



## **Building a toolkit for an inclusive culture in a remote work environment.**

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## Abstract

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<p>The scope of this thesis is that of researching Diversity and Inclusion at company x, a small company that operates in the IT industry, the research has a particular focus on inclusion and belonging. Through the research work the author's intention is that of creating a case study of the current situation of Diversity and Inclusion at company x by clarifying the level of understanding of the topic among leaders and employees at company x and what concrete actions company x has put into practice so far to make sure the workplace has an inclusive culture where employees feel like they belong.</p> <p>The thesis has a concrete outcome which is a toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment. This toolkit is created on the basis of the answers to the research questions and on the basis of the best practices on Diversity and Inclusion described by the literature.</p> <p>This thesis uses a qualitative method approach, through a self-administered questionnaire and a series of semi-structured interviews, the data is collected and then analysed through the thematic analysis methodology. The thematic analysis leads to the finding of themes that are most mentioned by company x during the data collection phase and that will serve to understand what the situation of company x in relation to Diversity and Inclusion is. The absence of specific themes in the thematic analysis results, themes which are described in the theoretical framework, will suggest the need of covering those themes in the toolkit for inclusion to provide the essentials of Diversity and Inclusion to all company x's employees.</p> <p>The theoretical framework includes the most common and essential information described in the Diversity, and Inclusion literature and the basic concepts that companies who are interested in building a culture of inclusion and belonging should be familiar with. The theoretical framework outlines the basics of Diversity and Inclusion and the benefits of having a diverse workforce, it highlights the importance of managing diversity and being aware of biases, microaggressions, stereotypes and prejudices which can be an obstacle to an inclusive culture. The theoretical framework also touches upon the several types of diversity, and describes concepts as self-awareness, emotional intelligence, psychological safety, mindfulness, and inclusive leadership, which are essential concepts that need to be well-understood and put into practice to support an inclusive culture.</p> <p>The outcome of the thesis, the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment, includes a description of what diversity and inclusion are and an introduction to biases, stereotypes, prejudices and microaggressions with concrete examples to provide clarity on these concepts which are not always easy to understand. The toolkit also gives guidelines to leaders, employees, and recruiters on how to contribute to building an inclusive culture and workplace, and it outlines the importance of speaking up if unfairness or discrimination has been experienced or witnessed. Overall, the toolkit gives the foundations for an inclusive culture, and it can be used now by company x and also in the future when the company will grow.</p>
<b>Keywords</b> Inclusion, Belonging, Diversity, Inclusive Leadership, Psychological Safety, Emotional Intelligence

## **Abbreviations**

AS: Asperger syndrome

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

D&I: Diversity and Inclusion

EQ: Emotional quotient

HR: Human Resources

ILO: The International Labor Organization

IQ: Intelligence quotient

IQ: Interview questions

MAAS: Mindful Attention Awareness Scale

Social ID: Social identity

RQ1: Research question 1

RQ2: Research question 2

RQ3: Research question 3

QQ: Questionnaire questions

# Contents

1	Introduction .....	1
1.1	The thesis' commissioning company .....	2
2	Objectives .....	4
2.1	Goals of the research .....	4
2.2	Research questions.....	4
2.3	Limitations of the research .....	5
3	Overlay matrix .....	6
4	Theoretical framework.....	8
4.1	Legislation supporting D&I.....	8
4.2	Diversity and managing diversity .....	10
4.3	Intersectionality and the dimensions of diversity.....	11
4.3.1	Neurodiversity and hidden inequalities.....	12
4.4	Biases, stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination and microaggressions .....	14
4.4.1	Biases.....	14
4.4.2	Stereotypes.....	16
4.4.3	Prejudices .....	16
4.4.4	Discrimination .....	17
4.4.5	Microaggressions.....	17
4.5	Inclusion, belonging and the benefits of managing diversity .....	19
4.6	Cross-cultural communication and leadership .....	21
4.7	Psychological safety.....	24
4.8	Emotionally intelligent leadership .....	28
4.9	Mindfulness practice for self-awareness and decreasing ostracism.....	28
4.10	Fostering inclusion with servant leadership .....	29
4.11	Leading diverse teams in a remote work environment.....	31
4.12	Steps to start a D&I and inclusive leadership-based culture .....	34
4.13	Theoretical framework summary .....	37
5	Methodology and Implementation.....	38
5.1	What is research? .....	38
5.2	Research design .....	38
5.3	Types of research .....	39
5.4	Research process .....	40
5.5	What is good research? .....	41
5.6	Research approach and strategy.....	42
5.7	Methods of data collection.....	44

5.7.1	Quantitative and qualitative data .....	44
5.7.2	Primary and secondary data .....	44
5.7.3	The quantitative and qualitative approach.....	45
5.7.4	Questionnaire and interviews .....	46
5.7.5	Sample selection.....	49
5.8	Other development methods .....	50
5.9	Ethical considerations .....	50
5.10	Data Analysis .....	51
5.10.1	Questionnaire analysis.....	51
5.10.2	Thematic analysis .....	52
6	Findings and outcome of the research.....	57
6.1	Interpretation of the collected data .....	57
6.2	The concepts of significance, generalizability, reliability, and validity.....	57
6.3	Trustworthiness and authenticity .....	58
6.4	Answering the research questions.....	59
6.5	Outcome: the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment .....	63
6.5.1	Rationale behind the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment.....	64
7	Conclusion .....	68
8	Suggested actions for the future.....	70
9	Further developments suggestions.....	72
10	Final reflections on building an inclusive culture .....	73
11	Reflections on the thesis process and on the thesis outcome.....	75
	Sources .....	77
	Appendices .....	83
Appendix 1.	Questionnaire questions .....	83
Appendix 2.	Invitation and instruction for the questionnaire.....	85
Appendix 3.	Semi-structured interview guide.....	87
Appendix 4.	Invitation to the semi-structured interview .....	88

## 1 Introduction

Diversity and Inclusion is a theme that has recently received a lot of attention from the world of business. Diversity indicates the differences among people at work, these differences can for example be related to ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation. Inclusion is an action done to ensure all people and, especially those belonging to diverse groups, can feel comfortable and included at work, and that their differences are appreciated. Diversity is what a business has because of the different type of people working in the company, inclusion is what a business does with diversity, it is how diversity is managed inside the organization, so that all can succeed and feel that they belong despite their differences. (Armstrong & Armstrong 2020, 165.) Because of migratory events and of the globalization, because of the recent pandemic and of the status of the business in the world, companies of all sizes are currently faced with complex challenges to integrate a diverse workforce in the organization and at the same time managing diversity in efficient and effective way. Being skilled at managing diversity is not the only new-normal expected from leaders around the world, but also knowing how to leverage diversity, understand it, and ultimately how to create work environments where people feel good, included and that they truly belong despite the differences. This might sound like an overly ambitious goal to some, but that is not the case and many businesses have already started with the right foot thinking of diversity as something positive that brings added value to the company, like more creativity, innovation, engagement, and benefits to the bottom-line. This thesis work will be done for one of those companies who thinks forward and has understood the value of implementing D&I actions right from the beginning to ensure a healthy culture and a healthy business for all employees. The outcome of the thesis will be a toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment that the thesis commissioning company, called from now on company x, will use to create and maintain a positive culture which fosters belonging and compassion among people and that supports seeing co-workers and leaders as human first despite their titles, their differences, and their backgrounds.

The report will give some initial information about company x to make the reader understanding the kind of entity, the size, the industry, and the goals of company x, this will provide the background information so to clarify from which point of view the study has been done and also to understand the analysis of the study results, the conclusions, and the suggestions for future developments. The report will then outline the essentials of D&I which can be found in the research and literature around the world, and it will list some of the most important concepts that need to be well-understood, considered and put into action, for a business to truly benefit from diversity and create an inclusive work environment. After the theoretical framework, the methodology, and the empirical implementation of the study will be described referencing also to the theory of research methodology, data collection and analysis. And finally, the findings and results of the study will be described,

specifically to understand if the research questions have been answered and how well they have been answered. The outcome of the study will be a toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment. Additional suggestions for further development will be given at the end of the report together with a personal evaluation of how the study proceeded and some self-reflections.

This is a research done on a limited sample, as only 4 persons work at company x at the moment, nevertheless, with this study I hope to give enough clear information on the steps that have been taken in this specific case of company x, researching D&I in a small-sized company which is still very new and does not yet have processes or firm guidelines in respect to D&I, and with that I also hope to describe clearly for the reader some basics theoretical concepts that can be applied to bigger entities as well. My wish with this study is that of satisfying company x's needs for clear guidelines on D&I through this research and through the D&I literature, all this with a toolkit company x will use internally and that will help them shaping their culture in a consistent way to foster inclusion and belonging in the organization.

With the writing of this thesis, my ultimate wish, is that the reader will get inspired and stimulated in thinking about their own organization's culture, how they contribute to that culture and what they can do personally to make the working place one that fully embraces diversity and acknowledges the importance of including and respecting others as humans. As after all, apart from being workers with our own titles, awards, and daily tasks, we are first and foremost humans with the right to be treated with respect and honor by co-workers and leaders, and the right and responsibility to contribute making our entity a great place to work for all. This thesis wants to talk to all layers of the organization, but it is especially dedicated to all those people who belong to a diverse group, and who have experienced or witnessed discrimination, prejudices, stereotypes at work, and who do not dare to speak up or ask for support. This is also a work focused on creating awareness in all those employees who lead a team of people, of the amazing opportunity and responsibility they are given, to change people lives at work because of their efforts and contribution to the well-being of others by adopting D&I friendly behaviors and practices.

## **1.1 The thesis' commissioning company**

Company x was founded in 2018 in Finland. The company currently has 4 employees including the CEO. The company also has advisors who help with consultancy work, they do not officially belong to the company. Company x works in the technology industry and its main product is a platform to help company x's customers manage the performance management process, particularly with a human-centric approach, as the tool helps both organizations and employees. Company x's customers get added value by streamlining the performance management process thanks to the tool's features and capabilities and the employees get a platform which is centered on the concept of

coaching workers and caring about their career development, giving them voice and choice on how their career can develop. The platform created by company x fosters a coaching culture and supports the engagement and growth of the employees making it a great tool for all in the organization. Company x is a diverse company in the sense that it includes individuals from other countries than Finland and it is also multilingual. They operate in Finland in a remote work setting, and they used to have employees located outside of Finland as well some time ago. Company x has a desire for growth and one of the main goals is to hire at an international level, so to have an even more diverse workforce. The company also created another platform dedicated to measuring D&I indicators through surveys, this is not the current focus of company x though. This makes company x already knowledgeable at a certain level of the D&I topic and of its importance. With this thesis a case study will be created to go deeper into what has been done at company x in relation to D&I and what company x's future needs and requirements for D&I are.

## 2 Objectives

In this chapter the goals of the research and the limitations of the study will be listed and described to give an initial understanding to the reader of what the thesis report will include and what not and why this study has been done.

### 2.1 Goals of the research

The goals of this study are both research-related goals, which will provide understanding on D&I as a phenomenon and offer the foundations for a reflection on the situation of company x in relation to D&I, and a more concrete goal which is a toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment to be used by company x internally, and which will be based on the findings of the case study and on the essential concept outlined in the theoretical framework.

The main scope of the research is that of collecting enough information through the data collection methods used in the study to be able to write a comprehensive summary of the research findings, so to provide an overview of what company x has been doing so far in relation to D&I matters, what the way of thinking and the approach of the leaders and employees at company x are when talking about D&I topics, what is obvious to them what is not so obvious, and what concepts need to be reinforced. Another scope of the research is that of understanding what the needs of company x are with respect to D&I so to be able to create a toolkit for inclusion that will help them shape a culture based on appreciation, respect and leveraging of diversity and, that at the same time, will support in creating a culture based on inclusion which may result in a feeling of belonging in all those who currently work in the company or who will join the company. The toolkit will be created specifically considering the remote work environment.

### 2.2 Research questions

There are three main research questions, the first one is made of two sub-questions a. and b.

- RQ1. What is the current status of company x in relation to D&I?
  - RQ1a. How do company x's leaders and employees see the importance of an inclusive culture?
  - RQ1b. What has been done so far at company x in relation to D&I?
- RQ2. What are the needs of company x in relation to D&I?
- RQ3. What are the best practices that could support company x in building an inclusive work culture?

Answering RQ1 and RQ2 will be done through the data collection and analysis phases, while RQ3 will be answered mainly by the literature on D&I taking into consideration the results of the case study.

### **2.3 Limitations of the research**

The research will primarily focus on the inclusion aspect of diversity, but it will also analyze diversity as the two are to be considered together, as they often support each other and because company x has goals to grow and be even more diverse than now. The research will mainly focus on what the situation is now at company x as we do not know what the future will be, but it will take into consideration the future plans for growth at company x. Although the D&I legislation in Finland will be mentioned in the theoretical framework, as I think it is necessary to know the basics of the legislation in order to run D&I actions in alignment with the law of the country, and also the results of the questionnaire show that the legislation is not a familiar topic to all at company x, this will not be the main focus of the research. Also, the study will be conducted more from a point of view of analyzing company x's culture so to give them tools to build what still does not exist or to maintain what is good in the culture at the moment, but the study will not delve into more HR aspects of managing D&I and will not go into much detail on areas like how to create a plan and strategy for D&I in an organization.

### 3 Overlay matrix

An overlay matrix in (table1) provides the reader with a map to find which question in the self-administered questionnaire and in the interviews, that are the main data collection methods used in this study, answers each research question. The overlay matrix also shows in which chapter of this report the results and finding of the answers to the research questions are described and discussed.

Table 1. Overlay matrix

<b>Research questions</b>	<b>Theoretical framework (Chapter)</b>	<b>Questionnaire and interviews questions</b>	<b>Results (Chapter)</b>
1) What is the current status of company x in relation to D&I?		QQ: 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 13, 16, 17,19, 22, 23 IQ: 8, 9, 12, 13, 14,15	6.4
1.a) How do company x's leaders and employees see the importance of an inclusive culture?		QQ: 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 19, 22 IQ: 1, 10, 11	6.4
1.b) What has been done so far at company x in relation to D&I?		IQ: 2, 3, 4, 5, 13	6.4
2) What are the needs of company x in relation to D&I?		QQ: 7, 18, 20, 21, 24 IQ: 6, 7	6.4
3) What are the best practices that could support company x in building an inclusive work culture?	4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4., 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9, 4.10, 4.11, 4.12		6.4, 6.5

As shown in the overlay matrix in (table 1) the research questions RQ1, RQ1a, RQ1b and RQ2 are answered with the questionnaire and the interviews, as these questions are strictly related to the situation of company x. The research question RQ3 is answered with the information on D&I found

in the literature, which is described in the theoretical framework (chapter 4) because this research question is related to the D&I best practices, which is best answered by consulting the literature. The results of the findings are commented on and discussed in (chapter 6.4, 6.5)

## 4 Theoretical framework

In this chapter I will describe what I think are the most relevant theoretical concepts to support the research and development work of this master thesis and the creation of the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment. I honestly believe the theoretical framework has a crucial role in the creation of the toolkit because, although a case study will be carried out on company x and its approach to D&I, the theory will give the foundations and principles that must be included in the toolkit in order for it to be based on solid research findings and on the most up to date information related to the topic of D&I. In the theoretical framework I will mention literature and sources related to D&I, the focus will be more on inclusion and belonging than diversity according to the scope of this thesis. I will describe the significant role of leadership in creating a culture of inclusion, I will particularly focus on the importance of psychological safety in creating a feeling of belonging in employees especially when working remotely. In addition to that, cross-cultural communication, and the role of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and mindfulness in leading people and making sure they feel appreciated at work, will also be some of the key topics which will be presented in the theoretical framework.

### 4.1 Legislation supporting D&I

This chapters gives essential information on the legislation and major bodies supporting D&I in the world and in Finland.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was published in Paris by the United Nations General Assembly, and adopted in 1948, set the basis for non-discrimination and equality at work in articles 2 and 23. In article 2 it lays the foundation for the entire declaration, stating the freedom and rights in the declarations are applicable to all human beings independently from race, sex, color, religion, and any other type of diversity. In article 23 the declaration goes into detail on the rights related to equality in pay for equal work and the right to such a remuneration that allows a life of human dignity. (United Nations 2023.)

The International Labor Organization (ILO) is United Nations' agency for the world of work, it was established in 1919 with the Treaty of Versailles to support social justice through work, and in 1945 it became a specialized agency of the United Nations, it is currently known as the world's authority on work. 187 countries in the world are currently part of ILO, not only governments but also employers and workers, they all participate in ILO's activities. ILO sets most of the standards and policies related to our work life, especially those related to anti-discrimination and anti-harassment. Each June the organization meets and discusses labor standards. ILO cooperates with governments and supports them in putting standards and policies into practice. In 2019 the ILO embraced

the Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, which was set because of the changes and transformations occurring in the world of work because of technological advancements and also COVID-19. The Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work has a human-centric approach and sets the direction for a world of work which is safer, more inclusive and based on justice. (ILO 2023, min 0:00-5:34.) In Finland, the ILO is represented by the ILO Finnish Committee, who acts as a body for negotiation and statement-issuing to the Government and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland. 2023.)

In Finland, the labor legislation includes various acts that support equality, non-discrimination, and non-harassment at work, and which ensure that employers and workers work under favorable conditions. One of these acts is the Non-discrimination Act. (Finlex 2023.) The Non-discrimination Act forbids unequal treatment of employees and job applicants on the basis of their or their family members' age, gender, nationality, disability, origin, belief, and other diversity dimensions. The Act on Equality between Women and Men includes law on non-discrimination on the basis of gender at work. Particularly regarding equality, the Finnish law states that employers who have at least 30 or more workers need to have an equality plan set up with the scope of promoting equality at work. (Työsuojelu.fi 2023.) In case of disability of an applicant in the recruiting process or of an employee, reasonable adjustments should be made to accommodate the disabled person. The adjustment should be reasonable and not put an excessive or non-reasonable load on the employer's finances. The employer who refuses a reasonable adjustment to a job applicant or employee needs to justify the reason for the refusal in written form to the person for whom the adjustment was denied. (Työsuojelu.fi 2023.)

In Finland, the National Non-Discrimination and Equality Tribunal is a body appointed by the Government that has the function to protect those who have been discriminated or treated unequally. The tribunal acts in alignment with the Non-Discrimination Act and the Act on Equality between Women and Men and it is the impartial judge in matters of public administration and private and commercial activities. Private and family life and religious matters are not under the responsibilities of the tribunal. (The National Non-Discrimination and Equality Tribunal 2023.)

The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman is an independent body in Finland that monitors situations related to discrimination and equality in accordance with human rights. It addresses matters of discrimination and promotes equality, it acts as a guide and trainer, also researching individual cases of discrimination or inequality and, if necessary, it can take the cases to The National Non-Discrimination and Equality Tribunal. (Non-Discrimination Ombudsman 2023.)

## 4.2 Diversity and managing diversity

The term diversity became popular in the business world in 1980s, it was initially used only in its narrow meaning, which is the one related mainly to the types of diversity that are visible like gender, race, and physical disabilities. Later on, it was understood that it is important to consider also other types of diversity which are not immediately recognizable because of the physical characteristics of a person, like for example differences in education, in language, in culture, and this made it so that a broader meaning of diversity started to be considered as well. The broader definition of diversity helps us understand that often the differences we see among people are a social construct that depends on the context and on the society in which we are. The context might influence what characteristics we notice more and that are considered a difference, for example in the working place the color of the skin might be considered more as a difference than the color of the eyes. A comprehensive definition of diversity that can be used from a psychological perspective on diversity management is that of various differences among employees that can have an influence at work on their career, job satisfaction and the level of appreciation they perceive. (Syed & Özbilgin 2020, 3-5.)

Managing diversity is a series of systematic activities at an organizational level meant to improve the communication, collaboration and interaction among people belonging to diverse groups, so to minimize the possibility of misunderstandings and conflicts, instead focusing on leveraging diversity as a source of innovation. If organizations successfully manage diversity one of the positive results will be inclusion, which is making sure that diverse groups in the organization feel accepted, listened to and able to influence their career progress despite of belonging to a diverse group. (Syed & Özbilgin 2020, 5.)

With the current world-wide demographic trends, it can be noticed that the workplaces are more diverse than before, not only there may be various ethnic groups working in the same business but also employees belonging to different religious beliefs, genders, or social classes. Diversity has often been the cause of discrimination in the workplace, and obstacles to career development or reaching positions of power for those belonging to the minority groups. But if the heterogeneity among groups is managed appropriately a climate of harmony and peace between the groups can be achieved. Inclusion in important meetings, social networks at work or decision-making processes has been linked to better career opportunities, job satisfaction and overall feeling of well-being at work, which often increases the commitment to the employer in the employees who have been included. When employees are excluded because of them belonging to a diverse group, this may well explain their dissatisfaction with their career development and overall, with the company, dissatisfaction at that level often ends up in the employee leaving the employer. (Barak 2017, 5-6.)

### 4.3 Intersectionality and the dimensions of diversity

In this chapter I will outline the types of diversity that are most described in the D&I literature, before that, I think it is important to consider what the author Turnbull argues in her book 'The Illusion of Inclusion'. Diversity is complex and it is not just a list of diverse groups. Inside each diverse group there are many nuances and differences, we should not generalize about a specific diverse group, and it is important to remember that people want to be first treated as individuals and not as part of a specific diversity group. (Turnbull 2016, 62–63.)

I think it is also important to describe the concept of intersectionality as described by the authors Syed & Özbilgin. An individual may belong to various diversity groups and therefore being subjected to discrimination on various levels. Intersectionality is the layering of these diversity categories which creates a complex situation in which the individual may experience a particular type of discrimination caused by the intersection of the diversity groups they belong to. Through intersectionality we understand that discrimination can take a more complex form than what binary and single-category models propose. (Syed & Özbilgin 2020, 358.)

Diversity management should not be done in a superficial way, adding some women or some people from minority groups to the organization and running couple of D&I initiatives a year will not contribute to create a just and diverse workplace, when planning for a D&I strategy it is important to consider the various aspects of diversity and to go deeper, especially considering the existence of intersectionality. (Syed & Özbilgin, 2020, 356.)

I argue that for any organization that is serious about D&I it is paramount to be aware of several types of diversity in addition to the most known as gender or cultural diversity. For this reason, the following paragraphs will outline some of the most common types of diversity which can be encountered in a workplace, with the disclaimer that a fully comprehensive list of the diversity dimensions is out of the scope of this thesis, with the goal instead of giving essential information on the most common types of diversity that might be often neglected or not recognized because of lack of awareness or other reasons.

Mitchell (2017) encourages thinking about three types of diversity: background, experiential and cognitive. Background diversity is the typical type that describes belonging to a particular category or having a different background. Experiential diversity is the difference in experiences among employees, for example different education or work experience. Experiential diversity originates from background diversity. Cognitive diversity comes from both background and experience diversity, and it is the way we think differently from each other's. (Mitchell 2017, 0:50-3:30.)

Gardenswartz & Rowe (2003, 33) propose a wheel of diversity modeled according to the original wheel created by Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosener (Loden & Rosener 1991.) There are 4 levels of diversity, personality is at the core, and it is the one aspect that distinguishes one human from the other. A second level of diversity in the diversity wheel is made of the internal dimensions of an individual, these are characteristics that for the majority cannot be changed but that can have an influence on how others see and perceive us. These six dimensions are gender, age, race, ethnicity, physical ability, and sexual orientation. Social background and life experience create the third level of the wheel, which is the one including external dimensions, over which the individual has more control and that can usually be changed. These dimensions are the geographical location, the marital status, the parental status, appearance, work experience, educational background, religion, recreational habits, personal habits, income. And finally, there is a fourth level which is the one of the organizational dimensions related to the work environment and work role and they are functional level, management status, union affiliation, work location, seniority, department, work content. (Gardenswartz & Rowe 2003, 33-57.)

#### **4.3.1 Neurodiversity and hidden inequalities**

Among the various diversity dimensions there is one which is very hard to identify by managers, recruiters, co-workers and generally by anyone who does not belong to this group, which is the reason I am adding this to the theoretical framework, to raise awareness on this specific dimension of diversity that not many might be aware of, because it is invisible and most of the time non-disclosed by the employees belonging to this group. I am raising this topic also because in the questionnaire that was administered to company x employees, for question n. 8 'Can you define the term "neurodiversity"?' only one person among 5 answered yes. The paragraphs below will specifically focus on AS, Asperger syndrome, which is a neurodiversity condition, as one of the hidden dimensions of diversity, which according to Caven & Nachmias (2018) is often overlooked by employers, and therefore I think it deserves its own dedicated section in this report.

Neurodiversity is defined as a difference in human behavior and brain function which is a normal variation of the human population. Neurodiversity is not a disorder but more a condition and depending on the situation some neurodiversity qualities can be considered as strengths. (Fung 2021, 13.)

AS is one type of neurodiverse condition, people with this condition may have more difficulty in social situations than the so called neurotypical individuals who are not neurodivergent, they usually also prefer routine to gray areas and unknown paths, which makes them sometimes having lower levels of flexibility than their neurotypical counterparts. AS people can also have issues with hyper- or hypo-sensitizations, for example to light, sound, textures, which for instance makes it sometimes

harder for them to work in noisy environments. There is also another way of looking at AS, which does not focus on the downsides of the condition but mostly on the strengths. Despite the evidence from clinical studies that found AS individuals having qualities like the ability to intensely focus, being independent thinkers with original ideas, being good with technology and at writing, being detailed and precise, and in some studies it even emerged AS people can be more reliable and trustworthy than neurotypical people, all this has been left out or ignored in many instances apart from certain employers who understood the benefit of having AS people as employees and who decided to hire them for technology related roles for example. (Caven & Nachmias. 2018, 39-40.) Because AS individuals fear the stereotypes that come with disclosure, for instance the typical stereotype of the 'arrogant and very hard to be friend with' person as shown in the 'Big Bang TV Show', many decide not to disclose their condition at work and because of this they remain without support. (Caven & Nachmias. 2018, 44.) Because of some of the difficulties AS individuals may experience, related to the social expectations and communication style demanded by the modern working society, there is a high potential that AS individuals experience hidden inequalities at work, in how they can proceed with their career and in the roles, they are offered. (Caven & Nachmias. 2018, 57.) It is suggested that employers and recruiters should take in consideration people with AS and think what is considered normal by the majority is abnormal or unpleasant by minorities like AS people and rethink the concept of pleasant and comfortable working environment, also including the views of neurodiverse people like AS individuals. Especially the role of HR is important in balancing the strengths and weaknesses of AS individuals at work, by putting people working with tasks that leverage their strengths and not forcing them fitting into the way the majority think or work, creating unnecessary stress for them. This would help the HR department to be much more inclusive and would contribute to the achievement of their inclusion goals. Reaching the balance between the majority of neurotypicals and the minority of AS individuals is hard, specifically it requires the ability to understand the AS condition and to appreciate the subtle differences that come with that. The challenge for HR is to avoid discrimination by superimposing neurotypical rules on the minority of neurodivergent people. This chapter has just touched on the topic of AS and the potential unequal treatment people under this group may experience at work, there is much to learn about AS at work and much more to highlight, like for example the fact that one should not stereotype AS with the male gender, which left the AS women at work not yet researched as much as the men, causing a lack of intersectionality in diversity and disability research. Another area which suffers a scarcity of research is that of the experience of AS workers in other roles than technology related ones. The purpose of this chapter has been that of creating awareness on the hidden AS condition with the hope to stimulate thinking on the current policies and norms of the working place and of the recruiting process which are mainly based on a majority and often overlook the existence of AS individuals with the risk of submitting them to hidden inequalities. (Caven & Nachmias. 2018, 58-61.)

## **4.4 Biases, stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination and microaggressions**

This chapter will focus on describing what biases, stereotypes and microaggressions are, why it is important to know what these are and especially why leaders need to be able to spot and correct situations where the biases, stereotypes and microaggressions can present themselves and be a cause of exclusion and stress in the workplace.

### **4.4.1 Biases**

A general definition of bias is that of favoring a group of people or an individual over another one, the preference can be intentional or unintentional. Favoring something or someone against another thing or another person or group can be the cause of inequality in treatment. Research found that bias is common in human beings, even though we as humans want to be bias-free and act fairly, we still can have biases. (Clerkin 2021, Introduction.) Unfortunately, the same brain mechanism that helps humans in quick decision making can become harmful because it can lead to the creation of stereotypes and bad decisions-making based on unconscious biases. (Assemble You Limited 2022, min. 1:10-1:56.)

Human behavior scientists think that humans' brains are hardwired with bias, this is because if humans were not able to distinguish between something dangerous and something harmless, that would have been detrimental for the survival of the human species, for example a quick judgment which helped distinguishing between a lion and a gazelle was necessary for the human to survive. How it works is that the information gets classified by the brain to help with quick decision making. This quick judgment-making system is what bias is based on, and it is also a part of how the human brain is designed. The problem with bias is not about having different preferences in colors or travel destinations, those are innocuous, the issue starts when a bias is held against individuals and groups of individuals. We all have biases, and it can be extremely hard to spot one's own biases, knowing we all have biases can help us be more understanding towards the other individuals who have biases. (Jana 2016, Introduction.)

In a working place everyone plays a vital role in avoiding biased decision-making and behavior, but leaders especially have a responsibility in spotting and addressing unconscious and conscious biases. Leaders have decisional power on many matters affecting the employee's life, therefore if they have biases, they can make generalizations which may lead to mistakes in assessing a situation or the performance of an individual, biases can affect the decision making in the promotion, in the hiring or in the dismissal of certain employees. Most importantly biases that have not been addressed can spread in the organization and create a non-inclusive work environment, leaders who

acknowledge biases and address them can be perceived as more inclusive and are better equipped at leading diverse teams. (Clerkin 2021, Chapter 1.)

Clerkin (2021, Chapter 2) describes a model called 'The Beyond Bias Model' (figure1), which shows how biases can extend from merely being quick decisions or associations made by the human brain to being the cause of discrimination, prejudices, and stereotyping in the working place. In this model bias becomes dangerous if not addressed specifically when it is connected to social identity. In analogy, the stereotype is connected to the head as stereotypes are based on belief, the prejudice is connected to the heart as they are based on emotion, and discrimination is connected to the hands as discrimination is an action. Bias and social identity are the causes of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination but these last three factors are not connected with arrows in the model as they can increase each other but not in a cause-effect order. (Clerkin 2021, Chapter 2.)

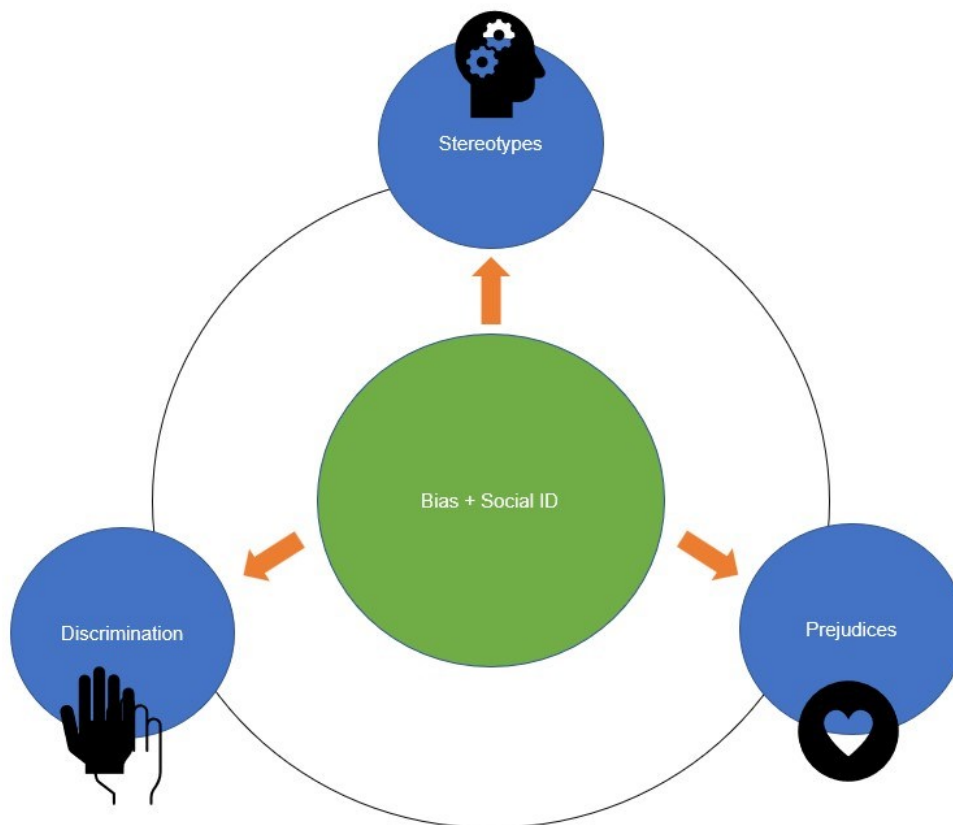


Figure 1. The beyond bias model (adapted from Clerkin 2021, Chapter 2.)

In the beyond bias model, the social identity is that part of an individual's identity that originates from belonging to a group, for example a gender, a culture, or a religion, and/or other groups. As humans we can have more than one social identity, and on the basis of that, we see the world in

our own unique way. In the presence of others who have the same social identity as us, we may feel we have something in common with them and a feeling of belonging to the group. Although this can be a positive thing it can also turn into a negative thing if we favor the ones belonging to our group or those who have a similar social identity, this because we can end up treating others unequally and in the case of the working place, maybe expecting from people belonging to other social identity groups to work harder and demonstrate they are worthy of our trust. Which explains why social identity and bias can trigger stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination in the working place. Leaders have the important responsibility to understand and familiarize themselves with different social identities because they can influence how these social identities are discussed or viewed inside the organization. (Clerkin 2021, Chapter 2.)

#### **4.4.2 Stereotypes**

Stereotypes are beliefs about a group or a social identity, they are usually generalizations reinforced by society via repetition in various way, for example the belief that a certain ethnic group is lazy or that a generation is hardworking are stereotypes. These are simplifications and overgeneralizations, and they are not true of each person belonging to a specific group and therefore stereotypes can create a lot of harm. Research found that being subjected to stereotypes can have negative consequences on mental and physical health. Stereotypes can invisibly affect work performance and wellbeing. (Clerkin 2021, Chapter 2.)

Individuals who are subjected to stereotypes because of their belonging to a specific social identity group, experience what is called a social identity threat. Especially those who are aware of the type of characteristics that are usually attributed to their social identity group, can suffer the effects of a social identity threat, and feel extremely uncomfortable in situation where there is a possibility of being stereotyped because of their social identity. A social identity threat can negatively affect the short-term intellectual performance of these individuals, causing them to perform worse than their peers who are not stereotyped or who are not aware of being stereotyped. Individuals who experience a social identity threat tend to avoid situations where they know they will be judged on the basis of their social identity group; they tend to perform worse and, in this way, they satisfy the expectations set by the stereotype. (Nelson 2009, 154.)

#### **4.4.3 Prejudices**

Prejudices are hostile emotional reactions towards the members of another group. Among psychologists it is believed that prejudices originate from the feeling of being protective towards our own group and that a prejudice is triggered when the outsiders are perceived as a threat to our own group's members. Research found that prejudice is a stronger factor for discrimination than

stereotypes although prejudices are more difficult to spot. The leader has a role in making the work environment psychologically safe so to minimize the risk of emotions like the feeling of being threatened, which are often the cause of prejudices. (Clerkin 2021, Chapter 2.)

#### **4.4.4 Discrimination**

Discrimination happens when people from diverse groups are treated unequally. In the working environment discrimination is often expressed by giving a different salary, promotion, and the possibility to be hired, depending on the group to which one belongs. Discrimination is not something that is openly discussed, nevertheless there is evidence through research that discrimination commonly happens in the working place. The interview process is one of the typical employee touch-points where discrimination may happen. In a study ten young men were trained to behave in the same way during interviews and their resumé were also very similar in background and experience. The study demonstrated that racial discrimination, probably triggered by stereotypes and prejudices, was the cause determining why some of these men were offered a job and why others were not. For the interviewer discrimination in an interview might be just a single event, but for the one receiving the discrimination action that can be one event in a series of numerous discrimination events, so discrimination can affect the career of an individual in a very negative way, which indicates it is very important to monitor our own beliefs when acting and making decisions that can affect other people's life for example when recruiting. To avoid the spreading of discrimination inside the organization it is also important to have metrics to measure certain factors that are indicators of discrimination, like for example monitoring if a different pay is given for the same level of experience but different social identity or if there is inequality in who gets promoted based on discrimination. (Clerkin 2021, Chapter 2.)

#### **4.4.5 Microaggressions**

Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal & Rivera (2018, 3) define microaggressions as derogatory sentences that are insults targeting an individual of a certain social identity.

Microaggressions can be expressed implicitly or explicitly and are of three types, micro-assault, microinsult and microinvalidation. In a micro-assault the perpetrator of the microaggression delivers the aggression in a very blatant way that has the clear intention to express discrimination towards the target. An example of micro-assault can be that of requesting not to sit close to someone of a minority group on an airplane. Micro-assaults are so overt and direct attacks that are the easiest to identify among the three types. As micro-assaults are explicit, the perpetrators usually use them when they are not seen by others and can remain anonymous, when they are in the presence of others who have the same point of view on a minority group or when they lose control. Microinsults

are usually unintentional messages or actions, nevertheless they hold an underlying hidden insult towards a person or persons belonging to a certain group. An example of microinsult can be assuming that a person of a determined social identity cannot work in certain professions that are considered positions of prestige and that this person is less qualified than a person who belongs to other groups. Microinvalidations are comments or actions that are usually unintentional and that carry a message that invalidates the reality of another group. An example of microinvalidation is that of denying the experiences of certain groups, for example saying that one does not see color or religion but only one human race, which represents an invalidation of the experiences of those belonging to a certain religion or ethnicity. (Sue et al 2018, 4.)

Microaggressions can be verbal or non-verbal and are often triggered by biases, they target a person's own unique characteristic that can be attributed to religion, ethnicity, or other dimensions. Microaggressions can be non-intentional or intentional and the one receiving them may sometimes be used to microaggressions but that is not a reason for accepting them. A common microaggression is asking a person belonging to a minor ethnicity group where they are from and if they are from the same place of the one asking the question, for example they answer they are British, questioning their heritage because they belong to another ethnicity. Microaggressions highlight differences. Usually, people feel uncomfortable when their differences are been addressed, people prefer to feel accepted not different, focusing on commonalities instead of differences is a better approach to avoid microaggressions. (Assemble You Limited 2022, min. 6:50-7:46.)

Although microaggressions can appear as small harmless incidents they are not, in fact research says they can be highly detrimental for both the psychological and physical health of the target, this because compared to the incidents of rudeness and incivility that everyone is subjected to from time to time during life, like meeting people who make rude comments, and that can create momentary anger, the microaggressions are something that people from certain social identities experience continuously during their life. Microaggressions are cumulative, they are not a one-time happening, that is also why they can have major negative impacts on the target. (Sue et al 2018, 9.) Not only there is research showing that microaggressions negatively impact on the well-being of the target but also studies suggest that they can inhibit learning and affect work performance leading to absenteeism and ultimately to turnover, because of the feeling of invisibility, social exclusion and self-doubt instilled by microaggressions in the targets. (Sue et al 2018, 11-12.)

In the working place microaggressions can manifest in several ways, they can come from various directions and can be experienced in different phases of the employee's life cycle. Microaggressions can happen during the recruitment process, as in the example of audits studies sending out similar credentials resumé with different names reminding different ethnicities, in which it was

found that the resumé associated to ethnical names received less call-backs from the recruiter than those associated with native names. These audits showed that disadvantage in the recruitment process has been attributed not only to different ethnicity but also to being a female. This means that microaggressions caused by biases and stereotypes are received by certain groups even during the recruitment process when the recruiter has not yet seen the person, which suggests the recruiter has some sort of bias in relation to ethnicity and gender when choosing who should advance in the recruitment process. It is obvious that microaggressions based on stereotypes in the recruiting process can potentially make an organization miss talent because of the recruiters or HR not being able to recognize their own biases. Not only during pre-employment but also during employment specific groups of people or individuals can be a target of microaggressions from supervisors, from subordinates and even from colleagues. (Sue et al 2018, 161-165.)

#### **4.5 Inclusion, belonging and the benefits of managing diversity**

Inclusion can be defined as being included and actively involved by others in what is happening. Respect for the other has a big part in inclusion and it is a sign of an inclusive behavior, be listened to and listening to others' thoughts on a specific matter, being able to exchange opinions and also to disagree have a crucial part in facilitating a climate of inclusion. (Atcheson 2021, 16-17.)

Belonging is nothing new, it is an ancient human instinct that can be observed in history in several instances, from the times when humans used to gather into tribes, in which belonging to a tribe would mean better chances to survive, to the Roman Empire when by breaking the law one would have been punished with exile and being excluded from the privileges of belonging to the Empire. Although belonging is a basic human need and source of motivation, often it is not included in the top priorities of a company's strategy. It is not enough that the CEO and the HR department set inclusion as a priority, it is everyone's duty to make sure that everyone is included and has a feeling of belonging. Training on inclusion and belonging are not going to be successful and effective if the people who are trained do not believe in the importance of belonging and if they do not look out for each other at work. (Unerman, Jakob & Edwards 2021, 73-74.)

A study by UCLA discovered that the part of the brain which is activated when a finger is cut, and one experiences pain is the same part of the brain that gets triggered when one experiences exclusion. The study even established that by taking a painkiller one can decrease the pain of exclusion similarly to the pain caused by an injury. The result of this study may explain why exclusion can negatively affect productivity in excluded employees, because they experience the pain of being excluded. (Turnbull 2016, 4.)

It is important to have a diverse workforce, and many organizations are already working on ensuring a diversity-mix in their workplace, what still needs to be done is to work harder to ensure a feeling of belonging. It is crucial that all layers of the organization take an active part in diversity initiatives or those will not succeed, the importance of focusing on strategies for belonging is crucial. In order for all to be involved and take part in D&I initiatives, all individuals in the company need to be educated and informed on the reasons why D&I and belonging are important. For example, if some groups in the organization feel like they are excluded or even blamed to be the cause of any problems related to D&I, these groups will not fully engage in D&I initiatives. Also, it is important to notice that there might be groups who are interested, even motivated, and see the value of D&I initiatives but they will not know what to do, these people need help and guidance, or the D&I initiatives will not succeed. Another key factor to make sure inclusion and belonging will happen is having empathy, the ability to understand the other and putting oneself in others' shoes. It has been noticed that some workplaces are not so empathic, a study from 2018 by Businessolver states the top managers might have a different point of view on empathy than the subordinates, 92% of them thinking the organization is an empathic one but only 50% of the employees agreeing on that. Empathy needs to be something all have not only one specific group, for example it should not be that only men must have empathy toward women, women too need to have empathy towards men. (Unerman et al. 2021, 18-20.)

There is a model for an inclusive workplace that can be applied by companies to support diversity management processes. The model is that of a business described as one that leverages the differences between groups in its workforce, contributes to its nearby communities, a business that is able to maintain a dual focus on both the financial and non-financial stakeholders, not only on the financial ones, because it is aware of its responsibility towards the wider community, it supports disadvantaged groups, it acts across the national and cultural boundaries to collaborate with individuals, groups and organizations. The inclusive organization does not just focus on itself from a point of view of managing diversity but expands its boundaries to external environments. Research evidence has been collected about the benefits of such inclusive business practices, like for example low turnover, cost saving, lower absenteeism, being more attractive to job applicants and talented people, a better corporate image which may positively improve the business' stock valuation. (Barak 2017, 7-10.)

There is evidence of the benefits of diversity management and of an inclusive workplace, for example a study from 2011 by Catalyst on Fortune 500 companies, which had a majority of women in the board of directors, demonstrated that these companies had 16% higher return on sales and 26% return on investment than those who had fewer women. An example of cost savings is that one from Nextel's 'All Inclusive Workplace' initiative in 2002, in which the company demonstrated

cost saving deriving from carrying out diversity training. The results of this initiative were 10% higher retention and an overall 2.2% decrease in turnover calculated on 371 employees. This was a great achievement which translated into a saving in the turnover costs of 3.5 million USD. (Barak 2017, 248-249.)

Cox describes several reasons why a good management of diversity may also contribute to the bottom line of a business. Cox argues that managing diversity can contribute to better marketing strategies and more efficiency in understanding different customers, it can also be a benefit to an organization's public relationships and create a reputation of being seen as a company that is able to manage diversity. A company that manages diversity well might have access to minorities of talented job applicants who value working in a company that prioritizes managing diversity. Managing diversity might also improve effectiveness in problem-solving, innovation and in the ability of a business to adapt to external changes in the market. Finally, Cox suggests that managing diversity well may reduce business costs, this because it may decrease the chances of workplace harassment, discrimination lawsuits, obstacles to communication that may contribute to higher absenteeism and turnover rates. (Syed & Özbilgin 2020, 13-15.)

Measuring the impact of diversity management initiatives seems to remain the hardest part of the process as Syed & Özbilgin (2020) argue. There are experiments done in a laboratory setting where the effects of good diversity management practices can be measured, but in a real work environment it might be difficult to measure the effectiveness of D&I initiatives, this because other external factors might influence the outcomes of these initiatives. (Syed & Özbilgin 2020, 15.) There are various studies that have been done on measuring how and if diversity management can positively influence an organization and the results are often complex, especially the work of Kochan concludes that the business case of diversity should be revised, that diversity by itself may not contribute to make a business more profitable, but because diversity in the workplace is a reality, managing diversity well through great leadership and interactional skills is a must for today's world organizations, so to minimize the risks of any potential negative impact of a poorly managed diverse workforce. (Syed & Özbilgin 2020, 17.)

#### **4.6 Cross-cultural communication and leadership**

This chapter will describe what culture is and the importance of having cross-cultural communication skills when working with others, specifically when leading others, considering that in the modern business world teams are often made of a mix of people from different cultures. I think it is important to understand how to manage and lead people from diverse cultures so that everyone can feel they can be themselves and at the same time part of the team. The work of Geert Hofstede will be cited in this chapter as he is one of the key authors on the cross-cultural communication topic.

Geert Hofstede is a Dutch scholar who is popular for his study on cultural values and dimensions done in the 1980s on IBM's employees who worked across the world in 70 countries. Hofstede identified patterns among cultures that he called dimensions. He identified 4 dimensions, the levels of inequality in a society also known as power distance, the levels of avoidance of uncertainty, or how much a society feels comfortable with uncertainty or not, the polarity of individualism and collectivism and the polarity of masculine and feminine characteristics in a society. Later, Michael Harris Bond, a social scientist, discovered a fifth dimension that describes the polarity of focusing more on the present or on the future. Hofstede also studied organizational cultures and found that these too have dimensions, but these can change in time, while the individual values that are at the base of a society rarely change. The importance of Hofstede's study and findings in relation to business and organizations is that his findings can help organizations manage cultural differences and create a better workplace for all, as it is sometimes easy to unintentionally offend someone because of not understanding the values and dimensions of a certain culture. (Erdman 2017, 8-12.)

An example of cultural dimension from Hofstede's study is uncertainty avoidance which can be high or low. Cultures with elevated levels of uncertainty avoidance tend to avoid situations that are uncertain and to look for certainty and clear rules. On the contrary, cultures with low levels of uncertainty avoidance feel comfortable in uncertain situations and uncomfortable when things are too defined and regulated. It was found that also management styles may differ depending on the uncertainty avoidance factor, for example in countries like France that scores high in uncertainty avoidance, managers tend to focus on the more operational aspect of management, they are the expert and are expected to know their area in detail, while in other countries that are on the lower side of uncertainty avoidance, like Great Britain, managers are expected to be more like strategists and problem solvers who can direct a team of experts. (Hopkins 2009, 40-41.)

The concept of culture has been examined and defined in many ways, as culture is multifaceted. Hofstede defines culture as the programming that the individual receives from the collective and that differentiates the members of one group from the members of another group. He states that a culture is made of a system of values and that the values are what builds a culture. Hofstede's definition of culture is wide and abstract enough to include various aspects that should be considered when describing what culture is. (Browaeyns & Price 2019, 12.)

Deal et al (2007, 7) introduce the concept of culture adaptability as the will and the capacity of acknowledging, understanding, and working with different cultures. Cultural adaptability is something that organizations should adopt at all levels because the differences that the individuals from various cultures bring may affect how people inside the organization lead, manage and interact. (Deal et al 2007, 7.)

Because of a work community that is increasingly global, leaders have a crucial role in learning about cultural differences and how to lead people considering the cultural aspect. Being competent is not enough, there needs to be a new type of leadership that is culturally intelligent. If the risk of intercultural misunderstanding is not taken into consideration it may lead to a loss in sales and a bad corporate reputation. Leaders need to understand the differences in culture and how these manifest according to each individual and team member. Not only that, but they also need to demonstrate genuine interest in other cultures to understand them better and to be able to reflect if they have cultural biases that could compromise work relationships. Being able and committed to solve cultural conflicts at work is also an important factor that leaders need to embrace together with being flexible to the changes that working in an international environment can bring. (Moua 2010, 7-9.)

As in the workplace most of the activities are usually done in a team setting, the culture of a team is a crucial aspect that needs to be analyzed and understood in order for the team to work effectively. Considering the cultural angle, a team can be homogeneous, token, bicultural or multicultural. A team that is homogeneous is made of people from the same culture, although this does not guarantee the teamwork will be more effective than in other types of teams. The so-called token team is one where there are only a few people from a different culture. Usually the token team happens when couple of people from a different culture are added to an homogeneous team for organizational reasons, depending from how the majority will behave, these one or two individuals from another culture may feel excluded or even ostracized and will have to put a lot of effort to demonstrate they are worthy to be part of the team and it is likely to happen that the majority will not pay attention to the difference in culture. A bicultural team is a team that consists of two cultural groups which are well and equally represented. This is found mostly in companies that have a team located in two different countries, often in this case the culture of the parent company will define the culture of the team. The multicultural team is instead a team that is composed of various cultures, how things will work from a point of view of cross-cultural dynamics will be often defined by the qualities of each individual and by the culture of the organization. The team that has a bigger risk to operate ineffectively is a team that has a couple of different cultures with several individuals belonging to each, this because the individuals can group and function according to their culture group independently and therefore making the overall efforts of the team more fragmented and less effective. (Hopkins 2009, 106-107.)

Hopkins (2009, 107-108) describes the advantages and the disadvantages of cultural diversity in a team:

- It is an advantage that diversity has the potential to generate new different ideas and to challenge group thinking.

- Diversity has the potential to improve problem solving and creativity in the team.
- Diversity may improve the level of flexibility inside a team.
- Individuals belonging to different cultures in a team can be a valuable resource to do business in a specific country.
- The fact that there is multicultural diversity in a team can make it easier to understand certain legal aspects of certain countries.
- Cultural diversity can contribute to a more energizing work environment.
- Diversity in a team can be seen as a potential disadvantage as it may contribute to unclarity and misunderstanding.
- The team's goal can be viewed by different cultures in different ways.
- There is a risk of inefficiency in a team caused by multicultural diversity which can lead to more costs.
- Trust among members of different cultures may be harder to achieve.
- There is a potential that in a diverse team, groups will form according to the culture and so the team will act in a fragmented way.

#### **4.7 Psychological safety**

In this chapter a description will be provided of what psychological safety is and why it is important to have a workplace based on psychological safety to ensure a feeling of inclusion and belonging is perceived by the employees working in an organization.

Psychological safety is not a new concept and was already discussed in 1965 MIT by professors Edgar Schein and Warren Ben, who stated psychological safety is needed to ensure that individuals feel safe to grow and learn and to facilitate achieving common goals without being disturbed by having to self-protect. (Edmondson & Schein 2012, Chapter 4.)

Psychological safety can be defined as the feeling of being safe and able to speak up, raise questions and doubts in candid and honest way, psychological safety happens when colleagues trust and respect each other. In a psychologically safe work environment people feel safe to ask questions and to admit when they do not understand something or feel safe to make a proposal without the fear of being punished or retaliated. Psychological safety does not mean to be always agreeing, instead it means that people can disagree with each other openly, it is not about escaping conflicts but rather facing the fact that others can have different points of view. Psychological safety is about a climate where people can feel they can speak up independently from a person's personality, one does not have to be extroverted to feel psychological safety. Also, psychological safety is different than trust, as trust may be experienced by one person and not by another, but psychological safety is more related to a workplace climate and often experienced by a group or more than

one group affected by the organizational climate. Psychological safety is not about allowing low performance but instead it is about allowing honest point of views to be expressed and through mutual respect facilitating and enabling the achievement of ambitious goals, in fact researchers have found that high levels of psychological safety promote high performance levels. Psychological safety is not enough for a high-performance achievement though, but it facilitates it. (Edmondson 2018, Chapter 1.)

Psychological safety is important because a culture based on fear of speaking up, the so-called Cassandra culture or culture of silence can be very dangerous. Cassandra is a mythological character from the Greek mythology. She was given the gift of prophecy, but she was cursed not to be ever believed. There are cases in history that are examples of the Cassandra culture, in those cases a major disaster could have been avoided if only the people speaking their concern would have been considered and listened to. One example is that of the disastrous launch of the Challenger shuttle in 1986 when before the launch an engineer called Roger Boisjoly spoke up about a malfunctioning but was not considered or believed because of not enough evidence or data. If the Challenger project had a culture of listening and psychological safety probably the observation or warning of Boisjoly would have been considered and maybe the disaster avoided via proper analysis and checks. (Edmondson 2018, Chapter 4.)

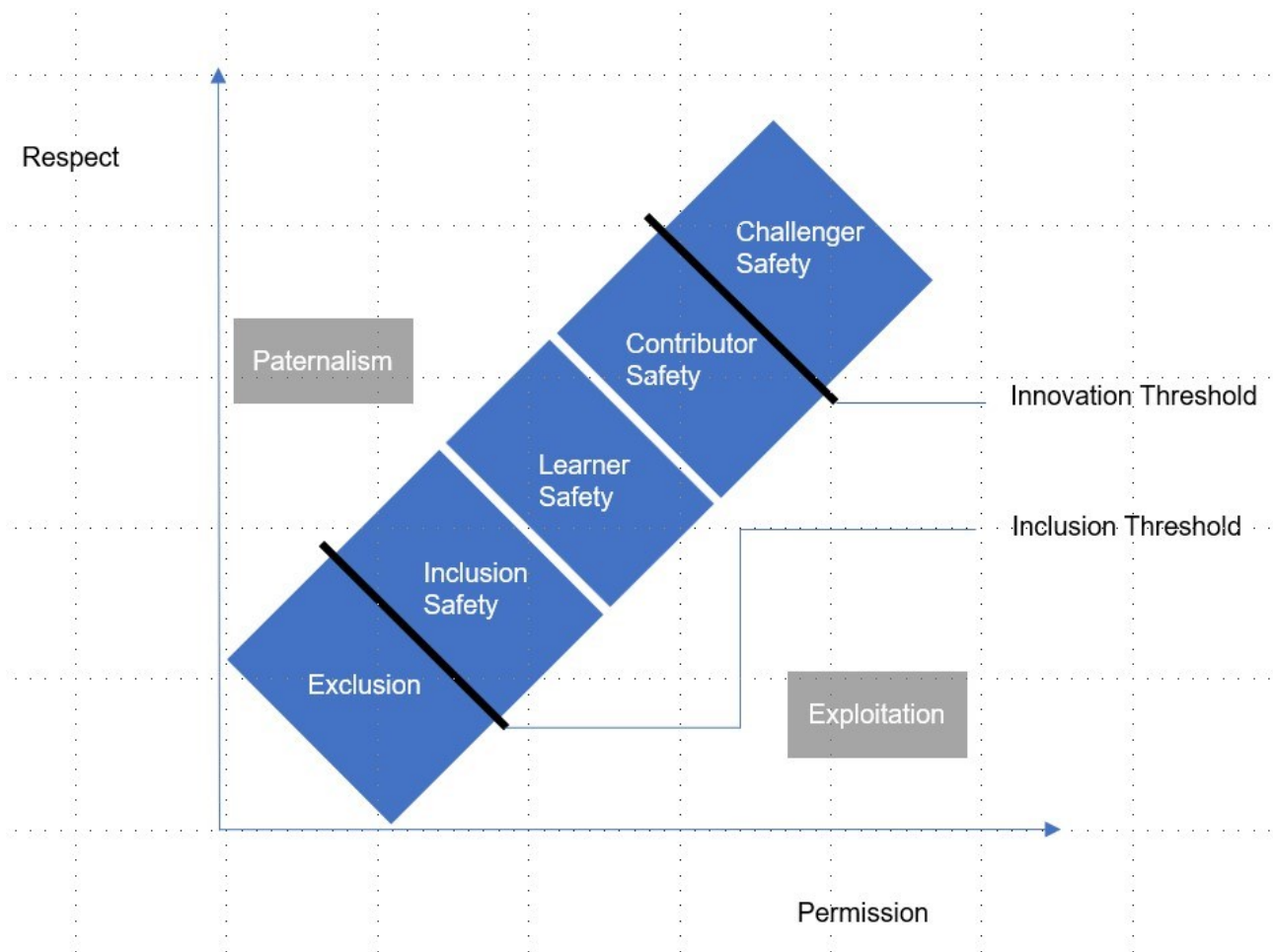


Figure 2. The path from inclusion to innovation (adapted from Clark, T. R. 2020, Introduction.)

There are 4 steps of psychological safety that can be used to make a diagnosis of the levels of psychological safety in an organization, inclusion safety, learner safety, contributor safety, challenger safety (figure 2). The more permission and respect are given the more the group and the individual will have psychological safety. For respect it is meant the consideration we give others and for permission it is meant allowing others to contribute and influence in a group. Low levels of permission and respect cause a situation of exclusion for the individual or group who is not respected and allowed to contribute. The first level that comes after the threshold of exclusion is surpassed and more levels of permission and respect are given, is inclusion safety. This is the foundation of psychological safety, without this step there cannot be psychological safety. For example, in a business environment this first stage is when the group accepts a new hire with repeated and consistent signs of inclusions. The formal inclusion to a team is given when a person starts a new job but there is an informal membership to the team that is the one meaningful for inclusion, and that is the acceptance of the new hire at a sociocultural level. The second safety phase is the learner safety which is given when it is possible to ask questions and be enabled to expand and grow even to make mistakes. With learner safety one does not feel scared to ask questions and to

be belittled or considered ignorant. The third phase is the contributor safety, this is the phase when the individual has demonstrated to be a competent and trustworthy worker, therefore the power to contribute with their work is given to them. This is a phase in which the employee can learn more and develop more thanks also to contributing to the teamwork. Although this is quite a natural phase that should always occur, contribution safety does not automatically happen and sometimes because of many reasons, for example the arrogance of a leader who is insecure or the lack of empathy of the coworkers or because of discrimination, contribution safety is not given which translates in the fact that psychological safety does not exist in that case. The last step is the challenger safety, this phase happens when there is enough psychological safety to dare to challenge the existing circumstances in a team or a situation at work and there is the feeling of not having to fear punishment for the ideas one wants to express, even if those differ from the ideas of others. This is the phase that has the potential to enable innovation and creativity, without psychological safety to activate this phase, people are scared to try something new and to express their creative side for fear of being negatively judged, and unfortunately a negative side effect of this is that also the sense of curiosity towards others is blocked. (Clark 2020, Introduction.)

Psychological safety is given when both respect and permission to participate are offered, if one of the two is missing the employees submitted to this lack will experience either paternalism or exploitation. In both cases the individual will not perform at their best. Paternalism happens when the individual is given respect but no or little permission to contribute; paternalism disempowers the individual and takes away the freedom of choice from them in the name of protecting and caring for the individual. It fosters dependency and lack of responsibility and also creates fear in the individual so that they always act according to pleasing someone external, for example the leader, who has the control, paternalism does not encourage growth and it blocks the creativity of employees. Exploitation is at the other extreme, it happens when contribution to participation is amply given but respect is not. It is the typical case of exploiting and taking advantage of others without caring for them and respecting them. In addition to basic exploitation, it can happen that the abuse happens in a way that is very confusing for the employee, for example when the leader alternates generosity with disrespectful behavior. Exploitation is very detrimental for the wellbeing of the individual and for the work-performance, many accept abuse for fear of speaking up, which ultimately brings to exploitation being normal and accepted by everyone. An additional point which needs to be highlighted is that one needs to be careful and be aware of when the feeling of wanting to belong to an organization, a team, or a group is going to be used by others for exploitation. There are situations in which leaders and co-workers pretend to act as they really care and create a false feeling of belonging in people joining an organization, which on the long term will be uncovered as a system to control others, if the person does not abide to the group's rules the person will be rejected and punished. This is what is called 'the false fellowship' or shaming culture, which takes

advantage of the desire of belonging to a group that some individuals may have, till a point that almost all is allowed but not being one's own self and having a different point of view, which differs from that of the group. In a shaming culture loyalty is conditional and is given only if one abides by certain rules. If one decides to leave the company, disdain and disrespect will be offered in return by those belonging to the shaming culture. (Clark 2020, Conclusion.)

#### **4.8 Emotionally intelligent leadership**

This chapter will be about emotionally intelligent leadership and the role of cultivating emotional intelligence to facilitate an environment where others feel included and acknowledged.

Business savviness and intelligence are qualities that a leader must have to be successful, but they are not enough, in order to succeed a leader must be able to create a positive atmosphere in the workplace so that people will feel happy to be part of it. Being able to serve and care for the team members is crucial for this positive climate to happen. When people feel good at work they serve the customers better, as one study found, for every one percent increase in positive workplace climate there is a correspondent two percent increase in revenue. (Tenney & Gard 2016, 66.)

Humans' emotions are contagious, the areas of our nervous system that are related to the feeling of emotions are affected by the emotions of those around us. This emotional influence can even affect the biological functionalities of our body, for example our immune system. Based on this, leaders have a great responsibility in how they manage their emotions, as their emotional state can have a ripple effect on their team members. Leaders can be more successful in leading people by cultivating higher levels of emotional and social intelligence. (Tenney & Gard 2016, 67.)

Having emotional intelligence does not mean to always agree and to always please others, emotional intelligent people can be assertive but are able to do that in a respectful manner. Emotional intelligence is a series of emotional and social skills that indicates how well individuals, as humans, are able to understand their emotions and communicate or express them, how well they understand others and others' emotions and how well they are able to manage their emotions and the relationships they have with others. Also, the emotional quotient, abbreviated as EQ, is different than IQ or intelligence quotient, the two are not correlated, research says that in humans the IQ grows till a certain age but then it remains stable across the life, while the EQ can be improved and can grow. (Faronbi 2020, min. 2:17-4:33.)

#### **4.9 Mindfulness practice for self-awareness and decreasing ostracism**

Mindfulness is a practice that was introduced in the 1970s by Jon-Kabat Zinn as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction exercise. In its original form it was a combination of stress management

meditations and yoga, but throughout the years mindfulness has been practiced in various settings and in organizations like Google, with the scope of leveraging especially its stress-management benefits. Jon-Kabat Zinn defines mindfulness as awareness that originates by focusing on the present moment in a non-judgmental way. Through the regular practice of mindfulness, one earns a higher level of consciousness and awareness that enables better decision making and decreases bias-based behaviors. Through mindfulness practice one can recognize actions that arise from triggers and automatic thoughts, so to have more control on one's own behaviors and freedom to choose what to do, instead of acting in autopilot. (Eblin 2014, Chapter 2.)

A series of three studies that was made on different samples of individuals demonstrated that the study participants with a higher level of trait mindfulness, which is the ability of being aware and focused on the present moment, excluded others less at work, and instead they were more inclusive of those being ostracized. The trait mindfulness was measured with the MAAS, Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, which is a series of questions meant to measure the level of attention to the present moment with a scale from 1, the highest level of awareness, to 6 the lowest level. In this study the scale was reversed having 1 as lowest level and 6 as highest level. (Jones, Wirth, Ramsey, & Wynsma 2019.)

Ostracism in the working place can happen intentionally as an action from the perpetrator but often it happens unintentionally, because those who ignore, exclude, or ostracize are not aware of their own behavior. Nevertheless, the damage and pain of those experiencing exclusion is real, even if the ostracism is often unintentional. There is confirmation from research that low levels of attention and awareness to the present moment may induce ostracism or the ignoring of the social needs of those around us. A study was done to demonstrate that reinforcing the levels of mindfulness in an individual can prevent or lessen ostracizing actions. The results of the study provided evidence that short interventions of mindfulness, for example a short training on the practice of mindfulness, contribute to decreasing ostracism at work. (Ramsey & Jones 2015.)

Although there is evidence of the benefits of mindfulness practice at work, it needs to be highlighted that to reduce stress-levels the practice should not be forced on individuals but should remain something suggested only, and not demanded by the organization, this because superimposing a regular practice of mindfulness could actually create the opposite result than reducing stress. (Review 2017, 114-115.)

#### **4.10 Fostering inclusion with servant leadership**

Gotsis & Grimani (2016) propose servant leadership as a leadership style with high potential of fostering a climate of inclusion. In this chapter a brief description of servant leadership will be given

and after that I will outline the thoughts of Gotsis & Grimani (2016) in the paper called 'The role of servant leadership in fostering inclusive organizations'.

Servant leadership is a term originating from Robert K. Greenleaf's work. Greenleaf was a businessperson, a teacher and a writer who dedicated his career to studying leadership, in particular the specific type of leadership called servant leadership which is well described in Greenleaf's essay 'The Servant as Leader' published in 1970. Servant leadership is a type of leadership that is based on serving others, on creating added value for others, the leader is first and foremost a servant and then a leader. (Greenleaf Center of Servant Leadership 2021.)

Spears (2022) lists 10 qualities of servant leadership that have been extracted by the work of Greenleaf:

- Listening to one's own inner voice and to the voice of others, as well as trying to hear and clarify what has been left unsaid.
- The quality of an empathic leader, who is attuned to the emotions of others, who tries to listen with empathy and who accepts others for their unicity.
- The quality of healing, which means a leader who sees their position as an opportunity to heal the relationship with others and themselves. The servant leader has an important role in helping others heal too.
- Awareness and self-awareness as characteristics that help the leader have a better view of a situation from a more holistic perspective.
- Persuasion over authority, the servant leader uses persuasion instead of authority to convince others or to find consensus.
- Conceptualization as the quality to extend leadership towards a broader view, the servant leaders not only need to be able to solve day-to-day problems but also, they should be able to see an organization and any problem related to it from a more conceptual point of view.
- Foresight as the ability to learn from the past and avoid potential risks in the future, the servant leader uses experience and intuition in the decisional process.
- Stewardship as a responsibility and commitment to serve others.
- Commitment to the growth of people, as the quality of the servant leader who sees the workers as individuals with potential and who is interested in their professional growth, thus doing all what is possible to help them grow.
- Building community as a crucial part of the leader's work, a servant leader tries to build communities among the workers and to facilitate connections among them.

Gotsis & Grimani (2016) argue that there is very few research and literature focusing on leadership styles in conjunction with inclusion, in their paper they propose a rationale for servant leadership as

a leadership model which fosters inclusion. The reasons why servant leadership was chosen as an ideal leadership style to promote and create inclusion is because of the attributes of humility, service towards others more than self-interest, and high levels of ethical values and trust it operates with. Servant leadership has been measured extensively through various studies, there is plenty of literature stating the positive effects of servant leadership on the employee's well-being and engagement and overall, on the work environment, like more trust and commitment towards the leaders, compassion towards others at work, decrease in burnout and in willingness to leave the workplace. Servant leaders are expected to foster inclusion because servant leadership genuinely cares about the employees, especially those who experience discrimination or exclusive behaviors at work. In summary, it is argued that the core qualities of servant leadership are key to adopting inclusive actions and behaviors and creating understanding on inclusion among employees. (Gotsis & Grimani 2016.)

#### **4.11 Leading diverse teams in a remote work environment**

This chapter outlines some of the research findings in relation to how to manage a diverse team and describes how to do that in a remote work environment as well. As Frost (2021, min. 00:08-00:15) argues, now that we are all virtual workers that does not mean we are able and have the competency to work remotely, to be competent we need to be inclusive when working remotely.

Research has studied the effects of diversity on team performance. What has been found is that diversity can affect team performance in negative way or in positive way. For example, the pessimistic perspective is that if people are different and there is diversity in a team the chance of conflicts in the team is higher. The optimistic perspective instead sees diversity as a resource for getting more knowledge and expertise inside a team also known as informational resource. Team tension and informational resource could happen thanks to diversity, but research found out that those will not happen for sure in all circumstances. One needs to consider the contingencies or the other factors that are present in a team reality to understand if diversity in a specific team will be something which creates tension or the success of the team. (van Knippenberg 2014, min. 6:52-8:30.)

van Knippenberg (2014, min. 23:04-23:07) defines the elaboration of information as the discussion, consideration, sharing of information that is necessary and relevant for a specific task. The contingencies of elaboration, as factors that can affect how much diversity is going to be a benefit for a team, define that for the elaboration of information to happen, people need to be motivated and have the ability of elaborating the information but also, the task should be the kind of more complex task for which problem-solving skills and innovations are necessary. In these circumstances diversity is going to be a factor that facilitates the team's success. (van Knippenberg 2014, min. 23:08-26:09.) Also, intergroup bias can negatively affect the elaboration of information in a team because

one who has biases could think the other does not have the ability to do a task or will be less motivated in sharing information, which can interrupt the flow for a fruitful process of elaboration of information. (van Knippenberg 2014, min. 26:10-26:56.) There are also contingencies of intergroup biases that need consideration, which affirm that realizing diversity does not necessarily end up in social categorization or intergroup bias but those could happen. Usually, differences trigger intergroup biases when one's own sense of identity is threatened, for example when one believes that the other thinks to be superior, that would create a threat to the identity and therefore easily trigger a bias. (van Knippenberg 2014, min. 27:12-30:34.)

If one wants to seriously leverage diversity and reap the fruits of investing time and efforts in developing a diverse team, one needs to be patient and the team needs to be given enough time to reach the desired performance levels. In the short-term homogenous teams achieve the performance goals faster than diverse teams, there is evidence that on the long-term diverse teams can reach the performance goals too and even surpass the more homogeneous teams. So as a team leader or as an organization, one needs to be ready to be patient and to invest time and effort to leverage diversity fully so that a team can achieve togetherness and shared expertise. If one is not willing to invest time and efforts one should have a different focus than leveraging diversity in teams. (van Knippenberg 2014, min. 52:38-53:50.) For the organization to reap the benefits of team diversity it is not sufficient to block group biases, although that is necessary, but also the team members need to be stimulated and motivated to inform themselves about what creates diversity in the team, about the different expertise that each team member brings to the group, and all this can be accomplished through adequate team design and team development. (van Knippenberg 2014, min. 55:02-55:25.) To avoid intergroup biases in a team one should prevent social categorization from developing into biases and stop differences from developing into social categorizations. But if one wants to fully benefit from diversity, denying differences is not a good option, instead one should inspire the acknowledgement and appreciation of differences so that those can be used to the benefit of the teamwork and not result in intergroup biases. (van Knippenberg 2014, min. 43:26-44:30.)

Cultural diversity in teams is something almost inevitable when a company expands its borders abroad, it is enough that a team has two people from different demographics for having cultural diversity. Being able to manage cultural diversity effectively is essential when leading virtual teams. Different perceptions of times and other cultural dimensions can be a challenge for the inexperienced manager, as misunderstandings can happen and a manager can easily offend employees if not educated on these cultural differences. Not considering the impact of cultural differences in a team can be detrimental and also create unnecessary conflicts inside the team, the manager of a virtual team needs to be able to present the differences in a positive way so that the differences

are not an obstacle. If for example one person comes from a monochronic society, which values time over relationship versus a polychronic culture which values relationships over time, accusing them to be wrong would be counterproductive and create conflict, instead the manager should approach the difference between monochronic and polychronic cultures in a team by simply setting the rule for the team in relation to the expectation of how time should be managed in the team, without pointing the finger on a specific individual or approach. (Brady & Prentice 2019, 73-77.)

With working remotely in a team, managers or leaders are faced with the challenge not only to manage a diverse workforce but also to make the team inclusive and finding ways to alleviate the feeling of isolation that can sometimes be felt when working remotely. Trust, role clarity and job satisfaction were considered very important in a study done on 103 remote workers working across the Americas and belonging to the same organization, but still only 37% of the virtual employees in the study thought their managers maintained the promise of a career development, which even if the result from a small study, it can highlight the fact that managers need to be very careful when promising career advancement or change. (Brady & Prentice 2019, 88-89.) Especially when working remotely, building trust is one of the elements that are most important to achieve and difficult to maintain for both managers and employees. (Brady & Prentice 2019, 86.)

Already in the pre-pandemic times a study showed that employees favor flexibility and work-life balance. A study found that after the pandemic period people are more likely to prefer working for an organization that not only allows working remotely, but also that puts efforts on special accommodations and the creation of an inclusive work environment. This means that leaders need to be much more focused than before on inclusion, providing the possibility of remote working is not enough, many left their job without having a new job, because of not feeling they belonged or that they were appreciated. In a recent study only 25% of employee demonstrated a preference for working in the office, the rest preferred working remotely, and in addition to this, some minority groups like individuals with disabilities and LGBT people, showed even stronger interest for remote working. Some demonstrated such a preference for working remotely that they were willing to quit their job if not provided the opportunity. It is quite evident that offering the possibility to work remotely is going to attract many talented people who, for example, would not dare to say they have a disability or belong to a certain group because of fear of rejection. Employees who work in such conditions that they cannot be free of being their own selves are subjected to daily stress factors, which can affect their well-being. If it is not possible to provide the right safe environment for these employees to be comfortable at work in an office, at least providing the possibility to work remotely can contribute to diminishing the levels of stress in these workers. In a study researchers asked employees which inclusion-related action they would have liked the organization to focus on, the top three actions were work-life balance, team building, mutual respect. With the work-life balance

there is a stronger wish to have their non-work matters acknowledged by the employer, with higher levels of flexibility in providing paid free time to take care of these matters. In relation to team building the respondents of the study expressed the preference to work in teams that are not only inclusive but collaborative, which allow healthy disagreement and nurture trust. A buddy system for those new hires joining the virtual team was suggested as a solution for avoiding isolation, coaching, getting to know each other, and avoiding demands from managers of using the time-off for the company were suggested practices to increase team cohesion. For mutual respect it is intended to show genuine interest in the well-being of employees with a commitment to treat each other with fairness and respect. The respondents of the study suggested to support mutual respect by having guidelines that foster seeing others as human beings first and then as leaders or colleagues, genuinely asking 'how are you?' and allowing employees to express frustration or happiness, gives a sign that the leader cares. Having the possibility to learn together, give and receive feedback and being recognized for efforts and achievement were also suggested actions to support mutual respect. The results of this study point out that the hybrid work together with a more diverse workforce is a challenge for many organizations, but for those who have humility and persistence in putting efforts in combining hybrid work, inclusion, and equity, the benefits might result in a higher retention, improved employee satisfaction and an overall healthier work environment. (Dowling, Goldstein, Park, & Price 2022, 1-9.)

#### **4.12 Steps to start a D&I and inclusive leadership-based culture**

In this chapter the basic steps to build a D&I- and inclusive leadership-based culture will be given.

D&I should be well integrated in all of the strategies of a business, the aim is that of discussing D&I in all possible strategies so to highlight the importance of the topic and ensure the leaders have all the necessary tools to start thinking a D&I strategy or program is as relevant as other business strategies. The D&I topic should be brought to light in areas for example like marketing, sales, customer relationships or in any other area that is crucial for the business. If leaders belonging to different business units see the value of prioritizing D&I and clearly understand what they can gain from that, it will be easier to make the right changes so that D&I programs and initiatives can be successful. (Leach. 2021, Chapter 4.)

Failure in implementing a D&I strategy is often caused by the fact the strategy is just a series of isolated initiatives on the topic but rarely the D&I strategy is implemented on the basis of change management principles. If there is no strategy for change the efforts spent in running the separated D&I initiatives will not be effective, it will not have a long-term effect on the culture and on the employees, there will not be true impact on the people and on the business. Even when just starting and even with a small company, it is advised to plan the D&I strategy based on a change

approach, the goal is to create a change that will impact the entire business and organization and that will continue having an impact on the long run. (Fleur Bothwick 2016, Chapter 1.)

Fleur Bothwick (2016, Chapter 1) suggests one effective way to start implementing changes towards a more inclusive organizational culture, which is that of applying the STAR model (figure 3), STAR is the acronym for starting out, taking the leap, achieving change, and reaping the rewards. The STAR framework can be applied despite the size of the company, from small to big organizations, it is a good starting point to map the status in the D&I journey and understand in which direction to go.

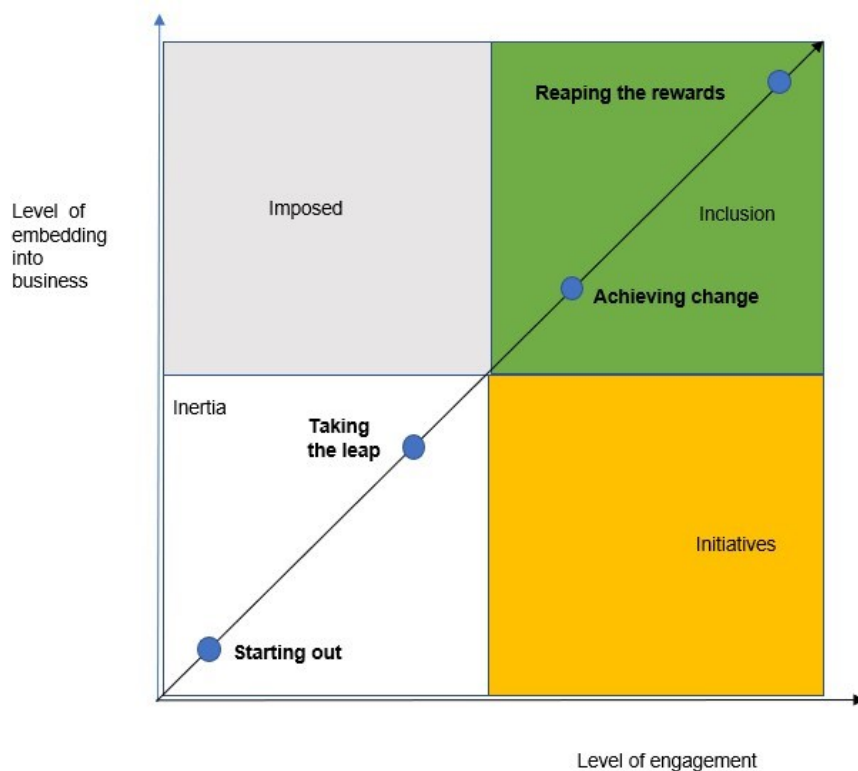


Figure 3. The STAR framework (adapted from Fleur Bothwick 2016, Chapter 1.)

One can map where the organization is in the STAR model, by checking to which quadrants it belongs. Quadrant 1 describes a situation of inertia, which happens when the engagement of employees is low, and the level of initiatives is low too in relation to D&I. Quadrant 2 is called initiatives and described a situation where a company is running several initiatives related to D&I but the level of embedding of D&I principles in every day's business is low. Quadrant 3 is called imposed, and it reflects a situation where there has been an imposition of D&I principles on the organization and its individuals from the business side but the reasons behind doing so are not clear to the employees or have not been justified or explained enough so to earn their engagement. The changes have not been planned and executed with the employees, but instead without their agreement or

understanding, this is a risky situation as it can create resentment in the employees. Finally, quadrant 4 is called inclusion and is the one where both level of engagement and embedding of D&I into the business are high, this is the situation a company should aim for, where the D&I activities and principles are deeply integrated in the business daily life and the majority of the employees is well-informed about the reasons why these actions are taken and change is necessary, in this situation the employees are more likely to be engaged. Positioning oneself in the fourth quadrant is the goal an organization should aim for, as it facilitates a change that will have a positive impact on the long term. (Fleur Bothwick 2016, Chapter 1.)

An inclusive leader is one who although self-aware and expert in their leadership style is also able to be flexible and extend leadership to other types of individuals than themselves, being able to effectively connect with people with different backgrounds and ways of working. Often managers who are particularly good at the operational aspects of their work are promoted to a leadership position and are expected to lead with an inclusive leadership style without having the background and experience required to be an inclusive leader. An important aspect in creating a culture based on inclusion is that the D&I topic should be a priority and integrated in the everyday life of a company as soon as possible, D&I needs to be seen by employees as being part of how a company operates at a daily level or the risk will be that D&I will remain just something to focus on after other priorities, what needs to happen is not just awareness about D&I but also a change in behavior and culture that supports D&I, trainings to raise awareness are a good start but not enough. (Fleur Bothwick 2016, Chapter 13.)

According to Armstrong & Armstrong (2020, 165) a diversity and inclusion strategy should be set to ensure individuals belonging to minority groups are included and their differences are appreciated, the D&I strategy should:

- Be based on fairness so that activities such as promotions or recruiting are executed on the basis of merit and potential of the employees.
- Make sure that everyone in the organization is able to discern their own biases and have control over them.
- Ensure that people who have different backgrounds are included and treated equally to the rest of the employees.
- Promote the company's commitment to the D&I strategy to all and clarify how this commitment is put into action.
- Offer specific D&I training especially for managers and leaders of people, particularly on topics like how to avoid or control one's own biases and how to be more inclusive.

#### 4.13 Theoretical framework summary

The theoretical framework described in (chapter 4) outlined the main themes that are foundations to understand the area of diversity and inclusion and the best practices to create and maintain a culture of belonging at work.

The most essential and relevant legislation related to D&I in Finland served as introduction to the theoretical framework where important acts like The Non-Discrimination Act and the Act of Equality between Women and Men (Finlex 2023) were mentioned.

Diversity, inclusion, how to manage diversity, especially by applying inclusive leadership skills were a central part of the theoretical framework together with the description of the benefits of managing diversity. One of the most important authors cited in relation to managing diversity was (Barak 2017). To offer a more complete overview of diversity and inclusion an emphasis on biases, stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination and microaggressions was put in the theoretical framework, particularly referring to authors like (Clerkin 2021) and (Sue et al 2018), this to highlight the importance of being aware of these concepts and being able to recognize them at work in us and in others so to avoid non-inclusive behaviors.

The role of developing appropriate cross-cultural communication skills and an understanding of various cultural dimensions was highlighted pointing out the work of Geert Hofstede.

Psychological safety, especially referring to the work of (Edmondson 2018), emotional intelligence, citing the work of (Tenney & Gard 2016) and (Faronbi 2020), and the role of mindfulness in decreasing ostracism at work (Ramsey & Jones 2015) were also included in the theoretical framework to provide the reader with additional tools to understand the basics of an inclusive culture.

The example of servant leadership from the paper of (Gotsis & Grimani 2016) was outlined in the theoretical framework as a leadership style having the characteristics that best fit the qualities needed to cultivate an inclusive culture at work.

Finally, notions of how to lead diverse teams at work in a remote work environment were given through the work of (van Knippenberg 201.) and the steps to start a D&I and inclusive leadership-based culture were added to the theoretical framework citing the work of various authors, mainly referring to the STAR framework outlined by (Fleur Bothwick 2016).

## 5 Methodology and Implementation

The scope of this section is to outline the fundamental concepts of research and research methodology and to illustrate how these concepts and methods have been applied in the research and development work described in this master thesis.

When writing about a research study, it is important to observe the principle of transparency, describing the steps that were taken and how the researcher arrived at the findings and conclusions. By providing a sufficient level of transparency, the reader should be able to understand the research process and if applying the same methods and strategies described by the researcher, the reader should be able to come to the same conclusions. (Flick 2008, 66.)

### 5.1 What is research?

With research process is meant the systematic, scientific, and academic exploration to define principles and facts or to collect data so to be able to describe a topic in detailed and precise manner. Usually, the aim of the research process is to solve a problem or find an answer to a question. This is done by following a series of steps and often by reiterating the steps. Research is not just a collection of information or facts, but it is the study of a problem with the goal of reaching a solution. (Habib, Pathik, Maryam, & Habib 2014, 3.)

According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2015, 5) three main factors can be attributed to research:

- The systematic collection of data.
- The systematic interpretation of data.
- A clear goal: discovering and/or clarifying certain things.

The word systematic means that the research process is not just based on beliefs but there is a logic that has been followed, the researcher is expected to describe the research process, the methodology for data collection and analysis and also to outline the reasons why the research results are meaningful and explain the limitations of the research. A clear goal is also a crucial characteristic of research, as it is what drives the research process, ultimately the researcher should find out things and answer specific research questions. (Saunders et al. 2015, 5.)

### 5.2 Research design

Research design is the fundamental phase in a research study from which the success of the study depends on and so it needs to be well-thought out and carefully planned. When building a house one needs to have in mind how the house will be built in its various parts already from the

beginning of the project, the same applies to research, the researcher needs to have a good plan and design of how the research will be done already from the start of the process. One can think of the research design as made of two levels, the first level defines the basic structure and architecture of the research including the research problem, research approach and what kind of evidence is needed in the study and the second level that goes more into the specifics of the research process by defining the type of data, and the methods that are used for the data collection and analysis. A well-planned design should be flexible, minimize the costs of the study, minimize the possibility of bias, and ensure the highest level of reliability. (Vinod Chandra & Hareendran 2017, Chapter 6.)

### 5.3 Types of research

In this chapter various types of research will be described and finally the type of research chosen for this thesis will be explained and justified.

Kothari (2004, 2-4) outlines the basic typologies of research as following:

- Descriptive and analytical: the descriptive type of research describes the current status of a specific situation or of an area of study as it is and it can only tell facts as they are or as they have happened, instead in the analytical type, the researcher uses available facts to run analysis and make critical assessments.
- Applied and fundamental: the goal of applied research is that of finding a solution to a real-life problem while the goal of fundamental research is that of generalizing or implementing a new theory.
- Quantitative and qualitative: the scope of quantitative research is that of measuring something through quantification, while the scope of qualitative research is that of understanding the reasons why something happens or has happened and it is not based on quantitative factors but qualitative ones, for example the study of human behavior is usually done via qualitative research.
- Conceptual and empirical: in conceptual research the goal is that of formulating new concepts or studying current ones, it is mostly used in philosophy, instead empirical research is not based on concepts but on observation and experiments or practice.
- Other types: there are other types of research that can be used depending on the case and they are usually a combination of the ones described above.

This thesis uses a descriptive research type, because it answers the research questions by describing the current status of company x in relation to D&I. After the data collection and analysis, a report has been created to describe what has been done so far at company x regarding D&I and

what the needs of company x are for the future in relation to D&I. All this is done by collecting data with different data collection methods which will be described later in this report.

#### 5.4 Research process

In this chapter the research process will be described first from a theoretical point of view, after that the actual research process that happened in this thesis' study will be described too.

The research process is a series of steps that can be taken as a sequence in order to complete a research study. These actions usually follow an order but not necessarily, often they overlap and happen simultaneously. It is important that the researcher anticipates what is required in the next phases so to be able to take correct actions and avoid potential difficulties or pitfalls at a later time in the process. (Kothari 2004, 12.)

The phases of the research process are described in (figure 4).

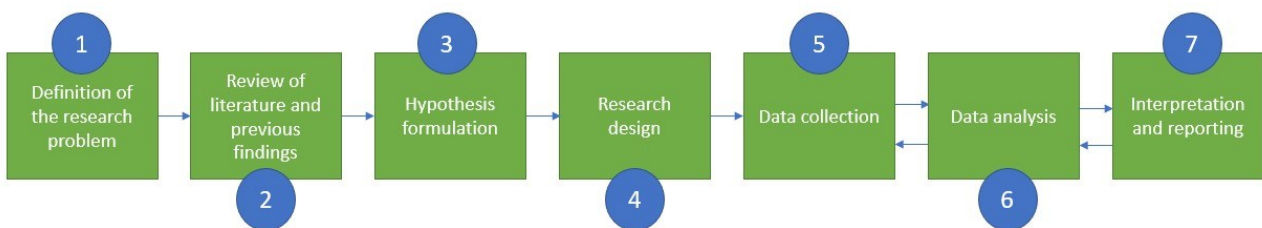


Figure 4. The research process (adapted from Kothari 2004, 11.)

Step 1 is the definition of the research problem which means the moment when the researcher defines the area to be studied. This is a crucial phase as from this it depends which data collection methods will be used, and other actions related to the research. In step 2 the researcher reviews the available literature related to the research area, the scope of this phase is to familiarize with what has already been researched and what not and to collect enough knowledge on the topic to be able to give a context to the problem. Step 3 consists in the formulation of the hypothesis or assumption that will serve as main focus during the research process. A hypothesis is usually formulated in research but there are some types of research that do not need to formulate and test a hypothesis. Step 4 is about designing the research, deciding the methods and the strategy that will be used, who will do what and when. Step 5 is the actual work of collecting data with the means that have been defined in the design research phase. This is also the moment when the researcher needs to ensure that all the research participants or respondents, the sample, will respond so to get as much data as possible. Step 6 is about analyzing the collected data via categorization and coding; this is also the moment when the hypothesis is tested if the research includes a hypothesis. Finally in step 7 the researcher interprets the analyzed data and writes the research report

which includes a summary of the findings with conclusions and observations. (Kothari 2004, 12-19.)

For this thesis I followed a research process similar to the one described in (Kothari 2004) with some exceptions that will be described in the next paragraphs. It is important to state that although the steps followed a precise order, already in the beginning of the process I had to consider the planning of certain actions that were coming in the later phases of the process so to avoid difficulties later on.

In step 1 of the research process, I have defined the problem and the research questions, this after receiving the commissioning of the thesis by company x and discussing the desired outcome with the individual commissioning the thesis at company x. After the needs of company x were noticeably clear to me, I have defined the research questions which are described in this document (chapter 2.2). Still in step 1 I defined the area of study, in this case D&I, in particular how to create a culture of inclusion and belonging in a remote environment. In step 2 I reviewed the D&I literature and wrote the theoretical framework, the scope of this phase was finding enough studies and research to give a context with well-defined limits which served also when analyzing the collected data and which would have helped answering the research question 3. This research work did not need to formulate or test a hypothesis, therefore step 3 was not part of the process. In step 4 I decided which research strategy and data collection methods to use. This was also a phase in which I had to collaborate with company x to understand what was doable and accessible in terms of data collection. In step 5 I conducted the data collection with a web-based questionnaire and a series of interviews with company x employees. Step 6 is the moment when I analyzed the collected data. In this phase I coded all the interviews transcript and the text parts of the questionnaire answers and categorized the codes into 15 themes. At the same time, I extracted the main themes from the theoretical framework and made a comparison between the two types of themes, theoretical framework versus collected data themes, finding out which themes existing in the theoretical framework were mentioned in the questionnaire and interviews and which were partly or not at all covered. The data analysis phase provided me with information on the status of D&I at company x and on which themes needed to be reinforced with the toolkit for inclusion, which is the final outcome of this thesis. In step 7 I created a summary and drafted the conclusions considering the research questions and how those were answered during the research work.

## **5.5 What is good research?**

Research should be based on scientific methods, this means that it should be done with a systematic thinking and a systematic approach, with clear steps that define a specific process, guessing and using intuition to reach a conclusion are not qualities of a scientific research. The process

should be directed by logical thinking, for example with deduction, which is reasoning from a premise to a conclusion, and with induction, which is going from specific to general. Deduction and induction are two logic-based ways of proceeding which are often used in scientific research. Quality research should be empirical which means based on real-life situations and concrete facts that can be observed and validated also by external agents. Finally good research can be replicated and verified again, replicability provides strong foundations for decision making. (Kothari 2004, 21.)

Kothari (2004, 21) offers a precise list of qualities and characteristics necessary to execute good research:

- The researcher should give a clear definition of the scope of the research and of what concepts will be utilized.
- The researcher should describe the research process in such a detailed way that another researcher could continue with the work or repeat the work.
- The research design should be organized in such a way to ensure the objectivity of the results.
- The researcher should state if in the research design there are imperfections that will affect the final result.
- The data analysis and methods should be adequate, and the collected data should be solid and valid.
- The researcher should only make conclusions which are supported by the research data and thoroughly justified by that data.
- The researcher conducts the research with integrity, and they have experience apart from being also of good repute.

## **5.6 Research approach and strategy**

In research a deductive, an inductive or an abductive approach can be used for theory development. In the deductive approach data follows theory, because usually the researcher starts from a hypothesis and through the collection and analysis of data, they will verify if the hypothesis is true or not. With the induction approach the theory follows the data instead, as the researcher starts from data collection and data analysis which will lead to the creation of a theory. The abductive approach is iterative from theory to data and from data to theory, it is like a combination of deduction and induction. (Saunders et al. 2015, 145-148.)

This thesis does not have the scope to develop new theory or validate an existing one, the scope of this thesis is that of describing the case of company x and D&I in a remote work environment, so to understand if the company is aligned or not to the most relevant and up-to-date findings and best practices about D&I discussed in the literature, and based on that create a toolkit for inclusion that will cover the missing pieces of the puzzle, if any gap is found. Because the scope is not

finding a new theory or validating a current one, but more a descriptive kind, a deductive logic has been used. The theoretical framework is the foundation or premise from where the research starts, the case study of company x will clarify whether company x is aligned to the concepts described in the theoretical framework or not. If the conclusions of the study inform that company x is not well aligned or is missing important pieces present in the D&I literature described in the theoretical framework, it will be necessary to cover those areas in the toolkit, and if company x is already well aligned to the D&I theory, the toolkit will be complementary to what company x is already doing and it will follow the needs of company x in relation to D&I and also the guidelines described by the D&I theory. The theoretical framework was created keeping in mind company x's current organization and its future plans for growth. As the organization is still quite new and small in size the theoretical framework includes topics that helps understanding the wide area of diversity and inclusion at a very basic level, this to give strong foundations based on solid research to company x's members, information that can be used now as well in the future when the company will grow. Because of the growth plans of company x internationally, apart from basic notions on diversity and inclusion and best practices to create inclusive cultures and managing diversity, topics as cross-cultural communication and leading diverse teams in a remote work environment have also been included in the theoretical framework.

Research can be executed with different strategies. In the case of this thesis the case study approach has been chosen as strategy.

A case study is an in-depth study or research inside a well-defined environment in a real-life situation. The case can be several things, for example a person, a group of people, a company, or a process. The researcher needs to be able to define the case and its boundaries. The case study is the research of a particular phenomenon's dynamics inside the boundaries of a context, how the subject of the case and the area of study interact. A case study in-depth research can be accomplished to understand what is happening and why something is happening in a specific setting. This can be done with quantitative and qualitative methods, usually a case study uses both approaches. A case study can be single when only a case is studied or multiple when more than one case is studied in the same research. Also, a case can be holistic or embedded, in the case an organization is researched, the case will be holistic if the organization is considered as a whole, and embedded if the case studies a specific department of the organization for example. (Saunders et al. 2015,184-187.)

The main reason the case study has been chosen as research strategy in this thesis is because one of the scopes of the thesis is researching the case of company x in relation to D&I to understand what company x thinks about D&I and what actions have been already taken in relation to

D&I. This specific case study is single and holistic as only the case of company x has been studied and company x has been considered as a whole. The conclusions of this case study will not be used to create theory or demonstrate theory, but to map the areas that need to be strengthened at company x, if any, and clarify what areas to integrate in the toolkit for inclusion. The case study conclusions will also serve to company x as a description of the D&I status in the company. The case study was the best option also from a more practical level, because I am not an employee of company x and other approaches, like action research or constructive research for example, would have required higher levels of interaction with company x, which was not feasible, and also would have required too much time and resources from company x employees, making the research process less efficient.

## **5.7 Methods of data collection**

Data collection is the process of putting together information in a systematic way so to answer the research questions, satisfy and test a hypothesis and assess results, this is done with the goal to get evidence that can be analyzed, through the analysis of the collected data the research questions can be answered. Collecting data is a crucial stage in the research process as without enough quality data it is hard to complete the research and satisfactorily answer the research questions. (Kabir 2016.)

### **5.7.1 Quantitative and qualitative data**

Data can be quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative data is made of numbers, and it is easy to measure, it can be computed. Usually, quantitative data measure something and it is collected via standardized methods like surveys or questionnaires, this method is affordable, but it has its challenges, as in order to give significant evidence it needs enough participants and often requires rigorous settings and implementations. Qualitative data is usually made of words or sentences. It is used to describe feelings, opinions, thoughts, emotions and matters of subjective nature. Usually interviews and focus groups are the main methods used to collect qualitative data. Collecting qualitative data is typically more time-consuming and expensive than collecting quantitative data and qualitative data is less generalizable because mainly related to the group where the data is collected from. (Kabir 2016.)

### **5.7.2 Primary and secondary data**

Primary data is a type of data that the researcher can get directly from the source without modification done previously by a human, like it happens instead with secondary data. Primary data is more difficult, time consuming and expensive to collect but usually it is more reliable than secondary data. Primary data can be collected with surveys, interviews, experiments, as advantages it has

that the researcher can be sure of the data quality, but there might be difficulties in obtaining the data as it requires permission to collect it, which is sometimes not given, and it requires efforts in ensuring the data is of high quality. Secondary data is usually available via secondary sources that have been created by others than the primary source like websites, magazines, books, and other type of resources and therefore it has a risk of containing bias and inaccuracy. Although not as high quality as primary data, secondary data is important and depending on the case it is necessary to refer to secondary data in the research process. (Kabir 2016.)

### **5.7.3 The quantitative and qualitative approach**

There are two main approaches in research, the quantitative and the qualitative approach. Quantitative refers to the creation of quantitative data that will be analyzed in rigorous quantitative manner. This is done usually with the support of surveys as data collection methods. The quantitative approach can be classified in inferential, experimental or simulation. The inferential approach is the case in which a sample of a group is studied to understand its qualities and the findings on the investigated sample are then attributed to the whole group. In the experimental approach variables are manipulated to understand the effects of the change on other variables. In the simulation approach an artificial environment is built, and inside it, data and information are collected. The setting of a simulation allows the examination of a dynamic system inside a controlled environment. Through simulation the behavior of the dynamic system can be observed throughout time, simulations can also be used for building models to understand the future state of a system. A qualitative approach, on the other hand, is not based on quantitative data but on qualitative data and on the subjective assessment of behaviors, thoughts, and opinions. The researcher's insights are central in the qualitative approach, and the outcomes of the research are based on the researcher's assumptions not on a rigorous quantitative analysis. (Kothari 2004, 5.)

In this master thesis a qualitative approach to data collection has been taken, specifically a multi-method qualitative study, described by Saunders et al. (2015, 168) as an approach that uses more than one qualitative data collection method. The main reason the qualitative approach was a better choice than a quantitative approach is because company x is very small and there was no possibility to collect enough data to be able to run a significant quantitative analysis. Also, the subject of the study itself is inherently linked to human behavior in a business environment, therefore the qualitative approach was a best fit to capture the thoughts of company x's employees in relation to the subject of this study.

#### 5.7.4 Questionnaire and interviews

Questionnaire and interview will be described in the following paragraphs as these are the main data collection methods used in this thesis.

A questionnaire is a series of questions to collect specific information needed to complete the research project. The questionnaire is usually an easy and affordable method to collect data as it is often quick to fill in by the respondent especially when having standardized answers like 'yes' or 'no' answers, making it one of the preferred methods to collect data. The questions in a questionnaire can be closed-ended, where the respondent needs to choose between a set of given options, or open ended, where the respondent is required to compose an answer. It is suggested that when designing the questionnaire the questions follow an order that goes from the initial questions meant to understand if someone is the right person and has enough knowledge to complete the questionnaire, so called screen questions, to warm-up questions to catch the interest of the respondent and keep them engaged, to transition questions which are meant to move from one area of the questionnaire to another. After the transition questions one can add the so-called skip questions, if necessary, which are those in the format 'if yes answer question x and if no move to question y'. The so-called difficult questions and questions which can be perceived as more personal should be positioned at the end of the questionnaire, as if put at an earlier stage there might be a higher risk the respondent could stop answering the questionnaire. Some advantages of using a questionnaire are the possibility to collect large amount of data from numerous respondents at the same time, a high level of reliability and validity, it is easy to quantify the data manually or with a software, also it is easier to analyze data in scientific and objective way compared to other methods. The disadvantages of using a questionnaire are that the respondents may interpret the questions in subjective way, there may be a difficulty in understanding if the answers are honest and true as there is no possibility to observe the behavior of the respondents. (Kabir 2016.)

Interview is a data collection method in which questions are asked to a person or a group of individuals, face-to face, by phone or via internet. Interviews can be structured, semi-structured and unstructured. The structured interview includes a series of questions which remains the same for all interviews, the structure of the question and wording do not change, and the questions are asked in the same order, the interviewer does not express their opinion during the interview instead they remain neutral. Structured interviews are used when there is enough background information on a topic and therefore it is easier for the researcher to create well-focused questions. The benefits of structured interviews are that it is not required to have a high degree of rapport between interviewer and interviewee and the data resulting from the interviews are often consistent and easy to compare. Semi-structured interviews are formal interviews in which a series of questions is

asked following an interview guide, but the interviewer can decide to ask for more information or clarifications if needed. Semi-structured interviews are a good way to obtain comparable data and are generally easy to manage because the interviewer can prepare a series of questions beforehand, the interviewer is allowed to express opinions and a certain level of rapport between interviewer and interviewee is required to make the interview as effective as possible. It is suggested to record a semi-structured interview as taking notes at the same time when asking questions and listening to the respondent can be a hard task. Unstructured interviews are formal interviews in the sense that they are organized and scheduled, but although there is a focus on certain specific areas, the questions are mainly open-ended and there is no interview guide to be followed. During an unstructured interview, the interviewer needs to be able to create rapport with the interviewee and to interact, so recording of unstructured interview is highly recommended. Unstructured interviews are a good method to collect preliminary data that can be used later as basis of surveys or other structured or semi-structured interviews. (Kabir 2016.)

The case study approach always makes use of various sources of data, which is why it is important to use more than one data collection method and source to triangulate the data and have a better understanding of what the evidence is in a specific setting. (Daguerre 2022, min. 9:27-9:56.)

A mixed method has been used in this research work because a questionnaire and a series of semi-structured interviews have been the main data collection methods. Although the survey also included the possibility to explain the reason of some of the answers with a free text, which means the survey had a qualitative aspect to support in the collection of qualitative data as well. As stated in Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight (2010, 206) quantitative research can help clarify the subject of the qualitative investigation. In this thesis I used a questionnaire to help preparing the right questions for the semi-structured interviews, as the answers to the questionnaire gave me information on the level of knowledge on various D&I topics at company x and what to ask in the interviews, it made sure certain questions could be asked in the interviews and that the interviewee would have had enough understanding on the topic to be able to answer all questions.

The questionnaire questions can be found in (appendix 1) and the semi-structured interview questions in (appendix 3).

The questionnaire was created through a web-based software provided by Haaga-Helia. The questionnaire was made with the goal of mapping the current level of knowledge on D&I topic so for me to be able to create the right questions to ask in the interviews, but also with the goal to answer some of the research questions. The questions were created considering the theoretical framework and required me to be already familiar with the basic theory and research on D&I. The questionnaire included 24 questions. The first question 'Are you familiar with the topic of "Diversity and

Inclusion”?', directed to the next question in case the answer was 'yes' and directed to the last question in the questionnaire in case the answer was 'no'. So, the first question was a screen question. The reason this type of selection was made right in the beginning was to filter out those respondents who were unfamiliar with the topic as they would have had difficulty in answering the rest of the questions without knowing the subject at least at a basic level. Out of 24 questions, 9 offered the possibility to elaborate the reason of the choice 'yes' or 'no' with some text. I added this option to collect more information and justifications on the respondent's choice. I did not add this option to all questions because I wanted the questionnaire to be quick and easy to take for the respondents, and to take about 10 minutes of their time only. I tested the questionnaire myself before sending it out to the respondents. The questionnaire was administered to the respondents by sending a password protected link to the person commissioning the thesis, who then distributed it inside the company to the rest of the 4 employees. The password was sent in a separate e-mail. The distribution of the questionnaire through the person commissioning the thesis was done in such a manner, as I was informed that was the easiest way to proceed for company x at that time. The link to the questionnaire was included in a brief email with guidelines on the questionnaire, a short description of the purpose of the questionnaire and how long it would have taken to complete it, the message can be found in (appendix 2). The questionnaire was set to be taken in an anonymous way to ensure confidentiality and also give the respondents the feeling they can answer in a genuine and honest manner so to secure the collection of accurate and reliable information. The questionnaire was to be taken only once per respondent. The questionnaire was completed by all 5 employees working in that period at company x, the data collection through the questionnaire was completed within the period of one month between October and November 2022.

In relation to the interviews, these were scheduled with each individual separately by sending them the interview proposal described in (appendix 4). Three interviews were done in the period of December 2022 and one in January 2023. The initial goal was to interview the same people who responded to the questionnaire, 5 individuals. Before the interviews started, I was informed one employee at company x was no longer part of the organization so there was no opportunity to interview this individual. For this reason, 4 individuals were interviewed at company x.

The questions of the interviews were created considering the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the pre-collected information from the questionnaire. The interview guide (appendix 3) included 15 questions which were asked in order and following the same wording to ensure comparability of the results. At the end of the series of 15 questions I asked an additional open question to collect more information and give the possibility to express something not asked in the questions in case there was a need. Although the interviews were set as semi-structured, I did not need to share my opinion and I tried to keep myself neutral to avoid influencing the answers.

Before starting the interview, I greeted the respondent and started creating rapport with them so to make the individual comfortable. After that I explained the information already sent via email-proposal once more and concisely, that the interview would remain confidential and anonymous, that the respondent could have asked for clarification during the interview if a question was unclear and that it was the respondent's right not to answer a question or more if that was the case. I also explained I would have introduced the question with its number first as 'question number n' and after that formulated the question. After the person had answered a question, I left a couple of seconds of silence to ensure the person had completed the answer and I informed them I would have moved to the next question. Before starting the interview, I asked for permission to record and informed the respondents that the recording would have started together with the activation of the automatic transcript. I also informed the respondent when the time to stop the recording came. During the interview I took some quick notes, in case the recording would have not been successful, at the same time I followed the respondent by actively listening and making sure the individual was comfortable across the entire interview and that everything was clear. After the interview was done, I informed the respondent that right after the interview I would have cleaned the transcript from system errors and sent the transcript to each person via email so that they had a reference of what material would have been used during the data analysis process. I interviewed 4 individuals working at company x. Each interview session happened in English language and lasted about 30 minutes, in all the interviews both interviewer and interviewee kept the video on.

#### **5.7.5 Sample selection**

In research for sample, it is meant a subdivision or group of a population. As it would be impractical to run interviews or questionnaires on an entire population, especially when the population is wide, usually a subset of this population, or sample, is chosen. The researcher should select a sample big enough that makes it easy to talk about a specific population and carry out the analysis of the study, and the researcher should also choose a small enough sample that is easy to manage. If the research goal is generalizability one would need to select the right sample with a mix of respondents that can represent the population, if the goal is not to come to a general conclusion, still the researcher should select the appropriate sample for their research goals. (O'Leary & Hunt 2016, 144.)

In both the cases of the self-administered questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews I had some limitations in selecting the sample, because in the case of company x the population was small, made of 5 individuals, and the population decreased to 4 in the interviews due to one person not being available. Choosing a sample from 5 employees would have meant reducing the number of respondents for both the questionnaire and interviews, which would have caused too limited a

variety and quantity of data as a result of the data collection phase. Therefore, the sample for the questionnaire that was chosen in this specific case was the entire population available in that period when the questionnaire was administered, which was 5 employees including company x's leaders. The sample for the interviews was the entire population available in the period in which the interviews were conducted, which was 4 employees including company x's leaders. So, in both questionnaire and interviews the sample included leaders and employees. To maintain high levels of confidentiality the exact role of these employees is not revealed in this report. The research scope was to find out and understand the status of diversity and inclusion at company x, so the limitation caused by the sample size had not been an issue, instead I was allowed to collect data from the entire population, which gave me a suitable amount of collected information to be able to carry out the study, and also because of the sample being small, it was manageable enough for me to collect the data and analyze it. Because in the specific case of company x the size of the sample was the available population, I could collect the data that allowed me to talk about the population, in this case company x.

## **5.8 Other development methods**

Other developments methods that have been used in this thesis are informal interviews.

Informal interviews are done when the interviewer or researcher asks questions in a casual way from the respondents without following an interview guide. This type of interview is usually done in the initial stages of a research project when there is still very little information available in a certain setting or area. (Kabir 2016.)

In this thesis informal interviews have been used especially in the beginning of the planning of the thesis to map the situation at company x and to understand a bit more about company x and the needs of the company in relation to the outcome of the thesis. I have mainly talked with the person commissioning the thesis at company x in a video conference setting. I have never personally met company x personnel in a face-to-face setting. I made use of manually written notes that helped me understand the focus of the thesis and helped me plan and design the research work. These informal interviews have been important because I am not an employee of company x, therefore they have helped me gain basic knowledge on the company, their culture and what the outcome of the thesis should be.

## **5.9 Ethical considerations**

The researcher has the responsibility to take into consideration the ethical aspects of the research process. Already in the planning phase of the research it is crucial to think about any possible ethical issue that may arise during the research process and after the research has been published,

the researcher needs to observe ethical principles in the process of data collection, analysis and how the data is distributed. The researcher needs to be clear about the scope of the research with the persons in the research who will respond to questions for data collection purposes and also needs to respect the agreed rules on confidentiality and ensure the respondents' protection. Ethical research requires an agreement and clear rules on how the data will be collected and distributed and the researcher's commitment to the agreement. (Blaxter et al 2010, 161-169.)

In this thesis the ethical issues of the research process have been considered right from the beginning by informing the commissioning company of all the steps of the research process, by maintaining the confidentiality of the researched organization and the respondents of the questionnaire and interviews with the use of anonymization and by not publishing data in the thesis if that would be going against the rules of anonymity and confidentiality agreed with the commissioning company or other ethical basic values on which good research is based. The respondents of the interviews were informed of the interview process and on the fact that they could have retracted their consent to use the data at any time or they had the right not to answer one or more questions, this was also repeated before the interview recording as a reminder. To ensure the respondents of the interview knew what data is used in the data analysis phase, a clean version of the interview transcription was sent to each of them after the end of the interview. Also, the interview respondents had access to both original interview uncleaned transcript and video. I ensured not to take too much time from company x during the research, so to make the research process a pleasant and efficient one also for company x.

## **5.10 Data Analysis**

This chapter includes a theoretical description of the data analysis approach adopted in this study and the definition of how the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews have been analyzed.

### **5.10.1 Questionnaire analysis**

Usually, questionnaires are mostly analyzed with a quantitative approach as they include answers that can be coded as numbers that can be translated into quantities. There can be various types of quantitative analysis attributed to a questionnaire, these are descriptive statistic made of frequencies, averages and/or ranges, studying the significance of the results through inferential statistics, finding interrelationships between two variables and more than two variables. (Blaxter et al 2010, 238.)

The questionnaire that was used in this research study was administered to a small sample of respondents, 5 individuals, as explained in (chapter 5.7.5), for this reason the questionnaire has mainly been analyzed via descriptive statistic method as that was enough for the goal of this study.

The questionnaire analysis was automatically done by the questionnaire software which translated the number of respondents who gave a specific type of answer, usually 'yes' or 'no' type of answer, into percentages. Because the questionnaire also included the possibility to elaborate on the choice of a 'yes' or a 'no' answer with words to be input by the respondent into an empty field, the answers that constituted sentences were coded and the analysis of these parts was integrated with the qualitative analysis of the interviews' transcripts. The results of the questionnaire will be commented on in (chapter 6) of this thesis report.

### **5.10.2 Thematic analysis**

This chapter describes thematic analysis as the main method of data analysis chosen for this thesis in relation to the analysis of the collected data.

The scope of thematical analysis is that of analyzing the data collected via interviews, questionnaires or other methods and looking for themes and/or patterns. In thematic analysis the researcher creates codes for the data set and applies them to each element inside a data set, for example a sentence of an interview transcript will be coded with a word. The codes are then grouped into categories and the research will look for common themes that can help describe a phenomenon or a situation. Thematic analysis can be done with a deductive or inductive approach. With the deductive approach the theoretical framework and the research questions guide the researcher in finding the themes in the collected data, with the inductive approach instead the researcher analyzes the collected data and find themes from that, not from the theory. In certain cases, a combination of deductive and inductive approach can be used. (Saunders et al. 2015, 579-580.)

Blaxter et al (2010, 233) gives the below described steps to be followed in a thematic analysis:

- Reading the collected data and material and understanding it to get a general idea of the content.
- Systematically going through the dataset and start adding codes or labels to the data units.
- Grouping of the codes into themes.
- Examine the theme and create a map of them.
- Giving a name to the themes and describing them.
- Writing a report on the findings including parts of the dataset that are useful to describe the findings and making appropriate connections with the literature and research questions.

In the case of this thesis, I followed a deductive approach and started mapping the principal themes deriving from the theoretical framework, after having a sufficient list of themes I analyzed the content of the questionnaire text answers and interview transcripts and coded it, then grouped the codes into themes. In this way I was able to map the main themes that came out from the data

collection process, which should have also reflected the status of company x in relation to D&I, and I compared those with the theoretical framework main themes (table 2). If a theme from the theoretical frame appeared more than once in the collected data, it meant there was a certain level of familiarity with the theme and the essential notion were covered, no mention of the theme in the interviews or a 'no' type of answer in the questionnaire meant the theme was totally unknown to company x or at least that had not yet been considered as a priority to be discussed in the data collection phase and therefore the research found a gap that needs to be covered.

The results of the thematic analysis with the themes that were found are summarized in (figure 5). The themes under which there were more codes are the ones that are more prominent in the graph. There were about 260 codes that were grouped into themes.

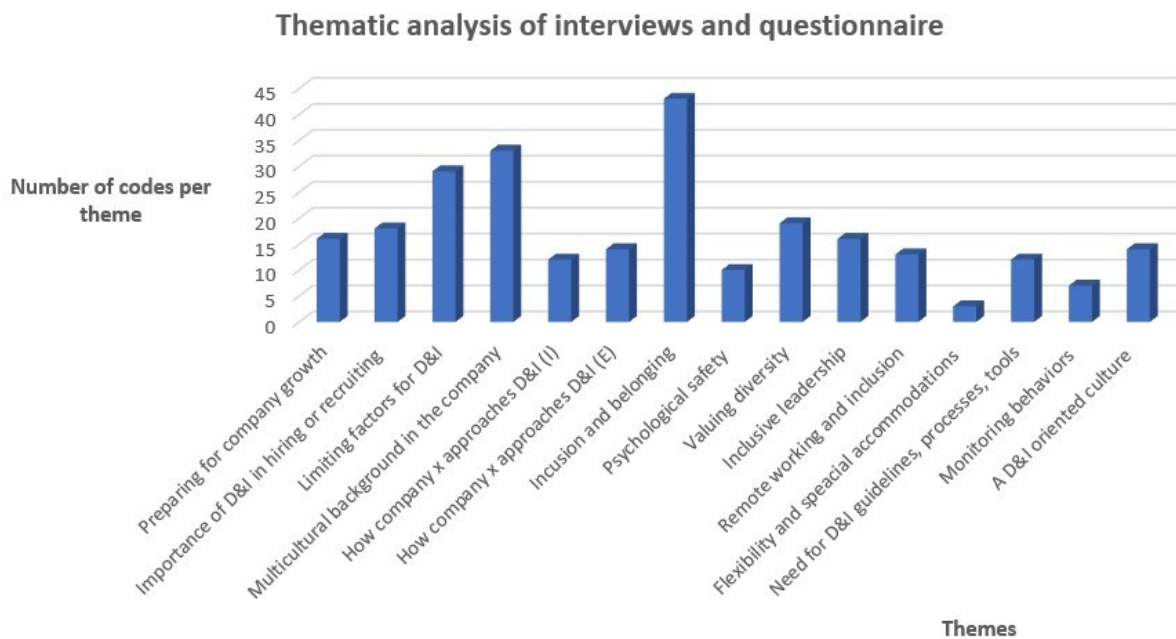


Figure 5. Thematic analysis of interviews and questionnaire

The themes are described as following:

- Preparing for company growth: this theme describes the information company x shared through the questionnaire and interviews, which mainly conveys the message that already now company x is willing to do the background work to support a culture of belonging and inclusion when the organization will grow.
- Importance of D&I in hiring and recruiting: this theme includes all codes that were attributed to sentences which in the interviews or questionnaire related to the recruiting process, to the fact company x wants to hire internationally and to the importance of mentioning company x's alignment to D&I values already in the recruiting phase.

- Limiting factors for D&I: this theme describes how company x personnel sees the current size of the company as a factor of no immediate urgency to develop a D&I strategy and guidelines or a limiting factor to have more diversity in the organization.
- Multicultural background in the company: this theme includes codes that are related to sentences implying company x personnel is multicultural, has been multicultural or will be multicultural. This theme also highlights the fact at company x the official language is English so that all can be understood, and all understand what has been communicated not only now but also in the future.
- How company x approaches D&I internally: this theme describes the ways D&I has been managed internally by leadership and among employees, how company x's people contribute individually to make the company an inclusive company that appreciates and leverages diversity.
- How company x approaches D&I externally: this theme describes how company x manages the image of the company externally and which concrete actions have been made in relation to D&I with potential job candidates, customers, stakeholders, partners.
- Inclusion and belonging: this is the theme that collects information on company x thoughts, actions and wishes in relation to inclusion and belonging, how leaders and employees see these concepts and how they manage them internally.
- Psychological safety: this theme describes the level of psychological safety that is currently experienced by company x's employees and leaders. This theme is related to codes that describe sentences expressing concepts like feeling comfortable in expressing own opinions, absence of fear of being retaliated for disagreeing, how comfortable people are with each other at company x.
- Valuing diversity: this theme groups the thoughts that came through the interviews and questionnaire in relation to what company x thinks about a diverse workforce and how each of the employees and leaders deal with diversity in the working place.
- Inclusive leadership: this theme describes the perception and thought of company x in relation to leadership and how leadership has managed and manages D&I related matters at company x.
- Remote working and inclusion: this theme outlines the feelings and thoughts of company x's employees in relation to working remotely, it clarifies if working remotely is seen as an obstacle or as a facilitating factor for D&I.
- Flexibility and special accommodations: this theme expresses what company x has done so far in relation to providing enough flexibility and accommodation to individual employees when needed.
- Need for D&I guidelines, processes, and tools: this theme is made of codes that are attributed to sentences related to the current needs of company x for D&I guidelines, processes and

tools, the theme includes the thoughts and suggestions of company x's employees for this matter.

- Monitoring behaviors: this theme describes the importance of having a system in place for monitoring behaviors or events that are not aligned to company x's D&I values and the importance of not allowing those behaviors to develop and spread in the company.
- A D&I oriented culture: this theme outlines a strong need and wish to design a culture at company x that incarnates the values of D&I and that supports inclusion and belonging.

The ones described above are the main themes that emerged from the thematic analysis, although those are the most important findings, it is important to specify that the themes came out also because of the questions in the questionnaire and interviews which were focusing on specific areas of D&I, if the questions had been different, one could argue that the outcome of the thematic analysis would have been different and other themes could have been found. Although I agree with this, the respondents had freedom to answer and add more information which could have introduced additional themes, and this is also the reason why themes like flexibility and special accommodations emerged in the thematic analysis, although those were not necessarily the focus of the interview questions or the questionnaire. For this reason I do not consider the results of the thematic analysis influenced by the direction of the questions to a degree that the respondents could have not mentioned additional themes, especially because in the end of the interview a supplementary question was asked which was open ended and asking if something additional should have been expressed in the interview, through this question the respondents were given freedom to complete the interview with any information they considered relevant and that was not asked in the questionnaire or with the interview questions.

Apart from the themes that emerged through the coding of interviews and questionnaire, I defined the comparison themes (table 2) which are described in the theoretical framework. (Table 2) shows whether a specific theoretical framework theme which is considered essential for an inclusive culture has been covered or not by the themes found in the thematic analysis and by the yes/no answers in the questionnaire. The column called 'final outcome' specifies the overall result of the data analysis and if a theoretical framework theme has been partly covered, not covered at all or if at least the essential notions have been mentioned in the interviews or questionnaire.

Theoretical framework themes	Questionnaire and Interviews thematic analysis	Questionnaire Yes/No answers	Final Outcome
Diversity and managing diversity	Partly covered	Partly covered	Partly covered
Intersectionality and diversity dimensions	Partly covered	Partly covered	Partly covered
Bias, stereotypes, discriminations, prejudices, microaggressions	Partly covered	Partly covered	Partly covered
Inclusion, belonging and the benefits of an inclusive culture	Essential notions have been covered	Essential notions have been covered	Essential notions have been covered
Cross-cultural communication and leadership	Partly covered	Partly covered	Partly covered
Psychological safety	Essential notions have been covered	Essential notions have been covered	Essential notions have been covered
Emotional intelligence	Not covered	Not covered	Not covered
Mindfulness and D&I	Not covered	Not covered	Not covered
Leading teams in a remote work environment	Partly covered	Partly covered	Partly covered
Inclusive leadership	Partly covered	Partly covered	Partly covered
D&I and legislation	Not covered	Partly covered	Partly covered

Table 2. Comparison between theoretical framework themes and themes found through the thematic analysis

## 6 Findings and outcome of the research

This section of the thesis will outline the results of the study and if and how the study has answered the research questions.

### 6.1 Interpretation of the collected data

After the data has been collected and analyzed the researcher starts the process of interpretation by writing down the conclusions of the study into a report. The scope of interpretation is to continue a previous study by linking its results to that of another and/or the formulation of descriptive concepts. Through interpretations the subject of the study is explained and/or new theories may emerge, which can be studied in other studies, also the researcher is able to explain the reason of certain findings and make the reader understand the importance of these findings. (Kothari 2004, 344-345.)

The researcher needs to follow certain steps during the process of interpretation for that to be of quality, according to Kothari (2004, 345) the steps are:

- The findings and the relation between those must be logically explained and there needs to be a common logic supporting the explanation of the findings.
- All collected information, including the extraneous one, needs to be considered in the interpretation as that may be the missing piece of the puzzle to answer a specific research question or problem.
- It is recommended to consult someone familiar with the study who can be honest and inform the researcher in case there are errors in the logic of the interpretation, this will raise the level of accuracy of the interpretation.
- The interpretation process should not be done in a hurry but with due focus and attention, by coming to conclusions too fast the researcher may incur in the formulation of false generalizations.

From an ethics point of view, it is important that the researcher considers the research participants when writing interpretations of the results, the interpretation should be fair and not offensive or cause of embarrassment towards the research participants. (Flick 2008, 103.)

### 6.2 The concepts of significance, generalizability, reliability, and validity

Researchers should be familiar with the concept of significance, generalizability, reliability, and validity. Statistical significance means when specific results are derived from a specific cause and not by simple chance. The more significant a result the more non-caused by mere chance that is. Significant also has a more general meaning which refers to how important a result is for the research.

Generalizability means when a study done on a specific organization or group can be generalized or be relevant to something which is outside the specific organization or group object of the study. Reliability is when the study has been conducted in a reliable way, meaning that what the researcher has done can be repeated by another researcher and the findings will be the same. The concept of validity means that the research has been conducted with methods and ways that measure and relate with validity to the problem or subject the researcher is exploring. (Blaxter et al 2010, 245.)

### **6.3 Trustworthiness and authenticity**

It is important to highlight research should be conducted with trustworthiness and authenticity by the researcher, who should not have any predetermined interest in leading the research study towards specific findings or results. There should not be any preset result that needs to be sustained by the study, instead the study should naturally reveal findings and the researcher should always keep in mind various point of views when conducting the study, avoiding personal biases and preferences towards a certain theory, instead they should strive to maintain neutrality as much as it is realistically doable. Even though the researcher should keep a neutral approach during the study, it does not mean the researcher should not have empathy. Empathy means being able to understand the opinion, feelings and positions of others when interviewing and when reading their answers, for example in a questionnaire. Max Weber highlights the importance of empathy in understanding the reasons why people think or feel a certain way. In qualitative research it is important to be neutral but at the same time use empathy to understand the world from the perspective of the respondents and to avoid understanding it as the researcher would assume or want it to be. The qualitative research offers the possibility to conduct the study with empathic neutrality, which means remaining unbiased and neutral towards the feelings and opinion of others and at the same time deeply understanding their perspectives and caring for the participants of the inquiry. (Patton 2002, 51-53.)

To ensure the highest level of trustworthiness and authenticity was maintained in this study, I based the work on a strong theoretical framework constructed on solid sources from the available literature on diversity and inclusion and related topics. The outcome of the study, the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment, was created striving to maintain a balance between the requirements and feedback of the commissioning company, the results of the data collection and analysis and the notions in the theoretical framework. I also made sure to keep the highest level of neutrality that was possible when creating the questions for the questionnaire and the interviews and especially when giving guidelines on how to answer the questionnaire and the interview questions, to avoid influencing the respondents towards specific results. A certain level of empathy was

necessary to understand the participants' perspectives and situation and it would have been very difficult to interpret the collected data without my previous work experience in business, the understanding and study of the diversity and inclusion topic and especially without empathy towards the members of company x who participated in the study.

Reliability and trustworthiness of the results of this study were also maintained by analyzing the data following a systematic approach based on the thematic analysis method, coding the text of the questionnaire answers and interviews transcripts, and grouping the codes into themes. I then compared the themes found in the collected data with the theme of the theoretical framework and found which theme was covered, partly covered, or not covered at all by the respondents of the questionnaire and of the interviews. In this way I could get a clear status of company x in relation to D&I, and by comparing the theoretical framework themes versus the collected data themes, understand if company x's status reflected completely or partly the best practices and themes described in the theoretical framework. I was aware that the researcher's personal values and beliefs can influence the process, therefore I decided to base the analysis and interpretation of the data on the themes described in the theoretical framework, which are the foundations and premises of this research work, and served as a solid guide that allowed me to make a comparison in the thematic analysis and an interpretation of the results free from my own beliefs, expectations and values.

#### **6.4 Answering the research questions**

In this chapter it will be stated if the research questions have been answered with the data collection methods which included one questionnaire completed by 5 employees and 4 semi-structured interviews.

RQ1. What is the current status of company x in relation to D&I? a) How do company x's leaders and employees see the importance of an inclusive culture? b) What has been done so far at company x in relation to D&I?

RQ1 has been fully answered by company x's employees and leaders and the results can be summarized as follows, according to the findings in the questionnaire and the most prevalent themes that emerged from the overall thematic analysis.

The current status of company x in relation to D&I is that the company is aware of the importance of having an inclusive culture, of the benefits of managing and leveraging diversity. The company has already a multicultural approach and all workers use English as official language. Company x is still a small company which plans to grow internationally and to hire globally, which means employees will have to work remotely. So far, although there is a will to grow and to incorporate D&I strategy and values into the business, company x does not see an immediate need for complex

and detailed D&I processes and strategies, but it is well aware that to be successful in the future, when there will be more employees, D&I will need to be well integrated into the culture and policies through a well-defined strategy, in the near future essential processes and guidelines will need to be in place too. At the moment employees and leaders work in a work climate based on inclusion, common respect and psychological safety and they wish to maintain this culture in the future. There is also a high focus on recruiting at an international level, and whenever that will be possible, company x will start growing the company internationally.

RQ1a. How do company x's leaders and employees see the importance of an inclusive culture?

Both leaders and employees are very well knowledgeable of the D&I topic at a general level and are aware of the benefits of having an inclusive culture and of leveraging and respecting diversity. It has been highlighted by the employees that the leaders are knowledgeable about D&I and there is trust and appreciation toward the leaders because of this. Employees feel included and leaders too. All experience high levels of psychological safety, and it is allowed to disagree with respect of others' opinions. Both leadership and employees take into consideration the future and act as a system that works as a unit based on the value of togetherness. In the thematic analysis the inclusion and belonging theme and the multicultural background in the company theme are presented in (figure 5) and are the themes with the biggest number of codes, I interpret this data as company x having a strong focus on inclusion and belonging and on the multicultural aspect of diversity.

RQ1b. What has been done so far at company x in relation to D&I?

- Company x has already focused on D&I but according to the questionnaire results not yet enough focus has been put into that.
- Company x has built a service that is a tool to measure D&I in an organization, that product has not been the main focus of company x though.
- Company x uses English as common language to facilitate communications when employees are non-Finnish-speakers.
- Company x takes into consideration special situations to accommodate the individuals who work in the company and to make sure they feel comfortable.
- All employees are included in meetings and also, they can contribute to the company's strategy with their ideas.
- Leadership is already knowledgeable of D&I and is aware of the importance of leading by example.
- Company x mentions they are an inclusive company who takes D&I seriously already during the recruiting process.

- Company x has mentions about D&I on the company website and is open to work with a diverse array of customers belonging to the technology sector, which is the sector company x products are currently designed for.

An interesting finding that came out in the data collection phase is that company x does not only think about the existing employees but also about the future ones, as one respondent mentioned:

“We even take the future employees that might work at company x seriously, because now everyone understands Finnish. But maybe in the future we might have people who only understand English. So that is why we talk in English in our chat rooms, so when new people join, they will understand the previous messages.”

It is also important to notice that the inclusion of employees who are non-talkative or do not dare to speak up has been taken in consideration at company x, as one respondent said:

“During meetings we have made sure that everyone get to participate in the meeting even if the person isn't that talkative or we always ask for their opinion.”

The fact that leaders are already focusing on D&I was mentioned several times across the data collection phase. As one questionnaire respondent stated:

“I think the leaders already have good knowledge about D&I and are implementing it. However, D&I is a long journey and takes a lot of effort to implement it successfully.”

RQ2. What are the needs of company x in relation to D&I?

According to the findings in the questionnaire and the most prevalent themes that emerged in the thematic analysis, RQ2 has been answered in a satisfactory way. Company x is still a very small and young company and according to the answers of the respondents there is no immediate urgency for an extensive set of guidelines and tools to manage D&I. Apart from the limitations of having a diverse workforce caused by the current size of the organization, company x made suggestions about tools and processes that could be beneficial to have when the company will grow. A tool for anonymization of job applications was highlighted as a solution to limit the risk of biases in the recruiting process, a tool for measuring D&I through a regular survey sent to employees was suggested and also a tool to collect data related to D&I. Clear process and guidelines for leadership and employees in relation to D&I when the company will grow have been suggested too. Both leadership and employees seem quite satisfied with the current situation, but they do acknowledge the need for guidelines in the future when the company will start growing and this is also one of the reasons this study was commissioned.

In relation to the obstacles to have more diversity in the organization an interview respondent mentioned:

“How small the company is because we can't be superdiverse because we only have 4 active employees for now.”

But it is interesting to notice that the limitation to more diversity because of the company small size was also seen as a reason for not having obstacles to have an inclusive and diverse environment, as some of the interviewees stated:

“And at this stage I don't think there is any obstacle, to be honest, because we are very small.”

“I think companies who have more than 10 members may have a negative impact if they are not focusing on D&I.”

All 5 respondents of the questionnaire think that having clear guidelines will help build a culture of belonging at company x, as all 5 employees give an affirmative answer to question n.18. ‘Do you think having clear D&I guidelines will help build a culture of belonging at company x?’

RQ3. What are the best practices that could support company x in building an inclusive work culture?

Although company x already has a solid background in relation to being aligned to the D&I values mentioned in the theoretical framework, and employees and leaders have a common goal to design a culture based on inclusion which promotes belonging, from the thematic analysis finding described in (chapter 5.10.2) it can be stated that there are some areas which were partly covered or not covered at all in the data collection phase. This can be because of the limitations of this study in relation to time and resources, but on the basis of the collected and analyzed data the RQ3 was answered with the available data collected in the questionnaire and in the interviews and with the theoretical concepts that the D&I research sources outline, which are described in the theoretical framework section of this report in (chapter 4). To summarize, the data analysis has served to map what the areas that are well developed at company x are and what needs reinforcement through the notions described in the theoretical framework and through the toolkit for inclusion. What was not fully covered by the respondents is:

- Awareness and mentioning of the importance of various dimensions of diversity. Company x focuses primarily on the multicultural aspect of diversity, the age diversity and the gender diversity were mentioned in the interviews, but the results of the questionnaire show that other types of dimensions are not seen as so urgent to be focused on now. To the questionnaire question n.7. ‘Among these diversity dimensions which one would you like company x to focus first?’ 100% of the respondents answered, ‘cultural diversity’. In relation to the questionnaire question n.8. ‘Can you define the term “neurodiversity”?’ Only one person defined the term, and the rest could not define it.

- Stereotypes, prejudices and microaggression were not mentioned in the interviews. Biases were mentioned but not largely. For question n.3. 'Are you familiar with the term "micro-aggression" in relation to D&I?' All respondents answered 'no'.

On the basis of the data collection and analysis and on the results outlined in the paragraphs above I can conclude that the toolkit for inclusion should include a clear description outlining the existence of hidden diversity dimensions like certain types of disabilities and concepts like intersectionality so to give everyone who will read the toolkit essential information on these aspects and avoid the risk of focusing only on multicultural diversity. Another important aspect which will be part of the toolkit on the basis of the collected data and the found gaps is the one related to bias, prejudices, stereotypes with a focus on the microaggressions, this to make clear to the reader what those concepts are and give some basic tools to recognize one's own biases and situations where microaggression may happen.

The data analysis also spotted the lack of mention in relation to emotional intelligence, self-awareness and mindfulness, in addition to that, the questionnaire highlighted that not all respondents were familiar with the D&I related legislation in Finland, for this reason these topics have been described in the toolkit, with exclusion of the legislation for which only a link to the legislation in Finland was added in the links section of the toolkit.

## **6.5 Outcome: the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment**

The outcome of this research and development work is a toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment which has been delivered and presented to company x. I first created a structure of contents and then I presented it to the commissioning company's representative in an online meeting. I wanted to double-check with the commissioning company that the topics I would have addressed in the toolkit and the tone of voice of the toolkit were aligned with their wishes. After confirming with the commissioning company, I started working on the toolkit content which is mainly based on the results of this research work and on the best practices related to D&I presented in the literature. The toolkit was also created considering the future plans of company x, which are plans of growth, the company would like to hire more employees in the future and especially having a diverse workforce and continue working remotely, all this was considered when planning and creating the toolkit.

The toolkit is made of several chapters. The introduction is meant to outline the goals of the toolkit and the reasons why it was created. After an informative intro on what diversity and inclusion are, I then focused on explaining biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and microaggressions, particularly I gave examples of what these are and also, I added some exercises and 'pause and reflect'

sections with questions to trigger deep thinking on the topic, so that everyone can understand those concepts at a basic level and also in relation to one's own experience of those concepts. I then explained topics such as self-awareness and emotional intelligence, the importance of communication and multicultural understanding, psychological safety, and mindfulness. The reason I talked about the latter topics is because those are at the base of creating inclusion in a diverse workplace and especially in a remote work environment everyone should be familiar with those concepts and with the importance they play in creating an inclusive environment. After laying the foundations of the toolkit so to ensure all acquire an essential minimum but satisfactory level of knowledge of D&I foundations, I gave guidelines on how to contribute to build an inclusive culture and work environment from various perspectives and in various situations. I gave a set of guidance for the leader, for the employee and for the recruiter. Also, I described what to do when someone new joins the company, the rules for running inclusive meetings and what to do when someone leaves the company. The last part of the toolkit focuses on the importance of speaking up if unfair situations are witnessed or experienced in the working place. I particularly wanted to highlight the fact that speaking up is a right, a responsibility of everyone in the working place and also it gives the power to start or lead a change in culture to those who speak up. I concluded the toolkit reiterating the importance of this toolkit for all people inside the organization to ensure a culture of inclusion can be created and maintained, and I highlighting the goal of this toolkit was not only to inform and create awareness on D&I but also to stimulate curiosity and new learning, so that company x's employees and leaders can grow together in diversity and inclusion. The toolkit will be used by everyone in the organization, it serves as a series of essential guidelines that will be shared with all current and new employees. All individuals working at company x, including the leaders, will get familiar with the basics of D&I described in the toolkit and align their behavior in various situations to the best practices outlined in the toolkit. The toolkit will serve as a platform from which company x will be able to build and maintain a culture of inclusion and as a starting point from which to develop further in matters of diversity and inclusion, in the future if the company grows.

### **6.5.1 Rationale behind the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment**

This chapter describes the link between the content of the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment and the interviews and questionnaire answers.

The first three sections in the toolkit are introductory and give essential information related to what diversity and inclusion are. The topic of diversity was described highlighting the hidden dimensions of diversity and intersectionality, this because according to the comparison between theoretical framework themes and themes found through the thematic analysis (table 2), the dimensions of diversity and intersectionality were partly covered, meaning that there were mentions on some of

the dimensions of diversity in the interviews and in the questionnaire, like for example the multicultural dimension and the gender dimension, but no mention of the hidden dimensions of diversity and intersectionality. Regarding the topic of inclusion, the comparison between theoretical framework themes and themes found through the thematic analysis (table 2) shows that the essential notions have been covered so the toolkit includes only a slide on the topic that summarizes the meaning of inclusion, this content has been added to the toolkit also because in the future the toolkit will also be distributed to new employees, who have not been part of this study, so it is important they too will receive the same kind of information of the current employees who participated in this study.

The results of the thematic analysis in the comparison between theoretical framework themes and themes found through the thematic analysis (table 2) shows that the topics of self-awareness, emotional intelligence and mindfulness were not explicitly covered by the respondents during the interviews and in the questionnaire, therefore these topics have been described in the toolkit as they are important pieces for an inclusive culture, as mentioned in the theoretical framework of this thesis.

The concept of bias was explicitly mentioned by one respondent in the questionnaire, and stereotypes and prejudices were not explicitly mentioned. All respondents of the questionnaire answered 'no' to the question 'Are you familiar with the term "microaggression" in relation to D&I?', so these topics have been described in the toolkit, also according to the requirements of company x, concrete examples have been added, so to make sure all the employees reading the toolkit content will know how to recognize and avoid biases, stereotypes, prejudices and microaggressions.

The comparison between theoretical framework themes and themes found through the thematic analysis (table 2) shows that the D&I legislation was not covered during the interviews, and was partly covered in the questionnaire, also considering the fact that company x has plans to hire more employees in the future and be a diverse company, a link to the Finnish legislation related to D&I has been included in the toolkit.

The topic of multicultural communication is marked as partly covered in the comparison between theoretical framework themes and themes found through the thematic analysis (table 2), this because the respondents in the interviews and questionnaire demonstrated to be aware of the importance of appreciation and understanding of multiculturalism, but the respondents approached this at a general level, mainly mentioning the use of English as a common language spoken at work to facilitate communication among people of different cultures. So, the importance of communication was added to the toolkit together with some tips on how to be more inclusive when communicating. The importance of communication was made part of the toolkit also considering the

future plans for growth of company x beyond the borders of Finland and the remote work environment, and because the commissioning company's requirement for the toolkit was to include this topic.

The comparison between theoretical framework themes and themes found through the thematic analysis (table 2) shows that the essential notions of psychological safety were covered in the interviews and in the questionnaire, this because the respondents clearly mentioned that there is enough psychological safety, even though without directly using the word 'psychological safety', specifically when answering question n.12 'Do you feel you can disagree on something or express yourself openly at company x without the fear of being punished or retaliated?'. Below are some of the respondents' replies to question n.12.

'Yes. Absolutely.'

'Yes, I feel that I can freely express myself as a person and express or share my idea and opinion without feeling of being judged.'

The topic of psychological safety has been included in the toolkit to reinforce the current culture based on psychological safety, and to ensure all employees, including the new joiners, will maintain high levels of psychological safety at company x in the future.

The comparison between theoretical framework themes and themes found through the thematic analysis (table 2) shows that the topic of inclusive leadership was partly covered in the interviews and in the questionnaire therefore the toolkit has a section that is called 'What can I do as leader to contribute' which gives information for leaders on the path to be an inclusive leader and how to lead inclusively.

The topic of the importance of D&I in hiring and recruiting was mentioned in the data collection phase in more than one instance (figure 5) which can be interpreted as company x being aware of this topic, in addition to that the commissioning company's request was that of highlighting this concept in the toolkit, therefore a section on how to contribute as a recruiter to create inclusion and appreciate diversity, with tips for recruiters, was included in the toolkit.

The importance of running inclusive meetings and the fact company x's meetings are currently inclusive was mentioned in the interviews by some of the respondents, the topic has been reinforced in the toolkit with suggestions on how to maintain a climate of inclusion in meetings.

The interview question n. 4 'What are the actions you personally do to make company x an inclusive environment?' resulted in answers which demonstrated the respondents do personally contribute to make the work environment inclusive, for some reason the respondents did not mention many different ways to contribute, so a section called 'What can I do as an employee to contribute'

was added to the toolkit to give additional suggestions and ideas on how to contribute to make the workplace inclusive.

Although in the questionnaire all the respondents answered 'yes' to question n.16 'Do you think that people who join company x feel to belong to the company already in the first 2 weeks of their assignment?', no clear mention of processes and actions on how to inclusively welcome the new joiners or inclusively greet the employees who leave the company was found in the interviews and questionnaire results, so a section with suggestions and best practices on these two situations was added to the toolkit.

Finally, the importance of speaking up was also described in the toolkit as this was something not clearly highlighted by the respondents in the data collection phase, and according to the theoretical framework the importance of speaking up is an essential piece of the puzzle to ensure that employees feel listened to and included at work.

## 7 Conclusion

The scope of this thesis was to make a case study of company x in relation to diversity and inclusion, especially in relation to inclusion and belonging considering working in a remote environment. On the basis of the data analysis, it can be concluded that company x is well-versed in the essentials of D&I and all the employees who participated in the data collection phase have demonstrated to have a basic understanding of the importance of a diverse workforce and of the respect of diversity, and also, they are all inclusive in their approach while working with colleagues and customers. Company x's culture is human-centric and also company x offers tools that are built so to support inclusion in company x's customers' businesses. Company x shows an inclusive approach not only internally but also towards the external stakeholders, customers, and partners. Company x already considers the future and writes all the documentation in English already now, so to make sure the new employees who will join the company will feel included and understand the history of a certain subject. Not only that but company x is also already mentioning they value D&I during the job interviews. Company x also provides special accommodation to employees when needed.

My observation on the gaps that were found during the data analysis phase is that they were mainly gaps that are related to essential foundations and concepts of D&I that are not necessarily always highlighted in a business environment or employees may not be familiar with these concepts, as they are more specific areas that are described in the literature or topics that usually businesses start researching or focusing more on when the organization starts growing. Themes like self-awareness, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, biases, stereotypes, prejudices and microaggressions have been described in the theoretical framework of this thesis document (chapter 4) and have also been included in the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment to ensure everyone at company x will receive essential information on these topics. I can argue that these gaps were probably concepts that company x has heard of or is not totally unaware of, but because the data analysis found no evident mention of these topics, they have been added to the toolkit so to ensure all have the same understanding and basic knowledge of these concepts. Also considering that these specific D&I areas can be found online, but they can be described in so many ways which can be erroneous at times, for this reason they have been added to the toolkit and they are described according to the available literature on the topic based on solid research, this to ensure all at company x get the same kind of information.

From the data analysis company x seems not to focus, at the moment, on other types of diversity than cultural diversity. Although the collected data indicates that there is no current need for complex D&I processes at company x because of the size of the company, the questionnaire question n. 21 ' Do you think company x's employees should receive information in the form of guidelines or

a toolkit in relation to the different types of diversity?’ received 100% yes answers, so the other dimensions of diversity have been described in this thesis report in (chapter 4.3) and also they have been mentioned in the toolkit. This is because if there are some diversity dimensions that are unknown or unclear to the employees and leaders, the unawareness of these dimensions could lead to unintentional behaviors which could be perceived as non-inclusive and contribute to exclusion. So, it is especially important that company x considers the various types of diversity so to have a common understanding of those.

Another aspect that came to surface during the data analysis is that not all company x’s employees are familiar with the D&I legislation in Finland. Although this is one of the research limitations described in (chapter 2.3), it is very important for both employer and employees to have a minimum of familiarity with the D&I legislation, especially now that the company does not have a HR department to support with this kind of details. So, a brief chapter on the legislation was added to the thesis report (chapter 4.1) and also a link to the D&I legislation in Finland was added to the toolkit in the sources and links section.

I think that the thesis report and the toolkit for inclusion are a starting point for company x, from this research and study now company x can have a general overview on their current situation in relation to D&I and make sure that all in the organization receive the same basic level of information on D&I through the toolkit for inclusion.

The thesis work was done in close cooperation with company x, the individual commissioning the thesis was informed of the steps of the research work process and of the results of the study, especially the toolkit was created on the basis of the results of the study and the best practices described in the theoretical framework, at the same time the requirements initially discussed with company x regarding the toolkit were considered when creating the toolkit. This was a work of cooperation with company x, with the goal that the company will benefit from this work from several perspectives, as they will be able to use the thesis report to understand the company’s status in relation to D&I, and also they may want to come back to this report five years from now to understand how the company developed in terms of D&I. Especially company x will benefit from the toolkit of inclusion in a remote work environment, which will allow to have a common platform and foundation from where to develop D&I processes and policies when the company will grow. The theoretical framework in this thesis, the research findings, and the toolkit as well will support company x in creating an inclusive company culture internally, an internal development and effort that may reflect externally, helping the business building a strong reputation with external stakeholders, a reputation that confirms company x is an inclusive organization that cares about their employees and behaves inclusively also with customers and external stakeholders.

## 8 Suggested actions for the future

My proposal for the future is that company x should continue to have an approach that is human-centric and based on the diversity and inclusion essential guidelines included in the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment and in the theoretical framework of this thesis. One important suggestion is to put efforts continuously on ensuring an inclusive culture is maintained and grows at company x, and on making diversity and inclusion part of each business unit, so to avoid the risk that it will only be something to focus on when there is some free time and that it will not be a priority. Especially when company x will grow it is important that the company will have dedicated resources to handle this aspect of the business, as it might not be possible to manage diversity and maintain an inclusive culture if the topic is left behind because of too few time and resources to dedicate to it. A D&I council could be created that meets regularly to discuss D&I topics, leading the D&I programs, and who works together with the rest of the organization and the employee resources groups in a systematic way towards supporting an inclusive culture. Davis (2022, Chapter 14) suggests a D&I council should consist of representatives of the diversity groups existing in the organization, usually an employee from the HR department and one senior leader can be appointed to lead the council and the D&I initiatives in case of limited number of resources. Employee resource groups are instead groups of employees who share the same background or interests, they are networks dedicated to various diversity dimensions, for example LGBT networks and people with disabilities networks. The employee resource groups regularly meet, discuss D&I topics, and actively support D&I initiatives to make the culture inclusive. (Davis 2022, Chapter 14.)

In the future with the growth of the organization, company x might have a need of D&I policies and processes that are well-defined to ensure people feel comfortable at work and protected by any kind of unfair behavior or action they may encounter in the working place. Especially because company x is planning to run the business mainly by working remotely, I think the more people will be in the organization working remotely, possibly in different locations and countries, the more complex it will be to manage diversity so that all employees feel they belong and are included. Therefore, it is especially important that company x focuses on doing the background work now that the organization is still small, and gradually grows into a bigger organization that has strong D&I foundations.

As company x plans to be a multicultural organization in the future, it would be beneficial to regularly run checks on the culture to understand what should be done in the future, by collecting relevant data and answering certain important questions meant to help assessing the situation on a regular basis. As Emerald Insight Staff (2005, 152) suggests:

- Run exit interviews to understand the reasons why people leave.

- Run surveys to get an understanding of the attitude of people in the organization.
- Run customer surveys to clarify the customers' perception of the organization.
- Hire considering diversity and not only people who are similar to the people in the organization or to the recruiters.
- Collect data on attrition rate particularly related to minority groups and compare the data among groups. Monitor the data across time, are the results getting better?
- Monitor the turnover and compare how many employees have gone through the onboarding process and how many quickly left after that, if the turnover is too high something is not done correctly in how people are treated at work.
- Find demographic trends across time, how did the company look like 5 years ago versus today and what do you think the company will look like 5 years in the future?
- Run checks on customer demographics across time and assess if the customer demographic resembles the organizational demographic and clarify if there are gaps.
- Plan for future talent, who the company's leaders will be, how well trained on diversity and inclusion matters they will be and make sure training will be offered to all leaders not only to some.

I especially think that company x should make sure all receive the same kind of information via training on diversity and inclusion topics. According to Emerald Insight Staff (2005, 157) it is important to provide clear information to all in the organization regarding what diversity is and how the company approaches the topic and what the company's goals for diversity are. Why the company wants to be a diverse company, it is beneficial to justify the reasons behind that choice. All layers in the organization should be included in the D&I training sessions. The training should possibly show examples of real cases of diversity problems affecting people in the company and give examples of good practices to be followed. Involve the training participants asking about situations where they have witnessed or experienced an unfair treatment, so that they can feel included and more interested in the topic, as it is something that involves them directly or that they suggested, and a learning that is based on existing experience will be easier to be absorbed. (Emerald Insight Staff 2005, 157.)

## 9 Further developments suggestions

I think that there is still a lot to research in relation to mindfulness and how that can trigger an inclusive behavior. While writing the chapter about mindfulness in this thesis, I had some difficulties in justifying my intuition with research, that higher levels of mindfulness promote a more inclusive behavior as I could not find many sources on that topic.

Another development suggestion is for someone to research startups and make a case study on several startups, to try to understand if there is a process that all startups could adopt so to start supporting an inclusive culture right from the beginning of their operations. The case study described in this thesis is applicable only to the commissioning company, but it would be interesting and beneficial to find out a set of common best practices based on research done only on startups.

I think a lot has been already done on researching the recruiting process in relation to diversity and inclusion, but it is important to consider the entire employee life cycle, and I argue that the exit process, in particular the termination process could be researched more, so to have set of essential guidelines all companies of all sizes could follow to ensure the employee does not feel mistreated after being terminated. The same thinking applies to situations in which the employee is not terminated but leaves the company by their own will, also known as resignation process.

Another development idea would be studying the use of spoken and body language in various situations at work, to understand what type of words and body language are more inclusive than other or create a deeper feeling of belonging, this could be linked to neuro linguistic programming, how to use that to create inclusion.

## 10 Final reflections on building an inclusive culture

One reflection that naturally emerged from this study is about the crucial role of leadership in shaping the culture of an organization, in leading a diverse organization and supporting an inclusive culture.

Leadership is about leading people and adopting the right behaviors for each situation, it is about learning new skills like empathy, inclusive decision making, making sure meetings are inclusive and deciding to be self-aware and focused. Inclusive leadership values differences and is curious about differences, inclusive leaders do not have all the answers, they are not afraid to reach out to others who are different to find a different point of view or way to solve a problem. Inclusive leadership is about creating the right setting for a psychologically safe environment where people can bring their true self to work, it is being open-minded and accepting the challenge that comes from different opinions, it is about being curious, asking questions and actively listening, and finally it is about making transparent decisions. Bad decisions need to be veiled by non-transparency, good decisions can be made in transparency and will continue to be good decisions in time. (Frost 2021, min. 2:26-3:59.)

I would also like to highlight the importance of moving from a too much individualistic, fear-based approach to dealing with challenges, which may arise by having diversity and remote work combined, to thinking in a more inclusive and conscious way, especially in challenging times.

This more conscious way of thinking comes from the neo-frontal cortex of the brain. It is about being more conscious and about conscious decision-making. It is about bringing more consciousness into our decisions and interaction with people at work, which may lead to creating a bigger community by reaching out to people who are different than the ones in our own group. Having more diverse connections can facilitate more informed decision making and open our mind to new perspectives. Especially we can learn to treat people how they want to be treated and not just according to what we want. The remote work environment offers us the possibilities to expand our horizons and make new valuable connections that can help us think differently, but only if we are willing to put the effort to reach towards these possibilities. (Frost 2021, min. 7:38-8:23.)

I think organizations should not only work on fine-tuning their D&I efforts but basic topics like building and maintaining trust should still remain as foundations to be worked on continuously. I argue one could focus on D&I but then miss on something considerably basic like not adhering to the psychological contract between employer and employee and so risking ruining the work done through D&I initiatives and efforts.

The psychological contract is the expectation based on an invisible and unwritten contract between employer and employee. The psychological contract is created at the start of an employee's career and develops over time, more expectations and commitments are added to it during the employee's career. The psychological contract can be transactional or relational, transactional refers to promises based on the more monetary aspect of an employee's career, like a salary raise, relational refers mostly to the career development aspect. The relational psychological contract is more human-centric, caring about the employee's development and growth in the organization may promote trust and better results. (Brady & Prentice 2019, 48-51.)

My final reflection is on the role of compassion in creating an inclusive culture in an organization.

Recently, especially in the period post COVID-19 there have been some major changes in the way some businesses are led, the old corporate way of doing business based on harmful competition is slowly giving space to a more compassionate way of doing business and treating people at work. The world has seen new generations of employees opposing injustice, discrimination, and unfairness at work through strikes and other activities meant to create awareness on the negative behaviors, conditions and treatment witnessed by some at work. These actions have set the basis for a more compassionate way of doing business which was accepted and adopted by some companies but not by all. Some organizations in the corporate world have started to be more flexible and accommodating and have provided a relief to some of the problems raised by employees, putting into practice what is called leading a business with compassion. The companies that will not align with this movement of leadership based on compassion will not survive because the new leaders of tomorrow will be from a generation that leads with creativity, which is often nurtured in an environment that supports the employees instead of a destructive competitive environment. People should come first, that is the way towards leading with compassion and toward supporting inclusion. When a company business is based on compassion, inclusion and equity in the company culture are the natural results of that. (Schreane 2021, Chapter 1.)

## 11 Reflections on the thesis process and on the thesis outcome

I found the thesis process quite straightforward thanks to the help of the literature which supported me in understanding the various phases of the process. What I found most difficult was collecting relevant data for the research because of the limited number of respondents involved in the data collection phase and being company x small in size and relatively young as a business, there was also a lack of material and documentation from company x related to D&I to add to the collected data. Similar concepts were repeated several times by the respondents in the data collection phase which made the collected data quite homogeneous, and a bit challenging for me to find significant findings or exceptions to present in the report. On the other hand, because of that I found it easy to justify that employees at company x shares similar values and knowledge in relation to D&I and are all well aligned with each other even without having a formal D&I strategy in place.

I found company x very responsive and collaborative to the thesis process and I am very satisfied of this because it helped my work but also because I could get the essential information that was needed not only for the research phase but also to create the outcome of the thesis, the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment.

The writing of the theoretical framework gave me so many insights on the topic of D&I, I very much enjoyed researching the subject and I feel I am more knowledgeable now than when I started the thesis, even though the D&I topic is so wide, and I still have a lot to learn. At times, the writing of the thesis document was not as fast as I would have liked it to be, as the literature research offered different interesting sources so that I had some difficulties in selecting the ones to bring to light in this thesis. I would have liked to have more time to read more sources, but I had to give myself a limit. The data collection phase has also been a growth experience for me as, apart from couple of interviews I ran in a previous course, this was the first time I had to run interviews keeping in mind this was research work that needed to be done in a formal way following a certain process. After I watched the video recordings of the interviews, I realized my facial expression was not always accurately delivering the intentions behind my words, so that was a learning lesson, to see how the facial expression is not always aligned to what the person's feeling in that moment is. It was an introspective learning.

The toolkit was one of the parts I enjoyed working on the most, I felt enthusiasm in creating it because I could write about the things I learnt during the research with the goal to create awareness and stimulate new learning, and the topic is such an important one that I felt I had to put all of my focus in summarizing the essentials in a toolkit and at the same time making the toolkit interesting to read for the employees of company x.

All in all, I am satisfied with the work done and with the process, I learned a lot and at the same time I also got the opportunity to familiarize myself with company x and to support them with this report and the toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment. I also enjoyed that with this thesis work I could contribute, even if on a small scale, to raise awareness in the workplace on matters related to diversity and inclusion and inclusive leadership.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Questionnaire questions

- Are you familiar with the topic of “Diversity and Inclusion”?
- Are you familiar with the word “belonging” in relation to D&I?
- Are you familiar with the term “micro-aggression” in relation to D&I?
- Do you think businesses focusing on D&I is only a trend?
- Do you think that company x should consider D&I as one of the business priorities? Please explain why you chose yes or no in the text field.
- Do you think having D&I as part of your culture will affect company x positively? Please explain why you chose yes or no in the text field.
- Among these diversity dimensions which one would you like company x to focus first? If you chose "Other" please explain your choice in the text field.
- Can you define the term “neurodiversity”? Write N/A in the text field if you do not know what neurodiversity is.
- Do you think company x’s leaders must be knowledgeable about D&I to ensure business success? Please explain why you chose yes or no in the text field.
- Do you think company x’s employees must be knowledgeable about D&I to ensure business success? Please explain why you chose yes or no in the text field.
- Do you think companies who do not focus on D&I are less successful than those who do?
- Do you think you as a person can contribute to creating a feeling of belonging at company x?
- Are you familiar with the D&I legislation in Finland, for example with the Non-discrimination Act?
- Do you think not focusing on D&I can have a negative impact on company x? Please explain why you chose yes or no in the text field.
- Do you think people will be more satisfied at work if D&I becomes part of company x’s culture?
- Do you think that people who join company x feel to belong to the company already in the first 2 weeks of their assignment? Please explain why you chose yes or no in the text field.
- Do you think that company x is already focusing enough on D&I? Please explain why you chose yes or no in the text field.
- Do you think having clear D&I guidelines will help building a culture of belonging at company x?
- Do you think working remotely is an obstacle to create a feeling of belonging at company x? Please explain why you chose yes or no in the text field.
- Do you think working remotely will work better if D&I guidelines are in place at company x?
- Do you think company x’s employees should receive information in the form of guidelines or a toolkit in relation to the different types of diversity?

- Do you see company x as one of the companies who will support D&I values in the coming years?
- Have you already worked in a company where D&I was already well integrated in the organization strategy?
- Would you like to know more about the D&I topic?

## **Appendix 2. Invitation and instruction for the questionnaire.**

Subject: Link to D&I questionnaire and info

Hi,

Below is the link to the questionnaire.

'Link to questionnaire'.

The password is sent separately.

This questionnaire is meant to be an initial step in data collection for the thesis work, which will give me the opportunity to get to know more about the situation of D&I at company x and about what company x's people know about D&I. The result of the survey will also help me create the questions for the interviews, as it will provide understanding of what we need to focus on in the interviews and so have more effective questions.

The questionnaire should be completed only once by the same person. It is important that the questionnaire is completed with the intention of doing it right the first time and one should not re-take it, this to ensure data accuracy.

It can take from 10 seconds to 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire, depending on the answers.

Please share with company x's people that in the questionnaire D&I means Diversity and Inclusion and that company x is 'company name'. I used company x to maintain confidentiality even though the questionnaire is password protected. Also, the questionnaire is anonymous, I will not see who has replied, only the number of people who completed the questionnaire and the answers.

Possibly the same people who took the questionnaire should then be interviewed in the second step of data collection.

As agreed, we can set 2 weeks' time to take the questionnaire starting from when you will share the link. Could you please inform me when you will share the link and to how many it will be sent including you?

Below is some info regarding the master thesis' scope in case it helps you clarifying the use of the questionnaire to company x's people:

The outputs of the thesis will be:

- A report of company x case in relation to D&I with the scope of finding information on the current status of D&I in the company and possible gaps that need to be filled with the aid of the toolkit.
- A toolkit for inclusion in a remote work environment considering the result of the case study and based on the best practices described in the D&I literature.

I hope it is all good and clear, if not please let me know!

Best Regards,

Tähti Freyja Virginia Novellini

### **Appendix 3. Semi-structured interview guide**

- Could you please describe what diversity and inclusion means at company x?
- Could you please list 3 concrete actions that have been done at company x in relation to D&I?
- What has been done to facilitate a feeling of inclusion when working remotely?
- What are the actions you personally do to make company x an inclusive environment?
- Is the importance of diversity and inclusion discussed or mentioned during meetings or internal communications?
- What tools would you personally need to facilitate your contribution to build a culture of inclusion and belonging at company x?
- What tools would company x need to build a culture of inclusion and belonging?
- Do you think there are obstacles to building a culture of inclusion and belonging at company x? If so, what are those obstacles?
- How would you describe your feeling of being included at company x?
- What are your thoughts about how company x should approach the D&I topic internally?
- What are your thoughts about how company x should approach the D&I topic externally? (with customers/partners and as an employer)
- Do you feel you can disagree on something or express yourself openly at company x without the fear of being punished or retaliated?
- Is the fact that company x supports D&I discussed or mentioned during the recruitment process?
- Do you think that company x encourages recognition and gratefulness towards each other?
- Is there anything you think must change so that D&I will be much more integrated into company x? If so, what does need to be changed?

Additional open question: Do you have anything that you want to add?

#### **Appendix 4. Invitation to the semi-structured interview**

Subject: Invite to an interview regarding Diversity and Inclusion at company x (Master Thesis work)

Hi X

My name is Tähti Freyja Virginia Novellini, I am finalizing a Master in Leadership and HR Management at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. I have been commissioned a master thesis work by XX. The main outcome of this thesis work is a toolkit for an inclusive culture in a remote work environment to be used by company x internally to build and maintain an inclusive culture. For this thesis research work I am making a case study of company x and D&I (Diversity and Inclusion) and on the basis of the research results and on the literature on D&I, I will create the toolkit for inclusion.

After analyzing the results of a questionnaire that was sent to company x's personnel, I created 15 questions to be asked in a semi-structured interview to get a better and deeper understanding of D&I at company x.

I would like to book 45 minutes time with you, if possible, during December 2022, to ask 15 questions about D&I at company x.

The interview should take between 30 to 45 minutes depending on how deeply you will go with your answers. The scope of the interview is to collect data to answer two research questions:

1. What is the current status of company x in relation to D&I?
  - a) How do company x's leaders and employees see the importance of an inclusive culture?
  - b) What has been done so far at company x in relation to D&I?
2. What are the needs of company x in relation to D&I?

The interview will be done on Teams, and it will be held in English, I will need to record it and get the automatic transcript from Teams. You may keep your video off or on in accordance with your preferences, keeping the video on will help me analyze the interview. After the interview is completed, I will clean the transcript from errors caused by the automatic system (if any) and send it to you for validation before starting the data analysis phase.

Please rest assured that I will not use your name in the thesis document (unless you want me to) but instead use "employee A", "B", "C", "D". The material of the interview will be saved so that I can analyze the data and it will not be distributed. Haaga-Helia thesis assessors might have access to

the collected data to advise with the thesis work. For your information, the name of company x will not be used in the thesis and instead 'Company X' will be used.

Please know that your participation in the interview is completely voluntary and that you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

For the purpose of this study, it is suggested to answer all questions with the highest degree of honesty, you have the right not to answer certain questions if you do not want to.

You can give your consent to be interviewed and to the collection of the interview data for the purpose of this master thesis study by answering this email and suggesting a time that works well for you. I will then send you a Teams invite.

In case of questions, please do not hesitate to contact me!

Best Regards,

Tähti Freyja Virginia Novellini