduced informal interactions. Opportunities included increased flexibility, greater autonomy, and broader participation in organizational activities.

The study proposed several strategies to maintain and strengthen organizational culture, including structured communication, regular informal interaction opportunities, improved onboarding processes, and support for self-leadership. These insights are particularly relevant for organizations navigating long-term hybrid work arrangements.

Keywords: organizational culture, remote work, hybrid work, communication, self-leadership, onboarding

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1 INTRODUCTION

Organizations have been at the center of a remote work whirlwind in the past five years. Before COVID-19 Finnish companies and organizations were among the top countries to conduct remote work. According to the 2019 Eurostat report, Finland, alongside the Netherlands, was already one of Europe's leading countries for remote work even before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even in these top-ranking nations, only 14 % of employees worked remotely at the time. This figure saw a sharp and rapid increase in the spring of 2020 as the pandemic took hold. (Kuisma & Sauri 2021, 23.)

This thesis examined how organizational culture can be maintained and developed in a remote or hybrid setting. In particular, the study explored the challenges and opportunities from a company's perspective. The inspiration for this study originated from the HR Director at LähiTapiola Capital Area, who expressed an interest in understanding how hybrid work methods influence organizational culture. The aim of the thesis was to generate insights into the matter and give concrete development proposals on how the development of organizational culture can be supported in an organization where remote and hybrid work are the main working methods. Additionally, the purpose of this study was to provide material for the commissioner to support the needs of the multilocal workgroup that began operating in January 2025.

The research focused on the following key questions: *How does remote work impact different aspects of organizational culture in LähiTapiola Capital Area? What strategies can an organization use to support and strengthen the organizational culture in the era of remote work? What challenges and opportunities do remote work present for building and maintaining an organizational culture?*

Organizational culture is a fundamental aspect of a company's operations, as it defines how the company operates and treats its employees and customers. Traditionally, organizational culture has been built through in-office interactions, where spontaneous encounters, informal discussions and shared events have

moulded the organization's culture. With the rise of remote work, these natural interactions have diminished, which can have an impact on the organizational culture and for the employees. In previous research such as International Labour Organization (2020, 3) the report indicates that both "remote work" and "telework" refer to work arrangements in which tasks are performed outside the traditional workplace. The terms "remote work" and "telework" are often used interchangeably to describe working outside a traditional office setting. To ensure clarity and consistency, this thesis will refer to both work arrangements collectively as "remote work."

This thesis excluded the employee's perspective, including aspects related to well-being at work, and instead focused on remote work from the organization's point of view. Employee-related factors, such as well-being, was deliberately left out, as the study aimed to examine remote and hybrid work specifically from the perspective of LähiTapiola Capital Area's corporate customer unit. The scope of this study was also limited to corporate customer service teams within LähiTapiola Capital Area, excluding other teams and roles, such as HR and private customer teams. Since corporate customer service teams primarily operate in a fully remote or hybrid mode, the study focuses exclusively on these working methods. Other forms of work, such as mobile or multi-location work, was not included, as they were not relevant to the context of this research.

This thesis employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing a case study strategy. Data was gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews. The focus of the study was on organizational culture and how remote or hybrid work affects the perceived organizational culture. The key themes of the theoretical framework revolved around organizational culture, variations of remote work and conditions of remote work. While previous research highlights the significant benefits of remote work on employee well-being and often focuses on employee-centric perspectives, the organizational viewpoint has largely been overlooked (Gressmann 2022; Poutanen 2024).

2 ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

This chapter explores the concept of organizational culture from multiple perspectives, drawing on key scholars such as Hofstede, Schein and Sackmann. Chapter begins by defining organizational culture. The chapter presents Schein's model of cultural layers — artifacts, values and basic assumptions — and discusses different academic approaches to organizational culture. The last two sections highlight the significance of organizational culture as a performance driver, adaptability and how it affects the strategic success. Finally, the chapter examines the impacts of remote and hybrid work on organizational culture and what kind of challenges and opportunities brought by digital communication and working method.

2.1 Concept and general definition

For over half a century, organizational sociologists have emphasized the importance of soft factors within organizations. Referring to the shared mental frameworks of individuals within an organization as "culture" provides a useful way to reintroduce these sociological perspectives. However, organizational culture is a distinct phenomenon, differing significantly from national culture. Unlike nations, organizations function as unique social systems where members typically did not grow up but chose to join, engage only during working hours, and eventually leave. (Hofstede et al. 2010, 47.)

According to Barney (1986, 657) organizational culture is described as a complex system of values, beliefs, assumptions, and symbols that shape how a company operates. This culture profoundly influences a firm by not only defining its key stakeholders—such as employees, customers, suppliers, and competitors—but also determining how the organization interacts with these critical groups. Schein (2016, 18) states that organizational culture can be understood as having three distinct layers. The first layer consists of visible artifacts, the second encompasses less apparent values, and the third includes deeply embedded basic underlying assumptions.

Artifacts encompass the visible elements of a group, including the design of its physical environment, language, technology, and products. They also include artistic expressions, style reflected in clothing and forms of communication, emotional expressions, organizational myths and stories, published value statements, as well as observable rituals and ceremonies. (Schein 2016, 17.)

Explicitly expressed beliefs and values or moral principles are intentionally kept conscious to provide guidance for group members in navigating important situations and to instruct new members on expected behaviour. Over time, these values and beliefs often develop into an organizational philosophy or ideology, offering a framework for addressing uncertainty and managing inherently challenging or unpredictable circumstances. (Schein 2016, 19.)

Basic underlying assumptions differ from what some anthropologists refer to as "dominant value orientation." While dominant orientations represent the preferred solution among several possible options, all alternatives remain present within the culture. Members of the culture may occasionally act in ways that align with either the dominant or alternative orientations. (Schein 2016, 21–22.)

Culture is a set of practices that enable people to collaborate based on assumptions rather than negotiations. It is not about what we say, but about what we do without asking. Corporate culture is often described as the company's DNA—something that influences everything the organization is and everything it has the potential to become. (Luukka 2019, 23–24.) Companies with a culture rooted in commitment consistently outperformed their competitors. This culture was the driving force behind their productivity, efficiency, and ability to swiftly identify changes in customer needs, enabling them to adapt more quickly and achieve superior performance. (Luukka 2019, 133.)

When discussing organizational culture Sackmann (2021, 19) argues that in management and organizational studies, researchers identify three distinct perspectives on culture within organizational contexts. These perspectives, each stemming from different disciplines and reflecting unique interests, are culture as

a variable, culture as a metaphor, and culture as a dynamic construct.

Variable perspectives, rooted in the social-fascist paradigm, views culture as a tangible and measurable factor that managers can influence and manipulate to achieve organizational goals. When organizational culture is looked through metaphor perspective, it seems to emphasize the creation and negotiation of cultural reality by its members through daily interactions. The dynamic construct perspective bridges aspects of both the variable and metaphor perspectives. It conceptualizes culture as an evolving phenomenon that emerges from social interactions among the members, where meanings are created, negotiated and redefined over time. (Sackmann 2021, 19–22.)

2.2 The importance of culture in organizations

According to Luukka (2024), Many organizations tend to be either-or. They are either extremely results-driven, focusing on money and success, setting high targets, and fostering a culture where only the toughest thrive while others burn out or realize it is time to move on. Or they aim to create a "great" workplace focus on inner harmony and people and where results do not matter as long as they can fund a nice office, annual company trips abroad, and electric bikes for employees. According to Luukka (2019, 135), culture defines how an organization operates, communicates, serves, and exists, playing a crucial role in its success. At its best, it unleashes the human energy within the organization, driving exceptional performance. In a rapidly changing world, the pace of global change often outstrips the speed at which organizations can adapt. Processes fail to keep up, and change happens too slowly. The corporate culture accelerates an organization's ability to adapt and transform.

Culture plays a significant role in shaping the discussions during strategy development and influences the implementation process. It impacts the selection of organizational structures, management systems, and tools. Additionally, culture defines who is considered a good fit within the organization, distinguishing between effective and less effective members or leaders. Moreover, organizational culture can have complex, direct, indirect, and non-linear effects

on various performance indicators, reinforcing the collective behaviour characteristic of the organization. For these reasons, it is crucial to understand and recognize an organization's culture, its unique traits, and its influence on individuals, teams, and the organization as a whole. This awareness allows for an evaluation of whether the culture aligns with the current business environment and the organization's future needs. (Sackmann 2021, 131.)

Organizational culture is a key driver of performance, with research showing that companies with top-tier cultures achieve significantly higher returns to shareholders—60 % above median performers and 200 % higher than those with weaker cultures. Unlike products or business models, culture is difficult to replicate, making it a critical competitive advantage in a fast-paced environment. A strong, healthy culture enables organizations to adapt to change effectively, while weak cultures hinder transformation, often leading to failure; studies reveal that 70 % of transformation efforts fail, largely due to cultural issues. Over time, unhealthy cultures not only result in poor performance but can ultimately lead to the downfall of even the largest organizations. (Dewar 2018.)

According to Raghuraman (2021) a strong organizational culture often fosters a sense of pride and identification among employees, encouraging them to align with the organization's values. However, remote workers are less likely to encounter the organizational values and beliefs that traditionally enhance this sense of belonging, due to the independence of time and location inherent in remote work.

2.3 Organizational culture in remote work

According to Bilderback and Kilpatrick (2024, 63) the transition to remote work has transformed how organizations communicate and collaborate. Traditional face-to-face interactions have largely been replaced by virtual meetings, emails, and instant messaging, reshaping team dynamics in the process. As organizations become increasingly dependent on technology for their communication needs, there is a growing need to reassess collaboration approaches. Prioritizing clear communication, fostering inclusivity, and

implementing regular check-ins are essential to maintaining effective teamwork in a remote work setting.

In their master's thesis Eriksson and Santesson (2021) concluded that remote work affects what the integration perspective defines as organizational culture. The absence of regular office interactions necessitates more frequent updates among team members, leading to increased transparency in work processes and fostering improved collaboration. Bentley et al. (2016) argue that research suggests that the level of remote work intensity influences employees' support needs and work experiences. Those who work remotely only occasionally, such as a few hours per week, may primarily use remote work to extend their working hours into evenings or weekends. Since their remote work duration is relatively short, they tend to rely less on organizational social and technical support compared to employees who work remotely more frequently.

On the other hand, Bilderback and Kilpatrick (2024) argue that remote work has had a complex and significant impact on organizational culture. The transition to remote work has required adjustments in communication, collaboration, employee engagement, and the sense of belonging among workers. Additionally, organizations face challenges in maintaining a unified culture, particularly in remote settings, where leadership plays a crucial role in cultivating a positive and cohesive work environment. This shift has underscored the importance of adaptability, trust, and innovative strategies to address the evolving needs of remote work.

To combat these negative effects Raghuram (2021, 160–161) proposes designating a half-day or full day each week when all team members gather in the office for essential meetings or task coordination or virtual coffee hours or social gatherings. These in-person sessions provide valuable chances for colleagues to connect both professionally and socially, helping to build trust-based relationships that are key to developing a strong organizational culture.

3 REMOTE WORK, HYBRID WORK AND MULTILOCATIONAL WORK

This chapter provides an overview of remote work and its different forms, including hybrid, multilocal, and mobile work. It begins by examining definitions of remote work and teleworking, highlighting the distinction between them. The chapter explores how the nature of remote work has evolved, particularly with advancements in digital communication tools. The chapter concludes by discussing the conditions required for successful remote work, such as infrastructure, leadership and effective organizational culture. It also highlights the challenges that arise in remote environments.

3.1 Remote work

In a general discussion about remote work, the term “remote work” mostly references to a fully remote work or a hybrid work where employees work mainly from home or in the office, but there are different variations of remote work like multi-location work or mobile work. (Finnish Institute of occupational health n.d.) According to U.S Office of Personnel Management (n.d.), telework is a work arrangement in which employees split their time between an agency worksite and an alternative location on a recurring basis during each pay period. In contrast, remote work does not require employees to report to the agency worksite on a regular schedule. According to Statistics Finland (2024) on working conditions, 22 % of employees worked remotely for at least half of their working hours in 2023. More than one in ten employees had the flexibility to decide how often they visited the workplace. Overall, 35 % of employees engaged in remote work, with just over one-fifth (22 %) doing so for at least half of their working hours. Among female employees, 23 % worked remotely for at least half of their time, compared to 21 % of male employees.

Work can be divided into three categories, remote work, hybrid work and multilocal work. The defining features of remote work are that tasks typically performed on the employer's premises are instead carried out remotely, and that the work or its coordination relies on information technology. (Kuisma & Sauri 2021, 26.) Defining remote work is seemingly easy but more complicated than

one would expect. Phrase remote work refers to flexible, voluntary method of organizing work. The task is done by the most efficient and appropriate way for both parties, the employee and the employer. Remote work means that work is done outside of traditional workplace, for example at home or at vacation home. (Akava 2024.)

Nowadays, employees have access to a wide variety of communication tools that enable not only audio and video interactions but also real-time collaboration on shared documents, such as Google Docs. As a result, remote communication has become significantly easier compared to a decade ago. (Klopotek n.d.) However, employees also report challenges such as longer working hours, blurred boundaries between work and personal life, difficulties disconnecting from work, excessive workloads, and inadequate conditions for sustained remote work. (Kuisma & Sauri 2021, 26.)

From the employer's perspective, remote work offers benefits such as enhanced employee performance and productivity, reduced costs associated with physical office spaces, and an improved employer brand that boosts recruitment efforts. On the other hand, organisations have identified drawbacks such as feelings of loneliness and isolation among employees and the complexities of managing teams remotely. To avoid oversimplifying the definition, remote work generally refers to work performed outside the employer's physical premises. (Kuisma & Sauri 2021, 26, 33–34.) In study published by Klopotek (n.d, 46) the most valued benefits of remote work among respondents were flexible working hours and reduced commuting time. Around one-third appreciated the ability to customize their work environment. Factors like supervisor absence, self-reliance, and accessibility for certain groups were less significant.

3.2 Hybrid work

Hybrid work, by loose definition, is a flexible work model that combines alternating between working remotely and at the workplace. The term "hybrid work" refers to situations where part of the work is done "remote," meaning outside the traditional workplace. (University of Turku 2023.) Hybrid work refers

to an organizational approach that combines remote work and on-site work at the primary workplace. In professional roles, a hybrid work model is becoming the standard, aiming to leverage the strengths of both remote and on-site work to promote productivity and employee well-being. (Finnish Institute of occupational health n.d.)

As a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, many companies and organizations, particularly those engaged in expert and knowledge work, swiftly transitioned to online operations and moved their staff to remote work. With the introduction of COVID restrictions and recommendations, their interpretation, and organization-specific practices, various flexible work models gradually became more common. This gave rise to the undefined concept of hybrid work, which referred to working flexibly and independently of location, utilizing digital technology. Over time, new forms of multi-location work emerged, where remote work was performed part-time, full-time, or alternated, for example, by individuals or groups. (University of Turku 2023.)

The goal of the hybrid model is to develop effective methods and shared practices that support seamless work processes. It often represents a balance, with key considerations revolving around the extent of remote work allowed and the conditions under which employees are required to be present in the office. (Vilkman 2023, 40.) The hybrid model also aims to enhance employee well-being and productivity by offering flexibility while maintaining opportunities for in-person collaboration and team cohesion.

3.3 Multilocal work

Multilocal work is defined as a work arrangement in which the employee has multiple designated workplaces, specified by the employer, where they can perform their duties following the employer's instructions. This differs from remote work, where the location is entirely irrelevant, as the nature of the tasks does not require the work to be tied to a specific location. (Kuisma & Sauri 2021, 26.)

Remote work can evolve into multilocal work, allowing tasks to be carried out flexibly wherever it is most practical for the customer, employer, and

employee (Finnish Institute of occupational health n.d). Multilocal work is a work arrangement in which the employee works at several predetermined locations according to the employer's instructions. This differs from remote work, where the place of work is irrelevant, as the tasks do not require being tied to a specific location.

Multilocal work involves performing tasks across various locations. Organizations may operate offices within a single city, across Finland, or internationally. Some employees may work at client sites, while others perform mobile duties. Remote work is often included as part of this arrangement. Interestingly, organizations may refer to "multilocal work" in their hybrid work policies, even if there is only one official office. (Vilkman 2023, 40.) Multilocal work can also serve as an excellent competitive advantage for a company. This model can enable the recruitment of more skilled employees and support training alongside work. Especially in rural areas, remote work is a significant factor, and if a company can offer a shared space where employees can gather to work and network, it can become a competitive asset—even if the company does not have an official office in that location. (Centre for Economic Development 2022.)

3.4 Mobile work

Mobile work is distinct from traditional remote work, where employees typically operate at home office. Instead, it refers to individuals who perform their tasks across multiple locations rather than being tied to a fixed workspace. This category includes hybrid workers, who divide their time between home and the office, as well as deskless workers whose roles involve mobility throughout the day. Examples of mobile workers include travel nurses, retail staff rotating between stores, and field technicians in the telecommunications sector. (IBM n.d.)

Mobility in both individual and team work contexts can be understood as physical movement, where employees operate in various locations and transition between them. Beyond physical mobility, team members can also exhibit virtual and cognitive mobility by collaborating in digital workspaces, sharing ideas and

information electronically, and converting them into tangible outputs such as documents or designs. Additionally, the subject of work itself may shift locations, either in a physical form through transportation or in a digital, non-physical format. Furthermore, tools and technologies, including production equipment and communication devices like phones, are also mobile. Mobile work introduces flexible arrangements that redefine the concept of a traditional office, often blurring the distinction between home and workplace, and in some cases, eliminating the limitations imposed by physical infrastructure altogether. (Vartiainen et al. 2007, 9–10.)

3.5 The conditions for remote work

Remote work affects not only the location of work but also its organization and power dynamics within the workplace. A centralized work environment makes it easier for managers to supervise and coordinate employees. In contrast, working at home grants employee's greater autonomy, as employers have less direct oversight of their activities. (Fana et al. 2020, 9.) Successful remote work relies on dependable technology, robust data security measures, and a foundation of trust between employer and employee. The remote work environment should promote productivity by being healthy, safe, quiet, and well-suited to the tasks being performed. (The Centre for Occupational Safety 2023.)

Leadership in remote work context emphasizes building and maintaining trust, collaboratively defining guidelines, setting clear objectives, and tracking progress. (The Centre for Occupational Safety 2023). According to Fana et al. (2020, 28), employees who had no prior experience with telework before the COVID-19 pandemic noted that their managers were hesitant to continue remote work. This was largely due to a preference for direct supervision. Successful remote work requires trust between the employee, supervisor, and employer, along with collaborative planning and agreements, as well as support for the employee's independent work. For remote work to succeed, the workplace culture and management must be based on trust rather than control. (Finnish Institute of occupational health n.d.)

Self-direction is essentially about leading oneself, often within the context of a community. Remote work further intensifies the need for self-direction. Importantly, self-direction does not equate to the absence of leadership—quite the opposite. A self-directed community often requires more leadership than a traditional setup, as individuals need clear objectives and defined boundaries to operate effectively. Supervisors should actively support and guide their team members, even in a remote environment. Nonetheless, remote workers spend a significant portion of their time managing themselves. They must be capable of prioritizing tasks, organizing their workload, and structuring their day with adequate breaks. (Haapakoski et al. 2020, 102.)

Challenges related to workflow issues, difficulties in fostering a sense of community, and the complexity of remote development suggest that processes and practices have not been effectively adapted to remote work. This has often led to a preference for returning work primarily to a specific physical location. In many cases, remote work has been approached using the same practices, processes, and methods as office-based work. From a leadership and collaboration perspective, this approach has highlighted significant challenges, leading to the perception that remote work is ineffective or suitable only for a limited portion of tasks. (Vilkman 2023, 51.) As everything, remote work is not black and white, there are numerous benefits and negative sides to remote work. The main benefits of remote work for employees include greater flexibility to adapt work to individual needs, increased peace of mind, and savings in both time and money by avoiding commuting. (Kuisma & Sauri 2021, 33–34.)

The influence of remote work on professional relationships is significant, especially regarding remote collaboration. The reduced availability of vocal and nonverbal cues from colleagues, supervisors, and informal interactions has profoundly affected employees' productivity, sense of inclusion, trust, and connection to their organization. Building team trust can mitigate many of these challenges, but it requires intentional effort and skilful leadership to establish. (Dinh et al. 2021, 23–24.) The findings of the study align with existing research on the benefits of remote work, such as flexible working hours, reduced

commuting time, and the ability to personalize the work environment, including factors like music, temperature, and furnishings. However, the study also highlights key challenges, including difficulties in maintaining a clear boundary between work and personal life, feelings of social isolation, and the need for strong organizational skills. (Klopotek n.d.)

4 COMMISSIONING PARTY

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of remote and hybrid work on organizational culture within LähiTapiola Capital Area's corporate customer service unit. LähiTapiola's task force for developing multilocal work model has recently begun its efforts in early 2025. Based on organizational theory and data collected through semi-structured interviews, this thesis aimed to develop proposals and concrete ideas for maintaining and enhancing organizational culture in a LähiTapiola capital area corporate customers unit where employees work extensively remotely. The development suggestions were intended to produce benefits on a wide scale and in such a way that it would be possible to use the results also in other teams of the organization, such as the development team or with the underwriter department.

At the time of writing this thesis, the LähiTapiola Capital Area corporate customer service unit employed fifteen people in various roles, along with one team supervisor. The team's purpose is to serve business customers and business owners in the capital area. Client services are primarily conducted through digital channels such as phone, chat, and email. This team can work at home, in the office, or, in some cases, at locations such as summer cottage. However, due to the nature of the work, mobile work is not suitable for this team.

Team members have significant flexibility to work either at home or remotely. Within the LähiTapiola Capital Area, the employer provides considerable freedom in how tasks are carried out. In this particular team, the supervisor places strong trust in employees' personal sense of responsibility and commitment to their work. The principle of "freedom and responsibility" is a core value within the team, with the employer requesting that employees visit the office one day per

week. The team was established in 2020 and has experienced personnel changes in 2024, which have also influenced the development of its organizational culture. Within the team, there are employees in supportive roles with expertise in various systems, as well as those focused more on sales and specific insurance products, such as life insurance.

5 RESEARCH METHODS, STRATEGY, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter outlines the methodological framework of the study, beginning with a discussion of nature and relevance of qualitative research. Chapter explains why a qualitative approach was chosen, highlighting its suitability for examining subjective phenomena such as organizational culture in the context of remote work. The chapter then introduces the case study as the primary research strategy and why it is suitable for this thesis. Finally, the data collection process and content analysis are introduced. The section explains the rationale for using chosen methods.

5.1 Qualitative research

According to Silverman (2013, 6), qualitative research includes a diverse range of approaches, with most approaches aiming to objectively explore certain aspects of reality, such as the functioning of culture. Qualitative data, at its core, refers to material expressed in textual form. This text can be generated either independently or directly by the researcher. Examples of the qualitative data include various types of interviews and observations, qualitative data can include personal diaries, life stories, letters, and purposefully created written or visual materials, as well as audio recordings. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 12.)

The distinction between qualitative and quantitative research often suggests a fixed preference or a predetermined notion of what qualifies as "good" or "appropriate" research versus "bad" or "inappropriate" research. However, the suitability of a method depends on how well it aligns with the specific research question at hand. (Silverman 2013, 19.) Since this thesis examined a

phenomenon that occurred between employees and the organization the subject matter is highly subjective and therefore a qualitative research method was chosen. According to National University (n.d.) qualitative research focuses on understanding phenomena, groups, or experiences that cannot be measured or quantified mathematically. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks exact answers or statistics in controlled settings, qualitative research takes an exploratory approach, utilizing data sources such as photographs, personal journals, video recordings to gather insights.

Qualitative research is an inductive, context-dependent approach that emphasizes the observation and description of phenomena. Its primary aim is to offer comprehensive narrative descriptions and holistic interpretations that reflect the depth and complexity of behaviours, experiences, and occurrences within their natural environments. This research method progresses inductively, moving from specific observations to broader generalizations and theoretical insights, drawing on data gathered through methods such as observations, document analysis, physical artifacts, interviews, and focus groups. (Lavrakas 2008, 729.) The distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is not solely determined by the presence of numbers or rigid structures. It is more crucial how the research problem is framed within a specific model of reality. (Silverman 2013, 201.)

When studying organizational culture and the impact of remote work on it, a qualitative research method is often a justified choice, as it enables an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and its meanings within the organizational context. In this study, a qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the research questions and the subjective dimension of the phenomenon under investigation. Organizational culture is not a directly measurable construct but is instead experienced, interpreted, and shaped through interactions between individuals and the organization. As such, it calls for a method that captures employees' lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings.

The research focused on understanding how employees at LähiTapiola Capital Area perceive organizational culture in a remote or hybrid work context, which is inherently nuanced, and context bound. These insights could not have been accessed through numerical data alone. The study utilized semi-structured thematic interviews, which allowed participants to express their thoughts freely while offering the author of the thesis flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes. This open-ended and interpretive approach aligns with the principles of qualitative research, where the goal is not to test hypotheses, but to uncover patterns, meanings, and perspectives as they naturally arise from the data.

5.2 Case study strategy

The core approach involves an in-depth examination of a single case, utilizing the methods best suited to the study. While specific research questions and objectives may vary, the overarching goal is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the case. (Silverman 2013, 142.) A case study involves a thorough and detailed exploration of an individual, group, or organization, utilizing information gathered from multiple sources, including observations, interviews, documents, participant observations, and archival materials. The purpose of this method is to deliver an in-depth, narrative-style account that offers a comprehensive understanding of the specific case under investigation. (Lavrakas 2008, 730.)

According to Vuori (2021), the subject of a case study can be an organization—such as a workplace, company, educational institution, or project—or a group, whether it is a formal organization or an informal gathering. A case can also focus on a specific process, for example, examining how a particular issue is prepared for societal decision-making, analyzing the changes pursued within a project, or investigating the response to an environmental incident and how it was managed. Also, as is discussed in length by Laine et al. (2007, 9) a case study inherently involves the use of multiple research methods. For this reason, it is more appropriate to consider a case study not as a single method, but as a research approach or strategy that incorporates various data sources and techniques. The focus of a case study is typically on a specific process or phenomenon.

The case study approach was selected for this thesis because it enables deep examination for a specific organizational matter in a LähiTapiola Capital Area corporate customer service unit. The aim was not to generalize findings to every corporation or an organization, but rather to gain detailed understanding of how organizational culture is perceived and maintained in a remote or hybrid work environment in LähiTapiola Capital Area. A case study method is very well suited in studies where the context is highly subjective and clear indicators or ways to measure it are not accessible. A case study strategy with semi-structured interviews with the participants gives freedom to really explore the matter in hand and offers comprehensive understanding of the current situation.

5.3 Data collection

According to Silverman (2013, 199–200), most qualitative studies rely on either interviewing respondents or conducting field observations. However, data collection extends beyond a purely technical process, encompassing deeper interpretative and contextual considerations. Hyvärinen et al. (2021) argue the concept of a semi-structured interview involved preparing questions in advance and presenting them in a relatively consistent manner, while allowing respondents the freedom to answer in their own words.

A semi-structured interview, is characterized by its open nature and shares similarities with in-depth interviews. It is guided by a set of predetermined core themes and accompanying follow-up questions. A key benefit of this approach is its adaptability, allowing questions to be adjusted and explored in greater depth based on the interviewee's responses. From a methodological perspective, thematic interviews focus on how individuals interpret various topics, the meanings they attribute to them, and how these meanings develop through interaction. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 87-88.)

A qualitative interviewer should come prepared with a brief list of topic-focused questions, which may be shared with the respondent to highlight the intention of covering specific subjects. The main goal is not to obtain simple yes or no

responses, but rather to encourage detailed descriptions of events, connections between ideas, and explanations. (Stake 1995, 65.) Qualitative interview studies are typically carried out with a relatively small number of participants and follow a more informal questioning style, allowing the interviewee to guide the pace of the conversation. While the interviewer usually has a prepared set of questions, these serve more as a guideline rather than a strict script, and deviations from them are not only accepted but often encouraged. (Silverman 2013, 204.)

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with employees of the LähiTapiola Capital Area corporate customer service unit between February 28 and March 10, 2025. A total of five employees were interviewed, three female and two male. In February 2025, potential participants for the study were recruited through the team's shared Microsoft Teams channel. Among those who expressed interest, the aim was to select participants with diverse backgrounds, representing different roles within the unit and varying lengths of employment to ensure a broad range of perspectives for the study.

To facilitate the interview process, the interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, which also provided automatic transcription of the recordings and in total transcription was 159 pages long. For the clarification purposes the study was conducted in Finnish to ensure the validity of the responses and because official working language in LähiTapiola is Finnish. The interview questions were sent to the interviewees via email prior to the interviews. The complete list of questions is available in Appendix 1. The duration of the interviews varied among participants, ranging from 30 minutes to 60 minutes. Interviewees were invited to participate well in advance to allow them sufficient time to review the questions beforehand and prepare their responses. Participants were informed in advance about the purpose of the study, the perspective being explored, and the recording of the interviews.

The interviews followed a predefined interview framework sent in advance by email, but participants were free to answer openly, and clarifying questions were asked by the author when necessary. Some themes generated more discussion

than others, and certain topics were revisited multiple times throughout the interviews. The researcher aimed to ensure that the wording of the questions did not include any preconceived notions and that they were asked in as neutral a manner as possible to avoid influencing the direction of the study.

At the end of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to share any additional thoughts related to the discussed themes or the interview process itself in case something had been left unaddressed. During the interviews, the researcher refrained from taking notes to remain fully engaged in the conversation and respond to the interviewees' answers in real time.

5.4 Data analysis

A fundamental analysis method that can be used in all traditions of qualitative research is content analysis. Content analysis can be considered not only as an individual method but also as a flexible theoretical framework that can be integrated into various analytical approaches. The analysis of qualitative research can be broadly divided into two groups. The first group is characterized by the fact that the analysis is guided by a specific theoretical or epistemological positioning. The second group includes forms of analysis that are not initially driven by a particular theory or epistemology but can be relatively freely applied within various theoretical and epistemological frameworks. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, 103.) According to Vuori (2021) qualitative content analysis closely resembles thematic analysis, and the two terms are often used interchangeably. This approach focuses on identifying the key topics, themes, and subjects present in the data—what interviewees discuss, the issues covered in media texts, the messages conveyed in photographs, and similar elements.

According to Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018, 104) the framework for qualitative research analysis consists of five key steps:

1. **Determine the focus of interest** – Decide what aspects of the data are relevant to your research and make a firm decision.
2. **Review and separate the data:**
 - a. Go through the material, identify, and mark the elements that align with your focus.

- b. Exclude everything that does not contribute to this specific study.
 - c. Gather and separate the marked elements from the rest of the data.
3. **Classify, theme, or categorize the data** – Organize the material into meaningful groups.
 4. **Analyze and interpret** – Examine the patterns, connections, and meanings within the categorized data.
 5. **Write a summary** – Compile the findings into a coherent conclusion, reflecting on the key insights and interpretations.

According to Elo et al. (2022, 218–223) the process of qualitative content analysis can be divided into three main phases: preparation, analysis, and reporting. In the preparation phase, the researcher thoroughly familiarizes themselves with the data, selects the unit of analysis, and transcribes the material if necessary. During the analysis phase, the data is processed either in a data-driven (inductive) or theory-driven (deductive) manner, where it is grouped or condensed using an analysis matrix. In the reporting phase, the results are presented clearly, often in both textual and visual formats, and compared to previous research.

The interviews have been transcribed, and the data have been analyzed using inductive content analysis as the chosen method. Inductive content analysis is a technique used for data analysis, particularly with text-based materials. This may include written transcripts of spoken interactions or documents in written form. These documents can either be pre-existing materials originally created for non-research purposes or texts specifically generated for a research study. (Vears & Gillam 2022, 112.)

Inductive qualitative data analysis, also known as data-driven content analysis, generally follows a three-phase process. In the first stage, data reduction (simplification), the raw data—whether interview transcripts, observational notes, or various documents—is simplified by filtering out information that is not relevant to the research. This ensures that only meaningful data remains for further analysis. Second stage, data clustering (categorization), the remaining data is systematically grouped by identifying similarities and differences. The original expressions from the data are carefully examined, and concepts describing similar phenomena are categorized into different groups. These groups are then

further refined into subcategories, forming the basis for higher-level classifications. In the final stage, abstraction (conceptualization), the essential information is extracted, and theoretical concepts are developed based on the selected data. This step allows for the formulation of broader theoretical interpretations that help answer the research question. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 122–127.)

Vears and Gillam (2022, 117–122) argue that the process of inductive content analysis follows five key steps. First, the researcher thoroughly reads and familiarizes themselves with the data to develop a holistic understanding. Next, in the initial coding phase, broad categories or "big-picture" meaning units are identified to structure the data. The second coding round involves refining these broad categories into more detailed subcategories, breaking down the data while preserving its context. This is followed by a critical comparison and refinement of subcategories to ensure clarity and coherence. Finally, the synthesis and interpretation phase connect these categories to construct a meaningful and contextually relevant narrative that answers the research question without imposing external theoretical frameworks.

According to Silverman (2013, 443), content analysis entails defining categories, identifying systematic connections between them, and quantifying how frequently these categories appear within a given text. According to Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018, 127), inductive content analysis is an interpretative process that moves from empirical observations toward a more conceptual understanding of the studied phenomenon. By structuring and combining concepts, the analysis provides insights that contribute to the research objective.

In this thesis, inductive content analysis was chosen as the method for analyzing and interpreting the research data. The material consisted of five semi-structured interviews conducted with employees of the LähiTapiola Capital Area corporate customer service unit. The raw data were produced using Microsoft Teams' automatic transcription function. The transcripts were then reviewed multiple times, during which grammatical and spelling errors generated by the automatic

transcription were corrected. Once the material had been revised and thoroughly familiarized, the actual qualitative content analysis process began.

In the first phase, the interview data was organized by participant and grouped under the corresponding interview questions. After this, the data was reduced by removing irrelevant or repetitive content that was not essential to the research. Based on the reduced responses, the data was then examined by theme. In the next phase, recurring patterns, observations, and similarities were identified in the responses, reflecting participants' experiences and insights related to the studied themes.

The aim was to move from a broad overview toward more specific and meaningful content that captured the essential issues raised by the interviewees. Through qualitative content analysis, the interview material was ultimately condensed into a focused research dataset, which formed the basis for answering the original research questions.

6 RESULTS

This section covers the results of the study. The section has five subsections, and they follow the same framework with the interviews. The section starts with communication subsection follows with community and trust, management, challenges and opportunities of remote work and ends with a discussion about hybrid model and current situation.

6.1 Communication and interaction

At the beginning of the study, participants were asked to reflect on communication and interaction within LähiTapiola. Most of them agreed that discussions and information sharing have now shifted to digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams and email, which have become key communication tools both generally and within LähiTapiola Capital Area. However, during the early stages of remote work, communication challenges emerged as organizations and

employees were not yet accustomed to digital interaction, as one of the participants mentioned:

“Remote work did not exist that much before that (Covid-19), so I feel that, at least in the beginning, there was a lot of misunderstanding in communication because people were used to communicating face-to-face, and Teams was hardly used at all.” (Participant 1)

Other participants wanted to highlight that volume of communication has increased and keeping track of relevant information has become more difficult. Also, participants expressed their concerns about the overwhelming number of communication channels. Team members agreed that due to the increased frequency of information, it is hard to keep track of relevant information. This also affects negatively to deep working state flow as one participant noted:

“Teams, it’s kind of like a workplace social media platform. If notifications were turned on for all discussions, there would be no time for anything else but reading messages.” (Participant 5)

One of the most notable effects of remote work has been the reduction of informal conversations, which previously played a significant role in workplace culture. Employees now have fewer spontaneous interactions, leading to the changes in team dynamics. Several participants mentioned that it was easier to get to know colleagues across the organization before remote work became the norm. The interviews revealed that in the past, employees from other units had occasionally visited monthly meetings to share insights about their work. This practice was seen as valuable and something the participants hoped would be brought back. For example, informal discussion between Underwrites or Claims department were held in the coffee room. These quick exchanges have now diminished since more and more employees are working remotely. It is safe to say that general discussions have changed form from more informal to formal as one of the study participants commented the situation:

“Our team was in 6th floor and there I got to know claims department and Underwriters. We all had our offices, and it was easy to just go and ask directly from Underwriters if I needed help or there was something to discuss further.” (Participant 6)

Despite these challenges, remote work has also given rise to new communication practices aimed at supporting team cohesion and sense of belonging. One such

example is the introduction of virtual coffee breaks, which several participants mentioned as a positive initiative. When asked, all interviewees agreed that these informal sessions could be beneficial for maintaining a sense of connection among team members. Additionally, LähiTapiola Capital Area organizes a biweekly *PKS Live* session, which was unanimously praised by the participants. They viewed it as an effective platform for hearing directly from top management about the company's direction, ongoing developments, and urgent matters. Transparent updates were seen as valuable in fostering trust and engagement across the organization as one of the participants described:

“Like today's PKS Live is a great example of real progress, and how these kinds of tools that makes use of Teams to share information represent significant improvements.” (Participant 4)

Overall, the shift to remote work led to both improvements and new challenges in organizational communication. While digital tools enhanced accessibility and flexibility, they also introduced difficulties in managing information overload and maintaining informal workplace interactions. Before remote work became more established, organizations and employees had already experienced challenges in adapting to digital communication. These changes highlighted the importance of continuous development in communication strategies to support both efficiency and workplace culture in a remote environment.

6.2 Trust and community

One of the most significant impacts of remote work on organizational culture was the shift in how trust and sense of community are built and maintained. Many participants noted that while physical distance has increased, trust has not necessarily diminished, provided that both individuals and leadership take active roles in communication and engagement. Once the bond between employees and managers has been established, maintaining that trust—even in remote conditions—is not particularly difficult, as long as both parties are committed to it, as participant noted:

You have to be active in reaching out and letting others know if something's going on. Trust is built from both sides, employee and management, and once it's there, everything flows naturally.
(Participant 1)

The sense of community appeared to be strongly influenced by team culture, leadership behaviour and established communication practices. Trust between managers and employees was seen as a crucial factor in successful remote work, and employees themselves must take responsibility for visibility of their actions. Several interviewees mentioned the importance of consistent virtual interactions to maintain sense of community, like participant 4 commented:

It all comes down to trust. Your actions speak for themselves. If things aren't working, we figure it out together with the supervisor.
(Participant 4)

While remote work has not affected perceived trust among the team negatively, some participants raised concerns that they were not sure if the supervisor knows what everybody was doing when working at home and that remote work required a more proactive approach from the leaders. From the perspective of trust, some interviewees found remote work problematic, as it was difficult to be certain whether the recipient had received or understood the message. If there was no acknowledgment or response, it often left the sender feeling uncertain about whether the message had been delivered. Participant 2 had this to said:

I've always been able to reach my supervisor quickly, but I don't necessarily trust that they fully know what everyone is doing while working remotely. (Participant 2)

Employees felt that they were trusted by the employer and treated equally, even if they worked more remotely. In terms of career opportunities, no unequal treatment had been observed, and all participants agreed that the mode of working had not affected promotions nor opportunities to participate in organizational events. In fact, many participants noted that digital tools have made it easier to participate in projects and initiatives that might otherwise have been accessible only to employees who work in the office. The onboarding of new employees was seen as a crucial part of a functioning organizational culture, and all interviewees agreed that it should always take place at the office. In-person onboarding was considered essential not only for learning the practical aspects of the job but also for helping new employees feel like part of the organization. Remote onboarding, in contrast, was perceived as a burdensome

process for both the new employee and the person responsible for the orientation as participant 2 noted:

“Onboarding should absolutely be conducted in person. It is also important that the trainer is someone who actually performs the work themselves. This makes learning more effective, as there are also trainers who may teach incorrect practices.” (Participant 1)

Overall, the study showed that trust and a sense of community can indeed exist in organizations that operate remotely or in a hybrid mode, but it requires commitment and active effort from all parties—both employees and supervisors. Structured virtual interactions, equal access to information, responsive leadership and recognition of employee’s emotional needs all play important roles when managing cohesive and trusting remote culture.

6.3 Management and organizational culture

Remote work has introduced both challenges and opportunities in leadership practises, significantly influencing the dynamics of perceived organization culture. The interviews revealed varying experiences with managerial support, expectations and leadership roles in remote work setting. These differences highlight the need for clear communication, consistent leadership practices, and adaptability to maintain trust and cohesion within teams.

One of the clearest findings was the shift in managerial responsibilities. Many team leaders now have multiple responsibilities beyond leadership over their own team. The interviewees felt that supervisors no longer necessarily have time to focus on actual leadership tasks, as their working hours are increasingly filled with other responsibilities. This, in turn, was reflected in a reduced level of care and support for team members. Concerns were also raised about how the distance from day-to-day work reduces managers’ understanding of what they ask of employees, potentially weakening their ability to lead effectively and empathize with operational challenges. Effectiveness of remote leadership depends heavily on the individual manager’s adaptability and communication style, which are increasingly put to the test in the era of growing remote work. Delivering messages in written form requires greater clarity and precision, as the

nuances of tone and intent are often lost compared to face-to-face conversations as two participants noted:

“You (supervisor) need to show that you’re available – if not physically- by proactively initiating conversations.” (Participant 1)
“It no longer feels like leadership is their main task. Supervisors seem overloaded with other duties not directly related to leading our team.” (Participant 2)

What comes to remote work – trust, management and self-leadership were recurring themes in the interviews. Many participants felt that the remote setting demands higher level of self-direction and initiative. Self-leader was also seen as personality trait what was given. Courses or training to improve one’s self-leadership skills was mentioned by several participants. Especially with how to build your day while doing work from home, it was clear that everyone had their own way of working but guidance was needed. Participant 2 said:

“I don’t really know how self-leadership could be taught or guided, but maybe some kind of training—something that would help everyone find their own way of getting things done, so tasks don’t pile up or become overwhelming.” (Participant 2)

Remote work has reshaped the role of managers, demanding new leadership styles that emphasize communication, trust and proactive support. Effective onboarding was also seen crucial among the participants, and both new employees and older employees who take part in onboarding processes agreed that onboarding must be done on-site. Also, recognition of individual work styles emerged an essential element of a healthy organization culture in a remote or hybrid work environment.

6.4 The challenges and opportunities of remote work

The participants generally acknowledged that while remote work offers significant flexibility and autonomy, it also presents some obstacles, particularly in terms of communication and separation of work and personal life. In terms of role clarity, most participants agreed that remote work had not significantly impacted their understanding of their responsibilities. Interviewees agreed that their role has remained clear in remote setting for themselves but roles inside the team were

not so clear. It was pointed out that more transparent role definitions and alignment within the team was needed, as participants 2 noted:

“I know what’s expected from me, but I’m not sure if there’s a unified understanding of what is expected from everyone. Even when we have the same title, it seems like responsibilities vary from person to person”. (Participant 2)

A frequently mentioned challenge of remote work was the difficulty of maintaining boundaries between work and personal life. Also, a lack of proper home office equipment and poor ergonomics as barriers to productive and comfortable remote work was mentioned. When it comes to social interactions, the answers were highly divided. Participants 5 and 1 said:

I miss the presence of my colleagues. It’s harder to stay connected when working remotely. (Participant 5)
It’s easier for me to concentrate at home, especially with my attention difficulties. I can dive into my tasks without constant interruptions. (Participant 1)

On the other hand, many interviewees praised the increased autonomy and flexibility that remote work enables. The most significant benefit outside flexibility and work well-being was the increased effectiveness. Many of the participants agreed that they are more effective at home, since there are no distractions. Autonomy was also linked to self-leadership, which many participants found both empowering and demanding. Participant 5 concluded the segment with these final words:

Remote work brings more freedom, but it also means you must manage your time and avoid distractions yourself. (Participant 5)

6.5 Hybrid model and current situation

Hybrid working model where employees divide their time between remote and office-based work has become the standard in many organizations after the Covid-19. In the LähiTapiola Capital area, this model has brought about both positive developments and areas that call further attention. Interviewees of the study expressed generally positive views of hybrid work, while also emphasizing the need for flexibility, trust-based leadership and clear consistent practises.

Overall, the impact of the hybrid working method on team dynamics was seen as

neutral or even positive. Many participants emphasized that team culture and professional relationship have remained strong, regardless of physical presence. Participants 1 and 4 were happy with current situation:

My relationship with colleagues has remained the same whether I've been remote or at the office. We talk the same way in Teams as we do face-to-face... When people are allowed to adjust how they come to the office—once every other week or randomly based on their needs—it prevents frustration and keeps everyone happy
(Participant 1)

That it's good that we see each other, but at the same time it's very flexible — so I think it's pretty ideal at the moment. (Participant 4)

Visibility and equal opportunities between remote and in-office employees were not seen as major concerns by the participants. This reflects a culture of trust between employees and managers. All participants agreed that career advancement opportunities are equal, regardless of whether an employee works primarily remotely or in the office. Promotions were seen to be based on performance and the quality of work, not physical presence at the workplace. Participant 3 viewed the current situation equal to everyone.

I don't think there's unfairness. Opportunities are usually shared openly, regardless of location. (Participant 3)

The current situation was highly valued and considered fair among the participants. Some concerns were expressed regarding mandatory office days. Forcing everyone into the office is not the solution. Rather, hybrid practices should remain role-specific and flexible, especially given the diverse nature of tasks within the organisation. In some instances, current hybrid model was in terms of organisational practises, there were positive examples of balancing structure and autonomy. Participant 1 and 4 commented the matter as follows:

If someone thrives in remote work and meets their targets, why enforce rigid in-office requirements? Flexibility and accountability should go hand in hand. (Participant 1)

Meeting at the office once a week works really well for our team. It supports team spirit, but it's also flexible. (Participant 4)

During the era of hybrid work, meeting practices have changed significantly. Several participants noted that before hybrid work became the norm, scheduled meetings were rarely rescheduled, and doing so was generally frowned upon.

Today, however, some employees feel that meeting times are frequently changed—sometimes without a strong justification. This makes it difficult to plan and structure one’s work and, over time, may erode trust in the organization and its decision-making processes as participant 1 noted:

“In the old teams, meeting times were never changed – in the current ones, they are constantly being rescheduled.” (Participant 1)

In summary, the hybrid work model and on-going practises at LähiTapiola are generally seen effective and appreciated. Its success relies on mutual trust, role clarity and adaptive leadership. The interviews indicated that with improved structure and sustained flexibility, the hybrid model can support both high productivity and a strong sense of belonging.

7 CONCLUSION AND DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS

This thesis explored how remote and hybrid work affect organizational culture in LähiTapiola Capital Area. The study was based on employee interviews and supported by theoretical perspectives on organizational culture, remote work, and communication. This chapter starts with key findings and then provides concrete recommendations for strengthening organizational culture in remote and hybrid environment. Evaluation of research trustworthiness concludes the chapter.

7.1 Key findings

The research questions presented in the beginning of the study revealed multiple perspectives, without a single, unified narrative emerging. This is understandable, as organizational culture is inherently a subjective concept—each employee experiences and interprets it in their own way. However, Schein’s (2016, 18), model of organizational culture offers a deep and broadly applicable theoretical framework to understand these variations. Key findings of the study revolve around communication, sense of community, leadership, and effective onboarding processes. The results indicate that remote work presents challenges in locating information and reaching colleagues, which in turn affects the perceived organizational culture.

The first research question explored how remote work influences different aspects of organizational culture, such as communication and leadership. One of the most significant findings was the increased importance of communication. As the number of digital communication channels has grown, effective communication has become even more essential within the organization. Communication also directly affects the level of trust within the workplace—both among colleagues and between employees and managers. However, digital tools make communication more complex. In face-to-face interaction, elements such as tone of voice, body language, and pacing all contribute to how a message is understood—these non-verbal cues are largely absent in written or digital formats. This aligns with recent research specifically addressing the topic how remote work changes communication in organizations. (Aquillon & Cronin-Gilmore 2024.)

The study showed that remote work had brought changes to leadership practices and requires employees to have stronger self-leadership skills. Team leaders were expected to develop new capabilities to lead their teams effectively. This same observation has also been made by Quinn and Cameron (2006, 118–122). Managers were expected to communicate more frequently and intentionally, ensuring their presence is felt even from a distance. Especially those who work mostly remotely felt that supervisors and the organization should offer autonomy in carrying out routine tasks in the way employees see fit, while also ensuring that support is easily available when needed. Self-leadership was frequently mentioned in the interviews and recognized as a crucial skill in remote work. To support this, the organization could, for example, arrange workshops that introduce various self-leadership methods to help employees manage their workload more effectively.

The sense of community is also more difficult to maintain without regular in-person interactions. Participants noted that informal, spontaneous conversations, which previously occurred naturally in the workplace, have significantly decreased as remote work has become more common. This shift has had a clear impact on how employees perceive and experience the organizational culture.

The second research question focused on identifying strategies an organization can use to maintain and develop its organizational culture during remote work. The interviews highlighted the importance of continuous and intentional communication and interaction. Whether this interaction occurs in person or virtually, the key finding was that it should be supported and facilitated by the organization itself—not left solely to the initiative of individual employees. Clampitt (2016, 28) has also highlighted the importance of communication. A good example mentioned was virtual coffee breaks, which help foster a sense of community by offering opportunities to connect informally with colleagues across the organization. As previously discussed, communication emerged as a critical factor once again.

Another major finding related to successful and sustainable organizational culture was the role of effective, goal-oriented, and especially in-person onboarding. A well-structured onboarding process helps new employees become part of the organization and internalize the ways of working. From the individual's perspective, especially in a remote work setting, it is crucial that their role and responsibilities are clearly defined. The study revealed that both new employees and those responsible for onboarding agreed that in-person onboarding at the office was essential for a smooth start. As highlighted in the study by Gomes and Sousa (2023), a well-planned onboarding process not only improves cultural assimilation but also contributes to faster productivity and employee satisfaction. This supports the interview findings, which emphasized the importance of conducting onboarding in person.

The final research question explored the challenges and opportunities that remote work brings from an organizational perspective. According to the research findings, the greatest challenge was related to communication and the ability to access information quickly. Interviewees felt that finding answers and getting support takes more time when working remotely compared to working in the office. In the office, it is easy to ask a colleague for help on the spot, whereas

remote work lacks this immediacy. Although it is easy to send a message via Teams, there is no guarantee that the recipient will notice or respond promptly.

Despite these challenges, remote work also offers several opportunities for organizations. It enables broader participation in projects and decision-making, as employees are not required to be physically present in office. According to the interviewees, hybrid and multi-location work is now standard in LähiTapiola, with many employees joining the same meeting from different locations. Remote work also supports a better work-life balance, which in turn benefits the organization through increased employee commitment to the organization and its values. Similar findings were reported by Pabilonia and Redmond (2024). This perspective aligns with recent research by Haque (2023), which highlights both the challenges and opportunities of remote work from an HR management standpoint.

7.2 Development proposals

This section presents proposals for maintaining and developing the organizational culture at LähiTapiola Capital Area. The suggestions are based on organizational culture theory, the research findings, and conclusions discussed in the previous sections. The study indicated that the perceived organizational culture is currently at a good level, making it particularly important to actively work on its maintenance and continuous improvement.

During the period of remote work, both the volume of communication and the use of various digital communication applications have increased dramatically. From the perspective of organizational culture, this heightened volume was seen as problematic because critical information may often be overlooked by employees. One proposal, therefore, is to streamline organizational communication by prioritizing essential messages and clarifying their purpose. A good example of effective communication is the "PKS Live" sessions, which summarize the most crucial business updates. An organizational-level weekly message that compiles the week's most important updates could further support effective communication.

Additionally, creating “Common Communication Guidelines” could help standardize effective messaging practices within the organization. These guidelines could address aspects such as message purpose, appropriate communication channels, message clarity, and recipient relevance. However, emergency communications (such as fires or system outages) should be excluded from these guidelines. Particularly for rapid messaging via Teams, clearly defined rules and an evaluation of existing Teams channels should be established to identify which channels are truly relevant for employees to follow.

To maintain and enhance a positive organizational culture that supports collaboration among individuals and teams, it is recommended to introduce informal "virtual coffee breaks" via Teams, where employees can gather to discuss informal topics and socialize. Since casual breakroom conversations have significantly declined due to increased remote work, transferring these interactions to a virtual environment could help preserve informal interactions that strengthen community ties. Initially, this concept could be piloted through official invitations from the organization to gauge employee interest and participation levels.

Another related suggestion is arranging regular team or departmental breakfasts at workplace during working hours. Such informal social interactions before starting official tasks would likely be well-received by employees and provide valuable opportunities for building relationships and fostering community spirit through casual conversations. These initiatives could help address the loss of spontaneous interactions and contribute positively to the overall organizational culture.

A leadership-related development proposal concerns self-leadership. To support employees' self-leadership skills, it is suggested to organize joint workshops where common pain points and challenges related to self-leadership are openly discussed. Participants would be encouraged to share practical solutions and approaches that have successfully worked for them personally. Additionally,

another recommendation within the leadership domain is the development of a clear and structured onboarding program. Such a program would contribute significantly to employee commitment and integration into the organization by ensuring clarity regarding their role, tasks, and expectations from the outset.

7.3 Suggestion for future research

One relevant direction for future research would be to explore how different digital tools and technological solutions support hybrid work and improve operational efficiency at LähiTapiola. This type of study could focus on identifying which tools employees perceive as the most beneficial for collaboration, communication, and productivity in a hybrid environment. Additionally, it could investigate common technological challenges employees face, such as tool overload, integration issues, or lack of training. Understanding these factors could help the organization prioritize and develop its digital ecosystem to better support hybrid work.

Another valuable follow-up study could examine which job roles and tasks at LähiTapiola are most compatible with remote work, and which functions are critical to perform on-site. This research could analyze different job profiles in relation to their collaboration needs, reliance on in-person customer interaction, or requirement for access to physical systems or confidential material. The findings would support evidence-based decision-making on hybrid work policies and help ensure that both individual and organizational productivity remain high.

A forward-looking research topic could focus on how work at LähiTapiola might evolve by the year 2035, considering broader trends such as increased hybrid work, automation, artificial intelligence, and the transformation of organizational culture. This study could explore how employee roles, leadership practices, and internal collaboration might change in the next decade. It would provide valuable insight into how the organization can prepare for future shifts in work models and employee expectations, helping ensure that the company remains adaptive, attractive, and resilient in an evolving working life.

7.4 Research trustworthiness

The credibility of this study was ensured by grounding all findings directly in the interview material. To support credibility, the research questions were provided to participants in advance, and after the analysis, participants were asked to review the results to confirm that their messages had not been misinterpreted. The number of participants was small, due to the limited size of the team, which may affect the reliability of the findings—particularly regarding how generalizable the conclusions are at the organizational level. The transferability of the results depends heavily on factors such as the size of the organization, the industry in which the company operates, and the remote work policies in place. Although the amount of data was small, the saturation point for new perspectives was reached relatively quickly. While some narrower sub-themes were excluded to maintain focus, the core areas were analysed in depth.

The author's own preconceptions was in favour of in-office work, which may have influenced the research process and some initial assumptions. Especially when participant responses were not immediately clear to the author, interviewees were asked to elaborate on their viewpoints to avoid misinterpretation. The findings of this study support the results of previous research, as several similar themes—such as virtual coffee breaks—were brought up by participants and are also mentioned in earlier studies. Since the organizational culture at LähiTapiola was already perceived as strong and functional, it is reasonable to assume that the research findings and proposed measures are valid, at least within the Capital Area unit of LähiTapiola.

The research process is described in detail to ensure transparency and clarity in each stage of the study. Interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams, allowing each participant to choose a comfortable setting for the discussion. Ample time was allocated for the interviews. Practical research methods were selected based on both empirical knowledge and established research practices that are considered suitable for examining subjective, organization-related variables.

The report proceeds logically from introduction to conclusion and connects theoretical insights with empirical findings. Direct quotations from participants were included to illustrate key points and enhance the trustworthiness and transparency of the interpretations. The study was conducted in 2025, at a time when hybrid work was widely accepted within the organization. The familiarity of interviewees with remote work likely made it easier for them to reflect on their experiences. The interviews were conducted in calm digital settings using Microsoft Teams, which minimized external distractions and encouraged open dialogue.

Research validity relates to how well the researcher's interpretations of observations are justified by the data and whether these conclusions are reasonable when considered alongside previous studies (Silverman 2013, 285). Some social researchers claim that concerns about the reliability and validity of observations are primarily relevant within the quantitative research tradition. According to what is referred to as the positivist perspective, no distinction exists between the natural and social worlds, and only positivists consider reliable and valid measures essential for studying social life. However, qualitative researchers can no longer disregard the issue of reliability. While the strength of field research lies in its ability to assess the validity of propositions, its findings may be dismissed without proper attention to reliability. To ensure reliability, it is essential for researchers to thoroughly document their methodologies. (Silverman 2013, 301.)

8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this final section, I reflect on the thesis process, the learning opportunities I encountered along the way, and my overall experience. As someone who is both people-oriented and business-minded, I found the starting point for this work to be ideal—especially since I had the opportunity to carry it out for my new employer on a topic that genuinely interested me. Based on the research findings, I believe I have identified practical and applicable development proposals that, with minor adjustments, could be implemented at LähiTapiola to support and further strengthen the organization's culture.

The thesis process began in December 2024, when I first discussed the topic with a representative of my employer. The objective of the thesis was to explore how remote work has impacted team dynamics and the organization more broadly. I was given a great deal of freedom in both selecting the topic and defining its scope. In hindsight, narrowing the focus to my own team—Corporate Customer Service at LähiTapiola Capital Area—proved to be the right decision. That said, the topic could have been even more precisely defined. Both remote work and organizational culture are vast subjects that could easily serve as foundations for multiple follow-up studies.

The starting point for the work was particularly motivating, as I had the opportunity to conduct the research for my new employer and on a topic that genuinely interested me—organizational culture. Organizational culture is abstract and highly subjective, which meant the research was inherently focused on individual experiences. Although I only fully realized the scale of the thesis during the process—and at times found it challenging to keep my focus strictly on the research questions—I believe I succeeded in completing the work to a high standard, especially considering I was simultaneously working full-time in a demanding expert role that I am still learning.

This project taught me a great deal about managing large, complex entities and the importance of self-leadership—skills I am very pleased to have developed. The research process also deepened my understanding of organizational culture and strengthened my awareness of communication and leadership practices. Conducting the interviews was especially interesting, and the insights gained from my colleagues proved valuable from a professional standpoint as I reflect on my own role within the organization.

One of the key learnings was the importance of not just identifying challenges but also offering practical and realistic development suggestions based on employee perspectives. I believe that the proposals developed in this thesis—such as clearer communication practices, structured onboarding, and improved support

for self-leadership—are feasible with minor adjustments and could genuinely support the maintenance and development of LähiTapiola’s organizational culture.

This thesis also underscored the value of continuous reflection and adaptability in modern organizations. I have gained valuable insight into how strategic cultural development can be aligned with both business goals and evolving work practices. Overall, this project has been a meaningful learning experience and has strengthened my interest in organizational development and the future of work.

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Interview questions

1. Personal background

- Could you tell me about yourself and your role in the company?
 - How long have you been working at LähiTapiola?
-

2. Communication and Interaction

- How has remote work changed internal communication methods? Could you give some examples?
 - How has the frequency of informal conversations changed? How does this affect your work and the general atmosphere?
 - How has collaboration between teams evolved?
 - How do different digital communication tools affect your work? What about the organizational culture?
 - Have you noticed any changes in the openness or accessibility of communication since the shift to remote work?
-

3. Trust and Sense of Community

- How has remote work affected your trust in your supervisor, colleagues, and between teams? Has building trust become more difficult?
 - How has remote work influenced the sense of belonging within the organization? What do you miss most about working in the office?
 - Do you ever feel isolated or left alone with your work? In which situations does this happen the most?
 - How has the organization tried to support a sense of community during remote work? (e.g. common events, virtual coffee breaks, other practices?)
-

4. Leadership and Organizational Structure

- How has remote work influenced leadership practices?
- Are there new leadership methods needed in your opinion? Have any new leadership approaches been implemented?

- Have you received support in self-leadership? If yes, in what ways? If not, what kind of support would you find helpful?
-

5. Challenges of Remote Work in Your Role

- What are the biggest challenges you face in your role when working remotely?
 - How has remote work affected the clarity of your tasks or responsibilities? Is it clear to you what is expected of you?
-

6. Opportunities of Remote Work in Your Role

- What positive impacts has remote work had in your role?
 - How has remote work affected your self-leadership? Do you feel you have gained more autonomy?
-

7. Hybrid Work Model

- How does the hybrid work model (partly remote, partly on-site) affect team dynamics and company culture?
 - Do employees experience inequality between remote and on-site work within the team? Do you feel that employees working on-site receive more visibility and opportunities?
 - Should the hybrid model be further developed in the organization? If yes, how?
-

8. Open Discussion

- Could you share an example that you think illustrates particularly well how working practices have changed in your organization due to remote work?
- Is there anything else you would like to say—something I didn't think to ask, or something you would like to clarify?