

## **How to support sales team managers to lead remote and hybrid teams. Case Company X.**

Anni Lindholm

<b>Author(s)</b> Anni Lindholm	
<b>Specialisation</b> Strategic thinking and management	
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<p>This thesis has its roots in the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes it inflicted on the society and on workplaces. Finland's government's recommendation in March 2020 to restrain the spreading of the virus caused a sudden transition into remote work at the case company. This thesis studies the effects of this and the new hybrid model of working on team leading in the company.</p> <p>This thesis has three targets. First, to find out how the company today supports its sales team managers (STM) in remote leadership and management. Second target is to understand how STMs experience the transition to remote work to affect leadership and what kind of an effect this had to performance and well-being management. The main target of this study is to understand how the organisation can better support the STMs in performance and well-being management when a hybrid model of remote and on-site work becomes the new norm.</p> <p>The thesis was conducted as case study research. The theoretical part of the study consists of defining the concepts of remote and hybrid work as well discussion on remote leadership, well-being, and performance. The data used in the study was collected from company documentation and semi-structured interviews with the STMs.</p> <p>Based on the theoretical framework and the data analysis, the main findings of this study are that trusting relationship between the manager and employee and timely and clear communication are the most important aspects that ensure high performance and well-being in the organisation. The case company, therefore, needs to focus on creating such policies and a working environment that support the creation of these in the hybrid model.</p>	
<b>Keywords</b> Remote leadership, remote management, hybrid work, Case study	

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## **Abbreviations**

AM            Account Manager

STM          Sales Team Manager

# **1 Introduction**

Remote work and remote teams have been discussed many years and, in many workplaces, remote work has been commonplace for a long time. However, this is not the situation in all organisations. One consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic at my workplace was the forced and unplanned transition to remote work, and even though the pandemic and the forced remote work are coming to an end, remote work will remain more typical, and the hybrid form of working will be commonplace.

In my thesis, I will study how the case company can support its sales team managers (STM) to lead their remotely working teams or individual team members so that the organisation can ensure that employees perform at a high level and that employee well-being is taken care of.

This thesis maps the present situation and clarifies what kind of guidelines managers have for remote leadership today and studies what kind of support managers feel they need to succeed in leading their remote teams. Based on this, recommendations will be given on how the company can support its managers to lead performance and employee well-being when working with remote teams. The purpose of this study is to help the company and STMs to create a functioning hybrid work model for the company by utilising the findings of this study.

## **1.1 Background and the research organisation**

In this section, the subject organisation, its structure, and essential topics for this study are presented.

The case company is a staffing and recruitment company that has approximately 200 employees in Finland. The biggest function is sales with about 45 account managers (AM) and 6 sales team managers. Before the Corona virus, working remotely was not common especially among account managers, and the organisation did not encourage employees to work remotely. This had led to a situation where the preparedness to remote leadership including, for example, performance management and employee well-being management was not on a high level.

When the interviews were held, in May-June 2021, there were 22 AMs and six sales teams in Finnish organisation, and these teams were divided into two offices (branches). Sales team sizes vary from two to five AMs. The STM role is often a partial role, which means that most STMs also work as AMs or in a process development role. The STM role is a multifaceted one and it is often combined to other roles, which makes it a challenging

combination to handle. STMs report to Branch Managers who are in charge and responsible for their branch's overall performance. (Case Company 2021E).

The STMs role is defined in its role description. Their responsibilities towards their team members include weekly team meeting, monthly 1:1s and generally making sure that team members reach their targets and are doing well. They are responsible for the team's results and therefore need to be aware and drive their team's performance (Case Company 2021D). Although the importance of an individual team member and their performance is often underlined (Case Company 2021A, 2021C), the job description of team managers highlights the importance of making decisions that are the best for the branch (Case Company 2021E), which can sometimes lead to discrepancies in the everyday life and decision making. The job description also emphasises that the STM needs to ensure that the team and team members reach their targets, contributes to the branch' development, leads and develops the team and lives the company's core values (Case Company 2021E).

The account manager role is a traditional sales role. The AMs are responsible for the entire sales process from prospecting to creating lasting relationships with their clients. (Case Company 2021K). The AM performance is measured extensively as will be further discussed later in this thesis. According to the role description, the AM should also try to develop themselves and their colleagues by sharing knowledge, knowhow and best practise in the organisation. (Case Company 2021K.)

AMs have assigned teams but most of the work is conducted individually. Naturally, AMs collaborate with other members of the organisation to succeed in their work and perform well, but the actual work tasks are not dependent on other team members nor the STM. The closest working partner that an AM has are the company's recruiters, who work together with AMs to develop their shared client accounts and focus on finding the right person for the open position. (Case Company 2021K). For the STM role, this means that focus is placed mostly on individuals and their performance, and not so much on leading their teams to perform well together or in shared projects.

In theory, all AMs work with both new and existing contacts and clients. However, the company has created a plan, called "career steps", that defines who the role develops. As the AM succeeds in reaching their targets and have worked as AM for a certain amount of time, they proceed to the next career step. In addition to some extra benefits, such as extra days-offs, the AM role should develop according to the "step" where the AM is at that time: the more senior they are, the more they should focus on their existing client companies and new contacts within them and growing these clients instead of focusing on

completely new companies that are not in their portfolio. (Case Company 2021AC). This changes the nature of the role and steers the AMs focus to a different direction than when they first started in the role. Also, the work tasks often differ a bit since with bigger client companies, contract negotiations, for example, can be more complex.

The company is highly sales oriented, has a competitive culture, and successes are brought up in the daily life. The building stones of this culture have been close team relationships and presence at the office. The case company is a culture-driven company, meaning that the company culture is known by every employee and employees are expected to act according to the culture. The culture is seen as one of the company's strongest competitive advantages. The company culture is based on three values: Share energy, Beat yesterday and Show heart. Share energy is described as the willingness to grow and share energy with your co-workers. Beat yesterday means performing better than in the past and doing it in a smarter way. Show heart is caring for your co-workers and making an effort to support them. (Case Company 2021F).

Employees are encouraged to make these values visible in their daily life. For example, in weekly office meetings there is a possibility to give culture cards to colleagues about something that they have done that highlights the company value. Also, living the culture is one of the criteria that is evaluated in the yearly employee performance review. (Case Company 2021H).

The company culture is competitive and sales oriented. Team and individual performance is discussed weekly in office meetings and team meetings, and good performance gets noticed and is celebrated. One of the most important moments when the competitive culture is highlighted is the yearly Awards party where the employees that have performed the best during the previous year are rewarded. (Case Company 2021G).

In addition to the celebration of good performance, feedback is an important part of the culture. All employees have a 1:1 meeting with their manager once a month as well as a yearly performance review where the whole year is summarised and the next year is planned. In these meetings, the employee's performance is discussed on a detailed level and feedback is given on performance and how the employee lives the company culture. Also, the manager should ask and leave time for the employee to share their feedback about the manager-employee relationship and the manager's way of leading (Case Company 2021I). Positive and small constructive feedback is given in the day-to-day life at the office. This is visible for example when an order is placed, and this is noticed at the office, or when colleagues share ideas on how to improve the way they book meetings with a client.



One of company's strategic goals is to have engaged co-workers, which has made leadership an important part of the company's strategy. Creating employee engagement is thought to be an important part of leadership work. Engagement is seen to affect how successful individuals are in their work, which is reflected in how well the company's operational goals and strategy are fulfilled. (Case Company, 2021A.)

A prerequisite for a leadership position at the company is said to be interest in people and care for their well-being and performance. The company has quite a young organisation and managers often take on their first leadership or managerial position there. Therefore, the leadership philosophy in the company is *Master the basics*. This is reflected in the leadership trainings, which are both extensive and start from the very basics but dive deeper with each separate training. There are five areas that receive special attention in the trainings and in leadership: Personal insight (how well the leader knows themselves); Understanding the company; Leading people; Managing business (analysis skills); and Tools and systems (how to use and promote these). (Case Company 2021B).

As mentioned above, engaged employees and creating this engagement is one of the main focus areas of leadership at the company. Engagement is defined as the emotional commitment an employee has to the organization and its goals. At the company, engagement is divided into two parts: clarity and energy. Clarity relates to performance, that employees know their and the organisation's goals, trusting that all share these goals and celebrating when milestones are met. Energy is connected to well-being and recognition. Creating engagement to the company is seen important since employees are said to be the company's most important asset. From the business perspective, engagement is important since, according to the company's ideal, high engagement leads to increased performance, higher client satisfaction, and, thus, improved financial performance. (Case Company 2021C).

As leadership is highly valued and a significant number of resources are put into leadership trainings, it could translate to trainings on remote leadership to STMs. However, there are not any trainings specifically targeted to leading co-workers who work remotely.

## **1.2 Objective and demarcation**

The objective of this study is to map how STMs experience leading their teams and individual team members in remote work and offer suggestions on how the case company can develop such a leadership and management guidelines and best practise that support the STMs in leading their remote or hybrid teams to ensure high performance and well-

being of employees. The thesis topic was suggested by the case company's Head of Sales.

The following questions are studied:

RQ1 What kind of guidelines and methods are in use today for managers to lead their teams remotely at the case company? Are these sufficient?

RQ2 How sales team managers describe the change in leadership in remote work and what they see as the most significant aspects that affect performance and well-being management?

RQ3 How the case company can support STMs' in leading their hybrid team or team members?

This study concentrates on the sales function at the company and is thus limited to a certain function within the whole organization. I will study what kind of support sales team managers need to succeed in leading their teams when working with remote team members either in complete remote work situation or in a hybrid model where some team members work remotely and others on-site.

### **1.3 Research approach and method**

This research is a qualitative case study.

Qualitative research aims to understand the phenomenon it studies and derive theories or generalisations from the study. It answers the question *what is this about*<sup>1</sup>. (Kananen 2018, 26). As Juuti & Puusa (2020, 9) argue, in qualitative research the aim is to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the individuals that are studied. This means that the researcher is interested in the individual's thoughts, experiences and meanings that they give to the phenomenon. Qualitative research has its own set of data collection methods, e.g. documentation, semi-structured interviews and observation (Kananen 2018, 23).

Qualitative research is empirical in its nature whereas quantitative research is theoretical. As Tuomi and Sarajärvi state, this does not mean that empirical qualitative research does

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<sup>1</sup> "Mistä tässä on kyse" in Finnish

not have theory or theory would not play an important part in the research. However, the difference can be found from how data is collected and in argumentation. In qualitative research emphasis is placed on the methods of how data is collected and analysed, and these are described thoroughly in the research report. This enables the reader to evaluate the research and is a vital part of the credibility of the research. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 24–27).

The other difference between theoretical and empirical research is the analysis of data. In quantitative research data is collected in a way that enables the individualisation of the data source (an individual). In empirical research, the identifiability of the data source is almost always removed in the analysis due to the ethical necessity to protect the identity of the data source. Therefore, the analysis is not presented via the individual who has put forth their thoughts but through the ideas. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 24–27).

Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018, 25) point out that all research, be the research approach quantitative or qualitative, is subjective as the thoughts, meanings and ideas the researcher connects to their topic and the chosen methods and tools affect the research outcomes. In addition, Hirsjärvi & Hurme (2015, 35) bring up that in qualitative research, the researcher and the subject interact, which means that the researcher is also creating the subject they study. This is important to note since it implies that there isn't such a thing as completely objective research. Whilst conducting research, this is something to keep in mind and bring up the possible bias that might affect the study. When this research is concerned, the researcher is employed by the company that is studied, and it is possible that the researcher has biases that might affect the study. In addition, this could cause the researcher to be too cautious in criticising the company and its actions. By using multiple sources of data (documentation and interviews) and documenting the study thoroughly, these biases can, however, be avoided.

There are three main approaches to theory development: deductive, inductive and abductive. In the deductive approach data follows theory, and the aim of the research is to verify or falsify theory. The research starts from a theory or hypothesis that is then tested by a series of propositions. The aim is to draw conclusions from single events. If the results of data collection and research analysis follow the theory, then the theory is confirmed. If the results do not follow the theory, it is deemed false or needs to be modified. In short, if the premises are true, this means that the conclusions must be true as well. (Kananen 2013, 50; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2016, 152–154). As Kananen (2013, 50) points out, deductive theory development is used mainly in quantitative research.

Inductive approach means that the research starts from observations, and it aims to explain phenomena, collect meanings from the used data and to identify patterns and relationships to create a theory or a generalisation. Theory follows data and researcher draws conclusions from the data. Qualitative research follows the inductive approach to theory creation. As Saunders et al. (2016, 155) state, the strength of the inductive approach is that it can be used to create an understanding of how we interpret the social world and incorporate this into the research outcome. In addition, induction gives more room to alternative explanations than the deductive approach, although they are not completely excluded from the deductive approach either. (Kananen 2013, 45, 24–25; Saunders et al. 2016, 155).

The abductive approach to theory building combines the deductive and inductive approaches as it moves between theory and data. It starts from a conclusion, or a surprising fact, to which a set of premises, a plausible theory, is found, and then the conclusion is tested against the theory. If this set of premises was deemed sufficiently accurate, then it can be stated that the conclusion is true as well. (Saunders et al. 152–153, 155).

As Saunders et al. (2016, 157) state, in reality, the division between different approaches is not that rigid. This research is a qualitative case study interested in understanding why something is happening in a specific context rather than describing what is happening or testing a theory, and in addition it has quite a small sample of data sources. This indicates towards induction. The main data collection method is semi-structured interviews, and the interview themes are build based on the framework of this study. After the interviews are analysed, the framework is revisited to ensure that it matches the topics risen in the interviews. This indicates towards abduction. However, as there is no theory which is proven correct or incorrect by the collection of new data, and the aim of the research is to explain a certain case, this thesis follows the inductive approach.

Single case study research as a method concentrates on a single event, process, individual or organisation, and the goal of the research is to gain as thorough understanding of the case as possible by using multiple data collection methods. In addition, case study research needs to fulfil the following characteristics: the case must be a contemporary one and the research should be conducted in its natural context. (Kananen 2013, 54; Yin 2018, 9, 15).

Yin has described case study research as the will to understand complex social phenomena and get a real-world perspective on the case at hand. He argues that case study is an appropriate method in a situation when the boundaries of the phenomenon

and its context are not clearly defined, meaning that getting a thorough understanding of the case at hand is tied to its specific context. (Yin 2018, 5, 15). Piekkari and Welch also emphasise the importance of the case's context as they argue that only if the case's specific context is intertwined in the analysis, the research can be described as a case study (Piekkari & Welch 2020, 198).

One defining character of a case study research is the research questions. Often, in research that follows the case study method, the questions start with a why or a how as a case study tries to explain a contemporary circumstance. Also, the more the research question needs in-depth and extensive description of the phenomena it seeks to explain, the more relevant this method is. (Yin 2018, 4.) Kananen (2013, 60) adds that questions that start with a what can also implicate a case study if the goal of the research is to describe the case.

Case study research has been criticized from many different viewpoints. One of the major critiques is the argument that case studies have not been conducted rigorously enough. According to Yin this can be avoided by conducting the research meticulously and not letting equivocal evidence influence the findings and conclusions. The second critique towards case studies stems from the confusion of the scientific case study method to non-scientific case studies that are common outside of the scientific world, for example in literature and media. However, this confusion is easily avoided by describing methods and being transparent about the researcher's' bias. (Yin 2018, 18–20.)

The difference between qualitative research and case study research is very narrow and it can be hard to differentiate these two. Kananen (2013, 56–57) argues that there are three main aspects that differentiate qualitative and case study research: the number of data collection methods, the complexity of the research topic, and the use of quantitative methods. In a qualitative study only one method of collecting and analysing data is used whereas in case study, multiple methods are used. The research topic can be clearly defined in qualitative research, but in a case study, the topic is more complex and its boundaries undefined. In a qualitative research, quantitative data collection methods cannot be used but in case study research they are often a source of data. (Kananen 2013, 56–57).

This study focuses on explaining a contemporary case that occurs in its specific and unique context. Emphasis is placed on understanding the context and its effect on the case. Therefore, the case study approach is chosen for this study.

This study could have also been conducted as action research. Action research aims at inflicting change on the topic or phenomenon that is studied as well as simultaneously studying and developing the topic (Heikkinen 2010, 214; Kananen 2013, 28-29). The objective of this study is to understand the research topic and offer advice on how to better lead remote or hybrid teams. The suggestions are not implemented as part of this study nor will the researcher be a part of the possible implementation of change initiatives. Consequently, the most important difference between this study and action research is the researcher's role and implementation of the suggestions. In action research, the researcher is an active part in organising the change and acts a "change agent" (Kananen 2013, 57, 61), which is not realized in this study.

When case study research is chosen as the study approach, triangulation needs to be discussed. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple data sources, researchers, theory, or methods in a study to increase the study's validity and to capture different dimensions of the case. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, 166–168). In this thesis, multiple data sources are used (documentation and structured interviews) to get a comprehensive and many-sided picture of the case. Data is collected in by using different data collection methods. However, as both data sources have been analysed using content analysis, methodological triangulation does not take place.

#### **1.4 Structure of the research**

The first chapter has presented the context of this study. The research problems and method have been stated. The second chapter contains a literary review that forms the theoretical framework for the study. Then the data collection methods are discussed in the third chapter.

The fourth chapter contains the analysis of the sources: firstly, documentation is analysed and after that the conducted interviews are analysed. In the fifth chapter, findings are summarised and recommendations on actions and guidelines on how the organisation could help the STMs lead their remote team members better are given.

Lastly, the sixth chapter concludes the thesis, proposes further research possibilities, assesses the study's reliability and summarises the researchers' own learnings.

## **2 Framework of the study**

This chapter forms the theoretical part of the study where the most important themes are presented and discussed. The chapter begins by introducing different definitions for distributed work practises after which the hybrid model of working is discussed. After this, emphasis is placed on leadership, well-being and performance.

### **2.1 Distributed work practises**

Distributed, or remote, work is not a new phenomenon, and it has been developing increasingly quick since the mass emergence of information technology. Also, other global phenomena, such as globalisation, hypercompetition and the millennials entering the workforce, have accelerated the spread of remote work. However, the pandemic made the change immediate and expanded remote work to all jobs and fields where conducting work tasks outside of the traditional working place is feasible. (Contreras, Baykal & Abid 2020, 2).

Remote work has both positive and negative effects for companies. Choudhury (2020, 62) pinpoints many possibilities for organisations: real estate costs can be lower, employees can work and be hired from different parts of the country or the world, which means better access to talent and more flexibility for employees, and better productivity and work-life balance for employees.

However, Choudhury (2020, 63) also brings up concerns that persist regarding remote work: less communication, including brainstorming and problem-solving; knowledge sharing; socialization, camaraderie, and mentoring; performance evaluation and compensation; and data security and regulation. Contreras et al. (2020, 3–5) broaden the scope of possible issues as they include the social side of remote work into the list: the possibility of blurred boundaries of work and non-work time, and the personal and social effects of not being present at the workplace, including missing out on information sharing and co-learning, which can lead to feelings of isolation and to poorer job performance among remote workers.

There are multiple terms that are used to describe distributed work practises. These concepts and terms include but are not limited to remote work, distributed work, telecommute and virtual work. They are often used interchangeably in both scientific literature and in everyday life, but they vary in meaning and are therefore quite ambiguous terms. Distributedness and virtuality are the main factors that define this categorisation. Distributedness refers to the physical or geographical distribution of work, which means

work that is not performed at a single, central location. Virtual refers to the use of ICT as the means of communicating between members of the organisation. (For example, Henry, le Roux & Parry 2021, e2; Rockmann & Pratt 2015, 151)

Remote work entails the idea that there is a conventional place of work from which the employee is geographically distant, and technology is used as the means of communication between team members and co-workers (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015, 43–44). As Henry et al. (2021, 2) point out, remote work is not a binary concept but a scale that represents the proportion of working time spent away from the conventional place of work. They suggest that some guidelines should be placed in an organisation to differentiate remote working employees from employees who are not constantly working outside of the conventional place of work, but only, for example, two days a week. (Henry et al 2021, 2).

Remote and distributed work are used interchangeably and are also very alike telework. The difference Henry et al. bring up is that remote and distributed work do not always include the idea of a conventional workplace, which is almost always linked to telework. The absence of conventional workplace emphasises the use of technology in work coordination. (Henry et al. 2021, 3).

Virtual work is very similar to the other concepts, however more emphasis is placed on internet-based communication that aims to create an impression of real co-location (Henry et al. 2021, 4). Allen & al. (2015, 43) add that in virtual work individuals or groups do not interact face-to-face due to geographical distance. As Henry et al. (2021, 4) argue, therefore, the work itself is not defined by virtuality but the communication and cooperation between employees is. Therefore, the terms virtual team or virtual organisation would be better suitable to describe such work practises (Henry et al. 2021, 4).

Rockmann & Pratt (2015, 151–152) also include reduced supervision and interpersonal connection between co-workers as defining particles of distributed work. Reduced supervision refers to the lesser possibility for managers to monitor and support their team members since the manager cannot oversee and follow-up on their team members casually during the day but needs to create specific situations for this through technology. As it is more difficult to gain a similar richness of communication via technology than in face-to-face situations, distributed work can cause reduced supervision and communication between managers and team members. (Rockmann & Pratt 2015, 151; Ferrel, J. & Kline, K. 2018, 32–33). The last defining factor for distributed work according to Rockmann & Pratt is the requirement of interpersonal connection. This refers to the



idea that person working alone, for example, at home without having to connect to others is not in distributed work, but their work situation is closer to a traditional office. (Rockmann & Pratt 2015, 152).

As the above discussion suggests, the distinctions between the terms used to describe distributed work practises are minimal. Although the situation at the company is today closest to what Henry et al. describe as telework, in this study the term remote work is used to describe the work practises. The term is use in the organisation and therefore is the most straightforward term to use in this study as well.

Henry et al. introduce a framework that can be used to determine the level of distributedness and virtuality in an organisation and to describe organisation scenarios. Distributedness is described as “a combination of two factors: the degree of physical (geographical) separation between locations where work is performed and the proportion of time that work is performed whilst work locations are physically separated.” Virtuality is defined as “the degree to which work activities are interdependent, and the extent to which communication and coordination of these activities is mediated by ICTs”. (Henry et al. 2021, 8). The framework is included in this study to create clarity on the current situation at the case company but also to highlight how the situation might change and become more complicated when the hybrid model is adopted.

Their framework creates the possibility to assess the level of distributedness and virtuality at the individual level, and to use this to form policies and practises in the organisation. Today, due to the pandemic, when situation a the case company is mirrored to this framework, the work tasks that are shared between the STM and AM have a semi-high level of distributedness and virtuality since working from home is highly recommended but employees work in the same time zone. Also, the level of interdependence between the STM and team member is high. In the future, when the hybrid model is taken into use, the situation can become more complex since the STM will work with team members that work with different levels of distributedness and virtuality which influences, for example, communication and team building.

## **2.2 Hybrid model of remote and on-site work**

A hybrid model of remote work and on-site work is one possibility of how work will be organised in the future, and this will be the way work is organised at the case company after the pandemic.

Alexander, De Smet & Mysore (2020, 27) define the hybrid model as a model where a part of the workforce works remotely and the other part works on-site at the office. The

positive effects of the model can be better access to talent, better productivity, more flexibility for the individual and improved employee experience as well as lower costs for the organisation. (Alexander et al. 2020, 27; Choudhury 2020, 60.)

However, there are downsides as well, which, according to Alexander et al. (2020, 27–28), concern mainly the company culture, and thus building trust in the organisation. The risk of the hybrid virtual model entails the possibility of the emergence of two company cultures where the in-person workers' culture dominates and the virtual co-workers and their socialization and inclusion to the workforce is forgotten. This can lead to lower feelings of belonging, loss of common purpose and shared identity, and this can affect organisational performance. (Alexander et al. 2020, 27–28.) Prasad, DeRosa & Beyerlain (2017, 189) also discuss the level of team distributedness which can lead to the formation of dividing lines between team members, especially if there are two sites with a similar number of team members. If there are multiple sites and uneven distribution of team members, they argue that this has less effect on team performance.

Another problem in the hybrid model can arise if the organisation does not have effective ways of measuring performance or if the organisation has the wrong metrics in place, such as hours spend on work tasks and not the outcomes or results of the work (Alexander et al. 2020, 29). Choudhury (2020, 66) brings up another side of performance management: the “soft” side of performance meaning for example interpersonal skills or virtual presence. In remote work, this can be harder to monitor and measure compared to colleagues working on-site. This can lead to an uneven assessment of how employees perform on these more ambiguous metrics if it is easier for the manager to assess the on-site team members (Choudhury 2020, 66). Alexander et al. also bring up examples where the on-site employees received the most important tasks or promotions, which affected the motivation and performance of the employees working from elsewhere.

The possible risks highlight the importance of placing emphasis on how cooperation and collaboration between team members and leaders is planned to ensure a well-working company culture, shared trust and inclusion. This can be achieved by creating regular forums for informal interaction for both the remote and on-site workers. Leaders should also consider how they share their time between the office and remote work, and what kind of a signal their actions convey to employees. (Alexander et al. 2020, 27, 29.)

On the other hand, Rockmann & Pratt (2015, 152) argue that the hybrid model can have a negative effect also on those who wish to work on-site. Their study states that when employees have the chance to decide whether they want to work on-site or remotely also those employees who would prefer to work on-site sometimes choose to work remotely.

On top of the most common arguments why employees choose to work on-site or remotely, Rockmann & Pratt found out that the willingness to socialize and share knowledge with colleagues was an argument for working at the office. However, as many are working remotely, the experience of working at the office changes. If employees feel that they do not have colleagues at the office and casual socialization does not take place, they might stay at home and not come to the office at all even though they would sometimes enjoy the benefits of working on-site. Even if they come to the office, they do not get the experience they wished. (Rockmann & Pratt 2015, 152, 154–156).

As Rockmann and Pratt (2015, 154–156) state, this suggest that remote work is contagious and when enough colleagues work remotely, everyone feels isolated. This indicates that the decision individuals make on where they work starts to affect the whole organisation and that even though the more traditional reasons to work remotely are important, also the lack of social interaction at the office affects these decisions. Rockmann & Pratt also note that if employees expect socialization at the workplace but do not receive this, they view the organisation in a more negative light, which can affect their engagement to the organisation (Rockmann & Pratt 2015, 154–156, 159).

### **2.3 Remote leadership**

As different forms of remote work become increasingly common, so does e-leadership. For this study, the interesting questions when talking about e-leadership are: what is e-leadership, are there some specific skills that e-leaders need and the importance of good e-leadership to companies.

As has been discussed above, there is a possibility that remote work can lead to feelings of isolation, lack of socialization, poorer performance and less engagement towards the organisation and team (Van Wart et al. 2019, 89–90) but up-to-date e-leadership that takes the specific remote work factors into consideration can hinder the emergence of these issues. Maduka, Edwards, Greenwood, Osborne & Babatunde (2018, 697–698) point out that effective e-leadership cannot be overemphasized to attain the benefits of remote work and to have highly performing teams that work remotely. They also bring up that this importance can be overlooked by new members of remote teams as well as team leaders and therefore organisations should place emphasis on pinpointing the specific nature of e-leadership and the skills good e-leaders have (Maduka et al. 2018, 697).

Traditional leadership can be defined in many ways. Conteras et al. (2020, 4) describe it as an influence process that aims at achieving organisational goals. They define leadership as follows: there is no leader without followers; one can be considered a leader

only when people recognize him or her as such; leadership can be considered an interactive process of social influence and it is based on relationships; and as a result of effective leadership, employees make their best effort to accomplish organizational goals. Hence, in addition to the formal authority, leaders must develop the ability to influence others to get work done. Cortellazzo, Bruni & Zampieri (2020, 2) define leader as a person who guides a group of people or an organization and empowers their transformational processes.

Although leadership has been studied for decades, many researchers have stated that knowledge and theory on e-leadership is still quite limited and more research is needed to form a common understanding of the phenomenon (see for example Avolio et al. 2014, 105; Conteras et al. 2020, 8–9, Cortellazzo et al. 2019). However, some common denominators and requirements for e-leaders can be found in literature, and these will be studied in this chapter.

Vilkman (2016, chapter 1) states that e-leadership refers to a situation where the team leader does not meet their team member or team members daily, weekly or even monthly in person, but communication and cooperation happen via technology (Vilkman 2016, chapter 1). Avolio, Sosik, Kahai & Baker (2014, 105, 107) define e-leadership as “a social influence process embedded in both proximal and distal contexts mediated by advanced information technology (AIT, such as the internet and email) that can produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behaviour, and performance”. In other words, e-leaders try to influence the employee, their performance, and actions via virtual communication channels.

Van Wart et al. (2019, 83) broaden the definition to include a blended way of communicating: “E-leadership is the effective use and blending of electronic and traditional methods of communication. It implies an awareness of current ICTs, selective adoption of new ICTs for oneself and the organization, and technical competence in using those ICTs selected.” This definition entails the idea that not only an e-leader needs to know how to use ICT but they also need to be able to define which ICT tool is suitable for effective communication and work for their team or organisation.

Some studies define e-leadership as the interplay of leadership, IT and digitalization without any reference to how work is organised but how communication is arranged (for example Avolio et al. 2014, 105–106). However, in this study, e-leadership refers to a situation where all or part of the organisation or team are working remotely, and communication is handled via ICT or traditional methods (such as face-to-face meeting or telephone call) depending on the situation.

Many competencies and skills that define successful on-site leadership apply to e-leadership as well. For example, Norman, Avey, Larson & Hughes (2020, 287) argue that in both, face-to-face and virtual work environments, the cornerstone of leadership is people and focus on people, and this does not change depending on how work is arranged. However, the traditional leadership methods and knowhow might not be sufficient and need to be rethought as virtual teams place new demands and challenges on leadership (Maduka et al. 2018, 697; Van Wart, Roman, Wang, & Liu 2019, 81; Vilkmán 2016, chapter 1).

Vilkmán (2016, chapter 1) argues that although good people leading skills are in the core of both traditional and e-leadership they differ from one another and one of the most common mistakes in organisations is to continue to lead remote teams the same way than on-site teams were led. She also states that as with all leaders, few people are ready to be great leaders when the responsibility is handed to them, and therefore e-leaders need to be taught the proper skills to perform well. Vilkmán (2016, chapter 1) lists trust, respect, openness, open communication, communality, and a clear set of team ground rules as the cornerstones for effective e-leadership.

Contreras et al. (2020, 1–2) argue that since remote work has changed the way employees work by making working practices more flexible, virtual and often more independent, e-leadership requires different practices and knowhow than traditional leadership to meet the needs of remote workers. In remote work, the traditional managerial tasks, such as budgeting or planning, might become even more straightforward but effective ways to influence others to achieve organisational goals, the leadership side, can be more complicated to maintain. To collect the gains that remote work has to offer, remote workers need managerial support and to achieve organisational goals, e-leaders should take a bigger role in forming a well-functioning team and in influencing their team to perform well. However, as mentioned above, since studies on e-leadership are still scarce, the methods on how to do this is unclear. (Contreras et al. 2020, 1–4).

Van Wart et al. (2019, 81) state that e-leadership needs to be studied from a different perspective than traditional leadership since the way people communicate has changed, digitalisation has altered how organisations work and this has affected leadership in itself. They propose that e-leaders need six skills to be effective and successful: e-communication, e-social skills, e-team building, e-change management, e-technology skills, and e-trustworthiness. (van Wart et al 2019, 91, 180–81).

E-communication refers to the leader's ability to communicate via ICT in a manner that is clear and organized, avoids errors and miscommunication, and is not excessive or detrimental to performance. If communication is effective, this can lead to higher productivity and satisfaction. E-social skills entail the ability to create a positive work environment, offer support to team members and to improve communication and collaboration through a variety of virtual communication methods. E-teambuilding skills require e-leaders to have the ability to build, motivate, recognize team members and hold their teams accountable in virtual environments. E-change management skills mean that the e-leader can manage change initiatives effectively through ICT. E-technology skills hold that the e-leader is technologically savvy and remains on top off on relevant ICT developments and ICT security-related concerns. E-trustworthiness refers to the leader's ability to create a sense of trust with their team members by being perceived as honest, consistent, and fair. This also involves ensuring that employees can maintain a healthy work-life balance even if working remotely. (Van Wart et al. 2019, 91–93).

Sull, Sull & Bersin (2020, 4–7) argue that there are five principles that can help leaders and managers to effectively lead their remote employees: frequent communication; providing support for physical and mental health; help employees to stay productive and engaged; manage work-life balance and keep sight of strategic priorities.

Firstly, communication should be transparent, consistent and two-way to give the employees a chance to share their thoughts in addition to receiving information from the manager. In addition, the provided information should be easily navigated. Secondly, offering support for well-being includes, in addition to the traditional flu shots, virtual social activities such as lunches and after works, but the most important aspect is the day-to-day communication and check-ins with employees to see how they are doing. This was also an important to factor in reducing the feeling of isolation that can be a challenge in remote work. Thirdly, they also noted that there can be a disparity between performance and rewarding in remote work. As remote work can enhance productivity, it has surprisingly been found out that remote work can hinder promotions and other forms of recognition. This can be due to the lack of capability of leaders to acknowledge and recognise the performance of remote employees. Fourthly, although remote workers often prefer working-from-home to on-site work since it saves time, it has been noted that they also log in more hours than their on-site colleagues, and they feel the need to be constantly available, which, together with lower levels of recognition, can lead to stress and lower level of engagement. Lastly, e-leaders need to come up with solutions to make sure that the team does not to lose sight of the strategic goals and the organisational culture. (Sull et al. 2020, 4–7).

Maduka et al.'s (2018, 707) study follows the same lines as Sull et al.'s as they state that in order for e-leadership to be effective they need, for example, to communicate efficiently and provide timely feedback, be able to create team cohesion and trust in their teams, create a sense of direction and achieve goals and be reliable. According to their study, teams where e-leader did not have these qualities underperformed and lacked in engagement. (Maduka et al. 707–709).

To conclude, the tasks and responsibilities of e-leaders are the same than on-site leaders. However, the execution can be more challenging due to the lack of facetime. An effective e-leader needs to be able to communicate clearly, create engagement and cohesion within the team, create an environment of trust and show direction and ensure the well-being of their team members. With such a skills-set and if emphasis is placed on achieving e-leadership in an organisation, the negative effects of remote work can be controlled, and the benefits of remote work achieved.

#### **2.4 Well-being at work and virtual well-being at work**

Well-being at work has been studied for the last 100 years. In the 1920s, focus was placed on studying how stress reaction is inflicted in an individual and the study concentrated on studying this from the medical and physiological point of view. Today, it is widely accepted that well-being at work is a complex phenomenon, which extends far beyond monitoring sick days or preventing workplace accidents. It is influenced by not only the resources present at the workplace (environmental resources) but also by the employee's characteristics and personal resources as well as their personal life and how these combine with the demands and possibilities present at work. These individual resources entail, for example, positive thinking, health and problem-solving skills. The environmental resources are, for example, social support, feedback culture, leadership and job security (Manka & Manka 2016, 68–70; Työterveyslaitos 2021).

For companies, the need to concentrate on creating a workplace that improves its employees' well-being is crucial in today's working life that is packed with changes, pressure to renew oneself and innovate. To succeed in such an environment, businesses need to have employees who are productive and innovative, and to achieve such a workforce, well-being initiatives need to be considered, developed and implemented. The cost of not focusing on employee well-being can be high. In 2014, it was calculated that the yearly cost of the lost labour input for the Finnish national economy is about 24 billion euros. (Manka & Manka 2016, 7–8; Puttonen, Hasu & Pahkin 2016, 4; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2014).

Manka & Manka (2016, 74–77) introduce a threefold model to study and enhance well-being at work. The model is based on Fredrickson's theory on resources, and it consists of structural capital, social capital and psychological capital (Manka & Manka 2016, 74–77, 158). In this research, well-being at work is understood as a such multifaceted phenomenon. Manka & Manka (2016, 14–24) approach well-being at work from the perspective of megatrends and how they will affect the future of work, and thus their approach takes digitalisation, globalisation, and the increasing spatial and timely flexibility of work practises (distributed work) into account. Therefore, their model is well-suited for this thesis.

According to Manka & Manka (2016, 80) an organisation that promotes well-being should have clear goals and strategy for well-being. They argue that a well-being organisation is target-oriented and flexible, it evolves and learns, and it has a safe atmosphere to work in. These are formed by the organisational culture and practises, and they form the structural capital. In addition, job design and the possibilities present at the organisation for the employees to influence their own work form structural capital. (Manka & Manka 2016, 80–84).

Social capital is influenced by the quality of leadership and work atmosphere. Social capital is related to the relationships between employees, and employees and managers. High level of social capital promotes trust, networking and reciprocity, and can influence how well goals are achieved and also affect the health of employees. It can also have negative effects such as too close relationships between co-workers, which can cause bullying and jealousy. (Manka & Manka 2016, 132–133).

Psychological capital entails the employee's attitudes, how they see themselves and the possibilities in life as well as physical and mental health. Psychological capital is tied to the employee's self-image, and it entails the view a person has on their capabilities and future possibilities. It influences the employee's behaviour and performance, and it is related to how committed the employee is to the organisation. Therefore, high level of psychological capital it is important for the employer. Psychological capital is constructed from self-confidence, hopefulness, perseverance and realistic optimism, and it can be developed. (Manka & Manka 2016, 158–161).

When remote work and virtual well-being are considered, Forbes Öste (2020, 819) argues that in the same way as with traditional well-being, in the virtual version it is important that employees set boundaries and take brakes to think about something else than work. A well-balanced relationship with technology can enhance virtual well-being and create a situation that Forbes Öste calls digital self-balance. In addition to the individual employees



investing in creating a healthy balance between work and personal time, as the place of work changes and communication methods differ from the traditional workplace, organisations need to rethink the way well-being is managed. At the organisational level, there emerges a need to establish boundaries that limit work hours and set up guidelines that encourage connectedness, well-being and thus productivity. If such actions are not taken, organisations risk creating a culture of overworking and isolation from colleagues and the workplace, which can have effects on the employees mental and physical health. Forbes Öste suggest creating intentional, unofficial virtual places for interaction (coffee rooms for example) and placing common guidelines on response times as well as on technology free periods (such as the weekend) for the organisation. (Forbes Öste 2020, 819).

Manka & Manka, too, bring up the concept of information ergonomics, which refers to the importance of having the information load at a manageable level. It also entails having guidelines on how to work for example with email, planning your work, having information on a few different places instead of multiple ones and having the possibility to focus on one task at a time. Better information ergonomics enforces the feeling of control, which is important for lower stress levels and better productivity and well-being. (Manka & Manka 2016, 114–115). This is especially important in remote work where all the information is stored in virtual form and different ICT programmes are used to communicate and store information. Since remote work enables employees to work at non-office hours more than before, it is important for the efficiency of work and workflow that information is easily accessible.

## **2.5 Team performance**

The goal of a company is to create value and the goal of managers is to get their individual team members to perform at their best to achieve their goals. Team and individual performance among account managers can be quite straightforward to measure, especially in the context of this study as will be discussed in chapter 4.3. However, what affects performance in a remote work environment is a more complicated matter.

Lippert & Dulewicz (2017) argue that the profile of a high performing virtual team consists of trustworthiness, commitment to goals, interpersonal communication, and communication style. In addition, knowledge sharing has been argued to influence performance (for example, Alsharo, Gregg & Ramirez 2017; Rosen, Furst & Blackburn 2007).

Commitment to goals is an important part of performance. It refers to the willingness to invest more time into achieving goal and unwillingness to abandon a target once it has been set (Lippert & Dulewicz 2017, 170). As Lippert & Dulewicz (2017, 179) state, in high-performing teams, commitment to goals resulted in more effort being placed on goal fulfilment, completing more tasks and supporting other team members. According to their study, high performing teams also conceived that their work was valuable to the company and their careers (Lippert & Dulewicz 2017, 179).

The importance of clear and continuous communication for effective remote work has been discussed in earlier chapters and it is discussed along trust building. In this chapter, more emphasis is therefore placed on trust and knowledge sharing.

Trust forms the basis for well-functioning cooperation between team member and manager, and therefore is an important component in creating a workplace where employees and teams can perform at a high level. Studies also show that the significance of trust-based relationships to performance is highlighted in virtual teams (Ferrel & Kline, 2019, 31).

Trust is important for achieving goals since it helps to create an atmosphere where employees have the courage to take risks and fail, share opinions, information and knowledge, and trust that their colleagues want to help them and see each other succeed. This is an environment where people can thrive and perform at their best. (Ferrell & Kline 2019, 31; Lippert & Dulewicz 2017, 177–179.). Trust is also an important component of dependence, the idea that all members of the organisation need each other to succeed, which forms the basis to accomplish personal and organisational goals. (Norman et al. 2020, 281).

Building and maintaining trust requires constant effort from the organisation and the manager. To build and maintain trust in remote or hybrid work, Ferrel & Kline (2019, 31–32) suggest organising some face-to-face meetings if possible, creating means to share personal experiences and values also in the virtual environment, and communicating frequently whilst maintaining a high quality in communication. Frequent communication is important since it enables knowledge sharing and creates visibility into how the others work and what is on their agenda. (Ferrel & Kline 2019, 31–32).

Norman et al.'s (2020) study supports the arguments made by Ferrel & Kline on what trust is built. In their study frequent and constant communication, openness, honesty and integrity were the most frequently cited as necessary elements for trust to develop in the leader-employee relationship. These findings also highlight how fragile trust can be, since

if leaders act contrary to these, they can easily lose the trust they have previously gained. Not that surprisingly, building trust is a two-way street: employees also expect their leaders to trust them so that a relationship that is built on trust can develop. (Norman et al 2020, 286–287.) Lippert & Dulewicz (2017, 177–178) also highlight the reciprocal nature of trust: to act in a trustworthy manner, employees expect the same from their leaders and colleagues.

Norman et al. (2020, 284) state that the development of trust and relationships does not differ between traditional face-to-face leadership situations and virtual leadership. They argue that trust evolves with time by successful and successive opportunities to build trust between people but that even one occasion where the other acts untrustworthy can destroy this trust. Their study also supports the argument that there aren't significant differences in what affects trust in leader-team member relationship in face-to-face or virtual working environments. In their study, elements that help create and maintain trust towards the leader include leader's knowledgeability, ability to perform tasks, espoused values, and experience. However, in virtual context, the ability of the leader to use the right technological tool to communicate a message can affect the leader's trustworthiness. This tech savviness also includes the efficient use of the chosen tool, which, thus, creates a new skill that the leader needs to master. (Normal et al. 2020, 284–285; 288–289).

Ferrel & Kline (2019, 31), however, note that virtual team members are more prone to mistrust towards leaders or other team members than their on-site colleagues. This can be due to the lack of synchronous communication, informal social interactions, or face-to-face interaction, which reduce the possibility of interpreting non-verbal cues and can create barriers to creating personal relations. Also, they argue that trust develops slower in virtual teams and leader-employee relationships because personal information is not shared that often in the daily communication. (Ferrel & Kline 2019, 31). Lippert & Dulewicz' (2017, 178–179) findings support the importance of informal communication. They noticed that in high-performing teams, one of the most significant factors affecting performance was the members' communication skills and ability to alter their communication style according to the situation. They also state that consequently, giving feedback about the employee's communication style is one of the most important actions that can enhance performance in virtual environment and remote work. (Lippert & Dulewicz 2017, 180).

As both formal and informal communication are in a significant role in trust building, both Norman et al. (2020, 284) and Ferrel & Kline (2019, 31–33) highlight the need for choosing the right technologies for communication and making sure that all know how to

use the chosen technology. Ferrel & Kline (2020, 32–33) suggests that the more complicated and sensitive the issue is, the more effort should be placed in finding a technology that conveys the most information and is synchronous. For example, text always conveys less information and is asynchronous compared to video conferencing. Neither is better than the other, but they should be used in different situations to maintain the trusting relationship.

To conclude, trust building and maintaining it demand well-planned and continuous communication and it does not develop overnight. In remote work and hybrid work situations the need for communication, both formal and informal, are highlighted.

As was mentioned above, trust facilitates the formation of an environment where employees feel safe to ask for help and to share knowledge. Knowledge sharing is a significant factor in achieving an organisational culture where individuals perform well.

Knowledge sharing refers to passing on information, previous experiences and knowledge as well as bringing in new information from external sources to the team and to colleagues. It plays an important role in enhancing performance both in individual and team level because it allows the efficient use of resources and prevents employees from making the same mistakes. It can also increase cohesion, satisfaction and motivation in the workplace. Rosen et al. (2007, 270–271) bring up that ineffective knowledge sharing can prevent an organisation to reach its full potential and risk losing its competitive edge and slow down the reaching of goals. However, effective knowledge sharing promotes better and faster decision making, faster development of employees, better employee experience and better performance. (Rosen et al. 2007, 260–261; 270–271; Alsharo et al. 2017, 485.)

In remote work and virtual working environments, knowledge sharing can become more difficult than in on-site work. As employees cannot look for support or advice from the person sitting next to them but need to schedule an appointment or call their manager or colleague, it might be easier not to ask for help. (Choudhury 2020, 64). Efficient knowledge sharing in remote work requires the technology for it, but most importantly the willingness of employees to take part in it. (Rosen et al. 2007, 260–261.)

Although the benefits of knowledge sharing are evident, there are hindrances that can affect the motivation of employees to take part in it. Rosen et al. (2007, 260–261) have pinpointed six constraints or barriers to effective knowledge sharing: trust, time, technology, team leader, transactive memory system (TSM), and culture (which refers to cultural differences in global virtual teams and thus is not important for this study).

Trust refers to the willingness to place oneself in a position where it is revealed that you don't know something, or have made a mistake, which without trust, can be perceived as incompetence. Time refers to the limited time employees want to invest in knowledge sharing since it is not seen as something that will directly affect your own current performance or diminish workload. Another hindrance can be technology if the organisation has not provided employees with efficient and easy-to-use ways to share information. Also, team leader can diminish the willingness to share information with their own attitude and actions: if they do not share information and act as role models, the team won't either. TSM refers to the way colleagues know each other's areas of expertise to utilize the organisation's collective knowledge. (Rosen et al. 2007, 262–264.)

Rosen et al. emphasise the creation of trust to enhance knowledge sharing. Setting clear rules on how and when information is shared is one of the possibilities to overcome the time constraints often associated with knowledge sharing. This is also one possibility on how the team leader or organisation can act as an enabler of knowledge sharing. In addition, creating space for individuals to talk about their knowhow and experiences on a regular basis can create an atmosphere where knowledge sharing becomes common. (Rosen et al. 2007, 267–269.)

Alsharo et al. (2017, 479) are on the same lines as Rosen et al. when it comes to the hindrances of effective knowledge sharing. They argue that the willingness to share knowledge is dependent on the individual's will to share unique information as common a fear is that sharing information can lead to the loss of power. This way of thinking can lead to hoarding of information. In their study, they also argue that knowledge sharing does not directly affect how efficient teams or individuals are, but it has an indirect effect on performance. Effective knowledge sharing creates more trust, which then creates more collaboration between individuals, and this has a positive effect on performance. (Alsharo et al. 2017, 480)

To overcome the challenges with knowledge sharing, Davidavičienė, Al Majzoub & Meidute-Kavaliauskiene (2020, 13) suggest that organisations place emphasis on motivation, ICT, trust, and leadership. Motivation refers to the willingness to share information and it can be enhanced by creating trust and strong ties between team members so that everyone sees the advantages of sharing information and feel like they benefit from it. Teams and individuals need to have relevant ICT tools to share information, know how to use it and be aware of which tool to use for what. (Davidavičienė et al. 2020, 5–7; 12).

To summarize, the key elements in remote team performance management are creating clarity on how performance is managed, and placing emphasis on open communication, trust building and knowledge sharing.

### **3 Data collection**

In a case study, multiple data collections methods can be used to form an in-depth picture of the case. In addition, this affects the validity of the case study since the information that is received from different sources should confirm the validity of the study's outcomes. However, different data might also produce different outcomes. (Kananen 2013, 77–78; 80).

In this study, the used data collection methods are the company's documentation and semi-structured interviews. Other possible data collections methods would have been a survey questionnaire that could have been targeted to the whole sales organisation to get an even broader understanding of the effects of Covid-19 to the organisation. However, with only about 25 to 30 possible participants the answer percentage would have needed to be very high to get a representative data sample. With this in mind, the added value of surveys to my other data collections methods, documentation and interviews, would have remain low and possibly provided me with data that would not have been relevant for the research subject.

#### **3.1 Documentation**

Documentation is often used as a data source in qualitative research as well as in case studies. The strength of documentation as data is its unchanged and stable nature as the research or research questions do not affect documents' content and, often, they do not contain opinions but facts about the studied topic (e. g. a company). However, documents are produced for a certain purpose, and they have been produced by someone, which means that they can include or exclude some information that serves the said purpose and therefore cannot be regarded as truth but need to be handled with criticisms. (Kananen 2013, 80; Yin 2018, 114–116).

In this study, documentation is used as a data collection method to gain information about the current guidelines on remote work and expectations towards managers during remote work as well as how success in this topic is measured. The company has an extensive wiki collection on best practises and guides for employees working in different positions and with different processes. I will use the documentation from there to gain an overview on the subject. The articles were found by using the search function on the web page and following linkages on the pages. The search terms that were used are "remote work", "remote", "hybrid model".

The documentation used in this study entails policies and guidelines that the organisation has set for its employees. It needs to be noted that the purpose of these guidelines is to form a uniformed way of acting and steer action and decisions to such that benefit the company, not the individual. Also, many of the policies are created by employees who do not work in the role for which the guidelines are prepared, and the implementation of the policies and guidelines cannot be monitored constantly or in every situation where they are applied. Therefore, the policies might not be applied to practise as they are intended. Consequently, this documentation does not reflect reality, or how things are really done in the organisation, but how things should be done.

### **3.2 Semi-structured interviews**

Interviews are one of the most common data collection methods in case studies (Yin 2018, 119) and they are an effective way to study what a person thinks or why they have acted as they have (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 84). Interviews offer a possibility to, for example, study topics that are not well known, if the researcher wants to gain a deep understanding of the topic and if the studied subject is such that produces complex answers (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 35).

In this research, semi-structured interviews<sup>2</sup> are chosen as the interview method. In this thesis the term semi-structured interview refers to the interview method described by Hirsjärvi & Hurme in their book *Tutkimushaastattelu: Teemahaastattelun teoria ja käytäntö* (2015).

In semi-structured interviews, there are multiple themes that the interviewer and interviewee discuss. The interviewer has selected the themes beforehand and has also created questions that support and help the discussion to go forward. The theme selection requires that the researcher already has an idea and a view on the matter at hand but does not know the subject so well that there are only predetermined themes and questions, and no new themes can emerge during the interview. These themes can be discussed during the interview, or a new round of interviews can be arranged. Therefore, even though the themes and questions have been preselected, semi-structured interviews give the interviewer the possibility to specify and elaborate their questions based on the given answers. (Kananen 2013, 92–94; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 48, 88). As Kananen

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<sup>2</sup> Teemahaastattelu in Finnish



describes semi-structured interviews, they are the right method to use when a researcher wants to learn more about the theme or themes (Kananen 2013, 92–94).

Hirsjärvi & Hurme (2015, 103) highlight the need for flexibility during the interview. They argue that the interviewer should find the right linguistic level to use with the interviewee meaning that the expressions and vocabulary should match the ones the interviewee uses. This applies also to the questions that are asked and how they are formed: they do not need to be the same for every interviewee but need to embody the same theme. The same can be said about the order in which the questions are asked, which can vary; however, one theme should be handled at a time in its totality. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 103–104).

As Hirsjärvi & Hurme mention, it is important to take language into consideration when interview is used as a data collection method (2015, 53). There exists an internal jargon at the case company and all get familiar with it during their introduction. This concerns both vocabulary and concepts that are used in everyday life at work. For example, all employees and especially managers share an understanding of what a “top performer” means. Therefore, what comes to the language and word choices that were used in the interview, the shared language and concepts that are present at the company made this easier. The researcher can trust that the terms used were familiar to the interviewees and interviewer alike, which made the interview situation clearer to participants.

However, the flexibility Hirsjärvi & Hurme mention does not mean that the preparations for the interview, theme formation and question formation can be undermined. The interview structure needs to be formed beforehand and each theme should proceed from a general level towards more specific questions. As Hirsjärvi & Hurme argue, in a semi-structured interview it is often enough that the interviewer knows if they are looking for facts or opinions from the interview and that the interviewer has prepared for the interview. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 106–107).

When interviews are used as a data collection method, the ethical aspect needs to be well thought through. One of the questions is how much information the interviewee should receive about the research and its goals: if too much information is given, will it affect the interviewee’s answers, and on the other hand the interviewee needs to decide if they want to take part in the research or not (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 20).

The interviewees should be chosen so that the case of the study concerns them. Kananen argues that in qualitative research the number of interviews cannot be predetermined since the interviews should continue as long as the saturation point is achieved and new

interview rounds should always be conducted when semi-structured interview is used. Saturation is achieved when a new interview does not bring up any new information about the topic. For the researcher to know when saturation is reached, it is important to continuously analyse the collected data, which is a typical requirement in qualitative and case study research. (Kananen 94–96). However, the semi-structured interview method by Hirsjärvi & Hurme does not comment on the number of interviews or rounds needed to gain a deep understanding of the topic, and, thus, leaves this to the researcher to decide (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 48).

There are also potential pitfalls when interviews are used as data collection method. As Hirsjärvi & Hurme describe, interviewing requires knowhow, studying and lot of preparation as well as time to analyse the interviews. Also, there are possible bias that can come into play both from the interviewer's and the interviewees' side (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 35). Kananen discusses the possibility that the interviewer might include their own ideas and thoughts about the matter into the discussion, which could skew the interviewee's answers. Also, the interviewee can have preconceptions and assumptions on what the researcher wants to hear, and this can affect their answers. (Kananen 2013, 80–81.)

As was noted earlier when the nature of qualitative research was discussed, researcher has an effect on the studied subject. When interviews are concerned, this signifies that all interviews, semi-structure interviews included, are formed through a cooperation between the interviewer and the interviewee. However, the interview situation is not the same as a discussion, since in the interview, the interviewer has predetermined the themes and the goal is to gain reliable data for research. Also, the interviewer guides and steers the situation and sometimes needs to motivate the interviewee. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 23, 43.)

This research is a thesis and due to the scale and timetable it sets for the research as well as due to my limited resources, in this study the number of interviews was predetermined and set to six and only one interview round was set up. Although this sets some limitations to the research and the chosen data collection method, the objective of this case study is to gain in-depth information on a specific case and not to draw statistical generalisations, the smaller number of interviewees is justifiable (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 59).

The STMs in were contacted by email (appendix 1) to ask if they were willing to take part in the interview, and all agreed. This email contained all the information that was provided to the STMs about the study beforehand. The interviews were held in Teams between June 3 and June 23, 2021, and each interview took around 60 minutes.

The original interview themes were created based on the scientific framework of this study. However, the interviews brought up trust as theme that needed to be included in the scientific framework after the interviews were held. The interview template was the same in every interview but during the interviews a different amount of time was spend on different themes based on the answers the interviewee gave. Also, depending on the answers, the structure of the interview changed as themes were gone through if they turned up in the interviewee's answers. The interview template can be found in appendix 2.

### **3.3 Qualitative content analysis**

The data was analysed using the qualitative content analysis. It refers to the attempt to describe the document content verbally and find meanings from the data, and present this data in a concise form. The aim of qualitative content analysis is to create a coherent picture of the used data, which creates more information on the studied subject and coherent conclusion can be drawn from the data. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 103, 122)

The steps in qualitative content analysis are reduction, clustering and abstraction. When reduction is done, the unnecessary information is deleted from the data. Clustering refers to grouping the concepts found in the data describing the same phenomenon under different themes. The purpose of clustering is to create a basis for the structure of the research and preliminary descriptions of the research topic. Abstraction refers to conceptualization of the data meaning that the relevant data is used to link the empirical material to theoretical concepts or to create conclusions. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 122–126).

The STM interviews were recorded, and recordings were transcribed with the help of the VCL multimedia player. With the use of VLC, it was possible to influence the playing speed of the recording, which made the transcription process easier. Interviews were transcribed on a word-for-word level, but all filler words, unfinished words and discussions that did not concern the interview themes were left out of the transcription.

After the transcription was complete, the written interview material was read through so that all unnecessary data could be left out, meaning that reduction of data was conducted. After the initial reduction, the remaining data was collected by thematically organising it into categories, meaning that recurring themes were sought from the material and written down. In this research, a part of the themes that were used came directly from the interview themes but a part of the themes were found from the interview data and included

into the analysis. After this, the thematical categories were combined and the research outcomes are reported based on these categories.

## 4 Analysis

In this chapter, the collected data, documents and interviews, are analysed.

First, the themes that were found in the company documentation are discussed. These include hybrid model of work, remote work, performance management and well-being. These topics are covered in subchapters 4.1–4.4. Subchapters 4.5–4.10 present the themes from the STM interviews, which include team practises during corona, performance management, well-being, communication, trust and STM's thoughts on hybrid work.

The separation between documentation and interviews is made in the analysis since I want to be clear on how the company policies and guidelines are presented in the documentation and how STMs describe these themes.

### 4.1 “The new normal” – hybrid model

The company has created guidelines for remote work and for the coming hybrid model. In principle, in the day-to-day work, this offers a lot of flexibility for the employee. Employees can decide where they want to work, and if they wish to work from abroad for a certain period, this can be agreed with their manager. Office and team meetings are held in a hybrid model, meaning employees can take part in them on-site or remotely. However, employees are encouraged to take part in weekly office meetings and team meetings on-site occasionally. The same hybrid model applies to all internal meetings if the manager does not see that an exception is needed; in such cases the manager decides if presence at the office is mandatory. Some company events where all employees gather together will be arranged in in-person format only, for example the yearly kick off and the yearly gala dinner. In addition, team events will be organised in-person. (Case Company 2021AB).

The manager has, however, the right to decide if an individual team member needs to spend more time at the office. More presence can be demanded due to poor performance, introducing new team members or if the manager deems some work tasks as such that they need to be conducted from the office. New hires should spend time at the office to get to know the company and take part in some trainings on-site. In addition, the company states that the office space is still seen as the main workplace where relationships are built, the company culture is lived, and new ideas created. Also, in the hybrid model the company won't provide the remote workers with the small extras such as breakfasts or lunch when they are offered at the office. Also, there aren't any guidelines on what kind of

office equipment (mouse, keyboard, for example) is provided for the employees who work remotely. (Case Company 2021AB).

In the AM role, in the hybrid model, client's wishes have a significant impact on where work is performed. If clients wish to meet in person, then the AM should prioritize the client's wishes and meet them in person. Otherwise, they can work from anywhere. Also, the AM role does not have set working hours, which adds a level of complexity since it is not possible to know when an AM is working and when they are not, which can affect, for example, communication. (Case Company 2021K.)

## **4.2 Remote work**

STMs are encouraged to put emphasis on communication and the quality of virtual meetings to stay close to their team members and keep the culture alive when working remotely and in the hybrid model. It is suggested that teams have virtual check-ins and coffee breaks daily to create team spirit and communality. There are tips and tricks on how to engage team members to take actively part in the meetings: the use of video is recommended, responsibilities on different topics should be shared to team members and more questions should be asked during a virtual meeting, for example. Also, the company has decided that Teams is the technology that is used for meetings. (Case Company 2021R.)

The need for team specific remote work guidelines is recognised and instructions on what it should entail is provided. According to the instructions, teams should agree on team availability, communication tools, management tools and how to track team's progress. In addition, emphasis is placed on asking for feedback and creating an atmosphere that sustains the company culture; it is stated that disconnection from the company culture is one major factor that affects retention in remote work situations. (Case Company, 2021X). However, a lot is left for the individual manager to solve and be responsible for, for example there are no guidelines or tips on how to keep the culture top-of-mind with remote working teams or how to set up a working communication toolset.

The purpose of managerial work remains the same in remote work as it is in hybrid or on-site model: to create results through the team. It is understood that in remote work managerial work is different and demands more emphasis, for example, on communication and interaction with the team to create performance, engagement, and culture. Therefore, setting up a meeting calendar for the team is recommended and tips and examples on how to do it is provided. The guideline recommends adding short check-ins with the team as well as with individual team members to create more clarity and

communication and to understand where the team member is succeeding or if they have any issues. (Case Company 2021S.) It is also brought up that managers should not be that concerned with the hours their team members put in but on the results they achieve. (Case Company 2021T). When AMs are discussed, this is not very relevant since AMs do not have working hours and are always evaluated according to their performance, not by the working hours.

Managers are provided with clear guidelines on how to conduct a good virtual team meeting or a 1:1, which indicates that it is understood that virtual meetings need to be planned and have a clear goal. Also, the need for flexibility is highlighted: if the team or individual benefits more from other talking points than the ones provided, focus should be placed on those if possible. In addition, greeting all participants by name, agreeing to focus on the meeting (and not other tasks), acknowledging everyone and keeping the video on are among the provided tips. (Case Company 2021S.)

On the employee side, the articles provide mostly tips on how to make remote work productive, social and sustainable. The tips are quite generic, ranging from setting up an office space, communicating with your team members and other co-workers, to creating workday routines, such as getting dressed, having lunch and signing out from work. (Case Company 2021U, 2021V, 2021Y.) However, there are no clear guidelines on what is expected from an employee, which can create a feeling of vagueness and detachment.

In an article dedicated to working with sales remotely, a lot of emphasis is placed on providing efficient ways for performing successful virtual client meetings. This focus is understandable since the AM work's core are the client meetings where relationships are built and sales are made. The guidelines and tips follow the same lines as those for internal meetings, such as structure and including everyone to the meeting. In addition, tips for using Teams efficiently are provided both for the AM and the client. Other points that are brought up deal with establishing a communication plan towards the client and agreeing on deadlines. (Case Company 2021Z.)

### **4.3 Performance management**

As previously mentioned, the case company has a sales-oriented and competitive culture, and performance is extensively measured especially in the AM role. There are in total 25 key performance indicators (KPI) in the sales function. Of these 25 KPIs 18 are directly linked to the AM position, and they include for example, the AM's revenue, hit rate and number of calls. The rest are more linked to the overall structure of the AM organisation, for example the number of AMs. As performance management is the most important area

in the STM work, there are many processes and lots of information available in the company wiki to support the STMs on how to follow-up on performance.

Performance is discussed in the monthly 1:1 meeting where both the manager and the AM have the chance to pinpoint possible development areas and strengths in the AMs work. There are different focus areas based on the seniority of the AM, and as the AM's seniority level grows, the more multifaceted the evaluation of performance becomes. (Case Company 2021J.) A yearly evaluation on the AMs performance is conducted in the performance review. It is a summary of the previous year's performance and an overall evaluation. However, for monitoring performance and development areas in an AM's work, the 1:1 meetings are more significant. (Case Company 2021H).

In the STM role at the company, managers are guided to target their performance management to the top 20% and bottom 10% of their team members. The top 20% are the top performers whose achievements are celebrated, and their performance is highlighted to portray them as role models to the rest of the organisation. The bottom 10% are those team members that are lacking in their performance, and they should also get more attention since they need support to enhance their performance. The remaining 70% should also receive attention, feedback and praise for their work, but the main attention is directed at the 20/10. (Case Company 2021D). This creates clear guidelines for the STMs on how to guide their efforts when it comes to performance management but does not dictate how the STM should use their time.

If an AM does not perform at the target level, the STM needs to intervene and together the AM and STM set up a follow-up plan. If performance does not improve within the agreed timetable, a more detailed plan is made where they agree on concrete actions and improvements the AM needs to make to perform at the target level. If the AM succeeds in improving their performance, the plan is deemed successful. If performance does not improve, it might lead to the exit of the AM (Case Company 2021L, Case Company 2021M). This process gives the STMs a clear action plan to monitor the performance of AMs and clear guidelines on how to act if there are any issues with reaching target levels.

Overall, there are clear guidelines for STMs to manage the AMs performance also in remote or hybrid work.

#### **4.4 Well-being**

In order to reach the high performance targets, the company has highlighted employee well-being as one of the key focus areas in the organisation.



The organisation approaches well-being as a phenomenon that employees, managers and the organisation affect. (Case Company 2021N). On the individual level, this means that all employees are responsible for their own life, health and well-being and they need to find a solution to integrate work with personal life in a way that suits them (Case Company 2021O). The manager's role is to ensure that employees are supported in their work so that they can find a balance between work and personal life and be well and healthy (Case Company 2021P). On the organisational level, well-being is supported by different benefits and via processes that help in monitoring indicators that reveal something about the organisational level of well-being (such as retention, sick days, and engagement levels) as well as guidelines on how to act in well-being related situations (sick leaves, return to work, for example). The organisation supports employee well-being with different offerings that vary from a weekly wellness hour and team events to early health awareness talks and easily accessible mental health services as well as occupational health. (Case Company 2021N).

According to corporate guidelines, well-being and well-being management should be constantly on the manager's agenda. In practise this means that it is the manager's responsibility to talk about well-being and issues affecting it with their team member, and also to be aware if there are changes in the individual's behaviour or increase in sick leaves or work hours, for example. The managers also need to evaluate work's effect on their team's well-being: does the team have the capacity to handle a bigger workload or a new project? (Case Company 2021P)

In addition to the everyday discussions with team members and observed variation in performance, the monthly 1:1s are the most important forum to address a team members' well-being (Case Company 2021P). There are People and Performance Partners in the organisation that can help the manager prepare for the discussions, and the manager's manager provides support with these as well (Case Company 2021AD).

In theory, the organisation has provided the managers with clear guidelines and processes on how to act if they feel an employee is having troubles with their wellness, be it work or personal life related. In practise, however, especially for unexperienced managers, bringing up often a quite personal and difficult subject, such as well-being, can prove to be challenging.

#### **4.5 Team practices and team building during remote work**

All STMs had changed the way they work with their teams and individual team members during telework. The biggest difference was in how their team meeting agendas had changed and how many planned meetings the STMs had with their team members.

There was a significant difference between teams on how much AMs and STMs had spent time at the office during the remote work recommendations. However, there has been variations between individuals and only in few teams most members have been at the office most of the time. Also, even though team members have been at the office, the restrictions and recommendations have caused people to spend time in different meeting rooms, limiting direct face-to-face interaction to a minimum.

The agenda of the team meetings was changed so that clearly more time was spent on non-business-related matters, mainly on reviewing how everybody is doing. This was considered to be important for team building and creating a connection between the team members, not just between the STM and an individual team member. Team building was considered more difficult during the crisis and some interviewees felt that a sense of distance had developed in their team during telework. However, other STMs described that their team spirit had remained high during this time.

None of the teams had held remote team events. Some STMs had discussed these with their team, and the team had decided that there is no need for such events. Others had not discussed this with the team but did not see them as necessary and none of their team members had wished for such events. Most of the teams had met in-person during the pandemic and held team evenings that way. This was done during the times when restrictions allowed it. However, fewer such events were held than before the pandemic, which was seen to affect team building in a negative way.

In one of the offices, the management team decided to double the number of 1:1 meetings with team members to two in a month. The STMs could decide if they wanted to implement this with all their team members, and after discussing this with their teams, some STMs decided to continue with one 1:1 meeting with some of their team members.

About a half of the interviewees brought up that they themselves needed to check how other teams were working with the different new processes and guidelines since this was not jointly coordinated. These STMs were aware that if this was not done, teams could be following guidelines and implementing new processes differently, which could lead to unequal treatment between teams.

#### **4.6 Performance management and knowledge sharing**

Performance management and discussing a team member's performance in remote work was largely perceived to be as easy as whilst working at the office. Performing client co-visits with a team member and giving very practical advice by showing something to team member by sharing the computer's screen in Teams was actually considered to be easier than before. Since co-visits could be arranged by joining a Teams meeting and not having to spend the time to travel to the client's office, this saved time and gave the STM the possibility to take part in more client meetings with an AM.

Overall, the sales organisation has performed better than was forecasted, and, therefore, the STMs have mostly been able to focus on positive communication about team members' performance. Especially activity levels (how many customer meetings an AM has in a week) have risen significantly during the pandemic. This is not a requirement that has come from the organisation but most STMs believed that the time saved from face-to-face meetings and travel between clients has led to this increase, and as the AMs benchmark each other, the norm has changed here.

There are very clear guidelines at the case company on what is considered as good-level performance and data on an employee's performance is easily accessible. This has remained the same during remote work. The STMs considered that discussing the basics, such as activity levels and sold orders, of an employee's performance is therefore still straightforward and these discussions have not changed during telework. The same KPI numbers are followed, and performance is measured similarly as before. This was true especially when a team member performed on the same level as before the Corona crisis or even better.

However, the lack of time spent face-to-face in the office has led to the STMs being very reliant on the numbers and statistics when assessing a team member's performance. The small cues and indicators that help define the amount of work, hardship and success behind the numbers are not as visible as before. Many interviewees pointed out that previously if a team member struggled or succeeded well in the daily work, the STM saw this in real time since most work tasks were performed at the office and consequently they could address these situations at once. Since this information is today lacking, it was felt that sometimes a lot of the team member's work was left unseen. Also, it was harder to know what is behind the numbers, and thus it was difficult to know how and on which topics the STM could support the team member.

This same issue applied to evaluating how a team members live the company culture and how the values are portrayed in the way they conduct their work tasks and communicate with their colleagues. As everyone is working remotely and the company has not created clear ways to follow up on this, the STMs felt that assessing the culture side of performance was challenging. This was seen as problematic since part of the formal performance evaluation is focused on culture and living the values.

Many STMs have tried to tackle the lack of facetime by doubling the number of 1:1 meetings with their team members from one in a month to two to increase the time spent with the team member and guarantee that there was enough time to discuss performance in addition to how the team member is feeling. Although this was seen as a positive thing, it was not enough to completely overcome the lost facetime, and it did not provide the insight into the daily work of the team member. The 1:1s were also very packed with things to discuss since the STMs often felt that they had collected a list of things to go through that they would normally address casually at the office, which narrowed the time that was left for more free discussion.

As discussed in chapter 1.1.1, good performance and success is brought up in the everyday life at the office and positive and constructive feedback on small things is given almost daily. This work was considered as a part of performance management by some of the STMs. During remote work this has, however, almost completely disappeared since the STMs felt that there is no natural way of doing this when they are not at the office. Having a phone call or setting up a meeting to give small feedback was thought to make the feedback seem bigger than it actually was. Also, even the providing of positive feedback via Teams or SMS was not considered to be a good way to give feedback by some interviewees. They thought that this way of giving feedback was not personal enough and would not be appreciated by the team member as much as feedback that was given by calling or in a Teams meeting. All in all, it was brought up by the STMs that the level of feedback in daily work had diminished.

However, on a general level, the interviewees thought that developing their team members and managing their performance was as easy as before. Similarly to the discussion on performance level, this was considered quite straightforward. The STMs were confident that they knew how to develop their team, on which stage their team members were in their development and which issues they should discuss and focus on with the team members.

The STMs brought up knowledge sharing in their interviews. Knowledge sharing was thought to entail the sharing of information among AMs, or between STM and AM, on, for

example, how to handle different issues, how to prepare offers and how to conduct day-to-day work tasks better, such as booking meetings or conducting them with clients. The STMs saw that it was one of the most affected issues during remote work. Even though many STMs had tried to increase the amount of knowledge sharing, for example, in team meetings, almost all stated that the amount has dropped significantly. The possibility to ask a colleague for help at the office has disappeared and has not been replaced by any action. Although this was seen to affect newcomers the most during their on-boarding, it was also seen to affect more senior AMs since they might have more complex offers or client cases at hand, and therefore they could benefit from peer support and information sharing.

#### **4.7 Well-being at work**

Staying on top of how team members are doing at work – i.e. well-being management – was considered by the STMs to have become more difficult during remote work. The STMs thought that from the case company's side, the expectations remained mostly the same as when working at the office.

The interviewees stated that during remote work, they are much more dependent on what their team members say and tell them as they try to assess how their team members are doing and feeling, for example, if they have high levels of stress or problems with motivation. Previously, in addition to discussions with their team members, the STMs were able to observe their team member's behaviour and energy levels at the office and that way they were able to get more cues on how their team member is doing. If there was a change in a team member's behaviour, this was a sign for the STM to start to find out if something was affecting their team members well-being.

Today, since the day-to-day physical presence is minimal, some STMs use changes in weekly or even daily performance levels to pinpoint possible issues in well-being and motivation. They are also more alert to ask how their team members are doing if there are fluctuations in performance. Furthermore, many STMs have changed the agenda of their team meetings to set more time to discuss things that are not directly related to business but have to do with how everyone is doing and what is going on in their lives. In addition, many STMs have added an extra monthly 1:1 with their team members to have enough time to discuss non-business issues. Some STMs decided to have the extra 1:1 with only a part of their team. The decision of having one or two meetings was discussed with each team member but the STM's opinion on how much the individual team member wanted to talk about non-business-related matters affected the decision: if a team member wanted

to discuss non-business-related topics as well, the extra meeting was seen more important.

Nevertheless, even with these changes, the STMs feel that they lack visibility to how their team members are doing. The STMs have communicated openly to their teams that during remote work team members need be more proactive in flagging well-being related issues since the time spend face-to-face was almost non-existent. This naturally makes the STM more reliant on what the team member chooses to share and what not.

The STMs felt that during remote work, it has been easier to keep track of their old team members' well-being than the newcomers'. This was due to the already stronger relationship with the old team members and the discussions that were held before the pandemic. The STMs felt that they knew how to better interpretate their old team member's communication based on their history than of those that have joined their team during the pandemic.

When problems arose with team member's well-being, the STMs told that they did seek for advice on how to act. When this was discussed further in the interviews, the STMs brought up that before the pandemic the case company had a dedicated person for manager support, who was solely concentrated on offering advice on how to approach a difficult situation from a leadership – rather than from a strictly business performance – perspective. This meant that STMs could discuss with this person if they had a case they did not know how to solve or needed help with how to address the sometimes very personal matters of their team members. The STMs felt that this person was familiar with the background of the situation and was generally up to date on what is going on in the organisation. This help was considered a great asset.

However, as due to lay-offs this role was terminated, the STMs felt that help of this kind has not been accessible for a year now. Many of the interviewees mentioned that whilst they can discuss these issues with their own manager, they are somewhat hesitant to do so since they feel that their managers are very busy and have bigger issues to think about. However, those STMs who mentioned this, also stated that if they had significant problems with a team member today, their own manager would be the one they asked for help. According to some interviews, the lack of support in leadership had also affected the STM's possibilities to develop as leader, which was seen to affect their ability to support team members with well-being in the long run.

Most interviewees brought up that the organisation has offered trainings and lectures on how to lead teams during remote work and, in general, how to give feedback, for example.

However, the STMs did not perceive such training as very useful or as of the kind from where they can adopt practises into their own work. The trainings were described to be too broad and general, and since they often did not relate to real-life events, the STMs felt that the trainings weren't very relevant. They understood that trainings cannot often be very targeted but still felt that they could spend their time better, and they would appreciate support that fits their own situational context better and is at hand when support is needed.

A positive thing that was mentioned in the interviews by some STMs was that due to remote work and the Corona situation, it felt that it had become more acceptable to bring up fatigue or motivational issues. This offered the STM a better possibility to discuss these issues with their team members and help them to overcome such problems.

#### **4.8 Communication**

One aspect that the interviewees felt had become more difficult during remote work was communication with their team members. The increased difficulty was linked to the unawareness of what is worth communicating and what is not in remote work since long distance communication demands extra effort. Also, the STMs were unsure how to communicate clearly and unequivocally so that their entire team or individual team members understood the message as the STM intended, thus reducing the risk of miscommunication.

Many STMs said that during remote work, they need to plan more where and when to communicate their message, and this takes more time. They had also noticed the need to use more time to prepare for discussions and 1:1's, for example. This was thought to be necessary due to the amount of information that needed to be shared in these formal situations since the day-to-day communication had diminished and there were less possibilities for informal discussions, such as what is going on in the team member's daily personal life. Also, the need to prepare sprang up from the feeling that they must make sure the team member or the whole team received the message as was intended. Many STMs had noticed the difficulty of sharing information or feedback via Teams since they cannot interpretate the receivers body language and reactions, and thus they felt that they could not be entirely sure how the message was interpreted. One interviewee told that they sometimes need to make "back up calls" to ensure if their message was interpreted by the receiver as they meant it.

Most interviewees thought that during remote work the amount of communication had diminished. Even though there were more planned meetings and 1:1s, all STMs felt that

team members have a bigger threshold to ask about things that were considered mundane and not that important. This was also reflected on the STMs' communication towards team members as they felt like smaller things were more easily left unsaid since they would have needed to make a call or book a meeting, and this was not considered necessary.

A few STMs brought up that communicating and discussing difficult issues felt easier via Teams. This was due to the perceived distance that gave both parties the possibility to remain more detached from the situation even as the discussion was going on. This also provided the STM the possibility to use notes and rely on them when a more difficult message was necessary to deliver to a team member.

Most interviewees had not agreed with their team which communication tools they use for which purposes. The organisation has guidelines for the most formal ways of communicating, meaning that Teams is used for conducting internal meetings, and Teams was the most common tool in 1:1s also. However, as also phone calls, emails and WhatsApp are in daily use, the guidelines have not been transferred into practice and each team uses different combination of communication methods.

#### **4.9 Trust**

All STMs believed that trust is the key element in creating a good and open relationship with their team both during remote work and whilst working at the office. Such a relationship was seen as important in making sure that both business related issues and personal matters were possible to be discussed openly, thus ensuring that their team performed and felt well. The building of trust was considered more difficult in remote work since most STMs felt that it is easier to build trust when working in the same space and having informal conversations – i.e. spending time together – which have been difficult to arrange during the pandemic.

The STMs felt that once trust had been established between them and their team members, it was as easy to maintain such a relationship or to break it as before. However, to build trust with a new team member was seen more difficult and it was seen as demanding more continuous and intentional work. This was due to the lack of opportunities to give spontaneous feedback and to chitchat with the new team member. Also, the possible miscommunications that happened more easily were seen to affect the building of trust.

The STMs try to build trust by being available to their team members, discussing even difficult matters in an open and honest, yet respectful, manner, and creating a feeling that



they believe in their team members even if their performance is not on an optimal level. Also, many STMs mentioned that sharing their own personal life, ups and downs in their work and being honest about their way of working was important. In addition, creating clear expectations for the team member and vice versa, and sticking to those expectations was essential in creating trust in the team.

#### **4.10 STM thoughts about the hybrid model**

The question of how work will look like in the future, after the forced remote work period has ended and we move towards the new normal, was also commented during the interviews.

The STMs hope that the company invests in making the coming hybrid model a reality. In addition, well-functioning technology, and proper training on how to use it was seen very important. This also included the wish to have training on how to hold a meeting or training in a hybrid form so that both the participants present and remote feel included, and the session is effective for both parties.

According to the interviewees, the STM role and expectation towards STMs needs clarification. The interviewees felt that the current situation and the coming hybrid model demands more from team leading as leading remote team members requires more time and effort to keep up to date on their team members situation. This, in general, reflected the mixed feelings some STMs brought up about their dual role: how much time should be spent on the STM responsibilities and how much on their AM role, especially in the future when part of the team works remotely and part on-site. In addition, there can be situations when the STM needs to spend time at the office due to new team members or if a team member is not performing at the target level. This created a feeling amongst some of the STMs that these kinds of expectations lead to a situation where they cannot in practice work in the hybrid model as flexibly as others.

The STMs believed the company culture that people were used to before the pandemic will not return. This was accepted, but at the same time the STMs wonder how the culture will look like in the future and especially how remote workers will be incorporated into the culture when some work from the office and others from somewhere else. There was some division here on how the STMs perceived this. Some believed that those who do not work at the office choose to not be included in the culture as much as those who do. In addition, the same STMs thought that these employees cannot expect to be included in building the company culture as much as the on-site workers. Therefore, they do not need

to be taken into consideration as much as those working on-site when questions about culture and inclusion are discussed.

This division was also reflected on the STMs' thoughts on how much they would like to be present at the office during the hybrid model as some felt they want return almost completely and others were opting more for a hybrid model. Depending on the STM's approach, their wish for how much their team members should be present at the office varied: those who want to work at the office hoped that their team members do the same.

These answers indicate that there is no shared understanding of the hybrid model and how it will be transferred into everyday life. It will be important to create common ground on this to ensure that all employees are treated equally and that no one feels that they are left out of the group or they cannot affect the organisation's culture because they are working remotely.

## **5 Summary and recommendations**

In this chapter, the most important themes that the analysis of the documentation, STM interviews and previous literature highlighted are summarised theme by theme. Also, recommendations are given on how the organisation can offer more support for STMs to lead their teams and individual team members better in the future as the pandemic subsides and the hybrid model of work becomes the new norm. Due to the case study form of this research, these recommendations have not been put into action and therefore they act as a foundation for the company to build an action plan and focus on the topics that are seen as the most interesting and important to reach such working methods that support STMs in their work.

The documentation highlighted that the organisation has quite a lot of policies and guidelines for managers to use in their work and to turn to if they face challenges in their work or with team members. However, as the interviews revealed, these policies and guidelines don't always transfer into the managers' actual work.

Based on the interviews and previous research, building trust and as well as timely and clear communication are the most important aspects that need to work well in the coming hybrid model, and they are entangled in everything. If the organisation lacks in these aspects, it will not perform at its best or be able to create a culture that boosts performance and enables the formation of a well-being organisation.

Overall, the issues that STMs faced or how they felt about being a manager and a leader during remote work did not differ significantly between individuals. This was true also when the seniority level of STMs is examined: senior and more junior STMs faced the same downsides and upsides. The more seniors have their set ways that they tried to adjust to function in remote work situations. The more juniors were able to create their ways of working in remote circumstances without having to change their set ways.

### **5.1 Working in the hybrid model**

The results on the data analysis place uncertainty on how much emphasis is truly placed on creating an environment and policies that further the inclusion of remotely working employees into the company culture and how their ideas will be heard in the hybrid model. From the remote work experiences during the pandemic, we know that the job tasks can be efficiently performed remotely, but this will not be enough if the company wants to truly offer its employees the chance to work in a hybrid model or completely remotely and still feel as part of the company culture. As was discussed in chapter 2.2

The documentation states quite clearly what is expected from employees in the hybrid model and how STMs can influence the presence of their team members at the office. However, the guidelines lack expectations on how remotely working employees are engaged in the organisation and its culture. According to the interviews, STMs are not of the same opinion on how the model will be implemented and how much remotely working team members should be included in the creation of the team culture and the company culture in general.

The confusion on how the hybrid model is implemented can result in setting up different expectations on where AMs in different teams should work and how much time they should be at the office. In addition, this can create a situation where expectations towards the STMs about the time spent on creating inclusion between the on-site and the remotely working team members are unclear. Some team leaders can feel that they need invest a lot of time and effort in including their remotely working team members to the team and others don't. This can lead to the emergence of two company cultures.

As was discussed in chapter 2.2, the emergence of a company culture where the on-site employees are more included in the culture – or if there are two coexisting cultures, one for the on-site workers and the other for the remote workers – can affect organisational performance in a negative way. In addition to lower performance levels, the existence of two cultures can lead to less engaged employees and early exits from the company. This can also create inequality in the time management between STMs and between employees working in different teams. As STMs often work as AMs as well, difference in the perceived expectations for the STM role affects the time STM can spend on their AM work and therefore influence the STM's performance, which might lead to feelings of unfairness.

Therefore, clear guidelines need to be agreed with the STMs on how much emphasis is placed on the inclusion of the remotely working team members. Whilst the general guidelines should be common to the whole organisation, specifications could be made on the branch level. Including the STMs on the decisions will provide them with a say in how they should conduct their work and can have a positive influence on the sense of control over their workload. In addition, STMs should be instructed to have an open discussion about this with their individual team members and the entire team. These discussions should be conducted regularly as this can be a way to create open and trustworthy relationships with their team members.

Many STMs felt that the STM role takes more time when you are working remotely or in the hybrid model, and it demands different skills than purely on-site leadership. Therefore,

the organisation should examine both how the hybrid model affects the STM role and the expectations the hybrid model places on it. Based on this study, a decision should be made on if the role should be rethought or, for example, if the percentage of the role should be increased to ensure high quality leadership and good employee-manager relations. In addition, as the organisation places a significant number of resources and time into leadership and management trainings, hybrid leadership and management should be incorporated into these trainings.

Based on previous research, it can be argued that one of the elements in creating trust and thus better manager–employee relationships has to do with the leader’s knowhow on how to use the provided technology. The interviews indicated that the STMs are not totally comfortable with using technology when it comes to leading hybrid meetings or trainings. They also felt that they lack in knowhow on how to hold effective meetings and trainings.

Therefore, the technical skill level of the STMs needs to be studied, for example via a survey. Based on the results, trainings and clear instructions on how to hold effective and inspiring hybrid meetings could be offered to STMs to ensure they are knowledgeable and confident in presenting in the hybrid model and know how to include both participants on-site and in remote work.

## **5.2 Support for the managerial and leadership role**

The organisation places quite heavy expectations towards managers to handle complex and difficult situations themselves. As managers often start in their first managerial position as STMs, these responsibilities and discussions can feel overwhelming which was brought up in the interviews. The STMs felt that although they have a good relationship with their direct manager, their manager does not have the time to devote to the issues the STMs face. Also, support from other company sources, such as the HR team, was perceived as limited mostly due to quite high turnover and limited resources in this team. These feelings have influenced the STMs behaviour, and they described themselves to be quite hesitant in asking for help. In addition, some interviewees brought up the wish to develop as leaders and hoped for support in this area, which is lacking today.

The STMs emphasized the need for timeliness and continuity in the support they receive. Continuity relates also to the knowledgeability of the person who acts as the sparring partner for the team and individual team members. The STMs felt that having to continuously explain the situation is time consuming and does not encourage them to ask for help. As remote and hybrid work can make it more difficult to keep track of how team

members are feeling and make it harder to address these issues, the company needs to ensure it provides enough support to the STMs. The company has offered the STMs trainings and shorter sessions where these issues have been discussed. However, these were not considered very useful since they lacked a connection to the practical work or were not topical at that moment.

The company has already placed emphasis on creating a bigger HR team and one People and Performance Partner has been tasked to concentrate on leadership questions. This work should be continued, and the organisation should evaluate if the present level in leadership support is enough. Based on the requirements the organisation places on managers and the importance of creating trust and open communication for efficient leadership, it can be argued that the present level is still not adequate since without a support network, the STMs might lack the needed skills to create such relations with their team members. This can also lead to difficult subjects not being addressed as efficiently and as early on as desired. The organisation should consider providing its HR team with more leadership knowhow. Pairing up STMs with each other or other managers as “manager buddies could be beneficial and offer an additional level of support which would be easily accessible. For those managers that wish to deepen their leadership skills and knowhow, a mentoring programme would be a cost effective but a meaningful addition for their development.

### **5.3 Communication**

STMs felt that communication is more difficult in remote circumstances than when employees are on-site. For example, communication took more time, STM could not be entirely sure how the team member has understood the message, and the overall amount of communication had diminished. STMs also felt that visibility to a team members’ work and the opportunities to give feedback had reduced in remote work.

The company documentation places clear expectations for communication in remote work. However, STMs lack concrete steps to create efficient and open communication in remote or hybrid situations. As the company had succeeded in creating a communication and feedback culture that was open and quite straightforward before the transition to remote work took place, it seems that it has not fully appreciated the difference between on-site and remote communication and the struggle remote communication places on managers.

Clear and open communication is one the key elements that define an e-leader’s success, as was discussed in chapter 2.3, and thus it affects the whole organisation and

performance levels and employee well-being. The whole organisation as well as the STMs could benefit from clear guidelines on which communication tools are in use and for which purpose they are used. This would create clarity and set the right expectations on where communication takes place, and also simplify where the communicated information is found.

Based on the interviews, it can be stated that the organisation would benefit from setting common expectations for virtual communication and encourage both managers and employees to communicate more openly and lower the barrier for formal communication, meaning, for example, how and when feedback is given. Some STMs said that they feel uncomfortable in giving feedback via Microsoft Teams or SMS since it does not feel personal enough. With shared expectations about the ways how communication and giving feedback takes place, such obstacles can be overcome.

Creating ways to communicate as openly and effortlessly as possible is also integral to creating trust and performance in an organisation as was observed in chapter 2.5. This demands continuous discussion inside the organisation and between team members and STMs to reinforce the development of such a culture. In addition, informal communication plays an important part in creating an open communication culture, and the organisation should place emphasis on creating ways for STMs to encourage their teams to communicate informally as well. Here too, the organisation would benefit from setting clear expectations for STMs on communication.

In the interviews, the STMs explained that creating trust in remote work takes more time due to the lack of informal communication and day-to-day chitchat. However, when trust had been achieved, it was as easy to maintain or break it as in on-site situations. However – as meeting face-to-face will be less common in the future – to achieve trust, it is very important to create space and time for virtual informal communication as well as to also make sure that there are occasional face-to-face events and meetings. Face-to-face meetings will take place according to the company's hybrid policy; whilst this is a good way to create togetherness and trust, it is not enough on its own.

Creating such norms becomes especially important as the organisation starts to work in the hybrid model and some team members might spend most of their time working from home and others at the office. It is important to ensure that the STMs have functional ways of giving feedback to those team members not working on-site but also that the team members know how to communicate towards STMs to bring up possible issues as well as successes. If there is not clarity amongst the STMs on how this should be done, it can lead to the remote workers receiving less positive feedback and recognition. If remote

workers are somewhat side-lined in the organisation, it can affect both the possibilities offered to the remote workers and their motivation.

#### **5.4 Performance management and knowledge sharing**

STMs consider performance management that relies solely on facts and numbers to be as easy in remote work as before. Assessing the softer side of performance, meaning the company values, was however considered more difficult. The aspects the interviewees consider to be affected the most are 1) gaining understanding of what is driving performance and changes in it, as well as 2) knowledge sharing. Both issues relate to effective communication and trusting relationships, as was brought up in the literature review. Although the organisation and the STMs reacted to the move to remote work quickly by adding more 1:1s and by changing the team meeting agenda, more can be done, especially on what comes to knowledge sharing.

Living the company culture is considered a part of every employee's performance evaluation and it is evaluated in the yearly performance reviews. Today, the STMs do not have the means or knowhow to track how their team members perform in this area when working remotely. Also, the STMs felt somewhat powerless in how to gain information and understanding of what is behind the team member's numerical performance level.

Both development areas stem from the fact that the everyday observation of the team member's actions and behaviour is completely missing in remote work and the team leaders are reliant on what the team member tells them. Many STMs have communicated this to their team and have thus brought up the wish for open communication. Also, since the company culture is visible at the office and is portrayed, for example, in the way colleagues take each other into consideration in the everyday life, which is quite challenging to evaluate in remote work. Therefore, the organisation should create new ways to evaluate the soft side of performance. This can be done by asking the team member's closest colleagues for feedback and putting emphasis on this. As giving feedback is an important part of the company culture, this should not be an issue.

Knowledge sharing is the other aspect that has suffered from remote work. Knowledge sharing is a part of performance management in this study since they were strongly linked together in the interview answers. STMs believe that remote work has created barriers between their team members and AMs in general. This has made it more difficult for AMs to ask for help and to understand who could help them with which issue: should they turn to their TM, other AMs or someone else in the organisation. This challenge is related especially to the more senior AMs who often work with more complicated cases.



Traditionally, the organisation has not placed much emphasis on knowledge sharing, and it has taken place mainly at the office in informal situations when someone asked for advice.

It would be beneficial for the organisation to create more formal ways for knowledge sharing in team meetings or trainings. However, these actions can limit knowledge sharing only to one team or one office and the knowhow from other parts of the organisation is not available or shared. The problems and tasks the AM work entails differs according to the AMs experience and seniority level. To share knowledge between AMs of different seniorities, the organisation could initiate networks between different seniority groups. This would, with time, create more relationships inside the organisation and lower the bar to seeking advice from outside of your team or office. Another way to lower the barrier to seek information inside the company would be to create a competence bank that would contain what kind of knowhow different AMs have and what they see to be their strengths.

A very concrete way to ease formal knowledge sharing is creating clarity in documentation. The organisation has a specific place to store agreements and other important documents relating to clients. A simple way to increase transparency and information gathering would be to name the documents in a unified way. This would help an AM working on an offer to find best practise and lessen the need to reinvent the wheel every time a similar offer needs to be created.

The AM role is very independent and competitive by its nature, and knowledge sharing has not traditionally been a focus in the company. Therefore such “*reforms*” might meet resistance in the company and would not be straightforward to implement. However, as STMs see knowledge sharing as an issue, this could be a suitable time to try something new and a start to the creation of a knowledge sharing culture in the company.

All these issues and their solutions are linked to open communication, which is unlikely to happen without trusting relationships. As trust is formed in continuous and constant communication, including places for informal communication as was discussed earlier, the company should place emphasis on allowing time for formal and informal communication and trust building. Trust also creates a space for risk taking and failing as well as information sharing, which are both important for ensuring that individuals and the whole organisation perform at their best.

## **5.5 Well-being**

When research literature and the interviews are studied it becomes evident that everything relates to and affects well-being and vice-versa: clear communication, having a

trusting relationship with manager and colleagues, information ergonomics and connectedness to the workplace are among the issues that affect it. An organisation that cares for its employees' well-being has the prerequisites to be efficient and to perform well. In a well-being organisation employees feel safe and appreciated, which reflects the organisational culture.

According to the STMs, well-being management was considered more difficult in remote work. As with performance management, the lack of face time was seen as the most significant factor here. Based on the interviews, many STMs have turned to using fluctuations in performance as cues to changes in well-being. This is sensible, since in the AM work, working hours are not monitored, and thus, changes in these cannot be used as indicators on increased amount of work or stress levels.

The organisation has guidelines on where and when to discuss well-being as well as many policies and benefits that are targeted towards enhancing well-being. They also offer STMs instructions on how to act if they need to steer their team member forward, for example, to use occupational healthcare. In such cases, managers can also turn to the company's People and Performance team for help.

For the successful transition to post-covid times and hybrid model of working, it is vital that the organisation puts emphasis on creating guidelines to follow-up on employee well-being and changes in it. This means continuing to conduct weekly and yearly surveys and forming action points from those. Also 1:1s form an important forum to discussing matters relating to well-being. The managers need to have strong skills to discuss their team member's well-being, recognise changes in it and how to act if there are issues that need to be dealt with. Here, as individual trainings were not considered very useful, it would be important that STMs have access to support and the possibility to exchange ideas with someone more experienced in these questions. This is important as, in the company, quite many who hold a managerial position are quite inexperienced and can feel that intervening in and discussing their team member's well-being is challenging. The possible support for managers in these situations was discussed in chapter 5.2.

Well-being should be taken into consideration when the organisation reflects on how it wishes the company culture to look like in the hybrid model and how it ensures that all employees, including those working remotely, can affect the culture with an equal standing. If creating the new culture does not receive the attention it should, there is a possibility that a divided culture starts to emerge in the company or that the culture is not something that the employees can relate to. This will start to affect the employee well-

being and engagement, which in the long run has an effect on performance, as was discussed in chapter 2.4.

In addition, to ease the work of the STMs and place responsibility on the employee as well, employees need to have a clear understanding of what is expected from them when they feel overwhelmed or need support for dealing with their well-being. This means creating clear expectations on open communication and having courage to bring up issues that affect well-being, which naturally demands that the employee feel they can trust their manager. Also, employees should be well informed on the different services available to them if they feel they need for support in their well-being. The organisation should also encourage employees to use the services with a low threshold.

As the STMs felt that it is easier to understand what is going on with the well-being of such team members that have been in their team already before the pandemic, it can be stated that the organisation has not been that successful in creating ways for managers to create with their new team members relationships that enable open discussion on well-being. Even though the organisation will be working in the hybrid model and at least part of the on-boarding trainings are done on-site, this issue needs to be addressed since employees will be working remotely in the future.

Achieving visibility to a remote team member's well-being requires continuous communication from the organisation towards both the managers and the employees. The expectations for managers and employees should be made clear from very early on, meaning that they need to be included in the employee on-boarding and manager trainings.

## 6 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the thesis and provides an assessment on how the study succeeded in achieving its goals. Topics for further research are briefly discussed and the validity and reliability of the research are evaluated. Finally, I evaluate my own learning during the research process.

The study organisation is a staffing and recruitment company that due to the corona pandemic found itself in a situation where the whole staff started to work remotely overnight. This change was particularly significant to the account manager organisation as they were used to working almost completely on-site at the office or meeting clients at their premises.

This study had three targets. The first was to find out what kind of support was available to STMs from the organisation's side to lead their teams remotely. The second goal was to understand how sales team managers felt that the transformation to remote work affected leadership and what kind of effect this had on performance and well-being management. The main target of this study was to understand how the organisation can better support the STMs in performance and well-being management when a hybrid model of remote and on-site work becomes the new norm.

The research approach that was chosen for this thesis is case study research and the data collection methods were documentation and semi structured interviews. Case study research offers the possibility to deep dive into a contemporary case and research it in its unique context. It also encourages the use of multiple data collection methods. Choosing case study research was a good decision and implementing it in this thesis was successful. Documentation and semi structured interviews offered a good data base for the thesis.

The main findings of the study are that trusting relationship between the manager and employee and timely and clear communication are the most important aspects that need to be working in the coming hybrid model. These are the aspects that form the base for both excellent performance and well-being employees – the goals the organisation has set for its managers. Although the organisation has a multitude of policies and guidelines aimed at helping managers lead the hybrid teams efficiently, these policies are often not translated into practise. Also, the organisation has not succeeded in offering the managers the day-to-day support they feel they need when they face difficult situations with their team members.

The research questions are answered, and recommendations are provided for the target organisation to support its STMs to better lead their team in the new hybrid model of work. Therefore, it can be stated that the research has reached the goals that were set for it.

### **6.1 Suggestions for further research**

This thesis has studied a complex phenomenon with specific demarcations. Naturally, there are more sides to the case that have not been covered in this thesis.

There are other managerial positions in the organisation that require working with remotely working team and team members. Probably they face the same issues that STMs do, but it would be interesting to conduct a similar study on how they have experienced leadership in remote work and what issues or successes they have encountered. This would also create a broader understanding of the state of leadership in the organisation.

Also, one of the aspects that deserves more attention and deeper examination is how the company culture should be reformed in the coming hybrid model. As this research brings up, an inclusive and clear company culture is a key factor in creating a workplace where people can thrive, and this not realized in the company today as it faces the new hybrid model.

Additionally, a fruitful topic to study would be the employee viewpoint on leadership during remote work or hybrid work: how have employees experienced the situation, what do they wish for and where they think that their managers or the organisation has succeeded during remote work when it comes to leadership and management.

### **6.2 Reliability and validity of the study**

In case study research, reliability and validity are assessed similarly than in qualitative research when qualitative methods are used. Reliability refers to how well the research outcomes stand the test of time and can they be replicated. Validity assesses if the study has examined the right subject, meaning the studied subject corresponds to the subject set when the research problem was formed. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 160; Kananen 116).

Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018, 163–165) point out that in the qualitative research tradition, there is not one single guideline to follow when it comes to the reliability and validity of the research since these terms are adopted to qualitative research from quantitative research. Therefore, in this research, for example, the possibility to replicate or generalize findings is limited since the study target was a unique case.

However, Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018, 163–165) list nine topics that need to be discussed in a qualitative research report that need to form a coherent entity for the research to be classified as filling the prerequisites of reliability and validity: research topic and why this is studied; why this subject is important; how data has been collected; who has provided data for the research and the relationship between the "informants" and the researcher; the timetable; analysis of the data; reliability and validity; and report of the research. All these have been explored in this thesis and the choices that have been made are justified. Also, when the research approach, method and data collection are discussed, other possible choices were examined and excluded.

### **6.3 Reflection of own learning**

The thesis journey has been filled with ups and downs, many study hours during evenings and weekends as well as doubts about the chosen topic, methods, and research approach. However, the thesis journey has been full of possibilities for learning. The topic, the research method and the data collection method were new to me before embarking upon this journey.

Remote work, remote leadership and the other topics discussed in the framework section of this study have been extensively studied by researchers, and forming the framework taught me a lot and deepened my understanding of the topics. This thesis also introduced me to case study research method more deeply, which I see as an asset for my work life as well since the learnings can be transferred into my work and coming projects.

The most interesting and rewarding part of this thesis project was planning, conducting, and analysing the interviews. They offered a deep dive into the research question and form a significant part of the research. Using semi structured interviews as the main data collection method made me realize the potential they have for understanding issues in an organisation and using the information gathered through interviews as the base for solving these issues.

The thesis has also given me a chance to examine my workplace from a different perspective, which has both deepened my understanding of the organisation and how leadership is perceived there. Also, the conducted interviews offered a unique view on the day-to-day life of STMs. All in all, I think that this topic and the decision to study my own workplace was fruitful. Hopefully, as I provide the organisation with the conclusions of this study and the recommendations based on the conclusions, they are deemed useful, and the organisation acts on the key pain points brought up in this study.

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## Attachments

Appendix 1. Email template send out to STMs

Hi,

I am doing my MBA studies, and now I am doing my thesis. I got the idea from Jesse that I could study what kind of support our STMs feel they need to lead their remote or hybrid teams.

I would like to interview all our STMs about this and I wanted to ask you if you could participate in an interview in early June? 😊 This would take maximum one hour and you would not have to prepare for it in any way, as I am interested in the opinions and wishes of STMs. Of course, all answers would also be anonymized in the study.

This would be a really big help to me, and it would be great if you could find the time in your calendar for this! If this suits you, I will look at our calendars and find a suitable time.

If you have any questions, let me know!

Best,

Anni

## Appendix 2. interview template

### Introduction

STM's background information (working and manager history, STM percentage, how their team is formed)

### Theme 1: Remote leadership 15 min

#### Support questions:

1. Have you been working remotely or from the office?
2. How about your team?
3. Have you met during corona? How often?
4. Has this affected leading your team (if some have been in the office and other not)
5. Has remote leadership differed from on-site/face-to-face leadership?
  - a. Has something been more challenging?
  - b. Or easier?
6. Does your STM time management differ in remote work?
7. Has the case company placed clear expectations towards managers in remote work?
8. Has the organisation offered support for remote leadership? What kind?
9. Have you gotten enough support?
10. Do you feel the need for more support? If so, for what kind?
11. What do you see is the most important in remote leadership
  - a. From your side
  - b. From the employees side (what do you expect/hope from your team members)

### Theme 2: The future hybrid model

1. What thoughts does this model evoke?
2. How do you think team members use this opportunity?
3. What will you do?
4. Do you feel that the current level of support is sufficient to lead your team in the hybrid model?
5. What kind of support would you wish for?

### Theme 3: Technologies

1. Which softwares do you use in remote leadership? (Teams, Skype, others?)
2. Do they work and do you know how to use them efficiently?
  - a. Do you feel that the team can use them efficiently? Can you help your team member if they can't?
  - b. Have any hopes for any technology or support

#### Theme 4: Performance management

1. How has your team performed during remote work?
2. How have you been able to support them remotely?
3. Has this changed now in remote work compared to before?
4. Has it been possible to share knowledge remotely?
5. How has remote management of performance been supported by the organization?
6. What kind of support would you like?

#### Theme 5: Well-being management

1. Is the remote management of well-being different from the management of well-being on-site?
2. How can you make sure your employee is doing well in remote work?
3. What about whether they are motivated or not?
4. What support or means have you received from the organization?

#### Theme 6: Culture

1. Has remote work affected the culture and its appearance in the organisation?  
What about the team?
2. How do you feel that remote management has influenced cultural management?
3. Have you received support from the organization here?
4. What kind of support would you wish for?

Any other topics that come to mind?