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Empathy in Remote Work Communication: A Qualitative Case Study

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ABSTRACT

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The importance of empathy is widely recognised and researched. Empathy is known to contribute to successful work communication and work satisfaction. In the context of remote work where communication happens digitally, empathy requires special attention and empathetic communication can´t be taken for granted. This thesis studied qualitative insights of empathy in remote internal communication: how it´s shown by employees and how the internal communication of a remotely working organisation could be improved with more empathy.

The focus organisation, where this case study was conducted, is a Finnish small-to-medium-sized private company. The purpose of this thesis was to create recommendations for the focus organisation on how they can improve their internal communication by making it more empathetic. The objective was to gain insights into how empathy is shown in digital communication.

The qualitative data were collected with three supporting methods: preliminary interviews, a survey, and a focus group discussion. All employees who took part in the study work primarily remotely. The company has already well-established practices for remote work communication. The key findings of this study highlight how delicate the topic is: simple communicational gaps can have drastic impact on how the employees feel. Conclusions of this study included that there is not one single solution to improving internal communication with empathy as the ways of showing and understanding empathy vary, just like individual communication preferences vary. Changes in communication practices and guidance, when done systematically, can shape the communication culture. Giving employees enough opportunities and channels for creating meaningful connections is important. Empathy can, and is shown, in remote communication in various ways such as offering help, using emojis, and taking time to connect. The data showed individual differences on what is perceived as empathetic communication.

The recommendations of this study provided the focus organisation with practical guidance. The findings and recommendations were presented in thematical sections, which could provide valuable insights for other organisations that are working and communicating remotely. This case study was concluded in a specific context, which should be considered when drawing wider conclusions. However, qualitative study explores the depths of human experience. Experiences of communication and empathy are linked to human emotions that are likely to occur in any context. The topic offers great potential for future research as it is timely in all its multidisciplinary aspects.

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Keywords: communication, remote work, empathy, digitalisation, SME

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1   INTRODUCTION

Remote work is becoming increasingly popular across numerous fields of business and experts believe this trend is yet to grow. For many organisations, at least some of the internal communication happens via digital platforms and project management, leadership, and teamwork can happen partly or completely remotely. This is often referred to as the future of work.

Digital platforms and technology tools are advancing with huge leaps, which allows remote work communication and can improve productivity, quicken processes, reduce manual work, and help with data collection, storing, and sharing. This effectivity also brings opportunities for business growth. At the same time, topics around wellbeing at work are trending, and organisations are encouraged to display and practice softer values and a culture of caring. The importance of empathy and emotions at work has been widely recognised both in business and in research. Without these softer values, the employees might not keep up with the speed.

Organisational culture, psychological safety, and empathy are known to have effects on the quality of communication and on how the communication (or lack of it) effects the employees' productivity and wellbeing. It is also known that leading emotions and moving towards a humane business culture is beneficial for organisations (Tuominen, 2020).

Remote working and digital communication, especially in a growing and changing organisation, brings new kinds of challenges for collaboration and leadership. Whilst working might be more efficient remotely and there are well-planned processes in place, there is more room for misunderstandings and communication errors when communication, teamwork, and leadership happens digitally. Are people able to create true connections and understand each other remotely? If not, there is a risk that employees could feel alone and might lack enough support and understanding, which could lower their productivity, motivation, and well-being.

The long-term effects of digitalisation for human-to-human interaction and ability to show empathy to others are still to be seen. Across fields, there is discussion and some concern about how digitalisation of communication and human interaction affects us.

Ultimately, digital, or fully remote organisations need to find a fine balance between the most effective and user-friendly digital tools while also fostering a positive and caring organisational culture that supports employee well-being. How can the positive effects of empathy be harnessed in remote and digital communication? This thesis explores findings about empathy in remote work communication and investigates how small to medium sized businesses can improve their internal communication whilst being effective and productive.

Why is remote work becoming so popular if it comes with communication challenges?

In 2020, the global COVID19 pandemic boosted the already fast-growing trend of remote work and digital communication in organisations of all sizes in all fields. However, the concept of remote working has been known in Finland for centuries as remote work has been in the discussion when finding solutions for living outside big cities or finding solutions for more effective work (Haapakoski, Yrjölä & Niemelä 2020). In a larger context, virtual teams and remote work can be seen as an attractive solution for many challenges linked with the changing business environment of the 21st century for its cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and allowing international collaboration and problem-solving without relocating (Kayworth & Leidner 2002). The possible positive environmental effects of remote work have been also studied and discussed in recent years.

As reported by The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, over one million Finns were working remotely in the exceptional spring of 2020 during COVID2019 pandemic, and many of them want to and have the possibility to continue remote work also after the pandemic is over (Ruohomäki 2020). Similarly, Eurofound´s e-survey with the sample around 100 000 responders EU-wide found that over three-quarters EU employees wanted to continue working remotely from home after the COVID restrictions (Eurofound 2020). This shows how there is a clear

will to move towards more remote work now that it has become a normal way of working for many.

In some organisations, such the focus organisation of this thesis, remote work and communication has been the norm for years. In this case there are already well-established practices and digital communication channels in place. However, as years of personal experience with remote work and numerous discussions have shown, the remote work comes with communicative challenges that can have negative effects on productivity and motivation, among others.

Personal experiences with remote work and improvement of remote work communication have been a big motivator for this thesis study. According to my experiences, adjusting to flexible remote work or work as part of a virtual team takes time. It puts individuals´ time management and self-motivating skills to test on a level that many are not used to if transitioning from a more traditional business environment. Communication plays a key role in the success of individuals, teams, and whole organisations. If, for example, the induction is not thorough and there isn´t enough supportive communication in the beginning of remote work, the challenges can start piling up and magnifying. In remote work there is always the element of social isolation. Enough communication and connecting on an emotional level could be a solution for this. Understanding the role and perception of empathy in digital work communication is not just intriguing topic to explore, but also one that is important to understand. Empathy is often said to be one of the most important skills for the future of work, and there is a multidisciplinary growing interest in researching empathy.

2 RESEARCH TOPIC AND AIMS

Empathy and the quality of communication are topics often linked with better well-being, motivation, and productivity at work (Salonen 2017; Ritakallio & Vuori 2018; Haapakoski et al. 2020). Understanding the basic psychological needs of others and responding to these needs empathetically leads to improved connections and ultimately more positive results in organisations (Rantanen, Kankaanpää & Leppänen 2020). Whilst there is a lot of information and research available on empathy, the practices how it is shown in remote work communication are less documented. In recent years, remote working has gained increasing interest among scholars, but findings across the studies vary; some reasons for this being the variety of conceptualisation and definitions around the topic as well as the varying remote working and communication practices (Allen, Golden & Shockley 2015).

This is a descriptive thesis case study, the data of which was obtained in a focus organisation that is a Finnish private company with whole teams working remotely, solely communicating through digital channels. In the preliminary discussions with the HR manager of the company, it was evident that there are some challenges that emerge when teams and remote project workers communicate digitally, especially if there isn´t enough communication. It raises the question of how satisfied remote workers are with internal communication and how it could be improved to create a more positive experience. Is empathy a solution for this and how is empathy even shown and perceived through virtual communication tools? Based on these questions and background knowledge, the objective and aims were decided for this thesis study.

The objective of this thesis is to gain insights into how empathy is shown in digital work communication, and to contribute findings towards this timely topic.

The purpose of this thesis is to create recommendations for the focus organisation on how they can improve their internal communication with empathy.

The primary aims of this thesis study are:

1. To understand how empathy is shown in remote work communication by collecting insights from a remotely working organisation that has a well-established communication culture and practices around remote work.
2. To create a measurable benchmark on communication satisfaction in the focus organisation that can be redone in the future to measure improvements after recommendations have been put into practice.
3. To produce context-specific recommendations.

2.1 Structure of the thesis

The research method of this study is qualitative (though some quantitative data is not excluded). This thesis is structured following typical steps of qualitative research as demonstrated by Juuti and Puusa (2020):

- Defining topic
- Defining aims of the study
- Defining research questions
- Demonstrating scope and context
- Setting theoretical framework through literature review
- Choosing and justifying approaches
- Choosing and justifying methodology, research plan and practices
- Acquiring data
- Analysing and interpretation of data
- Writing outcomes and suggestions
- Discussing research ethics and limitations

The data were collected through preliminary interviews, a custom-made questionnaire, and a focus group discussion. Following the case study, a suggestive, prescriptive guidance was compiled based on the study findings and relevant theory. This guidance is included in the recommendations section of the thesis and it was presented for the focus organisation. Whilst this is a case study con-

ducted in a single organisation, some findings and elements of the recommenda-
tions could be utilised by other organisations operating in similar contexts, and
therefore the thesis fulfils the wider objective.

2.2 Main concepts and theory

A case study typically aims to understand all relevant aspects of the specific case
and context to help create holistic understanding (Juuti & Puusa 2020). There-
fore, the theoretical background of this research aims to look at internal commu-
nication in remotely working small-to-medium-sized (here on referred to a SME)
organisations from a holistic view, considering the understanding of organisa-
tional communication in this context and the communicational needs of remote
work as well as the benefits of empathetic communication. Because the topic of
this thesis falls in multidisciplinary ground and because not much scientific or
purely academic research have been conducted in a similar context, the theory
and concept include non-academic literature and expert views (for example, busi-
ness literature focusing on remote work). Therefore, some of the concepts and
ideas presented can´t be argued to be purely theoretical but based on empirical
findings and experiences.

Findings of recent literature and studies are included in the three topic fields: re-
mote work, internal communication and measuring it, and empathy – and how
these are linked together. The theoretical background is laid out with a compact
review of relevant concepts found in literature, research findings, and expert
views focusing on the context-specific keywords such as: remote work, virtual
work, flexible work, communication in remote work, communicational culture, em-
pathy, emotional intelligence, empathy in business (and Finnish translations of
these words).

Theoretical background knowledge, framework, and concepts were gathered by
using the above keywords, searches being conducted in the Tampere Univer-
sity´s online library resources and scholarly literacy databases, local libraries,
Google scholar search engine, business literature e-book database of Alma tal-
ent, and e-book and audiobook platforms Storytel and Elisa. Whilst there are

Finnish references included in this thesis, the search for information was not restricted to Finnish or SME related literature, studies, or publications only. This decision was made due to the multidisciplinary nature of the thesis topic (Allen, Golden & Shockley 2015), and to get a holistic view on the main emerging topics.

For gathering information and theory about the research methods, data analysis, and assessment methods for communication and empathy, the same databases and platforms were used. Keywords for these searches included (but not restricted to these exact terms): qualitative research, analysing qualitative data, measuring empathy, ethics of qualitative research, assessing communication, communication audit, communication satisfaction in remote work, and the equivalent translations in Finnish.

The background information gathering of thesis research included expert interviews and discussions with licenced Psychologist and business coach Ilona Rauhala and the HR Manager and founder of the focus organisation of the case study (not named to protect the anonymity of the employees taking part in the study).

2.3 Research questions

The research questions of this thesis are based on:
1. the known challenges of remote work communication in the focus organisation,
2. the objective, purpose, and aims of the study, and
3. the knowledge that empathy is important factor in work communication.

The following table (Table 1 on page 12) shows the main emerging challenges in the current internal communication in the focus organisation. These challenges were recognised in the preliminary discussions and interview with the HR manager of the focus organisation. The table also indicates topic definitions, chosen research questions, and chosen methods to acquire data to answer these research questions.

TABLE 1. Listing the emerged challenges and topic, forming research questions, and ways to study.

CHALLENGES	TOPICS	RESEACH QUESTIONS	STUDY
Enough but not too much information	Remote working	How to improve internal communication with empathy in remote work?	Survey that focuses on internal communication satisfaction, communication culture, positive communication experiences, and how empathy is shown.
Stress and uncertainty	Internal communication and communication culture		
Misunderstandings		How is empathy shown in remote work communication?	
Understanding that people are different and communicate differently	Empathy and understanding others		
Complex role of leadership			Focus group discussion that focuses on how to improve the quality of communication in the organisation and how to make it more emhatetic.
Isolation, lack of connection			
Getting a shared vision and motivating			

Main research question:

How to improve internal communication with empathy in remote work?

Sub-research question:

How is empathy shown in remote work communication?

Following an interview with the HR Manager of the organisation and the survey, a focus group discussion with selected employees was held. The chosen topic frame for the focus group discussion was how empathetic communication and the overall quality of communication can be increased in the remotely working organisation.

2.4 Case study context

This case study is conducted in a Finnish SME working and communicating remotely. According to Statistics Finland (Suomen Tilastokeskus) SMEs are defined by the following criteria:

    a) An SME has fewer than 250 paid employees and

    b) the company´s annual

        -   turnover is either not more than EUR 50 million,

        -   or balance sheet total is not more than EUR 43 million,

and which meet the criterion of independent enterprises (Statistics Finland).

All of employees taking part of this study are Finnish by nationality although many of them live in other countries. Therefore, elements of multicultural communication or internationalisation of the workplace are not considered.

In the case study SME, most remote workers fall also under definition of *virtual workers* (defined in more detail further). Many of the employees work under flexible working hours where they can to most parts decide the time and space for their work.

The focus organisation works in the field of consultancy and staff hiring, offering flexible services in different fields of business operations. In January 2021, they are employing under 50 workers with over 20 of them working fully remotely.

It is notable that at the time of the case study, the private company has been in operation for nearly a decade. Some of the key values of the organisational culture, according to the interview conducted with the HR manager, include freedom, responsibility, and caring about people. Whilst the company is growing and over the years has employed more remote workers, it is to be noted that remote work and flexibility are deeply rooted in the company values and practices. Therefore, the company has already for years improved their remote working practices.

When comparing findings or drawing conclusions, the findings from this case study are valid for virtual work environments and fully remote working organisations. Typically, those organisations working fully remotely have more success

and good practises in place for remote work communication (Haapakoski et al. 2020). Organisations that are mixing traditional office work with remote workdays or otherwise experimenting with remote work don´t fully fall into the same context and should thus apply guidance only where applicable.

It is also notable that this focus organisation has growth aims and they are frequently employing new employees. The growth mindset and values are likely to also influence the communication culture and to also bring some challenges as there is frequent change. This might create uncertainty and communication issues that might not be present in a stable company that doesn´t undergo a lot of change. Any SMEs or other organisations that are growing rapidly and have internal communication issues, might benefit from the findings, theory, and suggestions presented in this thesis.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTS

3.1 Topics and their connection

The topics of the study (as demonstrated in Table 1. on page 12) are internal communication in organisations and communication culture, remote work, and empathy.

Remote work is the context of this study. As remote working limits the way to communicate, and face-to-face interactions are not possible, the challenges of remote work are included in the theoretical framework. Some of the challenges of remote work relate to communicational culture and practises.

Communication is an essential need for humans. It serves a deeper meaning and fulfils our human need to be social and feel a sense of belonging (Baumeister 2012, 121). These needs, and communication as a tool for fulfilling them, have been written about widely. Interaction skills like empathy should be paid special attention especially when much of the communication happens digitally (Prince 2019).

The research topic of internal remote work communication and empathetic communication falls on many disciplines. It´s important that with a topic like this, the focus isn´t purely on the process, mechanics, channels, or quantity of communication in remote context as communication serves indeed a deeper need. It´s not simply a matter of communication quantity, but also the quality of it. In psychology and in the field of empathy studies, the need to be heard, seen, and respected, or shortened HSR, is commonly referred to. Psychologist and business coach Ilona Rauhala in her communication book Keskustelun Voima states: "Humans have a deep desire to be heard, seen, and respected" (Rauhala 2020, 26). Remote organisations should pay attention to how well these needs are established in remote communication using digital tools. Are needs for connections, meaning, support, and belonging fulfilled?

In this study the terms emotions and feelings are used as synonyms. Some of the theory and literature in Finnish uses the term *tunne / tunteet*, which can be translated either as feelings or emotions in English. *Tunneäly* in Finnish translates to emotional intelligence. This field, emotional intelligence, has been researched greatly with notable contributions made by many psychologists and social psychologists. The widely recognised five domains of emotional intelligence by Salovey and Mayer are:

1. "Knowing one's emotions,
2. Managing emotions,
3. Motivating oneself,
4. Recognising emotions in others, and
5. Handling relationships." (Salovey & Mayer 1989)

Recognising emotions, or feelings, in others refers to empathy, which is the focus of this study. Empathy is always linked to feelings. The ability to show empathy to others is linked to communication and interaction skills. As later presented in the theoretical framework, creating connections and honest sharing of feelings in work environments is supported by a psychologically safe communicational culture. The ability to communicate and share with others can lead to sense of belonging. When these above-mentioned things actualise, they are followed by positive feelings. Remote work as a context sets some challenges of how this positive cycle is achieved in practise. These challenges are further explored under the following chapters.

As this qualitative study explores employee´s experiences and how they show empathy, the feelings of the employees are important. It´s known that in organisations, there needs to be consideration on how employees feel and how internal communication affects these feelings (Rantanen et al. 2020). Experiences at work affect feelings and feelings affect the overall satisfaction (Prince 2019). When communication is done remotely, it is important to understand how the used technology tools and digital messages together with the organisation´s structure and culture affect the ability to understand the feelings of others. The sub-research question of how employees show empathy in remote work communication gives qualitative insights for understanding this.

3.2 Defining remote work

At its core remote work means employment activity done outside the office or company premises (Vilkman 2016). It can also be referred to as teleworking, which is defined on the European Framework Agreement on Telework as following: "Telework is a form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/ relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis." (Eurofound 2010, 3). This EU-level definition has been used in Finland to create a guideline and definition of telework, in Finnish *etätyö* (Eurofound 2010, 3). Terms such as *new work, distance work, work from home,* and *work online* can be often seen used for the similar work conditions defined as remote work or teleworking.

The way remote working is set up and how much flexibility and self-governance the employees have depends on the organisation, their specific organisational culture, and work contracts. In the focus organisation of the case study, most remote workers also fall under the definition of *virtual workers* as some or most of their work is done virtually and communication and collaboration happen via digital channels (Vilkman 2016). Most of them also work *with flexible hours*, meaning they can conduct the agreed amount of work when and where best suitable for them except for time-specific responsibilities, which might include for example meetings, and customer and project team communication. Vilkman describes flexible work without time and place restrictions as the most modern and brave approach to remote work (2016).

3.2.1 Benefits and challenges of remote work

Understanding the characteristics of remote work in SMEs, as well as general benefits and challenges that come with remote work, is an important base for improving internal communication with empathy in remote work. The benefits and challenges of remote work can be looked at on many levels.

Pasi Pyöriä provides a chart looking at the benefits and downsides on three different categories: individual, organisation, and societal. The individual and organisational level are the most significant levels for this case study on internal communication and empathy. That is where the positive (or negative) effects of communication, feelings, and empathy happen. The be low table (Table 2) a translated and summarised version of Pyöriä´s chart, which he bases on interviews and his research work (2006, 247-248).

TABLE 2. The positives and negatives of remote work (Pyöriä 2006, 248)

Positives	Negatives
Individual level	
Flexibility in work times, better motivation and work satisfaction, increased productivity	Blurred lines between work time and free time, bad ergonomics, stress, and "workaholism", investing in work gear
Working from home: quiet, less interruptions	Lack of self-discipline when working from home
Organisational level	
Easier recruitment	Remote work is used to minimise costs
More trust, more freedom and responsibility for employees	Employers use new ways of controlling: lack of privacy
Dynamic, modern, and responsible image	Remote workers may have difficulties showing their importance and efficiency (out of sight, out of mind)
Societal level	
New possibilities and less arietal inequity	Social isolation of remote workers
Positive environmental effects that follow less work commuting	More private car use instead of public transport as remote work allows employers to live in more rural areas

Whilst flexible virtual work has great self-governance and flexibility, from a communication perspective, it raises questions such as availability and getting required information and answers on time. This is something that has been a concern in the focus organisation according to the HR manager, as organisation fosters values of freedom and flexibility.

Although there are many known positives to remote working, one alarming down-side of remote working is the blurred lines between work time and free time, which can create added stress and emotional exhaustion (Eurofound 2020). Vilkman states that leaders and managers of remote work need to pay special attention to the stress levels and amount of work the employees have. One of the solutions for this, as Vilkman describes in her book on remote leadership, is creating an open culture of communication and having constant dialogue with remote em-ployees. (Vilkman 2016)

3.2.2 Understanding feelings in remote work

Rantanen et al. demonstrate how important it is to understand feelings and needs of others and how this leads to better performance in an organisation (Rantanen et al. 2020). In an interview with psychologist and business coach Ilona Rauhala, she stated how based on her experience, connection on the level of feelings and empathy can be created remotely, but a personal connection through communi-cation is required to reach this or there can be misunderstandings, projections, and false assumptions (Rauhala 2021).

Haapakoski et al. state how building and maintaining feelings of trust and sense of belonging are probably the most crucial for the success of virtual teams (Haapakoski et al. 2020). Vilkman stresses the importance of these factors, but on the other hand, describes building trust and sense of belonging as one of challenges of remote work. She calls trust as the biggest challenge of remote work and states how in the opposite of trust, there is fear, and which is why there are still organisations and leaders who don´t believe in remote work. (Vilkman 2016) It is possible for two people to create trust and commitment through virtual contact only but creating a sense of belonging in a larger group remotely is more challenging (Haapakoski et al. 2020).

One-on-one contact and active communication are important for positive feelings to emerge. The feelings of trust and sense of belonging are essentially built through an open and communicative culture (Vilkman 2016). Empathy (defined

later) can be argued to be one of the key soft skills in remote work communication, helping to building stronger connections and shared understanding (Prince 2019).

What feelings are associated with communication and how satisfactory the communication is, might be one of the key questions and focus areas when improving internal work communication remotely.

3.3 Defining internal communication and communication culture

Communication in its most basic sense means the possibility to share information (Contrand 2020). From an academic point of view, a look into the literature by communication scholars and experts unveils that there is no one prominent, standard definition of the phenomenon of communication, let alone assessing it. Griffin states fittingly "there´s little discipline in the discipline" of communication and notes how there is a great number of definitions of communication and scholars frequently introduce new ones (Griffin 2011, 6). Communication discipline is rich and can be looked at from many perspectives - "scholars tend to see human phenomena from their own perspectives" (West &Turner 2018, 36). This naturally creates variety in the definition itself as well as in the outcomes and analysis of research.

The past two decades have seen the massive, global shift to online communication and development of new social platforms online (Aula & Heinonen 2015, 36-40). These platforms and applications have also enabled online communication at work and collaboration for remote virtual teams. Due to this digitalisation of communication and advance leaps in technology tools, it has become increasingly possibly to work without restrictions of time and place allowing remote working to thrive (Allen, Golden & Shockley 2015).

Since this study happens in the business context, the natural approach to defining communication is to look at business literature and communication in organisations and remote teams. Internal communication in this study refers to any information sharing that happens between the employees, teams, or top down from

managers to employees in the focus organisation. This internal communication can happen in various channels in written, spoken, or video format. It includes, for example, communicating about work and projects, having remote meetings, induction and other guidance, support, and training (either peer-to-peer or from leaders), information shared by managers to employees, and less formal communication between employees.

The participants of this case study are all Finnish, although the company is growing, and in the future, teams might have also international employees working remotely. Cross-cultural aspects of communication culture and empathy are not considered in the theoretical framework in this case study. However, understanding the nature of organisational culture and remote working climate is important.

The importance of effective and satisfactory internal communication is clear. Vilkman describes how lack of communication in virtual teams is known to lead to less collaboration and spreading of inadequate information (2016). She also states how communication and continuous dialogue in remote work are linked to better results, better sense of belonging, better motivation, and more commitment (Vilkman 2016). It´s known that being social and communicating serves a profound human need. Workplaces have throughout time being social place, and our brains are indeed developed to being social and having empathy towards each other (Huotilainen & Saarikivi 2018). How well does this realise in remote work when communication happens virtually?

The organisation´s culture plays a role in internal communication. Culture is never separate from the organisation – it´s part of everything in the organisational life and communication at work and it also vitally effects the performance. In simple terms, organisational culture is "how things are done" in that organisation including the practiced values. (Cameron & Green 2021, 335-338) This the definition of organisation´s communication culture used in this study – key elements being: how things are done or expected to be done and what are the shown or hidden values of the internal communication.

Remote work in its nature is very self-driven and employees have freedom to shape their practices and experience. How employees perceive the communication culture also varies greatly between individuals and their preferences. Whilst there is high-level of independence, leaders can help enable success in remote work and shape the communication culture. Glazer states: "Giving your team a list of best practices and procedures is helpful, but it´s even more important to take a close look at your organisation´s principles, operating systems and infrastructure to ensure your remote culture is both healthy and high-performing." (Glazer 2021, 75) Shaping communication culture starts with systematically practising desired values and actions, but it takes time (Kotter, 2012, 164-166).

3.3.1 Communication practises in remote organisations

Finding a balance in the right amount of communication can be challenging, especially in remote work. Usually in organisations more internal communication is needed, but in remote work adding more and more internal information can end up as an information overload for individuals (Vilkman, 2016) that just creates stress and interruptions to work. This dilemma was also mentioned by the HR Manager of the focus organisation in the preliminary discussions: "it´s challenging to communicate enough for people to stay motivated and for them to know everything they need to know to do their work, but not too much so they don´t get overwhelmed and interrupted constantly". Vilkman offers better organised channels and practices for communication as a solution for this challenge and stresses the role of leadership (2016). The focus organisation has been working remotely for years and has set channels for internal communication. There are, however, some inconsistencies between practices and guidance when it comes to the use of channels which include:

- Slack communication platform
- Project management tools (Such as Asana and Google Workspace)
- Video calls and online meetings (Zoom and Google Meets)
- Email and direct phone calls
- Intranet

A lot of the internal communication happens in written format. Studies are suggesting that text-based remote communication may lessen empathy (more under *empathy)* as recognising feelings is difficult when there is little information available about them (Huotilainen & Saarikivi 2018). Rauhala reflected her own experiences and stated how things can go wrong if there isn´t personal contact first as people are prone to making assumptions (Rauhala 2021). In remote, virtual work such as the focus organisation, this could mean having personal contact via video call in the beginning of the cooperation is beneficial for building understanding and trust. Moving to communication in the form of text (emails and instant messaging such as Slack) can happen later when the two communicators know each other. It is important to recognise that people understand communication and communication styles differently, and that based on studies, differences are in communication style are tolerated less in online environments than in live work environments (Vilkman 2016).

Another interesting dimension of text-based digital communication, especially with instant messaging and team communication tools (in the focus organisation´s case especially Slack and to some extent WhatsApp), is the use of emojis. As in the written format emotional clues such as facial expressions and tone changes are lost, emojis can give these cues and help the reader understand implied emotional tone (Alshenqeeti 2016, 60). Like facial expressions and understanding physical and emotional cues, it is suggested that emojis are universal, and cultural context or differences doesn´t affect the perception of them much (Alshenqeeti 2016, 60). However, there are likely to be individual differences – some people write short messages, some people excel in written communication, some use emojis extensively, some are new to digital work communication, and only learning to use the tools let alone emojis. This naturally creates possibilities for misunderstandings if creating a work-relationship and connection is solely based on written communication. Generational differences also play a role here and the overall digital communication savviness (Alshenqeeti 2016, 61).

An area that seems to be challenging in digital communication practices is showing and building emotional competences as well as creating a sustainable level of psychological safety. For example, in Google's international study on teams'

performances, the finding was that the most valuable asset for teams to be psychological safety (Rozovsky, 2015). Creating psychological safety in remote working organisations should be paid even more attention to than in an organisation that has possibilities to face-to-face interaction (Glazer 2021, 154). Psychologist and business Coaches Rauhala, Leppänen and Heikkilä talk about psychological capital of individuals, leaders and of organisations and stress how important the management's or leaders´ role is in improving this capital and creating a motivating, psychologically safe culture (Rauhala, Leppänen & Heikkilä 2013). This requires deep understanding of the organisational communication culture and the psychological needs of employees. It also requires strong core values from the organisation (Glazer 2021, 155).

Business growth often brings challenges to communication practices. Growth comes with changes that, according to the HR manager of the focus organisation, require a lot of internal communication and flexibility from employees. Growth can also have effects on the communication culture in the form of practiced values: It is typical for growing businesses to set targets on effectiveness and results. In these situations, the communication culture and practises of the organisation can easily start to focus on growth and results. This might have a negative effect on psychological safety and how satisfied people are with communication culture. Fast growing business may get trapped into ever increasing targets and constant change, which Bruch and Menges name fittingly the *acceleration trap* (2010). According to their studies, when growing, or accelerating, businesses might initially have positive results but in the long term too much speed into too many directions creates uncertainty, burnouts, and a culture of constant change and pressure (2010). Therefore, keeping focus on employer well-being and open, good communication is so important especially in a remotely working growth business. It is quite clear that the organisational culture and example set by leaders affect well-being at work – communication being a concrete example of this (Bruch & Menges 2010). It is vastly important for a leader to model the way towards a healthy work environment and organisational culture. According to Bruch and Menges (2010) and their studies on the subject, in fact a company with "less speed" is ultimately more productive and motivated.

3.3.2 Assessing communication

Assessing the communication and including employee´s opinions and experiences about the internal communication practises and culture is important. The ability to exchange and coordinate information at work is crucial for success (Downs & Adrian 2004, 2). Assessing communication might move things to positive direction. Downs and Adrian state: "The mere fact that an assessment takes place communicates to the workforce that the organisation has a strong commitment to effective communication" and that this builds both goodwill and sensitises employees to good communication practices (2004, 16). When there is assessing in place, and perhaps also training, it is likely that people pay more attention to their own communication and how it might be perceived.

When studying and evaluating organisational communication, different surveys are often used as a method. Assessing or auditing communication satisfaction in organisations is also an indicator of employee satisfaction and commitment (Downs & Adrian 2004, 6). A widely used instrument when evaluating communication in organisations is Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire created by Downs and Hazen in 1977. It asks employees many questions under eight different communicative topics, acquiring a holistic impression of the communication satisfaction (Zwijze-Koning & de Jong 2007).

The problem with questionnaires and quantitative surveys is that there is a ready presumption of what is important and what should be asked in that specific organisation (Meyer 2002). A qualitative questioning method Critical Incident Technique (here on referred to as CIT) focuses on critical, extraordinary incidents that had either a positive or negative impact on the person and outcomes (Zwijze-Koning & de Jong 2007). The qualitative nature and open questions make it possible to see new, unforeseen communicative issues that might be unique to that organising (Meyer 2002).

Organisational communication assessments should always be tailored to the organisation as each organisation has different features and needs in assessments (Downs & Adrian 2004, 9).

3.4 Empathy is timely but not a new concept

Empathy is a popular topic in business and in communication. The need for real connections and emotions in the age of digitalisation of communication and work has been recognised as crucial for successful work environments (Tuominen 2020). Empathy is often referred to as a key skill of the future, and the more communication, interactions and work happens online, the more important it becomes to practise empathy and develop empathetic skills (Prince 2019, 126-131). It can possibly help solve some of the challenges coming with remote work, as it deepens the level of connection when communicating.

Although empathy is a trendy topic of the time, it is not an entirely modern concept – empathy in the meaning as we know today can be traced back to the late-nineteenth century (Eisenberg & Strayer 1987, 17), and "the concept of empathy has received a considerable scholarly attention over the last 100 years" (Meinecke & Kauffeld 2019, 486). Today it is evident that there is more and more interest in the concept of empathy, also outside the field of psychology and psychotherapy. Empathy can be found emphasised in a lot of modern business and communication literature. Duan and Hill describe the multidisciplinary interest to empathy which supports empathy being basis for all human interaction, but also has resulted in confusion and inconsistency in results in research as there are various theories of empathy (1996).

Empathy, recognising feelings in others, is often seen as a subdomain larger scope of emotional intelligence, which challenges the traditional measures of intelligence. Some of the ground-breaking work for the notion of emotional intelligence includes Professor Gardner's work on theory of multiple intelligences. The theory broadens the view of intelligence, which before has been measured by IQ solely. According to another field expert, Goleman, Gardner's interpersonal intelligence (as part of multiple intelligences) is the base many modern notions of emotional intelligence have been built on (Goleman 1995).

3.5 Defining empathy

Empathy has an important role at work, in everyday life, and even in human evo-lution: it helps understand other´s and to be social with others. It also helps to recognise emotions and suffering in others, which can help avoid dangers and conflicts. Emotions, in this context used as the synonym of feelings, are human´s way of creating meaning of the world. There is also a lot of empirical data that supports the crucial role of emotions in moral decision making. Empathy is centric for human's moral – it helps to be morally present with others, to help others, and to want to fix situations that feel wrong. Empathy also lessens aggression, and as empathy helps understand the view of others, it helps make difference be-tween right and wrong. (Aaltola & Keto 2018)

Empathy requires being present for the other person and active listening with an active aim to understand the other person and their feelings (Prince 2019, 141 – 143; Rantanen et al. 2020). Empathy is understanding others both intellectually and emotionally as well as sensing and considering feelings and thoughts of oth-ers (Salonen 2017).

Prince gives easy-to-understand descriptions of empathy based on empathy re-searcher Brown´s work:

"Empathy is being able to see the world as others see it."
"Empathy is being non-judgemental."
"Empathy is understanding another person's feelings."
"Empathy is communicating your understanding of that person´s feelings."
(Prince 2019, 124)

The definition of empathy has variety among literature and science and empathy has various sub-concepts (Huotilainen & Saarikivi 2018). Listing and defining all sub-concepts and terminology used across empathy research is not done in this study. The chosen approach to defining empathy and empathetic communication in this study is:

Empathy is understood as a subdomain of emotional intelligence that allows to understand and consider the feelings of others. Empathetic communication is understood as communication that includes the aim of understanding and considering the feelings of others. Empathetic communication also aims to show that the other person´s feelings are understood and considered, and if possible, it can include intentions for making the other person feel better.

One aim of this study is to understand how remote employees show empathy so that the organisation can improve their communication with more empathy. Empathy is not defined to the participants of the survey or focus group discussion to get their authentic view on what they think is important. This is considered when analysing the findings.

For measuring empathy, there are a variety of tools and frameworks available, with new studies and suggestions made frequently. Many empathy indexes and tools such as *The Empathy Quotient* are based on self-evaluation scale (Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen & David 2004). On different fields and professions, field-specific empathy measurement tools are also used. This study doesn´t measure empathy of individuals as such, but the experience of how empathy is shown in communication.

3.5.1 The importance of empathy in remote work

"Empathy is one of the most important skills we can learn for workplace and team success" (Miyashiro & Colonna 2011, 17). Several studies suggest empathetic organisational culture and practises result in better performance, more creativity, and better employee satisfaction and wellbeing (Nowack & Zak 2020). According to Vilkman, showing feelings and sensing those of others strengthens the humane culture, helps build trust and good cooperation in remote work (2016). Neuroscience and empathy experts Huotilainen and Saarikivi state how although in certain positions empathy is crucial, it can be seen important for any work where work deals with solving people´s problems or interacting with others (2018).

Salovey's work with Caruso suggests that it is important for managers and leaders to recognise the centric role of emotions at work. They refer to studies and empirical examples showing the correlation between performance and emotions. (Caruso & Salovey 2004). Salovey, Caruso, and Goleman write about emotional contagion and how important it is to understand that emotions at work are in fact contagious.

In virtual work, special attention needs to be paid to showing emotions and understandings others as sensing emotions is more difficult virtually than face-to-face (Vilkman 2016). Online, there can be distractive factors and some environmental and verbal cues simply get lost when interaction doesn´t happen in person (Prince 2019). Misunderstandings and trouble in communication are common when communication is done online and non-verbal cues are lost, and differences in emotion-contagion also occur when comparing live and online communication (Belani 2016). In simple terms, there needs to be more effort put to creating an emotional connection when communicating online. Saarikivi (interviewed for Haapakoski et al. book) refers to this as taking a more active role as there is less non-verbal information available (2020). This may mean not only practising empathy skills but wording out feelings and actively asking more questions (Prince, 2019; Haapakoski et al. 2020).

The role of empathy in business communication, especially communication from leaders to employees and in international or cross-cultural business, has been studied already for decades. The importance of empathy in work communication is consistently recognised. On the flip side, studies on work communication cultures lacking empathy show interesting and alarming data. For example, Porath and Pearson have studied the cost of bad behaviour in form of incivility in business through focus group studies, interviews and a larger national sample of managers and employees in the United States of America (2009). Many examples of incivility listed by Porath and Pearson clearly demonstrate a lack of empathy and/or poor internal communication and it is evident with such incivility basic HSR needs of employee´s can´t be met to a satisfactory level. These include, for example, not listening, belittling others, withholding information, not caring about other´s opinions or taking credit for other´s efforts (Porath & Pearson

2009). The costs of bad behaviour following studies by Porath and Pearson (2009) are rather awakening:

- Over 95% of employees studied have either experienced or witnessed workplace incivility,
- 60% of the time, bad behaviour flowed top-down,
- 48% of employees intentionally decreased work effort,
- 47% intentionally decreased their work time,
- 38% intentionally decreased their work quality,
- 80% lost work time worrying about the incident, and
- 63% lost time avoiding the offender.

Although there are differences between American and Finnish business cultures and that of a virtual work environment, it is a likely assumption that the human reaction is similar in any context if an employee experiences empathetic communication. These findings are not unique, and they underline the importance of empathy and a positive communication culture at work. In the context of remote work, it´s perhaps even more essential to pay attention to empathetic communication practices and culture. It makes business sense too, as studies link empathy with better performance, business results, and leadership (Prince 2019, 128).

3.5.2 Creating a more empathetic remote organisation

Empathy can be practiced, and, in most cases, it is possible to learn to become more empathetic and to be perceived as empathetic by others (Prince 2019). This comes down to each individual and their motivation to do so, but at an organisational level there can be trainings, guidance, and common values that boost empathy. Individuals can be supported and encouraged to have their own wellbeing as a key value. It is known through research that regular exercise has positive effect on the brain health and mood – reducing stress and other factors that might lessen empathy (Hansen 2017). Exercise challenges and benefits such as gym memberships are used widely to encourage employees to exercise.

Empathy requires a feeling of connection between people, and therefore, having enough possibilities to communicate and connect is crucial. The feeling of being

connected and empathy improve cooperation, feelings of belonging, and motivation. (Haapakoski et al. 2020) Therefore, providing enough opportunities to create meaningful communication and connection is crucial for long term success. Also, creativity, art, and reading fiction literature are known to boost empathy abilities of an individual (Huotilainen & Saarikivi 2018; Haapakoski et al. 2020). Interestingly, wide research suggests that to harness these benefits and to be creative in the first place is again boosted by regular exercise that contributes to brain health (Hansen 2017). These insights from research are worthwhile to be considered when organisations consider additional benefits of bonuses for employees as there is an opportunity to encourage employees to do activities that boost their wellbeing, health, and ability to feel empathy.

Knowing empathy´s importance and what it requires, it is beneficial to investigate what could be hindering empathy in the organisation. Factors hindering empathy at a work environment include, for example, high-competitive culture, the use of power in management positions, not seeing people as individuals, and organisational structures, which all may lessen seeing others as individuals (Huotilainen & Saarikivi 2018). Therefore, paying attention to these structures and possible aspects of the organisational culture that might lessen empathy is important even if the virtual work is done in a low-hierarchy manner, like in the focus organisation. Saarikivi states that fully remotely working organisations typically have more success in remote work as they have formed an understanding of what is required for people and teams to work well in virtual work (Haapakoski et al. 2020).

Assessing and improving communication is naturally one step towards a more understanding, and more empathetic work environment. In addition to paying attention to the right communication channels and tones, speaking about feelings, and asking questions are part of empathetic communication culture (Haapakoski et al. 2020). Leaders can affect the emotional environment and culture at work (Rauhala et al. 2013; Rantanen et al. 2020), but everyone can improve their empathetic and communication skills (Prince 2019). This can be encouraged and supported with training and active communication around the topic.

As empathy and negative feelings such as hate and aggressions aren´t present at the same time, it´s important to encourage mindful and present communication

that aims to actively understand others (Rantanen et al. 2020). In a rush or in the middle of stressful situation it is difficult to be present for others, and therefore, the response might not be empathetic. Rantanen in a podcast with Rauhala states fittingly how rush or hurry kills emotions and lessens empathy (2021). Constant rush is also known to lead for more stress and to affect the interest and ability to make meaningful connections and communicate within the organisation, which can have an impact on feelings of belonging and commitment. It is proven, time after time, that meaningful connections at work are crucial for a positively viewed organisational culture. (Rantanen 2020) Creating meaningful connections, especially virtually, requires empathy (Prince 2021).

The direct role of management or leaders in improving work communication to be more empathetic in the context of virtual work is complex. As Rauhala states, the role of leaders depends on how self-directed the working culture is (2021) – in the focus organisation and in many other modern SMEs working virtually, the work is done often in changing teams or individually and clear management structures aren´t present. In the focus organisation, there are managers and leaders, but their role varies depending on the situation.

Theory strongly suggest that leadership is important for creating a well-functioning and empathetic remote working culture. The role of leadership in remote work can´t be like traditional top-down management, as employees have a lot of self-governance and a culture of trust need to be fostered for employees to feel psychologically safe and motivated (Glazer 2021).

Leaders have an important role in setting the emotional tone of the work environment and effecting the communication culture. Emotional competences, communication and empathy included, according to Goleman are especially important for leaders. (Goleman, 1998) Emotionally intelligent leaders also understand how team works and what motivates others. They understand also what effect their emotional tone, and example, has. Goleman calls this the "Leadership Ripple Effect" meaning the emotional tone set by leaders ripples down to the whole team or organisation (Goleman, 1998). Numerous studies link the perception of more effective leadership empathy together. For example, studies conducted on group leaders´ enactment of fair procedures found consistently "that empathic leaders

in particular were both more aware that these needs signal that a follower strongly values procedural fairness, as well as more likely to adapt their behaviour and pay more attention to procedural fairness rule adherence in response to these observed needs ("responsiveness")" (Cornelis, Van Hiel, De Cremer & Mayer 2013). Leaders' empathic communication is related to employees' intentions to change (Meinecke & Kauffeld 2019, 493), which is important to recognise in growing and rapidly changing orginations.

Since the focus organisation does have leaders and people in management positions, the link between leadership, empathy, and communication can´t be completely overlooked even though the culture in the focus organisation is of low hierarchy. Interestingly and alarmingly, Huotilainen and Saarikivi report about research findings that suggest a management position lowers individual´s empathy (2018). Online-based communication, which is often the norm of remote work, seems to also lower ability to feel empathy (Huotilainen & Saarikivi 2018). Therefore, added effort need to be made for leaders, like everyone else, to have emotional connection with others.

4   RESEARCH PLAN AND PRACTICES

4.1 Methodology

The research method of this study is qualitative, which suits the multidisciplinary topic of this thesis as qualitative study is used in the fields of business, communication, and psychology (Saldaña 2011). Qualitative data is descriptive, and the research aims to make sense of a phenomenon through studying people or phenomenon in their natural setting (McLeod 2019). Qualitative study methods study the human experience, and therefore at the background of qualitative data can be seen phenomenology which focuses on the human´s own experience and the way they construct the social reality they live in (Juuti & Puusa 2020).

Whilst collecting qualitative data is fitting for the purpose of this research and its set aims, it is to be noted that this method has limitations. Typically, qualitative data cannot be drawn from large samples as it is not cost-effective (McLeod 2019), which raises the question of how reliable conclusions can be made from small individual samples. However, the research topic in this case study is focused on human experience, making any individual experience valid and possible to emerge in similar contexts. The primary aim of qualitative research isn´t to find credible information on how regularly or often a certain phenomenon emerges but to find new perspectives to look at the topic (Juuti & Puusa 2020). The outcome of qualitative analysis presents new discoveries of humans in their social world (Saldaña 2020, 89), in this case, in the world of digital communication and virtual teams in a remote organisation.

Alasuutari describes the phase of interpreting qualitative data as solving the riddle and even finds similarities with qualitative research process and detective work (2015). He also reminds how this is indeed crucial part of qualitative research – the work never ends with a written-out research report of the findings but interpretation and answers to the research question(s) must be made and justified (Alasuutari 2015).

Where does this study position in terms of theoretical and empirical research? The basic research type division is commonly made between theoretical and empirical research (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018, 63). Theory is required as the backbone for all qualitative study (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018, 63-64), and therefore the analysing and suggestions of this study include descriptions of the collected primary data as well conceptialisations and suggestions that consider the theoretical framework and available literature. As Juuti and Puusa state, it is typical for qualitative research to use theory in all stages as a supportive tool rather than a premise (2020). This is the case in this study, which considers relevant, existing knowledge and theory around the topic and context, but discusses all emerging themes. The below figure (Figure 1) demonstrates the positioning between theoretical and empirical world and shows the different steps of this this study, starting from understanding relevant theory and recognising the cap in research for findings of empathy in digital communication of remote work to the final product of suggestions that leads to new practices.
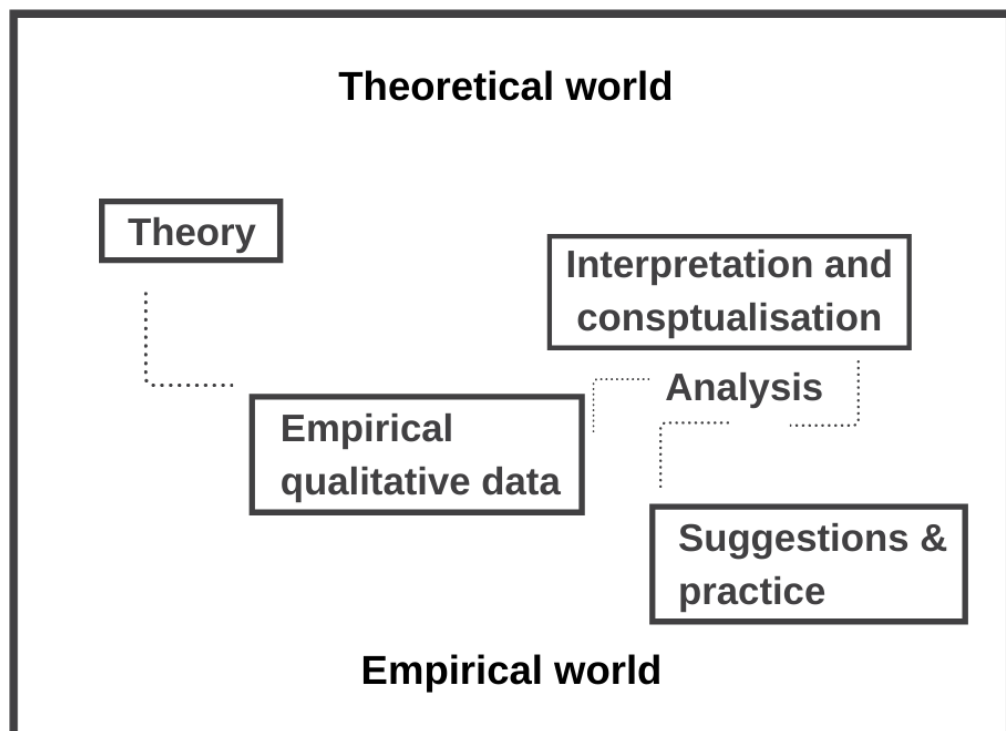

FIGURE 1. Positioning between theory and empirical study. Modified from Kallio & Jalomäki´s theoretical, empirical, and practise model of business research (Juuti & Puusa 2020).

There are many approaches to qualitative research in terms of research design, data collection, and the process of analysing data (Saldaña 2011; Juuti & Puusa 2020), which leads to great variety in qualitative research (Packer 2011). Following the advice of Packer (2011), it was first determined *why* research is done and what are the aims of it – only then is it possibly to understand *what* to do and *how* to do it.

4.2 Data collection

Qualitative data is often collected in a manner that allows in depth description and views from people, for example through open ended questions, and thus gives the researchers "insider's view" of the studied matter (McLeod 2019). The aims, approaches, and methods of qualitive research depend on the research project (Saldaña 2011, 4).

It is common in qualitative research to combine different methods of data collection to get more insight (Juuti and Puusa 2020). Combining different data collection methods was the choice in this study as the research aims have variety that might not be fulfilled with one method. Interviews and discussions with the HR manager (not named in the report) and psychologist Ilona Rauhala were done to identify challenging areas and to define the focus of the case study. Conducting a survey was chosen to get as large as possible sample to use as a both a benchmark on communication satisfaction and to get variety of insights around the topic. Focus group discussion again aimed to create a natural discussion where more in-depth and detailed experiences and insights could be shared, as the assumption was that the studied employees might not give detailed answers in written. Interviews and discussions with the HR manager of the company were conducted before narrowing down the topic and during the research.

4.3 Data analysis method

The chosen approach to analyse qualitative data may affect the focus and results of the study greatly as there is no standardised method of analysing qualitative

data (Saldaña 2011). After looking into different ways of analysing qualitative data, the decision was made to use a so-called data-driven method in analysing the answers to open ended questions of the questionnaires and in analysing the focus group discussion. Data-driven content analysis can still revert to and apply relevant theory as demonstrated in Figure 1 (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018; Juuti & Puusa 2020). The chosen reporting method of this thesis and reporting the findings and conclusions is dialogic theming as presented by Juuti & Puusa:

- Each theme is written-out as a chapter with relevant content on findings,
- These chapters include justifications for the theme as well as variation, deviation, and repetition of the theme in the data,
- Each theme chapter includes interpretation(s) in which there is dialogue between theory and contextual data, and
- Each theme aims to contribute towards answering the research questions (2020).

In this method, the data is first looked at as objective as possible, forgetting about hypothesises, theory, and presumptions (Suoranta & Eskola 1998, 50-52; Juuti & Puusa 2020). There needs to however be a clear decision on what is relevant and what is not as in qualitative data there is always interesting side paths and even surprising insights that may not be relevant to what is being researched. After relevant insights have been found, they are grouped into categories that form themes (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018, 351-353). Quantifying how frequently similar themes or insights appear can be done (Juuti & Puusa 2020).

The survey was conducted with a custom-made questionnaire. The questionnaire has some quantitative elements that work as measurements for employee communication satisfaction. Quantitative elements were also included in other parts of the questionnaire. This decision was mainly made to give the focus organisation a clearly measurable questionnaire that can be repeated later. Some of the quantitative questionnaire results are not analysed in detail in this study as the focus of this study is on qualitative insights around the research topic.

4.4 Preliminary discussions and interviews

It was important to identify communicational challenges in the focus organisation before finalising the research plan. Two preliminary discussions and an interview was held with the HR manager of the company. The HR manager was also included in testing the research questions and methods. The discussions and interviews with the HR manager were used to create a better understanding of the organisation and its intended values. It was stated out that there needs to be some measurable benchmark to evaluate employees´ satisfaction with the internal communication.

Ilona Rauhala was chosen for an expert interview as she has long expertise in coaching organisations and their leaders. As a psychologist, she is experienced with the topics of this study. The interview with Rauhala was used to gain theoretical insights and insights to help design a meaningful survey.

4.5 Internal communication survey

The premise for finding or creating a suitable questionnaire was to get insights on how employees view the current organisational communication culture in terms of satisfaction, practises, and how they show empathy in remote communication. The questionnaire aimed to give both qualitative insights for the purpose of this study as well as quantifiable measurements for the organisation.

After researching different techniques and questionnaires to study communication a customised combination of the two appealed the most:
- CSQ created by Downs and Hazen in 1977, which gives a holistic impression of the communication satisfaction (Zwijze-Koning & de Jong 2007) and is quantifiable.
- CIT technique, which focuses on critical, extraordinary incidents that had either a positive or negative impact on the person and outcomes (Zwijze-Koning & de Jong 2007), that aims for qualitative data.

Below is a breakdown of each section of the custom-made questionnaire with justification of why each section or question was included as well as possible a hypothesis.

The only background information collected in the questionnaire is the first question (Appendix 1), which asks how much remote work experience the employee has. This question is included to test the hypothesis that how long a person has worked remotely effects how their view communication or how satisfied they are with the communication culture. It is to be noted that the sample is relatively small to make generalisations. To secure anonymity of the employees, different categories were given to choose from.

The second section of the questionnaire (Appendix 1) includes statements for evaluating communication culture, modified from the widely used CSQ. Not all statements from CSQ are included, only ones that seemed fitting to the study and the context of remote work. Some of the statements are simplified, and the numeric scale is smaller compared to original CSQ to make evaluating when answering easier. The section provides an overview of the communication satisfaction that also works as a benchmark when initiatives are made to improve the communication. Evaluation is done on the scale of 1-5 with the instruction: 1 means you don't agree, 2 you somewhat don't agree, 3 is neutral, 4 you somewhat agree, 5 you agree.

The third part of the questionnaire (Appendix 1) aims to get the employees´ perceive the current communication culture. It also works as a benchmark for future testing. The organisational values include freedom, people-centricity, and low hierarchy. This section tests whether the employees perceive the communication culture and can also give insights on how urgent initiatives are in this organisation to make improvements in the communication. If the communication culture is viewed as negative or doesn´t reflect the intended values, something should be done urgently. The words or statements to choose from include hierarchical, supportive, judgemental, motivating, stressful, negative, empathetic, forgiving, unmotivating, not caring, understanding, people are listened, rude, team spirit, management-centric, positive, open, helpful, friendly, mistakes are ok, individualistic, ignoring, safe, and unsafe or insecure.

Section four of the questionnaire (Appendix 1) includes two open ended questions where employees can describe with their own words what they would wish from the internal communication or management of the organisation to improve the internal communication. This section gives qualitative insights toward the main research question. It also helps to understand how centric the employees view the role of managers role in the internal communication culture of the organisation and which improvements they see management could make.

The following question of the questionnaire (Appendix 1) is formulated using the CIT, which is often used for collecting insights about human behaviour and experiences (Zwijze-Koning & de Jong 2007). This question, if answered precisely, can give great qualitative insights for the main research question: How to improve communication with empathy in remote work. Typically, CIT is used to describe incidents that had either positive or negative impact. In this case, the choice was made to focus on the positive experiences to gather information about what in the communication influenced these positive experiences.

Section five of the questionnaire (Appendix 1) includes questions that relate to empathy and seek insights towards the sub-research question of how empathy is shown in remote work. The employees need to evaluate how empathetic they think they are in their work commoditisation, how empathetic they think others perceive their communication, and how empathetic they consider the communication in the organisation. The numeric questions of section five were given with an evaluation scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very empathetic). In the discussion with Rauhala, she stressed how the perception of empathy has a bias: people usually think they are more empathetic in their communication than it comes across (2021). In virtual communication it is possible that this bias is even bigger as there is more room for misunderstandings. These numerically evaluated question in section 5 are aimed to give indication if this bias exists. If it does, communicating about this in the following steps (communication training for example) could be a good idea, so everyone is aware of this. The part 3 of this section also gives indication how empathetic the employees evaluate current communication culture.

The hypothesis is that people evaluate their own empathy in communication higher than the empathy in communication of the organisation generally.

The section about empathy also includes two open-ended questions that ask to describe how the employee shows empathy in their work communication and what are some of the things others to in their communication to show empathy.

The questionnaire was tested on an independent person who is not aware of the research topic to see if they understood the questions. Also, the thesis supervisor and the HR manager of the company were sent an early version of the questionnaire, and some finetuning was done based on their remarks.

The participants of the survey were chosen with the criteria that they work and communicate remotely fully or most of the time. 24 employees of the company met this criterion. Not all of them work fulltime.

The chosen platform for the questionnaire was Google Forms, which allows anonymity of answers. The questionnaire (a Google Forms link) was emailed to the remotely working employees of the organisation with a cover email. Two separate reminders were sent out, one before the given closing date and one on the morning of the closing date. In all the cover emails and instructions, the purpose of the questionnaire as well as anonymity of answers were pointed out clearly to encourage for honest and uncensored answers. It was specified that the survey is about internal communication only, and that the employees should be as detailed as possible with their answers.

16 out of 24 in the sample answered the questionnaire. With a longer answering time, a higher answering rate might have been achieved. However, it is to be noted that the answering rate of this questionnaire is significantly higher than any internal questionnaires conducted in the organisation in the past.

Out of 16 employees who answered, eight have worked remotely over 36 months, three have worked remotely for 7-12 months, two have worked remotely for 13-18 months, two have worked remotely for under six months, and one has worked

remotely for 25-26 months. Other demographics was not included to secure anonymity and because the sample is relatively small for drawing conclusions based on quantitative data.

4.6 Focus group discussion

Focus group discussion is a method used for gathering qualitative insights in number of disciplines. What is interesting in a group situation (although in this case, it was not an entirely natural gathering) is that unlike during interviews, there is an element of group dynamics and communication culture at play (Alasuutari 2015, 472-474). This gives the researcher a chance to document detailed insights on how the group works and thinks (Alasuutari 2015, 472-474).

It was clear that some additional, more in-depth data were needed for this study in case people failed to answer the qualitative CIT questions of the questionnaire in enough detail. For the aims of this study, a group discussion seemed like a richer and more time-effective option than individual interviews. It can also be argued that in a group discussion, the risk of researcher effecting opinions and understanding is smaller than during individual interviews (Suoranta & Eskola 1998, 314). During a group discussion, the participants may encourage each other, and the method may be used with the aim of pursuing new ideas (Suoranta & Eskola 1998, 310-314).

One critique towards focus group discussion is the idea that people don´t share honest opinions or feelings in a group, and therefore discussion may only touch the surface (Alasuutari 2011, 479). According to Alasuutari, however, this critique includes a misunderstanding on how the qualitative data is analysed: the analysis can include observations on the communication climate and if there is no honest sharing in the group, it just serves as proof of the current communication culture (2011, 480-481).

4.6.1 Focus group discussion participants

Typically, a focus group discussion has 4-8 participants (Suoranta & Eskola 1998, 315-317). It is known that the heterogeneity versus homogeneity, cohesiveness, and compatibility of the group may alter the results of the discussion (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook 2007). The purpose and aims of the research determine decisions on who to invite to the focus group discussion i.e., who would have valuable insights (Juuti & Puusa 2020).

As the focus organisation of this case study conducts some of the work in virtual teams, it was important to invite employees from different teams to get discussion about the organisational communication culture – not just the culture of one virtual team.

The final number of focus group discussion participants was five. All participants were female (like most of the remote workers of the company are). All participants knew each other and have communicated with each other at work even if they belong to a different virtual team and aren´t in frequent contact with each other. The remote work experience between the group participants varied, but all worked fully remotely during the time of the interview. Some of the group participants were in more responsible position than others: project managers and team leaders. However, as the organisation values low hierarchy and leaders do generally conduct same work as all other employees, the different positions of participants were not seen as a hindering or problematic factor. How much these factors did affect the discussion is of course up to speculation and cannot be reliably confirmed.

The participants of the focus group discussion were included in the sample of 24 employees in the survey. It was not asked whether they filled in the questionnaire or not to protect their anonymity. As the topic of the discussion is more solution-centric versus the survey, it was not seen problematic even if the same employees took part in both the survey and the focus group discussion. Any detailed quantitative data is gathered only from the questionnaire answers (to avoid possible duplicates).

4.6.3 Focus group discussion practise

Focus group discussion is not firmly structured like an interview (Suoranta & Eskola 1998, 315-317). In the beginning of the discussion the researcher, or facilitator, tells the purpose and topic frame of the discussion (Juuti & Puusa 2020). The facilitator may also ask follow-up questions or lead the discussion back to the topic if needed (Juuti & Puusa 2020). This was the guideline used for planning and executing facilitation of the focus group.

The focus group discussion was held via Zoom video call and lasted approximately 1,5 hours. The whole group took part in the conversation actively. At times, the focus was more on practical issues than the core purpose of the discussion. The decision was made to not interfere too much with the natural flow of the discussion as it was clear these topics were important for the participants and active dialogue appeared between them. Some follow up questions were asked when there was a natural pause in conversation.

The analysing process of qualitative data, such as a focus group discussion, is flexible and lives as the process goes on (Juuti & Puusa 2020). As in qualitative research the researcher is an active research instrument, the analysing and observing findings starts already when gathering data (Juuti & Puusa 2020). This was done during focus group discussion when observations, such as used tones and language, were made already during the discussion.

5 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Analysis and the structure of findings and conclusions in this report

The findings of this report are presented thematically with conclusions. This report of findings and conclusions starts with the main insights gathered from the preliminary discussions and interviews. After this, quantitative data and general findings and conclusions are presented. Qualitative insights gathered from the employees with the two supporting methods, the survey and the focus group discussion, are presented together in themes, all under their own subheadings. Final parts of the report include discussion about the practices and ethics of the study, followed by general conclusions, and recommendations. The recommendation works as a guidance that is given to the focus organisation of this case study.

5.2 Key findings from the interviews

Key findings from interviews and discussions with the HR manager:

The HR manager of the focus organisation has recognised reoccurring challenges with remote work communication:

- Individual differences and communication styles
- Challenges with time management and self-governing work can lead to stress and rush.
- Finding the balance between enough communication to create a safe feeling, but not over informing as that can create stress (too much to know) or interrupt the workflow.
- Leadership hierarchies and practices about who reports and communicates to who have been challenging as the work is at the same time independent, but some teams also need leaders and project managers.
- Employees might have some misbeliefs about needing to be available constantly – this might be a case of lacking guidance, or more importantly, what example is shown (managers especially should pay attention to not expect communication over weekends or evenings)

People are vastly different when it becomes to communication and their personality in general. It´s important to find right matches and to have teams that have members that supplement each other's strengths but aren´t also complete opposites so they can understand each other. That´s a good base to build on when it comes to improving communication and feeling empathy towards each other. Different personality tests, such as DISC analysis, are good tools for understanding others. It´s also important that everyone has at least someone they can connect and communicate with just to be social, get support, or even release some stress, even if they can´t identify with the whole team or the general communication.

The communication culture is described as humane, and it aims emphasise freedom as a value even though the company is growing. Safe, accepting, and non-judgemental communication culture accepts also mistakes and supports individuals´ growth. It´s important that something is done if something or someone jeopardises this culture as it can create a lot of mistrust and despair. It´s important to keep to promises about the communication culture or employees can start to have negative feelings and thoughts that: "Nothing ever changes anyway". The culture is also low hierarchy. Leadership, hr, and team seniors are important, and they are needed, but they are not for telling others what to do. Their place is there for support and safety. Some people find it difficult to ask for help from leaders and are less active communicators in the first place. If a person like this does ask for help and doesn´t get it, it might have negative effects on that person´s feelings. It´s important that leaders have enough resources to help and support others.

People in any leadership position or project management position need to be good communicators and have empathy towards others. The most important thing is that they are likeable and caring. Experiences, where leaders perhaps lacked some empathy in situations or couldn´t think about how their communication affects others and the whole team, have been valuable lessons. Leaders and middle hr positions can have a key effect on wellbeing, communication, and motivation of the whole organisation.

Stress is problematic. Everyone is stressed out at times, but stress can lead to bad communication and it can be experienced very negatively by others. A person can also think they are being effective and to the point with their communication, or they are maybe tired, but to others their communication can be rude and as if they use their management position wrong.

Change comes with heightened need for communicating. But change can also be a possibility to improve and develop things, as long as the employees are included in the processes and decision making.
(Interview in 2020)

Key findings from interview with Ilona Rauhala

Rauhala described how there is a bias on how people experience empathy. They often come across more empathetic than they do if others were to evaluate them. For person to come across as an empathetic communicator, they need to show and communicate empathy to others systemically. People are naturally a little reserved and can take long to experience someone as empathetic.

The 5OK model (Rauhala 2020) is a good model for conversations. No steps of the model can be missed or unbalanced. This could lead to, for example, less connection and less mutual learning, which can lead to misunderstandings. It´s a skill to do all the aspects well as this creates a connection, and empathy, yet things still get done effectively. Learning good conversational skills and measuring them is recommended in organisations.

In remote work, based on experience with organisations, it seems that there needs to be personal connection before moving over to written or instant messaging. This helps lessen misunderstandings. People are naturally very prone to making assumptions. It is possible to create connections and feel empathy in remote work communication, but it might take more effort on both sides.

The role of leadership depends on the culture. If the culture is very self-driven and the employees can organise work among themselves, leaders are naturally needed less. But if leaders have a centric role in the work, their way of communicating can have a big effect on the whole atmosphere.

Sometimes it is also just a case that the employee and the organisational culture don´t match. If there is a mismatch on a value level, for example, it can cause unsafety and negative feelings.

It´s important to also talk about differences and how different people work and communicate. Mutual understanding and knowing about the team member´s personalities help greatly with communication.
(Rauhala 2021)

Conclusions about the interviews

The experiences of both interviewed experts are to most extend aligned with findings from literature and previous research. Both describe how leaders affect communication culture, and especially their negative effects on it can be damaging. Leaders should be empathetic and good remote communicators. The possibility of added stress and misunderstandings in remote work communication is clearly recognised and taken seriously by the HR manager, which is important to create successful changes.

5.3 Satisfaction with current communication and quantifiable findings

The findings of the modified and customed-made version of the CSQ questionnaire give an overview of the satisfaction with the current internal communication. These findings aren´t analysed in detail as they are quantitative, but they do offer interesting data of the possible focus areas that need more attention than others.

The average numeric value of all answers in the section (with 10 statements) measuring employee communication satisfaction was approximately 3,9 on the scale of 1 – 5. This average is closest to the value 4, which was defined as somewhat agreeing with the statements and being somewhat satisfied. The lowest average between all questions of a single participant was 2, which was defined as somewhat not agreeing with the statements and being somewhat dissatisfied. The highest average between all question of a single participant was 5, which was defined as agreeing with statements and being satisfied. Whilst the average numeric value of communication satisfaction is relatively good, there was quite a

lot of deviation between individuals and between different statements being evaluated as seen in Appendix 2.

The hypothesis was that in the questionnaire there might be noticeable differences between those who have worked remotely only for a short while and those who are experienced with remote work. On average the employees most satisfied with the communication (measured with the numeric data) were those who have worked remotely the least number of months averaging at 4,3 (when worked under 12 months remotely). The difference in the average is noticeable as those who have worked over 25 months (the majority) average on 3.6. It is to be noted that the largest group, who have worked remotely over 36 months, has the most extreme variety as the lowest individual average is at a 2 and the highest at a 5. Half of the employees fell into this group, so it is natural to see more variety in a larger sample. This sample is small for quantitative data, but for the focus organisation, it gives valuable information. The numeric average of employee communication satisfaction and the written-out answers given by the same employees were to most extend nonconflicting.

Below are the statements in the reverse order of average satisfaction (as seen in Appendix 2). This way, the higher priority areas of improvement are presented first. Under each section, analysis and any conclusions related to the section are presented.

C. The communication in my organisation makes me identify with it or feel like a vital part of it - I feel sense of belonging 3,3

- This statement produced the most variety in answers. This might be indication that there isn´t an identifiable communication channel for everyone. More opportunities to connect can be helpful. This is supported by theory: empathy and open dialogue can help boost sense of belonging (Prince 2019; Vilkman 2020).

*A. The amount of communication in my organisation is about right **3,4***

- The lack of communication (due to several reasons) was the most frequently mentioned challenge also in the qualitative insights. Considering these feelings from employees, systematic improvements can be made in communication practices.

G. I get on-time information in order for me to do my work **3,4**

- When analysing the qualitative answers, the challenge of not getting on-time information was often linked with the feeling of rush or stress not with practical challenges such as insufficient tools.

F. The communication in my organisation makes me feel that my feelings are considered **3,6**

- This statement links directly with empathy. For a company wanting to foster a humane culture, improving this experience should be a focus area even though the average is currently relatively high.

E. The communication in my organisation makes me feel like my ideas or opinions are considered and respected **3,7**

- The qualitative data suggests that employees who rated this section low, also felt there is too little active, present communication.

D. I feel like I'm listened to and paid attention to **3,9**

- In the qualitative data, one employee mentioned that more attention needs to be paid to the use of right communication channels. On practical level right channels for communication might improve this experience. Empathetic communication includes active listening and responding; therefore, empathy can improve the feeling of being heard and paid attention to.

J. I feel it's safe for me to communicate without the fear of being judged **4**

- This section links directly with empathy and empathetic communication as empathy essentially is being non-judgemental and considering. The statement also links to overall psychological safety of the organisation. Whilst the average satisfaction level is good at a 4, improving and

maintaining the experience of psychological safety should be considered as a priority in a remote organisation. As seen in Appendix 3, there is individual variation with this experience.

*B. The communication happens in the right channels **4,2***

- Out of all the statements this is perhaps the most practical one to improve. As seen in Appendix 3, most employees agree with this statement, which is not a surprise as the focus organisation has already established and developed their use of different remote communication channels.

*I. The communication makes me feel that I'm trusted **4,3***

- Trust is a core value in the organisation, and it is a positive finding that it is reflected in most employee's communication experiences.

*H. I get help or support when needed **4,4***

- This positive finding can be a result of well-established system around remote work. Empathetic communication might improve the experience of the only individual who evaluated this section low.

The two open ended questions of the questionnaire that focused on improved ideas and what more could be done to improve the communication culture received answers that go in-hand with the participant´s overall satisfaction with the communication. With these two questions, approximately third of the answers of the questionnaire describe an experience of an empathetic and motivating communication culture or didn´t have any improvement ideas. The rest, approximately two thirds of participants, gave improvement ideas. When it comes to the language used in these improvement ideas and suggestions, it is to be noted that most of them uses a somewhat neutral language. On the other hand, there were several answers from participants that use a language and examples that can be linked to a communication culture that lacks empathy and has traits of poor internal communication as described by Porath and Pearson (2019). These included mentions of inequality in how different employees are treated and communicated with, inequality in terms of communicated rules, wish for more humane communication, wish for change of personnel, feelings of being withheld information or

not given it on time, lack of trust for the management to follow up on ideas and to be present, and stressful communication environment.

The questionnaire (Appendix 1) included a section that gives direct quantitative insights on how employees perceive the current communication culture. In this section there were total on 24 words or phrase options available to choose from 19 of them were chosen by participants at least once. These answers serve as a valuable benchmark for reassessments in the future.

In this section, half of the participants chose the word empathetic among others to describe the current communication culture. Also other phrases and words that can be seen to link with empathy were frequestly chosen. The words or statements that were chosen to describe the current communication culture have been listed below in the order of frequency. Out of those words or phrases, the ones that can be linked with empathy (as it is defined in the theoretical framework of this thesis) are marked with the colour green. Those words or phrases that can be partly or in some situations be linked with empathy are marked with blue. Those words or phrases that describe an unempathetic communication culture or that can be seen to hinder empathy have been marked with red. Under each section below is dialogue with the theoretical framework that explain the colour codes.

Mistakes are ok 13

Having the feeling, without fear of judgement, that mistakes can be talked about and learned from is part of psychological safety (Glazer 2021). It links to empathy as empathetic communication is understanding and non-judgmental (Salonen 2017; Prince 2019).

Team spirit 12

Empathy helps with cooperation, working together, and interaction with others (Huotilainen & Saarikivi 2018; Vilkman 2019).

Supportive 11

Empathy helps to understand the emotions and suffering in others (Aaltola & Keto 2018), and to support others when they need it.

Understanding 11

Empathy is being understanding of others (Prince 2019). Empathy is understanding other both emotionally and intellectually (Salonen 2017).

Forgiving 10

"Empathy is being non-judgemental" (Prince 2019, 124)

Helpful 10

Empathy allows to be morally present with others and to help others, thus being helpful is linked to empathetic communication (Aaltola & Keto 2018)

Open 10

Open communicational culture can be understood for example as being honest, welcoming, or inclusive. These are also linked to empathy that in its core as empathy helps to be social with others and helps to understand their views open-mindedly (Aaltola & Keto 2018).

People are listened 9

Empathetic communication is about being present for the other person and active listening with an active aim to understand the other person and their feelings and motivations (Prince 2019, 141 – 143; Rantanen et al. 2020).

Safe 9

Psychological capital of the organisation is linked with creating a motivating, psychologically safe culture (Rauhala et al. 2013). Change and too much business-growth orientation (versus people-centricity and empathy) can lead to decreased feeling of safety, motivation, and even burnouts (Bruch & Menges 2010). Fear of judgement or punishment decreases creativity and motivation (Rantanen 2020; Glazer 2021).

Empathetic 8

Empathetic is communication culture is linked with better performance, and better employee satisfaction and wellbeing (Nowack & Zak 2020).

Positive 8

Positive and empathetic communication is crucial for organisations as seen from the alarming studies by Porath and Pearson. Emotions are contagious and ripple down the organisation, therefore positivity is crucial. (Goleman, 1998).

Motivating 8

Several studies suggest empathetic organisational culture and practises result in better performance, more creativity, and better employee satisfaction and wellbeing (Nowack & Zak 2020).

Stressful 3

Rush and stress in known to lessen interest in creating meaningful connection and known to lessen empathy (Rantanen 2020 & 2021).

Unmotivating 2

Communication that leads to less motivation leads to less commitment and interest in the work and can lead to avoiding others (Porath & Pearson 2009).

Not caring 2

Uncaring communication culture decreases wellbeing and commitment (Porath & Pearson 2009). Empathy is caring for others´ feelings (Prince 2020) and uncaring is essentially the opposite of it.

Ignoring 2

Empathetic communication considers the feelings of others and active listening is practiced (Prince 2020).

Unsafe or insecure 2

Psychological safety is the most valuable asset for teams (Rozovsky, 2015).

Hierarchical 1

Hierarchical organisational structures and use of management power are known to hinder empathy in an organisation (Huotilainen & Saarikivi, 2018).

Individualistic 1

Individualistic communication culture could be viewed as negative and nonempathetic in the sense that there isn´t meaningful connections or cooperation. However, Huotilainen & Saarikivi emphasise how important it is to view and treat others as individuals (2018).

The answers marked in red are from five (of 16) participants. Three of the participants choosing the red words also chose green or blue words. Two participants only chose red words to describe the communication culture. For the focus organisation it is a positive finding that mainly green and blue words were chosen by employees. As the focus organisation values a humane culture that considers individuals, it's important to remeasure this after some time, to see if the deviations between individuals have levelled out with improved, empathetic internal communication practices.

The amount of communication was mentioned as a challenge frequently in qualitative data. The amount of communication can be linked to many themes, and therefore, it is discussed in this report under several themes of findings. It can

also be seen more as a practical issue, if for example it isn´t clear which channel to use to communicate. From the data of both the survey and the focus group discussion, it's clear that there is some dissatisfaction in the organisation with the current amount of communication.

As seen on below figure (Figure 2), six out of 16 people evaluated the amount of communication being right with the number two, the rest of the participants were satisfied with the amount of communication rating it either four or a five. Open-ended questions of the questionnaire received several answers mentioning there is too little communication currently. In the focus group discussion similarly, the amount of communication was a recurring theme, mentioned by all participants at some point. The points made out by the participants of this theme can be seen to fall under the following:

1. there isn´t enough communication to know others well

2. finding a balance between rush, effective work, and communicating enough is difficult

3. there is a lot of change in the growing organisation and the current internal communication isn´t up to date

4. there needs to be clearer guidance on certain matters

a) The amount of communication in my organisation is about right / Viestinnän määrä organisaatiossani on sopiva
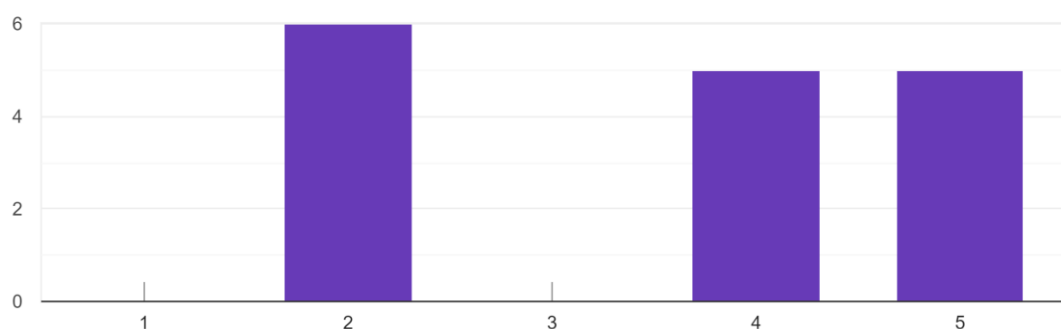
16 vastausta

FIGURE 2. How satisfied employees are with the current amount of internal communication.

5.4 How employees show empathy

The questionnaire (Appendix 1) asked participants two direct questions about how empathy is shown in internal remote work communication. One question focused on how the participant shows empathy and others one on what some of are the things others do to show empathy.

Two participants of the questionnaire couldn´t think of any examples of how others show empathy in their communication, both stated additionally that there is little communication. One participant couldn´t name any way they show empathy to others but instead said they are bad at it but try to improve. The rest gave answers, which all are categorised in the following table (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Frequency of answers about showing empathy.

What others showing empathy in their communication		How I show empathy to others	
Key element	Frequency	Frequency	Total frequency
Using emojis	6	6	12
Offering support or help	5	4	9
Friendly manners	4	3	7
Showing understanding	3	3	6
Positive feedback	2	2	4
Asking questions	2	2	4
Paying attention to communication	1	3	4
Being flexible	2	2	4
Encouraging	2	2	4
Sharing own experiences	1	2	3
Listening	1	2	3
Calls	1	1	2
Showing compliance	1	1	2

Creating positive atmosphere		1	1
Thanking	1		1
Practise what you breach		1	1
Humour		1	1
Welcoming new employees		1	1

The most frequent description on how to show empathy in remote communication was the use of emojis. Whilst it is known that the use of emojis add commonly known cues that help the reader understand intended tone (Alshenqeeti 2016, 60), it is hard to see how it would solely be enough to show and receive empathy. When analysing this deeper many questions arise: Does it still require personal contact and connection to understand how different people use emojis? Are the cues in the form of emojis consistent? Does an emoji reaction to a message fulfil the need to be heard? These would be interesting follow up questions to ask and analyse further, as the collected data of this study don't answer these questions.

The second most frequent description from employees of how empathy is shown was *offering support or help*. In some answers, this also was given together with *showing understanding* and *sharing own experiences*. Supporting this is the view given by the HR manager that having connections for help and channels to ask for it effectively can be crucial for the employee's experience in remote work.

In the focus group discussion, it was additionally stated by many of the participants that an emotional connection and empathy is linked with the amount of communication. It was especially pointed out that there should be more space for free, non-work-related communication that would boost forming connections with others. This was mentioned by everyone who took part in the conversation. For example, informal virtual coffee breaks and weekly video chats were mentioned as a suggestion. At some point in the conversation, all participants mentioned uncertainty over how much time can be used for such informalities as there is also pressure of being effective. Many of the participants also mentioned that scheduled times for informal communication would mean there is a set time and place where it happens and ensure that all (not just the more extroverted ones) would participate.

Intresting dimention of showing empathy is a difference between how empathetic people evaluate their communication versus that of others. The bias mentioned by Rauhala (2021) could be studied in more detail if these questions were asked at an individual level and people did self-evaluation as well as evalution of other individuals. This wasn´t seen as practical for the objectives and time restrestions of this study as it was also important to gather other insights. As seen in the figure below (Figure 3), the participants seem to have regocnised there is a bias and their perception of how their empathetic their communication is might not match how others perceive it. Nearly everyone rated their perception higher than what they think others would perceive their communication.
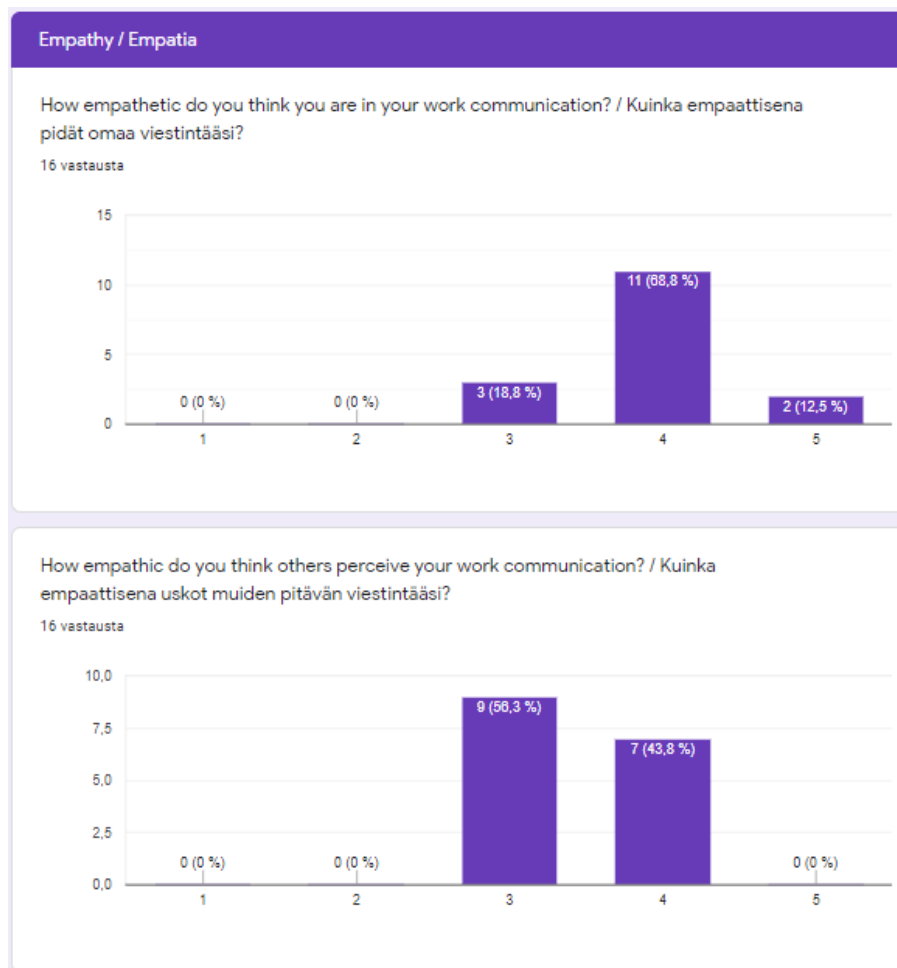

FIGURE 3. Evaluating empathy.

Interestingly, as shown in the below figure (Figure 4), the communication in the organisation was evaluated overall quite empathetic with majority of (11 out of 16) evaluating the statement with a four, three participant having neutral view on

it, and two participants evaluating the communication very empathetic with a five (Figure 4).

How empathetic do you personally consider the communication in your organisation? / Kuinka empaattisena koet viestinnän organisaatiossasi?

16 vastausta

FIGURE 4. Evaluating how empathetic the communication is.

The questionnaire data indicate that the current communication culture is perceived relatively empathetic by most employees. Yet, there is some conflicting findings. For example, one participant evaluated that the overall communication in the company as empathetic (giving it a four). But the same participant didn´t feel they can identify with the communication, didn´t feel they are paid attention to, and also chose words not caring, unmotivang, and ignoring to describe the current communication culture. In the focus group discussion, the lack of real connections and understanding others (through knowing each other better and communicating more) was mentioned at some point by every participant.

There are many possible reasons for these inconsistencies in the data. Also the mere fact that there is conflicting views (even when looking participants on an invidualistic level) shows that the topic is important and complex, and that some actions ought to be taken to have a more consistent communication culture.

One possible reason is the fact that empathy wasn´t definefined for the participants of the study. The conflicting data suggest that the perception of empathy in remote communication might be narrower than how empathy typically is perceived in litterature and study. Supporting this suggestion, the data collected from questionnaire with the questions how employees show empathy in remote communication show that employees think empathy is shown with simply

gestures, such as using an emoji or having friendly manners. Only few of the participants answered in more detail and gave multilayered insights. There is ofcourse a possibility that the data collection tool, a questionnaire, effects this as participants might lack the time or motivation to write out answers in detail, and there is also no chanse to ask follow up questions. This was expected to some extent and the reason why a focus group dicussion was held as a supporting data collection method. It is to be noted that there is individual differences on how well people are able to evaluate or word their experiences of emotions and abilities like empathy. Another possibility for the deviation is that empathy and how to show empathy, in it´s complexity, cannot be concretely evaluated or described at an orgnanisational level as it varies so much between different situations and between different people involved in the situations.

5.4.1 Empathetic language and responses

Whilst it is not in the aims of this study to analyse the empathy levels of individual participants of the study (nor are the methdos used suitable for doing that reliably), the use of language is an interesting domain that qualitative data allows. The used language with its choise of words and tones, or natural dialogue where applicable, holds great amounts of qualitative information that can be analysed (Alasuutari 2015, 265).

During the focus group discussion, empathetic responses could be seen between the participants as they actively listened, commented on each others insights, showed support to each other, and also seeked to find ideas to solve problems that others were having. Some answers of these empathetic responses can be seen below (translated from original discussion language Finnish to English):

- I have encountered that for example new people are afraid to put anything out on the internal Slack channels, as they are afraid to mark it as work time –

That is indeed a pretty bad thing. Maybe the internal communication could be developed by creating a culture and guidance on how it is acceptable that time is

used for other communication and that all work doesn´t have to be effective billable work.

I agree with many of the things. I have also worked here for a longer time and still I work with some people whose face I have never seen even on video. – I message a lot with many people, but it would be lovely to get to know each other better and to know atleast basic things about the other in order to also understand each other better. If we would know a bit like where each other live, how our lives are, and family situation, and other things it allows to understand the other one better. It also would increase compassion and sense of belogning.

I believe I heard that you are a bit in a situation where you are pretty alone, and like you might feel like no one really knows anything about anything, so maybe something like having a coffee together, like it was done in the office – they were our moments which were really important.

In this focus group discussion, empahty was thus shown remotely in a video call conversation between five people. Each parcticipant used empathetic communication, as it is defined in this study. It is an interesting question to wonder wether such empathetic interaction and dialogue would have happened should the focus group discussion have been held in written form over communication channel on Slack, which is commonly used for internal communication in the organisation and is, therefore, a natural setting.

The majority of the responses of the open-ended questions included words and language that can be linked to empathetic communication or the presence of empathy, such as the below example (translated from Finnish to English):

We can figure things out together and there is no jugdement or anything negative between the employees.

The use of emojies has a big impact and it up-lifts the atmosphere.

I really like that people call each other and solve things together instead of just writing to each other.

Relaxed chatting and getting to know the trueself of colleagues (not just the workself who is often in a hurry) brings great amounts of energy and creates a feeling of a nice work community.

Positive feedback has increased motivation and streghtened my belief in my own abilities. Understanding responses to difficult situations have been a relief and helped to look forward.

These examples clearly describe a collobrative, nonjudgmental, and positive communication environment. The word choises are also optimistic and there is a hopeful tone. There is however deviation as some, (less than one fourth), of the written answers to open-ended questions either used words linked with nonempathetic communication culture or themself seem like non-empathetic responses, examples being (translated into English):

Sometimes, but very rarely, I get positive feedback, the flexibility of people seems to be taken as granted.

I feel like an outsider when it comes to many things and changes happening in the company. I might hear of things through a colleague, sometimes after a long delay. Different people have different rules.

Some people should go.

On a theoretical level it is known that people have a deeply inbuilt desire to be treated fairly and feelings of unfair or immorale treatment activate haterate in the the brain. This can lead to negative and pessimistic cycle. (Rantanen et al. 2020) Empathy is said to be the most important feeling guiding humans to moral decisions and empathy also helps to see others as individuals with their own experiences, needs and views (Aaltola & Keto 2018).

Individuals feeling people are treated differently or taken as granted might feel that their needs, views, or experiences have not been listened to or have not been considered. Expressing feelings of unfair treatment or being taken for granted

suggest that there have been some dissapointments, frustration, or uncertainty leading to these feelings. Possibly, even some haterett and negativity has been activated trough feelings of unfairness. Similarly, feeling of being witheld information might feel unfair, frustrating, or even stratle psychological safety. "Some people should go" was an aswer given on its own without further explanations but the choice of words and meaning suggest there is a lot of feelings assosiated with it.

Going back to what is known in theory, with negative emotions especially, it is important to be alert as emotions are contagious. When certain emotions and feelings reaccure frequenty, the start to form the dominating climate that further forms the culture (Rauhala et al. 2013). Even a single emotion such as fear or chynicism can spread widely if no action is taken (Rauhala et al. 2013).

5.4.2 Critical Incident Technique findings about empathy in remote communication

The participants of the survey were asked in the questionnaire (Appendix 1) to describe an internal communication incident that has had a positive impact on them. All participants answered the question, but many of them did not used detailed description that is required for the technique to give in depth qualitative insights. For this reason, an in-depth analysis typical to CIT is not included in this report. Data that contributed towards the research question was considered and key findings and conclusion are reported below.

Positive feedback was the most mentioned communication incident that has had a positive impact on the individual (9 out of 16 participants mentioned this directly). Some mentioned how it's reassuring to receive positive feedback and how it creates to positive environment and positive feelings. One employee also added that whilst feedback is motivating, it should happen more often as in an office environment there are more chances for it to happen naturally than in a virtual work environment. Many participants mentioned the Slack channel that focuses solely on positive feedback to others as important and uplifting channel. Also feedback from project managers or leaders were mentioned as a way of them

making others feel good. Additionally, two participants mentioned that talking about mistakes and getting understanding feedback and reassurance that the making mistakes is ok and can be learned from has had a positive impact on how they feel.

Communicating as a team and solving problems together as a team was mentioned by five participants. One described in more detail how it has an uplifting and motivating effect. Three participants also mentioned talking non-work-related stuff and connecting with others in that manner as a communication incident that has had a positive impact on them. This is directly supported by the theoretical framework.

Mirroring these answers back to empathy, it is known that practising gratitude or uplifting others in the form of positive feedback and having understanding response to mistakes are linked to empathetic communication (Prince 2019, 126-129). Creating connections with others is the necessary for empathy to occur in the first place.

The words *encouragement, non-judgemental,* and *understanding* were used directly by two participants and indirectly by a third when they were describing a positive communication experience. These link directly with empathy as defined in the theoretical framework. Other mentioned but nonfrequent answers included:
- the use of emojis as uplifting atmosphere and feelings
- introducing new employees (a recent practice) and informing about their responsibilities

Whilst question asked to describe a positive incident, three participants also gave areas of improvement. The feedback included more feedback, more active Slack channels for project teams, and a wonder if people´s flexibility is taken for granted.

5.5 Theming the qualitative findings

The communication topics of the focus group discussion as well as answers to the open-ended questions about improvement ideas on how to improve the internal communication are presented in themes with conclusion. After a categorising and sub-categorising process of the qualitative findings was done, the most frequently recurring themes were:

- connecting with others (chapter 5.6),
- culture of rush (chapter 5.7),
- change (chapter 5.8),
- and the role of leadership (chapter 5.9).

Under these four themes, insights are presented that aim to answer the main research question of *h*ow to improve communication with empathy in remote work. The insights about how empathy is shown in remote work all contribute to the sub-research question and they link to all other findings and themes of this study.

5.6 Connecting with others

Connecting with others on a more personal level, sharing experiences and feedback, as well as increasing the quality and quantity of communication were all topics present frequently in questionnaire answers as well as in the focus group discussion. The wish to connect, communicate more, and identify with the organisational communication were recurring topics of this theme.

One participant in the focus group organisation mentioned how knowing each other better would add compassion, empathy, and sense of belonging. Another participant shared thoughts abouts feeling lonely at times and stated that there isn´t much active communication on a level that it would be possible to really connect and know each other. Two other participants responded to this by suggesting how to increase the communication and find people to connect with. The responses themself were empathetic, but it was also mentioned that sharing these feelings and thoughts are important as they always come across in the daily

work conversations over Slack. More video calls and less formal virtual get-to-gethers were mentions as possible channels for sharing such feelings.

During the focus group discussion every participant mentioned that there is some communication lacking (both quantity and quality of it) at some point.

In the focus group discussion, the way to show empathy to others was described by one employee as taking time for the other person and reaching out to connect with them. The same employee described how this time for connection needs to actively initiated and scheduled in the calendar, or otherwise it tends to get less and less with time.

As empathetical communication culture is known to improve the satisfaction and motivation, and ultimately well-being and results, these finding cannot be over-looked although the overall satisfaction with communication was rated relatively high.

In the questionnaire, one person rated the overall satisfaction of current communication in the questionnaire a 5 (agreed with all ten statements) and did not have any improvement suggestion. This is an important qualitative insight that suggests that although there are frequent and popular themes, there are also individual differences on employee experiences. Therefore, there will never be a solution that fully solves all challenges although actions are be taken to improve the employee experience and success.

The finding that even those generally quite satisfied with the current communication want to connect more with others and that some don´t feel they can identify with the current communication culture might be some of the most important aspects of this study. This is important to remember especially since the company is growing and there is likely to be more employers in the future. Focusing on solving this theme might solve some other more practical communication issues that were mentioned by employees, such as information gaps between teams, not knowing other employees 'responsibilities, and having misunderstandings in written communication.

5.7 Culture of rush

Culture of rush is a somewhat provocative name for the theme of hurry and pressure to be effective, but it is also one that describes this topic with many subcategories the best. Whilst only three participants of the questionnaire chose the word stressful to describe the current communication culture, not having time for communication or being in a rush and under pressure to be effective was mentioned by several participants of the questionnaire and by all participants of the focus group discussion at some point (it is unknown if these are the same people). Most of the participants of the focus group discussion mentioned being in a rush or not having time to communication more than once during the communication. It was also mentioned by them that there is poor time management and practices and lacking guidance around the topics, which might create some of the feelings of stress and rush even if there wasn´t actually that much rush. From the tones and intensity of the discussion some frustration or negative feelings around the topic could be sensed. The participants also linked being in a rush with less empathetic and present communication.

The discussion also describes some feelings of uncertainty and clearer guidance was asked on how much time can be used on internal communication. This was mentioned to also create feelings of being in a hurry with internal communication especially. Examples of this being (translated from Finnish into English):

I would wish more space for communication. – I feel at times there is little time or the connection isn´t deep enough to get to know others truly –.

I feel like there is some unclarity over how much time can be used for internal communication.

Maybe the internal communication could be developed by creating a culture and guidance on how it is acceptable that time is used for other communication and that all work doesn´t have to be effective billable work.

I get the feeling that we have a lot of guilt over not doing billable, effective work and this works as an obsticle for internal communication.

The culture has felt like it isn´t really acceptable to use time (for internal communication).

During the focus group discussion, the participants established that it is not actually effective to try to be effective all the time as it is not realistic. Creating clearer guidance was suggested as practical and easy step to take. Some of the participants mentioned how important the focus group discussion was as they get to word these feelings out and come up with ideas together for solving these feelings.

Some of the answers given by employees suggest that there are communicational habits that make it feel like there is a rush. One employee mentioned how some people are busy and it is celebrated as a good thing. One employee mentioned how ideas fly constantly but there aren´t follow ups.

There might be several reasons for the so-called culture of rush that includes the following categories created during data analysis: feeling of being in a hurry, celebrating high-tempo, stressful communication, availability, effectiveness, and the pressure and uncertainty over how much time can be spent on internal communication. It was mentioned that some people are indeed busy, and the workload could in some cases be spread more evenly.

The frequency of this theme recurring or the overall average of communication satisfaction doesn´t necessary suggest that the organisation is in the so-called acceleration trap as described in the theoretical framework, but it is something that should be paid attention to especially as the company grows more and sets more ambitious business goals. There are obvious problems that can arise with such a culture, after all being in a rush, high competition, and lack of time to connect can decrease empathy. Especially if continuous, the feeling of overloading, hurry, or pressure can lessen motivation and lead to burnouts or resignations (Bruch & Menges 2010).

It is known that when being in a rush or in the middle of stressful situation it is difficult to be present for others and positive emotions aren´t present (Rantanen

et al. 2020), tackling the feeling of rush is crucial for empathetic communication or when wishing to improve communication.

The issue might also need a deeper look into how well the values and culture that the organisation wants to foster shows in everyday communication.

5.8 Change

It was mentioned by several employees and recurringly that the information about changes is lacking. Some explained in more detail how this creates feelings of not knowing what is going on (uncertainty). Examples of this below (translated from Finnish to English):

One thing that I really wish is more information when things happen as sometimes when things happen, for example change or a new employee, or someone has gone, the information doesn´t reach everyone. Recently, steps have been taken to improve better but there is still more to improve. – It´s also important to have dialogue, not just information coming from top down but a possibility to discuss and for everyone to share their opinion and have a possibility to effect things.

Situations change extremely fast. People change, situations are alive, and re-sponsibilities change, the roles change. It would be especially important that all of this information would be up to date.

There was also a frequently mentioned wish to have clearer information on current values and aims and some employees expressed feelings of uncertainty over where the organisation is going and what is happening.

From another angle, there was also discussion on promised changes that haven´t happened. Everyone in the focus group discussion agreed that there shouldn´t be empty promises but information about change should be followed promptly by action and at least some follow-up updating. These information "teasers" that aren´t followed with action, as some employees called them, could be seen viewed negatively by the tones and facial expressions of the participants. One

participant mentioned that empathy needs the shown in the communication daily, it can´t just be an empty value on paper such as *being people-centric* if this value does not show in the actions every day.

From theory, it is known that change always startles the feeling of security and that empathetic, good leadership and inclusive communication are ways to tackle any feelings of uncertainty coming with change.

5.9 Role of leadership

The questionnaire asked if the employees would wish something from the management or leaders to help improve the internal communication, and if so, what. Five (out of 16) didn´t give an answer or said they can´t think of anything. Two (out of 16) stated they are happy with the current situation. They described that they get enough support and feedback.

The rest gave answers that can be divided into two approaches: practical and emotional. The latter being the one placed more focus on as it contributes more towards the research questions. Most of these suggestions were given in a neutral or optimistic tone, and a few used words that can be seen to express dissatisfaction.

Practical wishes included team meetings, more general information about key numbers, values, goals, more and clearer guidance, and more communication in general. These are all solved with practical steps of for example weekly or monthly team meetups and regular informing that reaches the whole company (as suggested by some of the employees in the questionnaire and in the focus group discussion).

The emotional approach again has many layers. Most of the answers given in this section aren´t unique as they were either mentioned in the answers of several employees. These frequent answers included the following points:
- Uncertainty and lacking information about ongoing or upcoming changes

- Needing clearer communication over roles and responsibilities (of own and those of others)
- Hoping for following up initiatives
- More meetings, meetups, or more systematic and regular internal communication from leaders would help to connect and increase motivation.
- Feeling of rush and stress is not good for the communication and it should be solved somehow, and leaders could contribute to this.
- More teamwork and opportunities for working together would help project work and lift motivation.

One employee mentioned how the communication environment is stressful and there is a lot of information lacking. The employee further explained that there should be more information about responsibilities and the workload should be spread out more evenly between different employees. In these regards, the employee wished more leadership.

One employee explained in detail how there should be more, or clearer, guidance and clearer communication about common values and goals. The tone of the message suggests some disappointment in current communication culture when it comes to leadership. Another employee also mentions clearer guidance in the context of getting clear answers to questions. This employee also feels that being in a rush or overworked sometimes means managers don´t have time to answer promptly, which creates uncertainty.

One employee mentioned that leadership in lacking in many aspects and promises are not kept. As there was no example given with this answer, it is impossible to say if this refers to a single incident or personal experience or observation the employee has made.

It´s to be noted, that most giving wishes to improve communication from management evaluated the communication culture still empathetic.

5.10 Final conclusions

The findings of this study are, to most extend, in line with insights provided by relevant literature, experts, and studies. It is interesting that although the organisation has vast experience with remote work, the challenges in communication seem to be similar with many organisations across contexts. One possible explanation for this is that the human experience with communication and empathy is simply that – human, and it doesn´t vary that much between different environments or work settings.

Some of the most important findings of this study might be how delicate the feelings of certainty, clarity, and being communicated empathetically are.

The right amount communication might be something that needs tweaking continuously, even when there is a lot of experience with remote work communication and good practices and channels in place. This study concluded that amongst remotely working employees, there is some dissatisfaction with the amount of communication as well as the communication culture itself. Some employees felt they cannot identify with the current communication or don´t feel like their ideas or feelings are considered. Simply adding more communication or expecting every employee to communicate throughout the day would not be a solution for these issues. Firstly, as conducted by this study and the theoretical framework, people have different preferences. Some people need more regular communication and support while other thrive with less. Secondly, constant interruptions or communicating in the wrong channels can increase stress and lessen focus.

In the focus organisation the employees have been provided with some training on time management and how to use technological tools to effectively plan out their days. The study findings indicate, however, that more guidance and training would be beneficial, and this might reduce the feeling of stress and rush felt by many employees.

This study suggested that those working remotely for a shorter period were on average more satisfied with the internal communication than those working remotely for a longer period. The sample of those working longer was however

bigger and so were the extremes in that sample. Uncertainty and lack of information were mentioned by those employees who had worked remotely the longest but were the most unsatisfied with the communication. Their answers suggested personal experiences of disappointment and lack of clear information, suggesting changes have happened during their time of employment. Those working remotely for less time might have started their employment during a more stable time, with less change happening and with clearer guidance in place for new employees. To further explain this phenomena, more qualitative data should be gathered through one-on-one interviews for example.

The study concluded that empathy can be, and is shown, in remote internal work communication in various ways. Having enough time to do so was highlighted in the findings.

There is no one simple solution to improving organisational communication with empathy. There is a lot of possibilities to create more connections and to empower people better based on the findings, but there is no quick fix that would give the best possible results on its own. For example, just because the use of emojis as showing empathy was mentioned by employees does not mean that problems they mentioned would resolve if everyone used more emojis in their written communication. Therefore, one-off solutions do not work but there needs to be continuous effort and reassessing in place.

6 DISCUSSION

As qualitative data is collected in natural settings, which vary, replicating qualitative research reliably is difficult, and on the other hand, one should be careful with generalisations (McLeod, 2019). It could be argued that findings of this study are only valid in the focus organisation, however, it is important to remember that empathy, as understood in this study, is a very human emotion and is as such universal to humans. Perceptions and experiences of empathy are always valid human feelings. Any research done to understand empathy better in the digital communication environment helps to understand how to improve work communication in remote work and other virtual contexts. The importance and timeliness of this topic can´t be emphasised enough as trends and development suggest remote work and digital communication are here to stay. There is more and more proof and research backing up the arguments that positive emotional environment, empathy, and other humane skills are crucial at work (Tuominen 2020).

What is good qualitative research and how does it look like? The answer to this question isn´t clear, as there is variety of beliefs of what qualifies as ethical research and how is the link between science and research (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018). Having systematic structure, using relevant theory, and basing arguments on them can be seen as indications of good, ethical qualitative research (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018). Ethicality of research also covers the standards of it: the research report should be clear, and the research should be constructed and conducted in a well-planned manner (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018). Well-planned and clearly reported research have been the aim of this study. The work began with understanding qualitative research and forming a good understanding of relevant theory and literature. Guidance on good research practices and ethics have been kept as a backbone throughout the process.

The role of researcher in qualitative study is always emphasised. As such, the researcher and chosen practices also affect the quality, and ethics of the study. In qualitative research, it is crucial that the findings aren´t just listed, but that there

is some discussion, possible conclusions, and dialogue with relevant theory. Interpreting qualitative data and drawing conclusions and suggestions based of the data requires expertise in the field that is studied (McLeod, 2019).

Transparency throughout the process and reporting has been one key aim to ensure the study is ethical. Therefore, choices made during the research has been documented and justified as clearly as possible. This includes reporting the methods, results, and conclusions of this study, which are all included in this report.

This study included variety of data collecting methods to get more detailed and natural data of the accruing communicational experiences in the organisation. As qualitative data have many nuances, using a combination of methods seemed like the best way to capture them.

When qualitative research is conducted across many disciplines, the outcomes of research vary from observations to new insights and understanding to evaluation, depending on the nature of the research and where the focus is (Saldaña 2011, 4). In this study, the focus was on empathetic communication and the perception of empathy. In the gathered data, there are likely to be many more possible conclusions to be drawn than those presented in this thesis. The findings presented in this study link all to some extent to the research questions and help to understand empathy in remote work communication.

The questionnaire used to collect survey data was custom-made and as such, the findings of it can´t be compared directly with other similar studies. They provided important insights for the perception of the current communication culture of the organisation and benchmarks for any future measurements.

Emotions aren´t concrete and easily measurable. The perception of empathy varies even among scholars, let alone among employees that were studied without predefining empathy for them. How well employees can numerically evaluate empathy in communication can be questioned. It is to be noticed that the numeric evaluation only served as an interesting insight to how the current culture is per-

ceived and if the employees recognise a bias that comes with empathy and emotions in communication. The actual qualitative insights and perceptions were gathered with open-ended question and the focus group discussion.

This topic offers great multidisciplinary possibilities for research that can help widely to understand the needs and future of digital work communication and human experience in it. There is still a lot to discover. During the literature review and topic research of this thesis process, it became clear that there are some gaps in research and literature when it comes to empathy in virtual work communication. Studying the long-term effects of solely virtual or digital work communication on employees' empathetic abilities and emotional intelligence could give some worthy insights on what effects digital communication is having on people. Other interesting and insightful avenues for research are to dig deeper into the dynamics of virtual teams from empathy´s perspective and to do research on a wider sample of remote workers and leaders on their perceptions of how to show empathy and what effects empathetic communication has on them or the organisation holistically.

It is likely that in the future, technology replaces even more of human labour. In this scenario, the importance of skills like creativity, emotional intelligence, and other less linear skills grows as human's role will be focused on creating connections rather than manufacturing or delivering. (Tuominen 2020) In digital work, this means processes can be automated with technology but creativity and using the technology is still up to employees. As the leaps in development of technology are huge and inevitable, there is no use to try and compete in the areas that machines can do. What humans can compete with is humane skills that technology doesn´t have – like empathy. Empathy can be seen as a competitive edge in organisations now and in the future.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 General considerations

Remotely working organisations, especially those growing rapidly, should not take a motivating, effective communication culture and practises for granted, but internal communication culture should be actively improved, measured, and endorsed. The so-called acceleration trap is real threat to the communication culture in a growing SME. In remote work special attention needs to be paid to the values and culture that are endorsed by the management and leaders of the company. Rush, stressful workloads or deadlines and other performance pressures can have a negative effect on the communication culture and practises. Under pressure or stress, also the ability to connect with others on an emotional level and understand others (empathy) is likely to be jeopardised. This can have damaging consequences for both individuals and the organisation.

Business success is, after all, down to the wellbeing and productivity of its employees. In remote work it certainly may require more active work to consider wellbeing of employees as they are scattered and only available via online platforms. Warning alarms should ring if the old saying "out of sight, out of mind" applies in a remote organisation.

SMEs might not have much development budget for internal communication. Another cost-effectivity related question becomes with the nature of remote work – if the work requires a lot of focus, constant communication (especially if it isn´t related to the task or doesn´t concern the employee) can cause unnecessary distractions. Therefore, balancing the right amount of communication in remote work especially is a demanding task and is likely an always ongoing process especially if the company undergoes other changes or grows rapidly.

How to find a balance? Empathetic, yet effective internal communication could be viewed as a puzzle. When it´s built, it forms a beautiful and well-functioning picture. But with any pieces missing, there are gaps, which can be information

gaps, misunderstandings, or negative feelings. If, for example, values and practical guidance would form the frame of the puzzle, but they were missing, other parts of the puzzle would hang loose, or be lost. Holistic approach is crucial.

The following recommendations and ideas are based on the findings and conclusions of this case study. They also include concrete ideas that were suggested by the participants of the study. This guidance is compiled for the focus organisation, but it can be utilised in organisations working in similar contexts and having similar or already established remote working culture.

The last part of these recommendations (chapter 7.10) is addressed directly to remote employees as a practical guide.

<u>What to consider before making changes</u>
Understanding what it requires to start cultural change in organisations can help with the success of change initiatives. As steps taken to improve communication with empathy require changes in the organisation, it is crucial to consider people´s needs during change. According to organisational psychologists Rauhala, Heikkilä and Leppänen, people need the following things during change:

1. Information and guidance on what is happening and why,
2. Support to deal with emotions,
3. Help with learning, and
4. Time to adjust. (Rauhala et al. 2013)

The participants of the focus group discussion took the opportunity to have their voice heard positively. The employees themselves often know what they need the best, and the change might be initiated better when it comes from them – not from to-down.

7.2 First practical recommendations

The insights found in this study can be divided into practical and emotional approaches. Practical improvements of communication practices and channels can be made with little effort and resources. As theory and the study findings suggest,

the emotional side however is more complex and touches on deeply rooted organisational values and culture. Making a change across the organisation in communicational culture will require time and continuous development.

The following practical changes answer the needs stated by employees. They also support needs of people during change (as presented above). They are relatively easy to implement and require little resources, making them cost-effective. Some of the changes have been practiced in the focus organisation before but were put on hold or stopped for various reasons. These practices were, however, requested by many employees.

1. **Breaking information barriers and providing key-information regularly.** The study clearly suggested that there are some communication barriers. Information isn´t shared between different teams, some top-down information and key-metrics are unclear and there is uncertainty about areas of responsibilities. Therefore, the following aspects of information sharing should be taken without delay:

   - Introducing regular information on key-metrics, goals, and values for the whole organisation
   - Clearing any uncertainties over responsibilities and roles
   - Systematically keeping up with monthly team info that has been started recently where each team gives a summary of key information for the rest of the organisation.
   - Systematically keeping up with the recently started and thanked practice of introducing new employees internally for the whole organisation
   - Making sure each team or business unit holds regular team meetings for information sharing and team bonding purposes.

2. **Double checking the basics.** During growth sprints in the organisation some practices have changes and employees have different information, tools, and even different understanding of guidance and rules. This can create uncertainty and lack of trust and motivation, which could be seen in the insights of the study. Doing a one-off check that every employee has sufficient tools and guidance, channels for communication, and other basics in place is a worthwhile activity. This includes a review of induction

and training material and the intranet. Any feelings of unfair treatment or not having the basics in place could hinder change initiatives as they can lead to negative cycles, therefore, it is important that clear guidance is in place.

3. **Re-introducing weekly catch-up questionnaire.** Weekly questionnaire in digital form reaches all employees on a regular basis. To ensure its not a superficial change there needs to be follow up if someone raises concerning information or great ideas in the weekly catch up. It is also particularly important that people know that someone (and who) reads the answers, and that their opinions, work satisfaction, feelings, and ideas matter. It should be therefore clearly stated why the weekly questionnaire is important and how it can have an effect in the workplace.

4. **Re-introducing training.** More regular training and video meetups for peer-learning were requested by some of the employees in the study. Re-introducing a company-wide training schedule not only gives employees new knowledge and skills to improve their work but to also indicates to employees that the company supports their growth. First training topic could be on the topics of time management / planning the day, communication practices and channels, and how to best utilise the available tools. The training schedule and extent of it can be adjusted according to resources and needs.

5. **Re-introducing support person for new employees.** These support employees are senior employees of the same teams. This practice ensures that a new employee is not "left to learn alone" after the induction, and that everyone has a possibility to form a connection and get support.

6. **Presenting the findings of this study and the steps following it.** This should include all employees of the organisation. Also, the intended plans for changes should be communicated (and followed up).

After these practical changes are made, longer change processes can start. The recommendations of the following chapters (7.3 – 7.7) are themed according to the findings and conclusions of the study.

7.3 Taking a look at the communication culture and practiced values

Evaluating the communication culture and practiced values as objectively as possible is important to know what really goes on in the organisation and how people might feel. The survey of this study serves as good indication of how employees see the communication culture, but assessments and continuous observations are recommended to make sure that values are aligned with action.

The data of the study suggested that employees would wish more communication about the values and goals of the organisation. When the values and aims are clear to everyone, there are less likely to be clashes.

"Practice what you preach." It was stated by employees that promises need to be kept and promises of a certain culture needs to show in action. Even if actions aren´t or can´t be taken for some reason, communicating this to the employees would likely reduce any feelings of uncertainty. Follow ups and updates are important.

7.4 Creating time and space for connection

Whilst remote work has many obvious benefits, it also comes with a risk of feeling isolated. Creating connections and enough time for building them needs to be a conscious decision, or as described by employees in the study, it might not happen.

Many employees feel there should be clear guidance and acceptance of having more internal communication and more opportunities for bonding and getting to know others on a more personal, or emotional, level. The focus can be on the quality of the communication and on taking away the pressure and uncertainty

that was mentioned by many employees of how they are not sure how much communication is allowed. Simply adding the amount of internal communication isn´t a goal that would solve all questions and issues – adding more communication might even make people feel more stressed or more in a hurry if there isn´t any focus on creating a safe and emotionally connected communicational culture and no guidance on effective or constructive internal communication practices. Opportunities for open communication also helps leaders and teams also to communicate about workloads and manage stress levels.

Is using time and money on more internal communication worth it? Simple answer is yes, always. Longer answer can be looked at from many angles. Employee satisfaction is always in the best interest of a business as it leads to better motivation and means the already hired and trained employees stay (Järvinen 2020). Keeping good employees happy with time and space for communication and connection and showing empathy towards them can be argued to be less costly than hiring new employees. Good, motivated employees are after all an investment that makes the business money – not an expense (Järvinen 2020). Nonempathetic, nonunderstanding, lacking or negative internal communication is shown, time after time, to decrease motivation and results, create avoidance and other contagious negative effects (Porath & Pearson 2009).

As project work is done in remote teams, having a good understanding of others, their areas of responsibilities, as well as ways of communication helps the execution of project work, information sharing and peer-learning. This has direct impact on the effectiveness and results of work.

Creating time and space for quality communication does not and should not mean that people communicate continuously over chats and don´t focus on work. The communication needs to happen in the right channels, between the right people. Also, effective video meeting practices should be paid attention to. If possible, it would be beneficial to have certain time slots of availability and unavailability (work that requires focus) at the same time within the team (Glazer 2021, 39, 124). These are all areas that can be reminded about and given guidance and training about to help employees succeed (more under next chapter).

As demonstrated in this study and in the theoretical framework, emotional connections and empathy has several benefits. For an emotional connection to be formed, there needs to be active communication with asking questions, feedback, wording out feelings, and positive and encouraging communication.

7.5 Improving understanding and providing training

The data of this study showed that there are many individual differences and preferences although they were also many commonly accruing themes. All focus group discussion participants reviewed positively the idea of doing some profiling within working teams to increase the understanding of each other. Possible tools for this profiling are for example the Workplace Big Five and DISC analysis, which both provide a personality profile. Whilst experiences and skills change and develop, personality traits are often argued to be stable.

Clearer guidance on many practical issues was requested frequently in the data. This shows that, whilst there is a high level of freedom and self-leadership, more guidance and training could be given from the company to tackle some uncertainty and confusion. Some suggested areas of training and guidance based on the collected data include:
- Guidance on communication practices
- Guidance or training on best remote work practices to reduce the feeling of being in a hurry (better time management, self-leadership, delegation etc.)
- Recurring guidance about how to login the working hours remotely
- Information or training on findings about the role of emotions and empathy at work
- More regular informing of company´s results, goals, and values for all employees
- Guidance on good video meeting practises to have effective and constructive discussion – for example based on Rauhala´s OK5 model as shown in her book Keskustelun Voima (2020)
- Guidance and encouragement on the use of different internal communication channels

It would be a good idea to involve employees or teams in the process of training topics, for example, by asking regularly (whatever time frequent is realistic regarding resources) what they need more information, guidance, or training on. A realistic "training budget" for each employee is one way to keep training cost effective. For example, a certain number of hours that can be spent weekly or monthly on self-development or training might be a solution.

7.6 Tackling the communicational challenges coming with growth

This is a valuable lesson to be learned about change: With constant change, creating connections and having healthy, well-functioning teamwork, and collaboration becomes more emphasised as an individual cannot keep up with the constantly changing skills and competences required alone (Kotter, 2012, 169-172).

Growth is a positive thing, yet it understandably comes with a lot of change and even uncertainty. Communication can help especially when it is done with empathy.

To keep everyone on board and to create a positive attitude towards change and growth (versus resistance to change) clarity and systematic communication practises will help. To avoid the acceleration trap, it is important to always keep a clear focus and communicate about the direction, goals, values, and priorities. These are the areas that many employees felt are lacking communication.

Frequent change and new recruitments are not untypical for a growing SME. Communication about changes however needs to be clear to maintain a level of psychological safety. It´s good to also note that all those "shaking things up" can often be a positive thing, when it's done frequently and teams and employees change too often, it can hinder the ability to form emotional connections that is required for empathy and sense of belonging.

Empathetic communication can help to restore the feeling of security and psychological safety even in the middle of change. Active listening and involving employees in the processes and decisions can improve positivity towards change as employees won´t feel like it is simply something thrown at them. Communicating about change needs also include every employee so things aren´t learned second-hand or someone is not left without key information.

Deeply integrated human needs such as the need to feel heard or the need to belong are aspects that should be kept in mind no matter how fast business is growing.

7.7 Empowering leaders (to empower others)

Having trust and optimism is crucial for being motivated especially in remote work.

In the focus organisation, a lot of the work is done independently and there is a high-level of self-governance. Whilst this freedom and trust is valued by most, it is interesting, how frequently clearer leadership and communication from top down was requested in by the employees. It shouldn´t be assumed that everyone initiating this are not capable of working independently, without supervision, or wouldn´t prefer it. When looking at the answers given holistically, there are indications of an issue with uncertainty, which is understandable when an organisation goes through a lot of change.

It is also known that implementing any changes in an organisation take time. Expecting change to happen fast or not leading people through it might create uncertainty, hopelessness, and decreasing self-belief among employees (Rauhala et al. 2013). This again might create disappointments on both sides which creates stress (Rauhala et al. 2013). Stress again creates problems with communication and empathy that lead to issues on an individual and collective level – all the way to decreased quality of work.

Although the work itself is very independent and the experience and practises varies between individuals, empowering leaders and those responsible for project

and team meetings is beneficial. They can empower others! Rather than focusing on traditional management or leadership, empowering leaders (or any responsible and motivated employee even if not in a leadership position) can be approached with the mission to empower empathetic and positive cultural shifters.

Their responsibility isn´t so much to lead the work or projects (that is often independent or done in dynamic small teams), but their role is to inform to create optimism, safety, and security, take away communicational obstacles, and also have an eye out on possible wishes of others, workload situation, and model an example for practices that improve wellbeing. They help enable others to work with less stress. They can also help initiate practices that improve empathy. They can also free some resources from the top management of the company that might not have time to react to all needs immediately. Such ambassadors of the organisational culture and values would ripple down optimism and motivation on others too. Emotions after all are contagious – even virtually!

If there isn´t clear leaders in some teams, the whole team can similarly be empowered to communicate actively and to have some self-governance on the decisions they want to make as a team.

Whilst some people are naturally more empathetic, empathy can be practised and when considering all the benefits of it, it is recommended to do so. For leaders especially it would be a good idea to organise a workshop on the importance of empathy, emotional contagion and modelling the way for empathetic communication. A short training or webinar could also be held for the whole organisation and everyone could make their own communicational goals. For example, Prince´s book 7 *skills for the future* gives practical worksheets that could be used. The contents of this thesis can also work as framework for a training entity that can be used among leaders and the whole organisation.

Changing any culture is messy. Organisational communication culture is never simply tackled by leadership efforts solely, especially in a low hierarchy remotely working organisation. The contrary, too much management efforts form top-down could be viewed negatively and resisted. It is known that leader's empathy improves the motivation and optimism within the team also when it comes to change

efforts. Empathetic, actively listening and considering communication is the way to empower positive change. Communication culture can´t be changed with force or simple to do-list.

7.8 Reassessing and continuous development

The study gave valuable insights into how people perceive the current communication culture and how satisfied they are with it. Assessing communication regularly is recommended for all organisations, but especially those working remotely when the success of work is causally linked with communication. Remotely there are likely to be less chances of picking up conversations or observing issues as at traditional working environments. Those that are naturally less activate with communication and raising their ideas can also be easily forgotten remotely. Questionnaires and regular stand-ups ensure everyone´s voice is heard and that everyone has a safe channel to raise issues if they don´t want to do so in the common internal channels or over calls or video meetings. Reassessments, when done frequent enough, help also understand which changes have worked well. Developing internal communication in a changing organisation is a continuous and flexible process.

7.9 Idea bank for remote SMEs

In this selection there is a collection of ideas that can be utilised in remotely communicating and virtual small-to-medium-sized businesses. Most of these ideas were suggested by remotely working employees of the focus organisation during the study. Some ideas have been gathered from literature or produced by the thesis author during the process.

Ideas from the remote employees of the focus organisation

- Weekly scheduled short videocall session that is either themed or open for free communication.
- Introducing new employees with more measures than currently.

- More focus on communication between different themes for synergy.
- Scheduled discussions with others so they are not forgotten when in rush.
- Clearer communication about responsibilities so people can work more effectively.
- More training and instruction – intranet (or similar) could be updated more often.
- Friday morning virtual coffee with for example half an hour open video connection for anyone and everyone to come chat.
- Regular team meetings for all teams.
- Guests from other teams invited to team meetings so there is more communication and connection between teams.
- More or clearer guidance on basic practices to reduce uncertainty and allow more effectiveness.
- More meetings between people doing customer work together (not just Slack channel).
- Systematic use of support person always for employees so they have help during the first weeks from a peer (not just the management).
- More general information or get-togethers between the whole company.
- Systematic communication on new or leaving employees, growth, and key numbers.
- Trainings and learning days should be organised systematically and focus should be put to opportunities for peer learning and information sharing.
- Regular assessments and questionnaires to ask about employee satisfaction, well-being, and ideas.
- Testing and training about different personalities and communicator types to understand others better.
- More communication from leaders also when it comes to mistakes to create an accepting and supportive feeling.

Ideas from literature

- Whilst some people are naturally more empathetic, empathy can be practised. Learning how to be more empathetic in communication situations starts with being present and actively listening the other person with the intend to understand how they are feelings (Prince 2019). Asking questions is a great way to improve the depth of conversation (Prince 2019). There different practices and routines individuals can do to improve their responses, listening, and skills of being present. Also, any self-care that is known to boost the ability for empathy such as exercising is highly recommended.

- Ideas to add connection and bonding: social virtual catchups for example once a week where employees can bond over a video call chat (20 – 30 mins), mix and match video calls with members of different teams getting one on one to know each other better over a virtual coffee, non-work-related virtual hubs, or channels according to interests like a self-development book club or exercise motivation (Glazer 2021)

- When having conversations over video call, there is great potential for communicating effectively and yet on a deeper level. Improving conversational skills leads to higher quality conversations. Rauhala´s OK5 model introducers five steps all conversations should follow, and those five steps can be practiced improving communication skills (Rauhala 2020). The steps are (translated from Finnish): tuning into the conversation, hearing, or active listening, exploring the topic, structuring what was said, and closing or concluding the conversation (Rauhala 2020).

- There is a lot of evidence showing how the negative side of remote work is blurred line between work and free time, and thus increased stress and risk for burnouts. Selfcare might be even more important for remote workers than those in traditional work as remote work is very static and can create negative feelings such as isolation. Glazer stresses the importance of selfcare for all remote employees and this should be talked about in the organisation (2021).

- As the organisation has remote employees working in different countries, traditional vouchers, or wellness passes (gym, art etc.) aren´t a realistic option. Instead, finding fun ways to bring people together virtually and to encourage them to enjoy creativity and exercise is a good idea.
- The ability to feel and show empathy and to be optimistic is shown to link with regular exercise. Since remote workers sit a lot during the day on their computers, it would be beneficial for them and for the organisation to encourage them to exercise. There could be for example challenges (measured with step counts, kilometres etc.) and a communication channel for exercise motivation (for sharing photos, ideas, getting virtual running partners etc.)
- Employees could be encouraged to read by rewarding them with audiobook memberships or free e-books. Reading (or listening to audiobooks) is a way to release stress and even to improve the empathetic abilities. There could also a be a channel to share book recommendations to give more possibilities for connections.

7.10 Guidance for employees: How to show empathy in remote work communication

This guidance is directed at remote employees about empathy in internal communication.

Whatand why

Empathy helps to recognise feelings in others and to understand where they are coming from with whatever they are saying. It is known that empathy is an important ability that helps improve communication, and ultimately results and well-being, at work.

Remote working can feel isolating especially if there isn´t much internal communication and collaboration. Communicating in written can also lead to misunderstandings or misconceptions. Empathy and empathetic communication can help! Good news is that empathy is an ability that can, in most cases, be practiced. Focusing on showing empathy to others is likely to improve communicational skills in general. This will lead to better, more rewarding interaction with others.

Empathy is one of the key interaction skills we have. It helps sense and consider other people´s feelings, and it can work as a moral guidance. Empathy deepens the connection between people and helps to understand the other person. When there are high levels of empathy, negative feelings towards the other person aren´t around. Misunderstandings and negative assumptions are also less likely when empathy is in the core of communication.

Empathy in communication means being present and listening with intend to understand and to consider the other person´s feelings. This helps to understand, for example, their motivations and moods in the communication situation. Empathetic communication also aims to consider the other person, and if possible, aims to make them feel better. This can have great positive impacts on motivation, feeling of belonging, and general wellbeing at work. The benefits are vast and worthwhile!

How to create connections

Getting to know colleagues and team members is a good way to start. Only by connecting with others can empathy towards others build. Connection building happens with time.

How open you are with others and how much you want to share is naturally entirely up to you and your preferences. It is completely normal that some are more private than others and that some are more introverted than others. Having some meaningful connections at work can be really motivating and helpful even if you couldn´t identify with the communication happening in the general channels. The organisation gives different opportunities and channels for peer-to-peer discussions, learning, collaboration, and less informal chatting, and online events.

It is known that digital, written communication lessens ability for empathy as important nonverbal ques are lost. Therefore, connecting over a videocall is a good idea. After you established basic knowledge of each other and each other´s communication styles, the communication can happen in written form. Anytime where there seems to be misunderstanding or uncertainty, it´s recommended to play it safe and pick up the phone or video call again.

How to show empathy in remote work

Empathy is, to some extent, a skill that can be learned. In remote work communication empathy might need more effort than in face-to-face interactions. In remote work, also the benefits of empathy might be even greater than in traditional work environments as remote working can be linked to less interaction with others or even to added stress.

Empathy starts with active listening. Whether the communication happens in spoken or written format, this can mean asking questions and focusing on the other persons answers with an intend to understand them and where they are coming from.

In written communication, it's important to word feelings or use emojis to give clues to the reader about the intended tone and related feeling.

Giving positive feedback or support is seen as motivating and uplifting, and a way to show empathy in remote work communication. It is a simple and fast thing to do but can have great positive impact on the feelings and motivation of others.

Feelings are contagious. Wording positive feelings and having friendly, kind communication manners are seen as ways of showing empathy. Asking, thanking, offering help, or sharing own experiences can all be ways that are perceived as empathetic in work communication.

<u>What to be aware of</u>

Empathy is more likely to occur when feeling positive or hopeful. The more positive and empathetic the communication culture at work is, the more likely it is to boost motivation for work. It´s therefore important to pay attention to own mood and how it affects the ability to feel and show empathy towards others.

There are known way to boost not only mood but empathy too. Regular exercise and reading fiction (stepping in someone else's shoes) are great ways to do so. Also being creative is known to spark empathy. Practicing communication skills such as active listening, consideration with answers, asking questions, and wording feelings can help with learning to express empathy toward others.

General wellbeing and healthy work-life balance are at utmost importance to keep stress levels and negative feelings low. Stress and rush can lower positive feelings and ability to feel empathy greatly.

Empathy is sometimes defined also as not being judgemental towards others. Judging, embarrassing, or ridiculing someone, for example, on their mistake can have devastating effects. On the other side of the spectrum is responding with empathy. Even corrective or constructive feedback can be given with empathy, considering the other person´s feelings and not being judgemental.

Also using rude or rigid language are opposites of empathy that should not be part of work communication.

<u>Shaping own and other´s experience</u>

Remote working and communicating experience can be shaped greatly by the employee themself, you. You have also the affect to ripple empathetic, positive communication with its benefits onto others. Improving communication and interaction skills and learning to show empathy to others is not only rewarding to others around you, but can unlock great connections with others, tons of motivation, and new positive drive for day-to-day work.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. The questionnaire.

Osio 1/5

Internal communication questionnaire

Sisäisen viestinnän arviointilomake

How long have you worked remotely? / Kuinka kauan olet tehnyt etätyötä? *

○ under 6 months / alle 6 kuukautta

○ 7-12 months / kuukautta

○ 13 - 18 months / kuukautta

○ 19 - 24 months / kuukautta

○ 25 - 36 months / kuukautta

○ Over 36 months / kuukautta

Osion 1 jälkeen   Jatka seuraavaan osioon ▾

Osio 2/5

How satisfied are you with the internal communication of the organisation? / Kuinka tyytyväinen olet organisaatiosi sisäiseen viestintään?

Evaluate on the scale of 1-5 – 1 means you don't agree, 2 you somewhat don't agree, 3 is neutral, 4 you somewhat agree, 5 you agree

a) The amount of communication in my organisation is about right / Viestinnän määrä organisaatiossani on sopiva *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not satisfied / Don't agree	○	○	○	○	○	Satisfied / Agree

b) The communication happens in the right channels / Viestintä tapahtuu oikeissa kanavissa *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not satisfied / Don't agree	○	○	○	○	○	Satisfied / Agree

c) The communication in my organisation makes me identify with it or feel like a vital part of it - I feel sense of belonging / Voin samaistua organisaationi viestintään tai tunnen itseni tärkeäksi osaksi sitä – tunnen kuuluvuuden tunnetta *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not satisfied / Don't agree	○	○	○	○	○	Satisfied / Agree

d) I feel like I'm listened to and paid attention to / Minusta tuntuu, että minua kuunnellaan ja minut huomioidaan *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not satisfied / Don't agree	○	○	○	○	○	Satisfied / Agree

e) The communication in my organisation makes me feel like my ideas or opinions are considered and respected / Organisaationi viestintä saa minut tuntemaan, että ideani ja mielipiteeni huomioidaan ja niitä kunnioitetaan *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not satisfied / Don't agree	○	○	○	○	○	Satisfied / Agree

f) The communication in my organisation makes me feel that my feelings are considered / Organisaationi viestintä saa minut tuntemaan, että tunteeni otetaan huomioon *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not satisfied / Don't agree	○	○	○	○	○	Satisfied / Agree

g) I get on-time information in order for me to do my work / Saan tietoa ajallaan voidakseni tehdä työni *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not satisfied / Don't agree	○	○	○	○	○	Satisfied / Agree

h) I get help or support when needed / Saan apua ja tukea tarvittaessa *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not satisfied / Don't agree	○	○	○	○	○	Satisfied / Agree

i) The communication makes me feel that I'm trusted / Viestintä saa minut tuntemaan, että minuun luotetaan *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not satisfied / Don't agree	○	○	○	○	○	Satisfied / Agree

j) I feel it's safe for me to communicate without the fear of being judged / Minusta on turvallista kommunikoida ilman pelkoa tulla tuomituksi *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not satisfied / Don't agree	○	○	○	○	○	Satisfied / Agree

Osion 2 jälkeen   Jatka seuraavaan osioon   ▼

Osio 3/5

Multiple choise question / Monivalinta

Kuvaus (valinnainen)

Please select all words or statements that describe the current communication culture in your organisation (you can choose as many as you want) / Valitse kaikki sanat tai väittämät, jotka mielestäsi kuvaavat organisaatiosi nykyistä viestintäkulttuuria (voit valita monta)

Choose all that are fitting / Valitse kaikki kuvaavat

Hierarchical / Hierarkinen	☐
Supportive / Tukeva	☐
Judgemental / Tuomitseva	☐
Motivating / Motivoiva	☐
Stressful / Stressaava	☐
Negative / Negatiivinen	☐
Empathetic / Empaattinen	☐
Forgiving / Anteeksiantava	☐
Unmotivating / Ei motivoiva	☐
Not caring / Ei välittävä	☐
Understanding / Ymmärtävä	☐
People are listened / Ihmisiä kuunnellaan	☐
Rude / Töykeä	☐
Team spirit / Tiimihenki	☐
Management-centric / Johtajakeskeinen	☐
Positive / Positiivinen	☐
Open / Avoin	☐
Helpful / Auttava	☐
Friendly / Ystävällinen	☐
Mistakes are ok / Virheet ovat ok	☐
Individualistic / Yksilökeskeinen	☐
Ignoring / Ei huomioiva	☐
Safe / Turvallinen	☐
Unsafe or insecure / Turvaton tai epävarma	☐

Osion 3 jälkeen   Jatka seuraavaan osioon   ▾

Osio 4/5

Open-ended questions / Avoimet kysymykset

Please be as detailed as possible, you can give examples. / Ole yksityiskohtainen ja halutessasi voit antaa esimerkkejä.

What more would you want from the internal communication? I.e. what could be done more or better to make you feel like the communication culture is empathetic, supportive, and motivating? You can give examples.   /   Mitä toivoisit enemmän sisäiseltä viestinnältä? Eli, mitä voitaisiin tehdä enemmän tai paremmin, jotta sinusta tuntuisi, että viestintäkulttuuri on empaattinen, tukeva ja motivoiva? Voit antaa esimerkkejä.

Pitkä vastausteksti

Do you want something from the management or leaders to help improve the internal communication, and if so, what? Please be specific on what are the things you think management could do to help improve communication in the organisation.   /   Haluatko johdolta tai leadereiltä jotain sisäisen viestinnän parantamiseksi, ja jos haluat, niin mitä? Kerro tarkasti, mitä mielestäsi johto voisi tehdä auttaakseen parantamaan organisaatiosi viestintää.

Pitkä vastausteksti

Describe a communication incident (or many) that had a positive impact on you (for example by improving your motivation or wellbeing at work). Please be as detailed as possible. You can include details such as what kind of positive impact it had on you and why, what the situation was, what was said, what communication channels were used and what was the outcome etc.   /   Kuvaile viestintätilannetta (tai monia), jolla oli sinuun positiinen vaikutus (esimerkiksi parantamalla motivaatiotasi tai työhyvinvointiasi). Ole mahdollisimman yksityiskohtainen. Voit sisällyttää yksityiskohtia, kuten millainen positiivinen vaikutus tilanteella oli sinuun ja miksi, mikä tilanne oli, mitä sanottiin, mitä kommunikointikanavaa käytettiin, mikä oli lopputulema jne.

Osio 5/5

Empathy / Empatia

Kuvaus (valinnainen)

How empathetic do you think you are in your work communication? / Kuinka empaattisena pidät omaa viestintääsi?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all / Ei ollenkaan	○	○	○	○	○	Very emhatetic / Hyvin empaattinen

How empathic do you think others perceive your work communication? / Kuinka empaattisena uskot muiden pitävän viestintääsi?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all / Ei ollenkaan	○	○	○	○	○	Very emhatetic / Hyvin empaattinen

How do you show empathy and support in remote work communication? Please be as detailed as possible. You can give examples.   /   Miten näytät empatiaa ja tukea muille etäviestinnässäsi? Ole yksityiskohtainen. Voit antaa esimerkkejä.

Pitkä vastausteksti

How empathetic do you personally consider the communication in your organisation?   /   Kuinka empaattisena koet viestinnän organisaatiossasi?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all / Ei ollenkaan	○	○	○	○	○	Very emhatetic / Hyvin empaattinen

What are some of the things others do in their communication to show you empathy and support? Please be as detailed as possible. You can give examples.   /   Mitä asioita muut tekevät viestinnässään osoittaaksen sinulle empatiaa ja tukea? Ole yksityiskohtainen. Voit antaa esimerkkejä.

Pitkä vastausteksti

Appendix 2. Communication satisfaction numerically.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	Average
4	3	3	3	4	3	3	5	5	5	3.8
2	5	4	5	3	4	4	5	5	5	4.2
4	5	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	4	4.3
5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
2	4	2	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	3.3
4	4	3	3	4	3	3	5	5	5	3.9
5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4.9
2	4	1	2	3	3	4	5	4	3	3.1
5	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	5	4	4.6
2	4	2	3	2	2	2	3	4	4	2.8
4	4	4	4	4	4	2	4	4	5	3.9
5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4.9
4	5	5	4	5	4	3	5	5	5	4.5
2	4	2	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	3.3
2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
2	2	1	3	1	2	4	4	2	2	2.3
3.375	4.188	3.25	3.875	3.688	3.563	3.375	4.375	4.313	4	3.8