



## **Meaningfulness at work – future success factor?**

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## Abstract

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<p>This thesis was part of a group study conducted with qualitative research methods. The topic for the study was received as an assignment through Haaga-Helia related to a diversity and inclusion project that is underway in one company that operates in international trade sector. The aim of the study was to gather information among the employees of the commissioning company related to the perceptions and experiences that their employees have on diversity and inclusion in their workplace at the moment. Diversity and inclusion are also related to the thesis topic linked to organizational transformation and to the idea that people increasingly desire to find their work meaningful, and that meaningfulness might be one of the future success factors also for organizations. The central questions for this thesis are what meaningfulness at work is, how does the topics of motivation, diversity and inclusion relate to employees feeling of meaningfulness and why should organizations take the feeling of meaningfulness into account in their operations.</p> <p>Based on theory and the study group results the most central issues for meaningfulness at work are the feeling of appreciation, internal motivation, the work community, social relations, feedback, self-development, communications, the possibilities to influence and that the person is noticed and heard. It is important that employees have time for reflection and that their jobs and tasks are linked to broader purpose and a wider societal benefit. As a basis for this all, is environment of psychological safety, which is strongly influenced by a culture of inclusion and diversity. Inclusion can be seen as the foundation that connects employees to the organization and enables collaboration, flexibility, and fairness, whereas diversity is a positive force that enriches the work community and the whole organization and also strengthens and makes teams more effective and successful. Important aspects for meaningfulness at work were linked to each other strongly through theory and seemed to be connected and explained through fundamental psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which were linked also to the need for benevolence. There is also research showing a clear connection between the basic needs, internal motivation, and meaningfulness.</p> <p>Meaningful work can be highly motivational, leading to improved performance, commitment, and satisfaction and it has seen to give rise also to several benefits for both individual level well-being as well as organizational level success. Also, the psychological fundamental needs and the need for benevolence as well as the experience of meaningfulness at work have been linked through research to four different individual and organizational level benefits: job satisfaction, commitment to work, work efficiency and voluntary actions at the workplace. A person that has found a meaningful job is generally healthier and more prosperous as well as more satisfied with his/her job and life overall. This shows as a greater commitment to work and as increased work efficiency.</p>
<b>Keywords</b> Meaningfulness, internal motivation, appreciation, work community, inclusion, diversity

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# 1 Introduction

Chapter one introduces the key information related to this thesis. Key information includes the aim, introduction to a group study that was essentially linked to this thesis, key concepts and delimitations, research questions and a short introduction to used literature and methodologies.

## 1.1 The aim of the group study and the thesis

This thesis was part of a group study conducted with qualitative research methods. The topic for the study was received as an assignment through Haaga-Helia related to a diversity and inclusion project that is underway in one company that operates in international trade sector. This company, referred in this thesis as commissioning company, wanted to stay anonymous, so no revealing details are shared. In addition to myself the group study included three other master students from Haaga-Helia: Niina Heinonen, Julia Saunamäki and Reeta Ylä-Jussila. From the commissioning company we had a dedicated contact person. All the students in the group study wrote their own thesis, but the data gathering and the agreed documentation for the commissioning company was done together. Due to common data gathering and documentation phases, chapters 3, 4 and 5 might have similarities between the above-mentioned students.

The aim of the study was to gather information among the employees of the commissioning company on the current state of diversity and inclusion. In this thesis current state refers to the perceptions and experiences that the employees have on diversity and inclusion in their workplace at the moment. The topic of the study is very topical at the commissioning company as the development work related to diversity and inclusion had just begun. The commissioning company wished to have recommendations to support their follow-up work and more information on how their employees understand the concepts of diversity and inclusion, what are the strengths and key assets and, on the other hand, the obstacles and the main factors that are hindering the experience. How should inclusion and diversity be visible in the everyday working life of the employees?

The topic of the thesis relates to the topic of the group study, my work as consultant, and to my studies, that focused on strategy and leadership. Through them all I have noticed that organizations are under a big transformation. This transformation influences especially the leadership but all other employees as well. There is a lot of talk about values and value leadership and the experience of meaningfulness has also been in the forefront for some time. Also, the word success is starting to have a different meaning than it used to have in people's thoughts and discussions. In addition, the value of personal differences and personal values are more and more highlighted. According to organizational psychologist Sahimaa (2.1.2019) people increasingly desire to find their work meaningful and that meaningfulness is one of the future success factors. Also, futurist

Pölönen (2021) has already several years talked about how human revolution will be the next big thing after technology revolution. Interesting questions are what meaningfulness at work is, why especially now the topic of meaningfulness seems to be so important to many and why also organizations should realize the importance of the topic. These are also the central questions for my thesis.

## 1.2 Research questions and delimitations

There are two main research questions and two sub-questions in this thesis, which are linked to relevant chapters in the overlay matrix. The research questions are the following:

Q1: What is meaningfulness at work?

Q1.1: How does the experience of meaningfulness relate to the motivation of the employees?

Q1.2: How does the perceptions and experiences on diversity and inclusion at the workplace relate to the employees' feeling of meaningfulness?

Q2: Why should organizations take the feeling of meaningfulness into account in their operations?

Table 1. Overlay matrix

Research questions	Theoretical framework (chapter)	Research results (chapter)
What is meaningfulness at work?	2.2, 2.2.1, 2.2.2, 2.2.3, 2.3, 2.3.1, 2.3.2, 2.3.3	4.1, 4.2, 4.2.1, 4.2.2, 4.3, 4.3.1, 4.3.2
How does motivation of the employees relate to the experience of meaningfulness at work?	2.2, 2.2.1, 2.2.2, 2.2.3, 2.3.1, 2.3.2, 2.3.3	4.1, 4.2.1, 4.2.2, 4.3, 4.3.2
How does the perceptions and experiences on diversity and inclusion relate to the employees feeling of meaningfulness at work?	2.2.1, 2.2.2, 2.3.1, 2.3.2	4.1, 4.2, 4.2.1, 4.2.2, 4.3, 4.3.1, 4.3.2
Why should organizations take the feeling of meaningfulness into account in their operations?	2.2.3, 2.3, 2.3.1, 2.3.2, 2.3.3	4.1, 4.2.1, 4.2.2, 4.3, 4.3.1, 4.3.2

Delimitations for the thesis topic were done as the thesis and the study proceeded. The themes and answers from the interviews helped me to focus on the relevant topics. Although meaningfulness seems to be an important topic for empathetical, inclusive and responsible leader, leadership as such is not addressed in this thesis as the topic of leadership is so wide. This thesis is delimited to address the feeling of meaningfulness only from the perspective of an individual, although in work context, because organizations can affect in the circumstances but the feeling of meaningfulness and how it is formed is a personal and deeply influenced by the experiences and perceptions of an individual. There are references to personal values and feelings, but only so far as they complement the issue of meaningfulness at work. Leadership and organizations are mentioned from the viewpoint that if there are some issues that are especially important to be noticed related to the employees' feeling of meaningfulness and how it can be supported. Meaningfulness at work is also closely related to mental health and well-being at work but this thesis does not cover welfare issues as such, although there are parts that point out the positive connection between the feeling of meaningfulness and the employee well-being. Theory also pointed out that meaningfulness might have relevancy to the resilience of the employees, and although the topic is quite relevant at the moment, the topic was left out as it was not mentioned in the group study interviews.

### **1.3 Literature, methodologies, and key concepts**

The theoretical framework for the thesis includes widely different scientific articles and scholarly journals. Especially HH Finna, Researchgate.net, Google Scholar and Harvard Business Review were used as a source for this thesis. Some suitable blogs were also used as a source of reference. As the thesis is written in English, many of the sources are international.

As a theory base used for the research approach of this thesis was a six-module collection of essential topics in qualitative research, presented by Dr. Curry, a senior research scientist in the Yale School of Medicine. These videos published by Yale School of Medicine are well listed by the Global Health Network (The Global Health Network 2016). In addition, also the article of Dubois and Gadde (2002, 559) about the systematic combining was used as a reference for explaining the abductive nature of the research. For data collection methods and especially for planning and conducting the interviews one source was also an article called Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews by W.C. Adams (2015) from George Washington University.

Key concepts for the thesis are meaningfulness, motivation, inclusion, and diversity. From all of these, there were several possible sources and as the concepts are quite wide and can be observed from different viewpoints, it was crucial to delimit and focus carefully only on the studied topic. The delimitations were presented in the chapter 1.2.

Below are explanations to the four key concepts in alphabetical order for the reader to have a better understanding for the concept itself but also for the way these concepts are understood and referred to in this thesis.

The concept of **diversity** is about respecting and accepting the differences between individuals that might be visible both in ways of being but also in ways of knowing. These differences can include widely different demographic and philosophical differences like race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical abilities, different religious or political beliefs or other ideologies. Psychological safety is the foundation for an environment that is positive, nurturing, and respectful. In this thesis, diversity is seen especially from the viewpoint that different people from different backgrounds are the main asset for organizations and building on this strength builds also future organizational success.

“It is extremely important to support and protect diversity because by valuing individuals and groups free from prejudice and by fostering a climate where equity and mutual respect are intrinsic, we will create a success-oriented, cooperative, and caring community that draws intellectual strength and produces innovative solutions from the synergy of its people.” (Queensborough community college n.d.)

**Inclusion** is about being valued, respected, and supported. In an inclusive working environment, it is ensured that the needs of an individual are considered and that there are right conditions for each person to achieve his/her full potential. In this thesis, inclusion is seen as the foundation for the feeling of meaningfulness to thrive and flourish.

“Inclusion should be reflected in an organization’s culture, practices and relationships that are in place to support a diverse workforce. Inclusion is the process of creating a working culture and environment that recognizes, appreciates, and effectively utilizes the talents, skills, and perspectives of every employee; connects each employee to the organization and encourages collaboration, flexibility, and fairness.” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development n.d.).

The English word meaningful also translates to significance and having a meaning or a purpose. The word significance may be used to express the feeling of being valued and appreciated, being significant. (Merriam Webster dictionary n.d.) Other explanation comes from the study of Bailey and Madden (2016, 2) where **meaningfulness** is seen as something that is personal, and individual compared to other work-related words like engagement or commitment that are related more purely on events or situations within the work environment. Meaningfulness seems often to be related to wider contribution to society in different ways that matter to the individual or " when an individual perceives an authentic connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self". In this thesis, meaningfulness is processed as an individual feeling, but from a work perspective, seen as the central future success factor for both individuals and organizations.



**Motivation** is something that has been researched a lot. There have been different kinds of theories, but what is common for all is that motivation is seen as the force or, as the energy that drives us forward. There are theories that concentrate on the amount of motivation and there are theories that highlight that the type of motivation might be more important than the amount of it, but everybody still agrees that everyone has it. (Deci May 2018.) Motivation is typically linked to psychological basic needs, that are covered more deeply in chapter 2.2. and its subchapters. This thesis is mainly based on the self-determination theory by Ryan and Deci (2000, 227), who highlight in their theory that the type of motivation is what counts.

## 2 Meaningfulness at work

Chapter two sheds light on how meaningfulness at work is described through theory and what kind of different topics are highlighted in relation with it. First, some consideration is given on the background behind the increasing discussion and interest toward the topic of meaningfulness at work, after which, the topic is covered both from individual and organizational perspectives. In the end, a theory framework is presented to summarize the theories and viewpoints addressed in this chapter.

### 2.1 Nature of work is changing – individuals are seeking meaning in uncertain times

The effect of Covid-19 is indisputable. Covid-19 has made diversity and different lifestyles visible for us. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of social sustainability, mutual trust, empathy and caring for others. (Dufva, Hellström, Hietaniemi, Hämäläinen, Ikäheimo, Lähdemäki-Pekkinen, Poussa, Solovjew-Wartiovaara, Vataja & Wäyrynen 2020, 44.) Covid-19 crisis has suddenly changed the daily lives of people and also touched the things that has formerly been taken for granted or normal. The discussion about "the new normal" has challenged us to examine what normal means for us and what is its relationship to diversity and inclusiveness. Who's normal are we talking about? In the best-case scenario Covid-19 crisis might end up giving us new kind of understanding what diversity in people's everyday lives mean and helps us to meet the challenges and needs of the society with more diverse solutions. (Dufva et al. 2020, 38.) According to Sitra (in Dufva et al. 2020, 44), we need trust, social capital, and hope for the future to change things and to embrace the inclusiveness in our society. Social capital is built by respecting and understanding diversity and by increasing and enabling people's possibilities to influence and to participate.

In addition to the inner changes and values of people, one big reason behind the increasing discussion and interest toward the topic of meaningfulness at work could be that the nature of work has changed and is evolving in an increasing speed. It is said that we are already experiencing the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which changes work more information intensive than before. (Sahimaa 2.1.2019.) The history and the speed of change is well explained in the citation below whereas the figure 1 presents how widely the Fourth Industrial Revolution already affects us.

"The First Industrial Revolution used water and steam power to mechanize production. The Second used electric power to create mass production. The Third used electronics and information technology to automate production. Now a Fourth Industrial Revolution is building on the Third, the digital revolution that has been occurring since the middle of the last century. When compared with previous industrial revolutions, the Fourth is evolving at an exponential rather than a linear pace. Moreover, it is disrupting almost every industry in every country. And the breadth and depth of these changes herald the transformation of entire systems of production, management, and governance." (Schwab 14.1.2016.)

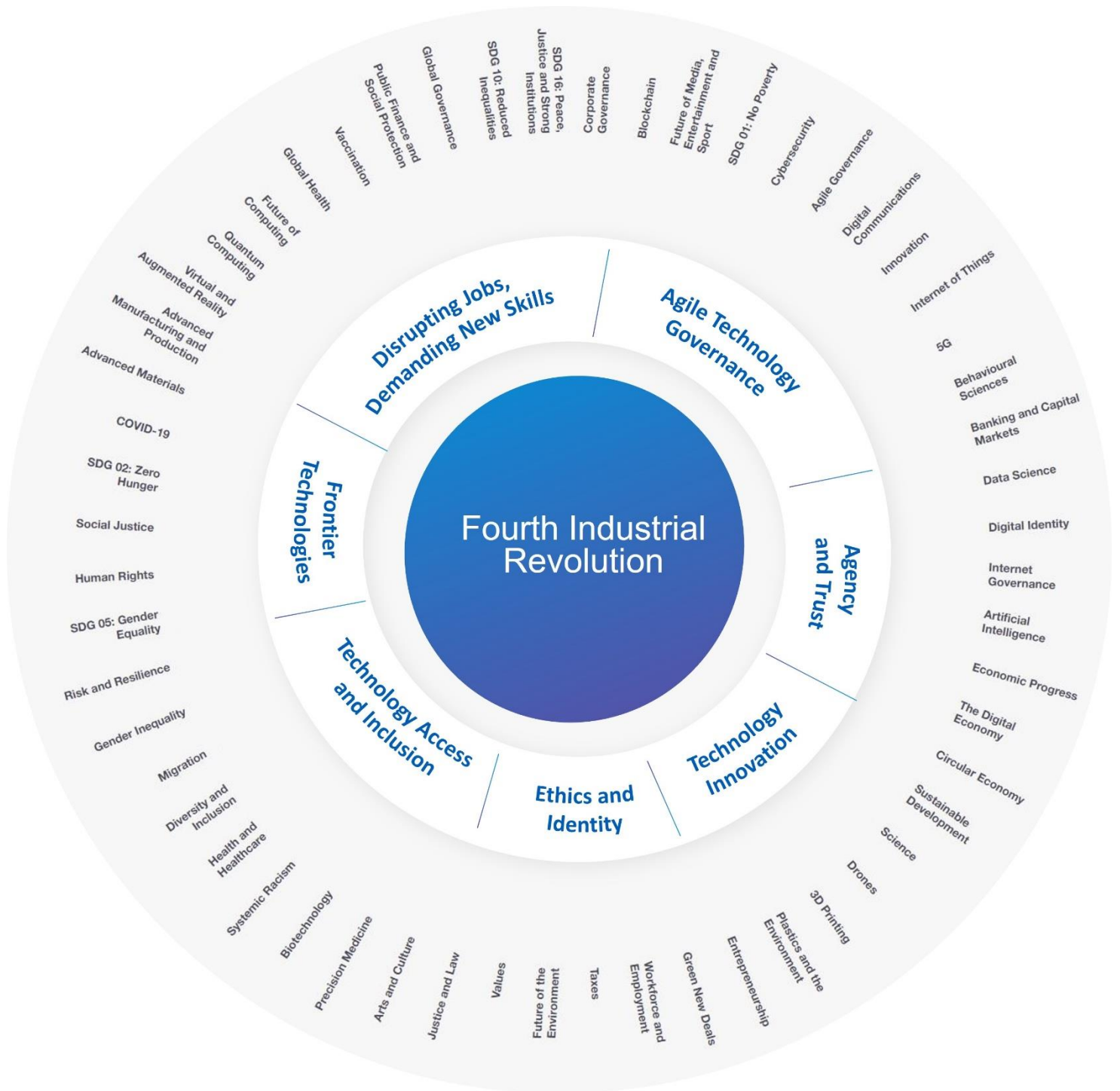


Figure 1. The Fourth Industrial Revolution “merging the physical, digital and biological worlds” (adapted from Schwab 14.1.2016)

As the progress with technology opens new opportunities, it also makes us meet new demands and a lot of changes, especially in our work. It has been noticed that as the speed of change increases, the communication concerning these changes decreases. This sets the individual in a challenging and uncertain position with lot of questions that might hinder the feeling of

meaningfulness at work or even make it to disappear. The challenges for individuals might also escalate to organizational problems, such as increased number of sick leaves and decrease in productivity. (Sahimaa 2.1.2019.) With all these challenges and changes in our current work life it is an interesting and central question what then brings meaning and motivation to work.

## 2.2 Qualities and central theories of meaningful work

Earlier the motivation theory was mainly based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, presented in figure 2, which is a theory invented already in the year 1943 and modified later in 1987 (McLeod 2020). The theory faced a lot of criticism mainly for the lack of empirical evidence, but also for that it wasn't comprehensive enough and there were lots of situations it did not explain. This said, it is still the theory that is usually mentioned when the topic of motivation is addressed. (Martela 2020, audio track 15). The theory is usually presented as a picture of a pyramid with hierarchical levels. The five different levels from down to top are physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem and self-actualization, from which the four first are called deficiency needs and the last one on the top a growth need. When a deficit need is mainly satisfied, a person is able and can concentrate to satisfy the next need in line. The growth need, however, is something that may even become stronger as it is engaged and is the only need that is not coming from a lack of something, but rather from the need to grow as a person. (McLeod 2020.) In the latest motivation research, the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has been replaced by the self-determination theory by Ryan and Deci (2000, 227) included also with other theories giving value to internal motivation (Sahimaa 2.1.2019).

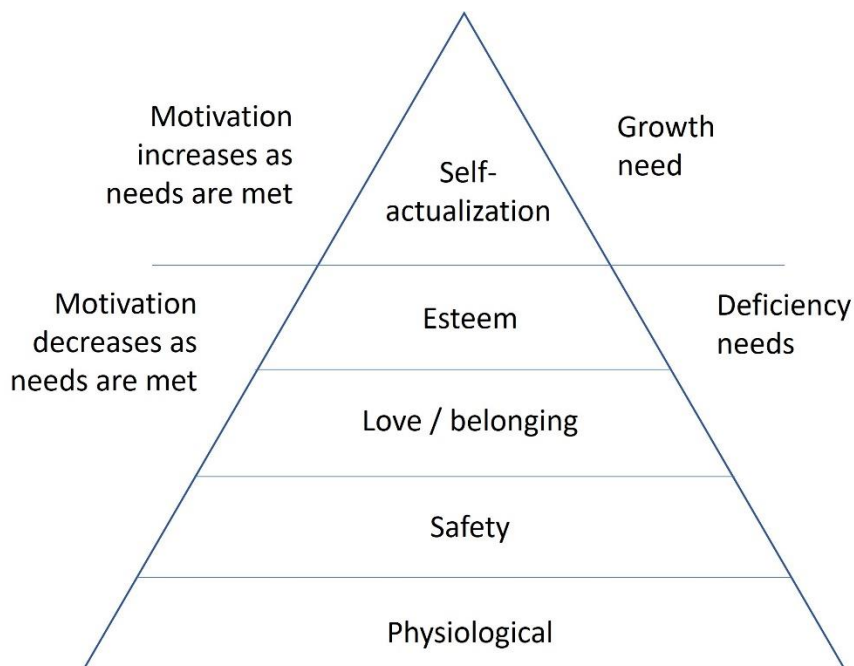


Figure 2. The Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (adapted from McLeod 2020)

Ryan and Deci (2000, 227) state that to understand human motivation, it requires to understand especially the innate psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. In their self-determination theory these needs are seen to specify “innate psychological nutrients that are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being” (Deci & Ryan 2000, 229). On top of these three, based on his own research, Martela (2020, audio track 34) has added doing good as the fourth fundamental need. Martela describes this need also through the term benevolence, which means goodwill towards other people. Also, work psychologist Luukkala (in Kronow 15.2.2022) states that psychological basic needs emphasize individual motivation. As examples of psychological basic needs, he raises the possibility to influence, to use own competencies and to feel cohesion. Also, positive feedback and flow of work are known to boost motivation.

The guiding principle behind the self-determination theory of Ryan and Deci (2000, 229) is the idea, that people are basically active, and they tend to seek naturally toward things that they find interesting, although different environmental aspects might hinder their active nature. In the 1990’s the self-determination theory was still mainly in the knowledge of limited people and groups, but towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century it has gained a wider appreciation. Nowadays the research concerning the theory is not restricted to basic psychology, but it has spread widely. It is used for example in sports, addiction treatment, health care, organizational research and in the field of education. The self-determination theory is also one of the basic theories behind year 2016 primary school curriculum reform in Finland. A good example how the theory is used at schools is physical education, that is nowadays treated more as a welfare subject, where central values are doing together, try one’s best, joy of sports, and to reward for these. Distressing experiences related to physical education are tried to be minimized by avoiding excess competition and that students would not be graded for performance, whereas more experiences of success and of student’s own competences are needed and concentrated on. (Martela 2020, audio track 17).

Self-determination theory and theories that describe meaningfulness at work seem to have overlapping themes. These different theories include for example characters related to competence and utilizing own strengths, contributing to common good and the importance of the social dimension. Also, empirical evidence of the connection between these different theories can be found. (Sahimaa 2017, 19.) These similarities can be noticed also from the results of Bailey and Madden (2016), who performed an interview study of 135 people in 10 very different occupations about situations that felt meaningful or meaningless, meaningfulness was often associated with a sense of pride and achievement for a job well done, whether the persons were professionals working in an office or manual workers working in a factory. It was seen from the answers that if the employees were able to use their potential, or saw work as creative, interesting, and absorbing, the work was perceived as more meaningful than others. Also, it was seen important if their work was noticed

and they had received a praise, recognition, or some kind of acknowledgement from others. However, Bailey and Madden also stated that these alone are not enough to make work meaningful. Their study revealed five additional features for meaningfulness at work. These five features were self-transcendent, poignant, episodic, reflective, and personal. (Bailey & Madden 2016, 3.) These different features and the different features of the self-determination theory are explained in more details in the following chapters.

### **2.2.1 The importance of autonomy and personal experiences**

As said earlier, the self-determination theory of Ryan and Deci (2000, 227) concentrates on the innate psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. According to Ryan and Deci (2000, 231), autonomy can be referred as independence and voluntary, although they highlight that with independence, they do not mean that person needs to be independent of others. Related to this, they sharpen that autonomy and relatedness have proven to have positive affects together for the well-being of an individual (Deci & Ryan 2000, 242). An individual can be completely autonomous and the same time part of a bigger group or a community. Also, employee that works according to organizational goals can feel autonomy if he/she has internalized the values of the organization. This means that the employee has chosen to follow these instructions and what is essential is that these values feel like his/her own. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 29.)

In work context, autonomy means that it is important that people can perform their work from voluntary basis and that they have enough freedom, responsibility, and authority to do their jobs properly. People do not like to be controlled, pressured, and told what to do and it is important to have the possibility to influence and make choices that affect their work. (Sahimaa 2.1.2019). In addition, Martela (2020, audio track 21) highlights that autonomy is also something that relates to individual interests and values and most of all it is a way for people to express themselves. When people have the possibility to act autonomously, they stand behind their decisions with pride, because their actions reflect their identity. An opposite for autonomy is controlled action where decisions are forced and come as given. Martela underlines that as all decisions are more or less made by individuals themselves, it is eventually about how it feels. Does it feel like I want to do it, or does it feel like I must do it?

Bailey and Madden (2016, 6) raised the importance of personal interests and values as well. They stated that work experiences like engagement or job satisfaction are purely work-related experiences, as on the other hand, meaningful work is seen in a wider context of individuals personal life experiences. For example, in their interviews, the "garbage collector described the time when the community's water supply became contaminated, and he was asked to work on distributing water to local residents as a time of great meaningfulness as he could see how he was helping

vulnerable people who lived nearby.” Bailey and Madden emphasized that especially profound feeling of meaningfulness was felt when the experience of helping others was mixed with the sense of job well done, that was also recognized and appreciated by others.

### **2.2.2 Work community and helping others as a source for meaningfulness**

As mentioned earlier, based on his own research, Martela (2020, audio track 34) has added doing good as the fourth fundamental need as a complement to the self-determination theory. Although doing good has not yet been officially approved as the fourth fundamental need as more research and empirical evidence is still needed, the topic has already been acknowledged in the field of psychology. Martela states that we feel well, when we feel that our actions help other people and on the contrary, we feel bad when our actions hinder others. He also highlights interestingly that based on his research, it seems to be more commonly accepted to state that people need the experience of competence and autonomy for their wellbeing than doing good. Martela links this observation in our culture that underlines the importance of independence and self-sufficiency, whereas more “soft values” are easily seen to be ideological and not that important, especially related to work. Saying that doing good is a fundamental need is not according to Martela an ideological statement how people should act. Based on psychological research it seems that people have the need to feel that they are positively influencing the world and that they want to help other people. Based on research, it can also be seen, that doing good for other people increases our wellbeing.

Doing good and helping other people were also brought up many times as a source for meaningfulness at work in the group study interviews, and it is a theme that is visible also in the study of Bailey and Madden (2016, 3), especially in how they describe the term self-transcendent. As self-transcendent, Bailey and Madden mean that individuals tend to experience their work meaningful when it matters also to others than just to themselves. It is important that the work of individuals has an impact or relevance also for other individuals, groups, or the wider environment. Bailey and Madden consider that even the motivation theorist Maslow, whose pyramid was explained in earlier chapter 2.2., would have positioned self-transcendence on the top of his pyramid, it being even more important source of motivation than self-actualization.

The importance of other people is highlighted also in the self-determination theory, where relatedness is referred as “the desire to feel connected to others – to love and care, and to be loved and cared for” (Deci & Ryan 2000, 231). In relatedness, the biggest weight is given on the work community, social relations, and the working culture. This puts emphasis on the overall working atmosphere and that people can commit and are able to participate in common actions, which strengthens the mutual sense of belonging. (Sahimaa 2.1.2019.) Martela (2020) states that we have a

natural attempt to promote our own objectives and interests, but as natural as this, is also our need to be connected with other people. We need to feel that somebody cares and appreciates us as who we are. It is important that we have the opportunity to be our own individuals, but we also need to have social relations with other people to whom we feel connected to and feel like we are part of a community. (Martela 2020, audio track 29.) There should be possibility for every employee to feel accepted as who they are. It is important for the well-being of an individual to have the experience that they are important part of the work community as a whole, with their faults and strengths. Good work community knows how to build on the strengths of its employees and also supports each other to use those strengths. As a prerequisite for this, is that the employees know each other quite well. If employees do not know each other's strengths, it is difficult to utilize them. It is also important to take care of good team spirit and to support the positive energy inside the team. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 46.)

A good working atmosphere where employees feel that they are cared for, is also a key element for internal motivation. Especially important it is in moments that are challenging or heavy. When facing disappointments, exhaustion or tiredness, the support of colleagues has crucial importance. If this element is missing the risks for burnout or other negative symptoms is much greater. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 30-31.) According to Bailey and Madden (2016, 4) doing good for other people is not always linked with positive feelings. Their term poignant refers to the fact that although usually meaningfulness is linked with positive feelings and attributes, it might contrary be that meaningfulness is not always a positive experience. Bailey and Madden suggest that the focus on positive psychology might lead us on "trying to make employees happy, engaged and enthused throughout the working day although people found their work to be full of meaning at moments associated with mixed, uncomfortable or even painful thoughts and feelings, not just a sense of unalloyed joy and happiness." There were for example nurses that found it meaningful that they could help the patients in the last moments of their lives or people that had coped with challenging conditions and complex problems. Coping with these challenges and situations led to a sense of meaningfulness more than dealing with normal everyday situations.

Same topics were brought up by Kukkonen (12.1.2022), who indicated that according to research conducted by The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, people working in social and education sectors found their work most meaningful and rewarding, although heavy. According to the research over 70 percent of the employees in the social sector felt that they are doing a meaningful job. This does not mean that if the situation would be too heavy, they would not consider changing their jobs. On the contrary, if the workload is heavy and the feeling of appreciation is missing, the situation is bad. Also, the group study interviews conducted for this thesis, underlined the importance of being valued and appreciated and that it seems to be linked also to the feeling of



meaningfulness, job satisfaction and motivation. It was said many times in the interviews that the work might be heavy but good colleagues, work community and the feeling of appreciation and meaning makes the work worth the while.

### **2.2.3 Reflection and feedback affect the feeling of competence**

Bailey and Madden (2016, 4-5) showed also that the sense of meaningfulness is not an enduring state of mind that individuals experience towards their work, instead it arose more in an episodic way. The interviewees in the study talked about unplanned, unexpected, or surprising moments during, which they found their work deeply meaningful. It seemed that nobody could find work constantly meaningful, there seemed to be peak moments, when the feeling was strong. These peak moments were so profound and highly memorable that they became part of the stories these people talked about themselves.

Related to the episodic sense of meaningfulness, the feeling was rarely experienced straight when something happened, but rather on reflection when people saw their work done and were able to make connections between their achievements and a wider sense of life meaning. For example, one interviewee in Bailey and Madden (2016, 5) was a garbage collector who, after he had finished cleaning a street and stopped to look back, said he felt how his work had contributed to the cleanliness of the environment and that moment he felt his work meaningful. "The experience of meaningfulness is therefore often a thoughtful, retrospective act rather than just a spontaneous emotional response in the moment, although people may be aware of a rush of good feelings at the time." Bailey and Madden reflected that it is more common that people notice the meaningfulness of their job afterwards than during their working day, which highlights the importance of having the time to reflect, as reflection also affects the feeling of own competence.

The episodic sense of meaningfulness was noticed also during the group study interviews, as it felt that people that were interviewed maybe had not thought about what they considered to be meaningful and important to them in their work. This underlines that busy working days and hurrying from one place to another seems to be the worst enemy of meaningful work as there is no time for reflection. There should be enough time occasionally to stop and reflect. This would help people to realize that they accomplish and get things done all the time, although they might not realize it. The group study interviews also showed that when asking what would bring more meaningfulness in the work of the employees of the commissioning company, the answers were mostly related on having time to learn, time to discuss with others, time to do work better and to have more flexibility and freedom.

Related to learning and having time to do work better, the self-determination theory also addresses the theme of competence in relation to the innate feeling that we want to get things done. Ryan and Deci (2000, 231) consider “competence or effectance to be one of the three fundamental psychological needs that can energize human activity and must be satisfied for long-term psychological health”. It is also related to the feeling that people have the knowledge and skills needed to carry out their duties at work and that they can use their knowledge extensively. Competence also motivates and feels good, whereas constant failures to succeed might cause people to feel discouraged and unmotivated. In research conducted by Martela, people have repeatedly told that self-development is one of the biggest motivators for them at work and that they feel energized if they have opportunities to learn and to move on and use their new skills. (Martela 2020, audio track 25.) The feeling of being competent boosts also the experience that employee is able to successfully perform the given tasks. The experience of competence affects straight as better end results and increases the productivity of the employee. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 29.)

According to Martela (2020, audio track 25), people have an innate need to both use their skills broadly and to develop their knowledge and learn constantly, so it is important that they can both use their strengths and that they are also offered suitable jobs that challenge their skills. Related to appropriate challenges at work, also feedback is important. Without feedback, through which we can evaluate our skills, there cannot be a real feeling of competence. Martela (2020, audio track 26) refers feedback not only as verbal feedback but also all the non-verbal cues that we are able to receive from our environment. The scarcity of feedback especially in information-intensive work is a real challenge as workdays mainly consist of different projects. Different tasks are not clear, and their meaning is hard to perceive. In addition, it might be that we are forced to work long periods without receiving any information or feedback about the quality of our work and that we are doing the right things. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 42.)

### **2.3 Meaningfulness as a success factor for companies**

At the same time as the nature of work is changing, also the expectations of employees have changed. People are more and more looking personal meaning and different kind of community from their work. (Sahimaa 2.1.2019.) Bailey and Madden (2016, 2) state that "recently, researchers have shown meaningfulness to be more important to employees than any other aspect of work, including pay and rewards, promotion or working conditions. Meaningful work can be highly motivational, leading to improved performance, commitment, and satisfaction." They also emphasize that meaningful work and the role of the leaders in this process should be researched more. In addition, Sahimaa (2.1.2019) states that seeking a new kind of meaning for individual and community levels is a new megatrend for work life. According to Sitra (in Dufva & Solovjew-Wartiovaara n.d)

“megatrends illustrate major, long-term phenomena that change slowly, are often interlinked and cannot be transformed in an instant”. It seems that meaningfulness at work might offer organizations a profit and a purpose at the same time.

Related to organizational purpose, the values and personal experiences of people have not typically been part of the company strategies. Companies have had values, but they have been mainly driven from top to down than developed between their employees. Maybe it is the global pandemic or the younger generations, that are more aware what is important for them, but companies have started to see values as a competitive advantage. (Fink 2021.) In addition, meaningful work has seen to give rise also to several benefits for both individual level well-being as well as organizational level success. Also, the psychological fundamental needs and the need for benevolence, that were presented in chapter 2.2 and its subchapters, as well as the experience of meaningfulness at work, have been linked through research to four different individual and organizational level benefits: job satisfaction, commitment to work, work efficiency and voluntary actions at the workplace. A person that has found a meaningful job is generally healthier and more prosperous as well as more satisfied with his/her job and life overall. This shows as a greater commitment to work and as increased work efficiency. (Sahimaa 2017, 19-20, 41.)

In addition to these, also standards like ESG highlight the importance of inclusion and diversity and link employee engagement to monetary issues. The abbreviation ESG stands for environmental, societal and governance issues, where the societal part also includes diversity and inclusion as one topic. ESG is also closely connected to responsible investments. Already now and increasingly in the future, investors are looking how companies are fulfilling the requirements of ESG. This brings a monetary perspective on how companies succeed to engage their employees. (Fink 2021.)

### **2.3.1 Establishing trust and acting with purpose**

As the feeling of meaningfulness also affects the organization through its employees, it is important to understand how organizations could then contribute and foster the right kind of ecosystem and atmosphere for meaningful workplace. It is hard for the organizations to “manage meaningfulness” as the feeling connects so deeply into individual’s personal life, but still Bailey and Madden (2016, 14-15) emphasize that if organizations succeed to focus on values beyond the profit motive, “it is more likely that these organizations attract, retain and motivate the employees they need to build sustainably for the future, and to create the kind of workplaces where human beings can thrive.” Also, the CEO and Chairman of BlackRock (Fink 2021), a multinational investment management corporation, underlines these issues as he writes in his 2021 letter to CEOs that

“Over the course of 2020, we have seen how purposeful companies, with better environmental, social, and governance (ESG) profiles, have outperformed their peers. It is clear that being connected to stakeholders – establishing trust with them and acting with purpose – enables a company to understand and respond to the changes happening in the world. Companies ignore stakeholders at their peril – companies that do not earn this trust will find it harder and harder to attract customers and talent, especially as young people increasingly expect companies to reflect their values. The more your company can show its purpose in delivering value to its customers, its employees, and its communities, the better able you will be to compete and deliver long-term, durable profits for shareholders.”

Related to the role of organization and its leaders, Bailey and Madden (2016, 3) were expecting to find a clear linkage between different factors that increase and decrease the feeling of meaningfulness but found otherwise. Interesting study result was that as those issues that were driving the sense of meaningfulness were mostly in the hands of the individuals, the factors that were related to the feeling of meaninglessness and the experience that "why am I doing this?" were mostly within the control of managers and leaders (Bailey & Madden 2016, 7). To create more understanding, why employees might change jobs or feel unmotivated, it is good to examine more closely on the seven central moments that Bailey and Madden (2016, 7-9) found. These following seven moments are also well connected with the findings from the group study presented in chapter four, as these issues were brought up when interviewees talked about their expectations and wishes for their managers and for leadership and what are the things that contribute or diminish their feeling of appreciation and meaningfulness. Findings from the group study for this thesis highlight the importance of the following seven moments by Bailey and Madden (2016, 7-9):

- Firstly, lack of recognition and taking employees for granted, not thanking for taking additional work or if workload had been extremely heavy.
- Secondly, unfairness and injustice, including also procedural injustices like the lack of opportunities for career progression.
- Thirdly, when required to do tasks that seemed to be pointless and that did not appear to benefit anyone or took time away from the core job. Most frequently this included bureaucratic tasks and form-filling not directly related to their core purpose.
- Fourth was when "people felt they were not being listened to, that their opinions and experience did not count, or that they could not have a voice, then they were more likely to find their work meaningless”.
- Fifth moment was when employees felt they were exposed for harsh working environments without appropriate kit or put otherwise at physical or emotional risk. These included for example very cold or dirty work settings, avoidable accidents or being left alone with aggressive patients.
- Sixth was the feeling of isolation or marginalization at work. Bailey and Madden brought up that most of the participants in the study talked about the importance of good relationships and the chance to share success and thoughts with co-workers as a sense of meaningfulness.

- The seventh moment was when people felt that they were disconnected from their own values, because of the values of the employer or work group. In Bailey and Madden this was the most frequent source of meaninglessness in work brought up. Especially "recurring theme was the tension between an organizational focus on the bottom line and the individual's focus on the quality or professionalism of work."

Through their interviews and wider reading of the literature of meaningfulness Bailey and Madden (2016, 10) stated that there are four elements that organizations can address for an integrated sense of holistic meaningfulness for individual employees. These four elements are interactional meaningfulness, task meaningfulness, job meaningfulness and organizational meaningfulness. Bailey and Madden (2016, 14) stated that when all these four elements of the meaningfulness ecosystem are well in order and in balance, they form a feeling of holistic meaningfulness that contributes to the physical and social well-being of an individual.

According to Bailey and Madden (2016, 10-11), organizational meaningfulness means that if employees understand the broader purpose of the organization, it is more likely that they feel their work is meaningful. The purpose should be formulated so that it focuses on the positive impact the organization is having on the wider society or the environment. It is also important that the purpose is thought through carefully and that there is something that is visible in how the organization operates and how it prioritizes things, otherwise it might paradoxically decrease meaningfulness as the purpose would be artificial and manipulative. It is important for the organization to listen to its employees and communicate through concrete examples to reach its employees in ways that make sense to them. Also, Martela (2020, audio track 22) underlines the importance that employees understand the broader purpose of the company and why it is valuable and inspiring to work for the common goal. If companies succeed in this, their employees are more energetic and enthusiastic and they enjoy their work, which contribute to the performance of the company.

The main source for individual meaningfulness at work is the job employees perform, and it is important that the job and the tasks it includes, can be tied to this organizational purpose, or how their job serves a wider, societal benefit. Bailey and Madden (2016, 11-12) said it well: "one of the challenges facing organizations and one that is rarely discussed, is how to help people understand how the individual tasks they perform contribute to their job, and, further, to the organization as a whole." Here the role of the manager is crucial, so it is important that managers are encouraged to discuss with their subordinates how their jobs and different tasks contribute to the broader whole or how their work is helping others. It needs to be highlighted, like stated also earlier, that meaningfulness can arise also from challenging, problematic, or sad jobs like the example of the nurse that was supporting people at the end of their lives. "The task for leaders is to acknowledge the

problematic or negative side of some jobs and to provide appropriate support for employees in doing them, yet to reveal in an honest way the benefits and broader contribution they make."

The responsibility of leadership related to motivation and the feeling of meaningfulness at work was also emphasized by Mäkikangas (in Kukkonen 12.1.2022), who is a lecturer at The Work Research Centre of the University of Tampere. At the University of Tampere, they have a two-year research project ongoing about the psychosocial safety climate related to remote work called "Safely remotely – occupational well-being and its management in telework". (Tampere University n.d.). Detailed research report has not yet been published as the project is still continuing until the end of 2022, but Mäkikangas was interviewed by Kukkonen (12.1.2022), where she raised that one of the conclusions from their study is that leadership has an important role in maintaining the meaningfulness and motivation at work. Especially important topics are to prioritize the welfare of the employees and to maintain open dialogue and interaction. In a work climate of psychosocial safety also difficult issues can be addressed together.

Also, Toivanen (in Sinervo 2022, 11-12) and Yli-Kaitala (in Sinervo 2022, 11-12) from The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health highlight psychological safety as an important factor for work communities. They showed that psychological safety is linked with initiatives related to work and work arrangements, and it is also positively connected to organizational financial success. Psychological safety is especially important in learning new, and it encourages to share information, which benefits the organization widely. Basic building blocks for psychologically safe work communities are the possibility to be yourself and openness. In these kind of work communities everyone's competencies are appreciated, people's differences are accepted, everyone has their own place in the community and different perceptions are respected without the fear of someone overlooking them. There is also a possibility to ask help from others if needed. Also, mistakes and failures can be brought into discussion without fear, and there is a possibility to learn from them. When it is accepted that there might be mistakes, it leads to more positive risk taking and innovation. (Sinervo 2022, 11-12.)

Innovation and creative thinking related to psychological safety was also emphasized by Google (in Rozovsky 17.11.2015), who had a multiannual research during 2012-2014 called "Project Aristotle" in which they studied hundreds of Google's teams and tried to figure out what makes a good and effective team. Google's top executives believed that building the best teams meant combining the best people, but their study ended up in showing that it did not matter that much who was on the team or that all the teams would behave the same. What seemed to matter was that all the team members had equal opportunities to participate and that there was high average of social sensitivity. (Duhigg 25.2.2016.) Google's data indicated that "who is on a team matters less than how the

team members interact, structure their work, and view their contributions”. It seemed that psychological safety, more than anything else, was critical for a team to work. Other important factors were dependability, structure, and clarity, meaning of work and impact of work, which are seen also in the figure 3. (Rozovsky 17.11.2015.)

” Project Aristotle is a reminder that when companies try to optimize everything, it’s sometimes easy to forget that success is often built on experiences — like emotional interactions and complicated conversations and discussions of who we want to be and how our teammates make us feel — that can’t really be optimized” (Duhigg 25.2.2016).

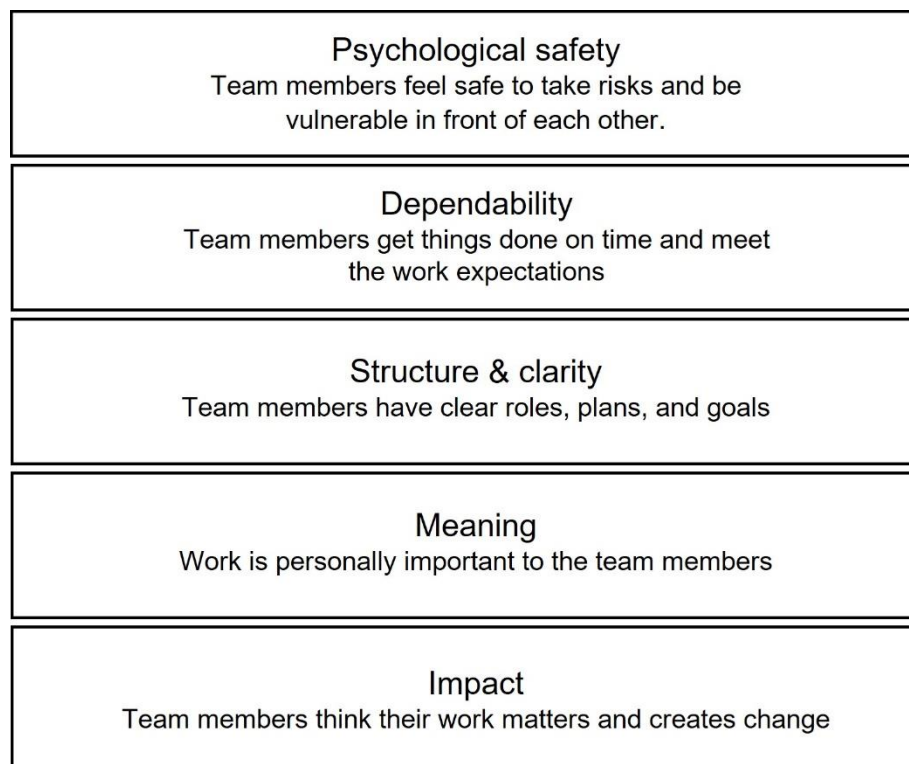


Figure 3. Five key dynamics for successful team according to Google (adapted from Rozovsky 17.11.2015)

### 2.3.2 Engaging diverse employees

Also, Hakanen from The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, that was interviewed in the same article as Mäkikangas by Kukkonen (12.1.2022), highlights that leadership has a responsibility that employees can thrive, are motivated and are able to feel appreciation and flow of work. If job is meaningful and promotes development and there is enough autonomy and experience of appreciation, it is more difficult for the employee to change job. In addition, the CEO and Chairman of Blackrock (Fink 2021) highlights the importance of understanding the needs of stakeholders and the value of diversity and versatile competences in his 2021 letter to CEOs, where he says that

"I cannot recall a time where it has been more important for companies to respond to the needs of their stakeholders. We are at a moment of tremendous economic pain. We are also at a historic crossroads on the path to racial justice – one that cannot be solved without leadership from companies. A company that does not seek to benefit from the full spectrum of human talent is weaker for it – less likely to hire the best talent, less likely to reflect the needs of its customers and the communities where it operates, and less likely to outperform."

According to Mäkikangas (in Kukkonen 12.1.2022), special attention should also be devoted to younger employees and how they can be engaged in the work community as inclusiveness is especially important for the younger generations. Matter is of high importance as so called millennials, that were born roughly between 1980-2000, are already fulfilling half of all the jobs in Finland and globally it is predicted that by the year 2025 already 75 per cent of employees would be millennials. What seems to be important at work for millennials is self-realization and meaningfulness at work and for this to happen millennials need constant feedback for self-development and regular high-quality interactions, especially with their managers. Also, feeling that they are seen as individuals, that they have chance to influence and that their work matters in a bigger picture are seen to be of high importance for the younger generations. In addition, too hierarchical organization and too strict instructions might be difficult aspects for a millennial that prefers autonomy, concrete instructions, open dialogue, and positive enforcing. (Riihimäki 1.6.2020.)

As it was earlier stated in the part that covered the seven central moments for meaninglessness, also task meaningfulness is related to the feeling of pointless tasks, because in almost every job there is at least partly repetitive work or work that feels purposeless. In Bailey and Madden (2016, 12), there was this example of a stonemason who told how the beginning of his training was filled with repetitive and simple carving tasks and it was not until the master mason was satisfied that he had perfected the task, that he was allowed to work with more interesting carvings. He said that he felt like giving up, fearing that he should maybe do something else instead. It was not until many years later as he looked back, he understood why that kind of detailed, repetitive training was an important first step for his future career and for more challenging and rewarding work.

According to Bailey and Madden (2016, 12), it seems that when organizations succeeded in explaining why this kind of repetitive or routine tasks were needed, these tasks were not seen so meaningless anymore. "Reducing this type of work to the minimum, creating a good fit between the person's skills and their job content, investing in new technologies to handle the bureaucracy with the minimum of time and effort, and explaining to people how these tasks contribute to the wider whole will all help alleviate meaninglessness." In addition, Martela and Jarenko (2014, 60) highlight that many times more important than the job itself is how the job is arranged. When the feelings and needs related to autonomy, competence and relatedness are well considered, employees can experience that they are doing valuable and meaningful job, almost despite the job content.



The issue of task meaningfulness was also raised in the interviews for the group study of this thesis, as it seems that new employees, especially working in their different local sites, might not always understand the purpose of the repetitive tasks or why they need to perform certain routine jobs on daily basis for a longer period. As their jobs feel pointless to them and they are not aware of anything else, they might give up and change jobs. According to Bailey and Madden (2016, 13), one option to ease this would be to improve communication and use more time to explain how their work contributes to the wider whole and that certain routine and repetitive tasks are part of the learning path for the new employees, and it is important for their future career to learn them well. It might not change the tasks to be motivational and meaningful, but it might turn it from being meaningless to more neutral.

The last of the four elements for meaningful ecosystem by Bailey and Madden (2016, 13), interactional meaningfulness, refers to interactions between people in two different ways. Firstly, when people are in contact with other people who benefit from their job, and secondly, that there is an environment that supports these interactions. The feeling of meaninglessness or meaningfulness is mostly connected with the cues employees are receiving from others about how valuable their work is considered to be. Lack of respect or recognition or if not able to contact the work beneficiaries all drive up a sense of meaninglessness.

"The challenge here is for leaders to create a supportive, respectful and inclusive work climate amongst colleagues, between employees and managers, and between organizational staff and work beneficiaries. It also involves recognizing the importance of creating space in the working day for meaningful interactions where employees are able to give and receive positive feedback, communicate a sense of shared values and belonging, and appreciate how their work impacts positively on others." (Bailey & Madden 2016, 13.)

The importance of work community and fair and equitable treatment were also underlined by a research project carried out by The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (2020) called "How is Finland doing?". The project is still ongoing, and its aim is to collect data on the well-being at work of Finnish employees and especially analyze what kind of affects Covid-19 pandemic has had. The research states that increase in social cohesion and fair and equitable treatment were seen to predict growth in the flow of work and job satisfaction and correspondingly also the decrease in the same factors contributed to a weaker sense of job satisfactions and flow of work. The deteriorating of social cohesion and uncertainty were also seen to be strongly connected to burn-out as well as boredom and apathy at work. (Työterveyslaitos 26.11.2020.)

### **2.3.3 Intrinsic motivation as a source for engagement**

According to Martela and Jarenko (2014), enthusiasm and motivation have a leading role when it comes to financial success. When, for example, in Finland new jobs are created in fields that require creativity and customer service as central competencies, internal motivation is the key for

organizational success. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 6.) Also, the role and importance of internal motivation in leading competencies will be pre-eminent in the coming years as the needs for different competencies are changing in an increasing speed. Organizations should focus on creating appropriate conditions for learning, to have inspiring and inclusive leadership and to build and maintain trustful environment between the employee and the employer. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 44.)

Internally, also known as intrinsically, motivating tasks are basically tasks that people would do naturally and spontaneously when they have the possibility to follow their inner interests. In a sense, it could be said that intrinsic motivation offers its own reward without the need to have somebody motivating you from outside. This is why activities that are internally motivating are also more energizing and not so burdening as tasks that are externally motivating. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 14.) Deci and Ryan (2000, 233) explain it well by stating that “intrinsic motivation concerns active engagement with tasks that people find interesting and that, in turn, promote growth”. According to Deci and Ryan, when people feel related to others, competent and autonomous, the basic psychological needs that were described in chapter 2.2. and its subchapters, people are engaged and intrinsically motivated (Deci May 2018). They emphasized that especially important is to fulfill the needs for autonomy and competence, but secure relatedness is also an important factor for intrinsic motivation to flourish (Deci & Ryan 2000, 235).

Internally motivated employees are more enthusiastic, active, and productive, and they can deliver results in a more sustainable way. According to research, employees that experience the flow of work are also happier, healthier and they have better abilities to work and less absences for sickness. When organizations are able to find a way to strengthen their employees’ internal motivation towards their tasks, it has clear and positive impact also to organization’s innovation and performance. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 32-33.) Organizations can significantly support their employees in finding and strengthening their internal motivation. Most important factors are to support the autonomy and competence of the individual employees but also to clarify the wider meaning of organization and its operations. The aim in leading internal motivation is to help the employee to find his/her inner strengths and to attract the employee to use these strengths for the achievement of organizational goals. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 36.)

Extrinsic motivation in contrast to the intrinsic is mostly about external motivators. Here, people are focused on doing something for a specific consequence, for example getting money or approval from another person. This means that the outcomes are more important than the behavior itself, changing the behavior to be an instrument to reach the desired outcome instead of the behavior itself to be the most interesting thing. (Deci May 2018.) Traditional reward schemes lead to unwanted results if they are poorly designed. The motivation of employees might not increase,

although rewarded, but the perceived injustice of the system decreases the motivation of other employees. Focusing too much on external rewards might also diminish employee's internal motivation. Well-designed bonus system should be transparent, fair and support the autonomy of the employee. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 6.)

In some cases, external rewards might be used to support internal motivation as well and the overall practices for company rewards can also be used to demonstrate organizational values and for example equity and fairness. Reward schemes that support internal motivation are based in strengthening the three fundamental needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Rewarding does not necessarily need to be monetary, in some cases the most functioning way to strengthen internal motivation is just to recognize the successes of the employees'. The employee's experience of own competence and also for the social cohesion strengthens, when the employee feels that his/her successes are noticed and appreciated. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 50-51.)

Intrinsic motivation and the conditions that support it have been given lot of attention in the field of motivation research, as various studies have confirmed it to be related to better learning, performance, and well-being. There has also been experiments that have shown that monetary rewards diminish intrinsic motivation as people feel less like origins of their behavior and more controlled by the reward. According to the studies, this might even lead to "level of post reward behavior that was below baseline." Additional studies have also underlined the importance of autonomy and highlighted the appreciation for people's inner experiences as a source for intrinsic motivation "by showing that other events such as threats, surveillance, evaluation and deadlines also led to the undermining of intrinsic motivation". In their research article about self-determination theory Deci and Ryan (2000, 234) also explain that different studies have shown that "events such as evaluations, rewards, and choice have corresponding effects on creativity, cognitive flexibility, and conceptual learning. For example, rewards and evaluations were found to decrease creativity, complex problem solving, and deep conceptual processing of information." It seems that there is a big impact for the motivation depending on the degree people feel they are self-determined versus controlled.

Related to the difference between internally and externally motivating factors, there was an interesting observation from the group study interviews that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can also be mixed depending on how the person him or herself sees it and what role the extrinsic motivator serves. Several interviewees brought up that they would wish for the benefits the company offers for its employees to be better and that they feel these benefits reflect the appreciation the company

has for its employees. They also said that better benefits would increase their motivation and enhance their wellbeing. So, in this case, the extrinsic reward has been given an intrinsic value.

Also, Martela (2020, audio track 18) highlights this observation by explaining that although some issues can be purely internally motivating and others purely externally motivating, most of the actions and issues we face, are some kind of mixture of both. For example, at work context an individual might be motivated from both the wage and the possibility to express him/herself. Martela underlines that it depends on the person how strong different motivation factors are, and that there are also degree differences between them, like external motivation factor that is internalized gradually. Deci and Ryan (2000, 233) also highlight that there are two different forms of internal motivation. Motivation that is endogenous means that doing itself feels enjoyable whereas internalized motivation is linked to objectives and values that are felt personally important, which makes actions feel valuable. Although endogenous motivation is the strongest form of motivation, Martela and Jarenko (2014, 14) underline that it might be more volatile, which makes well internalized motivation more essential for long-term performing.

Other issues that were brought up in the group study interviews for this thesis concerning motivation and what would make the interviewees work even harder were the possibility to self-development, to learn new things through challenging themselves and the experience of success. Also, the possibility to influence or shape own work and to be able to bring own strengths forward and to use them at work were mentioned as important topics. The feeling of trust, flexibility, and freedom to make decisions on matters affecting own work were all mentioned as issues that lay the foundation for the other motivation factors. All of these underline the importance of intrinsic motivators as a source for employee engagement and efficiency. They also emphasize how central issue the fundamental basic needs presented more closely in the chapter 2.2. and its subchapters are to create intrinsic motivation.

## 2.4 Theoretical framework

According to the theory presented in chapter two, there are especially four important building blocks forming meaningfulness at work. These dimensions are presented in figure 4, where it can also be seen that the basis for these different dimensions is psychologically safe working environment. Meaningfulness at work cannot be explained through only one of these, it needs to be viewed more broadly. Although the feeling of meaningfulness connects deeply into individual's personal life and experiences, there are also actions that organizations can do to support their employees' feeling of meaningfulness at work, which is also beneficial for the financial success of the organization. Figure 4 summarizes the theoretical framework of this thesis. The different parts of figure 4 are also shortly explained in the following pages.

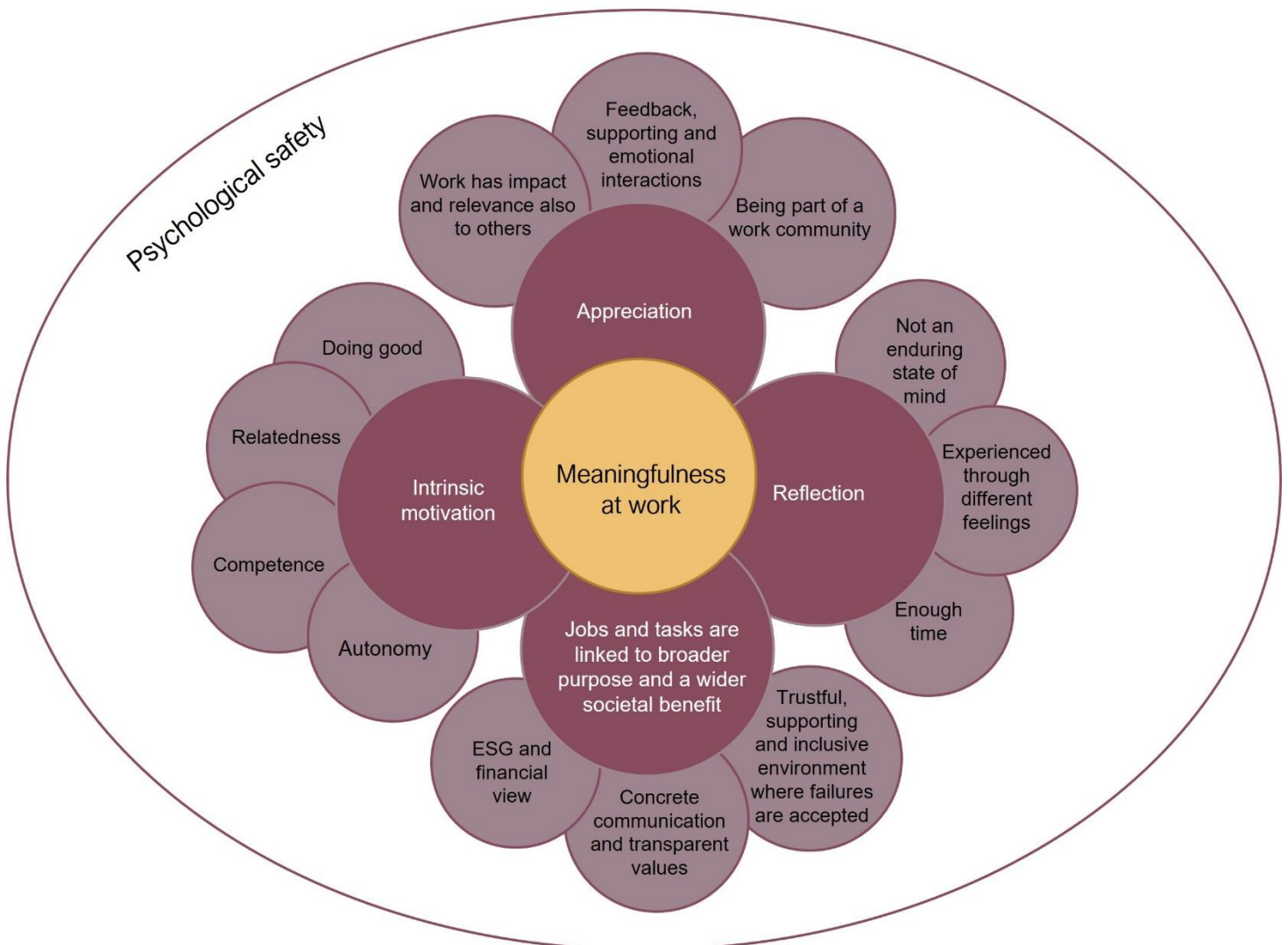


Figure 4. The areas of meaningfulness at work according to theory

One of the theories used in this thesis is the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2000, 227). Their theory states that to understand human motivation, it requires to understand especially the innate psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. On top of these three, based on his own research, Martela (2020, audio track 34) has added doing good as the fourth fundamental need. Deci and Ryan divide motivation in intrinsic, meaning internal, and extrinsic, meaning external, motivation (Deci May 2018). Contrary to more traditional view, that roughly states that external motivation and rewards are the basis for organizational success and the basis for human motivation, the theory of Deci and Ryan (2000, 227-228) state that the key to individual and organizational success lies in the intrinsic motivation and adding extrinsic motivation on top of that might even weaken the endogenous will to do things.

According to Martela and Jarenko (2014, 6), enthusiasm and motivation have a leading role when it comes to financial success. Internally motivated employees are more enthusiastic, active, and productive, and they can deliver results in a more sustainable way. Employees that experience the flow of work are also happier, healthier and they have better abilities to work and less absences for sickness. When organizations are able to find a way to strengthen their employees' internal motivation towards their tasks it has clear and positive impact also to organization's innovation and outcome. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 32-33.)

For employees to feel autonomous, it is important that they can perform their work from voluntary basis and that they have enough freedom, responsibility, and authority to do their jobs properly. In relatedness the biggest weight is given on the work community, social relations, and the working culture. This puts emphasis on the overall working atmosphere and that people can commit and are able to participate in common actions, which strengthens the mutual sense of belonging. (Sahimaa 2.1.2019.) It is important that we have the opportunity to be our own individuals, but we also need to have social relations with other people to whom we feel connected to and feel like we are part of a community (Martela 2020, audio track 29). A good working atmosphere, where employees feel that they are cared for, is also a key element for internal motivation. Especially important it is in moments that are challenging or heavy. When facing disappointments, exhaustion or tiredness, the support of colleagues has crucial importance. If this element is missing the risks for burnout or other negative symptoms is much greater. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 30-31.)

The third fundamental need according to self-determination theory, competence, is related to the feeling that people have the knowledge and skills needed to carry out their duties at work and that they can use their knowledge extensively. Competence also motivates and feels good, whereas constant failures to succeed might cause people to feel discouraged and unmotivated. According to Martela (2020), people have an innate need to both use their skills broadly and to develop their

knowledge and learn constantly, so it is important that they can both use their strengths, and that they are also offered suitable jobs that challenge their skills. (Martela 2020, audio track 25.) Related to appropriate challenges at work also feedback is important. Without feedback, through which we can evaluate our skills, there cannot be a real feeling of competence. Martela (2020, audio track 26) refers feedback not only as verbal feedback but also all the non-verbal cues that we are able to receive from our environment. Although doing good, also referred as benevolence, has not yet been officially approved as the fourth fundamental need as more research and empirical evidence is still needed, the topic has already been acknowledged in the field of psychology. Martela states that we feel well, when we feel that our actions help other people, and on the contrary, we feel bad when our actions hinder others. (Martela 2020, audio track 34).

Self-determination theory and theories that describe meaningfulness at work seem to have overlapping themes. These different theories include for example characters related to competence and utilizing own strengths, contributing to common good, and the importance of the social dimension that Deci and Ryan (2000, 231) describe as relatedness. Also, empirical evidence of the connection between these different theories can be found (Sahimaa 2017, 19). These similarities can be noticed also from the results of another important source for this thesis; according to Bailey and Madden (2016, 6), meaningfulness was often associated with a sense of pride and achievement for a job well done. It was important that employees were able to use their potential, or saw work as creative, interesting, and absorbing. Also, it was seen important if their work was noticed and they had received a praise, recognition, or some kind of acknowledgement from others.

Bailey and Madden (2016, 6) also raised the importance of personal interests and values and emphasized that especially profound feeling of meaningfulness was felt when the experience of helping others was mixed with the sense of job well done, that was also recognized and appreciated by others. According to Bailey and Madden (2016, 3), individuals tend to experience their work meaningful when it matters and has an impact or relevance also for other individuals, groups, or the wider environment. They also highlighted that doing good for other people is not always linked with positive feelings and attributes (Bailey & Madden 2016, 4).

Bailey and Madden (2016, 4-5) showed also that the sense of meaningfulness is not an enduring state of mind that individuals experience towards their work – instead, it arose more in an episodic way. It seemed that nobody could find work constantly meaningful, there seemed to be peak moments, when the feeling was strong. Related to the episodic sense of meaningfulness, the feeling was rarely experienced straight when something happened, but rather on reflection when people saw their work done and were able to make connections between their achievements and a wider sense of life meaning. Bailey and Madden reflected in their article that it is more common that

people notice the meaningfulness of their job afterwards than during their working day, which highlights the importance of having the time to reflect, as reflection also affects the feeling of own competence. (Bailey & Madden 2016, 5.)

Meaningful work has seen to give rise to several benefits for both individual level well-being as well as organizational level success. Also, the psychological fundamental needs and the need for benevolence, as well as the experience of meaningfulness at work have been linked through research to four different individual and organizational level benefits: job satisfaction, commitment to work, work efficiency and voluntary actions at the workplace. A person that has found a meaningful job is generally healthier and more prosperous as well as more satisfied with his/her job and life overall. This shows as a greater commitment to work and as increased work efficiency. (Sahimaa 2017, 19-20, 41.) Addition to these, also standards like ESG highlight the importance of inclusion and diversity and link employee engagement to monetary issues (Fink 2021).

It is important for companies to establish trust and act with purpose. Bailey and Madden (2016, 7) showed that as those issues that were driving the sense of meaningfulness were mostly in the hands of the individuals, the factors that were related to the feeling of meaninglessness and the experience that "why am I doing this?" were mostly within the control of managers and leaders. Bailey and Madden (2016, 10) underlined that there are four elements that organizations can address for an integrated sense of holistic meaningfulness for individual employees: interactional meaningfulness, task meaningfulness, job meaningfulness and organizational meaningfulness.

Organizational meaningfulness means that if employees understand the broader purpose of the organization, it is more likely that they feel their work is meaningful. The purpose should be formulated so that it focuses on the positive impact the organization is having on the wider society or the environment. For this, it is important for the organization to listen to its employees and communicate through concrete examples to reach its employees in ways that make sense to them. (Bailey & Madden 2016, 10-11.) The main source for individual meaningfulness at work is the job employees perform, and it is important that the job and the tasks it includes can be tied to this organizational purpose, or how their job serves a wider, societal benefit. According to Bailey and Madden (2016, 11-12), it seems that when organizations succeeded in explaining why repetitive or routine tasks were needed, these tasks were not seen so meaningless anymore. Here the role of the manager is crucial, so it is important that managers are encouraged to discuss with their subordinates how their jobs and different tasks contribute to the broader whole or how their work is helping others.

The last of the four elements for meaningful ecosystem by Bailey and Madden (2016, 13), interactional meaningfulness, refers to interactions between people in two different ways. Firstly, when



people are in contact with other people who benefit from their job, and secondly, that there is an environment that supports these interactions. The feeling of meaninglessness or meaningfulness is mostly connected with the cues employees are receiving from others about how valuable their work is considered to be. Lack of respect or recognition or if not able to contact the work beneficiaries all drive up a sense of meaninglessness.

The responsibility of leadership related to motivation and the feeling of meaningfulness at work was also emphasized by The Work Research Centre of the University of Tampere (in Kukkonen 12.1.2022), who underlined that especially important topics are to prioritize the welfare of the employees and to maintain open dialogue and interaction. In a work climate of psychosocial safety also difficult issues can be addressed together. Also, The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (in Sinervo 2022, 11-12) highlights psychological safety as an important factor for work communities. Psychological safety is especially important in learning new, and it encourages to share information, which benefits the organization widely. Basic building blocks for psychologically safe work communities are the possibility to be yourself and openness. In these kind of work communities everyone's competencies are appreciated, people's differences are accepted, everyone has their own place in the community and different perceptions are respected without the fear of someone overlooking them. There is also a possibility to ask help from others if needed. Also, mistakes and failures can be brought into discussion without fear, and there is a possibility to learn from them. When it is accepted that there might be mistakes, it leads to more positive risk taking and innovation.

### **3 Research and development methods**

In this chapter, the research methods are explained with help of theory. In addition, there are also descriptions for the data collection methods, the data analyzing methods and the study process.

#### **3.1 Research methods**

This thesis is a case study as the purpose of the thesis and the study was to produce new ideas for the basis for future development for one particular company and for a single topic. Case study was conducted with qualitative research methods. According to Dr. Curry (Global Health Network 2016) “qualitative research is a strategy for systematic collection, organization, and interpretation of phenomena that are difficult to measure quantitatively”. The product of qualitative research might be for example to find out recurrent themes or hypothesis, like patterns of behaviors, group interactions and individual perceptions. Qualitative research methods concentrate on finding out participants perspectives and experiences in greater depth for example using different type of interviews, focus groups or observation methods. The approach to qualitative study is inductive in nature, which means that the research questions are not based on any hypothesis that is being tested and the findings are built on the answers received in the study.

Although this thesis has features from inductive approach, abductive approach might be a better fit. In abductive approach the “continuous interplay between theory and empirical observation” is given more weight and importance than in inductive approach, which main concern is the confirmation of existing theory. In abductive approach the objective is to discover new things and to generate new concepts and theoretical models. Abductive approach “creates fruitful cross-fertilization where new combinations are developed through a mixture of established theoretical models and new concepts derived from the confrontation with reality.” (Dubois & Gadde 2002, 559.) This is also how this thesis should be read. There are new insights and concepts created through the combination of theory and the gathered data.

#### **3.2 Methods of data collection**

The group study was conducted with specialist interviews by phone and in Microsoft (MS) Teams. The commissioning company for the study wished us to use in-depth interviews for data collection method to find out the experiences and perspectives that their employees truly have. We would have wanted to conduct the interviews face-to-face, but Covid-19 laid down limitations for the implementation.

For our study group we set up a MS Teams for document handling and data processing purposes. In MS Teams we used different tools for drafting the interview questions, interview notes, the report

for the commissioning company and other relevant material. The interview questions, that are attached as appendix 1, were designed to benefit both the commissioning company and the different thesis topics in the study group. The interview questions were also approved by the commissioning company.

The sampling was chosen purposefully meaning that quality was more important than the quantity (The Global Health Network 2016). In our study this meant that we tried to achieve interviews extensively from different hierarchical levels in the organization to receive as reliable and holistic view on the current state as possible. To succeed in this, we explained to the representative of the commissioning company in the beginning of the study, that we wanted to interview employees from top management, middle management, a presentative from human resources and employees from different locations. We also agreed that a suitable amount for the interview would be 7-10 interviews per group member / student ending up in total of 40 interviews.

Participants were gathered for the interviews with invitation text published in commissioning company's intranet pages and in their mobile application both in Finnish and in English. Invitation text was approved by the dedicated contact person and the communication department of the commissioning company. The invitation text is attached as appendix 2. Both channels proved to be well chosen and the total amount of interviews that was realized in the end, was 33 interviews for which we as a study group were very pleased as the participants were located both organizationally and geographically on different sides of the organization. We had a total of 35 interviews agreed but due to tight work schedules and because of interviewee's illness, we were not able to carry out two of the agreed interviews, although we tried to offer additional interview times.

Eventually, five interviews were conducted by phone and 28 in MS Teams. In every interview there were two students from our study group; one discussed with the participant and presented our questions, while the other was concentrating on writing notes. If the participant had agreed, the latter recorded and saved the answers with the transcript tool included in MS Teams. For phone interviews we used group calls, where one interviewed, while the other wrote notes and if the participant had agreed, recorded the call with an external recorder. Phone calls were transcribed manually afterwards. In addition, also all MS Teams transcripts were checked and remedied afterwards if MS Teams had misspelled. For this purpose, the recordings were valuable.

First, the interview questions were planned to be half-structured meaning that we would have had specific themes and questions, but the questions would have been open-ended, and the order of the questions would not have been fixed and the questions would have varied from participant to another (Adams 2015). However, it was then decided in our study group, that the interviews were carried out with similar questions and fixed order for all of the participants to maximize the

comparability of the answers and to optimize the time spent for an interview. People that were working in managerial position were asked two additional questions. One interview took us approximately 40 minutes, but there were also 60-minute interviews, which was the maximum time we had to spend for an interview. The time limit of 60 minutes was a request of the commissioning company, because participating an interview was not considered as working time for the participants and they suggested that longer interviews would decrease the number of participants. As participating an interview was not considered as working time, the commissioning company promised to provide a gift voucher for the participants as a compensation and an incentive for taking part in the study. To deliver the gift vouchers, the participant names were reported to the relevant stakeholders using a secure system. In addition to names, no other information was reported.

For the interviews we had a specific presentation material prepared that included all of the base information and the interview questions. This material was used by all of the students in all interviews to both make it easier for the interviewer as well as the interviewee to follow the interview but also to ensure that the same lyrics and order of the questions were used in all of the interviews. Of course, in phone interviews it was not possible to present the material, but it was still used by the interviewer. The presentation material for interviews is attached as appendix 3.

Our interview questions were divided into two categories, for diversity and for inclusion specific questions. In addition to these, we asked also concrete examples. At the beginning of the interview, we asked three questions for background information: the department or site of the organization, if the person had a managerial position and the age of the participant.

In diversity questions we were interested to know how the participant personally understood and valued diversity, how prominent diversity was and if there were wishes how prominent it should be in the workplace. We were also interested to find out participants feelings on what made him/her feel appreciated and valued in the work community and if the participant had faced prejudices of discrimination.

The inclusion part was a little longer but started also with the question on how the participant personally understood and valued inclusion. The other questions concerned personal values and perceptions and his/her possibilities to raise topics for further discussion. It was also asked what made work meaningful and if there were something that would contribute to the feeling even more. We were also interested to know how participant's strengths were considered in his/her work or in the wider work community and if there were special issues that contributed to the feeling of being included in the work community or, on the contrary, feeling as left outside. We also asked about the participant's views on why developing diversity and inclusion in the organization was important and if he/she felt that the commissioning company treated employees equally.

For inclusion we had also two backup questions, which we had time to ask for almost all of the interviewees: how they saw that their organization demonstrated commitment to developing diversity and inclusion topics and what were the issues that they thought would make their organization to be an attractive employer also in the future. The two additional questions we asked for persons that were in managerial position were related to their wishes on how diversity and inclusion work should be developed in the future and if they had received training to lead these topics or, if they had ideas on what kind of training would be needed. Results of the interviews are presented in chapter four.

### **3.3 Methods of data analysis**

In qualitative research methods data analysis is usually done with iterative interpretation, which is a process where data is collected from the studied environment or group of people and the phase of data collection is always followed by the phase of interpreting the collected data. Sometimes the use of the language and the lyrics by the participants are used in a form of a quote to support and illustrate the findings and the studied themes (The Global Health Network 2016).

Already during the interviews, our study group started to write down common notes, well stated quotes or used lyrics about issues that seemed to be important for the interviewees. Also issues that were raised many times and seemed to have more weight than others, were highlighted. These notes were then organized under specific themes that were used as a basic structure for the findings in the report for the commissioning company. Idea to find out key themes this way came from a method called Affinity Diagram, which I have previously used to sort, analyze, and organize information and to develop new ideas. The method is mostly used in Service Design, which is a process to innovate new or to improve services to make them more useful and usable, as well as more efficient and effective for organizations (Moritz 2005, 7). According to Stefan Moritz “an Affinity Diagram is a creative process to gather and organize insights, ideas, and opinions. It helps adding structure to a larger or complicated issue, breaking down a complicated issue into broad categories or gaining agreement on an issue or situation”. (Moritz 2005, 202.) Although Stefan Moritz has written his book already in 2005, it is still widely accepted and used in the field of Service Design.

It needs to be emphasized that although the ideas and insights were generated already during the interviews, it was carefully seen that the interviews were still carried out with similar questions and fixed order for all of the participants not to jeopardize the comparability and reliability of the results. Another way to secure the reliability of the results was to use ATLAS.ti for data analyzing purposes. ATLAS.ti is a qualitative data analysis and research software that can be used for large

amount of textual, graphical, audio and video data (ATLAS.ti n.d.). The results from ATLAS.ti are attached as appendix 4.

### 3.4 Description of the study process

Although the figure 5 that represents the work plan for the study process begins from November, the process was started already in the end of October 2021 with a joint meeting with the commissioning company. In this meeting, the commissioning company gave us more information on the topics of diversity and inclusion from their viewpoint and what are their wishes for the project. After this, our group decided that I would act as a project manager and would mainly take care of the communication with the commissioning company and with our thesis supervisor.

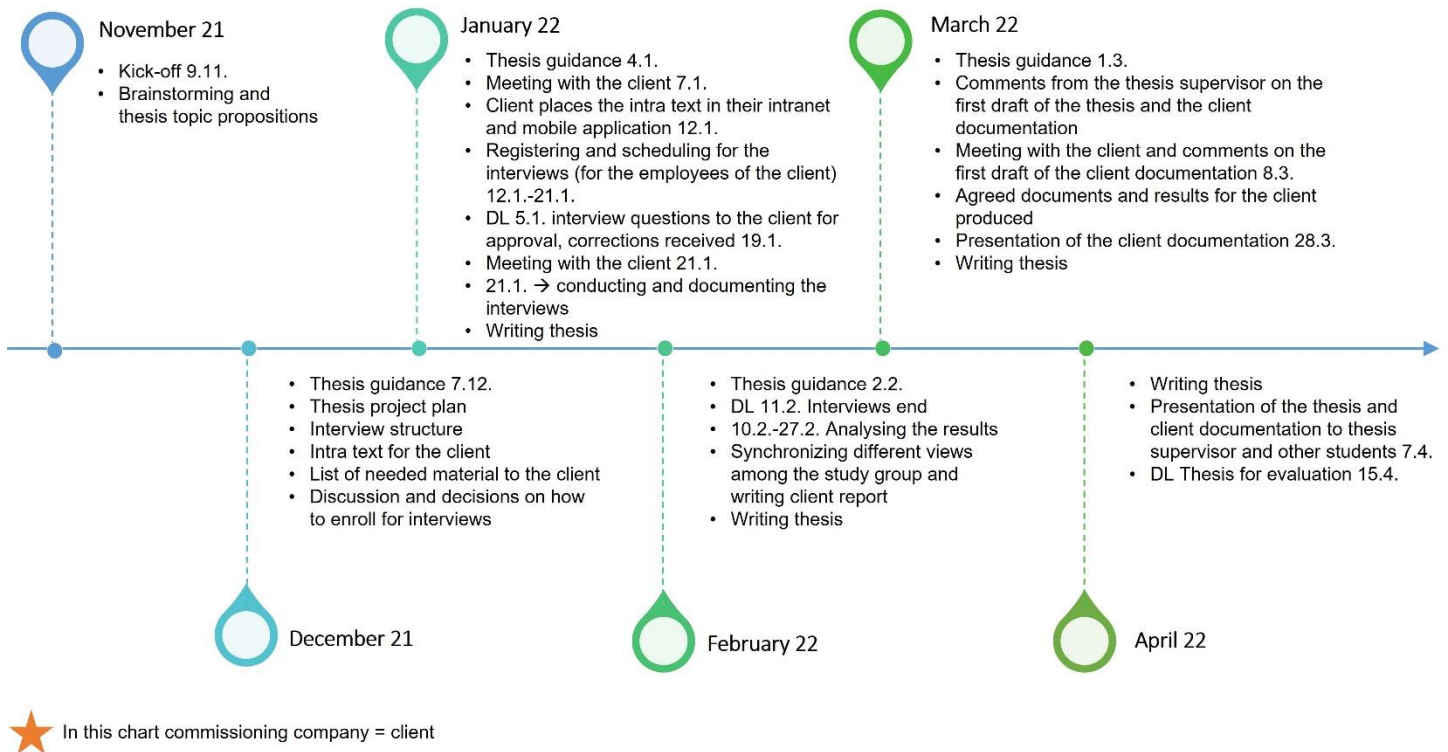


Figure 5. Work plan for the study and thesis work

Our first thesis guidance and internal kick-off meeting for the study was in the beginning of November, after which we made our thesis topic propositions for approval. During November we also structured the way we would communicate and handle different documents inside our study group. We decided to establish a WhatsApp group for communication and Microsoft (MS) Teams group

for document handling. We did not handle any confidential topics through WhatsApp; it was purely for effective communication purposes.

During December, we had our second thesis guidance session. It was also time to structure the project plan for the thesis and the work plan for the group study. After formulating the work plan shown in the figure 5, it was noticed that it was crucial to already think about the structure for the interviews and start to discuss how to enroll the employees from the commissioning company for the interviews. We drafted a list to the commissioning company on what kind of material we would need and what ideas we had for the interviews. We also drafted an invitation text for the interviews both in Finnish and in English. As we presented our timeline and our worry on the tight schedule to the representative of the commissioning company, it was decided that in addition to the intranet text, the invitation text would be published also to their mobile application and the company representative would contact also suitable persons for the interviews.

In the beginning of January, in our third thesis guidance the project plans for the thesis were presented, after which they were accepted by the thesis supervisor. We had also a meeting with the commissioning company, where we discussed topical issues and reviewed our drafts for the interview questions and the intranet texts. We decided that the employees of the commissioning company would contact straight our study group when enrolling for the interviews to maintain their anonymity, which we saw as an important issue, because the topic of the study and our questions were so confidential. After the interview invitation text was reviewed and accepted by the communication department of the commissioning company, it was published both in the intranet and the mobile application. It was very pleasing and reassuring to notice that we got many contacts, and it was a right decision to gather participants in different channels. People that were signing up for the interviews were contacted straight away and suitable timeslots were agreed between the interviewees and our study group. Besides the interviews, the last weeks of January were also scheduled for thesis writing.

The interviews were held as planned during 21.1.- 11.2. In our fourth thesis guidance on 2<sup>nd</sup> of February we presented our timeline and the current situation of our project to our thesis supervisor. Our study group had already during the interviews made notes of certain central viewpoints that were raised but analyzing of the results started officially on 10<sup>th</sup> of February. We analyzed the results with an analyzing software called ATLAS.ti and brainstorming and discussions in our study group. More information about the analyzing of the results can be found in the chapter 3.3. The analyzing of the results complemented also the thesis writing that was done at the same time.

In 1<sup>st</sup> of March, we had our fifth thesis guidance and in the beginning of March we also had the first comments from our thesis supervisor for the report our study group wrote for the commissioning

company and for the first thesis draft written personally. After the comments received from the thesis supervisor, our study group finalized the first draft of the report and presented it to the representative of the commissioning company in our meeting 8<sup>th</sup> of March. The commissioning company was satisfied with the first draft of the report, and it was agreed that this first version would also be the final version. The findings of the study were presented to the commissioning company on 28<sup>th</sup> of March in MS Teams meeting. In addition to the report, our study group wrote two short texts about the findings of the study to be published in the commissioning company's intranet. Besides finalizing the report, presentation material and intranet texts, writing, and structuring the thesis played the main role in March.

In the beginning of April, we had our sixth thesis guidance, where the documentation and findings for the commissioning company as well as theses of some students, including myself, were presented to other students and the thesis supervisor. After the thesis presentation, the thesis was complemented with the final adjustments before submitting it to the final evaluation, for which the agreed deadline was 15<sup>th</sup> of April.



## 4 Results

This chapter presents the results that are obtained from the interviews of the commissioning company and that are relevant to this thesis and for the research questions presented in chapter one. Commissioning company received its own report that was formulated to answer especially those questions and goals that were set for the group study and explained in chapter 1.1. The report of the commissioning company is attached as appendix 5.

### 4.1 Qualities of meaningful work

In the interviews conducted for the group study, especially work community and the nearest colleagues were seen as significant source of meaningfulness and appreciation. This statement was emphasized by almost half of the interviewees saying that good team spirit is a source of meaningfulness for them and an important aspect in their work. In addition, the possibility to be a part of the work community, the work culture and humor that is included in their everyday work life were all brought up as important themes. Good work community and good colleagues as well as common humor were seen as central strength that helped also when facing problems and during tougher times. It was seen especially important that there are possibilities to take part in common discussions and other activities. Only one person stated that the feeling of meaningfulness is directly connected to good managerial work, which might emphasize that meaningfulness is particularly a personal feeling. Interviewees were also asked what would increase their feeling of meaningfulness. Related to work community, one answered presence, two answered the enhancement of diversity, one answered trust and one that creation of positive atmosphere would be important.

Related to good work community, one important dimension for meaningful work is the possibility and knowledge to help others. Six interviewees answered that the feeling of doing good and to help others is an important source of meaningfulness at work. In relation to this, there were also six interviewees that mentioned that developing personnel or own team and one interviewee that mentioned that training others brings meaningfulness in their work. In addition to this, also two interviewees answered that they find it important that they can share their knowledge with colleagues. It is important that there is a possibility to both receive and give help when needed and for this, it is also important to have the knowledge and the time, whether it is a colleague or a customer that needs the assistance.

Successful encounters with customers were mentioned as sources of meaningfulness by two interviewees and the feeling of success by nine persons, whereas meaninglessness seems to be created by the feeling of urgency and the experience of too tight goals. Urgency and resource constraints were seen as one of the biggest challenges for well-being at work, which is emphasized by

four interviewees answering that meaningfulness affects their well-being at work. In addition to this, three interviewees mentioned flexibility as an important topic, one interviewee mentioned the possibility to perform well and one interviewee that the possibility to see the results of own work is an important source of meaningfulness. Interviewees raised the issue that their feeling of meaningfulness would be enhanced if they had more time to do their work properly and possibility to put more effort on taking care of their tasks. Both of these were raised by two interviewees. Also, sufficient amount of personnel, peace at the workplace, the feeling of freedom and more flexible working hours were mentioned.

Related to flexibility, also freedom to perform own work in best suitable way and in relaxed atmosphere were important factors. Some of the interviewees pointed out that if the company has lots of processes, the employees might not have so many opportunities to utilize their strengths and thus organization and managers should encourage employees to be brave and openly discuss about their wishes and needs. One interviewee especially mentioned that organizations should see their personnel as central strength for them. It would be important that there would be time and possibilities for open and informal discussions between different people and work groups. Organizations should cherish different discussions as a source of new ideas and good practices, which might boost both the engagement of the employees but also the success of the organization. It was also seen that managers should strengthen positive interaction inside their teams, which would also increase the feeling of success and teams' own enthusiasm to develop. According to the answers, this would create the feeling of meaningfulness and motivation towards work for both managers and other employees.

In addition, for the opportunities to use own strengths, which were emphasized by one interviewee in relation to meaningfulness at work, promotion opportunities were mentioned by seven interviewees and the possibilities to influence by nine interviewees. As a recurrent theme, especially related to the topic of inclusion, the possibilities to influence own role and work planning were pointed out. Three interviewees mentioned that the possibility for promotion would increase their feeling of meaningfulness as four interviewees said that the possibility to influence would be important for them to feel more meaningfulness at work. Related to this, two interviewees also highlighted the importance of the feeling that they have the possibility to influence. In addition, eight interviewees mentioned the possibility to demonstrate their competence. Also, the possibility to utilize own strengths at work and the possibility to present own ideas for more senior parties were mentioned.

According to the answers, subordinates appreciate if managers consider their life situations when planning work and different roles. Also listening and taking the perceptions of subordinates' forward and timely communication on relevant matters were important and meaningful topics. Related

to this, also trust and equal treatment were promoted. The feeling of trust was mentioned by three interviewees and equal treatment by one interviewee. Especially managers' responsibility related to equal treatment was seen important. According to the interviews, managers experience the feeling of appreciation and approval especially when their subordinates treat them as confidant about personal challenges and problems. This makes managers feel that they have been able to build a confident inspiring environment.

With the help of good and supporting manager also work and personal values can be in line with each other, which might be a strong source and experience of meaningfulness and motivation for the employees. The support of the manager was mentioned by two interviewees as ten interviewees considered the work itself to be meaningful and also ten interviewees considered that their job description was meaningful. In addition to this, six interviewees highlighted that for the work to be meaningful, it is important for the employees to understand the broader purpose for their jobs and tasks.

In addition to utilizing strengths, it was stated that also possibility to work with topics that are not that familiar, was seen important. Related to this, feedback that is aimed to develop the employee's know-how and skills, is crucial. Possibility to learn creates the feeling of meaningfulness and motivation related to work comprehensively. An organizational culture where people are not afraid of mistakes, and where employees are supported and instructed to do things correctly, creates appreciation and caring, which ends up showing as commitment and better work efficiency.

Although meaningfulness is to a large extent personal feeling, feedback from managers, leaders and colleagues was seen important in how the work itself and the well-being at work were experienced. Eight interviewees answered that feedback and received thanks were important for their work and the feeling of meaningfulness, whereas three interviewees answered that noticing their work efforts is important and three of the interviewees highlighted the importance of appreciation as a feeling and its affects related to meaningfulness. Also, communication was seen to significantly affect the feeling of appreciation. Communication was seen to play an important role especially in change situations depending on if relevant information had reached those employees that were influenced, or not. Four interviewees also stated that positive and constructive feedback would increase their feeling of meaningfulness, as six interviewees said that it would be important to receive more feedback related to their successes in order to strengthen their feeling of meaningfulness at work. In addition, the feeling that work efforts are appreciated and the feeling that person is necessary for the organization were mentioned as important themes to increase the feeling of meaningfulness.

Some of the interviewees presented a wish that in the future the experts of their own subject fields would be increasingly heard in earlier stages of product and service development processes. This way also the silent knowledge would be better collected and utilized in the different phases of development, through which a better and more suitable end result for the stakeholders influenced could be reached. This would in addition increase the feeling of meaningfulness and inclusion for those parties that were included in the development work. It could also be beneficial if the communication about planned changes and reforms could be carried out already in development phase and not until everything is finalized. In this way there would still be an opportunity for the employees to share their views and opinions, which might contribute for the personnel to be more committed in these reforms and changes, as well as increase the possibilities to influence and to feel inclusion, appreciation and being heard.

## **4.2 Appreciation is a key feeling for meaningfulness**

Topics that were raised the most in relation to the feeling of acceptance and appreciation were related to feedback, listening and respecting others and their opinions, the importance of good work community and a possibility for the employees to be themselves and noticed. It was also important that the work done was noticed and appreciated. Whether all received a sufficient amount of information at their disposal to carry out their work had a central affect in the feeling of appreciation. According to the answers the feeling of being left outside and to feel lack of appreciation was caused by the lack of communication and situations where employees were left without information they needed. Although the company benefits were mainly mentioned when asking what are the things that would make the commissioning company an attractive employer in the future, they were also brought up when talking about the feeling of acceptance and appreciation. It was seen that through benefits and for example given bonuses, the company can also show understanding and appreciation towards its employees. It would be important to listen to personnel in what kind of benefits and rewards would be seen as meaningful.

### **4.2.1 Inclusion affects the feeling of appreciation and motivation**

In the interviews, inclusion was mainly seen to be linked with systematic inclusion of the employees and their possibilities to be involved in common issues, their possibilities to influence by telling their own opinion and equal treatment. In addition, the feeling of being part of a wider whole and possibility to influence own role and work arrangements were also attached to the term inclusion. Twenty-two interviewees answered that inclusion means possibility to participate, twelve interviewees answered that by participating they can influence, and nine interviewees answered that inclusion means that the opinions of the employees are considered and noticed. In addition to these, for

example the experience of belonging, listening, that everyone is noticed, the feeling of appreciation, that nobody is left outside, equality, and equity were themes that were mentioned.

When asked about the personal meaning of inclusion, nineteen interviewees answered that it is really important. The possibility to influence and the experience of belonging were mentioned six times, whereas the experience of meaningfulness and equal treatment were mentioned five times. Some interviewees mentioned inclusiveness to be a motivational factor and that it is a part of building competence and related to the possibility to be heard. According to the interviews, the feeling of inclusiveness is strongly affected by the experience of the employees, which is strongly dependent on the level of how included in decision making they feel they are, or if the employees feel they are considered and informed on timely basis in matters that affect their daily work. Restricting information or the lack of communication, especially when it is linked to employees own work, is according to answers, a major reason that significantly decreases the feeling of inclusiveness and appreciation. In addition, when asking about the latest situation when person had felt to be left outside or not appreciated, the lack of possibilities to influence or the experience of not being heard were highlighted. Three of the interviewees mentioned that they felt they were not appreciated, and three interviewees mentioned that their opinions were not noticed. Two interviewees mentioned that they felt they were disregarded in decision making and also one interviewee specifically stated to be left outside on discussions that are related to work.

Interviewees were also asked, what kind of possibilities they feel they have to influence and indicate their views on matters related to work. Twenty-four interviewees answered that they are able to share their views, twenty-three interviewees answered that they have possibilities to influence in their own work community, sixteen interviewees said that in discussion with their manager, seven interviewees said that their opportunities to influence are included in their job description and sixteen interviewees that they have positive experience related to the matter. It seemed that most of the interviewees felt they had opportunities to influence in work matters that were close to them as fifteen interviewees answered that they do not feel they have possibilities to influence on the higher organizational level, although five interviewees stated that different questionnaires, especially job satisfaction survey, was an appreciated and a good channel to influence. Some of the interviewees also highlighted that it would be good to offer more opportunities to influence and that internal know-how should be leveraged more widely.

Whereas communication affects substantially to the feeling of being appreciated depending on the fact that was relevant information given to the people influenced or not, communication relates also to the feeling of equal treatment. To feel appreciated and for the job to have a meaning it is central, that employees working in same tasks are treated equally and that they are given the same

opportunities to learn and to fulfil their position. If this does not happen, there might be challenges with the flow of information, self-development or with equal treatment. In relation to the feeling of acceptance and appreciation, equal treatment and to be seen and noticed were mentioned by four interviewees. Trust and that individual opinions are noticed, were highlighted by seven interviewees, and listening by eight interviewees.

According to the interviews, it seems that processes and who the manager is are factors that significantly affect the opportunities for the employee to bring his/her own perceptions and values forward. In addition, managers are in a key position to promote their subordinates' competences for the usage of the wider organization. The perceptions of every employee should be listened regardless of how long they have been working in the company. Also, the trust imposed to the employees and the possibility to self-development were seen as important parts of feeling appreciated. The possibility to have more responsibilities or more demanding job or tasks was given as an example of the trust and appreciation that the organization might impose on the employee.

Investing and developing in inclusive culture and environment was seen as more important than developing diversity, although both were seen as important topics to recognize and be familiar with. Inclusion was seen as an important part of the leader's job description and leaders should have the ability to actively involve their subordinates in different issues and developing their work. In addition to this, also strengthening the positive interaction within the team was seen to be an important task of the team leader. This kind of approach was seen to increase both success and the experience of success but also the team's own enthusiasm to take things forward and the willingness to develop itself.

#### **4.2.2 Feedback and work community are key building blocks for appreciation**

Almost half of the interviewees stated that feedback received from colleagues is important for the feeling of appreciation and their well-being at work. In addition, eight interviewees said that the feedback received from managers is essential and six interviewees brought up that they feel appreciated if the work done is noticed. It was seen that feedback and receiving thanks for the job done are important but, in some respects, insufficient at the moment. Especially positive and encouraging feedback and supporting were raised as central issues that should be increased. When asking about the latest situation when person had felt appreciated, eleven interviewees answered that it was after receiving positive feedback, six interviewees said that after their opinions were noticed, five interviewees said that after discussing with their manager and four interviewees said that after receiving a thanks from a colleague or their manager.

Also, feedback that is meant to develop or build the capacity of the employee, was seen important and the willingness to put time and effort to develop and teach others to do things right, was seen to show respect and appreciation, whereas negative feedback should always be given personally. Unfortunately, some interviewees pointed out that they received especially negative feedback within the hearing of others. Feedback should always include a dialogue for the employee to have a possibility to discuss about the feedback. When asking about the latest situation when person had felt to be left outside or not appreciated, there were two mentions that were directly aimed at negative feedback, seven mentions related to negative experiences, a few mentioned that they felt their opinions or feedback were not appreciated or they had not received thanks for the job done.

Good working community, good colleagues and mutual humor were seen as central strengths that give energy and help to also withstand the tougher times and when facing problems. Good working community saves a lot, but if the feeling of appreciation is missing or the employees have an experience that their work has no meaning or it is not visible how their job is linked to a broader purpose, the employees might be more willing to change jobs. This emphasizes the meaning of good leadership and managers. In relation to the feeling of acceptance and appreciation, respecting others was mentioned by nine interviewees and the approval of the work community by eight interviewees. Good team spirit and good manners were both mentioned by six interviewees. In addition, the possibility for the employees to be themselves was mentioned eight times.

According to the answers, good work colleagues and the feeling of belonging affected the most to the feeling that person is a part of a work community. Many discussed about their own team when referring to work community, which emphasizes the importance of the closest colleagues when discussing about appreciation. According to twenty-two answers, the feeling of belonging relates closely to the importance of common discussions and activities that everyone is welcomed to join, like common meetings, festivities, recreational activities, lunch, and coffee moments. Related to this, thirteen interviewees considered that they would feel to be left outside if they would not have the possibility to join in everyday matters and gatherings. Especially new employees should be engaged to the work community already from the beginning to avoid the feeling of being left outside. There were four mentions that new employees were not welcomed properly, or they were treated differently. Some interviewees had also the feeling that they were left outside of the discussions that concerned work or that they were not spoken to at all during their workday. Related to this, some interviewees considered that persons that are shy or more silent are more easily left outside.

The contribution factors for the feeling of being part of a work community were quite similar than received answers for the question concerning the feeling of acceptance and appreciation. Thirteen interviewees emphasized the importance of having an open connection to colleagues, good team

spirit was pointed out by eleven interviewees, communication by eight interviewees, good manners and noticing the other in the daily work life was pointed out by seven interviewees and the possibility for the employees to be themselves was mentioned three times. In addition to these, other important factors that were raised as contribution factors for the feeling of being part of a work community, were respect, trust, equal treatment, possibility to work freely, open discussion and relaxed atmosphere with colleagues. In addition, the fact that managers and colleagues are present, truly listen, and managers take initiatives forward as well as communicate well and timely, were raised as important contribution factors.

### **4.3 Meaningfulness as a success factor for companies**

Some of the interviewees pointed out, that especially for younger generations, who are just entering the world of work, inclusion and meaningful work are important values and that these values have an increasing meaning in the future. In addition to younger generations, also older generations that are already working, have woken up to the importance of these topics from the perspective of their well-being at work. For organizations it would be of utmost importance to understand how they can offer jobs from where it is possible to find these feelings and experiences for both the future work generations as well as for the present ones. A noteworthy point is that the job itself does not necessarily need to change significantly but how it is communicated, how well different people are included and what kind of experiences are related to work, might be the most crucial aspects. In the interviews, it was highlighted that it would be important for organizations to reach humane and empathetic culture as well as culture where employees are truly listened to. The work community, leadership and communication play a significant role in this transformation. The experience of appreciation for job well done, as well as the promotion opportunities and a clear path for it, are factors that support long careers and employee engagement.

#### **4.3.1 Values and personal features of employees as parts of organizational strategy**

According to the interviews, diversity in the workplace comprises of people working in the same work community but with versatile backgrounds. These differences might be linked to issues like for example different sex, age, sexual orientation, nationality, personality, culture, religion or for example different disabilities. It was seen that diversity can be both externally and internally prominent. Internal diversity can be seen especially as different perspectives, perceptions, interests, ideas, educational backgrounds, competencies, and different personalities. Different nationalities were mentioned seventeen times, versatile educational backgrounds fifteen times, difference in age eleven times, different personalities ten times and different cultures nine times.



There were a lot of answers to the question what diversity means to the interviewee personally. Eleven interviewees answered that it means for the employees to be able to be themselves as ten interviewees answered that it means strength and five of the interviewees mentioned that it means a lot and is a positive issue. In addition to these, safety, appreciation of different opinions, openness, belonging to the work community and equal opportunities were especially mentioned. Diversity was seen to be a positive force that enriches the work community and the whole organization and also strengthens and makes teams more effective and successful, mainly because of different perceptions and competencies. Diversified work culture was also seen to create safety and building trust in the work community. A tolerant and varied workplace where everyone is accepted as they are, treated with appreciation and noticed equally despite the background without any discrimination or judgement was seen to be a central issue.

In different functions diversity was seen a little different. At headquarter, diversity was seen to be mainly internal as in logistic centers and in different local sites diversity was seen mainly to be external and many pointed out that their work included multiculturalism at daily basis. Communication about diversity seemed not to be distributed homogeneously, as it seemed that the employees at the headquarter were more informed about diversity matters than the employees in different local sites or in the logistic centers. In addition to the amount of information, the local distribution of information was seen geographically, as the employees that were informed the best seemed to be working in southern Finland.

According to the interviews, it would be necessary to take notice of diversity matters when formulating different instructions. Due to cultural and language barriers and differences people understand instructions differently. Instructions should always be looked through together with someone who could help and guide to understand the information correctly. Also, for example different aged people and their ability to perform in different duties should be considered in work planning, and when setting efficiency targets, for different jobs to be truly diversified and equal. Taking notice of diversity in different operations and instructions was seen to be a sign of appreciation.

#### **4.3.2 Self-development as a source of engagement**

When asking about the latest situation when person had felt appreciated, three interviewees mentioned that it was after a possibility to show own competence and two interviewees said that after receiving more responsibilities. According to the answers, feedback, the possibility to work in peace, trust and varied responsibilities were important instruments for self-development. Interviewees highlighted that it is important that strengths are noticed in work planning, but also feedback that is meant to develop or build the capacity of the employees, was seen to have an increasing importance. Due to urgent times, tasks seem to be given to those who already have the highest

competence to perform those tasks in order to save time and to be effective. This said, it needs to be highlighted that in the interviews, thirty-one interviewees, meaning almost all of the interviewees, said that strengths are noticed, twenty-four interviewees said that suitable tasks are given and twenty interviewees pointed out that competence and know-how is utilized.

Related to the answers concerning personal strengths and how they are used in the work community, three interviewees stated that managers should cover strengths better in their teams and five interviewees that said that strengths could be used better. According to the answers, it seems that the way employees are able to use their strengths in their work, is strongly tied in communication, managers and if the atmosphere of the work community is confidence inspiring. There were interviewees that felt they had reached jobs that met their strengths better than previous positions but also those that did not feel comfortable to talk about their interests and strengths. Yearly development discussions were seen as an important part of self-development but also other, especially informal, possibilities to have a dialogue with own manager were needed more. This was emphasized by five interviewees saying that they felt appreciated after discussing with their manager, and four interviewees said they felt appreciated after thanks received from a colleague or their manager. Also, when asked about the possibilities to influence, sixteen interviewees said that the best way is through discussing with their manager. In addition, seven interviewees pointed out that opportunities to progress or develop at work is a source of meaningfulness and an important factor, whereas two interviewees said the same about the support of the manager. Also well performed managerial work and developing own team and the personnel where mentioned.

Related to well performed managerial work, it was highlighted that it would be important for managers, in so far as possible, to discuss with their teams about different strengths and interests in the team and if these can be utilized for the work to be both efficient and significant. It would be of utmost importance to create both opportunities to learn and experiences of success for the team. This would increase the teams positive twist and the desire to develop. In addition to discussing important topics within the team, it would be important to also find time and possibilities for sparring between different work groups and positions, like for example between managers. Shared good practices and new ideas also help the organization to grow and succeed. The possibility to meet and share experiences for example with colleagues from different local sites was seen really valuable. Earlier the commissioning company had specific training and seminar days where it was possible to meet colleagues from different local sites, but these events have not been arranged for several years. This kind of events are seen to be important for self-development but also for peer support, communication purposes and for the flow of information. Some of the interviewees said that the decision to end these specific training and seminar days have increased the feeling that their work efforts and self-development is not appreciated.

## 5 Conclusions

Chapter five summarizes the findings from the theory and from the results received from the group study by answering the research questions presented in chapter 1.2. In addition, there are evaluations of the quality of the research, possible risks and how own learning progressed during thesis project. An essential part of chapter five is also the given recommendations for further actions and future developments based on the group study results.

### 5.1 Findings

My study included two main research questions and two sub-questions. My first main research question was *what meaningfulness at work is*, and to understand it, it needs to be emphasized that the feeling is personal and deeply connected into individual's personal life. Organizations can offer right kind of soil and climate, but for the feeling to flourish, it depends on the experiences and perceptions of the individual. The topic is wide and there are individual differences on the emphasis of different issues but based on theory and the study group results, it is possible to point out the most important issues that generate and maintain meaningfulness at work. The most central issues affecting meaningfulness at work are the feeling of appreciation, internal motivation, the work community, social relations, feedback, self-development, well planned and inclusive communications, the possibilities to influence and that the person is noticed and heard. The feeling of appreciation and internal motivation were so crucial that they could almost be seen as an umbrella covering the others as they seemed to be linked and explain the others. Also, psychological safety seemed to be an essential connecting factor.

The first sub-question concerned *the relation between meaningfulness and the motivation of the employees*. Important aspects for meaningfulness at work were linked to each other strongly in different theories and seemed to be connected and explained by fundamental psychological needs and the self-determination theory of Ryan and Deci (2000, 227), that brought internal motivation in the forefront as well. The connection between meaningfulness and basic psychological needs was prominent already in the beginning of the thesis project. It was surprising how big role these needs, and internal motivation played related to meaningfulness, and that there was research showing a clear connection between the basic needs, internal motivation, and meaningfulness. In addition, they were all important for the individual, but there was also a clear connection that affected organizational success as well. (Sahimaa 2017, 19.) Based on the research conducted for this thesis, it seems that the connection between motivation and meaningfulness is like a two-way street: the feeling of meaningfulness affects motivation, but motivation also affects the feeling of meaningfulness at work. These two topics seem to be closely connected to each other.

The second sub-question related to *the possible connection that the perceptions and experiences on diversity and inclusion might have on the employees' feeling of meaningfulness*. In the interviews, inclusion was mainly seen to be linked with systematic inclusion of the employees and their possibilities to be involved in common issues, their possibilities to influence by telling their own opinion and equal treatment. In addition, the feeling of being a part of a wider entity and possibility to influence on own role and work arrangements were also attached to the term inclusion. In theory, inclusion was seen to be essential for the working culture and environment; it was seen as the basis for recognition, appreciation and effective utilization of perceptions and competences of the employees (Sahimaa 2.1.2019; Martela 2020, audio track 29; Martela & Jarenko 2014, 46). It is also the foundation that connects employees to the organization and enables collaboration, flexibility, and fairness (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development n.d.). Based on the research conducted for this thesis, it is clear that the perceptions and experiences that are attached to the term inclusion have prominent role and connection to the employees' feeling of meaningfulness.

According to the interviews, diversity was seen as something that can be both externally and internally prominent. Internal diversity can be seen especially as different perspectives, perceptions, interests, ideas, educational backgrounds, competencies, and different personalities, whereas other differences might be linked to issues like, for example, different sex, age, sexual orientation, nationality, personality, culture, religion or, for example, different disabilities. Diversity was seen to be a positive force that enriches the work community and the whole organization and also strengthens and makes teams more effective and successful, mainly because of different perceptions and competencies. Diversified work culture was also seen to create safety and building trust in the work community. A tolerant and varied workplace where everyone is accepted as they are, treated with appreciation and noticed equally despite the background without any discrimination or judgement, was seen to be a central issue.

In theory, the concept of diversity was described as respecting and accepting the differences between individuals that might be prominent both in ways of being but also in ways of knowing. An essential part of diversity is psychological safety, that is the foundation for an organizational environment that is positive, nurturing, and respectful. (Queensborough community college n.d.). There should be opportunity for every employee to feel accepted as who they are. It is important for the well-being of an individual to have the experience that they are an important part of the work community as a whole, with their faults and strengths. Good work community knows how to build on the strengths of its employees and also, how to support each other to use those strengths. (Martela & Jarenko 2014, 46). My assumption was that diversity would not have such a straight connection to the feeling of meaningfulness at work as inclusion seemed to have, but personal differences, the

possibility to be heard, noticed, and appreciated as who we are, as well as the psychological safety and the trust we need for the feeling of meaningfulness to flourish, all part of diversity, seem to be essentially linked with the employees' feeling of meaningfulness at work.

The second main research question was *why organizations should take the feeling of meaningfulness into account in their operations*. Meaningful work can be highly motivational, leading to improved performance, commitment, and satisfaction and it has seen to give rise also to several benefits for both individual level well-being as well as organizational level success. Also, the psychological fundamental needs and the need for benevolence, as well as the experience of meaningfulness at work, have been linked in research to four different individual and organizational level benefits: job satisfaction, commitment to work, work efficiency and voluntary actions at the workplace. A person that has found a meaningful job is generally healthier and more prosperous, as well as more satisfied with his/her job and life overall. This shows as a greater commitment to work and as increased work efficiency. (Sahimaa 2017, 19-20, 41.)

From organizational point of view, the feeling of meaningfulness and internal motivation seem to be entwined together. Internally motivated employees are more enthusiastic, active, and productive, and they can deliver results in a more sustainable way. According to Martela and Jarenko (2014, 32-33), employees that experience the flow of work are also happier, healthier and they have better abilities to work and less absences for sickness. When organizations are able to find a way to strengthen the internal motivation of their employees for their tasks, it also has a clear and positive impact on an organization's innovation and performance.

Bailey and Madden (2016, 14-15) emphasized that although it is hard for the organizations to "manage meaningfulness" as the feeling connects so deeply into individual's personal life, it would be important for the organizations to realize that in order to attract and retain motivated and well-performing employees also in the future, organizations need to focus on values beyond the profit motive. Bailey and Madden (2016, 7) found out that although those issues that were driving the sense of meaningfulness were mostly in the hands of the individuals, the factors that were related to the feeling of meaninglessness were mostly within the control of managers and leaders, which emphasize the important role leaders have also on their employees' well-being.

In the future, the importance of meaningfulness at work is seen to have an increasing importance, because of younger generations who see meaningfulness as one of the most important factors related to work (Riihimäki 1.6.2020). In addition, to these more "softer values" there are also standards like ESG, that highlight the importance of inclusion and diversity and employee engagement to monetary issues (Fink 2021). In chapter 2 it was said that we need trust, social capital, and hope for the future to change things and to embrace the inclusiveness in our society. Social capital is

built by respecting and understanding diversity and by increasing and enabling people’s possibilities to influence and to participate. (Dufva et al. 2020, 44.) It seems that there are several reasons why organizations should take the feeling of meaningfulness into account in their operations.

In figure 6, the theoretical framework that was presented in chapter 2.4., is complemented with the study results of this thesis showing the close connection and dialogue between the theory and the results. The basic psychological needs were all mentioned several times in the interviews conducted for this thesis. Most weight was given to competence and relatedness but also autonomy and doing good were mentioned as important topics. Especially work community and helping others were seen as important sources for meaningful work and appreciation. Even when the workload was heavy and there were disappointments, job was seen to be satisfying if these issues were seen to be positive and the feeling of belonging strong.

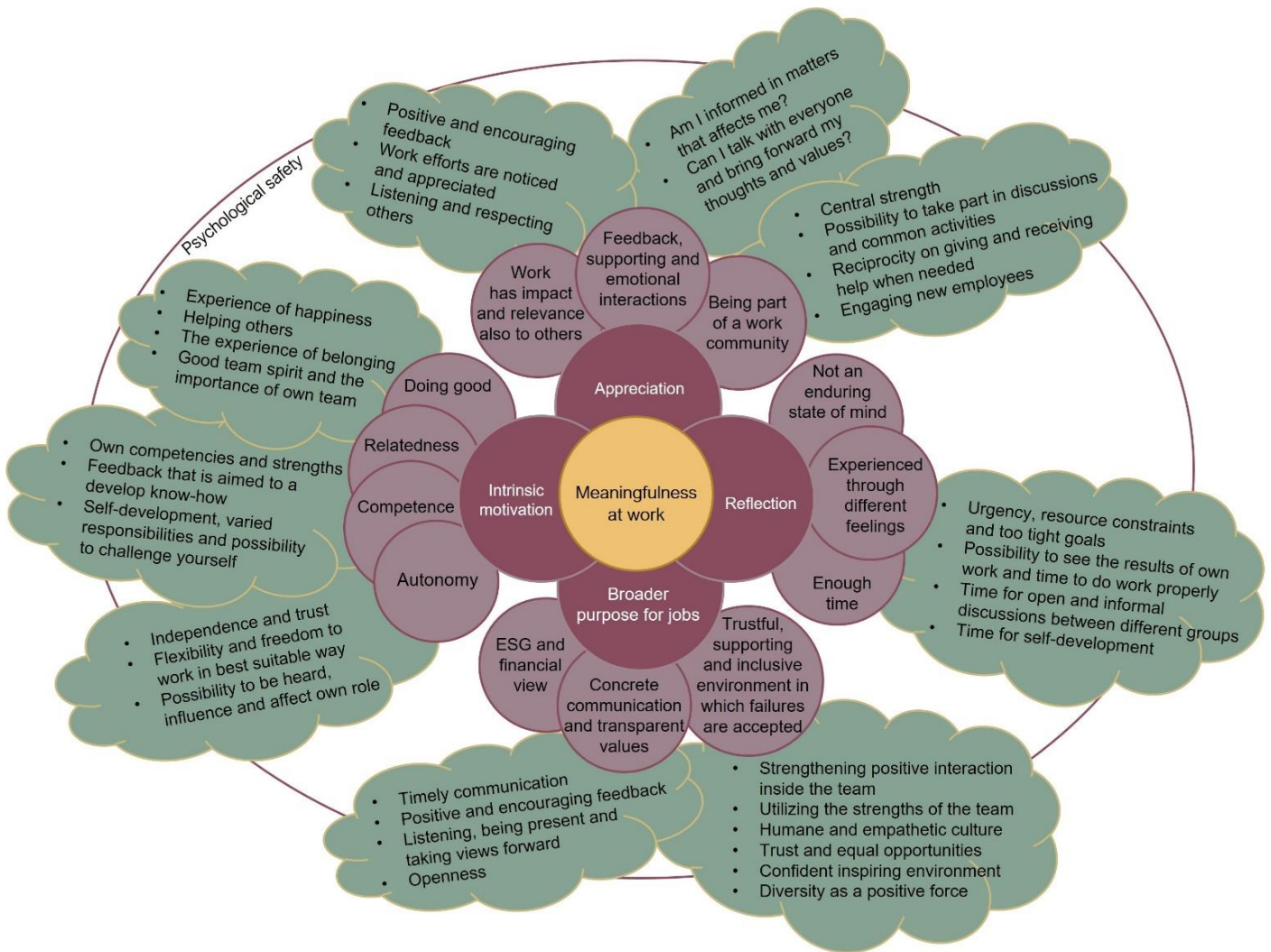


Figure 6 Meaningfulness at work through theory and research

In the interviews, it was asked that what makes a person feel appreciated and valued. It was pointed out that communication with colleagues is extremely important. It is important that all of the employees are talking to each other, and no one is left outside from the conversations or from different groups. Also, feedback and received thanks from colleagues but especially from managers were seen as important sources of appreciation. It was hoped that there would be more positive feedback and encouraging from the managers, especially now when Covid-19 makes work heavier. Feedback and supporting were seen to have a clear connection for the well-being but also in the experienced meaningfulness and importance of employees' own job. Communication was seen to be crucial factor also from the perspective that if the views and ideas of the employees were listened and taken forward, and if the organization communicated well on different issues and changes affecting their work or not. If employees did not receive information on matters affecting their work, it made them feel unappreciated and that their work had no value.

Both according to theory and study results, for long term effectiveness, success, and employee experience it would be better to develop more employees to have wider competencies. The opportunity to learn creates a sense of meaning and motivation for holistic work. Related to this, a culture that is not afraid of mistakes and instead supports employees to develop themselves and perform their duties correctly, shows as increased employee engagement and work efficiency, whereas urgency and having no time to reflect are the worst enemies of the feeling of meaningfulness and self-development.

## **5.2 Recommended actions and future development**

In the interviews of the group study, one central experience that was raised, was the feeling that the employees in the headquarter might not understand entirely the practical work done in the different local sites although the people in the headquarter are still making many decisions that affect the practical work of the sites. Referring to the chapter 2.3.2. and presented concept of interactional meaningfulness, this might be related on the practicalities or the opportunities to be able to meet the people who benefit from the job done. This means that it could be meaningful for both the employees in the headquarter, as well as the employees in the local sites to be able to meet and discuss more. In this way, the employees of the local sites would feel more appreciated and inclusive and the employees in the headquarter would have increased sense of meaningfulness as they would meet the people their work contributes to and see the actual environment that their decisions affect. Related to the interactional meaningfulness, it was also raised from the local sites, that one of the most meaningful part of their work is the opportunity to meet and to serve their clients as well as possible, but their efficiency targets might be so tight that this is not always possible. To increase the feeling of meaningfulness, the work should be planned and arranged so, that there is

also time reserved for customer service. In the light of research, it seems that this boosts also other parts of the work.

Local presence and diversity aspects should be considered in how communication is planned and implemented, as well as how different instructions are conducted and how they are discussed with the employees. All information given forward should be concrete and as far as possible also tied into the target groups daily work, to make sure that the subject is well understood, and it is internalized also to the practical work. Due to cultural and language barriers, all employees might not understand topics equally. This puts emphasis on the chosen communication channels, as well as in the chosen lyrics and examples.

For the organization to develop even more diversified, inclusive, and equitable, it needs to be able to face change. Listening and general efforts to try to understand local needs and questions, especially related to diversity and inclusion, are central topics for successful change. When the local needs are truly understood, it is easier to develop and introduce customs and changes that are taken into use permanently. In some cases, local diversity and inclusion champions might help in enhancing the dialogue.

Also, managers should be encouraged for more inclusive leadership, which would also increase employees' feeling of inclusion, meaningfulness, and appreciation. In addition, also giving feedback should be placed more emphasis on. Especially supporting feedback and related communication are important topics. As a means for self-development and a way forward, many of the interviewees wished to have more feedback that is especially meant to develop or build their capacity. A culture, where mistakes are not a taboo, and on the contrary, employees are supported and instructed how to make tasks right, is a culture of appreciation and caring, which forms a foundation of psychological safety. This kind of culture shows as increased employee engagement and improved work efficiency.

In the orientation of new employees, it would be of utmost importance to put emphasis on everyone having the same quality training and information. It would be important to focus that new employees receive a comprehensive picture and understanding about their job descriptions and the importance that their jobs and tasks have for the wider organizational purpose. In order to motivate employees, it is also good to go through possible future learning and career paths. If the feeling of appreciation is missing or employees have an experience that their work has no meaning or the link to wider purpose is not prominent, there is a significant risk for the employees to change jobs or underperform.



Related to competencies and skills, a lot of expertise is found within the organization that could be a favorable foundation for internal trainings. Hands-on trainings would also respond to the need to help colleagues and to self-develop. It would also boost the knowledge of the organization as a whole. In addition to these trainings, it would be important that there would be time and opportunities to discuss more and spar with other employees and work groups. Shared good practices and new ideas can also boost organizational success.

Development projects should include those employees, or representatives from those departments, who are affected most by the planned reforms and changes. Also, employees from different hierarchy levels should be engaged. Planned reforms, that are under development, could be communicated earlier when the received feedback could also be better utilized. This could also contribute to the employee engagement, increase inclusion, feelings of being heard and appreciated, and also the possibilities to influence that are all important topics for the feeling of meaningfulness at work.

As this thesis was delimited to address the feeling of meaningfulness only from the perspective of an individual, although in work context, it could be beneficial to research the role of the leader in this process more as meaningfulness seems to be an important topic for empathetical, inclusive and responsible leader. For future research, also welfare topics related to meaningfulness could be beneficial to study more, as meaningfulness at work is closely related to employees' mental health, well-being, and resiliency, which are all important topics for future organizations to understand and manage. Especially in a world, where the nature of work and the environment is constantly changing.

### **5.3 Quality of the research**

At the beginning of the study, the biggest risk for the data gathering and for the thesis was seen to be the risk of not getting enough persons to attend the interviews in the necessary timeline. A suitable amount from the commissioning company's perspective was seen to be 7-10 interviews per group member, which meant approximately total of 40 interviews. We discussed in our study group that if this risk materialized, we would need to think alternative and supplementary ways for data gathering. We tried to manage this risk by communicating with the commissioning company and expressing our worries concerning the topic. We presented our timeline limitations and our wishes on the possibility to contact possible interviewees in different channels to maximize the participants. In addition, the representative from the commissioning company promised to help with contacting suitable persons for the interviews.

The risk of getting enough participants did not materialize, but unfortunately there were only Finnish speaking people attending, although the invitation text was published in both Finnish and in English. It was also highlighted that the interviews can be conducted in both languages. Although we already used multiple channels, it may have needed more time for us to directly contact those sites that were the most multicultural and it may have been good to discuss straight with team managers in order to help them to encourage their teams to participate. As our study topic was related to diversity and inclusion, the views and perceptions of people that are non-native speakers would have been important and diversified the results.

In addition to the first risk, there was also the risk of not getting enough interviewees from different levels and different parts of the organization. As our topic concerned diversity, this was also crucial for relevant study findings. We tried to manage this risk by presenting to the representative of the commission company our plans and wishes to interview employees from top management, middle management, a presentative from human resources and employees from different locations. This risk did not materialize as there were quite evenly people participating both geographically as well as organizationally. This said, I believe that as the interview time was not considered as working time, we would have been able to receive even more staff members from local sites if we had contacted straight some of the team managers that could have discussed with their teams about the importance of the study and to support in work arrangements if necessary. Although, it needs to be said that anonymity would have been harder to keep in this way.

We also discussed in our study group about the time challenge with the transcriptions of the interviews as that is usually heavy and time-consuming phase of the study process. To minimize this risk, we used the transcription tool available in Teams whenever the interview was conducted in Teams. Phone calls were transcribed manually afterwards. Interviews were also recorded if the participant had given his/her consent. We tried to divide the interviews as evenly as possible between the study team to avoid one person having too much work with transcriptions. All in all, we were still surprised of the time the transcriptions consumed as all transcriptions of MS Teams needed to be checked and remedied afterwards if MS Teams had misspelled. We were able to keep up with the timetable we had planned for the interviews and transcriptions, but we noticed that if there had been more challenges like sicknesses on the way, we would have been delayed. This in mind, it would be good in the future to plan more time in the work plan, just in case.

For the interviews, we had a specific presentation material prepared that included all of the basic information and the interview questions. This material was used by all of the students in all interviews to both make it easier for the interviewer, as well as the interviewee, to follow the interview but also to ensure that the same lyrics and order of the questions would be used in all of the

interviews to keep the quality of the study as consistent as possible. Another way for us to secure the reliability of the results was to use ATLAS.ti for data analyzing purposes. Using ATLAS.ti brought reliability for the study and also to us personally, that we had interpreted the most important themes correctly.

Related to analyzing the results, we noticed later from the recordings and transcriptions, that we sometimes had unintentionally went along with the discussion and added some comments, that we later considered might have led the interviewee in the moment. We believe that this was related to the issue, that our knowledge about the topic increased during the interviews. Although, it was carefully seen that the interviews were carried out with similar questions and fixed order for all of the participants not to jeopardize the comparability and reliability of the results, we had to leave these parts out when analyzing the results in ATLAS.ti, to be sure that the comments that were included in the analysis were purely the opinions of the interviewees.

Also, open mindset was important in analyzing the results. Our study group noticed that there is a difference if you just read the notes or if you also listen to the recordings from the interviews. This was especially important to notice as all of us did not attend all of the interviews. When reading just the notes there is some kind of experience or feeling missing that you get when you hear the voice and how the interviewee uses and emphasizes different words or laughs during the interview. It made me wonder what the effect on the interpretation of different issues is.

Concerning the interview situation, we received really positive feedback from the commissioning company that we conducted the interviews professionally. It seems that people had given spontaneous positive feedback to the dedicated contact person. We believe that we were able to create a confident inspiring climate that was crucial for the topic and to receive answers that would truly reflect the perceptions of the employees. This in mind, it needs to be said, that it is hard to draw the line between dialogue that keeps the situation relaxed and confidence inspiring, and dialogue that leads the interviewee's answers. There is definitely room for improvement here.

In addition to the study, one additional risk for my thesis was also the delimitation of the topic. The topic was wide and included various interesting viewpoints. The thesis needed to be structured so that it is easy to read and follow and all of the presented viewpoints are clearly connected to the case and, eventually, also to the findings. I tried to manage this risk with well-stated research questions and continuous reviewing and formulating of the text. Already in the beginning of the study, I started to draw a mind map, which was complemented during the interviews and during theory reading. The visuality of the mind map made it easier for me to observe and structure the whole topic and also to think about the delimitations. For me, the finalized thesis seems to be a consistent package, where different parts are well integrated together.

#### 5.4 Evaluation of personal learning

Preparing this thesis and the report for the commissioning company, have made me notice that my former work as an assistant and my communication skills but especially my current work as consultant including my ability to adopt vast amount of information and to draw conclusions, have all contributed on writing this thesis. I am now able to see my background as a bigger strength for my future career. Also, the master studies have helped me to further process my ability to see things in a different light, to see solutions and to think more widely. In addition, all positive feedback along the way has furthermore strengthen me to trust in my different skills. I chose to study in English as a challenge for myself and I now notice that, once again, going to the discomfort zone has given me new strengths.

During this process, I have also noticed, that it is especially useful if there is an opportunity to have a wide support network both in personal life and in studies, especially if studies are accompanied by full-time working. I was able to participate and produce my thesis in a group, which was especially beneficial for me. Although the common part was related to data gathering and writing the thesis was individual work, I still felt that the group supported and had a big impact on my well-being and motivation. It was also easier to discuss and ask questions concerning thesis work, as we all were in the same situation.

What comes to the process of writing thesis, it can definitely be said that it is worth choosing a topic that is interesting. The process is long and there are moments when it would be hard to carry on if the topic did not motivate and I did not be eager to learn more about it. Another motivation factor was also the opportunity to discuss it at my workplace for the possibility to utilize the new knowledge at my work in the future. Also, the project plan our study group made in the beginning of the process, proved to be useful as concrete tasks and deadlines helped me to schedule my work and cut it to smaller pieces. If I had thought about the whole process and work all the time, I might have been exhausted and would not have been able to produce anything. By concentrating on smaller pieces, I wrote something all the time and eventually I noticed I had already done quite a lot. Also, the opportunity to receive feedback from thesis supervisor already for the incomplete thesis and its structure, proved to be really useful.

Related to the topic, I noticed that open mindset is really important. As I already stated in the part where I discussed about the findings, I had presumptions what my work would look like and what topics would be important. If I had followed these thoughts, my work would have looked really different. As I now reflect on this, I notice my learning path was like a service design process, where everything is vague and messy in the beginning but as you just keep an open mind and a curious attitude with few iteration rounds it all makes sense in the end.

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## **Appendixes**

### **Appendix 1. The interview questions**

For the request of the commissioning company, the name of the company is not mentioned and is replaced with the term commissioning company in the interview questions.

#### **Background questions (B1-B3)**

B1 Which of the following groups do you belong to?

Employee or manager in local site / employee or manager in distribution centre / staff member or senior staff member at headquarter / staff member of senior staff member of supporting function in distribution centre

B2 Are you in a managerial position?

B3 Which age group do you belong to? Under 20 yrs, 20-30 yrs, 30-40 yrs or above 40 yrs

#### **Diversity (Q1-Q9)**

Q1 How do you personally understand diversity at workplace?

Q2 What does diversity mean to you?

Q3 How is diversity visible in the daily work at your workplace? Can you give an example of a situation?

Q4 How would you wish diversity to be visible in the daily work at your workplace?

Q5 What kind of things make you feel accepted and appreciated in your work community?

Q6 What was the latest situation where you felt yourself accepted in your work community?

Q7 What was the latest situation where you did not feel appreciated, or you felt like you would be left outside or excluded?

Q8 What kind of prejudices have you faced in your work community? Can you give an example?

Q9 Have you experienced or seen others experience discrimination at the commissioning company?



**Inclusion (Q10-Q22)**

Q10 How do you understand the term inclusion?

Q11 What does inclusion mean to you?

Q12 In what way are your personal values and perceptions considered at the commissioning company?

Q13 What makes your work meaningful to you or are important to you in your work?

Q14 What kind of things would increase the feeling of meaningfulness?

Q15 What kind of possibilities do you have to influence and indicate your views on matters related to work?

Q16 What issues would further assist your feeling of being included in your work community?

Q17 What issues make you feel like you would be left outside or excluded from your work community?

Q18 How are your personal strengths considered in your work or in the activities of the work community?

Q19 Why is it important to develop diversity and inclusion work?

Q20 Do you think that equality is reality at the commissioning company?

Q21 How do you feel that the commissioning company shows its commitment on proceeding diversity and inclusion?

Q22 What are the things that make / would make the commissioning company an attractive employer in the future?

**Additional questions for managers (Q23-Q26)**

Q23 How would you wish that diversity and inclusion activities would be developed in the future?

Q24 How would you wish to be able to influence, or be involved in this?

Q25 What kind of training have you received to lead diversity and inclusion?

Q26 What kind of training would you wish for?

**Appendix 2. Interview invitation text posted on commissioning company's intranet and internal mobile application**

The content is removed due to confidentiality.

**Appendix 3. The presentation material for interviews**

The content is removed due to confidentiality.

**Appendix 4. ATLAS.ti results**

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**Appendix 5. The report of the commissioning company**

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