



Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences

Buda Campus

Human Resources Management Bachelor Course

**Impacts of sustained remote working on employee efficiency and
professional relations**

Internal Consultant: Erika Varga, PhD.

Associate Professor
Institute of Rural
Development and
Sustainable Economy

Written by:

Dávid Márton
OXCMNT
Student, Correspondence
Course

Institute:

**Institute of Agricultural
and Food Economics**

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1. Introduction and objectives

In the last few years, the possibility of remote working has been a common form of working arrangement or benefit for many companies around the globe. Whether due to the Covid-19 pandemic, budget cuts making it necessary for office spaces to be closed, or it being simply a benefit to increase flexibility in work, there has been an increase in employees working remotely, or in a mixed or hybrid arrangement while opting to work from home more often than in an office. The available technology makes it possible to perform more and more jobs from the comfort of our home, while also reducing time spent on commuting. At the same time however, there can also be negative sides to working remotely. The distance between employees and teams generated by remote working can lead to feelings of isolation, disengagement, lack of motivation or connection with the teams or companies. This in turn can affect the efficiency at which we are able to perform our jobs, or reduce the quality of our professional relations. It can also provide a challenge for leaders to focus on how well the team works together and damage the cohesion of teams.

Recent news has also highlighted the continued actuality of this topic. Amazon has announced in September, 2024 that they would be reintroducing a mandatory five days a week attendance at their offices which would improve corporate culture and support with efficiency in the views of leaders. At the same time, the news was met with a considerable amount of negative feedback from employees, some of whom consider this change depressing. (Weise & Goldberg, 2024) The feedback of the amazon employees compared to the views of the leadership also highlights how this is not a black and white topic. While some might benefit from remote working when it comes to productivity, for others it has the exact opposite effect. I also have a personal connection to this topic, as I have recently changed from an office only working environment to a company where remote working is more popular. This change was difficult to process and I had to go through a difficult period of adjustment before I could get accustomed to this new culture.

The goal of my study is to look at how sustained remote working can affect the efficiency of people's work and how it might affect professional relationships. At the same time, I am also reviewing how leaders are able to support fostering team cohesion in a sustained remote working environment. My hypotheses are also following these three main topics. The reviewed literature should provide a general overview of the topic and the main focus areas while also showing the continued relevance of remote working arrangements and its effects. Looking at a

company that provides the opportunity of working remotely – and is leaning more towards a remote only culture – I aim to review how employees find sustained remote working has affected my research areas. With a survey shared with employees of this company, and interviews conducted with some of its leaders, I am hopeful that I can show whether sustained remote work has a positive or negative impact on the main research areas.

I believe that the results of my research will help with highlighting difficulties that employees and managers may be facing with remote working. These findings could support teams as they are moving into remote working arrangements by pointing out the obstacles or pain points that employees who have been working in a remote environment for a sustained period have faced. As such, employees and leaders might be able to take preventive measures in order to mitigate the negative impacts.

2. Literature Review

This research takes into consideration various studies in connection with isolation, remote working, as well as the public feedback and evaluation of these circumstances. The reviewed literature accounts for both the involuntary, or mandated isolation and remote working, that was more prominent as an effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the voluntary choices that people made when presented the opportunity to work away from their companies' office spaces, potentially from their homes. This chapter will cover various events that made it necessary for people to work from home starting with the review of the Covid-19 lockdowns, its effects on both wellbeing and professional life and discuss the lessons learned. The second part of this chapter will review statistics discussing the current state of working arrangements in connection with office spaces, the perceived future of possible arrangements and the related expectations elaborating on cases both for and against office closures. Further sections of this chapter will discuss the various aspects that isolation has an effect on that directly or indirectly affects efficiency and productivity. The final section will provide an assessment of the reviewed literature, summarizing the lessons learned and presenting pros and cons for remote working and the aim of further study in the subject.

2.1 The effects of Covid-19

Before we go into the effects of the pandemic, it is important to note that the phenomenon of remote working or teleworking cannot be attributed solely to the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, remote work was already observed before that in the 20th century. In the US, in the 1960s around 4.7 million people were reported to be working remotely, and while the number to 2.2 million by the 1980s, it saw a steady increase until 2020 and onward. Silver's study also shows that close before pandemic, in 2016 at least 43% of the workforce of the US spent some of their time working remotely. (Silver, 2023) In literature, Jack Nilles is regarded as the first author to use the phrases "remote work" and "teleworking" in his book. (Andrei, 2022) Considered as the father of telecommuting, Jack Nilles recognized the negative effects of commuting on the environment and the potential of performing certain tasks from home, and conducted a research on telecommuting with his colleagues starting from 1972. He found that productivity increased and also, health care costs went down which provided an opportunity for cost reductions in insurance spending. However, his ideas were rejected by business owners at

the time. (Berthiaume, 2020) In the 2020 research by the International Labour organization (ILO), based on findings from 118 countries, it was estimated that around 7.9% of the global workforce worked from home on a remote basis. Based on data of EUROSTAT research conducted in 2019, when looking at workers of the 28 countries of the EU, the average barely exceeds 5% of workers who usually work from home while the occasional rate is around 16%. In Hungary, this value is both below 5% both for people working regularly and occasionally from home. Based on the data of KSH, the rate of people working remotely or from home was observed to be under or around 2% until March, 2020 when the rates increased drastically. (Vargha et al., 2021)

As these studies demonstrate, the option of working outside a dedicated office space of a company was present before the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus. However, for a long time, this was not a widespread working arrangement, and while literature is available, such as the study of Jack Nilles, observing the option of teleworking, the possibility of performing jobs remotely only became a dominant choice in the professional life after the virus and its observed consequences on employee's safety and wellbeing. We could argue that the reason for the slow rate at which employees were able to work remotely could be attributed to the rate of technological advancements, and the appearance of jobs that made it more possible for people to perform their tasks from their homes. Today, most professional tasks and employee collaboration is performed online through different networks and the internet which is widely available for households. But we need to consider that the Internet in 1970 was primarily available in the US for research networks and the military, and only became available for the public in the 1990s, which opened up the possibility for the public to connect via e-mails, and also browsers were slowly introduced as well, and the 21st century introduced enhancements to social connections with social networks as a primary example. (Kahn & Dennis, 2024) As such, it is understandable why the rate at which it was possible for workers to be able to perform their jobs remotely or work in a teleworking arrangement was rising so slowly before the 2020s.

In 2020, the coronavirus started showing its effects in Europe with Italy becoming the first country to issue lockdown orders. Companies, schools, shops and most places where people could gather closed down to prevent spreading the virus. In her study, Eszter Hargittai (2022) observed people in Italy, Switzerland and in the US and as most areas of the observed countries have entered lockdown by April 2020, the severity can be seen through various statistical results of the research. For example, Italy experienced a strict sheltering policy, with respondents to the research mainly leaving their home in order to buy groceries or to go to the pharmacy, while in the US and Switzerland people have left their homes for other non-essential reasons as well.

The study also observed that the lockdowns and virus raised concerns in the observed countries in connection with finances, safety and security and also employment. While the study also shows the positive outcomes of sheltering, such as respondents observing more personal time, better conditions in relationships and calmness, it also highlights some negative ramifications, such as the feeling of respondents of being trapped, tensions within the households and lack of personal space. (Hargittai, 2022)

There are several studies that further explore the impacts of teleworking on professional and personal life that were imposed by the necessary working arrangements of sheltering during the Covid-19 pandemic. One study that aimed to research these positive and negative impacts was conducted in Romania. The study highlights positive effects of teleworking, such as improvements to work-life balance, an increase in autonomy and flexibility in professional life, a potential increase in productivity and reduced stress that would be imposed by commuting. However, it also serves as a reminder for the negative impacts as well, such as a blur between the boundaries of personal and professional life, an increase in responsibilities as remote working employees would often try to conduct household chores along with their professional responsibilities. The study also talks about negative impacts on wellbeing, such as stress and loneliness imposed by both professional and personal isolation. And while on the positive side it mentions an increase in productivity, this can be explained by the increase in working hours as remote workers can find it difficult to keep boundaries when it comes to their time. The study also proves via a survey performed by around 600 participants that these negative effects of teleworking can also influence employee turnover intentions, feelings of insecurity when it comes to the potential of losing jobs and also an increase in professional isolation and consequential negative impacts. (Nemțeanu & Dabija, 2023)

Another study reviews the relation between organizational support, professional connectedness and wellbeing focusing on the reduced level of connection between colleagues as a result of the sheltering and isolation during the Covid pandemic. Research identifies that social connectedness can diminish the symptoms of depression, stress and anxiety caused by isolation and lead to increased wellbeing. The study highlights how organizational support and communication can reduce the level of stress in the employees, mitigate uncertainties and contribute to employees' wellbeing. These relations were also analyzed by the study through feedback from 188 participants to a survey conducted in late 2020 in the United Kingdom. The results prove that greater social connectedness correlated with reduced ill-being, more time spent alone contributed to illness, and also highlighted the role organizational communication

played in reducing uncertainties and contributing to employee wellbeing. (Brown & Leite, 2022)

A research conducted in Québec, Canada focused on the perceived experience with teleworking of employees who were forced to work in such arrangements due to the Covid-19 virus, and the effects of organizational and supervisor support during this time. While other studies previously discussed around this era focused on the effects on wellbeing, this article reviews the satisfaction employees experienced during lockdown and mandated teleworking. The primary area the study reviews is whether professional isolation affects satisfaction with teleworking experience negatively, analyses the relationship between isolation and affective organizational commitment which refers to the attachment employees can feel towards their employer companies. It also studies the effects of organizational and supervisor support on isolation and its ramifications. The study was conducted via a survey filled out by 728 respondents from various professional areas. The results show that professional isolation significantly reduces satisfaction with teleworking experience and varying relations on how organizational and supervisor support affects the relationship between isolation and remote working. The study highlights the significance of supervisor's preparedness when it comes to dealing with the negative implications of professional isolation, the need for connectedness and the need for proactive supervision and organizational commitment to contribute to employees' wellbeing. (Deschênes, 2022)

Results of these studies are varying showing both positive and negative results of professional isolation, remote working and commitments of companies towards their employees. They show that while productivity can be increased by remote working, there is a presence of a counterbalance in the form of the negative wellbeing effects presented by isolations. They also show that while it is undoubtable that remote work can contribute to a better work-life balance, these contributions can also have a negative impact, such as the damaging effects of a deteriorating work-life balance. These contradictions will be highlighted in studies presented later on.

2.2 State of working arrangements

The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have drastically affected the attitude of employers and employees alike towards working arrangements and remote working arrangements and remote work. As the following statistics show, despite the conflicting reasons for and against remote

working and the perceived negative effects on people's wellbeing, remote working seems to be favored by most companies. Of course, we do have to consider that remote working may not be available for all of the industries. One study shows that in the US before the pandemic, in 2014, out of 140.44 million observed workers, around 20.78 million people worked in the industry sector, and 2.15 million in agriculture. (Herrendorf et al., 2014) Based on statistics of the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 2022, it is estimated that 24% of the world's employed population worked in the industry sector (ILOSTAT, n.d.), and 50% worked in services. (ILOSTAT, n.d.) Another statistic shows that in 2022 815.63 million employees worked in the industry sector and 1,696.68 million worked in services out of 3404.75 million people observed worldwide. (Dyvik, 2024) These statistics are important to consider because it affects the availability of remote working or teleworking for employees. There might be a distorting effect depending on how different countries' statistical institutes might categorize different types of job within sectors, considering how one might work in the industry sector but perform administrative tasks that would be possible to manage remotely as well. However, the following statistics will consider employees working in the services sector for whom, depending on employer's support, remote working might be an option.

A study by the McKinsey Global Institute highlights that although after the pandemic, while some people were returning to the offices, the amount of people working on site was significantly less than the rates observed before 2020 by approximately 30%. Hybrid working arrangements – meaning a mixture of days within a week spent in office and remotely – became increasingly popular. The research also observes in major cities a negative relation between rate of employees working in services sector and rate of office attendance, meaning the higher rate of service workers there are in a metropolitan city, the less they work from company office spaces. Another influencing factor could potentially be the size of the company as the research posits that larger firms have better finances to support remote workers than smaller ones, while on the other side at companies with lower headcount, the connectedness of the colleagues could potentially be stronger than at a larger firm. Additionally, the study also found that if given the option to choose, employees would rather spend less time in the office. (Mischke et al., 2023)

A study conducted by Gallup reinforces these trends and intentions. The research was done in the US and was conducted with organizations where some percentage of the work could be performed remotely. Out of the 60 million employees asked, around 30% indicated that they would rather work from home or work remotely and 60% preferred a hybrid working arrangement. When asked about the reasons as to why they would not go to an office space, the primary arguments were reduced or eliminated commuting time and improved work-life

balance and wellbeing. Based on this research, in 2021, Gallup estimated that from 2022, office space attendance would be reduced by 37%. (Clifton & Wigert, 2021)

Another article explores the approach towards managing office spaces of different companies. The findings of a survey conducted by 350 companies concluded that 50% of the larger businesses were planning to reduce their office space even if by a small amount, while smaller companies were aiming to increase them. As companies are trying to balance providing sustainable but amiable office spaces for their employees while also maintaining the option for flexible working arrangements, it is important that this balancing act is done in an efficient and sustainable way. (Partridge, 2023)

Further statistics show an increased interest and continued shift towards remote working. While in 2023 around 12.7% of full-time employees worked from home, and 28.2% worked in a hybrid model, a trend indicates that in the US around 32.6 million employees would be working remotely. The primary sector that shows increased potential and interest in remote working is IT, while other supporting sectors such as finance, marketing and even Human Resources are also following suit. When it comes to demographic data, employees between the ages 24 and 35 are the most predominant age groups working remotely. When it comes to genders, although the difference does not seem to be large, a larger percentage of male employees work remotely than female workers. Specifically, 38% of men work remotely full-time, with an additional 23% working part-time. In comparison, 30% of women work remotely full-time, and another 22% work part-time. And the sentiment of the community favours remote working to the point where a significant amount of employees would even consider leaving their employers if they didn't provide opportunity for teleworking. (Haan, 2023)

These studies show how in recent years the interest in remote working has increased and also show a tendency of future increase in employees who will likely opt for teleworking, home office or at least a hybrid working arrangement. This may seem like a drastic change compared to the vision of employers before the Covid-19 pandemic. Not so long ago, many employers even went as far as rolling their remote working policies and support back. While the McKinsey report suggested that these days, larger companies are more likely to support remote working, in 2013 and in following years, companies such as Yahoo, HP or IBM changed their policies and required all employees to work in their respective offices. The reason for this step was that employers felt that remote workers were not as productive and also disengaged from their companies. Returning to the office space gave teams the opportunity to collaborate in the same physical space at the same time instead of exchanging long lines of emails. Companies mention

the opportunities for better teamwork, efficiency and better interactions as well when it comes to reasons for returning to the office. (Schawbel, 2020)

These findings on reasons to choose remote working or working in offices once again look somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, just a few years ago, it seemed like working in office spaces increased the efficiency and productivity of employees, while in recent years, many report to be better at performing their jobs remotely or from home. Of course, technological and software improvements can enhance one's ability to perform their duties, and such technologies make it possible for us to perform our tasks digitally from anywhere in the world as long as we have access to the internet. However, as the following sections will show, technology can also create controversies when it comes to the benefits and hindrances that remote working may offer.

2.3 Connection and Engagement

One might think that the beautiful thing about technology is that it would erase distances between people, that it would connect us and make it possible to engage with each other. However, this is also a matter of perspectives as the professional relationships of individuals can be affected differently by working remotely or in a digital environment, and some might not even experience changes, while others may be struggling. The following studies will serve as examples to present the duality that technology creates in a working environment and highlight how important it is to consider how we utilize technology to foster connection and engagement rather than letting it divide us.

In his book, *Back to Human*, Dan Schawbel highlights the issues technology may present. The study highlights how relying on software and online platforms to connect and communicate with each other can lead to loneliness which leads to even more detrimental effects, perhaps worst of all being a reduction of lifespan. It raises attention to the correlation between social connections, including workplace connections, and commitment to employers, work, teams and performance. Low levels of social connections can have significant impacts on these aspects. And while some might be conflicted by the idea of having friends at work, the research shows that people who have friends at work are more likely to be engaged in their work and committed to their teams and companies, while at the same time people have fewer friends or none at all are more likely to be lonely and feel disengaged. (Schawbel, 2020)

This book also highlights the importance of engagement, the thing that the social isolation directly or indirectly caused by technology is hurting so badly. For companies, it would be important to maintain employee engagement in a high level considering how disengaged employees are more likely to leave their jobs than their engaged counterparts. And while technology makes it possible for us to work remotely away from the company office space, it also establishes the perfect ground for social isolation by disconnecting teams who would be working together. But it is not just the employees working remotely who can be disconnected. People working in offices can also feel lonely and disengaged from the company and their teams, and it is probably one of the most important jobs of a leader to make sure their team feels engaged as it can directly or indirectly lead to lower performance rates, higher rates of absenteeism and this can all lead to loss of revenue for the company. (Schawbel, 2020)

Another research highlights the importance of team cohesion and connectedness, and through research establishes ways to effectively build team cohesion even for virtual teams. The research finds team cohesiveness a vital building block for success as it provides enhancement to team creativity, knowledge and morale as well. Virtual teams are identified as groups of coworkers who are dispersed geographically or organizationally and collaborate using informational technologies and telecommunication. The goal of the research which was conducted with leaders from Fortune 500 companies was to identify ways to build better, more cohesive teams in a virtual environment. While the results identified task-oriented practices to build cohesive teams as well, such as practices to build trust or roles and responsibilities of leaders and group members to maintain respect within the team and support each other, the findings also identified social oriented principles as well. Some examples of such best practices are the encouragement of workplace friendliness, team bonding exercises, having regular calls or meetings, and the reinforcement of teamwork to improve cohesion within the team and thus improve the engagement perceived by the members of the team. (Thiss, 2023)

The study of Venczel-Szakó Tímea, Balogh Gábor and Borgulya Istvánné (2021) raises awareness on the importance of internal communication which is another tool that can enhance engagement and reinforce connections between colleagues and also between employer and employees. As the article covers research in connection with internal communication with contradicting results, it also mentions findings on the importance and role of different communication types, such as the way digital communication might be better used to perform or support a certain task, while personal, face to face communication might better serve the personal relations rather than professional connections. Through interviewing 24 employees, the research focused on the nature, contents and the experiences of internal communication

among peers and between employers and employees as well. When it comes to connection, one main finding was that the individual's attitude towards others can affect the communication potentially enhancing or reducing the level of connection and engagement. The study also found that tasks requiring teamwork, and as such, better communication leads to better formal and informal cohesion as well between colleagues. Also, as the feedback received shows that technological solutions are used more often, these solutions improve the internal communication both for employees working in the office spaces and for people working remotely as well, leading to increased engagement and motivation. While the study finds that providing the option for remote work for employees is an effective form of motivation and tool for retention, it also recognizes the importance of effective communication in order to maintain engagement and avoid isolation which can be supported by the efficient use of communication technology. (Venczel-Szakó et al., 2021)

While these studies present mixed findings in connection with how technology affects communication, connectivity within teams or between colleagues, they do have some aspects in common. While the studies may differ when it comes to findings on how remote working may or may not promote disengagement among peers or employees and employers, the importance of effective communication is a recurring motive. It is within our best interest, regardless of position in a professional hierarchy to develop ourselves in effective communication to maintain connections and engagement in order to be able to function better together. Another recurring motive is the critical role of technology in our connectedness. As we spend more and more time working with technology, and utilizing it to communicate with each other, it is imperative to be conscious of how we utilize these mechanics effectively to promote efficient exchanges while also keeping on top of the human connections we have established to avoid the effects on isolation technology may promote.

2.4 Productivity

Previously discussed studies have mentioned the effects of remote working and isolation on productivity showing how it can be both increased and reduced by the change in working environment and distancing from colleagues. While research may have shown how productivity can be increased by working remotely, or would not be affected negatively, we cannot ignore the detrimental effects that isolation has directly, or indirectly on productivity as it reduces the efficiency of communication, separating team members and reinforcing disengagement and

commitment to a company. The following studies will approach productivity more directly and how changing to remote working can affect productivity of organizations and employees.

One study utilizing a Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework focusing on productivity, people and planet aimed to synthesize research on remote working and its impacts due to the Covid-19 pandemic. When it comes to productivity, its main focus areas were workplace outcomes, KPI-s, firm performance and efforts of workers and organizations. While it was focusing on the impacts of the virus on productivity, people and the planet, it also raised questions on how the changes would shape the future of workplaces. When it comes to productivity, the findings highlight the difficult transition from office working to working from home arrangements due to an initial increase in email and virtual communication and meetings leading to longer workdays and reduced productivity due to less uninterrupted work time. However, overtime employees have adapted to remote and digital working, and the productivity and time management improved. Employees did report fatigue from increased amounts of virtual meetings and social disconnectedness which highlighted the need to review the best practices when it comes to remote working and collaboration. The research also found literature on four-day work weeks, and while it gained traction among employees and companies and showed an increase in morale and productivity, there was a need for cultural and strategic changes to be able to implement it, and without these, there could have been an increase in pressure on productivity. At the same time, when it comes to the people aspect of the research, it highlighted wellbeing as an aspect that was negatively impacted due to social isolation and work intensification mixed with an increase in caregiving responsibilities due to shared sheltering of families. (McPhail et al., 2023)

The research shows the adaptability of employers and employees to potentially drastic and sudden changes in their working arrangements. Supported by a fast and efficient response by management, the implementation of new practices, working arrangements and the acknowledgement of change and need of development can help reduce negative impacts, and maintain productivity or normalize its level after an initial drop. The Kübler-Ross change curve presents this road of adaptation to change over time perfectly. Once the change takes place, after an initial phase of blame, denial and depression, people and organizations are able to accept the change and adapt to it, implementing the opportunities and improvements the changes bring into their processes and practices, and learning from this process, they are able to come out of the change with improved morale and potentially improved productivity as well. (Savolainen, 2016)

Other research also focused on the shift to remote working due to the Covid-19 virus and its impact on productivity and well-being of employees and their experiences. The study was conducted by collecting data from 278 US workers and conducting interviews with 8 individuals. The questions of the study focused on worker perceptions of working from home arrangements, its intensity, productivity, impact on stress and wellbeing and strategies for support. The results from the feedback show that about a third of the respondents reported an increase in responsibilities, working hours and job demands after transitioning to a remote working arrangement. At the same time, 56% found working from home to be a positive experience and 61% expressed they would prefer to continue doing so post-pandemic. When it comes to productivity, half of the respondents reported an increase in perceived productivity, while the rest experienced either no change or a reduction, but at the same time the majority of the respondents agreed that the new arrangement presents an increase in opportunity to learn to be more productive. The implementation of online platforms and collaborative tools also supported the increase in productivity, but 26% of the respondents did not agree with this statement. A common response to the research and interviews was that loss of coworker support and an increase in work-life integration was a source of friction when it comes to productivity, but also in the areas of stress and health challenges. The study concluded that productivity is influenced by alignment with personal values, organizational purpose and maintaining boundaries between work and personal life. As a result of the research, the authors suggest that employers should focus on accomplishments and results of employees rather than working hours. It also highlights the need to promote informal connections, establishing work-life boundaries, implementing enhanced wellness support and better communication of the organizations purpose and the meaning of employees' roles and work. (George et al., 2022)

The studies of McPhail and George have shown that an increase in productivity is possible despite possible reduction in initial stages of switching from an office-based working arrangement to working from home or teleworking. At the same time, however, both studies show that this increase in productivity comes at a cost. While employees may have experienced an increase in productivity and efficiency after adapting to new working arrangements and effectively implementing remote working tools, at the same time they also saw an increase in commitments, pressure, increase in working hours and detrimental effects on their work-life balance. In his book, Dan Schawbel also highlights this duality. His research with over 25,000 employees, over 60% reported an increase in productivity which they attributed to their working arrangements. This can be owed to a quieter working space and also an increase in working hours, as some employees tend to start earlier, take shorter breaks and also work past the

designated working hours. At the same time, while employees may report satisfaction with their working arrangements and productivity, they are also isolated and are more likely to check in with their coworkers informally. (Schawbel, 2020)

As these studies show the effect of sudden working style changes on productivity, they will be interesting to compare to the findings of this study as the company it focuses on is also expecting to go through a change of working arrangements shifting to a digital first policy. My expectations are that the impact of the change will not be as significant as it was at the outbreak of Covid-19 due to the experience and lessons learned and processes implemented during and after the pandemic. However, the question remains whether individuals and organizations have made enough effort to maintain employee wellbeing in a remote working environment.

2.5 Diversity

While we consider the implications of how remote working may affect isolation, which, in turn can affect a person's productivity, we also need to remember that we are different in the ways we are able to cope with different working arrangements and conditions. As such, we cannot simply state that everyone can be productive in a remote working environment or suggest that we can all cope with isolation and distancing from our team members. As previously discussed research shows, people have experienced shifting to remote working in different ways, and while the studies did not necessarily focus on people's preferences on how this diversity in our relation to working and social settings may affect the results, I find it to be an angle that is worth remembering.

Diversity and inclusion are words that often comes up when discussing corporate culture. Diversity can be understood as the quality, condition, or fact of being diverse or different. (Oxford University Press, 2024) In science diversity can be taken as the composition of social units used to describe a wide range of physical, cultural, psychological, and behavioral differences in organizations. (Chui et al., 2015) As these approaches show, diversity can be present in many areas and aspects of life. Some examples can be race or ethnicity, education, gender, generations and ages, religion, political views, sexual orientation, but it can be profession or employment status, as well. (Schawbel, 2020)

According to one research, inclusion can be described as a feeling of respect and belonging. At the same time the study highlights that inclusion can have different definitions or meanings in different areas, or it can be defined differently by different education levels as well. (Sunkler,

2024) The George Washington University refers to the term inclusion as one used to describe the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity. (The George Washington University, n.d.) The Cambridge Dictionary describes inclusion as the act of including someone or something as part of a group or more simply, the act of including something or someone as part of something. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d.)

McKinsey research highlighted the importance of considering working arrangements from the perspective of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) framework. A research conducted with 1345 respondents from the US, Europe and Australia focusing on those whose work allowed hybrid work revealed various experiences and approaches towards remote working. The study highlights that hybrid work models that lack a well devised strategy often leads to problems such as isolation and mental health issues, especially among underrepresented groups. The research shows that employees with disabilities were 11% more likely to choose a hybrid work model over employees without disabilities, LGBTQ+ employees were 13% more likely to share this sentiment than their heterosexual peers and nonbinary employees were 14% more likely to choose this solution. These results highlight how important it can be to consider preferences in working arrangements for diverse communities, especially because some employees – out of their own choice or preference – might be hiding disabilities, gender identities or sexual orientations, and the option to work remotely can alleviate some stress that comes with hiding these differences. At the same time, research shows that younger, black, LGBTQ+ and female employees were more likely to leave their workplaces if they didn't have the option to work remotely. While the research finds that focus on inclusion has improved since the pandemic started, it also emphasizes the need for continued focus on the DEI strategy of companies. The article suggests an increased focus on establishing inclusive cultures - with practices and benefits such as work-life support, team building and mutual respect - that prioritize trust and support in order to improve retention rates and effective collaboration. (Dowling et al., 2022)

Another idea to consider when it comes to diversity and working together with diverse teams is the effect technology can have on the collaboration of diverse teams. Considering how older employees may not have grown up with the same technologies or the same aptitude to handle newer tools, technology may cause a divide between some diverse groups rather than bringing them together. As we rely more on communicating through emails and applications rather than speaking face to face (in the same physical space or virtually), there might also be an issue when it comes to how people from different cultures and backgrounds or groups may interpret certain written messages which can lead to misunderstandings, incorrect conclusions, loss of productivity and conflicts. However, these differences also provide an opportunity for

individuals from diverse groups to learn from each other to better understand backgrounds and culture and improve collaboration. (Schawbel, 2020)

The discussed studies show that underrepresented groups would more likely prefer remote working, and previous research indicated that remote and hybrid working arrangements are significantly preferred. This might be a strong argument to switch to a digital first working culture meaning employees would be working from their home with rare opportunities to get together and work at the same workspace. At the same time, it could raise the question of how people who prefer to work in an office environment with colleagues present in the same physical space might be affected and if the DEI strategy and efforts of the company will be able to cover their interests as well.

2.6 Conclusion

The studies presented so far have shown the duality of the effects of remote working and social and professional isolation in multiple aspects. The sudden shift to remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted countless challenges with the implementation of remote working. As the choice of where an employee would wish to perform their professional responsibilities at the time was not necessarily a common commodity, some of those who were working only in a professional working environment had to face some challenges working from home presented. Of course, some people may have experienced additional challenges such as families where adults would be working at the same time as their children attending online classes, which may have presented challenges in having the necessary privacy or the inability to establish the adequate setup to work, and then some may have even faced challenges with having the necessary technology and infrastructure for the whole family to be able to operate at the same time. However, the studies also show that people were able to recover from the initial hardships, they adapted and overcame the challenges and having learned from it are now ready to update their working styles and arrangements.

Research presented the common misconception of remote workers being less productive than those working in office spaces with their colleagues. However, it appears that this idea has been refuted. One Gallup study shows the example of IBM, where it was reported that in 2009, 40% of the workforce was working remotely. As the company experienced repeated losses, in 2017, the management decided to mandate working from offices for a significant amount of remote workers in order to achieve better performance and enhance collaboration. But the result was

the complete opposite. Those who had to return to the office space from working remotely started looking for other jobs, and at the same time, these employees established themselves isolated even in the office spaces to keep a semblance of the environment they were used to. (Hickman, 2019) As the studies show, it is possible to achieve better performance when working remotely, and as such, providing this option to employees is now a popular choice of employers. At the same time, it is important to remember that in some cases, this improved performance may come at a cost.

One study highlights what can be considered the cost and effect, or the pros and cons of working remotely. Before addressing these, the research provides a reminder on the state of remote working with statistics showing interest in teleworking. Before the pandemic, 44% of companies world-wide did not provide the option for employees to be working remotely. Due to the virus and mandated sheltering, employers adopted remote working policies, and it was reported in 2020 that 42% of the workforce of the US were estimated to be working from home. It was estimated that by 2025, 26,7% of the American workforce would be working fully remotely. The research then shows the positive and negative aspects of working remotely that people have experienced. While employees reported an improvement in work-life balance, there were also reports of the boundaries between work and personal life being blurred with longer working hours without setting clear boundaries and routines. The stress levels of employees were also reduced as there was no need to commute between home and the workspace. However, commuting and being present in the workspace provided a structure which people were now lacking. Employees reported autonomy and better control over establishing their own work environment by being able to create their own ideal workspaces and in some cases being able to choose when to perform their jobs. At the same time, as employees were working in most cases from their homes, this presented challenges with the ability to concentrate and dedicate attention to work as people often experienced distractions with household chores, family and outside noises. And while there were reports of improved wellbeing through the option of healthier life choices due to implementing wellness activities instead of commuting and thanks to the options provided by an increased flexibility, employee wellbeing also suffered from negative impacts such as the experience of professional isolation due to lack of in person interactions, increased stress and anxiety due to isolation and lack of immediate support that would have potentially been available in the office, and also stress from adapting to a new dynamic of work-life balance. (Garg & Ranga, 2024)

As the research has shown, while remote work presents tremendous opportunities both for employees and employers, it also presents additional challenges for both parties to face.

Thankfully, most studies present solutions as well to resolve and address issues which most employers have potentially already implemented. Offering flexible working arrangements, such as choices in working hours can reduce stress for remote working employees. Technological solutions allow teams to connect virtually which fosters opportunities for clear communication, regular formal and informal check-ins, and even virtual team building activities to maintain connectivity between colleagues. Inclusive decision making and setting clear career advancement frameworks can enhance engagement and help employees feel valued and supported. Implementing wellness programs, providing additional resources for wellbeing and giving access to virtual counselling can support individuals with mental health issues. (Garg & Ranga, 2024)

The studies discussed have presented an exhaustive list of positive and negative impacts of remote working along with indirect arguments for and against this working arrangement and possible solutions employers can use to support their employees. However, many of these studies provide a review and conclusions of remote working experiences around the Covid-19 pandemic or draw conclusions from data collected in certain years but are not addressing the impact and effects of sustained remote work over years of working in such arrangements. As the trends show, remote working arrangements are on the rise and some companies are also considering closing offices in order to save costs of upkeep and maintenance. While acknowledging the positive and negative impacts of remote work, we should now be able to learn from those who have been working remotely for an extended period of time, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, and learn from them to be able to implement strategies that can prevent perceived negative impacts caused by professional isolation. As such, this study will aim to highlight the effects of sustained remote working. With this study, I hope to be able to provide an insight into the experiences of individuals and draw attention to certain issues of remote working arrangements that employers may be able to learn from and address.

While literature addresses many aspects that can be affected by professional isolation, my research will be focused on two primary areas. One of the main areas that is impacted by professional isolation and distancing between colleagues is the efficiency at which individuals are able to perform their tasks and team members are able to collaborate. While the discussed studies show both positive and negative experiences in this area, and the implementation of collaborative tools may help to support teams with their projects, I am concerned that sustained remote working has made the efficiency of collaboration worse. As such, my first hypothesis that I would like to review is that *Sustained remote work reduces the efficiency of team collaboration.*

The discussed literature also talks about engagement and connection among colleagues which is another area that is considerably impacted by professional isolation. While distancing among colleagues may be helpful sometimes when it comes to efficiency, collaboration is an important part of our daily working life, and a decline in the amount and quality of professional relationships and connections may negatively impact on our ability to be take part in teamwork. I would argue that professional isolation leads to a decline in professional relationships and sustained remote work would even enhance the negative impacts. In light of this, my second hypothesis is: *Sustained remote work negatively impacts the professional relationships of colleagues.*

Finally, as the reviewed literature provided results of snapshot studies from the past few years, my aim is also to focus on how leaders were able to adapt to support their teams in a sustained remote working environment. While leaders may have varying approach towards supporting team cohesion, and connectedness, I believe the distance presented by the remote environment can take away many opportunities that can help support in keeping the bonds between team members. As such, my third and final hypothesis is: *Leadership support is perceived as ineffective in supporting team cohesion in a sustained remote working environment.*

In summary, my established hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Sustained remote work reduces the efficiency of team collaboration.

H2: Sustained remote work negatively impacts the professional relationships of colleagues.

H3: Leadership support is perceived as ineffective in supporting team cohesion in a sustained remote working environment.

I am hopeful that by reviewing employee experiences related to these hypotheses, I will be able to highlight the impacts of professional isolation and provide useful information that employers may be able to use to prevent negative impacts of remote working arrangements if or when they would switch to such plans.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Introduction of examined company

In order to prove or disprove my hypotheses, I have selected a company with a considerable headcount and diverse community that I am familiar with and have connections at to support my study. Given the topic of my thesis, it was important to be able to conduct my research with a community that has experience with remote working, and also has experience with working in teams. My connections within the company allowed me to gather information both via the means of a questionnaire shared on the internal messaging system of the company, and structured interviews with managers or leaders.

The company in question is an American multinational company with subsidiaries present all around the globe, including the European (or EMEA) and Asian and Pacific (APAC) regions. When it comes to the main profile or product of the company, it is providing SaaS services (SaaS standing for Software as a Service) to a wide variety of customers including governments, private or public trading companies, and individuals as well. The main focus of the product is Critical Event Management (CEM). These events can include natural disasters or events, terrorist attacks, cyber security issues, travel related issues, medical problems, and so on. The company was established after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the main focus continues to be providing services to customers that can help with establishing or reaching safety and recovering from negative impacts of critical events in a resilient manner.

The global headcount of the company is approximately 1300 people working in a wide variety of positions. Some of the primary positions are focused on software development, but there are also positions in sales, marketing, professional services working more directly with customers, and also supporting departments, such as finance, IT, or human resources. The teams within the different departments work in a matrix organizational structure, meaning individuals report to their direct people leaders as well as project managers at the same time, and often work in cross-functional teams across different departments. The different teams also consist of members in many cases from different countries. As an example, for one specific product, there are software engineers and similar positions supporting the product from the EMEA region as well as from the APAC. This can potentially present difficulties in efficiency of the teamwork, and strain on the professional relationships within the team.

The company has recently gone through some changes that are directly or indirectly relevant to my research, and also came up during the interviews conducted. Firstly, the company has recently gone through some organizational changes, which has led to the elimination of some positions. These changes have impacted on the workforce in various ways, including potentially affecting the level of engagement and motivation of the employees. This presented a challenge in my research, as these factors could potentially affect the outcome of questionnaires, and level of engagement with it, or affect the people leaders as well during the interview process. Additionally, the organizational changes meant that there was a severe time constraint on the people leaders, which made it difficult to find time to perform our interviews.

Secondly, the changes experienced within the company also leads to the decision of office closures around the globe, meaning the company has opted to close some shared office spaces. This has come up during the interview process with the managers, and they have voiced their concerns, and those of their team members. However, given the topic of my research, this presents an opportunity, as I am hopeful that the proven or disproven hypotheses and lessons learned can help highlight some pain points in connection with remote working, efficiency, professional relationships and isolation that could potentially help some leaders in tackling possible issues within their teams.

3.2 Introduction of circumstances of the research

As previously mentioned, for my research I have chosen to gather information via the means of a questionnaire and structured interviews. In both cases, the data collection was conducted on online platforms. I have shared the questionnaire with the workforce on the internal messaging platform of the company after receiving approval from management. This platform allows employees to communicate with individuals privately, but also has various public channels with a large number of people engaging with them.

Given the difficulties presented by the organizational changes, and consequential impact on engagement, I experienced a lower level of engagement with the questionnaire compared to what I hoped for, after sharing within the company on a shared communications platform in various channels. As such, in order to drive further engagement and collect data, I shared the questionnaire on a professional community site as well. As an online community platform with possibilities of social and professional networking, I could reach multiple people across the

globe as well, while also reaching out to friends and acquaintances to share the questionnaire to reach more people.

At the same time, I approached various leaders within the company to support with structured interviews in connection with this topic. As the difficulties of the organizational changes led to time constraints on the managers, I have also decided to share the interview questions ahead of time to help them gather ideas for their answers to make sure we could conduct the interviews within a reasonable time frame. These interviews were conducted using the Zoom application which allowed us to meet and conduct the interview in real time, but also provided the opportunity to record the conversation – with the approval of each interview subject – which provided me the opportunity to focus more on the feedback of the managers and ask clarifying questions when necessary. I approached managers or leaders from different departments with different team sizes, and team members working with them from various countries. This allowed for a broad diversity of ideas, experiences and opinions. However, while the approached leaders were supportive of the interview process, the challenges they faced due to the ongoing organizational changes made it difficult for them to find time to conduct the interviews which lead to a limited number of respondents.

Despite the ongoing challenges, I believe the responses received both for the questionnaire and interviews are useful to establish an idea for the general, and diverse opinion of the workforce of the company in connection with the areas of research. While due to the limited number of respondents, the results may not be representative, I do believe they are adequate to prove or disprove the established hypotheses and highlight matters that can be useful for the company given the ongoing changes and provide basis for further research in connection with this topic.

3.3 Presentation of the research sample

As mentioned previously, the two selected methods for research were questionnaire and structured interviews. Structurally both methods followed the same structure and question order to research the three areas of the study: efficiency, professional relations and leadership support. The goal of using both the questionnaire and the interviews within the same company with the same structure was to see if the responses to the questionnaire and information provided by the leaders match, or if they tell different stories.

In the following paragraphs, I will be presenting the demographic data of the respondents of both the questionnaires and the interviews. In both cases, both during the collection and

processing of data, the identity of the respondents was kept anonymous. The questionnaire was filled out by all respondents on a voluntary basis, and no personal identifying information, or email addresses were collected. The data collected was not shared with any external parties and is used solely for the purpose of completion of my research.

3.3.1 The questionnaire

The target demography was not limited by specific constraints or conditions. The questionnaire was initially shared internally within the researched company as the workforce potentially has experience with remote, hybrid working styles and/or worked in a shared working space or office with colleagues. Additionally, the employees are working both in functional, or intradepartmental teams, and cross-functional project teams, and as such have experience and insight on the efficiency of teamwork. Also, given the considerable headcount of the company, and the different teams, it could be expected that people have professional relationships internally as well, but of course they would have professional relations outside of the organization.

The – expected – advantages of sharing the questionnaire within one company were the existence of a shared and widely followed communications platform which could have led to a higher number of respondents. Additionally, knowing the workforce had experience in connection with the subject areas of the research meant that there would be no bias deriving from an unknown subject material to respondents. In addition, the collected data and results can potentially support the development of processes currently in place within the company as well. At the same time, however, there are disadvantages as well to distributing the questionnaire within one company, which were apparent during the collection of data. The response rate was lower than expected, potentially due to the ongoing events within the company and potentially due to concerns in connection with privacy, as employees might have expected that I would share the responses with leaders. Additionally, the generalizability of the results is also limited to the company itself, meaning the drawn conclusions might not be applicable to different companies due to the different company cultures, or leadership practices. As such, there would be a need to conduct further research to generally prove or disprove my established hypotheses. As I mentioned, the rate of respondents after sharing my questionnaire internally within the company was lower than expected. As such to drive further engagement, I have shared it on a professional social media platform as well, however it didn't yield a considerably higher amount of feedback. Overall, the questionnaire was filled out by 130 respondents (n=130),

which may not be a representative amount, but I still believe that it provides an insight into the views of the responders and provides a general idea on the subject matters.

Based on responses to the demographic questions, most of the respondents of my questionnaire were from the age group of 26-35 years, but their numbers are matched by respondents from the groups of 36-45 and 46-55 providing a wider variety of experiences. As I expected, when asked “How often do you work remotely (not in an office space)?”, none of the respondents answered with “Never”, meaning the provided data shows experiences in connection with remote or hybrid working styles as reflected by Figure 1.

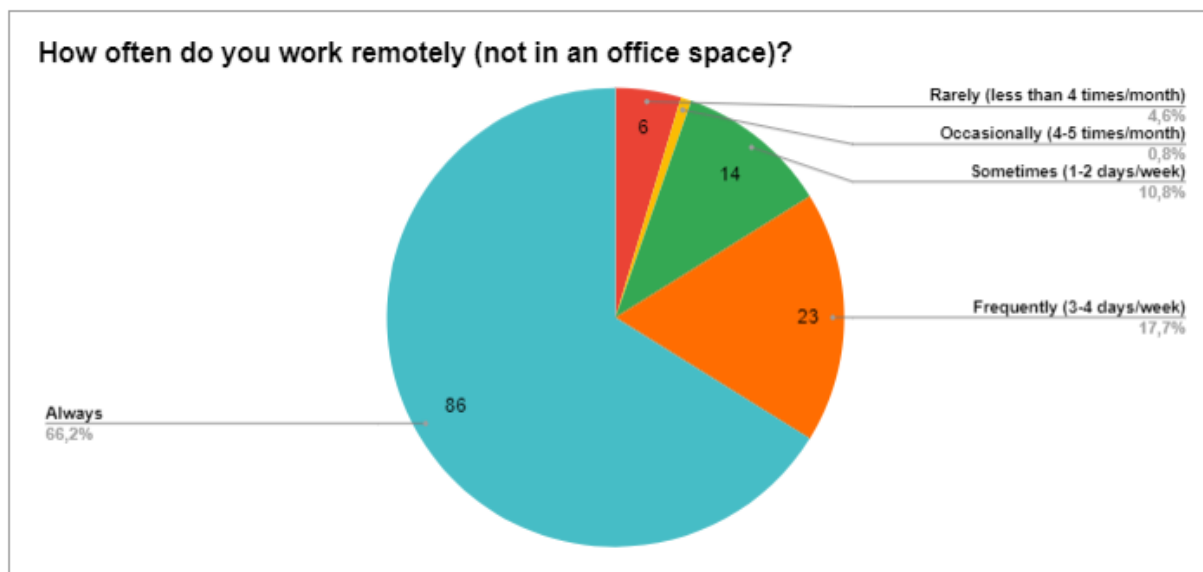


Figure 1.: Number of respondents working in different working arrangements - Source: Author's own research (2024)

There is also a variety in team sizes of the respondents. The most common team size is teams of 6-10 people, but there were responses from individuals in a larger team consisting of 11-20 people, and 14 responded saying they are part of a 20+ size team. To see trends in connection with preferred working styles, I also asked the respondents to indicate which working style they prefer. Out of the 130 respondents, none answered with “In office only”, and only 25 responded with “Hybrid – but more in office” showing the increased interest towards remote working discussed earlier based on the articles of McKinsey Institute or research conducted by Gallup. Based on these responses to the demographic data, while there is a shared trend or consensus leaning towards the remote working style, I believe there is a diversity to the experiences of the people working in different team sizes and also based on the amount of experiences they had in various working styles. Further demographic factors such as gender of respondents, level of seniority or years worked within the company could have shown further differences and

potential correlations in experiences and opinions, however for the purpose of my research, I did not think these aspects to be relevant to help prove or disprove my hypotheses.

3.3.2 The Interview

When reaching out to the interview subjects, I aimed to target people leaders with larger team sizes from a variety of departments and leading team members in different working arrangements to have a diversity of opinions and experiences as shown by Table 1. Due to the ongoing challenges within the company, while the people leaders were supportive of the idea for an interview, the time constraints meant there was a lack of opportunity to conduct these interviews. In all cases, the interviews were conducted in English via the use of Zoom and recorded with the consent of the managers with the intention to process and review the discussion after the interview.

| Designation | Department | Size of team | Frequency/Ability to work in shared space |
|-------------|--|-----------------------|--|
| Manager 1 | Professional Services/Technical Support | 11 direct, 1 indirect | Never |
| Manager 2 | (Software) Development/Engineering Manager | 11 | Often (1-2 times a week) with local, Never with international team |
| Manager 3 | People & Culture (HR)/Business Partner | 7 | Often (1-2 times a week) with 1 team member, Once a year with international team |
| Manager 4 | Professional Services/Medical Assistance | 5 direct, 11 indirect | Frequently (More than once a month or weekly) |
| Manager 5 | Professional Services/Risk Intelligence | 22 | Rarely (Once a month or less) |

Table 1.: Details of Interview subjects (2024) - Source: author's own research (2024)

The 5 managers I had the opportunity to conduct an interview with were all from different departments. While it may seem that some of them were from the same department – Professional Services – they were all from different areas with different responsibilities. A common factor is that all of the managers are leading an international team, meaning that while some members of their teams are from the same country, the teams comprise of employees from different countries, or even areas of the globe – for example, a manager from the EMEA region

leading members of their teams working and living in the United States. This presents a difficulty when it comes to the option of working together with their teams in a shared workspace and presents potential challenges in efficiency or professional relations.

3.4 Research Methods

While conducting my research, I utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods as well to help prove or disprove my established hypotheses. Both methods followed a similar structure following the topics discussed in the discussed literature in order for me to be able to answer the proposed questions and compare ideas presented by the literature, and information received from both research methods. Once again, in all cases, the respondents were informed that the research is conducted on a voluntary and anonym basis, and the received results would solely be used to help with my research and would not be shared with external parties.

3.4.1 Quantitative Method

The quantitative method of the research was conducted via the means of a questionnaire shared primarily within the same company. This method allowed me to gather information from respondents in a structured manner with their feedback having numeric values to allow for easier processing. The selected tool for the questionnaire was a Google form which people who received the shared link for could access and fill out. The system also allowed me to specify that each respondent could only fill out the questionnaire once and could not edit their responses after submitting the finished form. Google Forms also makes it possible to export data into an excel sheet for easier processing, and also provides visual representation of the gathered feedback with graphs and pie charts generated by the system based on the type of the question and answers.

The questionnaire had 2 main sections. The first section was the primary section with 16 questions focusing on the research area. This section can be split into 3 parts with questions focused on the 3 primary areas of my research: efficiency, professional relations and leadership support. I only used closed questions, and primarily utilized Likert scales with varying ranges, but primarily even – ranges of 4 or 6 – when it comes to deciding how sustained remote working affected different aspects of professional relations or work and as such the efficiency. The goal of utilizing Likert scales with an even range was to avoid ambiguity by having a neutral option,

and as such to receive more definitive insights into the experiences of the respondents. I also utilized multiple choice grids to review different aspects that can affect efficiency, and that of professional relations. These multiple-choice grids provided a more detailed insight into the areas that affect efficiency or professional relations and can highlight specific areas that need to be improved.

The second section of the questionnaire consisted of 4 demographic questions to show the diversity of the respondents in their level of experience, with remote working by indicating their age groups and how often they work remotely, and also their experience with professional relations and possibility of working in teams by indicating the sizes of their teams they work in. I have also asked the respondents to indicate their preferred working arrangement – office or remote only, or hybrid with either more in-office or in-remote occasions. These preferences can potentially show a tendency or trend in connection with an intention to work more remotely, this emphasising the importance of addressing potential issues that can come up in different working styles.

I received generally positive feedback in connection with the questionnaire, however I did receive some comments in connection with the ranges used for the Likert scales. As I mentioned, for most questions, I chose to utilize an even scale of 4 – or 6 in case of 2 questions to indicate how respondents see their leaders are prioritizing fostering team engagement and team cohesion. In most cases, utilizing an even ranged Likert scale was necessary to avoid respondents picking a neutral option, as the questions were focusing on the satisfaction of respondents with different areas of my research. However, admittedly when looking at how the respondents were affected by sustained remote work in different aspects, or how it impacted overall efficiency, I did not consider using a neutral option, as I was focused on avoiding ambiguity. As such I did not consider that in certain cases or aspects, changing to sustained remote working arrangement might not have had a significant impact on the aspect in question. This should have been considered and added before sharing the questionnaire, as it may have affected the number of respondents.

3.4.2 Qualitative Method

The second method of my research is a qualitative approach performed via the means of structured interviews. While the questionnaire allowed for simple answers allowing for processing in statistical method, the structured interview made it possible to review the different areas in question with open ended questions leading to more detailed review of the primary

topics. At the same time, with the diversity of responses, it also makes it harder to evaluate the responses.

Similar to the questionnaire, the interview questions were focused on the efficiency and the professional relations of the team, however I also asked questions in connection with the ability of the leaders to support their team members in matters of wellbeing, and also asked how they were affected, and how they felt like they were supported by the organization or their leaders. When compiling the questions, I focused on making sure that the questions were in harmony with those of the questionnaire, but also made sure that they were open questions, focusing on the means and rationale in which the interview subjects, the people leaders were approaching the different subject matters. This made it possible to explore their experiences, thoughts and views which provided a wide variety of responses in the research areas. Before conducting the interviews, I shared the questions with the leaders, which allowed them to gather their thoughts. As such, we could make sure to fit into the available time frames dedicated to the interviews. Recording the interviews with the approval of the leaders allowed me to be more present as they were providing their feedback, which made it possible in certain cases to ask further questions to explore their thoughts in more detail.

The proposal for these interviews, the questions and the way in which we were able to conduct the interviews were well received by the leaders. Each of them provided detailed answers to all of the questions, and while in some cases, they were straightforward and less detailed, in most cases the leaders went into granular details allowing for deeper insight into their experiences. The interviews were also considered to be valuable conversations as we were reviewing matters that are becoming relevant as the company is moving towards closing office spaces. While these interviews were only conducted with people leaders, interviews with employees would have also been valuable to hear their experiences as well in connection with the research area.

3.4.3 Process of Analysis

The results of the questionnaire were processed with Microsoft Excel and the SPSS software developed by IBM. Processing the data in excel provided a clearer layout of the data, and made it possible to perform simple statistical calculations and reports from the received data. It also helped with creating figures that supported with the visualization of data. In addition, it also made it possible to perform paired two-sample t-tests to show the relations between results of two questions.

The SPSS software supported with more complicated statistical calculations. As such, it helped with a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test to present differences between a larger amount of paired samples, and showing deviations between current and preferred states in connection with one survey question.

4. Results and Evaluation

In the following paragraphs, I will be presenting the results of the primary section of the questionnaire focusing on my research area, and the feedback received from the interviews. These results will be illustrated by various charts and diagrams to better illustrate the feedback received.

4.1 Results of the questionnaire

The questionnaire focused on the 3 primary elements of my research: efficiency, professional relations and leadership support in fostering team cohesion and team bonding in a sustained remote working environment. With each question I aimed to approach the different elements from varying viewpoints to get a detailed overview on each research aspect, and to help prove or disprove my established hypotheses. I have also asked about the experience of the respondents with feeling of isolation to see if there could be a correlation, but I tried to avoid going into granular details of psychological factors, as these might have been too sensitive questions. With 130 respondents providing diverse information from various age groups, team sizes, and preference in working arrangements, while the results may not be representative, the feedback can certainly indicate a trend within the researched company.

The first set of questions within the questionnaire focused on the perceived efficiency of the teams. Using Likert scales with ranges of 4, I aimed to see how sustained remote working has affected efficiency. In the first question, utilizing a multiple-choice grid, I asked how the team has been affected by sustained remote work. The aspects the respondents had to rate on a scale of 4 ranging from strongly worsened to strongly improved were efficiency, communication, time management, utilization of collaborative tools, decision making and motivation and engagement (Figure 2).

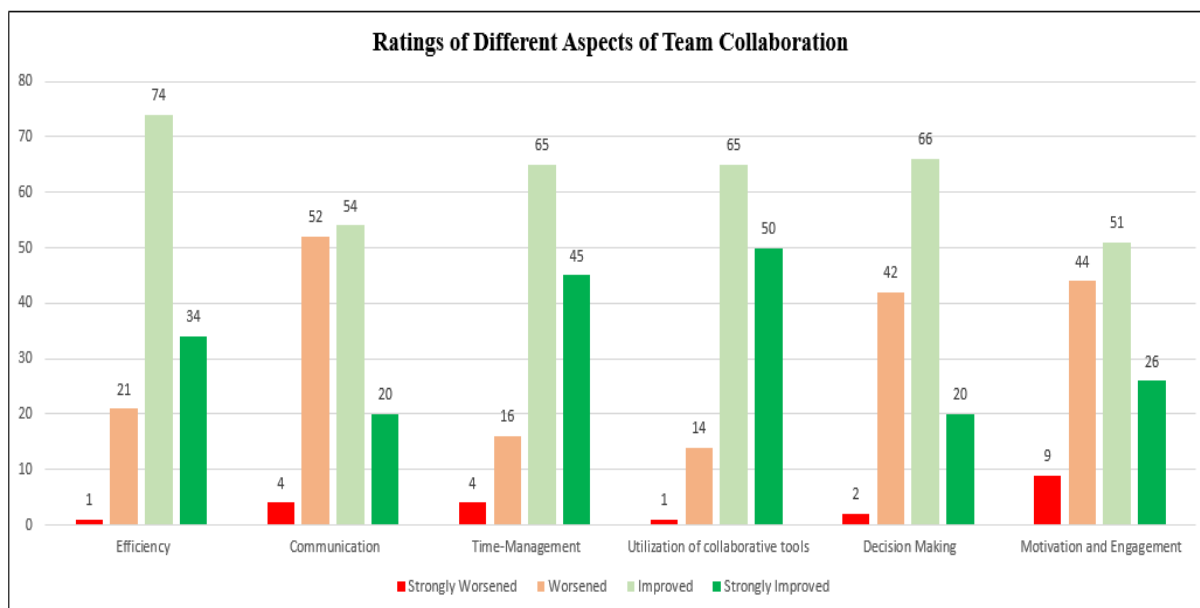


Figure 2.: Ratings of different aspects of team collaboration - Source: author's own research (2024)

Overall, the results show that most of the respondents feel the different aspects improved with remote working. The 3 areas that show a potentially significant rate of worsening are communication, motivation and engagement, and decision making. Communication received most of the negative ratings. While there is a balanced split between those who think this aspect has improved and those who perceive it otherwise (54-52 in the favor of improvement), the result indicates that this area of team collaboration remains a challenge that potentially needs more attention from leaders. Another aspect that received a negative review from the respondents is motivation and engagement with most respondents indicating that it strongly worsened in a remote environment. A common demographic factor of the 9 who picked strongly worsened was their preference in the working environment with all 9 indicating they would prefer to work in a hybrid arrangement but with more options for working in an office environment.

At the same time, utilization of collaborative tools, time management and efficiency were the most improved aspects. Utilization of collaborative tools indicates the most improvement which shows the teams have been able to adapt well to these tools in a remote environment. In a later question, I have also asked the respondents separately how satisfied they were with the collaborative tools their team utilizes, using a Likert scale with a range of 5 allowing for neutral feedback. However, while this allowed for a potential neutral bias, only 22,3% of the respondents selected this option, while a majority – 43,1% indicated they were satisfied, and another 30% responded with very satisfied. Only a minor 4,6% indicated they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the utilized tools. Time management was the second most

improved aspect in a remote environment, suggesting that respondents could benefit from the flexibility and autonomy of remote working arrangement.

When asked to rate the overall effectiveness of their team's collaboration in a remote working environment, the majority of the respondents – 43,8% – indicated the collaboration of their team is very effective, and another significant number of respondents – 36,2% – deem it to be effective. The rest of the respondents perceive their team's collaboration to be either ineffective or very ineffective. This result is reflective of the feedback received on the previous question reinforcing the positive views of collaboration in a remote environment as reflected by Figure 3.

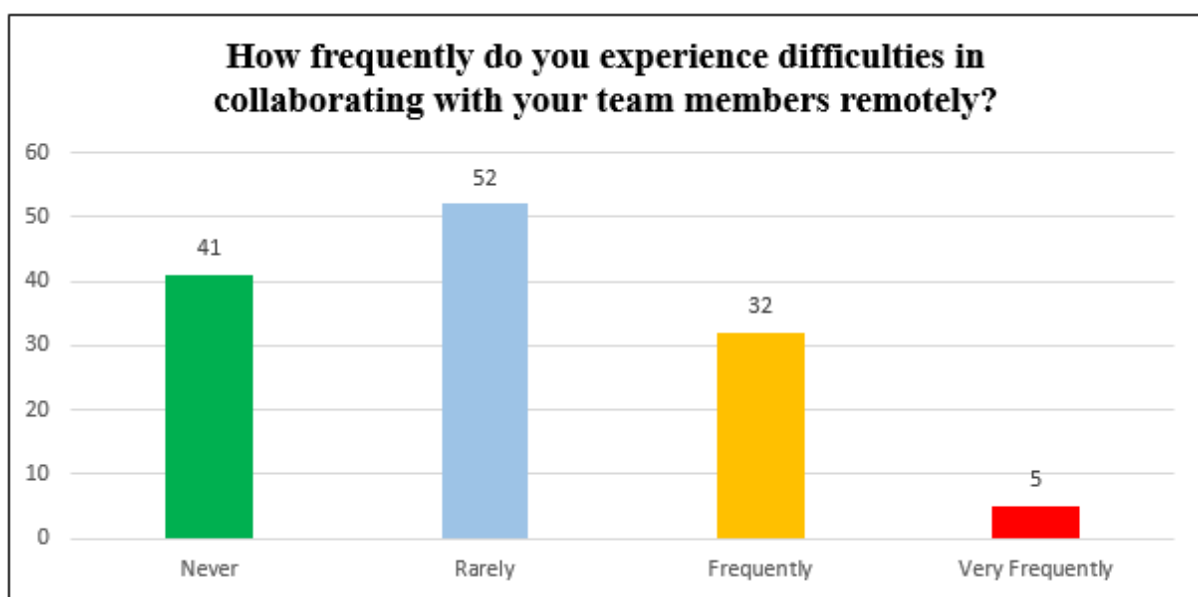


Figure 3.: Rate of experiencing difficulties in case of remote collaboration - Source: author's own research (2024)

The positive experience in connection with efficiency is reflective in the feedback provided when asked how frequently the respondents experience difficulties in collaborating with team members remotely. A combined 71,5% of the respondents indicated that they either never or rarely experience difficulties indicating minimal obstacles in collaboration. A smaller group faces difficulties more often. This would indicate a potential need for improvements, such as the aspects of communication or motivation and engagement discussed previously.

Overall, the majority of the respondents – 56,2% feel that sustained remote working has improved the effectiveness of their teams, and another 22,3% indicated that the effectiveness was strongly improved. On the other hand, 20% indicated that remote working damaged the effectiveness and only 1,5 of the respondents feel that their team's overall efficiency has been strongly damaged. This aligns with the overall results indicated in the multiple-choice grid

question where respondents were indicating their experiences with the different aspects affecting team collaboration. I also reviewed the results received for the first multiple choice grid question, and the results indicated for overall efficiency with a Paired two sample t-test. As Table 2 shows the p-value (0,85) is greater than the alpha level (0,05) which shows there is no significant difference between the overall responses of the two questions. This alignment also shows that the aspects of team collaboration reviewed in the first question are in line with the overall team effectiveness as indicated by the respondents.

| | <i>Variable 1 - Overall results of aspects of team collaboration</i> | <i>Variable 2 - Results of perceived overall impact of remote working on effectiveness of team.</i> |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Mean | 0,25 | 0,24 |
| Standard Deviation | 0,03 | 0,05 |
| N - (looking at overall %) | 4,00 | 4,00 |
| Pearson correlation | 0,98 | |
| Assumed average deviation | 0,00 | |
| df | 3,00 | |
| t value | 0,21 | |
| P(T<=t) two-tailed | 0,85 | |
| t - two-tailed critical | 3,18 | |

Table 2.: Result of Paired two sample t-test for means for results of multiple choice grid and feedback on overall effectiveness - Source: author's own research (2024)

The second part of the questionnaire focused on the professional relations of the respondents with their colleagues and team members. At first, I briefly looked into how isolated or disconnected individuals feel from their colleagues and team members when working remotely on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 indicating never, and 4 indicating always feeling isolated.) The responses show minimal difference among people who either never, rarely or often feel isolated from their team members. 31,5% of respondents indicate they never feel isolated or disconnected, 26,2% rarely, and 32,3% often feel isolated from their team members. Only 10% of the respondents show they always feel disconnection from their colleagues when working remotely. This can indicate that a majority of the respondents have effective coping mechanisms in place to tackle isolation, but it can also potentially show a lower level of connectedness among team members and colleagues in a remote environment. This can potentially be further uncovered with the results of the questions that follow.

Similarly, to my question reviewing different aspects of team collaboration to have a more detailed understanding in connection with efficiency, I also used a multiple-choice grid to review the different aspects of professional relations and how respondents perceive these individual aspects (Figure 4).

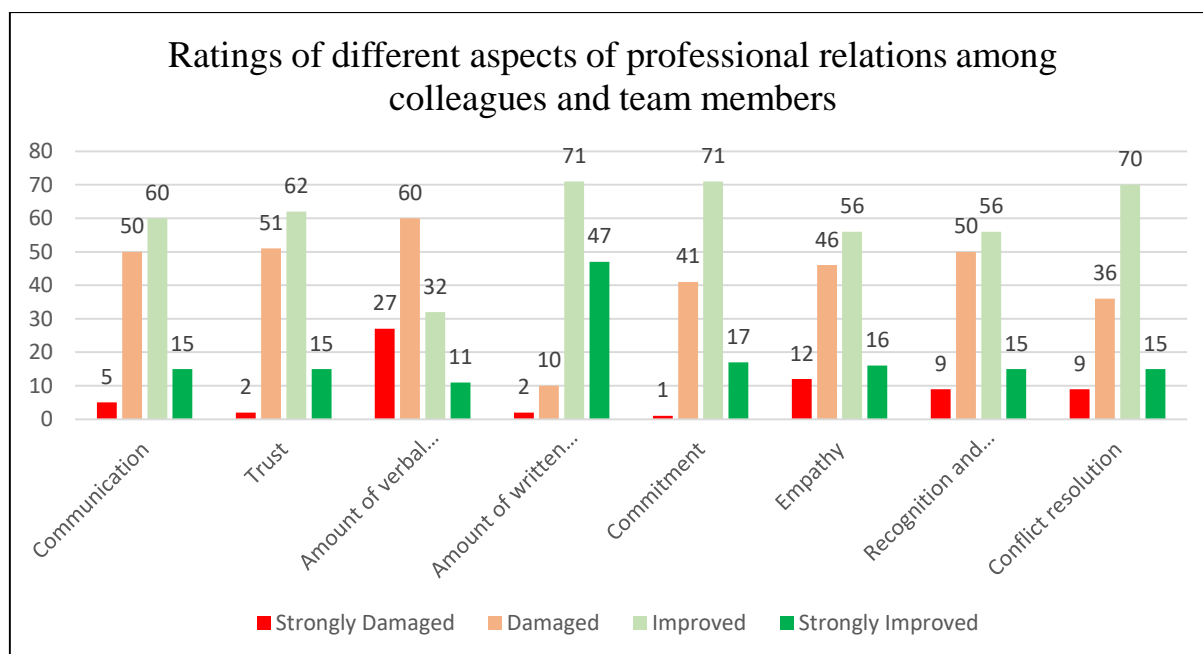


Figure 4.: Ratings of different aspects of professional relations among colleagues and team members - Source: author's own research (2024)

The results show that the most improved areas experienced by the respondents were number of written interactions, commitment and conflict resolution. In contrast, the number of verbal interactions appears to be an area of concern. When looking at the amount of written and verbal interactions, it shows that due to the nature of remote working, and the potential lack of option for some of the respondents to meet their colleagues in a shared workspace, the number of written interactions has increased, while the number of verbal interactions has decreased. Colleagues might feel more inclined to utilize emails or instant communication channels in which they can text each other, than utilizing collaborative tools, platforms or applications such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams that can be used to communicate verbally, and with the use of web cameras to see each other. While the utilization of applications and platforms used for written communication may bridge the gap presented by the lack of opportunity to personally meet colleagues, it is also important to consider the need to make sure that the written communication is clear. As the feedback received for the overall communication aspect of professional relations shows mixed perceptions, this is one area that could potentially be considered for improvement.

Recognition and appreciation, and empathy received most of the negative feedback after verbal interactions. While the respondents indicating that these areas have improved, the significant number of respondents showing negative feedback could suggest that these areas are in need of further attention. As empathy among colleagues and team members could require a sense of emotional connectedness, the distances generated by remote working and potentially the lack of face to face (whether digitally or in one physical space) interactions can be damaging when it comes to empathy among team members. Recognition and appreciation can also suffer from distancing among colleagues or leaders and subordinates which could potentially be due to the lack of spontaneous recognition that would be possible in an office environment. Although recognition can still be communicated via digital tools, team members or leaders may rely more on written recognition and notes of appreciation which could lack the warmth of a verbal appreciation.

When asked about the rate of satisfaction with overall professional relations with colleagues and team members, the majority of the respondents indicate that they are very satisfied (42,3%) or satisfied (38,5%). Based on this feedback, despite potential obstacles, such as experienced issues with communication, or meaningful connectedness allowing for increased empathy, and appreciation, the respondents are content with their professional relations with their colleagues, indicating that remote working may not affect professional relations significantly in a negative way.

Next, I asked the respondents in 2 multiple choice grid questions to indicate the frequencies in which they connect with their colleagues or team members in different topics. These were discussing task related matters, company related experiences, casual conversations, and talking about or asking advice on personal difficulties. One of the questions was looking at the current state and the other the preferred frequencies in which the respondents would like to connect with their team members about the different matters. The aim of these 2 questions was to have a more detailed insight into the level and areas of connection with the respondents and compare the actual and preferred states to see if there is a need for improvement. The results of these questions are presented with Figures 5 and 6.

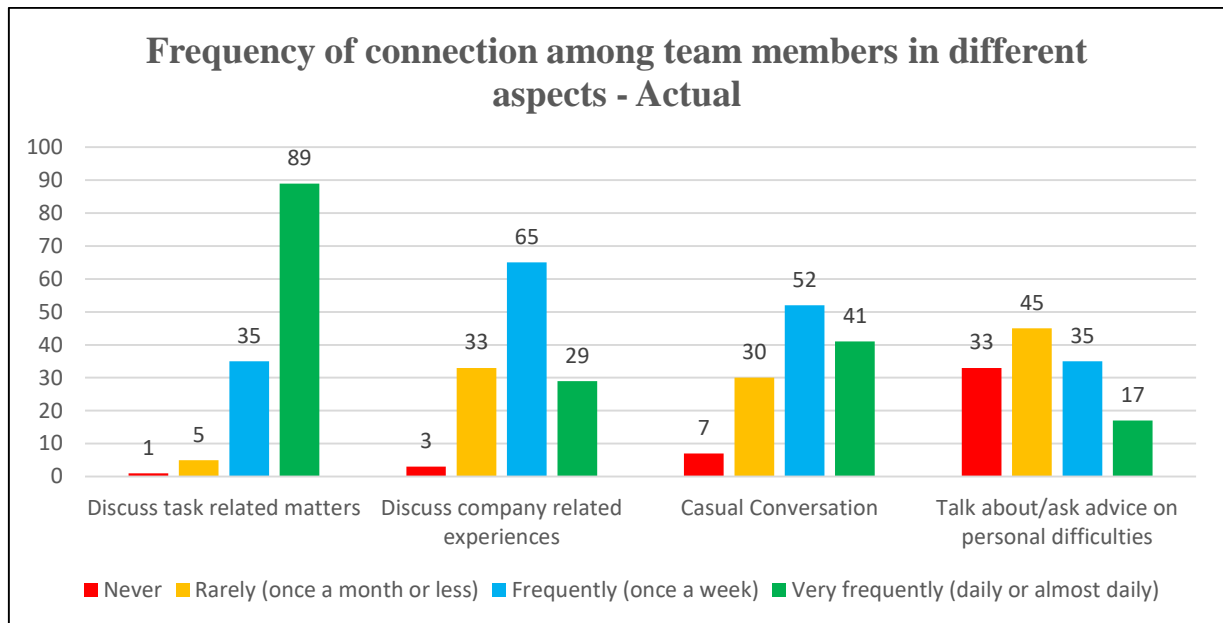


Figure 5.: Frequency of connection among team members in different aspects - Actual - Source: author's own research (2024)

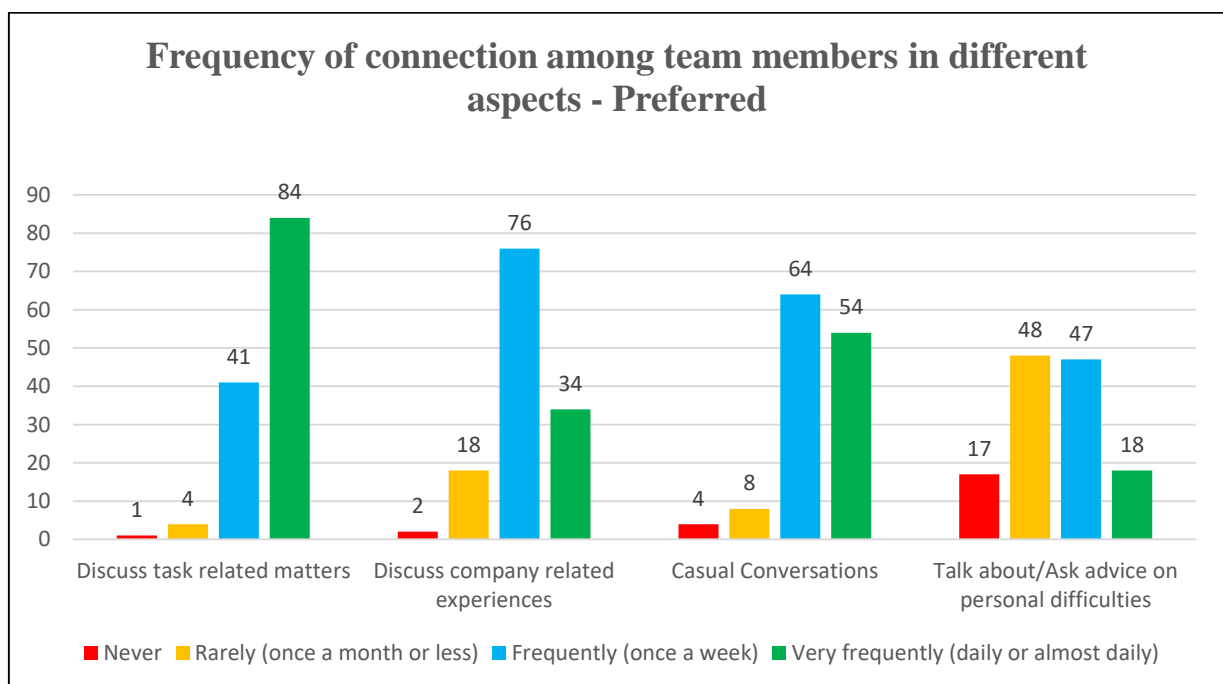


Figure 6.: Frequency of connection among team members in different aspects - Preferred - Source: author's own research (2024)

The “actual” results show that the respondents talk about task related matters most frequently, and casual conversations or discussions in connection with personal difficulties are less frequent potentially indicating a lack of trust among colleagues, or minimal intention to share matters of personal life among peers. A potential area of research related to these questions would be how

different the results would be if the questions were answered by respondents who work in shared office or working spaces. Results might indicate a closer, more personal connection among colleagues who see each other frequently in person.

In order to better see the difference between the results of the question related to the current state of discussion and the preferred frequencies, I used a paired two sample t-test for means to compare the two results. While some of the numbers may appear different, the tests indicated that there is no statistically significant difference between the results of the 2 questions, which would indicate that the respondents would not change the frequencies of conversations drastically in the 4 aspects, which would also reinforce the level of satisfaction with professional relations as indicated through an earlier question. At the same time, when looking purely at the numbers, it would appear that the respondents would in some cases prefer to have casual and more personal conversations with their colleagues or team members more frequently.

At the same time, when asked how connected the respondents feel to their team, the majority of the respondents indicate a high level of connection. 39,2% indicated they are very connected, 37,7% responded with connected, and 17,7% indicated they are somewhat connected to their teams. Only 5,4%, 7 respondents indicated that they are not connected to their teams. The feedback on this question would once again indicate a good quality of professional relationships among colleagues and a high level of satisfaction as well which would indicate that these professional relationships can be sufficiently maintained despite the potential obstacles of remote working.

The final set of questions aimed to review the effectiveness of leadership support when it comes to professional relations and maintaining team cohesion. The questions looked at satisfaction with the leadership support with the idea that a high rate of satisfaction would indicate that leaders are perceived to be effective in supporting employees.

When asking respondents about the quality of communication with their leaders or managers, nearly half of the respondents – 46,9% replied rating the quality of communication being excellent with their leaders and another 30,8% indicating a good quality. 16,9% indicated the quality of communication as fair, and 5,4% indicated it as being poor quality. While we cannot dismiss the 22,3% of negative or lower ratings which should be reviewed as to why the respondents feel the quality of communication to be low in quality, the significant majority of the responders appear to be satisfied with their communication with their leaders which can contribute to better quality and higher rate of satisfaction when it comes to professional relations, and it can also support efficiency.

The following questions dealt more directly with the leadership support in fostering team cohesion and the frequency at which the leader encourages activities that promote team bonding or cohesion. While there are digital tools and platforms available to host team events to support leaders and teams in these aspects, hosting such events in a remote environment may prove to be challenging, and the outcome may not be as satisfactory, as in person events, team buildings or team dinners or lunches may be. The feedback to the question asking how supported the individual feels by their leaders when it comes to fostering team cohesion shows a mixed result with a lower level of difference between the different ratings. 36,9% of the respondents feel highly supported, 33,8% feel moderately supported, 20,8% feel minimally supported and 8,5% feel to be poorly supported by their leaders in this area.

When it comes to the frequency at which the leaders encourage activities that promote team bonding or cohesion, 17,7% indicated their leaders encourage such activities very frequently, 42,3% responded with frequently, 26,9% answered with rarely and 13,1% of the respondents indicated their leaders never encourage these activities. These results could be due to various factors. A lack of time might be a reason that can affect the leaders' abilities to support these team-building events, which can be due to the earlier discussed organizational changes the company experienced at the time of the survey. Different departments may be working in different schedules, or teams may even be working in shifts to be able to provide a 24/7 coverage for customers, which – as the interviews will touch on this – is a requirement in some departments. There could be a lack of technical or financial support to organize these events. But also, it could potentially be due to the teams and employees' satisfactory perception of their teams' cohesion and their professional relationships, and it could be that there is no articulated need for these events.

Finally, I asked respondents to indicate where they think their managers are prioritizing fostering team engagement and team cohesion on a scale of 1 to 6. Choosing a scale of 1 to 6 allows for a more granular view of the priorities of leaders given the range of responsibilities they potentially have. At the same time, with another question I asked respondents how they feel their leaders should be prioritizing fostering team engagement and team cohesion. By comparing the results, it would potentially provide an insight into how satisfied the respondents are with the prioritization of this matter, which could indicate desired areas of improvement. To compare the results, I used the Wilcoxon signed-rank test which allows for the comparison of paired samples which were provided by the respondents. Making sure that the values for the 2 variables are paired, I used IBM's SPSS software to conduct the analysis. The result is shown in Table 3.

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

| Ranks | | N | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks |
|--|----------------|-----------------|-----------|--------------|
| Preferred Priority Rating - Current Priority Rating | Negative Ranks | 16 ^a | 25,88 | 414,00 |
| | Positive Ranks | 67 ^b | 45,85 | 3072,00 |
| | Ties | 47 ^c | | |
| | Total | 130 | | |

a. Preferred Priority Rating < Current Priority Rating

b. Preferred Priority Rating > Current Priority Rating

c. Preferred Priority Rating = Current Priority Rating

Test Statistics^a

| Preferred Priority Rating - Current Priority Rating | |
|--|---------------------|
| Z | -6,145 ^b |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | <,001 |

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on negative ranks.

Table 3.: Result of Wilcoxon signed-rank test - Source: Analysis generated in SPSS based on author's own research (2024)

The test indicated that there is a meaningful difference between the preferred priority rating of the subject in question, and the currently perceived priority rating. Figure 7 indicates the differences.

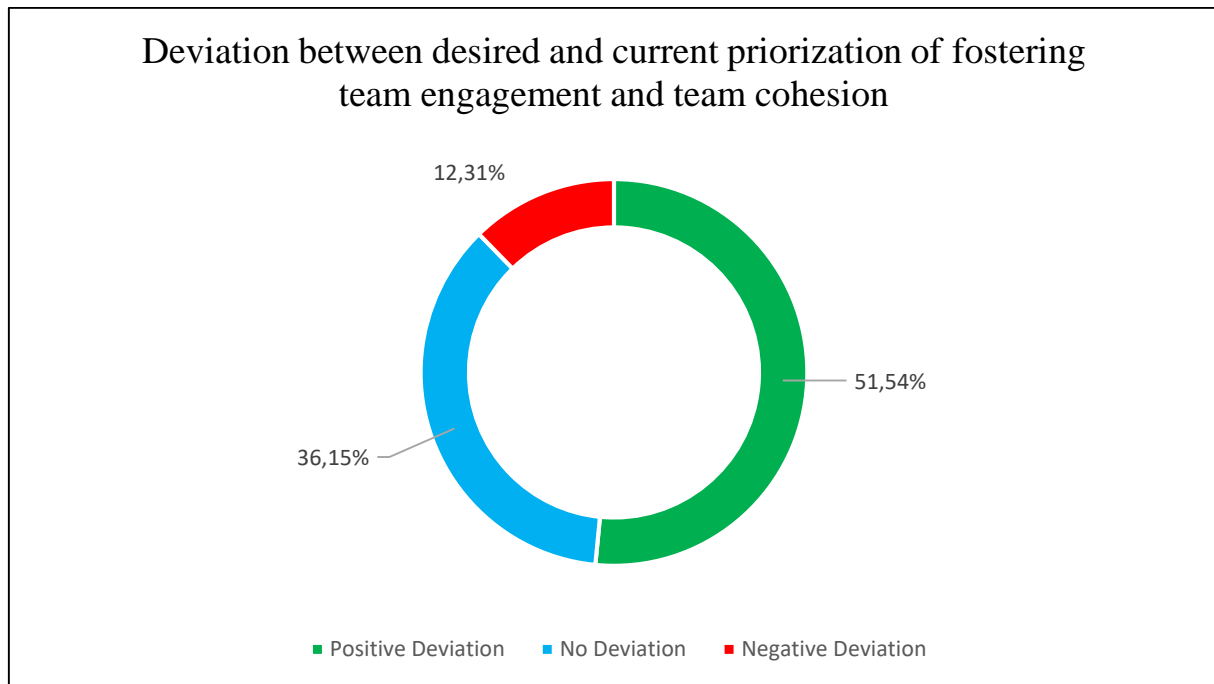


Figure 7.: Deviation between desired and current prioritization of fostering team engagement and team cohesion - Source: Author's own research (2024)

The negative deviations show where the individual would prefer the leader to consider focusing fostering team engagement and team cohesion at a lower priority. No deviation means that the current and preferred rankings match. Positive deviation indicates the respondents would prefer for their leader to consider this factor a higher priority among their responsibilities. When looking at the results, it appears that respondents would prefer for this aspect to be a secondary priority with 48,46% of the respondents selecting the second to top ranking, and 30% of respondents put this factor as third on the scale of 6. This would indicate that respondents are experiencing a lack of focus from their leaders on team engagement and team cohesion.

4.1.1 Conclusions of the questionnaire

Based on the results of the questionnaire, when it comes to efficiency in a remote working environment, and effectiveness of team collaboration, it appears that respondents are experiencing that these areas have been positively affected by remote working in most cases. While the areas of communication and motivation and engagement remain areas where improvements may potentially be necessary, the respondents have been able to adapt to remote working in a sufficient manner. They are able to effectively utilize the available collaborative tools and collaborate with their teams while only rarely experiencing difficulties and obstacles.

While experiencing isolation at varying levels, it appears based on the data collected that professional relations have also not been affected in a significantly negative manner. Respondents do indicate to some degree a desire to connect more in connection with personal matters or to have more informal conversations, which could lead to an improvement in the aspects of empathy or trust. However, the data shows a high level of satisfaction in connection with professional relations and also a high level of connectedness with their colleagues and team members.

At the same time, the perceived leadership support in connection with professional relationships and team cohesion appears to be in need of improvement. While the majority indicates a good quality of connection with their leaders, the data also indicates a need for more focus on fostering opportunities for team building to strengthen the cohesion within teams. This area will be further explored in the feedback collected from interviews conducted with people leaders within the company.

4.2 Results of the interview

The goals of the interviews were to see if the feedback received from the leaders would align with the answers received in the questionnaire, but also to gain a better understanding about the ability of the leaders when it comes to supporting their teams, and what successes and challenges they would highlight.

After covering demographic questions, I asked the leaders what they believe to have been the biggest positive and biggest challenge when it comes to leading a remote team. When it comes to positives, the managers have already touched on the main topics by highlighting an increase in productivity due to not having as many interruptions as they would have in the office, which in a heavily customer facing role is important. Another win for one leader was the ability to establish processes in connection with remote work and the successful implementation of these, but also mentioned the ability to strengthen professional relations after the Covid-19 isolation by implementing a social day in the office once a week. One manager mentioned the shared experiences within their team, and the team's ability to work together in a remote environment. Recurring positive factors that managers mentioned were the reduction in commute or the ability to recruit colleagues internationally to remote positions which provides access to a wider talent pool. However, recruiting was also mentioned as a negative from another perspective, which is the lack of opportunities to meet candidates in person.

When it comes to challenges, the leaders mentioned engendering trust and respect among team members who – due to the need for remote collaboration – might feel some team members are not as productive as they are. Another pain point that was also highlighted by the questionnaire is communication for various reasons. While an office space presents opportunities for direct communication, a remote environment can be challenging due to technical difficulties. Another factor when it comes to communication is the different styles of people, and how they communicate, and sometimes the message can be misunderstood, and this meant that the leader had to work with the team to reframe the approach of the employees. However, another manager had a somewhat opposing approach. Their team communicates more due to the remote arrangement, and instead the issue they saw was the lack of opportunities to learn from each other, which is made more possible in an office environment where people can hear their team members and leaders working and can pick up on their styles in which they address certain challenges and approaches. The lack of ability for leaders to oversee their employees was also mentioned in the sense of productivity as well as the wellbeing of team members, as a shared space provides more opportunity to see if someone is not doing well, while in a remote environment, the leaders need to rely on people reaching out and telling them if something is wrong.

With the next questions, we looked at how the leaders feel remote working affects efficiency. As all of the leaders have international or global teams, I asked about efficiency in general, but also made sure to look into whether the international nature of the team's setup affects efficiency in any way. Overall, the leaders are satisfied with the efficiency of their teams whether looked at in general or looking at the international nature. They highlighted the lack of commuting as a benefitting factor, the ability of people to create their own setup in which they feel they are most effective, and the lack of interruptions was mentioned again. One manager highlighted the efficient communication of their team. However, all of the leaders mentioned that this matter is not black and white and is really dependent on an individual and cannot be generalized. While having the ability to have their own setup, some people are not able to create an ideal working environment, which brings to the surface wellbeing issues including the feeling of isolation, or the inability to separate themselves from the high-stress working environment and responsibilities they have. Some people need more oversight than others or are not able to establish proper boundaries when it comes to work-life balance. Employees do tend to work longer hours sometimes due to working from home, and the leaders interviewed did admit that they are no exception from this. One leader mentioned that while they are satisfied with the efficiency of their team, more in-person meetings would be able to provide

more opportunities for conversations, brainstorming which would leave to more creative ideas. Communication was mentioned again, as sometimes to perform their work, people rely on others reading their messages, which sometimes gets missed which in turn causes frustration. Another manager mentioned that efficiency is not necessarily damaged due to working remotely. Sometimes there are different factors, such as an overwhelming amount of work which people cannot finish in time, or the lack of motivation, or it could be that people would need further guidance on how to deal with certain problems and this can be difficult to communicate to the leader more directly, or the leaders themselves are not able to see instantly if there are problems. As such they highlighted the need to establish and maintain trust among employees and between leaders and subordinates to make sure that the issues are communicated instantly.

With the next set of questions, we focused on professional relationships and how the leaders are able to support the maintenance of professional relationships of their subordinates. When asked how remote work affects professional relationships of team members, in contrast to efficiency, the leaders highlighted more issues than positive notes. While one of the managers was more accepting of the remote working arrangement, they did highlight that there is a lack of personal interactions compared to when they worked in an office. Also there are less opportunities to spend time together with the team in an informal setting, such as going out together for lunch breaks, or socializing after work which provided more opportunities to deepen the professional relationships. Another manager highlighted the physical distances which can be bridged with digital applications, but due to technical difficulties or people not seeing written messages, while in an office, communication could be more direct or instantaneous, the remote setting presents challenges in this area. The lack of in-person interactions can also strain relationships or cause conflict, as team members are not necessarily able to communicate with each other more freely, and sometimes rely on the leader as a medium to resolve even minor issues. One manager did highlight some positives as they were able to build trust within their team among team members as well as with the leader, especially among people or team members who work together in the same shifts and could get to know each other better.

When it comes to different strategies, to maintain or improve professional relations within a team, the leaders mentioned options, such as focusing on continuous updates and open communication. Empowerment was mentioned as another strategy in terms of letting team members come forward with potential improvement ideas, or elevating senior team members to guide junior team members, and giving way for more direct interactions with leadership.

Looking at how teams connect using technology came up again in a conversation with one of the managers. One manager highlighted social calls to promote more social connection among team members. Another manager took a more process focused approach by implementing a team charter to set guidelines for their team to follow when it comes to working together, organizing meetings, and further actions they can take to ensure they are able to work well together as well as maintaining professional relationships.

The leaders also identified many difficulties and obstacles when it comes to organizing team-building activities. A lack of time and constant volume of work can be a challenge to find time. The managers mentioned the difficulty of organizing online team building activities which are also less popular than in-person events. Another leader mentioned that there are cultural differences among the team members as well when it comes to preferred activities. At the same time, managers also added that a team-wide drive for team-building events would be necessary to support the leaders' efforts.

I have asked the leaders to highlight positive or negative experiences as well in connection with professional relationships in a sustained remote working environment. When it comes to positives, the leaders mentioned the shared experience of remote working leading to stronger professional relationships. An increased opportunity in development leading to more promotions was also mentioned. In addition, growing a broader professional network is also a benefit, but at the same time, these relationships need more work to be maintained. The misinterpretations of written communication were mentioned once again as another challenge. Another leader brought up the digital barriers caused by having to rely on technology to connect which is often unreliable due to hardware issues, internet cutting out, and it seems easier to not be present or forget about meetings in an online working environment. In their experience, colleagues are more likely to pay attention during an in-person meeting in an office environment, than in a digital one.

Based on these questions in connection with professional relationships and fostering team cohesion, it would appear that the leaders are actually trying to maintain solid relationships within their teams and appear to be mostly content with their ability in doing so given the current framework. However, the common thread appears to be a need for more in-person meetings, which the leaders mentioned are always well received by employees, but there has been a lack of opportunity to arrange these whether due to a lack of time or funding. Further organizational support would be necessary for teams to be able to facilitate these meetings. We have also explored the organizational support the leaders receive in one of the following questions.

Before we touched on organizational support, we addressed a few questions in connection with wellbeing. First, I asked leaders whether they received information that their team members are feeling isolated or disconnected. The leaders brought up varying experiences, such as difficulties in adjusting to remote environments or not having an adequate working space at home. They mentioned continuous clashes among team members which can be driven by a lack of in person or verbal communication. There were reports of deteriorating connections with colleagues in office environments, or lack of connections with wider, inter-departmental teams. But the foreseeable office closures also caused concerns. In some cases, the leaders also expressed that they have felt negative effects of isolation.

I have also asked the leaders how often they have conversations with team members about wellbeing, isolation or professional relations, and who would bring these matter up in a conversation. Most of the managers are consciously talking about matters of wellbeing and check-in on their team members, and if they do not bring it up, the leaders would directly or indirectly check in on them. One manager experienced cultural differences as their local team members are more likely to talk about these matters during one-on-one meetings and team meetings alike, while colleagues from another country are less open about it. Another leader mentioned that while they do not directly ask about these matters, they would still monitor their team members and gauge their wellbeing and make observations. Tasks and responsibilities also make it necessary to talk about these matters directly for another leader. As they are dealing with mental health issues on a daily basis, it is likely that the team members take on some negative emotions they are trying to tackle, which makes it necessary for the team to consciously monitor their own wellbeing and address issues immediately. They address these issues during one-on-one meetings as well, and team members do bring up issues organically, but they also organized counselling sessions with external providers to support the team. Another manager, similarly, due to their responsibilities, has taken part in a course in connection with trauma risk management, and as their team members are also dealing with stressful situations on a daily basis, the leader is actively employing the lessons learned during this course, which makes it easier for him to identify issues even during online conversations. When it comes to organizational support to address matters of wellbeing and professional connections, the responses were varying. Most of the leaders were content with the support they receive from the organization or their direct leaders. Some managers mentioned that while their team is well supported, as a leader, they can be overlooked, or they can be left out of communication about changes that affect them or their team. One manager raised concerns about the office closures, mentioning that having a shared space available would be important

to allow team members to build and maintain relationships and this ties into wellbeing as well. They also added that there is less support when it comes to organizing in-person meetings for international teams which would help with building connections and highlighted that there should be a budget to allow organizing events like this.

I was also interested in the personal experiences of the leaders with isolation as it would potentially affect how they pay attention to this matter when it comes to their teams, and how they might prioritize matters of wellbeing with their team members. The leaders mentioned varying levels of isolation due to not being able to see team members, or long working hours. But they also mentioned coping mechanisms, such as a conscious approach to work-life balance, and leaving working stations to take breaks, or when possible, visiting the local office space. Physical activity is another approach that helps as well as focusing more on personal needs and families. But regular online connection with team members due to the nature of work is also helpful in mitigating isolation.

Finally, I asked the leaders if they had any other thoughts, they wanted to add to what we discussed. While most managers either did not want to add anything else, or mentioned matters already discussed, a common factor they mentioned was the subjective nature of this topic. They mentioned that it is not easy to address this, as different people have different experiences, or are dealing with different issues. Also, when it comes to addressing these issues, and providing support, some people might receive the support well, and others would think the leaders are interfering, even if the intention is good. Another leader highlighted the need for a strong strategy to be in place when organizations think about changing to a remote only environment. They explained that the organization needs to review what wellbeing looks like to an organization in a remote environment, how they can support having regular connections and strong partnerships among people, how the organization can ensure that people feel safe to address challenges in a remote working environment. And while they mentioned that the organization needs to look at creating a strong strategy to address these matters, it is also important that team members also drive culture of engagement and support leaders with addressing matters of wellbeing.

4.2.1 Conclusion of the interviews

When it comes to efficiency in a sustained remote working environment, based on the feedback received from the leaders, it seems that the teams have mostly been able to adapt to the remote arrangement well. They were able to address initial concerns in connection with setting up an

appropriate workstation and address technical difficulties. Saving time on having to commute to the office and back also allowed for better time management, and more flexibility. A recurring issue that came up with efficiency in most cases was the factor of communication. As teams rely more heavily on written communication, due to different styles deriving from personal or cultural differences, there can be issues with misinterpretation which can cause friction.

In connection with professional relations, the leaders were also content for the most part, as they were able to empower their team members and support them by establishing an environment in which they are able to maintain trust in each other. In addition, the remote environment allows for more professional relations. However, a common issue the leaders mentioned was the lack of in person connections which would be able to strengthen the existing relationships among team members. With the ongoing changes within the company, it would be important to focus on generating more opportunities for teams to organize more in-person meetings and team building activities to maintain good relationships and have deeper connections to be able to prevent frictions, which appears to be difficult to do on digital platforms.

At the same time, leaders are equipped and supported to address any issues in connection with professional relations and even well-being and have the support of the organization as well. But in addition to the need for more in-person meetings, they would also need the support of their team members with driving engagement and addressing outstanding issues in connection with maintaining healthy professional relationships. In addition, when it comes to collaborating over digital platforms, a more conscious approach from team members would also help leaders in everyday work life to maintain efficiency and healthy professional relationships.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

In this section I am presenting the conclusions of my research as it relates to the established hypotheses. When it comes to proving or disproving the hypotheses, I am relying on the combination of the results of the questionnaire and the outcome of the interviews.

My first hypothesis was that *sustained remote work reduces the efficiency of team collaboration*. The responses to the questions within the questionnaire that relate to the efficiency of teams in a sustained remote working environment show that while some areas of team collaboration may need some improvement, the overall view is that team efficiency has improved. As figure 2 has shown, the respondents experienced improvements in efficiency, and when asked about their overall views, 78,5% of the respondents gave a positive answer as well. The leaders have also shown that their teams have been able to adapt to the remote environment, they can utilize the collaborative tools effectively, and as such, while there may have been initial concerns, the team efficiency in a sustained remote working environment has improved. Given these results, my first hypothesis can be considered as disproved.

Next I was looking at how sustained remote work affects professional relationships. When asked about their satisfaction with professional relationships in a remote working environment, 80,8 of the respondents provided positive feedback. In addition, as the paired two-sample t-test used to compare results presented in figures 5 and 6 in connection with current and preferred frequencies in connection with different matters shows that there is no significant difference between current and preferred cases, this would also corroborate the satisfaction with professional relations. As such, I would conclude that my second hypothesis – *sustained remote work negatively impacts the professional relationships of colleagues* – has also been disproved. When it comes to my final hypothesis in connection with leadership support around team cohesion, the survey results articulate a need for improvement. As table 3 and figure 7 show a positive deviation between current and preferred ranking of leadership support among the leaders' priorities, it would indicate that the leadership support in this area is indeed perceived as ineffective. The feedback from leaders also show difficulties when it comes to fostering team cohesion due to the nature of the remote working environment and some cultural differences within the teams. As such, there may be grounds to consider the statement - *leadership support is perceived as ineffective in supporting team cohesion in a sustained remote working environment* – to be proven.

At the same time, I must also consider certain circumstances that have an impact on leaders' ability to support team cohesion. As the majority of the responses for the questionnaire, and the leaders interviewed are from one company, the ongoing organizational changes have an impact on both groups. These organizational changes have had a considerable impact on engagement, motivation and possibly on experiences in team cohesion. It also reduced the possibilities for leaders to create opportunities and organize events that would be supporting team cohesion. Office closures may also have an impact on teams that are working together in the same physical space on a more regular basis. These circumstances are potentially reflected in the survey results for questions asking how supported the individual feels by their leaders when it comes to fostering team cohesion or how frequently leaders are organizing events that support team bonding and cohesion. Given these circumstances, while in the present the survey results may support my hypothesis, for a general view, they are inconclusive, and as such, in my view, the final hypothesis should be rejected as well.

Summary of results:

H1: Sustained remote work reduces the efficiency of team collaboration.

Result: Rejected based on positive responses to survey showing improvements and minimal negative impact on efficiency. Relevant questions in survey were 1 to 5 with results presented by figures 2 and 3, and table 2. Leaders' feedback to interview questions 4 to 6 also show a positive outlook on team efficiency, and adaptation to the remote environment and collaborative tools.

H2: Sustained remote work negatively impacts the professional relationships of colleagues.

Result: Rejected based on responses to survey questions showing a high level of satisfaction for professional relations in a remote working environment. Relevant questions in survey were questions 7 to 10 with results presented by figures 4 to 6 showing statistically insignificant difference between current and preferred connections. Feedback to interview questions 4, 7, 11 and 12 show that while there is a challenge in differing communication styles, cultural differences, and lack in opportunity for personal connections, leaders and their team members experienced minimal negative impact to professional relations while also showing the ability to adapt to maintaining professional relations in a remote environment.

H3: Leadership support is perceived as ineffective in supporting team cohesion in a sustained remote working environment.

Result: Rejected on a general basis due to circumstances potentially influencing questionnaire and interview results. Relevant questions in survey were questions 13 to 16. While table 3 and figure 7 – created based on a Wilcoxon Signed Ranked test – shows a deviation towards employees preferring for leaders to put more emphasis on fostering team cohesion, current circumstances and changes at the reviewed company present an obstacle in this area. Feedback of leaders to interview questions 8, 9 and 13 also show a commitment to supporting team cohesion and highlights current challenges.

While the hypotheses have been disproved, or due to certain factors cannot be considered definitively proven, the research highlighted certain areas that are in need of improvement. The most prominent area is communication that received negative feedback both in connection with efficiency and professional relations. While working together, given the cultural and individual differences, employees need to be more considerate when communicating in writing to avoid misunderstandings and possible friction. While some may prefer to use written communication, verbal discussions can help with misunderstandings, and also reduce time that would otherwise be spent on waiting for a written feedback, which in turn would also benefit efficiency. In my view, employees should be encouraged in a remote working environment to initiate verbal communication through the available digital tools. For some, it may not just have a positive impact when it comes to efficiency, but would also be beneficial for professional relations.

In addition, while the survey results show that employees would prefer their leaders to focus more on fostering team cohesion, the interviews highlighted that this should not be a one sided initiative coming from leaders only. Employees reporting to leaders should also have an understanding or insight about their teams' dynamics, areas of friction and areas where support would be needed to aid in team cohesion. In addition, employees working from different countries can also work together to find the common ground that would bridge the gap generated by cultural differences. This cooperation and contribution to team cohesion would in turn help the leaders with seeking better opportunities to support team cohesion.

If leaders are able to work together with their teams to address these primary obstacles as more employees are transitioning over to a remote working environment, I am hopeful that the recurring issues can be prevented, and the experience of employees and teams alike can be improved, and a favorable corporate culture can be employed even in a digital environment.

6. Summary

The goal of my study was to look at how sustained remote working, or professional isolation can impact certain aspects of work and employee relations. While the reviewed literature helped to gain a general insight into the reviewed areas, a survey and interviews conducted within a company helped to gain a closer look at how employees and leaders view the subjects of my research.

My hypotheses were focused on two main areas of work. Firstly, I looked at how efficiency is affected by sustained remote work. The second area was the state of professional relationships within a remote working environment. In both cases my view was that these areas would have been negatively impacted by working remotely. Finally, I looked at how effectively leaders can support fostering team cohesion in a remote working environment. The first two hypotheses were disproven by the results of the survey and the interviews I conducted with leaders. In both cases, the feedback shows positive impact on efficiency and professional relationships as well in a sustained remote working environment. While my third hypothesis could be considered to be proven based on results of the survey, given certain circumstances present at the reviewed company, the results cannot be considered as conclusive to definitively prove or disprove my statement. At the same time, my research highlighted areas where improvements would be necessary. As such, an increased collaboration between employees would be necessary to improve communication which was a recurring pain point in all of the research areas. Also, employee support would be necessary to provide better opportunities for leaders to help support team cohesion.

While my established hypotheses have been disproven, I believe that the results of my research could help support leaders at the company by highlighting problematic areas in connection with sustained remote working that needs more attention. As some employees and teams are looking at moving into a remote only working arrangement without having a shared physical working space, the experiences of employees who have been working remotely for a longer time can help with preventing issues coming from this change, and help maintain a high level of efficiency, better quality professional relations and sustainable team cohesion.

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8. Appendices

8.1 Interview questions

1. How big is the team you are managing? (number of direct/indirect reportees)
2. How often are you able to work together in a shared space?
3. Are you managing a localized team in one country or a global team?
4. What do you believe has been the biggest positive and the biggest challenge of leading a remote team?
5. How effective do you feel your team is in a remote working arrangement?
6. How do you feel having a global team affects efficiency? (If managing a global team.)
7. How does remote work affect the professional relationships between team members, in your opinion?
8. Have you used or tried specific strategies to maintain/improve professional relationships within your team?
9. Have you tried team building activities with your team to strengthen connections/enhance engagement? If yes, how did they work? If no, what are your thoughts on them/why would they or wouldn't they work?"
10. Have you observed or received information that your team members are feeling isolated or disconnected? How were you able to address this?
11. How often do you have conversations related to wellbeing, isolation, professional relations with your team? If it comes up, who brings it up?
12. What positive/negative experiences would you highlight in connection with professional relationships in a sustained remote working arrangements? (without names, and too detailed specifics)
13. How supported do you feel yourself as a leader by the organization to address matters of wellbeing and professional connections?

14. Have you yourself felt any negative effects of professional isolation? If so, how did you deal with it? If no, how do you prevent it?
15. Open ended question if there is anything else to highlight about what we talked about.

8.2 Survey Questions

1. Please rate how you feel your team has been affected by sustained remote work in the following aspects?

(Options: Strongly worsened, Worsened, Improved, Strongly improved)

Aspects: Efficiency, Communication, Time-Management, Utilization of collaborative tools, decision making, motivation and engagement, professional relationships)

2. How would you rate the overall effectiveness of your team's collaboration in a remote working environment?

(1-Very Ineffective, 2-Ineffective, 3-Effective, 4-Very effective)

3. How frequently do you experience difficulties in collaborating with your team members remotely?

(Options: Never, Rarely, Frequently, Very Frequently)

4. How do you feel sustained remote working has impacted the effectiveness of your team overall?

(1-Strongly Damaged, 2-Damaged, 3-Improved, 4-Strongly Improved)

5. How satisfied are you with the collaborative tools your team uses?

(1-Not at all, 2-Rather dissatisfied, 3-Neutral, 4-Rather satisfied, 5-Absolutely satisfied)

6. How often do you feel isolated or disconnected from your colleagues or team members when working remotely?

(Always, Often, Rarely, Never)

7. How do you feel sustained remote work affected your professional relations with colleagues or team members in the following aspects?

(Options: Strongly Damaged, Damaged, Improved, Strongly improved)

Aspects: Communication, Trust, Amount of verbal interactions, Amount of written interactions, Commitment, Empathy, Recognition and Appreciation, Conflict resolution)

8. How satisfied are you with your overall professional relations with your colleagues and team members?

(1-Very Dissatisfied, 2-Dissatisfied, 3-Satisfied, 4-Very satisfied)

9. How often do you connect with your colleagues/team members on the following topics:

Topics: Discuss task related matters, Discuss company related experiences, Casual Conversations, Talk about/Ask advice on personal difficulties

Options: Never, Rarely (once a month or less), Frequently (once a week), Very frequently (daily or almost daily)

10. How often would you prefer to connect with your colleagues/team members on the following topics:

Topics: Discuss task related matters, Discuss company related experiences, Casual Conversations, Talk about/Ask advice on personal difficulties

Options: Never, Rarely (once a month or less), Frequently (once a week), Very frequently (daily or almost daily)

11. How would you rate the quality of communication with your leader/manager?

(Poor, Fair, Good, Excellent)

12. How connected do you feel you are to your team?

(Not connected, Somewhat connected, Connected, Very connected)

13. How supported do you feel by your leader when it comes to fostering team cohesion?

(Not supported, Minimally Supported, Supported, Very Supported)

14. How often does your leader encourage activities that promote team bonding or cohesion?

(Never, Rarely, Frequently, Very Frequently)

15. On a scale of 1 to 6, how much do you feel your leader/manager prioritizes fostering team engagement and team cohesion?

(1 to 6 where 1 is the lowest, 6 is highest priority)

16. On a scale of 1 to 6, how much do you feel your leader/manager SHOULD prioritize fostering team engagement and team cohesion?

(1 to 6 where 1 is the lowest, 6 is highest priority)

17. Please indicate your age.

(18-25; 26-35; 36-45; 46-55; 56-65; 66+)

18. How often do you work remotely (not in an office space)?

(Never; Rarely (less than 4 times/month); Occasionally (4-5 times/month); Sometimes (1-2 days/week); Frequently (3-4 days/week); Always)

19. How many colleagues do you have in your team or immediate working group?

(1 - I work alone and with my immediate manager; 2-5 people; 6-10 people; 11-20 people; 20+ people)

20. Which working style do you prefer?

(Remote only; Hybrid - more remote; Hybrid - more in office; In office only)

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8.5 Content Extract of the Thesis

Impacts of sustained remote working on employee efficiency and professional relations

Dávid Márton

Human Resource Management (BA), correspondence course

Institute of Agricultural and Food Economics, Buda Campus

Internal consultant: Erika Varga, PhD.

The possibility of remote working has become a popular choice of both employees and employers alike. As these days employers put more emphasis on opting for a remote or office only working arrangement, it is important to review what the effects of sustained remote working are on employees, and whether there are more benefits or negative impacts that people experience. As such, the focus of this study is to look at how sustained remote working affects the efficiency and professional relations of employees, while also reviewing how leaders are able to support their employees in fostering team cohesion while working remotely. While the study reviews relevant and recent literature in this area, the results are based on a survey and interviews conducted within one multinational organization.

The results of the research show that the respondents have a positive experience both in the areas of efficiency and professional relations, and while there is a need for leaders to focus more on creating opportunities to focus on team cohesion, exceptional circumstances experienced by the organization lead to the rejection of all established hypotheses. At the same time the research highlighted the need for working teams to focus on their communications more, as it has been identified as an issue both in terms of efficiency and professional relations. In addition, interviews with leaders highlighted the need for employees to support their leaders with creating an environment in which the team cohesion can be improved, as the leaders need to rely on them to bridge any gaps generated by cultural differences.

The research and results can be used by leaders of the company to focus more on the identified issues as the organization moves towards a remote only arrangement, and prevent issues from escalating as many of their employees will be experiencing changes.

NYILATKOZAT
a szakdolgozat nyilvános hozzáféréséről és eredetiségéről

A hallgató neve: **Márton Dávid**
A Hallgató Neptun kódja: **OXCMNT**
A dolgozat címe: **Impacts of sustained remote working on employee efficiency and professional relations**
A megjelenés éve: **2024**
A konzulens intézetének neve: **Vidékfejlesztés és Fenntartható Gazdaság Intézet**
A konzulens tanszékének a neve: **Idegennyelvi Tanszék**

Kijelentem, hogy az általam benyújtott szakdolgozat egyéni, eredeti jellegű, saját szellemi alkotásom. Azon részeket, melyeket más szerzők munkájából vettem át, egyértelműen megjelöltem, és az irodalomjegyzékben szerepeltettem.

Ha a fenti nyilatkozattal valótlan állítottam, tudomásul veszem, hogy a záróvizsga-bizottság a záróvizsgából kizár és a záróvizsgát csak új dolgozat készítése után tehetek.

A leadott dolgozat, mely PDF dokumentum, szerkesztését nem, megtekintését és nyomtatását engedélyezem.

Tudomásul veszem, hogy az általam készített dolgozatra, mint szellemi alkotás felhasználására, hasznosítására a Magyar Agrár- és Élettudományi Egyetem mindenkori szellemitulajdon-kezelési szabályzatában megfogalmazottak érvényesek.

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Kelt: 2024 év Október hó 26 nap


David Marton (Oct 26, 2024 13:53 GMT+2)

Hallgató aláírása

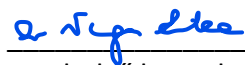
NYILATKOZAT

Márton Dávid (hallgató Neptun azonosítója: OXCMNT) konzulenseként nyilatkozom arról, hogy a záródolgozatot/szakdolgozatot/diplomadolgozatot/portfóliót¹ áttekintettem, a hallgatót az irodalmi források korrekt kezelésének követelményeiről, jogi és etikai szabályairól tájékoztattam.

A záródolgozatot/szakdolgozatot/diplomadolgozatot/portfóliót a záróvizsgán történő védésre javaslom / **nem javaslom**².

A dolgozat állam- vagy szolgálati titkot tartalmaz: igen nem^{*3}

Kelt: Gödöllő, 2024. október 21.


belső konzulens

¹ A megfelelő dolgozattípus meghagyása mellett a többi típus törlendő.

² A megfelelő aláhúzendó.

³ A megfelelő aláhúzendó.