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CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION AT BRP FINLAND

Case Study

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Thesis

Business Administration
International Business

2025

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Thesis abstract

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This thesis was commissioned by BRP Finland to answer the research question: How do cultural differences affect communication and collaboration between Finnish employees and their remote managers from different cultural backgrounds at BRP Finland, and how can these challenges be addressed?

To support the exploration of this main question, three sub-questions were used:

1. What cultural differences are most relevant to the interaction between Finnish employees and their remote managers from Canada, Belgium, and Switzerland, based on Hofstede's framework?
2. What best practices can BRP Finland learn from managers in Canada, Belgium, and Switzerland?
3. What strategies can help Finnish employees navigate cultural differences in communication and collaboration with their remote managers?

The theoretical framework of the study was Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, and the research was conducted as a qualitative case study. The study took place in the spring of 2025, with data collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically.

The findings showed that, although employees were generally satisfied with their current situation, challenges emerged due to the Finnish direct and low-context communication style, low-hierarchy approach, and tendency to avoid uncertainty. In addition, Finnish employees typically did not emphasize their achievements, which could be interpreted abroad as a lack of ambition or reluctance to advance in their careers.

Based on the findings, suggestions for development were provided. In addition, a separate guidebook for internal use at BRP Finland Ltd. was created to support employees in recognizing cultural differences and developing their cross-cultural competencies.

Keywords	Intercultural communication, Cross-cultural, Cultural competence, International business, Cultural awareness, Cultural studies, Multicultural education
Special remarks	An internal guidebook created for the commissioner.

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Opinnäytetyön tiivistelmä

Liiketalous
International Business

Tekijä(t)	Hanna Halonen	**Vuosi**	2025
Ohjaaja(t)	Anne Tolvanen		
Toimeksiantaja	BRP Finland Oy		
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Tämä opinnäytetyö toteutettiin toimeksiantona BRP Finland Oy:lle etsien vastausta kysymykseen: miten kulttuurierot vaikuttavat suomalaisten toimihenkilöiden ja eri kulttuuritaustoista tulevien etäesihenkilöiden viestintään ja yhteistyöhön BRP Finland Oy:ssä, ja miten näitä haasteita voidaan ratkaista?

Tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin kolmea alakysymystä:

1. Mitkä kulttuurierot ovat Hofsteden kulttuuriteorian perusteella merkityksellisimpiä suomalaisten toimihenkilöiden ja heidän Kanadassa, Belgiassa ja Sveitsissä sijaitsevien etäesihenkilöidensä vuorovaikutuksessa?
2. Mitä hyviä käytäntöjä voidaan oppia Kanadassa, Belgiassa ja Sveitsissä toimivilta esihenkilöiltä?
3. Mitkä strategiat voivat auttaa suomalaisia toimihenkilöitä selvittämään kulttuurierojen aiheuttamia haasteita viestinnässä ja yhteistyössä etäesihenkilöidensä kanssa?

Tutkimuksen teoreettisena viitekehyksenä käytettiin Hofsteden kansallisen kulttuurin ulottuvuusteoriaa ja tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tapaustutkimuksena. Aineisto kerättiin teemahaastatteluina, jotka litteroitiin ja analysoitiin temaattisen analyysin avulla.

Tulokset osoittivat, että vaikka toimihenkilöt olivat pääosin tyytyväisiä etäesihenkilöihinsä, haasteita syntyi muun muassa suomalaisten suoraviivaisen ja kontekstista riippumattoman viestintätyylin, matalahierarkkisen toimintatavan sekä epävarmuuden välttämisen seurauksena. Lisäksi suomalaisten taipumus olla korostamatta omaa osaamistaan saatettiin tulkita muissa kulttuureissa haluttomuudeksi edetä uralla. Löydösten perusteella yritykselle laadittiin kehitysehdotuksia. Tämän lisäksi yritykselle tehtiin erillinen ohjekirja omaan sisäiseen käyttöön, jonka tarkoitus on tukea toimihenkilöitä kulttuurierojen tunnistamisessa ja kulttuurienvälisen osaamisen kehittämisessä.

Avainsanat	Kulttuurienvälinen viestintä, Monikulttuurisuus, Kulttuurierot, Liiketalous, Organisaatiokulttuuri, Kansainvälistyminen, Kulttuuriosaaminen
Muita tietoja	Toimeksiantajan sisäiseen käyttöön tehty ohjekirja

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and context

The need for strong cross-cultural skills is increasing due to continuing globalization. This is also evident in Finland, where in the year 2000, only around 1,42% of the salaried workforce (aged 18–64) had a native language other than Finnish, but by 2023, this number had risen to 9,71%. (Tilastokeskus 2025.) These demographic changes emphasize the increasing need for cross-cultural competence in Finland.

The same need has also increased locally in Lapland. A 2022 study indicates that approximately 58% of the Finnish population in Lapland is of working age, while 27% are retired. In contrast, 80% of the foreign population in Lapland is of working age, with only 2,7% retired. Despite this, the study found that half of the foreign population in Lapland remains unemployed, even as the Finnish workforce continues to age. Additionally, the study highlighted Lapland's challenges in retaining foreign workers, which is particularly concerning given the region's growing labour needs. The report suggests that due to the heterogeneous nature of foreign worker groups, they often have culturally specific expectations and needs that are not adequately recognized, leading to difficulties in workforce retention. This underscores the importance of cross-cultural competencies at companies to improve the integration and long-term employment of foreign workers in Lapland. (MDI 2022.)

The commissioner company operates in the technology industry, which is represented by the Technology Industry of Finland work union. In an interview in mid-March 2025, the union emphasized that Finland needs to make it easier for specialists in the field to move to and work in Finland long-term. Even though Finland has a high unemployment rate, the industry pointed out that in the next decade, between 6000-8000 people will retire from the sector yearly. Additionally, as the industry is expected to start growing again, the usual yearly increase in personnel during periods of growth based on historical data has been around two percent,

meaning that approximately 6000 new employees will be needed annually. Without a sufficient number of specialists, Finland's technology industry could be at risk of losing out on potential growth. (Teknologiateollisuus 2025.)

In addition to this broader trend, the commissioning company, BRP Finland, has its own need to enhance its employees' cross-cultural skills. Being a large international company, along with its global presence and the company's shift toward internationalization in the early 2000s, there is a further need to develop its international competence. Today, BRP operates multiple factories and offices worldwide and follows a shared code of ethics that promotes diversity and inclusion across all locations. (BRP 2025.)

When managed effectively, diversity and strong cross-cultural competencies can bring significant value to a company by increasing creativity and improving problem-solving capabilities (Viitala 2021). However, despite these potential benefits, Huhta (2023, 23) references a study by Williams and O'Reilly (1998), which found that diversity can also slow down implementation processes and create challenges. Furthermore, research suggests that cross-cultural skills do not develop automatically; they need active effort and training. (Trompenaars, Berardo, Deardorff & Trompenaars 2012, 3–4.)

At BRP Finland, an increasing number of employees are managed by remote managers from different cultural backgrounds at various BRP locations. As a result, the company has begun paying closer attention to the challenges employees may face in these working relationships. This thesis applies Hofstede's cultural dimensions as a framework to identify key cultural differences and explore ways to address them. While cross-cultural skills are not tied to any specific country, this study will focus on three key locations with a high number of remote managers: Canada, Switzerland, and Belgium.

This research will be conducted using qualitative methods and will address the following main research question:

How do cultural differences affect communication and collaboration between Finnish employees and their remote managers from different cultural backgrounds at BRP Finland, and how can these challenges be addressed?

To examine the current situation at the company, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with selected employees who report to a remote manager. The interviews will be transcribed and analysed thematically to identify patterns, cultural differences, and potential challenges. The aim is to pinpoint the most significant differences and key challenges to develop practical recommendations.

The research will be guided by the following sub-questions:

1. What cultural differences are most relevant to the interaction between Finnish employees and their remote managers from Canada, Belgium, and Switzerland, based on Hofstede's framework?

This question will help analyse the interview data and draw connections between the responses of different employees. It will also provide insights into why certain challenges may arise in communication and collaboration.

2. What best practices can BRP Finland learn from managers in Canada, Belgium, and Switzerland?

The second sub-question aims to identify the positive aspects of working with remote managers, particularly any processes or leadership approaches that Finnish employees have found to be more effective or smoother compared to working with local managers in Finland. Gathering this information is feasible, as most employees with a remote manager also have prior experience working with a Finnish manager within the company. This topic will be explored during the interviews to gain further insights.

3. What strategies can help Finnish employees navigate cultural differences in communication and collaboration with their remote managers?

To provide meaningful recommendations to the company, the author will connect the research findings to Hofstede's cultural dimension framework. This will help in forming a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and offering realistic suggestions that could support employees to overcome potential issues.

Although Hofstede's theory has been criticized for being outdated in some of its dimensions, the author also explored Trompenaars's and the GLOBE frameworks. However, the GLOBE study was considered too extensive for the scope of this research, while Trompenaars's framework lacked sufficient empirical grounding for the author's purposes. Hofstede's theory was ultimately chosen because it is still widely used and provides an accessible foundation for identifying and discussing cultural differences.

Although all six dimensions of Hofstede's theory serve a valid purpose, this study will focus on the first five dimensions. The sixth dimension primarily examines individuals' perspectives on life and does not have a direct connection to workplace dynamics in a way that would contribute to the research questions.

1.2 Commissioner overview

The commissioner has a long history in snowmobile production, and since 2003, all manufacturing in Rovaniemi has operated under the name BRP Finland Ltd. BRP's main headquarters are in Canada, and it operates 11 manufacturing sites and multiple offices across 18 countries (BRP 2025b). The company specializes in recreational vehicles, including snowmobiles, ATVs, and motorcycles. Among its products, the snowmobile brand LYNX, designed and produced in Rovaniemi, has been the market leader in Scandinavia.

Globally, BRP employs approximately 20,000 people (BRP 2024). In the third quarter of the fiscal year 2025, the company reported nearly 2 billion dollars in revenue. However, compared to the previous year, financial performance has declined due to high inventories in BRP's network of resellers caused by lowered demand due to inflation (BRP, 2024). This downturn has also affected BRP Finland's operations, leading to reduced production throughout 2024 (Yle 2024).

Despite these challenges, BRP Finland and its LYNX brand continue to expand. Recently, the company announced new product releases for the coming year, which will also be introduced to new customers in North America (BRP 2025c). This expansion increases the company's potential customer base and further highlights the need for cross-cultural competencies across its workforce.

2 CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

2.1 Definition of culture

As the study aims to identify cultural differences, it is important to understand what culture means. Research does not offer a single definition of culture, but it can be described as a set of unwritten values, beliefs, and expectations collectively shared within a group. The surrounding culture shapes what an individual considers normal and influences their opinion on what is socially acceptable behaviour or communication. Hofstede has described culture as a mental programming—a collection of patterns learned through everyday experiences. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 4–7.)

There are also different types of cultures that influence individuals: national, organizational, and personal cultures. (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 74–76.) While organizational or individual cultures may differ from the national culture, the national culture still sets the tone for other cultural layers within the country. For this reason, this thesis uses Hofstede's national culture framework as its primary theoretical foundation. (Hofstede 2011.)

All types of cultures consist of multiple layers, which can be divided into visible and invisible aspects. The visible aspects include observable behaviours and practices, such as clothing or cuisine. Beneath these visible aspects are unspoken cultural norms—implicit yet widely accepted habits and behaviour shaped by shared interpretations. (Dolan & Kawamura, 2015, 75–76.)

For example, in Canada, making eye contact is considered polite and a normal part of social interaction, whereas in Japan, it is often avoided. (Argyle, Henderson, Bond, Iizuka & Contarello, 1986; Akechi et al. 2013.) Similarly, Canadians tend to stand closer to each other during conversation than the Swiss (Sorokowska et al. 2017). These examples illustrate how culture shapes everyday behaviour in subtle but significant ways.

The invisible layer of culture reflects deeper values of the society, such as whether the focus is on the individual ("I") or the collective ("we"). These differences tend to be particularly noticeable between Western and Asian cultures. At

the deepest level, culture consists of unconscious rules that are the most difficult to recognize, as they feel natural and self-evident. These include underlying perceptions of what is considered acceptable or unacceptable, for example, how aging and elderly people are viewed. (Dolan & Kawamura, 2015, 74–76.) Such deeper cultural layers often become visible only after prolonged interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds, or if someone acts in a way that goes against these norms.

2.2 Organisational culture

Professional communication and behaviour are influenced not only by national culture but also by the organisational culture of the workplace. Therefore, it is essential to understand the concept thereof.

Organisational culture guides the employees' everyday actions, even in situations where they are not being directly monitored. Every company has its own culture, whether consciously acknowledged or not. Leadership strongly influences this culture, as employees often observe and model their behaviour after their leader, who serves as a role model for acceptable and expected behaviour. (Luukka 2019.)

Ideally, an organization's culture is built around its core values in a way that supports the achievements of its strategic objectives (Kulmala & Rosvall 2022). Therefore, each company has unique needs for its organisational culture. However, culture is also shaped in everyday interactions between employees. Without conscious efforts to lead and maintain the desired culture, it may evolve in unintended and unwanted directions. (Luukka 2019.)

While national culture shapes what individuals perceive as acceptable or important, organisational culture determines which behaviours are considered appropriate for achieving the company's goals. As a result, the research findings will reflect not only national cultural influences but also the specific culture of the company studied. This is also why the study was approached as a case study – to avoid overgeneralisation and better capture the unique context of the organisation.

2.3 Communication in an international setting

As the research focuses on understanding how cultural differences may influence collaboration and communication, it is also essential to examine the concept of communication and its broader implications.

Communication refers to the act of conveying a message from one individual to another. In this process, the communicator attaches meaning to their message and waits for the receiver's acknowledgement. (Mikkola & Valo 2020, 6) Some studies have argued that communication is synonymous with relationships, due to its fundamental role within them. It is also described as the force that shapes people's social reality. (Baxter 2004; Manning 2014; Mikkola & Valo 2020, 6.)

Communication has various forms, such as face-to-face interactions and remote communication. While in-person communication includes non-verbal elements like body language and facial expressions, online communication may occur solely via text. This can increase the risk of misunderstandings. Nevertheless, an increasing share of communication has moved entirely online. This is also the case for the Finnish employees at the commissioner company who work with a remote manager.

In a work setting, communication directly affects a team's success, efficiency, and productivity (Mikkola & Valo 2020, 1–6). It plays a key role in discussions, debates, conversations, and feedback (Mikkola & Valo 2020, 3). The communication is shaped by both national and organizational culture. This is due to the social expectations learned through shared values at both levels. (Keyton 2014; Mikkola & Valo 2020, 6–7; Mehra 2014, 2–6.) While communication at work can be more formal and conservative, it is commonly adapted to the receiver, based on their status and whether they are an internal or external stakeholder (Mehra 2014, 2–15).

Misunderstandings and disagreements in communication often arise from differing expectations and interpretations. These differences are particularly pronounced when individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds interact. (Mikkola & Valo 2020, 9.) Research has shown that the risk of misunderstandings increases

when individuals rely on previously learned, automatic responses and behavioural scripts that may be interpreted differently in another culture (Mehra 2014, 2–6).

Communication in an international setting can also be challenged by language barriers. Although English is widely accepted as the language of international business, some cultures challenge this notion and oppose it. For instance, some French speakers are known to strongly prefer using French. (Mehra 2014, 14–15; Simon 2013.) This could be relevant in the commissioner's case, since some of the remote managers are located in predominantly French-speaking areas.

Another important difference in international communication is the distinction between high-context and low-context communication styles. For example, countries like Sweden are known for their low-context style: individuals are direct, explicit, and get straight to the point. Studies also suggest that Finland may belong to this category. High-context cultures, such as France, rely more on implicit messages and indirect communication. The French often imply meaning rather than stating it directly. (Mehra, 2014, 11–31.)

While low-context communicators may believe they are saving the listener's time by being clear and direct, their message can seem blunt to someone from a high-context culture. Without an awareness of these differences, misunderstandings and negative reactions can occur. (Mehra, 2014, 11–31.)

As demonstrated, communication can be a complex issue in multicultural teams, where differing values and communication styles may create misunderstandings. Nevertheless, effective communication and collaboration remain essential for building cohesive teams and sustaining productivity. These challenges, however, can be addressed through mutual understanding and good cross-cultural skills.

2.4 Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions

As the research uses Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, it is indispensable to have a basic understanding of the model's history. The theory is widely recognized and even seen as the foundational framework of cultural studies. The theory was initially introduced in 1980 with four dimensions and later expanded

to six dimensions. (Geert Hofstede 2025.) While Hofstede's model is the most well-known, other notable cultural models exist, such as Trompenaars' cultural dimensions (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1998) and the GLOBE study (2020), as well as Hofstede's model specifically focused on organizational cultures. (Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohavy, & Sanders 1990.)

This thesis primarily relies on Hofstede's national cultural dimension theory due to its extensive validation and widespread acceptance, making it a reliable framework. Additionally, the limited number of dimensions makes interviews practical, ensuring that discussions remain within a one-hour time frame. While the GLOBE project could also have been an option, its 21 dimensions would have significantly expanded the scope of research beyond what is feasible in the given time frame.

Lastly, as Hofstede's theory is already over 45 years old, some may question whether it is still relevant. After all, the world today is vastly different from when it was originally developed, for example, due to the technological changes that have occurred since then. Hofstede acknowledged that culture inevitably changes, but he argued that this change happens very slowly. According to him, the most visible changes are in wealthy countries becoming more individualistic, and the rise of global news coverage has increased anxiety and, consequently, uncertainty avoidance. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 473–474.)

Hofstede explains the slow pace of cultural change by pointing to the core values of a nation, which he sees as the most stable part of culture. These values are typically passed on to children from parents, who in turn learned them from their own parents. Hofstede views technological change as merely affecting the surface level of culture, observing that people continue to use new tools and technologies to express the same core values as previous generations. (Hofstede, 2010, 18–20.)

Despite this and other justified criticisms, the theory has also been shown to remain relevant today. Both the critical and supportive perspectives on Hofstede's work will be discussed within each individual dimension. Nevertheless, the author maintains an open mind when interpreting the findings.

Hofstede's six cultural dimensions are as follows:

Power Distance refers to the degree to which inequality is accepted within a society (Hofstede 2011, 9).

Uncertainty Avoidance measures a nation's tolerance for ambiguity and risk (Hofstede 2011, 10).

Individualism - Collectivism assesses the extent to which a culture values personal independence over group cohesion (Hofstede 2011, 10–11).

Masculinity - Femininity reflects societal value patterns traditionally associated with gender roles. Although this dimension has been criticized as outdated, it remains useful in identifying the degree to which a country adheres to conservative or liberal societal norms. (Hofstede 2011, 11–12.)

Long-Term - Short-Term Orientation was introduced in 1988 through a study with Bond and later refined with Minkov. (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010.) This dimension explores how societies perceive and prioritize time scales in decision-making (Hofstede 2011, 13–15).

Indulgence - Restraint examines the extent to which a culture emphasizes personal enjoyment, freedom, and self-gratification (Hofstede 2011, 15–16).

This thesis will focus on the first five dimensions to structure interview questions and analyse the results. The sixth dimension, Indulgence versus Restraint, was deemed less relevant for addressing the research questions, as it primarily measures subjective well-being. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, 277–278.) Additionally, the differences in score between the relevant countries on this dimension are minor, with a maximum variation of 11 points on a 100-point scale. In contrast, the first five dimensions show more significant variations between Finland and Canada, Switzerland, and Belgium, making them more suitable for comparing cultural differences and potential communication challenges.

Finally, it is essential to recognize that cultural comparisons are always relative. What is perceived as unusual depends on the referenced culture. To Americans, Finns may appear very direct, but from a Finnish perspective, the Dutch may seem direct.

3 HOFSTEDE'S CULTURAL DIMENSIONS IN FINLAND, CANADA, SWITZERLAND, AND BELGIUM

This chapter examines how Hofstede's cultural dimensions influence work life. While the nationality of remote managers does not always align with the country in which they are located, the author and commissioner have agreed to mostly focus on the managers' location, as it is expected to shape the expectations placed on the team and influence its daily practices.

The headquarters in Canada and the office in Switzerland are in French-speaking regions, while the Belgian office is in a Flemish-Dutch-speaking area (BRP 2025d). As Hofstede's framework provides specific scores for these linguistic regions in the dimensions of Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, and Uncertainty Avoidance, the regional scores will be used for these categories. However, for Long-Term Orientation, national-level scores will be applied, as regional data is unavailable.

Each score reflects a country's (or region's) relative position on the cultural dimension in question (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 32–33). These scores typically range from a minimum of zero to a maximum of 100 or above.

3.1 Power Distance

In Hofstede's Power Distance dimension, Finland scores the lowest among the four countries with a score of 33. Canada ranks in the middle at 54, followed by Belgium at 61, while Switzerland has the highest score at 70. In a workplace setting, this dimension reflects the typical hierarchy within the organization, indicating how individuals interact with their supervisors and subordinates. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 57–59.)

The GLOBE study has also examined power distance in its cultural framework, though the results do not fully align with those of Hofstede. According to Hofstede, this discrepancy results from the different focus of the GLOBE study's questions. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 63.) Nevertheless, the GLOBE findings are consistent with Hofstede's ranking for Finland and Canada in this dimension. Additionally, France, which culturally influences both Switzerland and Belgium, is

classified as a high-power distance country, which aligns with Hofstede's region-specific scores to some extent (House et al. 2014, 16–17).

In countries with a flat and more flexible hierarchy, such as Finland, employees are accustomed to approaching people of higher status directly. They may not even realise that such behaviour could be perceived as inappropriate in other cultures. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 60–62.) House et al. (2014) also describe how countries with low power distance tend to distribute power more equally. Coworkers today may become managers tomorrow, and salary differences between job titles are generally lower. Employees expect to be consulted in decision-making, even when the final decisions are made by managers. Leaders are expected to earn their positions based on performance rather than age.

In cultures with high power distance, older individuals are traditionally expected to be given more respect and authority than younger colleagues. Skills and salaries vary more significantly based on title, and organisations often consist of multiple hierarchical levels. Employees tend to expect clear, top-down instructions rather than independent decision-making. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 74–76.) According to the GLOBE study, people in high power-distance countries prefer one-way decision-making processes directed from the top down (House et al. 2014, 11–17).

As the differences in power distance are significant between Finland and countries like Belgium and Switzerland, the framework suggests potential for misunderstandings or friction. For example, a Swiss remote manager might feel uncomfortable if Finnish employees express critical opinions directly or bypass them when seeking guidance. Conversely, Finnish employees may feel excluded from the decision-making process if their remote managers operate in a more hierarchical manner. Of course, these are only potential challenges; the reality may vary and display more flexibility than the framework suggests. Still, the framework highlights relevant differences, which are important to consider for improving intercultural collaboration.

3.2 Individualism versus Collectivism

In the dimension of Individualism versus Collectivism, Finland scores the lowest with a score of 63. Switzerland follows closely with a score of 64, while Canada scores 73. Belgium has the highest score at 78. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 95–97.) A lower score indicates a tendency towards collectivism, whereas a high score implies an inclination toward individualism.

The differences between Finland and Switzerland are insignificant, but the contrast, especially between Finland and Belgium, should be noted. This dimension has also been shown to correlate with other studies, such as research conducted by Smith, Peterson, Swartz, and Koopman (2002, 188–208). Despite some correlations, Brewer and Venaik (2011, 436–445) have questioned whether this dimension should be renamed as Self-Orientation versus Work-Orientation to more accurately reflect Hofstede's original data. Either way, the dimensions remain relevant for the purpose of this thesis.

In collectivist cultures, personal relationships take precedence over tasks. Trustworthiness within the group serves as a proxy for the company's overall reliability. Team members collaborate towards shared goals, and rewards are distributed collectively. Managers in these cultures typically provide feedback privately to avoid causing an individual to lose face or to prevent jealousy within the group. Additionally, companies in collectivist societies tend to hire individuals who fit into the existing team. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 105–123.)

Canada and Belgium both lean strongly towards individualism. In these countries, tasks are prioritized over personal relationships. Employees are hired as individuals and are expected to find internal motivation for their work. Performance is typically rewarded on an individual basis, and feedback is more likely to be given openly, even in front of colleagues, to motivate individuals to work harder. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 105–123.)

Studies have also indicated a link between the Individualism–Collectivism dimension and communication styles: collectivist cultures are often associated with high-context communication, while individualistic cultures tend to favour low-context communication. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 319–320.) In collectivist

societies, protecting group harmony and maintaining shared values foster a communication style that relies heavily on implicit understanding. In these high-context cultures, messages are often conveyed through what is left unsaid or implied, rather than being stated directly. In contrast, low-context communication is more explicit – individuals communicate directly and clearly, leaving little room for ambiguity. (Meyer 2014, 34–44.)

Finnish communication is positioned between high- and low-context but tends to lean towards the latter (Mayer 2014, 39). However, studies have shown mixed results. These variations may arise from differences in organisational culture, or depending on the country used as the comparison baseline. Also, while Finns can be direct, they often avoid uncertainty and aim to maintain group harmony. Therefore, some may soften their messages, particularly if they fear that their words could have negative consequences or disrupt cohesion within the group. In contrast, French, spoken in the company's Canadian headquarters and parts of Switzerland, is a high-context language.

While differences in preferred feedback styles under this dimension may lead to friction between Finnish employees and remote managers, the framework suggests that the greatest potential for misunderstanding lies in their differing communication styles. If Finnish employees fail to recognize that certain messages are conveyed implicitly rather than explicitly, they may perceive their managers as vague or even misinterpret the intended feedback. Conversely, a manager may interpret the Finnish communication style as overly direct and blunt.

3.3 Masculinity versus Femininity

In the Masculinity versus Femininity dimension, Finland scores the lowest with only 26 points, followed by Canada with 45 and Switzerland with 58. Belgium has the highest score among the four countries at 60. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 141–143.) A low score represents high femininity, while a high score indicates high masculinity. According to Hofstede, countries tend to display one dominant tendency, even though individuals within a country may exhibit both mas-

culine and feminine traits. In a workplace setting, this dimension highlights cultural norms related to emotional expression, self-promotion, and approaches to conflict resolution.

Although Hofstede refers to earlier studies supporting this dimension, Minkov and Michael (2017) concluded that the original basis of the masculinity index did not hold up under further scrutiny. Also, according to Hofstede, countries with strong masculine tendencies often oversell their achievements and skills, ensuring that their successes are visible. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 160–162.) It is important to note, however, that many of the studies referenced by Hofstede are over 30 years old, potentially limiting their relevance today. Still, as the dimension continues to be widely used in research, it offers a useful framework for identifying cultural differences, such as attitudes towards self-promotion that may not be captured by other dimensions.

More masculine cultures tend to emphasize visible achievement and skill, often adopting a “live to work” mindset. Conflicts in the workplace are more likely to be approached head-on, with success defined by the strength of the argument. A strong emotional tone of expression is also considered normal. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 161–167.) In contrast, feminine cultures like Finland generally avoid self-promotion, adopt a “work to live” attitude, and prefer to resolve workplace conflicts through compromise and negotiation. Communication in feminine cultures tends to be calm and neutral, with limited emotional expression to prevent conflict. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 166–167.)

The framework suggests that several aspects of this dimension could potentially cause issues. For example, the difference in emotional expressiveness may surprise or cause discomfort in Finnish employees. Differences in attitudes towards work could also lead to tension if expectations around the importance of work are misaligned. Moreover, Finnish employees may understate their achievements, leading to their contributions being overlooked. This, in turn, could result in frustration if they feel that their skills are not being recognized.

3.4 Uncertainty Avoidance

In the dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance, Finland scores 59 and Canada 60, both falling within the mid-range. Switzerland follows closely with a score of 70, while Belgium scores the highest among the countries with 97. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 192–194.) The higher the score, the less uncertainty is tolerated, and individuals exhibit greater levels of anxiety, with a stronger emotional need for predetermined rules and structures in the workplace.

While Hofstede has cited other studies supporting this dimension (2001, 196, 198–199), the GLOBE study's attempt to measure uncertainty avoidance produced findings that negatively correlated with Hofstede's. A separate study concluded that although both models offer useful insights into uncertainty avoidance, they measure distinct aspects of it (Brewer 2010, 1294–1315). Therefore, this thesis focuses solely on Hofstede's dimension to keep the analysis concise and manageable.

In countries with strong uncertainty avoidance, work environments tend to be highly structured, with numerous laws and regulations governing the actions of both employees and employers. Individuals in these cultures are accustomed to following clear structures in all situations and typically view such rules as necessary for emotional security. They also tend to work diligently and maintain a visibly busy appearance. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 203–210.)

By contrast, countries with low uncertainty avoidance may find rigid structures and rules unnecessary, time-consuming, and emotionally draining. These cultures prefer fewer rules, applied only when necessary. Their approach to work is also more relaxed: while they can work hard when needed, they place value on rest and downtime. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 208–210.)

The framework suggests that the large difference between Finland and Belgium could potentially present challenges. Belgians may feel anxious about the Finnish more relaxed work approach due to not knowing precisely what their Finnish subordinates are doing. Conversely, Finnish employees may feel frustrated by the number of rules or the degree of reassurance they are expected to provide. These

kinds of situations could further widen the cultural gap between the countries. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 210.)

3.5 Long-Term Orientation versus Short-Term Orientation

In the Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation dimensions, Canada scored the lowest with 36 points, followed closely by Finland with 33 points. Switzerland ranks high at 74 points, while Belgium scores the highest at 82. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 255–258.) A high score indicates long-term orientation, whereas a low score reflects short-term orientation. In workplace settings, this dimension reveals whether employees are more likely to pursue short- or long-term goals and how much importance they place on work-life balance. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, 251.)

Although this dimension has shown positive correlations with other studies, the GLOBE Project's version, called "Future Orientation", did not align strongly with either Hofstede's or Misho's findings. It did, however, correlate with Hofstede's combination dimension of Long-Term Orientation and Power Distance (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, 259–260). This suggests that the GLOBE study may have approached the topic from a different angle, which could explain the weaker correlation in this specific area. A study by Minkov and Michael (2017) concluded that Hofstede's dimension remains relevant but noted that the original scope of Hofstede's work was limited by its national-level focus. They proposed renaming the dimension "Flexibility-Monumentalism" to better capture its emphasis on adaptability over time.

Countries with long-term orientation, such as Belgium, emphasize continuous learning, adaptability, and self-discipline, placing significantly less importance on leisure time. Long-term goals are prioritized, and individuals work hard to achieve them. Plans for the future are often detailed and carefully conducted over a longer time. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, 251.) In contrast, countries with short-term orientation, such as Finland, place value on work-life balance and personal freedom. Individuals are more motivated by short-term goals, and future plans are typically less detailed and made for shorter time frames. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, 251.)

This framework suggests that differing core values around work-life balance and goal setting could create challenges, particularly between Finland and Belgium. For example, Belgians, who place less emphasis on leisure time, might expect Finnish employees to prioritize work more. Meanwhile, Finns may outline a project plan they consider sufficient, while a manager from a long-term oriented culture might find it lacking in detail.

4 CROSS-CULTURAL SKILLS

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the cultural gap between Finland and Canada, Switzerland, and Belgium can be significant. To bridge this gap, cross-cultural skills are essential. However, simply being in an international environment does not automatically enhance one's cross-cultural competence. Developing such skills requires conscious effort, as personal growth in this area often involves stepping outside one's comfort zone. (Trompenaars, Berardo, Deardorff & Trompenaars 2012, 1–4; Sanford 1966; Bennett 2008.)

Although leaders are responsible for setting an example by demonstrating respect for others and providing guidance on overcoming cultural differences, effective communication is not solely dependent on a manager's cross-cultural skills—it requires effort from both parties. (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 256–264.) This is particularly relevant in remote work environments, where most communication takes place through online tools, making it more challenging to interpret facial expressions and vocal tones (Ferreira, Pereira, Bianchi & da Silva 2021).

While multicultural teams have the potential to enhance innovation, poor management of cultural differences can negatively impact team effectiveness (Adler 1997). Although many studies on this topic are older and have certain limitations in scope, research consistently highlights the importance of strong cross-cultural skills on both sides to improve communication and collaboration.

This chapter outlines the optimal conditions for developing cross-cultural competencies and the initial steps required to foster them. These insights will form the basis for the recommendations presented later, which are grounded in the interview findings.

4.1 Learning conditions for cross-cultural skills

Cross-cultural competencies can be learned and developed. These skills help individuals navigate new environments by reducing stress and increasing their sense of safety, especially in ambiguous situations. This, in turn, helps them adapt to their surroundings, enabling smoother communication and interaction.

Still, developing these skills requires a certain degree of risk-taking. Studies have shown that individuals are more willing to take risks or try new things when under short-term stress (Byrne et al. 2020). Therefore, stepping outside one's comfort zone – although stressful – can contribute to the development of cultural competence.

However, long-term stress can hinder and reduce people's willingness to change their behaviour (Hartney 2006, 12–13). This is particularly problematic in multicultural environments, where self-reflection, behavioural adaptation, and cultural flexibility are key.

The greatest factor influencing how much stress a person feels in a given situation is their own attitude towards it (Hartney 2006, 24–27). This suggests that by being aware of cultural differences and approaching them with curiosity, individuals can limit perceived stress in unfamiliar situations. Anticipating challenges can make them feel less threatening and increase the potential for learning. When individuals are able to manage their stress and feel successful in dealing with cross-cultural situations, it boosts their self-confidence and promotes mental well-being. (Colan & Kawamura 2015, 43.)

4.2 Steps to develop cross-cultural skills

Schwartz's (2012) study of a sample of 67 countries suggests that people share basic values related to biological, social, and welfare needs, both as individuals and as members of a group. While recognizing similarities between diverse cultures is valuable, even slight differences can lead to misunderstandings and difficulties between individuals. (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 49.) Since each person's cultural background shapes their values and assumptions about what is good and how things should be done, individuals may be surprised to realize how differently other cultures approach the same issues. A lack of awareness of these differences can become a source of problems when working in multicultural teams.

Depending on an individual's level of cross-cultural competencies, their behaviour can be either constructive or destructive. (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 18; Cross, Bazron, Dennis & Isaacs 1989, 13–17.) For example, a person lacking cross-cultural skills may become trapped by their own perceptions, unable to see

others as they truly are or to understand different cultural perspectives. As each culture operates according to its own internal logic, which shapes common behaviours and expectations, this can easily lead to misinterpretations. Developing cultural competence typically requires adjusting aspects of one's own behaviour, which demands humility, honesty, and courage. (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 49.) This is where self-awareness and an open mind support more effective interaction (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 46–47).

The first step in developing cross-cultural skills is to become aware of one's own cultural background, values, and biases. This awareness helps individuals understand why they may feel irritated when their own norms are challenged, which supports better emotional regulation and reflection on personal behaviour. (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 135–142; Glazer 2016.) However, change is not trivial, as people repeat habitual behaviours thousands of times in their everyday lives. Developing cross-cultural competence, therefore, requires both a willingness to change and practice in becoming comfortable with doing things differently. (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 43–44.)

Secondly, communication patterns familiar within one's own culture shape expectations for social interactions (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 115; Hall 1960.) Someone who has only experienced one cultural context may be unaware of alternative communication styles. For example, in some Asian cultures, a direct message might be so confronting that they are unable to process it and instead ignore it entirely, while a Western person may miss a strongly implied but indirect "no." This highlights the need to understand high- and low-context communication. Additionally, many cultural elements are not immediately visible; attentive listening is key to uncovering underlying values. (Trompenaars, Berardo, Deardorff & Trompenaars 2012, 119–123.)

Lastly, attitude plays a significant role. Being open-minded and respectful despite personal differences and showing empathy towards others supports effective communication. Curiosity fosters dialogue and connection, while a sense of humour, especially about oneself, can help navigate ambiguous situations. (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 43–44.) Empathy and an effort to see the world from another

person's perspective are essential to adapting and finding common ground. (Trompenaars, Berardo, Deardorff & Trompenaars 2012, 98–100.)

As highlighted, cultural awareness can be developed through active learning to observe and appreciate both similarities and differences. This approach encourages individuals to notice cultural dynamics and apply their awareness in actions and decisions. (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 73; Lynch & Hanson 1992.) It also supports understanding of how one's behaviour may be interpreted by people from other cultures. (Trompenaars, Berardo, Deardorff & Trompenaars 2012, 174-178.) Ultimately, developing cross-cultural skills enhances the ability to correctly interpret unfamiliar cultures and their people (Dolan & Kawamura 2015, 43; Mendenhall & Oddou 1985).

4.3 Context-communication and cross-cultural skills

The previous chapters explored communication in terms of directness and emotional expression. However, context-communication goes deeper, referring to the implicit knowledge and shared assumptions that people within a culture use to interpret meaning. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 2012, 111.) The concept of context in communication became widely known through the work of Hall and his colleagues between the 1950s and 1990s.

While Hall's theory of communication context broadly describes communication as synonymous with culture itself (Hall & Hall 1987, 3; Hornikx & Le Pair 2017), this thesis focuses on a more specific aspect within low- and high-context communication: the shared contextual understanding in interpersonal interactions. This includes culturally shaped expectations around small talk, the purpose of meetings, and appropriate ways to say "no", as they have a strong impact on work life.

Individuals from low-context cultures typically avoid small talk and get straight to the point, whereas high-context cultures often place greater value on relationships, which leads to more small talk and an emphasis on building personal rapport before addressing business topics. This difference is also evident in meeting

practices: while low-context communicators tend to prioritize efficiency and decision-making, high-context communicators may seek group consensus or wait for a leader to announce their decision on a topic. (Mehra 2014, 21–22, 25.)

The contrast between directness and indirectness is especially apparent in how people say “no”. In low-context cultures, people are often clear and direct, saying “yes” when they agree and “no” when they do not. In high-context cultures, disagreement is often communicated indirectly, using polite expressions such as “We appreciate the efforts you have put into this. Let me consider the idea.” These responses are designed to “save face” and maintain harmony in the relationship. (Mehra 2014, 24.) When interacting with high-context communicators, it is important to focus not only on what is said, but also on what is meant. As Meyer (2014, 50) explains, understanding implied meaning is essential with this kind of interaction.

Without awareness of these cultural differences, individuals may easily become frustrated or misinterpret one another. Low-context communicators may perceive indirect responses as evasive, while high-context communicators may view directness as insensitive. Such misunderstandings can lead to confusion and strained relationships (Meyer 2014, 51–52; Mehra 2014, 22.)

By adopting a cross-cultural mindset and learning about different communication styles, individuals can better interpret key messages, respond appropriately, and build stronger interpersonal relationships. It is not enough to communicate clearly and simply – effective cross-cultural communication also requires sensitivity to other potential needs, such as relationship-building. Whether the goal is to establish rapport or reach a quick decision, understanding these cultural dynamics helps both parties achieve more productive and meaningful outcomes by enhancing communication and collaboration between the parties.

5 RESEARCH METHODS

The research methods used in the thesis were carefully selected to support answering the research questions. The thesis employs a qualitative case study approach, and the data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The transcribed interviews were then analysed thematically. This chapter introduces the research methods in detail, explaining why they were chosen and how they were used throughout the process.

5.1 Qualitative case study

The research questions were developed based on the commissioner's needs, which focused on cultural differences and cross-cultural competencies. The core aim was to find out whether there are cultural differences between Finnish employees and their remote managers from Canada, Belgium, and Switzerland, and how these possible differences would affect their communication and collaboration.

Answering these questions required understanding what culture and communication are, and how they affect working habits in the selected countries. While culture is shared, it is personally experienced. As the focus was on people's experiences, behaviours, and perspectives in depth, qualitative research was chosen as the most fitting option, based on Creswell's (2014) study. While a quantitative approach could have been used, relying solely on numerical data would have risked overlooking important insights into workplace dynamics and communication. A qualitative approach allows for deeper exploration through individual interviews, making it more suitable for addressing the research questions. It is also recommended for situations where little is known about the topic prior to the research. (Gahuri 2004, 7–8.) This was relevant for the study since it was the first time this topic was researched at the commissioner company.

As the study aims to understand the current situation of Finnish employees with remote managers at the commissioner company, a case study was recommended to explain situations (Gahuri 2004, 16–25). A case study method also

ensures that the findings reflect the specific context of the commissioner company, rather than generalizing the findings too broadly. For example, the commissioner's organisational culture influences the results, and since only the company has that specific culture, the findings cannot be generalised for use in other companies without adjustments. This also allows for the creation of suggestions that are the best suited to this particular case. The case study method is also mentioned as being appropriate for research that aims to answer questions such as "How should [something to be done]?" and when dealing with real-life phenomena. (Yasir, Ammar, Muhammad, Sana 2019.) This approach allowed the study to focus on individual interactions, further supporting its use.

To identify and compare cultural differences between Finnish employees and remote managers, Hofstede's cultural dimension theory was selected as the theoretical framework. While other frameworks exist, Hofstede's model was chosen due to its well-tested and structured approach, which aligns with the study's objectives. It also includes a limited number of dimensions, which facilitates keeping the research scope manageable.

5.2 Semi-structured interviews

Initially, the author considered using surveys to collect data from a large group of potential participants, but realised that this approach would not provide the depth needed to sufficiently understand the current situation. Semi-structured interviews are recommended for case studies, as they allow interviewees to express their own perspectives. Therefore, the author chose to conduct one-hour, semi-structured interviews, which offered flexibility to follow up on interesting or unexpected points raised by the interviewees. (Gahuri 2004, 40.) This method has also been cited as an effective way to ensure that all necessary data on each topic is collected (Bryman 2016, 10).

A semi-structured interview means that the interviewer prepares a set of questions in advance. During the interview, if the interviewees say something relevant or particularly interesting, the interviewer can explore the topic further with follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding of the situation. (Gahuri 2004, 40–41.)

The interview questions were designed in accordance with Hofstede's cultural dimensions, with a particular focus on workplace interactions and challenges. Research ethics were carefully considered in the design of the interview to ensure that participants felt comfortable and able to speak openly. This was also one of the reasons the author chose to conduct the interviews individually rather than in a group setting.

As the quality of interview data also depends on the selection of participants (Gahuri 2004, 40), the interviewees were selected in collaboration with the commissioner company's Human Resources manager. This allowed the author to quickly identify employees who had a remote manager from one of the relevant countries and to ensure a relatively balanced group of participants. Based on this information, the author then contacted potential interviewees independently via email, introducing the interview agenda and asking whether they would be willing to participate. One interviewee approached the author independently, and otherwise, nearly all contacted potential participants responded positively within a few hours to two days. The interviews were organized based on the schedule of the interviewees, usually within a week of initial response.

The author interviewed six Finnish employees and three remote managers. While the interview structure was mostly identical for both groups, the questions were slightly adjusted to fit their respective roles. The interviews were conducted between mid-February and early March 2025 via Google Meet, which is a reliable tool made available by the commissioner for the process. At the beginning of each interview, the author introduced themselves, explained their background, outlined the basic idea of the thesis, and described the purpose of the interview. All interviewees were informed of their rights to refuse to be recorded or to withdraw their participation, even retroactively, until the beginning of April.

The interview questions were not provided to participants in advance, as the author aimed to obtain the most authentic and spontaneous responses possible. While this approach was likely appropriate, it is possible that some insights were missed, simply because certain thoughts may not have occurred to the interviewee during the interview.

Each interview was planned to last at most one hour. The author monitored the time spent on each dimension to ensure that all key questions were covered while still allowing time to follow interesting leads. All interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. A more structured interview format could have allowed for shorter sessions or the inclusion of multiple cultural frameworks while staying within the time limit. At the same time, some relevant information would not have been obtained other than in semi-structured interviews.

All interviewees permitted the interviews to be recorded. The interviews conducted in English were transcribed using Google Meet's built-in transcription tool. However, since this feature was not available for Finnish-language interviews, Microsoft Word's transcription tool was used instead. All of the transcripts were manually reviewed and corrected, as recommended by Widodo (2014). This way, the author was able to ensure accuracy, especially in Finnish interviews, where dialects posed challenges for automated transcription.

The transcription process was done within two days of a recording to keep the workload per interview manageable. Transcription was completed by the end of March. The author removed parts of the recordings that were considered irrelevant to the results, typically the introductory section, the explanation of interviewees' rights, and closing remarks. The final number of transcript pages analysed was 185.

5.3 Thematic analysis

As the interview questions contained clear themes, the author chose to use thematic analysis for data interpretation. Thematic analysis is also particularly well-suited for handling large volumes of data (Braun & Clarke 2006). This approach provides tools to identify patterns and deeper meanings within qualitative data. It is also useful for uncovering contradictions in responses. For instance, a Finnish employee might state that they do not feel pressured to work overtime at all, yet later responses may reveal subtle expectations to work beyond contractual hours. This became especially relevant after a couple of interviews, when the author noticed discrepancies between participants' perceptions and the actual

realities they described. These emerging contradictions motivated the author to explore these themes further.

In thematic analysis, it is essential to become familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). After completing the interviews, the author listened to each recording multiple times, carefully corrected the transcripts, and read through each transcript several more times to ensure no important details were overlooked. To conduct the analysis, the author used a software tool called Taguette. This tool was selected for its user-friendly interface and local functionality, as it runs entirely on the user's PC and does not require internet access. Since each interview question was linked to a specific Hofstede's cultural dimension or a sub-question of the research, the initial labelling (coding) process was relatively efficient.

First, the author coded the transcripts using descriptive and meaningful labels. These labels were then reviewed for recurring patterns to identify commonalities across participants' responses. The patterns were further analysed to determine overarching themes and their connection to the theoretical framework. This process followed the typical steps of thematic analysis. (Bacon-Shone 2022.)

The analysis was completed in late March 2025. It resulted in the identification of nine main categories, which are presented in the next chapter, along with recommendations for the commissioner based on the most essential findings. In addition, the author created a company-exclusive guidebook, primarily intended for Finnish employees who work with remote managers in the three selected countries.

6 RESULTS

The key findings can be summarized as follows: The Finnish tendency toward low hierarchy, combined with a rather direct, low-context communication style, can be unusual for individuals from countries with higher hierarchical structures. This cultural difference can cause confusion and misunderstandings. Although major issues have mostly been avoided so far, there is a clear potential for misunderstandings, and it is recommended that this be proactively addressed to prevent future challenges.

Finns may also misinterpret indirect, high-context communication, leading to situations where they do not fully grasp the significance of the feedback they receive. This can result in mutual frustration. Furthermore, Finnish employees are generally not accustomed to promoting themselves and tend to rely on their work to “speak for itself.” As a result, they may miss valuable opportunities or inadvertently signal to their managers that they are not interested in career advancement.

Coupled with a higher degree of uncertainty avoidance, particularly a reluctance to engage in unfamiliar or uncertain situations, Finns may spend excessive time trying to solve problems independently that could be more efficiently resolved through collaboration.

Stronger emotional expressions may also be perceived by Finns as aggressive, which may lead to non-urgent, though important, issues being left unspoken. In addition, some Finns may view the strong work-focused attitudes prevalent in certain other cultures as “outdated”, although these perceptions may simply reflect differences in national values rather than judgements about modernity.

Overall, the findings were organized into nine main categories, each containing multiple related themes. A detailed description of all findings is presented below.

6.1 Background

The interviewees’ professional backgrounds highlighted five main themes: Previous International Experience, Current Global Teams, Role of Canada, Managers’ Backgrounds, and Role of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Firstly, the employee's previous experience varied significantly. While a few interviewees had a long history of working in international environments, some joined an international team for the first time. Most of the Finnish employees had no prior education in cross-cultural skills. Some reported having occasional international interactions in their earlier Finnish teams, but others had not previously used English as a work language. Many Finns applied for their current international roles because they were encouraged by team members to apply. Overall, the Finns interviewed expressed satisfaction about working in international teams, even though some had heard concerns beforehand that such roles could involve less autonomy and a heavier workload.

The second theme concerned the composition of current global teams. Most teams shared similar characteristics: all the Finnish employees worked in international teams made up of members from multiple nationalities. As the commissioner company in Finland is dominated by Finnish employees, this represented a substantial change for many. Often, they were the only Finn in the team, although there were some exceptions. While the teams had designated operating locations, where some employees and a manager were located, many team members worked fully remotely. As a result, all important meetings offered options for remote participation. Most communication within the teams happened through emails, chats or video calls.

Thirdly, almost all Finnish employees mentioned frequent interactions with Canada, even when their manager was not located there. English was reported as the main working language, but some teams also occasionally used French, which, in some cases, caused frustration among the Finnish employees.

Fourthly, the interviewed managers had several things in common. All of them had lengthy experience of working at BRP, some for over 15 years. It was also not uncommon that the manager had a diverse background or was located in a different country from their nationality. The study hinted that a manager's cultural background may be a stronger influence on their communication style than their current location. However, in some cases, local culture also had a strong impact on ways of operating, such as in the Flemish area of Belgium.

All remote managers showed a clear awareness of cultural differences and demonstrated good cross-cultural understanding. They mentioned how managing multicultural teams had given them perspective and allowed them to compare Finnish behaviour with that of other nationalities. They also described efforts to adapt their own management style to better connect with their subordinates.

Finally, both employee and manager groups reported the impact of COVID-19. As many had transitioned to remote work during the pandemic, the workforce became even more internationally diverse. At the same time, the tools for remote collaboration improved significantly. One downside however, was that face-to-face meetings decreased, which, for some employees, increased feelings of isolation and loneliness.

6.2 Power Distance

According to Hofstede's framework, Finland exhibits a low level of Power Distance, especially in comparison to the other countries examined. Based on this, it was expected that Finns would demonstrate low-hierarchy tendencies and prefer to participate in decision-making processes. The findings supported this expectation and revealed three main themes: Giving Feedback to Managers, Hierarchy in Teams, and Decision Making.

Firstly, all Finnish interviewees reported that giving feedback to their remote managers was easy, with an average score of 9,8 when asked to give a rating from 1 to 10. The few lower scores were primarily attributed to physical distance or the general difficulty of giving negative feedback, rather than issues related to hierarchy. When asked how well their remote managers received feedback, some respondents noted that both they and their remote managers communicated directly, making feedback easy to give and receive. Others mentioned that feedback occasionally led to further discussions, but overall, managers reacted positively.

Secondly, hierarchy emerged as a significant theme. The findings demonstrated clear low-hierarchy behaviour among Finnish employees: they gave feedback freely, expressed their opinions openly, and interacted with colleagues at all lev-

els without hesitation. Although the author initially expected that this might present challenges for managers from more hierarchical cultures, none of the managers interviewed reported it as problematic. However, Finnish employees themselves observed that some teams operated with stronger hierarchical structures than what they were accustomed to in Finland. In cases where a Finn bypassed a colleague in a higher position, tensions occasionally arose. Finns had mostly recognized these cultural differences on their own and adjusted their behaviour to avoid further conflicts.

The third theme concerned decision-making. Hofstede's model suggests that employees from low Power Distance cultures, such as Finland, expect to be involved in decisions beyond their immediate tasks. Since the three other countries examined generally scored higher in Power Distance, it was anticipated that there would be less employee involvement in broader decision-making. The findings partially confirmed this: while managers reported involving employees in decision-making, many Finns felt excluded from broader decision-making processes.

Further analysis revealed a difference in how "decision-making" was understood. Finns often expect to be included in decisions beyond their own scope of work, such as choices regarding tools, work methods, and team-wide processes. Managers, by contrast, typically referred to decisions directly related to individual job responsibilities. This discrepancy reflects cultural views: in high Power Distance cultures, broad decision-making is often considered outside the employee's role.

Although this mismatch was mostly noticed by Finns, the resulting frustration was relatively mild, and most employees accepted the situation. Nevertheless, clarifying expectations around decision-making could further strengthen collaboration between Finns and their remote managers.

6.3 Individualism versus Collectivism

According to Hofstede's framework, Finland had the lowest Individualism–Collectivism score among the four countries, with 63 points. This led to the expectation that, while the most collectivist of the studied countries, Finns would still lean rather toward individualism and exhibit low-context communication. It was also anticipated that the trend toward individualism would be even stronger in the other

countries. However, the results for this dimension were somewhat surprising. For this category, the analysis produced two main themes: Preference for Receiving Feedback and Teamwork.

While individualistic countries typically prefer receiving feedback in front of others, the findings revealed a different pattern. Although all the Finnish employees appreciated receiving feedback and recognition for their work, they preferred it to occur in one-to-one meetings. Receiving praise in front of a large group often felt uncomfortable. Although Finland's score on the individualism-collectivism scale leaned toward individualism, this finding aligns more closely with the norm of collectivist cultures, where public praise can sometimes lead to jealousy or other conflicts.

The remote managers, originating from more individualistic countries, may not have been fully aware of the Finnish preference for receiving feedback. Nevertheless, they also preferred to provide feedback mostly during one-to-one meetings, typically on a weekly or monthly basis. Therefore, potential cultural differences in this area had not caused any noticeable friction.

The second main theme highlighted teamwork, where Finns also appeared to lean slightly more toward collectivism. Although many employees worked independently, they still felt that remote teams placed even greater emphasis on individual success, whereas in Finland, the focus was more strongly on team success. One interviewee described this as follows: "It feels like in Finland, a team becomes more like a close-knit group that is working and moving forward together. However, here people are working individually. When work is done alone, the mistakes feel bigger on a personal level, and even the wins seem less valuable."

Finns seemed to place greater emphasis on sharing skills and knowledge to support the overall success of the team. The importance placed on the team was also noted by some remote managers. They observed that Finns often overlooked potential cultural differences within their teams that could otherwise have led to conflicts. Instead, Finnish employees appeared to prioritize maintaining harmony within the groups. One manager commented: "It seems like they have all chosen not to go that way [get irritated by the difference]." This observation

further supports the finding that teamwork was strongly emphasized by the Finnish employees.

Interestingly, the behaviour of the remote managers was also somewhat contrary to expectations based on the framework. They appeared to place more emphasis on team spirit than the model would predict. Managers actively fostered a strong sense of team cohesion and sought to create psychologically safe environments where open discussions could take place. While this behaviour did not entirely align with Hofstede's framework, it makes sense in a managerial role, where ensuring smooth collaboration and minimizing conflicts among subordinates are essential responsibilities. Some managers even demonstrated a willingness to go to great lengths to build trust and strong communication within their teams. As one manager described: "But you're going to have to give something. Without anything in return. Then there is a great connection there. No matter where you are, no matter the language, no matter the country, because really, you have a trustworthy group of people."

While some small cultural challenges were identified within this category, they did not cause significant issues for collaboration. The managers' strong efforts to maintain a positive team spirit likely played a key role in this. In the future, simply being aware of the existing cultural differences may further help bridge any remaining gaps.

6.4 Communication

The analysis found that Finland exhibited a strong tendency towards a low-context communication style, which was noted by both, Finnish participants and remote managers. This was likely further reinforced by the Finnish cultural norm of low hierarchy. The category of communication produced four main themes: Low-Context Communication, Email Communication, Directness Towards Upper Management, and Reactions to Feedback.

While Finns generally did not feel the need to read between the lines in conversations, some noted that they occasionally had to clarify meaning: "So, do you want me to do this, or what do you mean?" Two possible reasons emerged for this. First, remote managers from other cultures may have been more talkative,

causing the main request to become buried within a wordier explanation. Second, the differences between low- and high-context communication styles may not have been immediately apparent to the Finnish employees, as they were accustomed to an explicit communication style, and may therefore have overlooked the main request.

Remote managers noted that, while Northern Europeans in general tend to be more direct than others, “Finns take this a step further”. Several Finns even reported that they found people from other cultures to be “lacking directness.” Even though some managers were not initially accustomed to such directness, they ultimately found it beneficial when interacting with Finnish team members. As one remote manager explained: “With other team members, sometimes I have the feeling that when you say something [you mean something else]. But yes, with a Finn, I know when something is not going well or they are not in a good mood, I can tell it directly.”

Open communication was seen as particularly valuable in remote work settings, where unaddressed issues could escalate quickly. It appears that Finnish directness contributed to a stronger sense of mutual trust between remote managers and their Finnish employees.

However, this strong directness also presented challenges. One Finnish participant mentioned that they initially communicated as directly as they would in Finland. Later, they realized that if they were too blunt, their message was sometimes dismissed as too harsh. However, when they softened their wording, their message was taken more seriously: “Then I saw that if the message was slightly softened, it might be taken immediately with courage to approach. But if the message is too harsh, its edges need to be smoothed out before being able to discuss it further.”

Remote managers also found Finnish meetings somewhat perplexing. In contrast to many other nationalities who are naturally more talkative, Finns appeared comfortable with silence, even in work-related meetings. While a Finnish team might regard a 30-second pause in a meeting as completely normal, a remote manager could find these silences unsettling, potentially interpreting them as a sign of trouble or confusion.

The second theme concerned email communication. This appeared to be an area where Finnish directness could lead to misunderstandings. Due to cultural differences in communication styles, a direct email from a Finn might come across as impolite or blunt to someone from a different cultural background. This could result in conflicts, as recipients would interpret the message based on their own cultural norms.

One participant described Finnish emails as following a basic format: “We [Finns] write messages in the format of an introduction, topic, thanks, and bye.” Some Finns had received feedback that adjusting their tone and enhancing politeness and including small talk could be beneficial for getting their point across more effectively. However, not all participants fully agree with the necessity of this adjustment. This was also noted by a remote manager: “During soft skill training, the Finns may not have fully understood what we were practising.” This suggests that Finns tend to move quickly to the central topic, whereas some other cultures expect more time spent on building a personal connection before discussing the main topic.

The third theme was directness towards upper management, where misunderstandings can sometimes occur. While a Finn’s immediate team and direct manager may have learned to understand their communication style, this was not necessarily the case for those less familiar with Finnish norms. As one interviewee described: [After a Finn gave direct negative feedback in a meeting to a higher-up] – “I noticed that they did not take it the same way [as me]. Having worked with [a Finn] for many years, I understood that it was not personal, only business-related, but I could see that they were not used to someone being that direct to them.” This could lead to misunderstandings where a Finn could be perceived as insensitive.

The fourth and final theme was receiving feedback. This aspect particularly stood out to some remote managers. Finns were observed to challenge their managers’ feedback, including positive feedback. As one manager put it: “They are direct in the sense that they openly challenge feedback, even when it is positive. It is usually well received, but when the feedback is less positive, they may question it more, engaging in a back-and-forth discussion.” This behaviour suggests that

Finland’s low-context communication style, combined with its low-hierarchy work culture, influences how Finns respond to feedback.

As the findings suggest, cross-cultural communication is not straightforward. Differences in communication context strongly affect both oral and written communication and shape whether communication is more task- or relationship-focused. These findings highlight the importance of investing in cross-cultural communication skills, particularly in remote and international settings.

6.5 Masculinity versus Femininity

According to the framework, Finland was expected to exhibit more feminine characteristics in this dimension – an expectation that the analysis confirmed. The analysis produced five main themes within this category: Language Barriers, Emotional Output, Conflict Resolution, Self-Promotion, and Position of French Canada in Hofstede’s Framework.

Firstly, Finns frequently mentioned that in some meetings, small talk was conducted exclusively in French, even when team members who did not speak French were present. This may be linked to a more masculine attitude, where individuals assume it is each person’s responsibility to make efforts to include themselves, i.e., to learn French rather than expecting everyone to speak English. From a Finnish, more feminine and collectivist perspective, this was sometimes perceived as inconsiderate. These occurrences were present in all three countries, creating barriers for collaboration.

Another key finding is related to emotional output. In more feminine cultures, such as Finland, it is usually preferable to stay calm and aim for emotional balance. In more masculine cultures, on the other hand, it is common to express emotions more openly and strongly, engaging in intense discussions on various topics. Finnish employees may perceive these stronger emotional expressions as a form of aggression: “Sometimes their speech speeds up, and in certain situations, you can sense a bit of heightened energy. It’s not exactly the same, but when a situation arises that sparks discussion, their conversations tend to take on more of a debate-like tone.”

As a result, Finns may avoid raising certain issues to prevent uncomfortable situations. This concern was mentioned only by the Finns and not reflected in the perspectives of remote managers. While this cultural difference was not said to have caused notable issues, it could lead to missed valuable discussions.

The third theme was conflict resolution. While some Finns reported occasional conflicts within their teams: “We have a large, truly international team, so tensions can easily arise. Even though our team is close-knit and works well together, the conflicts are not internal but rather directed elsewhere.” Most Finns had not observed conflicts within their teams.

Similarly, remote managers had encountered only a few issues within their teams and reported that the teamwork had mostly been smooth. When the remote managers were asked how they handled conflicts, they all described situations in which they tried to speak with both parties and help them understand each other’s perspectives. All of them agreed that conflicts most often stemmed from personal stress or misunderstandings, which could be resolved by mutual understanding: “But I think the important thing is to sit down with the people involved, try to understand one person’s perspective and why this friction has started, and then hear the other person’s point of view.” And “I believe that, in many cases, conflicts – at least in my view – are simply due to misinterpretations or misunderstandings.” This type of conflict solving is closer to more feminine cultures, aligning well with how Finns are accustomed to resolving conflicts in workplaces.

The fourth key finding is related to self-promotion. The analysis highlighted that Finns tend to underpromote themselves. It was also noted that Finns tend to focus more on their shortcomings than on their achievements. Additionally, they may operate under the assumption that “someone will recognize my hard work” without actively promoting themselves, which in an international setting, may mean that their contributions go unnoticed. As a result, some Finns could have missed out on career opportunities: “We have a lot of talented people here in Finland, but since Finns are generally not as outspoken as Americans or Canadians, who tend to promote themselves more, I believe we’ve missed many opportunities. The positions often go to those who are able to communicate well.”

Finally, the results raised many questions regarding Canada's position on this dimension. For example, the high self-promotion tendencies suggest that Canada may be more masculine than the framework had initially indicated. The author later observed that Canadian behaviour aligned much more closely with French or American behaviour across several dimensions.

While this category reveals many cultural differences, the most urgent one that would have the strongest impact on the Finns' communication would be addressing the lack of self-promotion. Additionally, understanding the differences in emotional output could potentially encourage Finns to bring up all the important matters on their minds. It would also be advantageous for Finnish employees and the human resource department to regularly remind remote teams of the designated working language.

6.6 Uncertainty Avoidance

Although Finland had the lowest score among the four countries in this dimension, it still leaned towards above-average levels of uncertainty avoidance. This tendency was also confirmed by the research findings, as all of the Finnish participants reported being hesitant to act in uncertain situations. The analysis identified three key themes within this category: Unclear Situations, Managers' Uncertainty, and The Amount of Information.

Unclear situations emerged as a major theme that significantly shapes how Finns behave in work life. All of the Finnish participants reported that they would immediately seek clarification if instructions were unclear in any way: "I don't like to walk on the grey area. It's much easier when things are black and while. [If so,] It's easier to come back to it [the topic] later on."

Remote managers also observed that Finns often avoided tasks they felt uncertain about. While Finnish employees did ask for clarification in unclear situations, remote managers noted that they tended to ask fewer questions than employees from other cultures. When a Finn does ask a question, it is often complex, indicating that they have already attempted to resolve the issue independently: "The people in Finland are not going to come up with random questions, without first trying to find information on their own. When they can't find the solution, that's

when they'll ask, but they make the effort 100%." And: "I can tell you, when a question comes from a Finnish person, be ready. It might not be as easy to find information or give an immediate answer." While this behaviour was not viewed negatively, some managers noted that it could sometimes be more efficient to take the risk and simply ask others, as doing so might ultimately save everyone time.

The second theme is Managers' Uncertainty Avoidance. While the interviewed managers generally believed that Finns performed their work reliably, some Finnish employees reported experiences in which their activity appeared to be discreetly monitored – for example, by receiving seemingly casual emails that were easy to respond to quickly: "Or they might send confirmation messages to check if you respond at a certain time, which can sometimes happen. — I've received messages that were kind of like check-up messages." This kind of activity tracking was perceived rather negatively by Finnish employees.

Additionally, some of the countries typically sent the most urgent tasks via chat messages. This practice, which allowed for immediate confirmation (e.g., through read receipts), may have developed as a strategy to reduce uncertainty. Some Finnish employees also reported being asked to provide proof of work, particularly for less visible tasks: "If you were not present [in the system] for two hours, you would start receiving inquiries about your whereabouts – Well, you had been filling out an Excel sheet." While this behaviour may stem from stronger uncertainty avoidance, it could also be explained by the fact that other countries may not track working hours, but rather completed tasks or daily work attendance.

Lastly, Finnish employees noted that most of the other countries provided more information upfront compared to Finland. Often, countries with higher uncertainty avoidance tend to provide more detailed information in advance to reduce ambiguity. Many participants found the increased upfront communication positive, as it helped them to get started more quickly with new tasks. However, at times, the sheer volume of information led to stress, as Finns had to invest time in evaluating which information was necessary and how to ensure they could locate it later when needed: "Sometimes you just need to take a moment to process everything

and make sure you can absorb all the information. It's also about storing it somewhere so that when you need it later, you can find it. That's the challenge – being able to locate the instructions when the time comes."

The results suggested that Canada displayed notably higher uncertainty avoidance tendencies than the framework had originally indicated. The author believes that the French language and culture may have a strong influence on these findings, as France scores very highly in uncertainty avoidance. These tendencies could also reflect organizational culture. The key element for Finns to address from this category would be the fear of appearing foolish when asking simple questions – even if doing so could save time. This hesitation may lead to delays and can hinder effective collaboration.

6.7 Long-Term Orientation versus Short-Term Orientation

The framework suggests that Finland would be short-term oriented, and this finding was supported by the analysis. The themes that emerged within this category were Motivation and Ambition, Work-Life Balance, and Future Planning.

Starting with motivation and ambition, nearly all respondents indicated that Finns are motivated primarily by short-term goals. They typically do not engage in extensive long-term planning but tend to react to present situations. In contrast, remote managers were perceived as adopting a long-term perspective: "I [a Finn] don't usually look far ahead — They [managers] likely have a longer-term perspective than I do." Another interviewee stated: "It came up in a conversation with my manager that they are thinking about my career path, even looking five years ahead. That made me feel like, OK, someone is clearly considering it. It's more about them being interested in what I'll be doing in a few years and, in a way, making sure there's some direction for my career development."

Both Finnish employees and remote managers also observed that Finns generally do not express strong ambitions to advance in their current positions. One Finnish employee stated: "I don't have any specific goals for the future." A manager similarly noted: "There is not as much ambition to grow professionally as there might be in some other countries." It was mentioned that individuals from other nationalities tended to express stronger ambitions to advance and climb

into higher positions as quickly as possible. The author would also argue that the perceived low ambition may be compounded by the Finnish tendency to engage less in self-promotion.

While managers from Belgium and Switzerland were seen as more long-term oriented, there were conflicting views regarding Canada. Some participants perceived Canada as similar to Finland, while others described it as highly focused on work and achievements. This finding was somewhat surprising, as the original framework places Canada close to Finland. However, Canada appeared to be more long-term focused, potentially due to French cultural influence.

The second key finding concerned work-life balance. The Finnish attitude toward work prioritizes ‘working to live’ rather than ‘living to work.’ Managers also observed that Finns were particularly strict about their working hours: “They can be quite strict, like, ‘No, if I work an extra half hour, I’ll log it in the system so I can take that time back later’ or something along those lines.” One of the managers noted: “I think in Finland you focus a bit more on your work-life balance.”

In international teams, Finns perceived their working hours to be longer, and it was common to receive chat messages as late as 6:00 PM, even though Finnish working hours typically ended around 4:00 PM. This made Finns feel as though they were expected to work longer than their contracts stipulated, which led them to become even stricter about adhering to their working hours.

The third key finding concerned future planning. Based on the theoretical framework, the author initially anticipated that cultural differences might lead to friction regarding future planning and work-life balance. However, no such issues emerged during the interviews. Although differences were apparent, Finnish employees were comfortable providing additional details when requested, and managers seemed to accept the Finnish approach to work-life balance.

Although this theme revealed several cultural differences, managers described Finns as loyal employees who reliably fulfilled their duties. Nevertheless, it remains crucial for Finns to set clear boundaries regarding working hours and communicate them effectively to their remote managers. The author found it surprising that the differences in planning did not cause notable friction. However, the

potential misinterpretation of Finnish career ambitions, caused by limited self-promotion, should be acknowledged and addressed.

6.8 Additional findings

The analysis also produced three additional relevant themes, which did not fully align with the framework and were grouped separately. These recurring themes were categorized as Regulations, Blind Spots, and Occupational Culture.

Firstly, all Finnish participants noted that their remote managers sometimes struggled to keep up with Finland-specific work structures and regulations. The relevant details have been shared with the commissioner.

The second theme identified was blind spots. Finnish employees generally reported enjoying work in highly diverse teams, which were perceived as more relaxed and socially open. However, this also raises questions about whether Finns, due to their low-context communication style, tend to interpret statements too literally and may form a more positive impression of a message than was intended. By recognizing these blind spots, one may further enhance the effectiveness of the best practices discussed in the following section.

This issue may apply, for instance, to the feedback received from remote managers, as all Finnish participants reported that the feedback they received was highly positive and supportive. It is important to consider that, in some cultures, such as the United States, a phrase like “this could be done a bit better” may imply that immediate improvement is expected. A Finn, however, might interpret this as a non-mandatory suggestion. Furthermore, in certain cultures, negative feedback may be given in the form of positive feedback that deliberately omits the matters expected to be acted upon. (Meyer 2014, 61–88.)

The final theme was occupational culture. A remote manager pointed out that, despite cultural differences, certain roles tend to attract individuals with similar values. For example, employees working in sales or customer service may differ significantly from each other within the same nationality but may display greater similarities with counterparts in the same roles across other national cultures.

This observation aligns with Hofstede's concept of occupational culture. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 268–369.) However, the author chose not to focus on this aspect, as it would have widened the scope of the research beyond its intended purpose.

6.9 Best practices to be learned from remote managers

Despite the challenges, all Finnish employees expressed a generally positive experience working under a remote manager. While some participants found it difficult to articulate specific reasons for this preference, the interviews consistently highlighted several key aspects that were especially appreciated. The findings emphasized the managers' strong soft skills, which were categorised into five main themes: Appreciation, Feedback, Team Building, Empathy, and Cross-Cultural Skills.

The first theme was appreciation. The Finnish employees noted that in Finland, it is not frequent to receive feedback, expressions of gratitude, or recognition for one's work. However, all the Finnish interviewees found it positive to be recognized, citing it as one of the reasons they preferred having a remote manager.

The second theme was feedback. Finnish employees reported that they found it easier to receive feedback from remote managers and that the feedback was offered regularly, even without being prompted, and perceived it as encouraging and constructive. Some employees also mentioned receiving practical, real-life examples that helped their work processes: "My manager helped even more and provided guidance and examples on how to move forward and achieve results." Overall, Finnish participants emphasized that frequent expressions of appreciation and recognition of their work significantly increased their motivation.

The third theme was team building. Although Finnish employees felt that their tasks focused more on working as individuals, remote managers were praised for their efforts in fostering a strong team spirit. The managers were reported to establish a clear sense of purpose, which helped create shared values among team members. Some Finnish employees even appreciated small talk at the beginning of meetings, as it lowered the barrier for further communication. Another human-

oriented practice noted was that participants would keep their cameras and microphones on to at least greet each other in every meeting. Several employees also highlighted that their teams celebrated successes more frequently than they were accustomed to in Finland, which was perceived positively.

The fourth theme was empathy. Remote managers were commonly described as having strong interpersonal skills and a high level of empathy toward employees and their personal lives: “Yeah, and then this thing where they are also interested in a person’s personal life outside of work.” They were seen as actively contributing to the creation of psychologically safe environments where employees felt comfortable speaking openly. Support was often tailored to employees’ individual needs, reinforcing a sense of care.

The final theme was cross-cultural skills. The analysis showed that remote managers were generally more aware of cultural differences and were able to adjust their communication and leadership style accordingly. A remote manager explained: “And if I’m going to talk with a Finn, I should adapt by presenting summarized, clear points, and that’s it.” This level of cultural awareness and flexibility contributed to better mutual understanding.

Overall, Finnish employees expressed a high level of satisfaction with their remote managers and international teams. As one of the aims of the research was to identify transferable best practices, these findings have been shared with the commissioner company’s human resources team to support potential improvements in managerial approaches and internal collaboration.

6.10 Suggestions for the company

As the findings demonstrate, several cultural differences between Finnish employees and their remote managers were identified that could affect communication and collaboration. While it is not feasible to address every issue at once, the following suggestions focus on key findings that are likely to have the most effective and immediate impact.

The most crucial findings concern Finnish self-awareness, a preference for direct, low-context communication, and a relatively flat hierarchical structure, including

shared decision-making practices. Additionally, the Finnish tendency to understate one's achievements, avoid unfamiliar situations, and expect low emotional expressiveness is addressed.

First, as with anyone developing cross-cultural competence, it is essential to understand one's cultural background – an idea emphasized in the chapter on cross-cultural skills. Accordingly, the author has created a commissioner-exclusive guidebook that includes a section on typical Finnish behaviours. This section draws from cultural dimensions discussed in this thesis as well as interview insights. It aims to help Finnish employees recognize their deeply rooted cultural values and behavioural patterns, and enable them to better manage stress in unfamiliar situations as well as understand that different approaches to work can be equally valid. This awareness supports smoother collaboration across cultures.

For example, managers from cultures with higher uncertainty avoidance may require more information, request additional proof, or check up on employees more frequently. If Finnish employees interpret this behaviour as a way to be reassured rather than a form of control, they may find it easier to maintain constructive and trusting relationships. By consciously adapting to different cultural expectations, Finnish employees can improve their professional relationships and increase the likelihood that their perspectives are also acknowledged.

Second, while self-awareness provides an important foundation, expectations regarding hierarchy and participation in decision-making also deserve attention. Unclear expectations or exclusion from decision-making processes can hinder collaboration. To address this, the author recommends that Finnish employees initiate open discussions with their managers about cultural differences, particularly regarding hierarchy, to clarify mutual expectations for workplace behaviour. Such dialogue fosters shared understanding. In addition, Finnish employees should clearly express their interest in participating in decisions, as this may not be expected from subordinates in more hierarchical cultures. Making this interest explicit increases the chances of being included.

Third, communication style differences should be addressed. While the remote managers interviewed had generally adapted to Finnish directness and even appreciated it, others unfamiliar with Finnish culture may perceive such directness as insensitive. In particular, Finnish emails that go straight to the point can seem cold to those from high-context cultures. To address this, the guidebook includes a section explaining low- and high-context communication styles.

However, as communication preferences are often deeply rooted and difficult to change, the author also recommends that the company organize a workshop for employees working with remote managers. Since communication styles can be experienced as personal and slightly sensitive, such a workshop should be held in a supportive and familiar environment.

Interactive exercises can help participants understand how different styles may lead to misunderstandings. For instance, in some Asian cultures, laughter may indicate discomfort, whereas Western colleagues might interpret it as a positive sign. Likewise, addressing differences in emotional expression across cultures can make certain behaviours feel less confrontational, encouraging more open and continuous dialogue.

Exposure to different perspectives may help Finnish employees recognize that softening a message does not compromise authenticity but increases the likelihood that the intended meaning is understood. The workshop could provide a practical opportunity to safely practise adapting communication styles to different conversation partners, which is an ability that, as noted in the section on cross-cultural skills, typically requires stepping outside one’s comfort zone. Moreover, becoming more familiar with diverse communication patterns can help Finnish employees better interpret feedback and messages from their managers, supporting more balanced and effective communication.

Fourth, the findings indicated that the other countries included in the study are more masculine, and therefore, self-promotion is more culturally accepted and expected. Finnish employees may find such behaviour uncomfortable or unnecessary, as they expect personal success to be recognised by their work. However, in more masculine cultures, visibility plays a central role in being acknowledged. Although this issue did not emerge as a major source of conflict, Finnish

employees may still benefit from developing this skill to avoid having to justify their contributions and to ensure their efforts are recognised. This can be done in one-to-one meetings by telling the manager what the Finn has done and achieved in between the meetings.

In addition, since Finns often avoid uncertainty and fear being judged or ridiculed, the author recommends that they practise stepping out of their comfort zones and seek support from others when needed. Doing so not only fosters a stronger sense of team spirit but can also enhance overall team efficiency and communication.

Furthermore, while Finnish employees typically value work-life balance, colleagues from other cultural backgrounds may place a stronger emphasis on their careers. Although individual values should always be respected, an open-minded attitude toward differing priorities is recommended. At the same time, Finnish employees need to communicate their boundaries to maintain a sustainable workload. The author also recommends that the human resources department brief all remote managers on the Finnish practice of tracking and adhering to contractual working hours, as some countries track work in other measures than hours.

Finally, the best practices observed among the remote managers across all three countries were primarily related to soft skills, such as appreciation and empathy. The author recommends that the company invest in soft skills training for managers. To assess the effectiveness of such training, baseline data should be collected on current team dynamics, followed by evaluation after the training to identify changes. If necessary, the training programme can then be refined to meet its objectives more effectively.

By addressing these key findings, the company is likely to improve not just communication and collaboration between Finnish employees and remote managers but also the leadership qualities of its local managers. Encouraging open dialogue, increasing the visibility of employees' contributions, and reaching a mutual consensus for interpreting feedback are all steps toward building a more inclusive and effective international working environment.

7 DISCUSSION

The thesis was created to address a real-life need identified by the commissioning company: establishing a baseline understanding of cross-cultural communication and collaboration between Finnish employees and remote managers. The research questions were agreed upon in cooperation with the company. It was also decided that data would be collected through interviews, with participants selected in consultation with the human resource manager to ensure relevance. This was especially important as the remote managers' backgrounds varied significantly.

Selecting the theoretical framework was relatively straightforward after reviewing different models and critiques. The framework was defined before the semi-structured interviews began, to ensure alignment with the interview questions and to enable relevant follow-ups that would deepen understanding of the key topics. The nine interviews were scheduled to last one hour, produced 185 pages of transcripts, which were manually corrected. The combined length of the transcripts was more than the author had anticipated. Had the research been conducted as a quantitative study using a questionnaire, the number of participants would likely have been higher, but the findings would have been more limited and likely less insightful.

The data was analysed using thematic analysis, which was a suitable choice for handling a large volume of qualitative data. This phase was the most time-consuming part of the research, as it involved identifying recurring patterns, connecting them to the framework, and carefully determining which findings were relevant for this thesis and which should be included only in the company-exclusive guidebook. The results and suggestions presented in this thesis successfully address both the research question and sub-questions. The findings were comprehensive enough to support both a full thesis and the separate guidebook.

For future research, a follow-up study conducted six months to one year after the initial research could help assess whether the measures implemented based on the guidebook have achieved the desired outcomes.

The author further recommends a more targeted study focusing specifically on Canadian remote managers, as the findings often deviated from the framework's expectations about Canada. In addition, nearly all Finnish employees with a remote manager also frequently interact with colleagues from Canada, further underlining the need for a more in-depth study.

The research contributed greatly to the author's ability to develop concrete strategies for business situations that could benefit from increased awareness of cultural differences. In addition, it has strengthened the skills for identifying underlying key elements, providing a point of reference for cross-cultural competence, and offering solid approaches for addressing potential issues. Altogether, this has significantly defined the author's expertise in the field of international business.

7.1 Research ethics

Research ethics were an essential aspect of this thesis, and the author took them seriously. This research involved not only a major company but also individuals who could have been put at risk by sharing their subjective experiences. Therefore, every step of the research process followed ethical guidelines to ensure both the integrity of the study and the protection of participants.

According to the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2003), good research practices include establishing an environment that provides proper guidance throughout the process, thereby ensuring the quality of the study. Key principles include reliability, honesty, and transparency. For example, the interview questions used in this thesis have been designed to be as neutral as possible, allowing participants to express their views without being influenced by the phrasing. The author also treated the participants respectfully and remained accountable for the final publication. They also acknowledged the potential for bias in interpreting the interview transcripts, particularly because Hofstede's cultural dimension framework may have created certain expectations. Being aware of this, the author remained open-minded about unexpected patterns in the data.

The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) outlines eight key areas for ensuring good research practices. Research organizations are responsible for providing students with the necessary knowledge of research ethics and

adequate mentoring throughout the process, as they have done in this case. Researchers must adhere to truthfulness and obtain all permissions required to conduct their studies. The author ensured that all necessary permissions were obtained for conducting their studies. Transparency is also crucial, particularly in cases where data from external organizations or commissioners is used. Furthermore, data management and research collaboration must be carefully considered to maintain ethical standards. (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK 2023, 11–15.) The data for the thesis was stored on two password-protected devices (a PC and a laptop), accessible only to the author. The data was not shared with or given to any third parties and was processed solely by the author. All the interview data was permanently deleted upon the release of the thesis.

Beyond procedural guidelines, research ethics also involve respecting individuals. In this thesis, the author ensured that participants were not treated merely as sources of data but as individuals whose dignity must be upheld. This included providing them with all necessary information about their participation and ensuring their voluntary and informed consent. The principle of beneficence was followed by minimizing any potential psychological or social harm that could arise from participation. For instance, interview citations were anonymized so that no individual could be directly identified. Justice was also considered, as only those who were relevant to and could also benefit from the research were asked to participate, avoiding unnecessary burden on others. (Mack et al. 2005, 8.)

Throughout the research process, the author ensured that every potential participant was fully informed about who was approaching them, the purpose of the study, and the time commitment required. Before any interviews were conducted, a permit was first obtained from the company’s human resources manager. After this, the interview requests were sent, specifying how personal data would be handled, the potential benefits of participation, and the measures taken to mitigate risks. (Mack et al. 2005, 10–11.) These measures include modifying the collected data so that no individual could be identified from the quotes – this was also clearly communicated to participants. They were explicitly asked for permission to record the interviews, which was clearly informed about in the interview invitations and reconfirmed orally before the interviews began. They were also

informed that they had the right to withdraw their data from the study until the beginning of April 2025.

The author has requested the commissioner to share the thesis with all Finnish employees and their remote managers, regardless of actual participation, ensuring that everyone involved can access the study's outcomes. This approach allows for broad access to the findings while avoiding selective distribution, which could risk unintentionally revealing participants' identities within the company.

7.2 Reliability of work

This chapter discusses the reliability of the research by evaluating the suitability and execution of its methods. A qualitative approach was deemed most suitable, as it enables the exploration of personal experiences, essential when studying culture. (Creswell 2014; Hammarberg, Kirkman & de Lacey 2016.) Furthermore, qualitative research is especially valuable when addressing topics that have not been previously studied, as it provides rich, in-depth insights through words rather than numerical data (Ghauri 2004, 7–8). A case study approach is recommended when aiming to explain complex, context-bound, and situational phenomena, as it helps avoid oversimplifying the topic. (Moilanen, Ojasalo & Ritalahti 2022; Ghauri 2004,16–25.) This approach allowed for the consideration of both national and organisational culture.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions were chosen as the main theoretical framework, as they offer a practical structure for examining cultural differences in a work setting. The model was applied as a guiding framework rather than a rigid rule, with its limitations carefully acknowledged. For example, in the case of Canada, a stronger French cultural influence was observed than the model suggests.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data, as they provide flexibility while enabling the exploration of relevant themes (Ghauri 2004, 40; Bryman 2016, 10). Interviewees were selected in collaboration with the human resources manager to ensure the relevance and quality of the employees' experiences and the collected data.

The primary limitation of the study was the scope of the interviews, which was affected by time constraints. The initial goal was to interview at least two Finnish employees and two managers from each relevant country. Ultimately, six Finnish employees and three remote managers participated. While quantitative methods could have increased the sample size, they would have lacked the depth necessary to examine subjective experiences and nuanced cultural challenges. Despite the relatively small sample size, the interviews yielded rich insights, with the results being consistent, as many of the key findings appeared in each interview. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their experiences freely, which maximised the quality of the responses. (Bacon-Shone 2022; MacDonald & Headlam 2009, 39–43.)

Another challenge stemmed from the complexity of the managers' cultural backgrounds, which turned out to be more diverse than initially anticipated. However, participant selection was conducted in cooperation with the company to ensure that the data reflected real working relationships. The quality and consistency of the interviews, along with their alignment with the theoretical framework, suggest that the collected data can be considered reasonably reliable. Several key findings emerged repeatedly across both employee and manager interviews, further supporting this conclusion.

The interview questions were not shared with participants in advance, in order to avoid idealistic responses and to encourage authentic reflections. While this approach carried the risk of participants overlooking certain points during the interview, it was believed to yield more genuine data. All interviews were conducted one-on-one to ensure that participants felt comfortable and free of judgment. Finnish participants were offered the option to be interviewed in Finnish, which supported more natural expression. On top of this, research ethics were also considered essential in ensuring the reliability of the study. (Cohen & Crabtree 2008.)

The author acknowledges that personal expectations may have influenced follow-up questions or the interpretation of responses. To minimise potential bias, all interview data were carefully reviewed to identify the actual intent and implications of participants' answers. Although transcription tools were used, each transcript was manually validated and corrected for accuracy, as is recommended.

(Widodo 2014) Only non-relevant beginning and ending sections were trimmed to reduce the volume of data without affecting the core content.

Due to the extensive amount of data (185 pages of transcripts), thematic analysis was selected as the most suitable method of analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). This method is well-suited for small sample sizes and facilitates the identification of both explicit and implicit themes (Guest, MacQueen & Namey 2019, 8–10). It revealed recurring patterns and underlying challenges that participants may not have fully articulated. After familiarising themselves with the material, the author organised the content into relevant themes and analysed them in greater depth. While thematic analysis allows flexibility in identifying themes, the author remained mindful of objectivity to ensure accurate insights and meaningful recommendations. The analysis followed the standard protocol of identifying recurring patterns, linking them to the theoretical framework, and developing coherent categories and themes for the results. (Bacon-Shone 2022.)

As previously mentioned, the main limitations of the study were time and scope. Nevertheless, participant selection was carried out with utmost care and in close collaboration with the company to ensure the relevance and quality of the data. Each interviewee contributed a valuable perspective, deepening the understanding of current company challenges. The author maintained an open-minded approach throughout the research process, with the aim of providing the commissioner with feasible, insightful, and actionable recommendations. However, the need for further research is acknowledged. Future studies focusing on a single country at a time could help to refine or more clearly validate the findings presented here, as such an approach is recommended for assessing the reliability of qualitative results. (Hammarberg, Kirkman & de Lacey 2016; Morse & Richards 2002.)

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