



Creating a Remote Leadership Concept in the Banking Industry

Saana Salonen

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Creating a Remote Leadership Concept in the Banking Industry

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Saana Salonen

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COVID-19 pandemia vaikutti maailmanlaajuisesti työelämään ja mahdollisti etätöön läpimurron. Pandemian vuoksi etätööhön siirtyminen tapahtui monissa paikoissa yllättäen ja pakotti perinteisemmätkin yritykset pohtimaan työskentelytapojaan. Sopeutuminen äkillisiin muutoksiin on luonut organisaatioille tarpeen ymmärtää, miten ne voivat kehittää etätöitä ja etäjohtamisen käytäntöjä.

Opinnäytetyössä tarkastellaan etätöitä ja etäjohtamista pankkialalla. Opinnäytetyön toimeksiantajana on Danske Bank. Opinnäytetyön pääpaino on etäjohtamisessa mutta myös yleisiä etätöiden käytäntöjä, taitoja ja resursseja tutkitaan tarkasti. Työn tarkoituksena on tarkastella onnistuneita etätö- ja johtamiskäytäntöjä, jotka auttavat organisaatioita kehittymään. Tavoitteena on edistää toimeksiantajan etätöikäytänteitä, vahvistaa asemaa houkuttelevana työnantajana sekä auttaa menestymään muuttuvassa liiketoimintaympäristössä.

Opinnäytetyön tietoperustassa tarkastellaan johtamisen kehitystä, digitalisaation roolia sekä etätöitä ja etäjohtamista. Perinteiset johtamisen käsitteet ovat korostaneet kontrollointia ja käskemistä, mutta uudempia trendejä ovat jaettu johtajuus ja itseohjautuvuus. Digitalisaatio on mahdollistanut etätöiden, sillä teknologiset ratkaisut ovat avainroolissa etätöiden kehittämisessä. Tietoperustassa tarkastellaan lisäksi etätöitä ja etäjohtamista, erityisesti kommunikaation, luottamuksen rakentamisen, saavutettavuuden ja yhteisöllisyyden näkökulmista.

Tutkimuksellisenä lähestymistapana hyödynnettiin tapaustutkimusta, sillä tavoitteena oli kehittämisideoiden tuottaminen tapausorganisaatiolle. Kehittämistyössä hyödynnettiin ensisijaisesti laadullisia tutkimusmenetelmiä. Laadullisen aineiston analyysi tapahtui sisällönanalyysin keinoin.

Opinnäytetyössä kehitettiin etäjohtamisen malli, jossa kuvattiin keskeiset etätö- ja etäjohtamiskäytännöt, taidot, resurssit, sekä etäjohtajan ja etätiimin kehittämisalueet. Kehittämistyön tuloksissa korostui muun muassa kommunikaatio, luottamuksen rakentaminen, valmentava johtamistyyli, saavutettavuus sekä vahvat sosiaaliset sekä itsensä johtamisen taidot.

Etätöikäytänteet ja vahvat etäjohtamistaidot ovat erityisen ajankohtainen aihealue, joka on tärkeää huomioida organisaatiossa. Opinnäytetyö lisäsi toimeksiantajan ymmärrystä menestyksekkään etätöiden ja etäjohtamisen edellytyksistä.

Asiasanat: etäjohtaminen, etätö, digitalisaatio työelämässä, tapaustutkimus

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected workplace practices globally and enabled the breakthrough of remote work. Due to the pandemic, the change to remote work happened in many places overnight and forced even the more traditional companies to reconsider their ways of working. Adapting to abrupt changes has created a need for organizations to fully understand how they can develop remote work and remote leadership practices.

This thesis examines remote work and remote leadership in the banking sector. The case organization is Danske Bank. The primary focus of the thesis is on remote leadership, but overall remote work practices, skills and resources are also explored. The purpose of the thesis is to explore successful remote work and leadership practices that help organizations develop. The objective is to develop the remote leadership practices of the case company, as well as to help the case company stay as an attractive employer, and to thrive in the complex business environment.

The theoretical part of this thesis explores the evolution of leadership, the role of digitalization as well as remote work and leadership. Traditional leadership explanations have emphasized efficiency and control, but newer trends include shared leadership style and self-management. In addition, digitalization has had an impact on and enabled remote work as an option, as technological solutions are in a key role in the development of remote work. Remote work and remote leadership aspects are examined, and the importance of communication, trust building, accessibility and social aspect are detailed.

The thesis utilized a case study research approach, as the objective was to create development ideas for the case organization. The development task was carried out mainly by using qualitative research methods. Data was analysed through content analysis.

A remote leadership concept was created. The concept included key workplace practices, skills, resources, team leader actions, as well as remote team development areas that enable the success of a remote team. The results of the development task emphasized the importance of proper communication, trust building, a coaching leadership style, accessibility, and strong social and self-management skills, for instance.

Remote work and remote leadership practices have never been a more current topic as they are now, and important for any organization to keep in mind. The thesis enhanced the case organization's understanding of the prerequisites for successful remote work and remote leadership.

Keywords: remote leadership, remote work, digitalization in the working life, case study

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1 COVID-19 as a catalyst for remote work

“Remote Work: The Biggest Legacy of Covid-19” (Levanon 2020). Whether Forbes author Gad Levanon’s (2020) declaration is true or not, COVID-19’s effect on workplace has been undeniable. COVID-19 pandemic abruptly changed the way work is done and forced companies to change their workplace practices overnight. In Finland, one million people worked remotely due to the pandemic (Pantsu 2020).

While remote work has been especially popular in Finland (Raeste 2021), the phenomenon is not limited to Finnish companies only. A report by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), stated that 48% of employees in the EU were working partially or fully from home in July 2020. In the financial sector, which is the sector that is explored in this thesis, the number was almost 75%. (Ahrendt et al. 2020, 31-32.)

Remote work is a current phenomenon that has challenged the view on where work can be done. Uncertainty has flourished during the tumultuous, postmodern era where disruption is common and norms are constantly challenged (Juuti & Luoma 2009, 196-200). While it is still uncertain what the post-pandemic “new normal” will look like (Elnaj 2021), remote work can already be considered one of the biggest impacts of the pandemic (Levanon 2020). The global pandemic has forced even the more conservative organizations to adapt to virtual demands (Gerdt 2021). Thus, there is a distinct need for organizations to fully understand how they can develop their remote work and remote leadership practices (Contreras, Baykal & Abid 2020, 1).

This thesis examines remote work and remote leadership in the banking sector. The primary focus of the thesis remains in remote leadership. However, overall remote work practices, skills and resources are also explored as they all are firmly intertwined. The purpose of the thesis is to find successful remote work and leadership practices that help organizations develop. The objective of the thesis is to not only develop the remote leadership practices of the case company, but to also help it stay competitive and attractive as an employer, and to thrive in the complex business environment where adaptability is key (Contreras et al. 2020, 1).

The thesis structure follows the common thesis format set by Laurea University of Applied Sciences. Chapter 1 introduces the topic, case company, as well as the purpose and goals of the thesis. Chapter 2 describes the theoretical background of the phenomenon including leadership, digitalization, and the history of remote work. Chapter 3 explains the case study approach, including the development task, data collection and analysis in a detailed manner.

Chapter 4 describes the results of the development process and the answers to the development questions posed in the thesis. A development proposal, a remote concept, is also introduced. Chapter 5 concludes the thesis and reflects on the applied methods, results, and theoretical background. Areas for further development as well as ethical and privacy issues are discussed in detail.

The case company is Danske Bank, a Nordic bank headquartered in Denmark. Danske Bank has globally 3.3 million customers and over 20 000 employees. It operates in 13 countries but has its core markets in Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. (Danske Bank 2021a.)

In Finland, Danske Bank has around one million customers and 2 000 employees. The bank's roots in Finland stem back to 1887 with the establishment of banks operating out of local postal offices. Local post office banks were later called Leonia Bank and in 2001 Sampo Bank. Sampo Bank became officially a part of Danske Bank in 2007 after the Danish bank purchased Sampo Bank. (Danske Bank 2021b.)

Danske Bank is the third largest bank in Finland after OP Group and Nordea (Bank of Finland 2020). Danske Bank offers banking services to personal customers, business customers as well as corporate and institutional customers. Offered services include day-to-day services, loans, investment advisory services and wealth management for private banking customers. (Danske Bank 2021b.)

The target group of the thesis is limited to one department in Danske Bank. The primary tasks of the department are based on the legal requirements that financial institutions have, to identify and know their customers (Financial Supervisory Authority 2020). The department handles financial crime prevention related activities, such as customer due diligence, customer identification, customer risk behaviour analysis, and risk mitigation tasks. They also act as a liaison in customer due diligence area and offer guidance to other units in the bank. Although the department is in direct contact with customers, there are no face-to-face customer meetings, instead the customer contact happens mainly via a phone or secure online bank messages.

The department operates from Danske Bank Finland's main office in Helsinki. Before COVID-19, the department did not have remote work option for their employees, instead all the teams were daily present in the Helsinki office. Due to the global pandemic, the department shifted abruptly to remote work in March 2020. To support remote work practices, in spring 2021 Danske Bank announced a bonus payment of around 1 000 EUR to each staff member for the purchase of home office equipment (Erkko 2021).

2 Leadership in the digital era

This chapter describes the knowledge base of the thesis. The evolution of leadership is explained, as well as the role of digitalization in working life. Remote work and particularly remote leadership are explained thoroughly while reflecting on the future of workplace.

The knowledge base of the thesis is based on multitude of different sources from peer-reviewed scientific articles to printed literature and online webinars. Peer-reviewed articles and recently published sources were preferred, most being published within the last five years. Sources are both domestic and foreign.

2.1 Leader and/or manager?

The words “leadership” and “management” are often used interchangeable and viewed as synonyms, but many agree that there are dissimilarities. Kotter (2012, ch. 2; 2014, ch. 4) describes management as a set of actions that produce dependable and expected results, for instance budgeting and organizing, whereas leadership leans more heavily towards motivating, showing direction, and creating vision. Bennis, Sample & Asghar (2015, 38) state that a manager “*focuses on doing things right, whereas the leader focuses on doing the right thing*”.

Many definitions emphasize the specific connotations that the terms have: a manager manages and handles the daily activities, but a leader leads the crowd and looks to the future. There is a sense of hierarchy in the terms where the leaders are at the top while managers are viewed as line managers in the middle (Kotter 2014, ch. 4). Pardey (2016, 7) criticizes the hierarchical view: “*Seeing leadership as something more important, superior, or powerful than management reduces any distinction between the two terms to one simply of scope and power, rather than there being any fundamental difference.*”

In Finnish, there are subtle differences between the translations. Management is often translated as “*johtaminen*” and leadership as “*johtajuus*”. Several Finnish authors have defined management as the act of leading things, and leadership as the act of leading people (Kamensky 2015, ch. 1; Juuti 2016, ch.2; Jylhä & Viitala 2019, ch. 1).

Eikenberry and Turmel’s (2018, ch. Introduction) writing echoes a similar statement as they emphasize that leadership is human-centred, whereas management focuses on things instead people. Leadership seems to be the more common term used to include both managing and leading, hence the thesis will use leadership as the primary term defining the leading of things, people, and activities.

2.2 Evolution of leadership

From the vast amount of different leadership trends to widely recognized leadership paradigms, leadership is one of the most studied and researched fields. Historically, it has been viewed that a person is born a leader and it wasn't until recent centuries that the focus turned from being born a leader, to a person becoming one (Jylhä & Viitala 2019, ch. 1). One of the first leadership paradigms, *scientific management*, also called Taylorism, was developed in the steel industry in the US during the late 1800s. The task-oriented leadership style focused on high productivity, standardization, and discipline in the workplace (Martin 2005, 541).

What scientific management excelled in efficiency and emphasizing tasks, it lacked in individual worker concern. Due to the lack of consideration for individuals and poor focus on the workers' conditions, *the human relations* school of thought, the second leadership paradigm, was developed in the late 1920s as a reaction to Taylorism. It focused on understanding human behaviour, relationships, and motivation. (Martin 2005, 4, 56-60; Pardey 2016, ch. 1.)

Taylorism and human relations theory are a few of the first, prominent leadership paradigms that have prevailed. As evidenced by the creation of human relations movement, leadership paradigms and theories have often developed reflecting the needs and changes of current society and workplace (Seeck 2015, ch. 1).

Leadership has evolved from the control-heavy scientific management to a more contextual view that requires the leader to adapt their style continuously (Sydänmaanlakka 2019, ch. 4.2). *Situational leadership* approach was developed with the idea that there isn't one prevailing, best style of leadership, but instead to be successful, leaders must adapt their methods based on the situational needs (Hersey & Blanchard 1993, 111-112, 183-185; Northouse 2004, 106).

From the more modern leadership styles, *shared leadership* is particularly present in recent Finnish leadership literature. Shared leadership emphasizes collective thinking and the importance of team interaction. Collaboration between leaders and team members is essential, instead the team leader having a more authoritarian leadership style. Especially in the Nordic countries, shared leadership style has prevailed as a paradigm. (Jylhä and Viitala 2019, ch. 1.)

Liao (2017, 653-654) discussed shared leadership in terms of *self-management*. Members of remote teams who show strong self-management abilities can share responsibilities with one another, guide each other, and experience collaborative decision making. Shared leadership style is also connected to enhanced team effectiveness. (Liao 2017, 653-654.)

In the last few centuries, one of the significant changes in leadership thinking has been the changes in the dynamics between a leader and a follower (Jylhä and Viitala 2019, ch. 1). The traditional, authoritarian “command and control” -leadership style is undoubtedly out of date, and the leadership goal is not to control subordinates anymore (Eikenberry & Turmel 2018, ch. 3).

Instead of micromanaging, newer leadership models such as being a coach or a facilitator, are appreciated. Helping your employees by providing an environment where they can work as efficient as possible, is necessary. This includes not only removing obstacles and providing resources, but also overall support of each team member. (Dyer & Shepherd 2021, 76-77.)

Particularly in the Nordic countries, the leadership culture is open and equal. Hierarchies are dismantled and the emphasis has shifted from leadership focus to a collective leadership. (Sydänmaanlakka 2019, ch. 4.2, ch. 4.6.)

2.3 Digitalization and work

Digitalization is the integration of digital technology into the everyday activities and utilizing the vast possibilities the digital technology offers (Alasoini 2018, 3). It is a worldwide social and economic evolution that has enabled easier information transfer and data processing (Hämäläinen, Maula & Suominen 2016, ch. 2).

Digitalization began to gain momentum in the Finnish society mainly in the 1980s with the increase of personal computers. The next decade brought mobile phones and internet, and the beginning of the 21st century introduced mobile internet and social media (Alasoini 2018, 11).

Digitalization is more than the mere conversion of an item into a digital format. It involves a deeper level of transformation, a comprehensive change in people’s behaviour, market dynamics and the core business of companies. Digitalization has changed the world irreversibly and, in many industries, it has meant a shift in existing paradigms, where old ways of working, ways of thinking and practices have been replaced by new ones. (Ilmarinen & Koskela 2015, ch. 2.1 - 2.2.)

The speed of digital transformation has been immense. The effect that digitalization has on a workplace cannot be overstated as digitalization affects all functions of a company. Digitalization has a high impact on leadership behaviour (Cortellazzo, Bruni & Zampieri 2019, 1-4), and leaders are tackling new challenges from increased pace of doing business to shifts in organizational culture (Kane, Phillips, Copulsky & Andrus 2019, 34-35).

While some traditional skills such as the fundamentals of good leadership remain the same, digitalization has also created a need for new skills in today’s working life. Having a forward-

looking perspective, understanding technology, as well as being open-minded and adaptable, are among a few of the most critical new skills that are needed. (Kane et al. 2019, 34-36.)

Digitalization has enabled remote work as an option, as technological solutions are in a key role in the development of remote work (Vilkman 2016, ch. 7). The future of work is highly virtual, and the pandemic has only accelerated digitalization and the implementation of many technologies (Elnaj 2021). When it comes to working life, a physical location has an even smaller role as in the past. Companies are rethinking their physical premises, and even more conservative institutions have adapted to the demands of a virtual world (Gerdt 2021).

2.4 Remote work

Remote work has been around in many work environments for decades, but it was not until the global pandemic that remote work became a worldwide phenomenon for most of knowledge workers (Sostero, Milasi, Hurley, Fernández-Macías & Bisello 2020, 3). The effect of COVID-19 on the breakthrough of remote work is immense. McKinley Institute's report on future of remote work explained the role of the pandemic as following:

“The virus has broken through cultural and technological barriers that prevented remote work in the past, setting in motion a structural shift in where work takes place, at least for some people.” (Lund, Madgavkar, Manyika & Smit 2020.)

Remote work is a permanent trend that is here to stay, and the pandemic has shown how crucial it is for companies to be prepared for virtual work environment. Remote leadership is a relevant challenge that companies must face in order to be successful and sustainable. (Contreras et al. 2020, 5-6.)

There are many terms that are used interchangeably with remote work, such as telework, telecommuting, virtual work, and flexible work to name a few. In the field of remote work, there is an overall lack of consensus when it comes to the definitions of the key concepts, and the terminology varies greatly between authors, decades, and geographical locations.

Telecommuting was one of the first terms used regarding flexible work location. It originated in the United States in the 1970s by NASA engineer Jack Nilles, who described telecommuting as work done with the help of information and communication technologies (ICTs), with the primary idea being the replacement of expensive commute during the oil crisis. (Allen, Golden & Shockley 2015, 40-41.)

Telework, similar to telecommuting, is described as work done with the help of ICTs outside the main workplace (Bailey & Kurland 2002, 384; Gurstein 2001, ch. 1; Sostero et al. 2020, 6-7). Telecommuting and telework are often used as synonyms, the main difference being that

the former is primarily used in the United States and the latter in Europe (Ellison 2004, ch. 2; Gurstein 2001, ch. 1).

Remote work, similar to telework and telecommuting, has varying definitions based on the source. Eurofound's report (Sostero et al. 2020, 6-7) defined remote work as work being done at an alternative worksite instead of the default place of work. Remote work is also considered the umbrella term to telework and other concepts of spatial distribution of work (COVID-19: Guidance for... 2020, 5; Sostero et al. 2020, 6-7).

Remote work terminology is visualized in Figure 1. The figure shows the relationship and overlap of terminology and concepts. Remote work is the umbrella term consisting of all work that is conducted outside the default place of work. Telework is remote work that uses ICTs as a means of communication. Working from home is work done in worker's own residence. Default work at home is work that takes place in worker's own residence, which is also the default place of work, instead of having an outside office or location. (COVID-19: Guidance for... 2020, 5-7.) The thesis uses remote work to describe work carried out outside the default place of work.

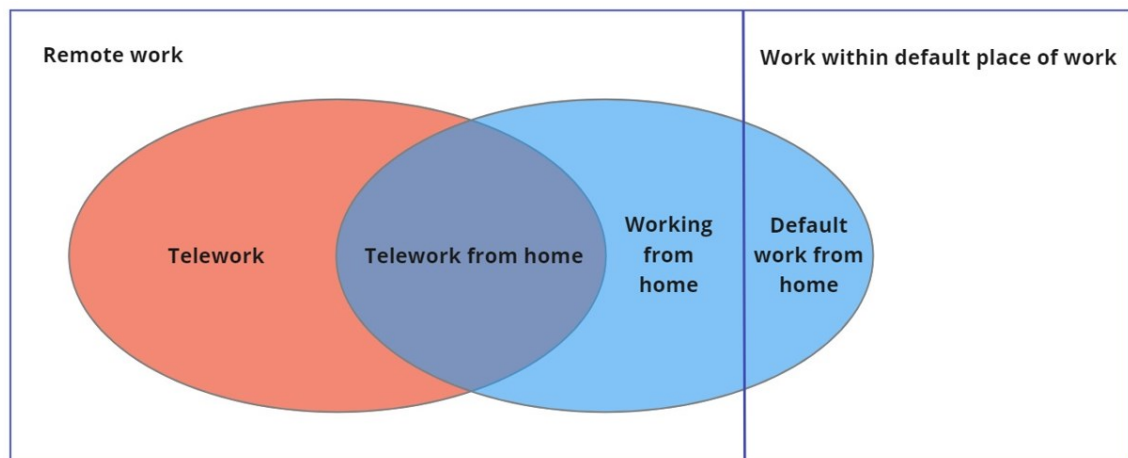


Figure 1: Remote work terminology (modified from COVID-19: Guidance for... 2020)

2.4.1 Remote work benefits

As many workers switched to home offices at the beginning of the pandemic, the benefits of remote work became apparent to many.

One of the advantages of remote work is the flexibility that working outside the primary office brings. Flexibility in location can have a great impact on a worker's daily life, for instance when it comes to childcare (Contreras et al. 2020, 3; Paul 2020, 9-10). For many remote workers flexibility also means more accommodating hours, lack of daily commute, and overall, a better work-life balance (Fried & Hansson 2014, 17-30).

Having autonomy is another advantage of remote work. As modern digital age requires employees who are committed, proactive, engaged, and flexible (Ryan & Deci 2017, 533), having autonomy is an important aspect of motivation for an employee (Kuitunen & Luoma-aho 2021). According to Ryan and Deci's (2017, 538) self-determination theory, more autonomous forms of motivation are associated with higher quality of engagement and wellness in the workplace. Additionally, more autonomously motivated employees experience less exhaustion and burnout, and in some cases higher performance (Ryan & Deci 2017, 538).

Productivity and higher efficiency are also connected to remote work (Paul 2020, 10-11; Ropponen 2020), as working outside the office tends to have fewer interruptions and better opportunities to focus on tasks (Fried & Hansson 2014, 15-16). Remote work also affects workers' mental and physical health positively. YLE (2020) reported in October 2020 that in Finland the number of sick leave days in working life had dropped down 30% compared to previous year.

Remote work is an economical choice (Mattiske 2020, 26). Lack of commute results in smaller daily expenses when it comes to commute and lunch for instance, and significant savings for the employer for not maintaining office space (Paul 2020, 7-8). If remote work were a permanent option for workers, they could be physically located in a smaller city with a lower cost of living than to be required to live near a major city where majority of the offices tend to be located (Fried & Hansson 2014, 27-28).

Sustainability and environmental issues are important to many. Remote work can be considered more environmentally friendly than a conventional office setting due to the lack of commute and air pollution (Bailey & Kurland 2002, 384; Paul 2020, 11). As companies promote ecological values, remote work could be a natural way for them to live up to their principles.

Diversity is another important benefit of remote work (Mattiske 2020, 26, 221). Having a more diverse workforce improves innovation and financial results for a company (Levine 2020). Offering the option of remote work for employees allows work for those unable to work in an office full-time due to health, personal life, age, or disability (Paul 2020, 9), for instance. Having a more diverse view also means access to global workforce and talent (Fried & Hansson 2014, 35, 144). Having access to the best possible talent regardless of physical location, is one of the key benefits for any company (Fried & Hansson 2010, 224-225; Paul 2020, 10). Overall, offering remote work is a great incentive that helps attract the best possible staff (Paul 2020, 8).

The key benefits of remote work are visualized in Figure 2.

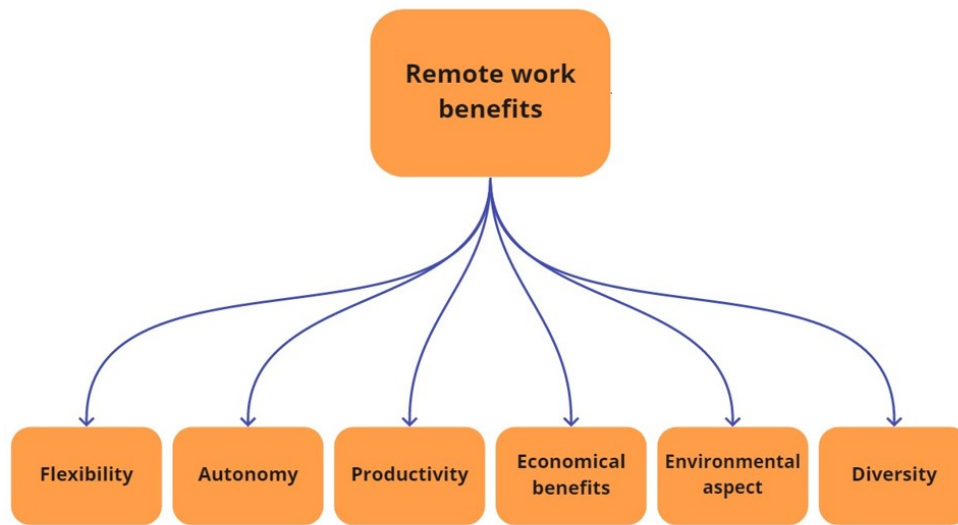


Figure 2: Benefits of remote work

2.4.2 Out of sight, out of mind - Remote work challenges

While the benefits of remote work have largely been discussed, remote work, as any other concept, has its challenges as well. One of the challenges is changing the existing work culture. Change is often feared, and many companies, especially before the pandemic, have hesitated with remote work. There is an unmistakable conservative resistance, where remote work is still viewed as undermining discipline, productivity, and creativity (Dyer & Shepherd 2021, 16). Lack of visibility and control, along with the traditional view on appropriate work location, are a few of the reasons for hesitancy when it comes to remote work (Ellison 2004, ch. 2).

Changing the existing work culture is not easy, and some companies, for instance Yahoo and Best Buy, have doubted remote work as a norm. In 2013, Yahoo's CEO banned remote work, citing difficulties with supporting a collaborative, innovative environment as the reason. Shortly after Yahoo, Best Buy made a similar decision, their CEO stating that remote work was "*fundamentally flawed from a leadership standpoint*". The critical stance on remote work was dubbed unsurprising, as the reason for hesitancy is often the fundamental change in how business has been done. (Allen et al. 2015, 40-41.)

As the name suggests, remote work is work conducted remotely, typically with fewer social contacts. Loneliness is one of the most common complaints about remote work and social isolation can cause employees to feel disconnected from the team (Larson, Vroman & Makarius 2020). Helsingin Sanomat (Malmberg 2020) reported on "remote work apathy" - the feeling of isolation during remote work due to the monotony of workdays and isolation from social contacts. COVID-19 has additionally caused perceived loneliness, psychological distress

and decreased social support, according to a study (Savolainen, Oksa, Savela, Celuch & Oksanen 2021). The study emphasized the responsibility of workplaces providing a caring work culture and giving support to employees (Savolainen et al. 2021).

Pandemic or not, work isolation and job-related stress are among the negative outcomes of remote work. A study made in 2016 suggested that social and technological support was key in the success of remote work, and organizations wishing to benefit from remote work should be supportive through organizational policy and overall practices (Bentley et al. 2016, 214).

Creating team unity and a sense of community in a virtual setting is a challenge for any remote team. Humans have a natural need for togetherness and the feeling of belonging, therefore a lack of said unity often leads to a decrease in communication and overall morale. With improper leadership, there is a risk that the group never becomes a team. (Vilkman 2016, ch. 1.)

One of the key challenges is communication through virtual channels (Vilkman 2016, ch. 1). With remote work there is a distinct lack of informal interactions, the so-called “water cooler talk” (Mattiske 2020, 64; Tuomimaa 2021). Many times, vital information, for instance communicating a project status or sharing information on new leads, is passed on in informal settings, for example in the break room or in the elevator. This rarely occurs in remote work (Mattiske 2020, 64, 105). Goal setting, decision-making and dealing with conflict are also more challenging in virtual setting (Ivanov 2021, 9). Communication issues are especially relevant during remote meetings. Communication is not just words but also visual cues that can be lacking in remote meetings, such as facial expressions, hand gestures and overall body language (Mattiske 2020, 138).

Building trust in a remote team is one of the biggest challenges when it comes to remote work (Vilkman 2016, ch. 1; Mattiske 2020, 105). Trust is often based on people knowing each other and it is easier to build trust with people in person, thus it becomes more challenging in a virtual setting (Mattiske 2020, 105). Ferrell and Kline (2018, 30-34) discussed the barriers to trust in virtual teams that mostly include geographical issues, for example time zone issues, the lack of connection to team and issues relating to lack of face-to-face interaction, for instance miscommunication.

Having proper desks, chairs, screens, and other equipment might be a standard in the office but not always a guarantee when it comes to home offices (Schall & Chen 2021). It may be tempting to work from the kitchen table or couch, but ergonomics should be taken into consideration at home as well (Dyer & Shepherd 2021, 232-233). Poor home-office setup can lead to a decreased productivity and even permanent health issues (Paul 2020, 15-16). Although reported sick day numbers are lower with remote work (YLE 2020), remote workers

also tend to work sick more than people working in traditional offices (Sutela 2020). Home ergonomics and occupational health in general should be emphasized in remote work.

The key challenges of remote work are visualized in Figure 3.

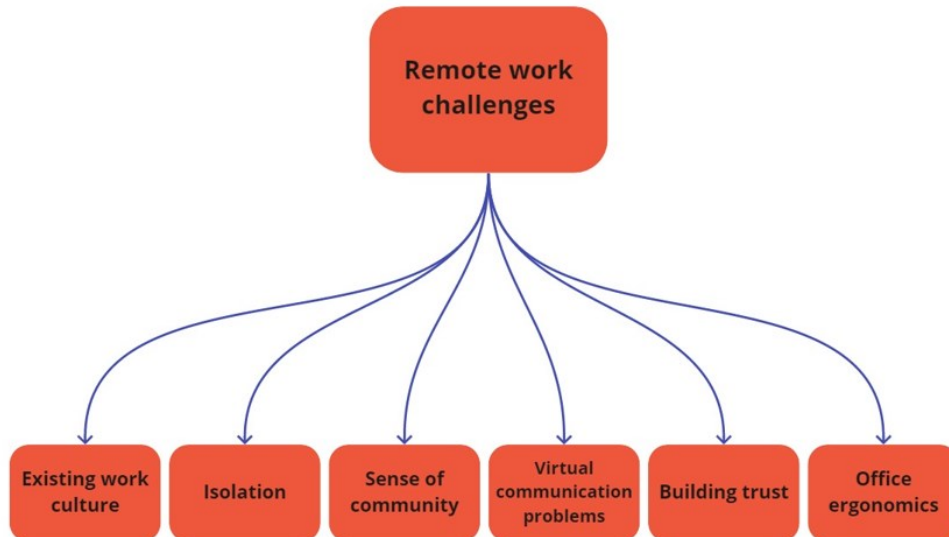


Figure 3: Remote work challenges

2.5 Remote leadership - the core competence of future leader

Technology enables work to be done from anywhere, but even the most sophisticated technological solutions do not guarantee the success of a remote team. Good leadership is still paramount, but too often the existing leadership styles are merely transferred to a remote team instead of the leadership style being altered. Successful remote leadership requires the courage to re-evaluate existing norms and break the mould. (Vilkman 2016, ch. 4.)

2.5.1 Remote leadership challenges

One of the challenges in leading a remote team deals with the lack of visibility when measuring work performance of team members. Lack of control from leader perspective is often dubbed as the reason for experiencing problems with measuring work performance (Vilkman 2016, ch. 3). Especially for workplaces that hold an old-fashioned leadership style, switching from behaviour-based evaluation to an outcome-based system may create a challenge for leaders (Ellison 2004, ch. 2).

Conflict is inevitable in every workplace, but team leaders of remote teams have an added challenge of spotting conflict and dealing with it accordingly as conflict is more likely to occur in a virtual setting (Vilkman 2016, ch. 3). Challenges with crisis management or any

negative issues in a team are magnified when it comes to a lack of physical presence (Kuitunen & Luoma-aho 2021), as the leader is unable to see what is happening and solving the issues quickly face-to-face is not an option (Pullan 2016, 76-77). Small disputes over tasks can easily develop into bigger conflict or even feuds due to remote team members tending to have less understanding and trust amongst the team (Pullan 2016, 141).

Having a low team engagement especially during virtual team meetings, is a common challenge remote team leaders face (Pullan 2016, 165). Virtual meetings tend to be more tedious than physical meetings, resulting often in unfocused participants (Pullan 2016, 145, 165). Team engagement is not only about a lack of presence during virtual meetings, but also the overall lack of commitment to team, employer, and company culture that remote teams sometimes experience (Vilkman 2016, ch. 3).

A global business environment has brought its challenges with understanding cultural nuances and rituals (Mattiske 2020, 195). While having a more diverse workplace has its advantages, dealing with different cultures, languages, and time zones bring also new challenges to a remote team leader (Vilkman 2016, ch. 3). Misunderstandings can be quite common when it comes to different languages, manners, and cultural subtleties, especially in remote teams. When meeting people face to face, it is easier to be aware of cultural differences due to having visual cues, such as witnessing body language and gestures. Remote teams, however, often lack that visual awareness, making cultural differences a challenge for a leader (Pullan 2016, 186-192).

Remote teams rely heavily on technology to support their communication; hence it is vital that each team member is comfortable with a variety of technological solutions and has the knowledge to use the correct tool in each situation (Ferrell & Kline 2018, 31-32). Choosing the correct technology for each purpose in a team has its challenges, due to different technologies working for different situations. Having too many tools is not only complicated but also expensive to run and difficult to support (Pullan 2016, 101). Choosing between synchronous technologies (for instance instant messages and conference calls) and asynchronous technologies (for example email) takes careful planning and consideration (Ferrell & Kline 2018, 33; Pullan 2016, 101-108).

Remote team setting brings additional challenges to a leader regarding team participation as it is easy for an individual to be invisible or passive in a remote team (Pullan 2016, 18-19). Though it may be someone's core personality to be more on the introverted side, it is the team leader's responsibility to make sure no one is withdrawn (Pullan 2016, 164). Lack of physical presence makes it harder for leaders to spot employees who are stressed or struggling with too much work (Vilkman 2016, ch. 3). Remote workers may struggle with limiting the amount of work they do, because the line between work and leisure often gets

blurred (Sibakov 2021; Fried & Hansson 2014, 121-123). In some instances, the remote setting may not be the most effective style, for instance onboarding new employees remotely is a challenge (Lund et al. 2021).

The most common remote leadership challenges are visualized below in Figure 4.

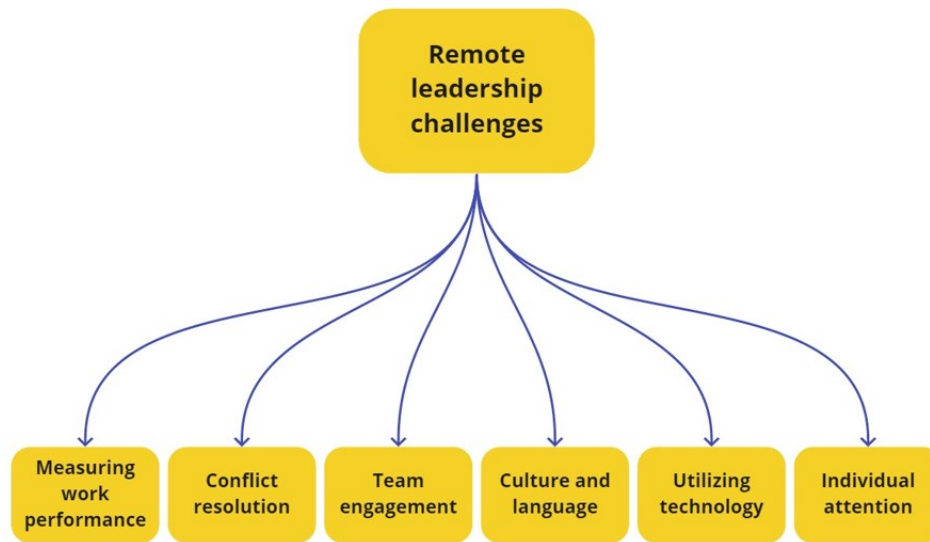


Figure 4: Remote leadership challenges

2.5.2 Successful remote leadership

The benefits and challenges of remote work in general have been discussed. For a remote team to be efficient, the leadership must be effective. Leaders today want to inspire and create the best possible conditions of success for their teams (Luoma-aho 2021b). The basics of good leadership are no different in remote setting, however, certain issues are highlighted and require special attention when it comes to the physical separation (Vilkman 2016, ch. 1).

Trust is the most important element in the success of a team and one of the key factors in effective leadership (Liao 2017, 651-654; Juuti 2016, ch. 1). Without trust the team struggles to keep conflict low (Pullan 2016, 141) as well as becomes less productive and less willing to share information with one another (Sobel Lojeski & Reilly 2020, 105). Building trust takes longer in remote teams than in face-to-face setting due to the lack of physical awareness of what a teammate is doing at any moment. That confusion and uncertainty is the biggest obstacle in trust creation (Riihimäki 2021). Overall, trust is the foundation of a good working relationship and essential to uphold between all team members (Pullan 2016, 63-66). Team leaders should emphasize trust building by providing a safe environment for open communication, understanding different personalities in their team and by being reliable and credible themselves (Pullan 2016, 63-67).

Sharing a mutual understanding of team tasks, goals and ways of working is important for the success of a remote team (Liao 2017, 650-652). Having ground rules and defining expectations for the team strengthens overall efficiency and team satisfaction (Larson et al. 2020), as well as helps with measuring work performance in remote teams (Vilkman 2016, ch. 3). Having ground rules is also about setting boundaries regarding working hours, for example. Fried and Hansson (2010, 224-225) recommend that all remote teams have real-time overlap when the whole team is available for at least a few hours a day. Remote team members should also try to meet in person occasionally, at least once a year if physical distance is not too significant (Ivanov 2021, 71-72; Dyer & Shepherd 2021, 180). This is understandably easier for workers living in the same country and city, but a considerable challenge for more global teams with different time zones and locations (Fried & Hansson 2010, 224-225). Deciding on ground rules for a remote team should be done together as a team as much as possible, which also gives team members ownership (Mattiske 2020, 134).

The importance of communication cannot be overstated when it comes to remote teams. Team leaders of remote teams have additional challenges from face-to-face teams starting from team coordination, trust building and even establishing credibility (Liao 2017, 657). As conflict is less visible in remote teams, being able to listen and communicate effectively is essential in keeping conflict to a minimum (Pullan 2016, 20). Having clear and transparent communication can also decrease possible conflict situations (Pullan 2016, 77) as well as help with understanding different cultures (Mattiske 2020, 195).

Communication is especially crucial during virtual meetings, when it's easy for participants to zone out and be passive (Pullan 2016, 125). Successfully leading a remote meeting is about keeping people focused and engaged in the matter at hand and ensuring that the message gets across. Ensuring that there's time for small talk, having a clear agenda, keeping webcams open and taking a facilitative stance instead a team leader dominating the discussion, are a few things to keep in mind (Pantsu 2021). Organizing face-to-face meetings and virtual parties are also an effective way of promoting communication in the team (Liao 2017, 651-654).

A lack of visibility does not equal to a lack of being present, in fact, being present and accessible is all the more important in a remote team (Dyer & Shepherd 2021, 76-77). Being accessible as a leader communicates trust and respect to the team, as well as helps with overall commitment and performance (Brower 2020). It is important for a leader to stay up-to-date on how the team is doing and how each team member is feeling. Team leaders are strongly recommended to use the same tools and systems and keep a close eye on the discussions that team members are having in different communication tools, such as chats (Haapakoski, Niemelä & Yrjölä 2020, ch. 3).

The key elements of successful remote leadership are visualized in Figure 5.

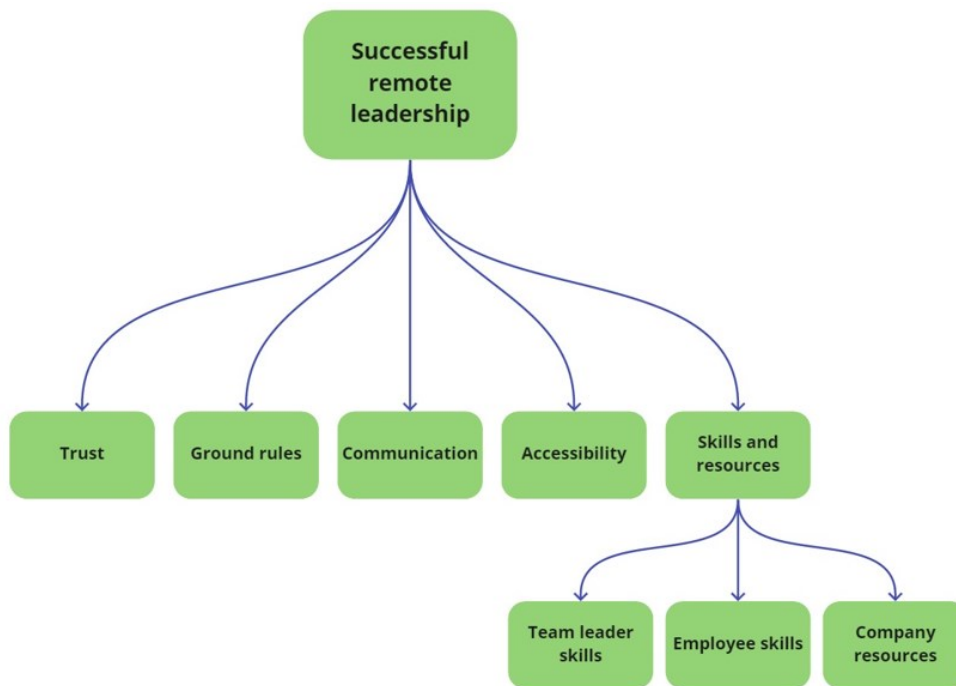


Figure 5: Successful remote leadership

Remote work setting has also brought a need for specific skills and resources. For remote leadership to be successful, necessary skills by employees and team leaders, as well as sufficient company resources should be met.

For leading a successful remote team, it is not enough for a leader to merely know the tasks at hand and handle administrative responsibilities. Having strong social skills is paramount, especially in a virtual team setting (Liao 2017, 650-651; Haapakoski et al. 2020, ch. 3). Having strong relationship-oriented skills (for example supporting team members and caring about their well-being) is just as important as possessing task-oriented skills (for example initiating structure and clarifying team goals). On an individual level, it is important for a team leader to maintain a high-quality relationship with each team member. Team leaders should pay attention to professional respect, provide individual coaching and resources, show personal attention, as well as loyalty and motivation towards each team member. (Liao 2017, 650-656.)

A few of the key skills of a strong remote team member are self-management to maximize efficiency, the ability to use appropriate communication tools in the right way and overall great communication skills in a virtual environment (Mattiske 2020, 56-61). Writing skills, in particular, are important since most of the communication is done via email and instant messages (Fried & Hansson 2014, 163). Having routines for separating work and leisure

(Saunders 2021, 31-34) as well as the ability to gather information self-reliantly are also key characteristics (Tuomimaa 2021). Being self-disciplined and self-motivated lessens the need for constant supervision (Pullan 2016, 61). Strong decision-making and problem-solving skills are also valued highly, as well as being self-motivated and independent (Mattiske 2020, 69).

There are also resources that the company should provide for remote leadership to be successful. Excellent recruitment and orientation processes (Tuomimaa 2021), special care on occupational well-being (Schall & Chen 2021) and providing sufficient communication tools and training how to use them (Pullan 2016, 89-92) are all important aspects. Competence management and understanding of capabilities within the company are also emphasized in virtual setting, as lack of casual discussion often results in unclear knowledge management (Tuomimaa 2021).

Skills and resources are visualized below in Figure 6. Many of the listed qualities are the same as what are needed for excelling in an office setting. However, with remote work the qualities need to be even stronger, for example, having a sense of responsibility is important in any work setting, but when it comes to remote work, it is crucial. (Dyer & Shepherd 2021, 120.)

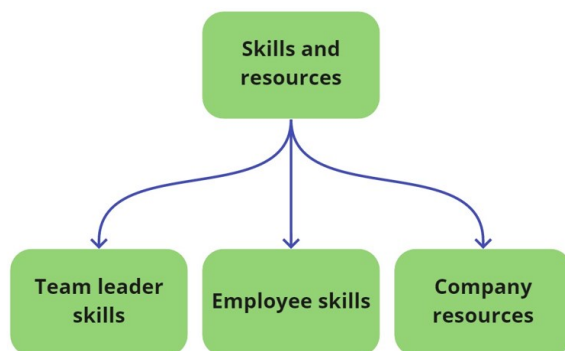


Figure 6: Skills and resources

In general, when it comes to successful remote work and leadership in a workplace, one of the most important aspects is to negotiate remote work practices together with both the management as well as the workers. The task is not easy as remote work often splits the crowd: some prefer working permanently from home while others never. For many, however, the freedom to have even a couple of days a week remote is sufficient. What is important though, is to discuss the options and make the decisions together with the employees. (Onali 2021.)

2.6 Future of work

“*R.I.P. Office*” - declared Helsingin Sanomat in March 2021, stating that the era of open offices is over. Many have indicated that remote work is here to stay but to what extent, is still unknown. (Luoma-aho 2021a.)

Although the popularity of remote work cannot be refuted, some are nevertheless more sceptical of the idea of a completely different working life. According to Finnish futures studies professor Osmo Kuusi, it is not likely that all work is done remotely in the future as humans tend to have a need for physical proximity and closeness (Haapakoski et al. 2020, ch. 1). It was also reported that the peak of intensity regarding remote work has been reached during the pandemic, however, remote work is likely to continue nonetheless (Lund et al. 2021).

When it comes to the financial sector, remote work can be expected. A report by McKinsey calculated overall remote work potential for each sector, depending on the activities and tasks of different jobs (Lund et al. 2020). Out of all the sectors, finance and insurance was mentioned as the sector with the highest potential for remote work, with 75% of time being spent on activities that can be conducted remotely without a loss of efficiency (Lund et al. 2020). The two biggest banks in Finland, OP Group and Nordea, have already stated that remote work will continue as a permanent option, even after the global pandemic is over (Närhi 2021).

According to the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, the remote work experiences during the pandemic have irreversibly changed the Finnish working life. The attitude towards remote work from management is more positive than before the pandemic, and the overall leadership style has changed. A hierarchical approach to management that focuses only on substance and employee control is no longer the case, instead it is being replaced by an encouraging leadership style that focuses on employee well-being. (Onali 2021.)

As majority of knowledge work can be done remotely, the role of the traditional, physical office is in disruption. Before the global pandemic, the office was seen as a place where work was done and monitored, but the abrupt global change to remote work proved that a significant number of tasks could be done from any location. Even though the attitude towards remote work is changing and the stigma is broken, the traditional office still has its purpose. What remote work is lacking, for instance a sense of community, is where a traditional office can still thrive. (Kuitunen & Luoma-aho 2021.)

Regardless of pandemic, remote work is undoubtedly a megatrend (Bentley et al. 2016, 207). Advances in technology and changing attitudes on where work should be done, have enabled remote work to thrive. Flexibility in physical location and the autonomy it brings to an

individual, is all the more important to today's employee. For companies, the era of attracting top talent with fun office activities, such as game rooms and yoga studios, is over (Luoma-aho 2021a).

2.7 Synthesis of the knowledge base

Figure 7 visualizes the knowledge base of the thesis. The evolution of leadership was discussed in detail in chapter 2.2. While traditional leadership explanations have emphasized efficiency and control, newer trends have included empowerment and self-management. In general, leadership thinking has evolved from the 19th century control heavy leadership style to the trust-based, shared leadership of today. (Jylhä & Viitala 2019, ch. 1.)

Remote work has many benefits to both individuals as well as companies, as discussed in chapter 2.4.1. The most common benefits include independence, flexibility, productivity, and diversity, as well as the economic and environmental benefits.

Remote work has its challenges as well. Criticism and the heavy stigma of remote workers taking advantage of being out of sight, have prevailed. Key challenges include the existing work culture, as well as dealing with the isolation, lack of sense of community, challenges with virtual communication, difficulties with building trust amongst the team as well as challenges with office ergonomics.

Leading a remote team can be challenging. Measuring work, giving individual attention, resolving possible conflicts, technological issues, team engagement as well as dealing with cultural and language barriers, are some of the key challenges that a remote team leader might face.

Concerning the key aspects of successful remote leadership, it is crucial to have a trust-based culture, have clear ground rules, remain accessible as well as focus on effective communication. There are also specific skills and resources that the team leader, team members and the organization should have. These include, for instance, strong self-management skills, excellent communication skills as well as proper communication tools and recruitment processes.

In addition, digitalization has had an impact and enabled remote work as an option, as technological solutions are in a key role in the development of remote work (Vilkman 2016, ch. 7). The future of work is highly virtual. Digitalization and the implementation of many technologies have been accelerated by the global pandemic, and the role of the traditional, physical office is in disruption (Elnaj 2021). Remote work is expected to stay, but to what extent, is still unknown.

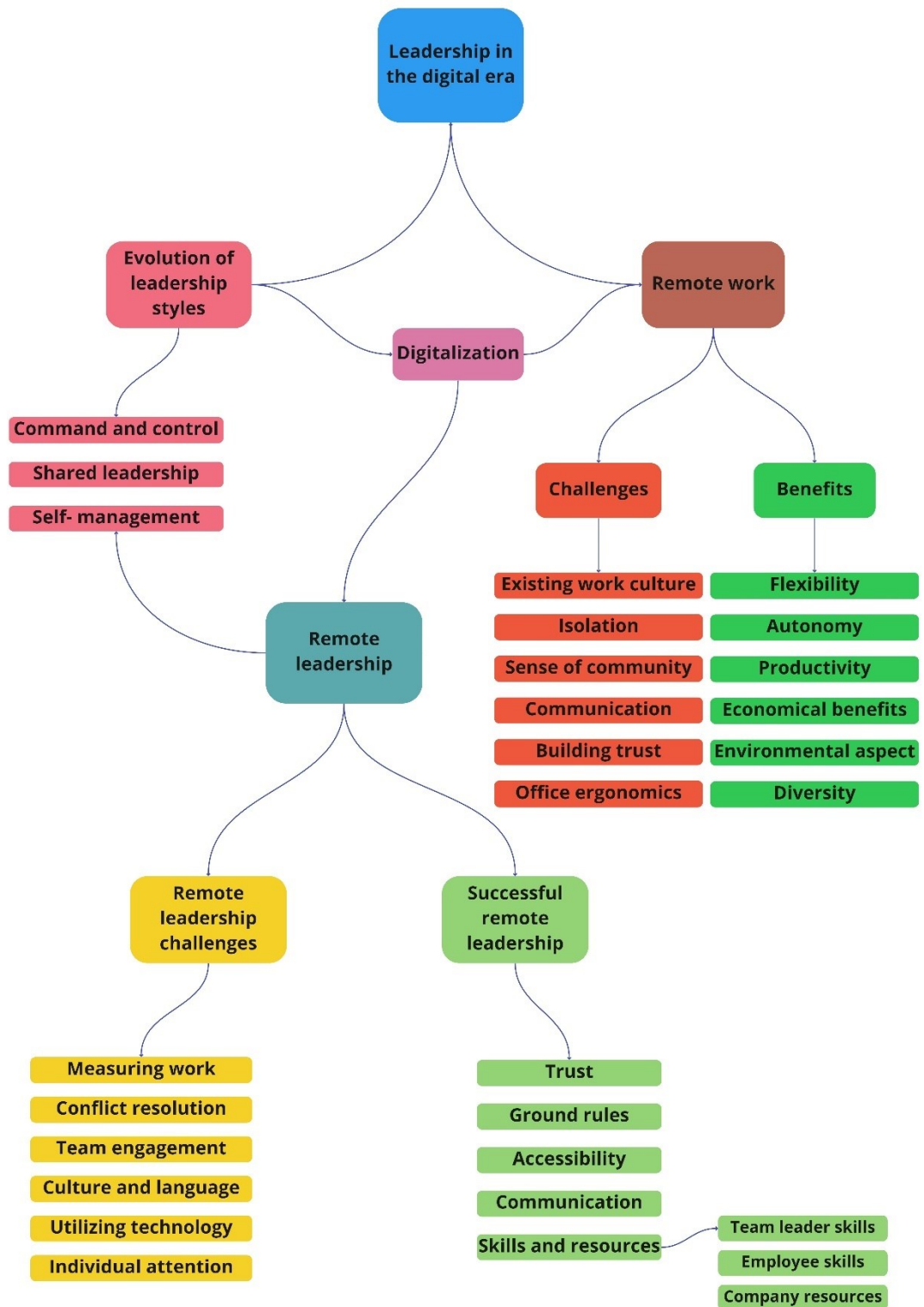


Figure 7: Synthesis of knowledge base

3 Development setting and methods

3.1 Development questions

Digitalization, the changing nature of workplace, as well as the current remote work phenomenon were discussed in previous chapter. As the knowledge base demonstrated, remote work is a megatrend. Therefore, it is important for any company to provide the necessary workplace practices to keep top talent and stay agile in the changing business environment.

Based on the needs to stay current as well as the ethos that the global pandemic has caused in workplaces, the thesis aims to answer to the following development questions:

- What kind of skills and practices are needed for effective remote work and leadership?
- How can the remote leadership of the case organization be developed?

The goal of the thesis regarding the development outcome, is to create a remote work and leadership concept as the development proposal for the case organization. The purpose is to find efficient remote work practices, methods, and development ideas for the case organization. In addition to developing the remote leadership practices of the case company, the objective is to also help the case organization to stay competitive and attractive as an employer, and to thrive in the complex business environment where adaptability is key (Contreras et al. 2020, 1).

3.2 Case study as a development method

The purpose of a case study is to thoroughly explore a case in its own environment and produce detailed information about the subject (Ojasalo, Moilanen & Ritalahti 2015, ch. 3.2). Yin (2018, 286) defines case study as *“a social science research method, generally used to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and in its real-world context”*.

The case that is being investigated is the main focus of the study and a concrete entity, for example a person, a group, an organization, a process, or a policy (Yin 2018, 286). In this thesis, the case that is studied is banking industry, and more specifically the case organization, Danske Bank. The unit of analysis refers to the precise case in the case study (Yin 2018, 288). In this thesis, the unit of analysis is the specific department in the case organization that is focused on.

Case study is a suitable development method when the purpose is to find development suggestions (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 3.2) or seek explanations to current circumstances, for instance (Yin 2018, 4). This thesis examines remote leadership, a current phenomenon, with

the objective of finding development ideas for a case organization, which requires vast, in-depth knowledge of the circumstance. Therefore, case study is chosen as the development method for the thesis.

A typical case study process is visualized below in Figure 8 (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 3.2). The process has four steps from preliminary development task to the final development proposition. Yin's (2018, 1-2) case study process has a few more steps compared to the process by Ojasalo et al., however, it has a similar logic in its core: a clear, linear path, yet iteration is encouraged throughout the process (Yin 2018, 1).

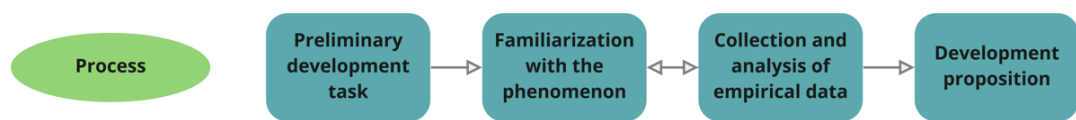


Figure 8: Typical case study process (modified from Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 3.2)

First step in the case study process is the creation of a preliminary development task and problem, as well as getting to know the case organization and subject at hand. Yin (2018, 2, 24) discusses planning and designing the case study as some of the early steps in case study research, as well as the importance of developing early propositions. The purpose during the first step is to set preliminary goals and development ideas for case company (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 3.2). In this study, this goal is accomplished through open, thorough discussion with the case company.

Step 2 of case study process is the familiarization with the phenomenon both in practice and theory. The purpose is to have a deeper understanding of the phenomenon as well as specifying the development ideas (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 3.2). Preparation for data collection is one of the main goals in this step (Yin 2018, 80), which is done by studying existing literature, conducting an open interview, and observing the case organization.

Step 3 involves the collection and analysis of empirical data. Data collection and analysis practices, such as using multiple sources of evidence and looking for patterns, are followed carefully during the step (Yin 2018, 110, 164). The overall purpose is to gain thorough knowledge of the overall phenomenon and create new information for case organization (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 3.2). In this study, this is achieved through a questionnaire as well as conducting individual interviews. Altogether, case study development method relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion (Yin 2018, 15).

The final step of a case study process is sharing the results (Yin 2018, 218), in this case by creating a development proposal for the case organization. The overall goal of the last step, and the whole thesis in fact, is the creation of a remote work concept to help the case organization develop successful, efficient remote work and remote leadership practices in the future.

Figure 9 summarizes the case study process steps, the purpose of each step, as well as the specific activities or methods that were used during each step to reach the target. Although Figure 9 shows numerical process steps from steps one to four, the case study process is often iterative and does not necessarily flow in a specific order (Yin 2018, 1). Adjusting the development task throughout the process is not incorrect, but in fact part of a typical development process (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 3.2). Different steps may also be combined with one another, for instance steps 2 and 3 are conducted in parts simultaneously. The numerical steps are added to the figure mainly for visual clarity.

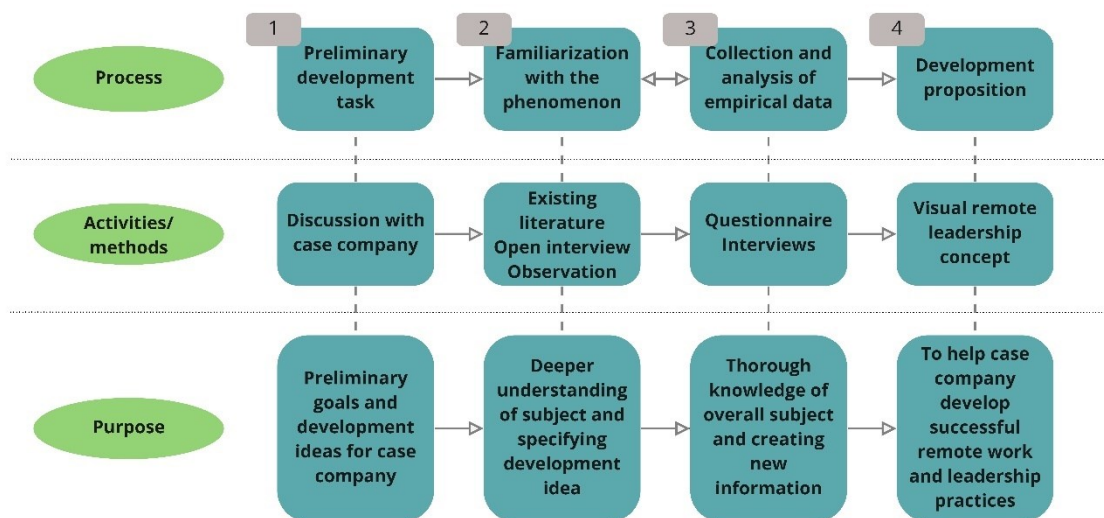


Figure 9: Case study process in the thesis

3.2.1 Step 1: Preliminary development task

The first step in the case study process is planning and designing the case study process (Yin 2018, 2, 24) and defining the preliminary development task (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 3.2). Open discussion about possible topics and development ideas were had with the case organization, and goals were set for the thesis process.

The idea for the thesis topic, remote leadership, as well as the development idea of finding effective remote leadership practises for case organization, were suggested early on by the thesis author. The case organization accepted the thesis topic and gave free range for the

thesis author to develop the thesis further. A written agreement of master's thesis was signed with the case organization.

3.2.2 Step 2: Familiarization with the phenomenon

The second step is to prepare for the case study process (Yin 2018, 80). This includes familiarizing with the phenomenon thoroughly both in practice as well as in theory (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 3.2). Practical side consists of conducting an informal, open interview as well as direct observation of case organization. Theoretical knowledge is gained through researching existing literature from a variety of different sources from published and peer-reviewed scientific articles to printed literature and online webinars, both domestic and foreign, as demonstrated by the knowledge base in chapter 2.

Informal, open interview

An informal, open interview was held with a team leader of the case organization. Interview topics were decided beforehand, but discussion was mainly open. The open interview was done for background research before the beginning of quantitative research, as instructed by Ojasalo et al. (2015, ch. 4.2). The purpose was to get a general, preliminary understanding of case organization details and daily practices but not to delve deeper into the development task.

Interview topics included background information of the case organization, such as the size of the organization, the number of teams and personnel, existing rules on communication and the typical schedule of a team member (for instance the number of meetings). The purpose was to understand the daily flow of the team in order to prepare for direct observation. The interview was not recorded; however, notes were taken during the interview.

Information gathered from open interview included:

- Size of the case organization:
 - o Before organizational changes: 56 people in 5 teams (including 5 team leaders)
 - o After organizational changes: 35 people in 2 teams (including 2 team leaders)
- Typical schedule for a team member:
 - o Daily meeting (10-20 minutes): each team has a short, virtual meeting at the beginning of every morning that includes going through the daily plan for work tasks and any ad hoc issues
 - o Weekly team meeting (30-60 minutes): each team has a weekly team meeting, that consists of weekly targets, efficiency, quality, new instructions, or anything current

- Monthly department wide meeting (45-60 minutes): all teams participate in a monthly meeting together. Agenda includes current issues, changes to instructions, or important events
- Communication rules:
 - Email, calling, Microsoft Teams and Skype are used for communication
 - A support chat for questions exists in Microsoft Teams

Passive observation

Direct observation was conducted at the beginning of the thesis process, after the informal, open interview. Observation is a common research method that investigates what happens in a natural situation. Observation enables access to the case in a real-world context and is a typical research method in service design, for example. (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 4.3.)

Observation is more than the mere examination of a group; it is a systematic and organized approach of examining something with an emphasis on proper preparation and meticulous documentation (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 4.3). Observational evidence often offers additional information about the phenomenon that is being studied (Yin 2018, 121-122), and it is a particularly efficient research method for cases that examine individual behaviour and interaction with others (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 4.3).

Determining the role of the observer is important to establish early on (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 4.3). *Non-participant observation* is observation conducted in a passive manner, where the observer remains passive in the situation (Stickdorn, Hormess, Lawrence & Schneider 2018, ch. 5.2). The other end of the spectrum is *participant-observation*, where the observer has an active role participating in the actions that are being studied (Yin 2018, 121-125). According to Ojasalo et al. (2015, ch. 4.3), passive observation is particularly well suited during the early stages of the research, where the purpose is to become familiar with the subject. Hence, passive observation was chosen in this stage.

Observation has its limitations when it comes to data collection. One of these limitations is that observation only focuses on external behaviour on the surface and does not cover behaviour in more detail, such as the thoughts and feelings of subjects. Another limitation with observation is that having an observer may affect the actions of the subjects that are being observed. (Patton 2015, 390.)

The thesis scope in the case organization was limited to one department, in which observation was conducted. Initially, the observed group consisted of 56 people. However, the department decreased to 35 people due to organizational changes. Observation was done only during virtual meetings due to the ongoing pandemic. Meetings that were observed were mostly short, daily, morning meetings that were scheduled for the beginning of each morning.

Additionally, weekly meetings and department-wide monthly meetings were observed. Overall, eight hours of observation was done during a period of four weeks. Total number of observation events was 21. All observation events were conducted via Microsoft Teams, as there were no physical meetings due to the global pandemic.

The purpose of the observation was to familiarize with the topic and the case organization in a natural way, therefore it was decided together with the case organization that the observer's role would be passive. Additionally, as the team meetings often involved discussion on actual customers and their sensitive banking information, it was decided that observation events are not recorded, however, notes regarding the thesis topic, in other words remote leadership, were taken.

The customers of the case organization are out of scope of the thesis, meaning no customer related information was included in the notes. Furthermore, the thesis author is employed by the case organization and obligated to follow banking secrecy. Notes were to be kept in a safe place with no outside access, and to be deleted when they are no longer needed after the thesis is finished.

The intention was to observe majority of meetings where remote leadership is often occurring. The purpose of observation was to get a good, overall view on how remote systems and remote leadership during remote meetings is done, as well as find out any potential underlying issues the teams may have concerning communication, for example. All behaviour and communication were observed, as well as paying close attention to what people were not doing, as body language, gestures and lack of answering are equally important to note (Stickdorn et al. 2018, ch. 5.2).

Although observation was not considered the main research method for collecting empirical data, the observation process was nevertheless handled meticulously. Immediately after each observed event, notes were clarified and detailed while still in fresh memory. Notes were later cleaned out of topics that were out of scope of the thesis. Information was organized by themes, and similarities and dissimilarities were spotted, as instructed by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, ch. 4.1).

Some of the observation results are shown below in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 shows the similarities that were observed between different teams during observation events. Meeting agenda was clear, distributed before meeting and shown during the meeting. Meetings mostly followed the agenda, which usually included going through the team's daily "numbers", in other words the target of their work, the plan for the week and previous day's tasks. Communication similarities included the team leaders overseeing meetings as well as being the most active. Additionally, the team leaders always had their cameras on.

Similarities:

Agenda	Communication	Camera use (team leader)
Clear agenda Agenda distributed before meeting Agenda shown during meeting Meetings followed agenda	Team leaders in charge Team leaders most active	Team leaders had cameras on

Table 1: Observation results: Similarities

Table 2 shows the dissimilarities that were observed between different teams. There was a distinct lack of any small talk or casual conversation in some teams, while others had a habit of always including casual discussion. Camera use between team members had differences as well: some teams had all team members with their cameras on, others not.

There also seemed to be differences in set rules regarding camera use as some team leaders reminded their team members to use them, while others did not. Observer noticed that many times when people had cameras on, the overall mood and communication was better in the team. The main takeaway from observation was the overall range of practices between different teams, and the different practices regarding small talk and camera, for instance.

Dissimilarities

Communication	Camera use (team members)
Some had lots of small talk, others none	Some had always on, others never Some team leaders reminded about cameras, others not

Table 2: Observation results: Dissimilarities

3.2.3 Step 3: Collection and analysis of empirical data

Step 3 of the case study process is the collection and analysis of empirical data. The primary data collection methods in the thesis are questionnaire and interviews. Data is analysed by applying content analysis method which is described in detail in this chapter. Affinity diagrams and personas are utilized during the analysis phase.

Questionnaire

After the initial familiarization with the subject that was conducted through open interview and observation, an online questionnaire was sent. A questionnaire is a widely used data collection method that has many benefits, above all the possibility to reach a large number of people and being inexpensive to generate. Challenges with choosing a questionnaire include

the risk of receiving superficial results as well as respondents not being familiar with the subject in question. (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 4.4.)

Questionnaire was sent to the initial case organization of 56 people. 39 responses were received, making the response rate 70%. Microsoft Forms was used for questionnaire and all answers were anonymous. The questionnaire had two multiple choice questions, but the emphasis was on qualitative, open-ended questions with free text option, even though typically it is recommended to focus on multiple choice questions instead. Ojasalo et al. (2015, ch. 4.4) recommend using open-ended questions when the target group is known to be active and eager to share opinions. The thesis author had become acquainted with the case organization through previous work as well as during the observation period, hence, using open-ended questions is well-founded.

The questionnaire had 11 questions in total about remote leadership and remote work, with eight questions being mandatory to answer and three optional ones for additional information. The purpose of the questionnaire was to get more detailed information from the case organization, including the existing views and experiences of remote work and leadership. The intention was not necessarily to find solutions or answers to the research questions, but to get an overall understanding on the status of remote work and leadership in the organization, so that common themes could be found out and later explored in interviews.

Questionnaire was conducted in Finnish as it is the primary work language in the case organization. Appendix 1 shows full questionnaire in Finnish.

Interviews

Interview was chosen as a data collection method as it is a common, effective approach to getting in-depth knowledge in case studies dealing with human affairs. Interviews can help give insight into participants' perspectives as well as find explanations to key subjects. Interviews conducted during case studies often resemble guided conversations instead having a more rigid, structured style. (Yin 2018, 118-121.)

Interviews, as any other data collection method, have its limitations. With interviews, there is a risk that data collection is affected by the emotional state of the interviewer or interviewee, which may result in ineffective questions or distorted answers (Patton 2015, 390). Biases and misunderstandings are also possible challenges when it comes to interviewing (Yin 2018, 121).

Interview principles according to Patton (2015, 428) were followed to ensure high quality information and an ethical approach. Principles include for instance, having clear, open-

ended questions, focusing on listening and especially following up, observing as well as being neutral (Patton 2015, 428).

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner during the data collection phase of the thesis. Interview topics and themes were decided beforehand but specific wording and order of the questions varied between the interviews. A semi-structured method was chosen due to its adaptability during interviews, as it allows the option to probe an answer with further, clarifying questions (Silverman 2020, 176). Additionally, a structured data collection method, questionnaire, had already been conducted and the purpose of the interviews was to get more in-depth insight from participants in the case organization.

A total of six interviews were conducted, each interview lasting one hour. All interviews were conducted in Finnish. Interviewees were team members of the case organization and although they were suggested by the case company, they took part in the interviews voluntarily. Interviewees were made aware that interviews are recorded both before the interviews via email, as well as at the beginning of each interview. Anonymity was guaranteed. Interview guide can be seen in Appendix 2.

Affinity diagram

Interview and questionnaire data was analysed through content analysis method, as introduced by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, ch. 4.4.3). Content analysis includes first transcribing and translating the data and then removing repetitions and out-of-scope data. Remaining data is reduced to a shorter format and grouped thematically. Groups are named according to the content as well as further grouped together for clarity, while finding larger themes and relationships from the data. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, ch. 4.4.3.)

Affinity diagram was utilized during the content analysis. Affinity diagram is a tool for organizing large sets of data as it helps with grouping data and finding potential solution ideas (Dam & Siang 2020). Affinity diagram was used digitally by typing reduced data into digital post-it notes. Notes were organized thematically into groups and each group was given a title reflecting the content. Larger themes and similarities were looked when arranging groups into boards. Four affinity diagram boards were created from the data:

- Remote work and leadership challenges (current situation)
- Remote work and leadership benefits (current situation)
- Successful remote work and leadership (ideal, future scenario)
- Development and improvement ideas (ideal, future scenario)

The four affinity diagram boards are visualized below in Figures 10-13. Figure 10 visualizes current remote work and leadership challenges in the case organization, based on the

information received from the interviews and questionnaire. The challenges board includes five themes: communication, information and knowledge sharing, leading a team, team rules as well as personal challenges that team members have.

Figure 11 details current remote work and leadership benefits in the case organization. Themes that emerged from data are proper communication, benefits at home, positive experiences from leadership, as well as specific personal benefits.

Figures 12 and 13 detail views on ideal remote team in the future. Figure 12 visualizes successful remote work and leadership themes such as leader actions, leadership style, communication, remote team aspects, as well as soft skills and leader traits. Figure 13 details specific development and improvement ideas. The themes included communication, collaboration, social aspect, freedom, work and tasks, and leader actions. All four affinity diagram boards are shown below in Figures 10-13.



Figure 10: Affinity board: Remote work and leadership challenges

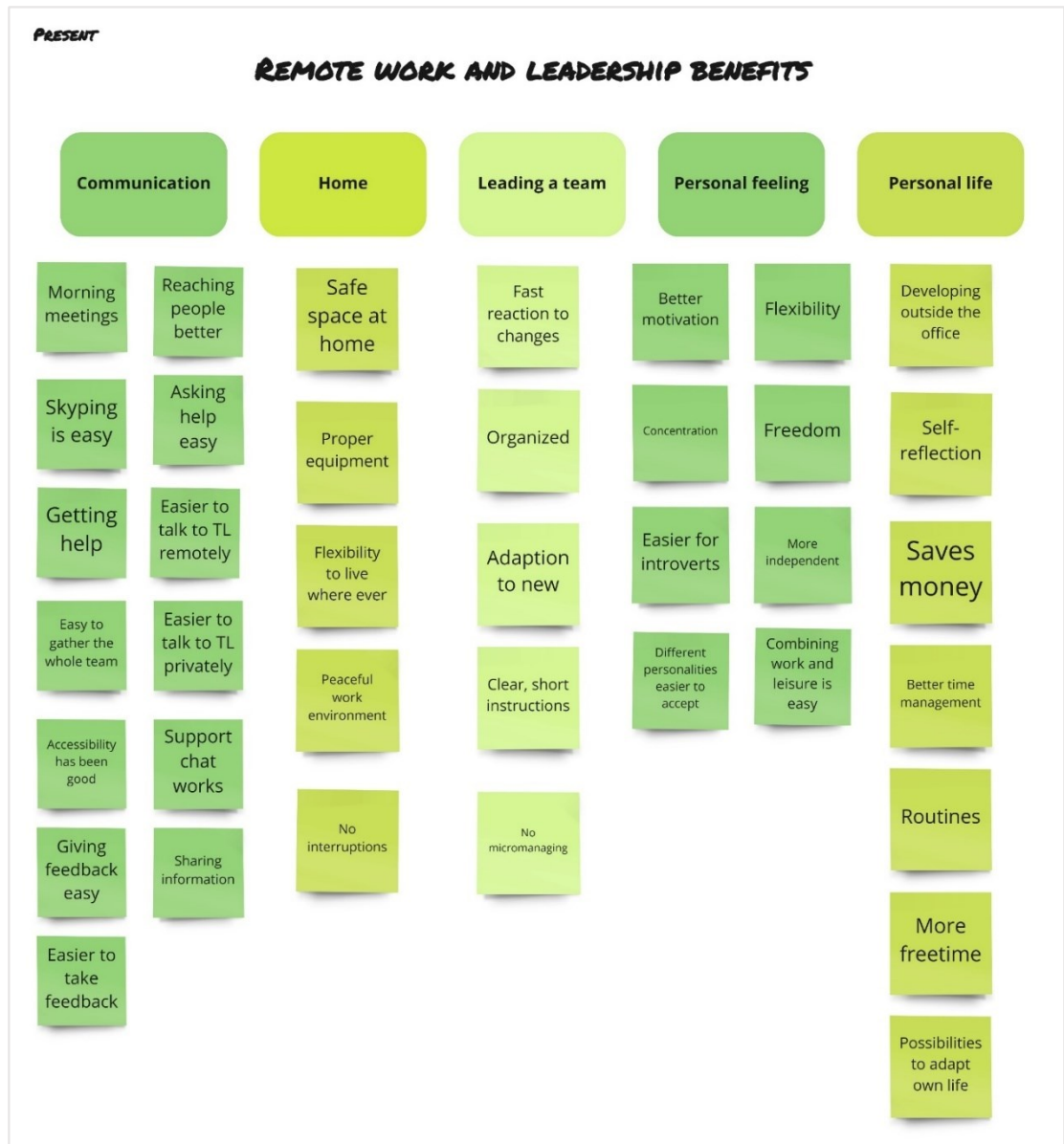


Figure 11: Affinity board: Remote work and leadership benefits



Figure 12: Affinity board: Successful remote work and leadership



Figure 13: Affinity board: Development and improvement ideas

Personas

Data from interviews and questionnaire was further analysed by utilising persona posters. Personas are examples of fictitious archetypes that present a group of people, such as customers or employees, and visualize their motivations and behaviours. Personas are not stereotypes but profiles based on research, and they are useful for sharing research findings. (Stickdorn et al. 2018, ch. 3.2.)

Personas are particularly popular in service design, where they are often used to visualize different customer profiles (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 3.5). Personas were chosen for the development task due to their ability to make groups that share similar needs more understandable (Stickdorn et al. 2018, ch. 3.2). The purpose of the personas is for the case organization to better understand different groups of people and their needs, which help them when planning future remote work practices. Personas were also chosen because the case organization is familiar with them, as they have utilized personas previously in their projects.

Personas were created based on the information received through interviews and the questionnaire. Out of the collected data, three personas were created: *Team trainer*, *Experienced team member* and *New team member*. The three personas visualize different groups of people that were discovered during data collection.

Persona posters include a personal profile of each persona, typical frustrations of a specific persona as well as their values and preferences on different remote work related matters. Future expectations of each profile and a quote that describes their thoughts on remote work are also detailed. All three personas are introduced in Figures 14 - 16.

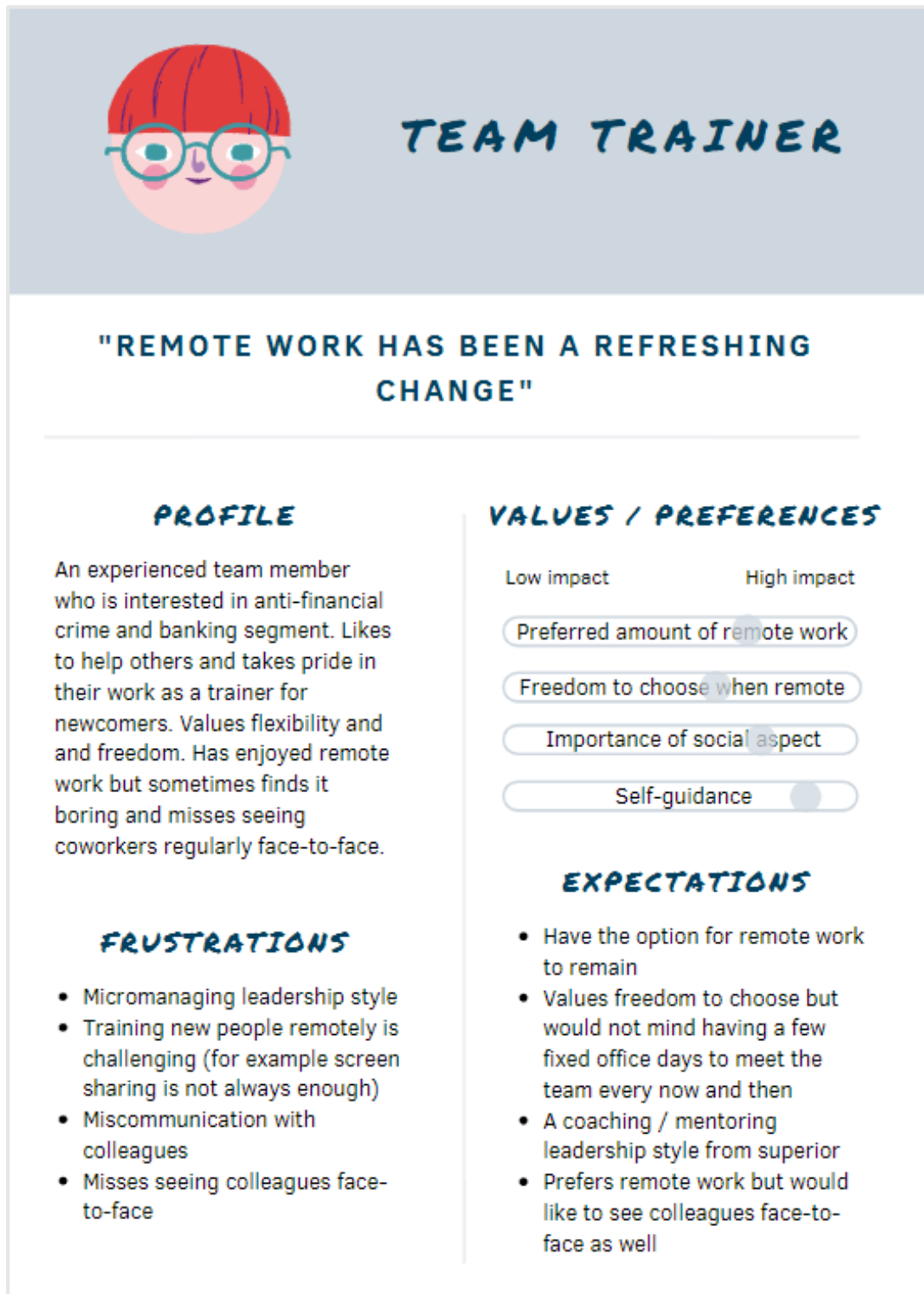


Figure 14: Persona poster: Team trainer

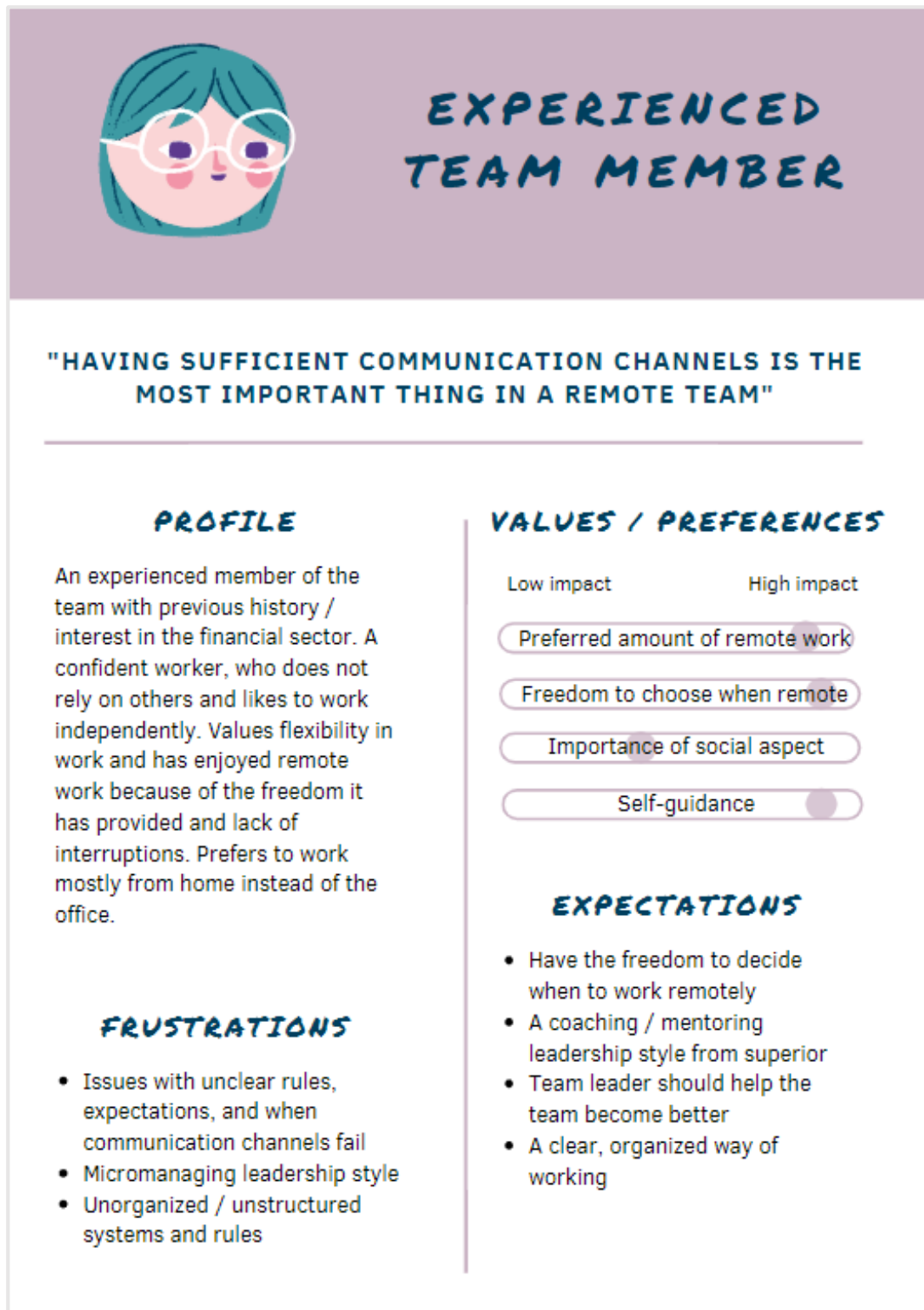


Figure 15: Persona poster: Experienced team member

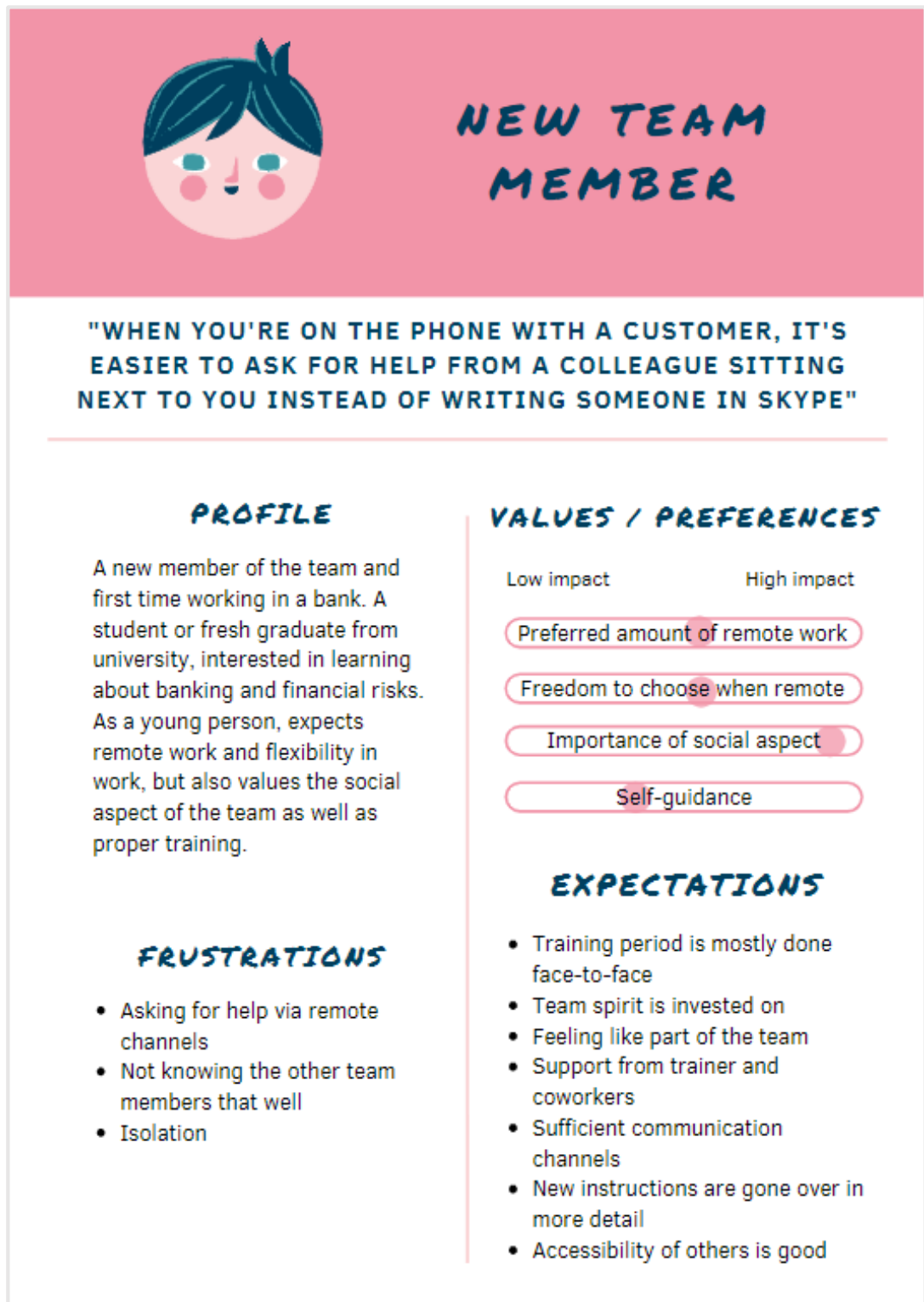


Figure 16: Persona poster: New team member

4 Results of the development process

This chapter details the results of the development process. Current remote work and leadership status in the case organization is first explained, and subsequently the answers to the development questions as well as the final development proposal are introduced.

Open interview, observation and researching existing literature helped with familiarization of the phenomenon and prepared for the collection and analysis of the empirical data. Final development proposal is based on information gathered through primary data collection methods, in other words questionnaire and interviews, but existing literature and observation were also utilized.

The goal of the thesis is to create a remote work concept that the case organization can utilize. The remote concept details efficient remote work and leadership practices, skills, methods, and development ideas.

The thesis aims to answer the following development questions:

- What kind of skills and practices are needed for effective remote work and leadership?
- How can the remote leadership of the case organization be developed?

The results of development process and the answers to the two development questions are based on information and data gathered through interviews, questionnaire, observation, and existing research literature. Chapter 4.1 describes existing remote work and leadership experiences in the case organization in detail. Chapters 4.2 and 4.3 then detail the answers to the two development questions. Chapter 4.4 introduces the development proposal.

4.1 Existing remote work and leadership experiences in case organization

It is important to understand thoroughly the existing remote work and leadership situation in the case organization before any development proposal can be given. Questionnaire and interviews inquired about existing remote work and leadership experiences in the case organization, particularly the remote work and leadership aspects that have been successful and the aspects that need to be developed.

Remote work experiences

Many of the positive comments regarding remote work experiences included lack of commute. Many commented on enjoying better time management, financial savings, and more free time during the day. A more peaceful work environment at home and having experienced less interruptions were also indicated in the results, with many specifically mentioning better

concentration and increased efficiency. The overall flexibility and a larger sense of freedom and independence that remote work offers, were the most common benefits that results revealed.

The results also indicated challenges that respondents had experienced with remote work. Lack of social contacts and feelings of isolation were the most common answers when the negative aspects were asked. Many also commented on the lack of team spirit and no communal feeling in the team. Some felt that work and leisure were mixed easily and separating work was difficult. Results also indicated poor communication, and challenges with asking for help. Poor ergonomics at home were commented by a few in the questionnaire, but not during interviews. After the questionnaire, the case organization offered a 1 000 EUR bonus to each staff member for the purchase of home equipment which could explain the change.

Remote leadership experiences in case organization

In addition to remote work experiences, remote leadership was also enquired. More than half of the replies (24/39) in the questionnaire mentioned that overall remote leadership experience had been positive, some answers (7/39) were neutral, and some (8/39) negative. Positive experiences included good communication and good accessibility to team leader. Daily meetings were also appreciated, because they helped with connecting better with the rest of the team.

The following few quotes (translated from Finnish to English) describe the positive experiences that respondents had detailed in the questionnaire:

“Remote leadership has been very successful, and our team leader has been very active with us, even though we’re all working remote.”

“It’s been good. Team leader can be easily contacted via Teams, Skype, or phone when necessary and he/she has always time to help and talk.”

Results also indicated negative experiences from remote leadership. While some thought communication was adequate, some felt that communication was not clear and too irregular. Lack of support was also mentioned, and some respondents commented having experienced problems asking for help and team leader being difficult to reach. Results also indicated a need for more personal support and interaction with team leader. Lack of casual discussion and small talk were also reported by many. The following quotes (translated from Finnish to English) represent some of the negative experiences that were detailed in the questionnaire:

“Team leaders are hard to reach, and it is more difficult to get help/answers.”

“It has gone very badly. Leadership quality is bad and communication with team leader is basically non-existent.”

In general, when asked about future expectations regarding team leaders in remote setting, many mentioned hopes for more casual discussion and personal communication with team leader. Communication outside the virtual team meetings, in particular, was mentioned, as many felt uncomfortable sharing personal issues during team meetings in front of others. Several people mentioned that a simple “*how are you*” question would be appreciated, especially if it was asked proactively by team leader. Majority of the answers also mentioned the importance of support and good accessibility, for example reaching the team leader fast.

The questionnaire gave contradictory results in some cases, for instance some felt team leader was very easily accessible while others had negative experiences regarding it. Deviation in the questionnaire results may be for instance due to different personal expectations or differences in the leadership styles of specific team leaders, as the case organization originally had several teams and team leaders.

Figure 17 below visualizes some of the remote work experiences and opinions that respondents had. Grey colour in the centre represents neutral opinion (the respondent neither agrees nor disagrees). Red colour visualizes the respondents disagreeing with the statement and blue represents agreement with the statement. The further the coloured bar is from the grey centre, the more times the specific answer was given.

As visualized in Figure 17, majority felt that they were more efficient and could keep up better with tasks in a remote setting. Majority also trusted their colleagues and team leaders, and felt that they were trusted as an employee, as well as had proper remote work equipment at home. Personal motivation and team spirit, however, were not experienced as better in remote setting.

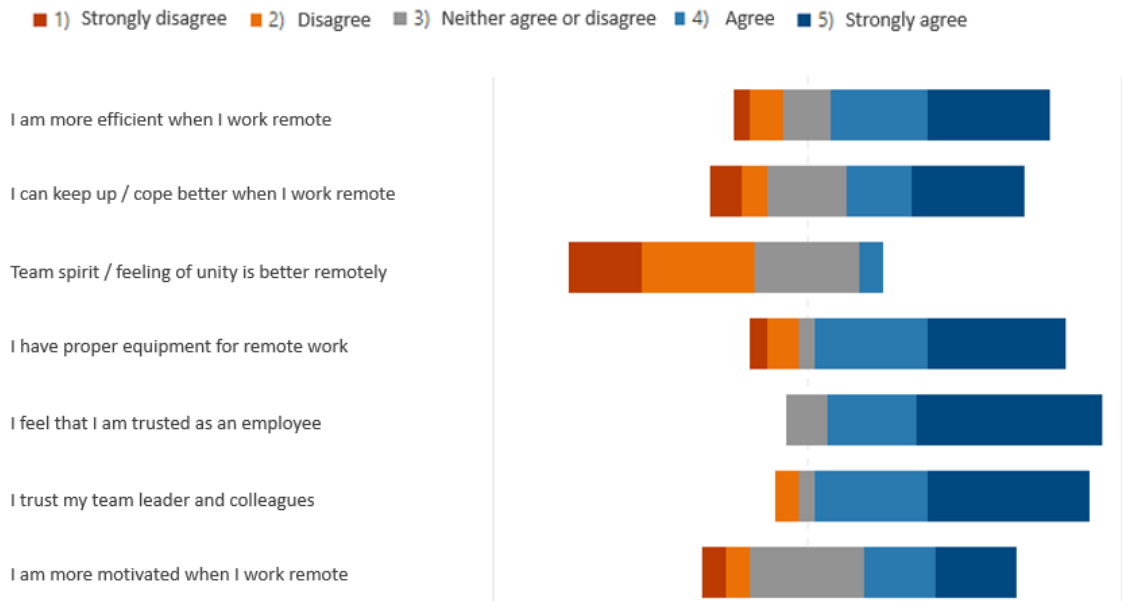


Figure 17: Remote work experiences

Results clearly indicate that remote work is appreciated. Figure 18 below shows the results to the question: “How often would you prefer to work remotely in the future (after the pandemic)?” The scale 0-20 in the figure represents the number of respondents that chose the specific option, for instance 19 respondents answered that they prefer working 2-3 days a week remotely. Majority expressed preference that remote work would be permanent in the future and not just a temporary solution during the pandemic and social distancing recommendations. Over half of the replies preferred having remote work on a weekly basis, majority hoping for 2-3 days a week outside the office. Only a few respondents hoped for no remote work or very little remote work in the future. In many of the answers, freedom to choose when to work from home was mentioned as a priority over a specific number of days.

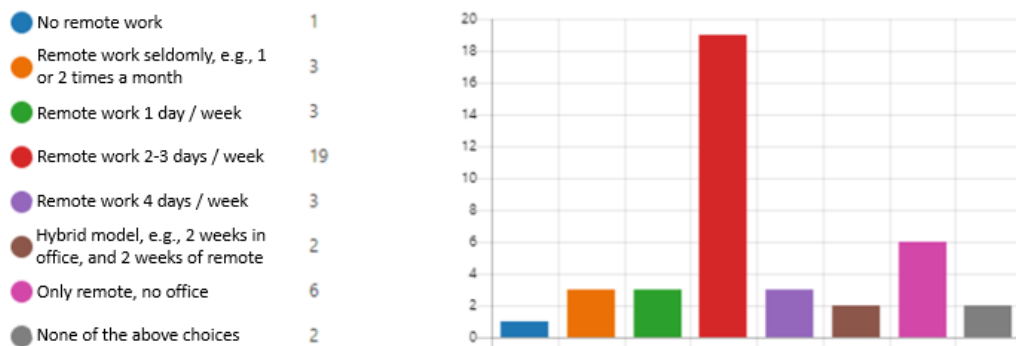


Figure 18: Remote work preference in the future

Interviewees were asked to briefly describe the current status of remote work and remote leadership in the case organization, as well as to describe the future, ideal remote work and remote leadership. The answers are visualized below in Figure 19 in word clouds.

Word cloud is a visual tool to show results. The bigger the word in word cloud, the more times it was mentioned (Chauhan 2020). Red cloud visualizes the current situation and the green cloud ideal situation in the future. The purpose of using the word clouds in the thesis is to visualize and simplify the current situation in the case organization as well as show the ideal, future one. This helps the case organization to understand why developing remote work and leadership practices is important in the first place.

As Figure 19 shows, many felt that although the current situation can be described as sufficient and improved, it is mainly viewed of as unorganized, challenging, and having to only rely on yourself. Ideal future scenario includes a more organized way of working. Having better team spirit, freedom to choose remote work and a coaching leadership style were also mentioned as important. Micromanaging leadership style was specifically stated as something that many felt strongly against.



Figure 19: Word clouds

4.2 Skills and practices in successful remote work and leadership

The first development question was: *What kind of skills and practices are needed for effective remote work and leadership?* Researching existing literature provided the answers to the first development question, and questionnaire and interviews were additionally utilized.

Skills and resources in successful remote work and leadership

Remote work phenomenon has brought a need for specific skills that employees and team leaders should have that enable remote leadership to be successful and efficient. For leading a successful remote team, it is not enough for a leader to merely know the tasks at hand and handle administrative responsibilities. Having strong social skills is paramount, especially in virtual team setting. Results from the questionnaire and interviews also indicated that having a leader with strong relationship-oriented skills, such as supporting team members and caring about their well-being, should be emphasized.

The support of a team leader is all the more essential due to remote workers being isolated. Same applies to the importance of team leaders being able to maintain high-quality relationship with each team member. Providing individual coaching, resources and showing personal attention and professional respect are traits that are expected from team leaders. Results from interviews and questionnaire specifically emphasized proactive communication from the team leader. The following questionnaire response explained the issue well:

“By calling or messaging me to ask how I’m doing and if everything is okay. Not everyone wants to share their thoughts during team meetings where everyone else is present.” -a response to the questionnaire question: When it comes to remote work, how can your team leader best help you?

As for key employee skills, both existing literature as well as data gathered from interviews suggest that self-management is of utmost importance. As the virtual setting often means working alone, being self-reliant and having a strong sense of responsibility are a few of the most important characteristics to look for in an employee in a remote team. The following quote represents the matter well:

“As a team, we are very self-organized, which helps the team leader.” - a respondent in the questionnaire

Communication skills are equally important as being self-reliant. Great communication skills in all channels, in particular strong writing skills, are vital as most communication happens via virtual channels. Remote workers should also have routines for separating work and leisure as well as have strong decision-making and problem-solving skills. Personality traits, such as being self-disciplined and self-motivated, are encouraged in remote teams.

Having the right skillset is important, but there are also specific company resources that enable a successful remote work and leadership culture. Having excellent recruitment and onboarding processes, along with providing sufficient communication tools are required. Companies should additionally pay attention to occupational well-being, for instance issues

with isolation and home ergonomics. Since remote work often lacks casual “water cooler talk”, competence management and understanding of capabilities within the company are important aspects to note.

Remote team practices in successful remote work and leadership

When it comes to specific practices that make a remote team successful, building trust should be the first priority. With remote teams this is particularly important due to the physical distance. Team leaders can emphasize trust building by creating a safe environment, understanding different personalities and by being reliable themselves.

Establishing ground rules must be done carefully in a remote team. All workplace goals, rules, and expectations should be defined in detail. It is recommended to decide on ground rules together as a team, as it gives team members ownership and promotes efficient communication.

Communication in virtual channels is important to prioritize in the team due to the physical separation. Technological tools should be clear to everyone: which tool to use, how to use it and when to use it. During virtual meetings it is recommended that team leaders take a facilitative stance instead of dominating the discussion. Virtual meetings might be the only time during a day an employee gets to socialize with their co-workers, so it is important to allow them the chance to communicate. Ensuring that there is enough time for small talk and following a clear agenda are also important. Team leaders can also promote communication by organizing face-to-face meetings and virtual events.

Maintaining good accessibility and being easily reachable are paramount in virtual teams in order to promote better communication. Majority of the responses to the questionnaire specifically mentioned the importance of accessibility, especially regarding the team leader. One respondent in the questionnaire mentioned the following when asked how the team leader could help the team succeed:

“By being available or clearly communicating when they can be reached and who is responsible in the meantime in the event of a problem.”

The team leader should stay up-to-date on how the team is doing and know how each team member is feeling. The following quote summarizes the expectations well:

“To regularly ask how we’re doing as they have so far. The main thing is that the supervisor remains reachable and has time for their employees.” - a respondent in the questionnaire

4.3 Development and improvement ideas

The second development question was: How can the remote leadership of the case organization be developed? The interviews and questionnaire provided the answers mainly, but existing literature was also utilized. The answer to the second question is divided into two parts: development and improvement suggestions for a remote team, and development and improvement suggestions for remote leadership.

Remote team development and improvement suggestions

The importance of proper communication cannot be overstated, and case organization could develop their current communication further. Good communication includes ensuring better reachability and making sure that asking and receiving help in a virtual setting is easy. It is also recommended that teams share knowledge and discuss current topics and events that are happening. Overall, having more casual discussion in case organization was mentioned as a topic that could be improved.

Having better clarity in what the team is doing and reacting more quickly to changes should also be improved. A practical development idea from team members is going over new instructions and changes in greater detail, as many felt that it was insufficient. Results also indicated that existing chat rooms in Microsoft Teams, which is the primary communication channel, are not always sufficient, and there is a need for more topics, for example technical issues and a priority support chat during phone shift when getting help quickly is crucial. This issue should be discussed with the teams further and specific action plan should be made together with the team members based on the needs.

Collaboration was another topic that many felt could be developed further. Some felt there was a lack of unity and they wished to develop the workplace together as a team. Learning from each other was also mentioned as lacking. Overall, the collaboration between team members should be emphasized, for example by having more trainings with partners. One respondent commented the following on the subject:

“I wish the team spirit was better. I would like to have a more united team.” -
a respondent in the questionnaire

Social aspect is understandably an issue of concern in a remote setting. During data collection it was discovered that team members wished to do more things together as a team and hoped that social activities were more encouraged by team leaders. Some felt that they barely knew their co-workers and hoped for a change. It is recommended that the teams physically meet in the office together every now and then, for instance a few times a month, to promote

social aspect further. Teams could have more casual meetings during work hours and promote socialization, for instance by having voluntary virtual coffee breaks.

Development and improvement ideas for organizing work and tasks were also discussed in detail during data collection phase. It is recommended that onboarding a new team member should be done primarily in the office, as virtual channels might be too challenging for someone unfamiliar with existing technological solutions. It is additionally recommended that in general, tasks should be simplified as many felt that the current situation was unorganized and teams too large. A more organized platform for all instructions and personnel lists could be developed in the team and was specifically expressed during data collection phase.

Remote leadership development and improvement suggestions

When overall leadership and leader actions were discussed with the case organization, the most important factor that emerged was for team leaders to be coaches and mentors, instead authoritarian managers. Micromanaging, in particular, is strongly recommended against as the feelings towards it were unanimously against, as the following quotes demonstrate:

“Remote work becomes extremely distressing if individuals are scrutinized in excessive detail or team leaders start micromanaging.” - one respondent in the questionnaire

“A coaching leadership style where we could concentrate on how to develop in the future.” - one interviewee when asked about preferred leadership style

Results indicated a need for more communication. It is recommended that team leaders discuss current news and especially go over past events together with the employees, for instance by having a “follow up day” each quarter where past quarter is reflected. This is especially important due to some members mentioning underlying issues in the team that had not been given enough attention. They expressed hopes that issues would be discussed clearly and openly. It was expressed that daily morning meetings were not the correct setting to conduct the discussion because it requires more time and preparation and would ideally take place face-to-face.

Team leaders should additionally discuss career paths as well as understand different personalities and dynamics between people. Overall, team spirit and social aspect should be encouraged in the team as many felt it was lacking.

Results suggested a need for team leaders to focus on having more realistic goals, to reward quality as well as emphasize proper support and guidance when there are abrupt changes. Regarding remote work in general, the consensus was that remote work should remain as an option. Although it is recommended that teams meet face-to-face every now and then, the

employees ideally have the freedom to decide on remote work, as independence is the one of the key benefits of remote work.

4.4 Step 4: The development proposal

The final step of a case study process is sharing the results (Yin 2018, 218). The aim of this thesis is to create a development proposal for the case organization, that details a remote work and leadership concept that essentially combines the answers from the two development questions into a practical, visual format.

The purpose of the remote concept is not necessarily to give detailed, small-scale development ideas, although some practical tips are included as well. Instead, the primary idea is to create a holistic remote work and leadership concept, that includes efficient practices and methods, necessary skills and resources, as well as development and improvement areas that could be applied in the case organization but also more broadly in the banking sector. The remote concept should be discussed in the team and ideally the best, specific practices decided together with all employees.

The remote concept is a 5-page-remote guide which consists of the results of the development questions in a visual format. The remote guide includes a cover page, specific workplace practices, necessary skills and resources, as well as detailed development and improvement ideas. Both the team level as well as the team leader perspective are included in the development and improvement ideas. Figures 20-24 visualize the remote concept.



Figure 20: Remote concept - Cover Page

REMOTE GUIDE

WORKPLACE PRACTICES

BUILDING TRUST

- Trust building in the team a first priority
- Team leaders can emphasize trust building by:
 - creating a safe environment
 - understanding different personalities
 - by being reliable themselves.

ESTABLISHING GROUND RULES

- Clearly defined goals, rules, and expectations
- Ground rules established together as a team (gives team members ownership and promotes efficient communication)

FOSTERING COMMUNICATION

- Technological solutions clear to everyone
- Team leaders take a facilitative stance instead of dominating the discussion
- Ensuring time for small talk and following a clear agenda
- Promoting communication (organizing face-to-face meetings and virtual parties)

MAINTAINING ACCESSIBILITY

- Team members are accessible and easily reachable
- Team leader stays up-to-date on how the team is doing and how each team member is feeling

Figure 21: Remote concept - Workplace Practices

REMOTE GUIDE

SKILLS & RESOURCES

TEAM LEADER SKILLS

- Strong social skills
- Strong task-oriented skills and relationship-oriented skills
- Maintaining high-quality relationship with each team member
- Providing individual coaching and resources
- Showing personal attention and professional respect

EMPLOYEE SKILLS

- Self-management, being self-reliant and having a strong sense of responsibility
- Great communication skills in all channels, including strong writing skills
- Having routines for separating work and leisure
- Strong decision-making and problem-solving skills
- Being self-disciplined and self-motivated

COMPANY RESOURCES

- Excellent recruitment and onboarding processes
- Caring about occupational well-being
- Providing sufficient communication tools
- Competence management and understanding of capabilities within the company

Figure 22: Remote concept - Skills & Resources

REMOTE GUIDE

DEVELOPMENT & IMPROVEMENT IDEAS - TEAM LEVEL

COMMUNICATION

- Reachability and getting help faster
- More casual discussion
- Sharing knowledge
- Discussing current topics / events
- Better clarity in what team is doing and quick reaction to changes



- New instructions / changes gone over in greater detail
- More chat groups for different topics



COLLABORATION

- Developing the unit together as a team
- Learning from each other
- Trainings with team members emphasized

WORK/TASKS

- Onboarding a new team member done primarily in the office
- Training days face-to-face
- Small teams
- Sufficient equipment
- Freedom to decide on remote work
- Flexible hours when possible
- Simplifying where/how tasks are done
- Using systems correctly



- One platform for all instructions
- Structured information on others (sickness day, vacation, etc)
- Personnel list of people's strengths and roles
- Real-time anonymous poll during training to see if people are understanding the topic



SOCIAL ASPECT

- Doing more together as a team (virtual coffee breaks, casual meetings, etc)
- Social activities encouraged
- Knowing team members better
- Whole team together every now and then


Figure 23: Remote concept - Development & Improvement ideas - Team level

REMOTE GUIDE

DEVELOPMENT & IMPROVEMENT IDEAS - TEAM LEADER


LEADERSHIP STYLE

- A coaching / mentoring leadership style
- No micromanaging
- Trusting of team
- Supportive & facilitative
- Organized & clear
- Adaptive to changes



LEADER ACTIONS

- Discussing current news and past events
- Understanding different personalities / dynamics between people
- Discussing career paths
- Team spirit is invested on
- Support/help when there are changes
- Quality is rewarded
- Realistic goals
- Clear, short instructions
- Contacting team members proactively



QUICK TIPS

- Morning meetings are held always
- Quarterly "follow up day" where past quarter is reflected
- "How can I help you"




Figure 24: Remote concept - Development & Improvement ideas - Team leader

5 Conclusions and reflection

This chapter concludes the thesis and reflects on the methods, results, and theoretical background. Ethical and privacy issues are discussed along with areas for further development.

5.1 Conclusions

The global pandemic changed workplace practices overnight and forced many organizations to rethink their ways of working. Remote work is a particularly current topic and something that all workplaces need to consider in order to stay competitive.

The thesis examined remote work and leadership on a practical level in the banking sector. The purpose of the thesis was to create a development proposal, a remote work and leadership concept, which the case organization can utilize in the future when moving to a post-pandemic “new normal”. In a broader sense, the goal was also to help the case company stay competitive and attractive as an employer, and to thrive in the complex business environment where adaptability is key (Contreras et al. 2020, 1).

The thesis aimed to answer the following development questions:

- What kind of skills and practices are needed for effective remote work and leadership?
- How can the remote leadership of the case organization be developed?

The thesis process followed case study approach. Case study is a suitable development method when the purpose is, for instance, to seek explanations to current circumstances (Yin 2018, 4) or to find development suggestions (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 3.2). This thesis examined remote leadership, a current phenomenon, with the purpose of finding development ideas for a case organization, which required vast, in-depth knowledge of the circumstance. Therefore, case study was chosen as the development method for this thesis.

The object was to create a holistic remote concept that helps the case organization further develop its remote work and leadership practises. The aim was to dive into the current remote situation and to find out which aspects were successful and which needed further development in the future.

Based on the answers to the two development questions, a remote work and leadership concept was created. Essentially, the concept is combination of the results from the development questions, and it is intended to work as a guide for the case organization when developing remote work and leadership practices in the future. The remote concept includes

specific workplace practices, necessary skills and resources, as well as development and improvement ideas.

First development question aimed to explore the overall skills, resources and practices that make remote work and leadership effective. Existing literature provided a good basis and understanding of the topic, but information gathered from the questionnaire and interviews was also utilized as the emerging themes from literature were further explored in questionnaire and interviews.

The results to the first development question indicated that the basics of good, successful leadership remain the same in a virtual setting as they are in a traditional office. However, there are a few specific aspects that should be emphasized when it comes to remote leadership (Vilkman 2016, ch. 1). Results showed that team members having strong communication skills and being self-reliant, for instance, is important in the traditional office but in a remote setting, it is a necessity. Successful remote work includes remote team members having clear routines for separating work and leisure, as well as strong decision-making and problem-solving skills. Personality traits such as being self-disciplined and self-motivated, are crucial.

When it comes to leading a successful remote team, it is not enough for a leader to only focus on administrative tasks, but having strong social skills is also expected (Liao 2017, 650-651). Results from the questionnaire and the interviews revealed that having a leader with strong relationship-oriented skills, such as supporting team members and caring about their well-being, is particularly valued and viewed as a characteristic of a good remote leader. In addition to specific remote team leader skills, the organization is expected to provide sufficient resources that enable a successful remote work and leadership culture. Interview results also emphasized the need for excellent onboarding processes. Additionally, good recruitment practices (Tuomimaa 2021), caring for occupational well-being (Schall & Chen 2021) as well as providing sufficient communication tools and training to use them (Pullan 2016, 89-92) are important.

Regarding the specific practices in the team that make remote work successful, building trust is the first priority (Liao 2017, 651-654). Successful remote work additionally includes establishing common ground rules, setting up efficient communication processes, and above all maintaining good accessibility, as revealed by the questionnaire and interview results. In general, it is important that all workplace goals, team rules, and expectations are clear and decided together as a team.

The second development question aimed at developing remote work and leadership in a practical way in the case organization. The interviews and the questionnaire provided the answers to the second development question, but existing literature was also utilized. Results

specifically emphasized the importance of having sufficient reachability and proactive communication in the organization. Having more casual discussion in the case organization was mentioned by many as a topic that could be improved. Overall, emphasizing the social aspect was highlighted, as many expressed feeling a lack of unity in the team and felt that collaboration within team members was insufficient. Learning from each other and encouraging social activities are also important aspects to develop in the future.

Different development and improvement ideas for organizing work and tasks were discussed in detail during data collection phase. Results showed that for instance, onboarding a new team member was more challenging in a remote setting, hence preferably conducted face-to-face in the office. In general, results suggested that the current remote work situation was unorganized, teams too large, and there were expectations that tasks were more simplified. An organized platform for all instructions and personnel lists were specifically expressed during data collection phase.

When overall leadership and leader actions were discussed, the most important factor that emerged was for team leaders to be coaches and mentors, instead of authoritarian managers. Results unanimously indicated that micromanaging style of leadership should be avoided in the case organization and a low-hierarchy style applied.

To further develop the team, team leaders are expected to discuss current news and go over past events together with the employees, for instance by having a “follow up day” each quarter where past quarter is reflected. This is especially important due to results indicating underlying issues in the case organization that had not been given enough attention. It was mentioned that issues should be discussed clearly and openly. Results also indicated that team leaders were expected to discuss career paths as well as provide support and guidance. Overall, team spirit and social aspect were lacking and many expressed hopes for further development.

Regarding remote work in general, the consensus was that remote work should remain as an option. Although the results suggested that it is beneficial for teams to meet face-to-face every now and then, employees also expect to have the freedom to decide on remote work, as independence is one of the key benefits of remote work.

5.2 Reflection

COVID-19 broke the norm for what was considered standard practices in the workplace. Remote work became the main topic when discussing changes that the global pandemic had caused in workplaces and forced many organizations to rethink their ways of working.

Remote work is here to stay (Luoma-aho 2021a), therefore creating successful remote work and leadership practices for all companies has never been more current. This thesis examined remote work and leadership on a practical level in the banking sector. The case organization had no prior experience in remote work practices before the pandemic, thus finding a suitable remote work concept is important.

The results emphasized that the basics of good leadership remain similar in a virtual setting as in the traditional office, however, the physical separation creates its own challenges that teams need to be aware of (Vilkman 2016, ch. 1). For remote teams to thrive, specific workplace practices are required. Existing research highlights themes such as building trust, having set ground rules, ensuring communication and accessibility. These were widely discussed in the knowledge base in chapter 2, but similar themes were also discovered during interviews and in the questionnaire. The results from interviews and questionnaire emphasized especially accessibility as a key to successful remote work.

Skills and necessary resources were discussed in detail in both the knowledge base as well as the final development proposal. The knowledge base emphasized the importance of remote leaders having strong social skills and maintaining high-quality relationships with each team member (Liao 2017, 650-656). Empirical data supported this, as many interviewees mentioned the importance of leaders having strong soft skills such as social skills and a supportive and a respectful mindset. When it comes to employee skills, being self-disciplined as well as having communication skills (Pullan 2016, 61) are key. Results from the interviews and the questionnaire matched with the knowledge base, as similar themes, such as self-management, were brought up during interviews and questionnaire.

Development and improvement ideas were based on the results of the data collection. Regarding leadership style, team leaders should adopt a coaching mentality and avoid all micromanaging. Knowledge base also discussed the evolution of leadership and emphasized a coaching and facilitating -centred leadership style (Dyer & Shepherd 2021, 76-77), instead of an authoritarian "command and control" -style (Eikenberry & Turmel 2018, ch. 3). As demonstrated in previous chapters, results in general are unanimously against micromanaging.

Communication was one of the key themes of successful remote work and leadership in the knowledge base. Having sufficient communication includes the correct tools and practices, but also developing communication within the team, for instance by sharing knowledge and collaborating more, as the results indicated. Simple things, such as a team leader proactively reaching out and asking how an individual is doing in a remote setting, are encouraged.

Lack of social aspect was another topic that was discussed widely. Lack of social aspect is one of the key challenges when it comes to remote work and leadership, as evidenced by both

knowledge base and the data from the interviews and questionnaire. It's worth noting, however, that many of the negative topics regarding isolation are not only linked to remote work but more so to remote work during the pandemic. Although lack of social contacts and feelings of isolation can be due to working from home, global pandemic and social distancing recommendations are arguably affecting the outcome as well. Therefore, it is recommended that when case organization develops remote leadership practices further, the challenges brought by remote work in times of COVID-19, and challenges brought by remote work itself are clearly differentiated.

In general, there is a strong consensus between the key themes in research literature and the findings from empirical data when considering the success of a remote team. Overall, the results from interviews and questionnaire matched with the themes in existing literature, although some specific aspects, such as accessibility and a coaching leadership style, were highlighted more in the empirical data.

The thesis aimed at helping the case organization develop their remote work and leadership practices in the future and to provide them a remote work concept they could utilize. The case organization commented that the results of the development process and the created remote work concept are beneficial for the case organization and can be easily utilized in the future. Persona posters, in particular, were found as a valuable and practical way to view some of the remote work and leadership expectations in the organization. Post-pandemic remote work practices are constantly being developed, and the proposed remote concept was commented as being a practical, useful tool for the future not only for the case organization but also for the banking sector in general.

5.2.1 Reliability of the research

Reliability of the research refers to being able to reach the same research findings and conclusions if another researcher follows the same procedures. The goal is to minimize biases and errors when conducting research, and to enhance consistency and repeatability. (Yin 2018, 46-47, 288.)

When assessing the reliability of the research, it is important to critically discuss any possible limitations. The employment status of the thesis author in the case organization, for instance, is important to note. Ojasalo et al. (2015, ch. 4.1) state that with qualitative data collection methods, it is typical for a researcher to be close to the subjects and even participate in their activities. As the purpose of the thesis was to create a development proposal for the case organization, the internal role of the thesis author could be considered an advantage as she has prior knowledge and deep understanding of the case organization. Although the thesis author is employed by the case organization, she was not actively working during the thesis writing process. Thus, the author was able to maintain a distance with the

researched subjects. Additionally, there was no financial compensation for the thesis. Nevertheless, any possible personal bias or objectivity were carefully averted by recording data in a concrete, verbatim manner, instead of allowing generalizations influenced by personal opinions occur (Silverman 2020, 89-90). In general, maintaining an impartial view was emphasized to ensure an ethical, unbiased research process.

The created remote work concept is based on the data interpretation of the thesis author. Although scientific data analysis methods were followed carefully and each step thoroughly documented to enhance reliability (Silverman 2020, 90), the remote work concept is nevertheless based on the analysis of the thesis author. Subjective view as well as the limited size of the data collection group should be kept in mind when assessing reliability or developing remote leadership practices in the future in the case organization. Reliability was strengthened through transparent research process, which included detailing research process and data collection methods, as well as avoiding any personal perspective through meticulous data recording (Silverman 2020, 89-90).

The thesis includes a comprehensive description of the research process as well as well-grounded views, which help with establishing reliability of the thesis (Ojasalo et al. 2015, ch. 4.1). To further emphasize reliability, a triangulated approach was applied in the thesis. As many data collection methods have their unique limitations, it is important to have multiple sources of data to minimize the weaknesses of each approach, hence increasing the validity of the research (Patton 2015, 390). The thesis included open interview, passive observation, a questionnaire, and interviews as data collection methods. Utilizing multiple sources of evidence is particularly well suited for case study research, as the main motive of a case study is to thoroughly study a case in its real-world context, which requires a variety of data that the triangulation method offers (Yin 2018, 127).

5.2.2 Ethical issues, privacy, and data protection

To ensure an ethical thesis process, the ethical recommendations set by the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (Arene), were followed carefully. The recommendations include clarifying any conflict of interest and familiarizing of the thesis topic and guidelines of research ethics, for instance. As instructed by Arene (2020), a thesis agreement including thesis details such as the topic, schedule, and the responsibilities, was signed between the case organization and thesis author. (Arene 2020.)

Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) guidelines set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK), were additionally followed. This included, for instance, emphasizing integrity, meticulousness, and accuracy, as well as following scientific criteria and an ethical approach during data collection, research, and data analysis. Sources were cited carefully, and scientific standards were complied with during planning, recording, and

reporting of the data and results. The need for any research permits and preliminary ethical reviews were examined beforehand. Connection between thesis author and case organization has been thoroughly clarified. (TENK 2021.)

Privacy protection as instructed by Arene (2020) was guaranteed during the process. The questionnaire was conducted so that answers could be anonymous, for instance no information about name, age, sex, contact information or title was asked in the questionnaire. During the observation and interviews, names were not included in the notes, and notes were encoded so that individuals could not be recognized from any material.

Anonymity was guaranteed to all parties present in written format before the interviews, as well as in the beginning of the interviews. All interviewees took part in the thesis process voluntarily and were suggested by the case organization. Special personal data, such as race, political opinion, or health-related information, was not asked or recorded, as it is out-of-scope of the thesis subject.

Data protection issues and all-around careful, appropriate handling of data were emphasized during the process. All collected data was kept in password protected systems, where only the thesis author had access. All research data is destroyed as soon as it is no longer needed, in other words, after the thesis process is finished.

5.2.3 Further development

Remote work and remote leadership could be further developed by following through with the given suggestions and improvements in the development proposal and assessing their effectiveness. The purpose of the thesis was to make a remote work concept that could be utilized in the future. Hence, a logical area for further development in the matter would be to assess whether the suggested concept is effective for the case organization and how they could best utilize and implement it.

Another area that could be further developed is to research team leader viewpoint specifically and include that separately into remote concept. Although team leader aspect was included in the concept, team leaders were not interviewed in the thesis due to lack of resources in the case organization personnel, and hence the inability to guarantee anonymity. By increasing the scope of the case organization, more team leaders or people in management position could be included in the remote work concept which could further expand the understanding of the subject and create more depth into the remote concept.

Another interesting aspect to research further is the changing nature of what is considered a workplace. When it comes to remote work, the definitions often suggest that primary workplace is the traditional office and home is the secondary location. However, more recent

discussion in the media, for instance about multi-location work, indicates that there may not necessarily even be a primary workplace in the future. Instead, the focus seems to be changing from the core idea of “office versus home” setting, into a thinking where work can be evenly carried out from any location. This is another interesting view that could be further researched to see how it affects organizations and how that could be utilized best.

In general, the thesis process is meant to develop both the thesis author professionally as well as develop the working life. COVID-19 was the catalyst that enabled remote work to be considered the new norm in the case organization, and although the change was abrupt and happened due to the global pandemic, it was an important shift and opened doors to the idea of new ways of working. Researching and developing a complex, unpredictable subject that requires new strategic approaches, was both challenging as well as developing. The thesis author has gained valuable knowledge on the subject and has been able to help the case organization with their future workplace practices.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Etätyöskentely

1. Mitä hyviä puolia näet etätyössä? *

2. Mitä huonoja puolia näet etätyössä? *

3. Mikä on sinulle tärkeää etätyössä? *

4. Asteikolla 1-5, vastaa seuraaviin väittämiin (1 = täysin eri mieltä, 5 = täysin samaa mieltä). *

	1) Täysin eri mieltä	2) Jokseenkin eri mieltä	3) Ei samaa eikä eri mieltä	4) Jokseenkin samaa mieltä	5) Täysin samaa mieltä
Olen tehokkaampi työssäni etänä.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Jaksan paremmin työssäni etänä.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tiimihenki on parempi etätyössä.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Minulla on sopivat välineet etätyöskentelyyn.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Koen, että minuun luotetaan työntekijänä.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Luotan esimieheeni ja tiimiläisiini.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Olen motivoituneempi työssäni etänä.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. Voit tarkentaa tähän yllä olevia (kysymys 4) vastauksiasi ja antaa lisätietoa.

6. Missä määrin haluaisit työskennellä etänä jatkossa (koronapandemian jälkeen)? Voit tarkentaa mielipidettäsi kohdassa 7. *

- En halua työskennellä ollenkaan etänä.
- Haluan työskennellä etänä harvoin, esim. yksittäisiä päiviä kuukaudessa.
- 1 päivä viikossa etänä
- 2-3 päivää viikossa etänä
- 4 päivää viikossa etänä
- Hybridimalli (esim. 2 viikkoa putkeen etänä, 2 viikkoa putkeen toimistolla)
- Haluan työskennellä vain etänä, en lainkaan toimistolla.
- Ei mikään edellä mainittu (kerrothan seuraavassa kohdassa tarkemmin)

7. Voit kommentoida tähän tarkemmin edellisen kysymyksen valintaasi.

Enter your answer

Etäjohtaminen

8. Miten etäjohtaminen (eli esimies työetäympäristössä) on sujunut tiimissäsi? *

Enter your answer

9. Millä tavalla esimies voisi parhaiten auttaa sinua etätyöskentelyssäsi? *

Enter your answer

10. Millaisia piirteitä arvostat esimiehessäsi etäympäristössä? *

Enter your answer

11. Muita kommentteja, kokemuksia, toiveita, haasteita, yms etäjohtamiseen tai etätyöskentelyyn liittyen?

Enter your answer

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Interview guide:

Background information and work history:

- Work history in the team?
- Experiences from remote work?
- Overall view on remote work

Current status in target group:

- Benefits of remote leadership and remote work
- Challenges of remote leadership and remote work
- Describe the current remote leadership in one word

The ideal, future remote team:

- Describe a successful remote team
- Important aspects of remote leadership
- Important aspects of remote leader
- Describe ideal remote leader
- Hopes/wishes for what remote work/leadership is like in the future
- Development / improvement ideas
- Describe remote leadership in the future in one word
- Other possible topics