HANDELSHØGSKOLEN VED UIS

BACHELOROPPGAVE

STUDIUM:	OPPGAVEN ER SKREVET INNEN FØLGENDE TEMATISKE RETNING:
Økonomi og administrasjon	HR og Ledelse
	ER OPPGAVEN KONFIDENSIELL? Nei

TITLE:

What are the primary challenges associated with virtual leadership and management of remote teams?

NORSK TITTEL:

Hva er de største utfordringene knyttet til virtuell ledelse og ledelse av fjernarbeidende team?

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Engelsk er ikke vårt førstespråk, og kunstig intelligens er benyttet som er verktøy til å oversette og sikre at oppgaven opprettholder en god flyt.

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English is not our first language, and artificial intelligence has been utilized as a tool to translate and ensure the assignment maintains a smooth flow in English.

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Forord

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Denne bacheloroppgaven representerer avslutningen av vårt bachelorstudium i Økonomi og Administrasjon ved Handelshøyskolen på Universitetet i Stavanger, våren 2024. Det har vært en utfordrende, morsom og lærerik prosess, som vi vil ta med oss i videre i både studier, jobb og livet.

Ledelse og strategi er emner vi tidlig viste en felles interesse for, og vi har gjennom de siste tre årene samarbeidet godt i emnene vi er blitt presentert. Det var derfor liten tvil om hvilke tema vi ønsket å ta for oss i bacheloroppgaven. Gjennom et utvekslingssemester sammen i Australia, hadde vi ved Griffith University tre valgemner innen ledelse. Det var der vi befant oss da vi utformet problemstillingen vi ønsket å undersøke.

Vi ønsker å benytte oss av anledningen til å takke alle som har hjulpet oss og bidratt til denne oppgaven. Vi vil takke venner og familie som har stilt opp til både prøve-intervjuer, og til samtaler med oss, samt motivasjon når det har vært som mest utfordrende. Videre vil vi også rette en stor takk til alle intervjuobjektene i denne oppgaven. Dere har gitt oss verdifull innsikt og informasjon, og uten dere ville det ikke vært mulig å skrive denne oppgaven.

Til slutt må vi rette en stor takk til vår veileder Kjersti Berge Evensen. I hele semestret har du vært tilgjengelig med verdifull veiledning på stort og smått. Det har vært fantastisk god oppfølging, og vi vil takke for at du har fulgt oss med engasjement i hele perioden.

Stavanger, mai 2024.

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Thale Kivijervi Ellertsen   Vilde Hatterud Eid

Abstrakt

Problemstilling: Hva er de største utfordringene knyttet til virtuell ledelse og ledelse av fjernarbeidende team?

Bakgrunn: Virtuelle- og fjernarbeidende team har hatt en stor utvikling siden 90-tallet. Covid-19 pandemien gjorde at et flertall av ledere ble tvunget til å innføre virtuelle- og fjernarbeidende team. Etter pandemien valgte en rekke ledere å fortsette med dette, mens andre kommanderte ansatte tilbake på kontoret. En artikkel omhandlende fremtidens arbeidsmiljø ble presenter i kurset Organisasjon, Resurser og Ledelse. Dette ble oppgavens grobunn til å undersøke utfordringene med ledelse av virtuelle- og fjernarbeidende team.

Metode: Gjennomført syv semi-strukturerte kvalitative forskningsintervjuer med ledere i Norge, som leder fjernarbeidende- og virtuelle team. Data ble analysert ved bruk av tematisk analyse.

Resultat: Oppgavens primære funn: utfordringer med å etablere og opprettholde en effektiv kommunikasjonsstruktur; opprettholde engasjement; bygge og opprettholde tillit; sikre balanserte utvekslingsprosesser; og imøtekomme behovet for autonomi, tilknytning og tilhørighet.

Begrensninger: Lite utvalgsstørrelse begrense datametningen. Begrenset til norske ledere, kan begrense mangfoldet i perspektiver. Avhengighet av virtuelle verktøy kan innføre teknologiske begrensninger. Respondentenes selvrapporterte opplevelser kan være forutinntatte.

Nøkkelord: Virtuell ledelse, Virtuelle Team, Fjernarbeidende team, Utfordringer, Tillit, Engasjement.

Artikkeltype: Forskningsartikkel.

Abstract

Research Question: What are the primary challenges associated with virtual leadership and management of remote teams?

Background: Virtual and remote teams have undergone significant development since the 1990s. The Covid-19 pandemic forced a majority of leaders to implement virtual and remote teams. Following the pandemic, some leaders chose to continue with this approach, while others mandated employees back to the office. Further, an article on the future work environment was presented during the course Organization, Resources, and Leadership. This formed the basis of the investigation into the challenges of managing virtual and remote teams.

Method: Seven semi-structured qualitative research interviews with leaders in Norway, leading remote and virtually. Data was analyzed using a thematic analysis.

Results: The primary challenges are: establishing and maintaining an effective communication structure; maintaining engagement; building and sustaining trust; ensuring balanced exchange processes; and meeting the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and belongingness.

Limitations: A small sample size was potentially limiting data saturation. Limited to Norwegian leaders, possibly restricting diversity of perspectives. Reliance on virtual tools might introduce technological limitations. Respondents' self-reported experiences could be biased.

Key words: Virtual leadership, Virtual teams, Remote teams, Challenges, Trust, Communication, Engagement, Self-Determination Theory, Social Exchange Theory.

Paper type: Research paper.

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1. Introduction

The distinction between the digital and physical world is steadily fading, placing us squarely within the realm of the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2016). As our daily lives become increasingly technology-driven, workplaces are also undergoing a significant shift towards more innovative and complex digitalization (Schwab, 2016). Leaders have been compelled to operate at a rapid pace to ensure their companies remain abreast of the ever-evolving technological landscape. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated swift adaption from companies, employees, and leaders alike (Buchanan, et al., 2020). Several organizations had to implement remote work almost overnight (Buchanan, et al., 2020). Prominent leaders who, in the years before the pandemic, believed that remote work and telecommuting were the future, swiftly reversed their stance post pandemic, urging employees to return to the office (Thompson, 2023). Conversely, other leaders maintain that remote work and virtual workspaces are here to stay, a viewpoint supported by statistics (Feitosa & Salas, 2020). According to Statistics Norway (Statistics Norway, 2024), over 95% of public Norwegian companies with more than 500 employees currently utilize virtual meeting rooms (attachment 1).

Virtual teams (VTs) represent a dynamic organizational structure wherein members collaborate across geographical boundaries using information and communication technologies to achieve common goals (Lopez, 2020). A study conducted by Ferrazzi (2014) highlights, among other things, the importance of good leadership as one of the keys to achieving successful virtual teams. What leadership is, and especially what good leadership entails, can be difficult to define. Leadership represents a broad field of study, with countless theories describing how leadership should be best practice (Gordon, 2017). But as Northouse (2015) defined it, "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal".
Fundamentally, leadership is a relationship (Knight, 2023). For leaders to be effective and achieve the desired results, they depend on positively influencing their employees (Knight, 2023). Several factors indicate that a leader's challenges are continually evolving. This is due to the development of information and communication technology, faster changes, and increasingly complex environments (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2019). With the fourth industrial

revolution shaping the world, technology, people, and businesses, it is natural to consider that leadership has also had to adapt in line with this.

Remote leadership often necessitates adaption to diverse cultural norms, time zones, and work dynamics, challenging conventional management frameworks. Simultaneously, it offers the opportunity to tap into broader talent pool by enabling employees to work from various unrestricted locations (Bartram, 2024).The capability to proficiently lead and coordinate remote workers has emerged as a pivotal skill for leaders in the contemporary work landscape (Wingard, 2020).

As the distance between the digital and physical world continues to blur, leaders and businesses are endeavoring to navigate the complexity of the fourth industrial revolution. This era of rapid technological advancements has not only transformed the everyday life but also the workplace. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic served as a catalyst, accelerating the adaption of remote work practices and highlighted the need for effective leadership (Buchanan, et al., 2020). While some leaders embrace the shift, others hesitate (Thompson, 2023). However, with the right strategy and skills, leaders can seize the opportunity to develop their business and employees for great success in the digital world (Wingard, 2020). As leadership continues to evolve in response to technological advancements and changing workplace dynamics, the ability to effectively lead remote teams emerges as a critical competency for leaders navigating the complexity of the modern work environment (Schmidt, 2015).

1.1 Background

The story of VTs traces back to the rapid advancements in communication and information technologies over the past few decades (Garro-Abarca, Palos-Sanchez, & Aguayo-Camacho, 2021). While the concept of remote work has existed for a long time, it was the advent of modern technology that truly revolutionized the way teams collaborate across geographical boundaries (Garro-Abarca, Palos-Sanchez, & Aguayo-Camacho, 2021).

The proliferation of the internet in the 1990s marked a significant milestone for VTs (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). With the emergence of email, instant messaging, and early versions of video conferencing, teams gained new avenues for communication and collaboration. However, technological limitations such as slow internet speeds and limited bandwidth posed challenges to the effectiveness of virtual collaboration (Postolache, 2017). As technology continued to evolve into the 21st century, so did VTs (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). The introduction of more sophisticated communication tools, cloud-based collaboration platforms, and project management software transformed the way teams interacted and worked together (Marion & Fixson, 2020). VTs gained popularity due to their myriad advantages over traditional face-to-face teams, including access to global talent, cost reduction, and increased flexibility for employees (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019 and persisted into 2020 and beyond, served as a catalyst for the widespread adoption of VTs (Chai & Park, 2022). With lockdowns and social distancing measures in place, organizations worldwide were forced to transition to remote work virtually overnight. This unprecedented shift accelerated the acceptance and normalization of remote work practices, leading to a surge in the use of VTs across industries. Prior to covid-19, VTs were typically formed as a strategic choice, either by organizations seeking access to global talent pools and flexible collaborations options, or by individuals preferring the autonomy of remote work setups (Garro-Abarca, Palos-Sanchez, & Aguayo-Camacho, 2021). However, the advent of covid-19 disrupted this established paradigm, fundamentally altering the fabric of organizational structures and operations. This upheaval compelled a significant portion of the global workforce to swiftly transition into a virtual working mode from the confines of their homes, marking a departure from the earlier VT model which often transcended geographical boundaries (Bartram, 2024).

1.2 Motivation

In the course "Organization, Resources, and Leadership" with Thomas Laudal (personal communication 4. February 2022), a research article on the future work environment was presented during a lecture session (attachment 2). Virtual leadership and its advantages and disadvantages were subject of class discussion. Subsequent exploration of the topic revealed a predominant focus within research articles on virtual leadership emphasizing its benefits and strategies for enhancing efficiency. Prominent corporate figures such as Mark Zuckerberg (Meta) and Evan Spiegel (Snapchat) had expressed, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, that remote work represented the future of the work force (Thompson, 2023). However, following the pandemic, both leaders mandated their employees to return to office settings, indicating a shift from their previous optimism towards virtual workplaces. This reversal has sparked curiosity in understanding the foremost challenges associated with virtual leadership.
The motivation to uncover challenges associated with virtual leadership took root initially during the class discussion with Laudal and further evolved with the news coverage featuring Zuckerberg and Spiegel.

1.3 Research Question

The fact that Zuckerberg and Spiegel, prominent leaders, drastically changed their stance following the virtual period of the pandemic, suggest significant challenges associated with virtual leadership (Thompson, 2023). In addition, several experts from UiO argue that virtual leadership and the utilization of virtual communication are a phenomenon here to stay (Torgersen, 2020). These factors formed the basis for the study's research question:

What are the primary challenges associated with virtual leadership and the management of remote teams?

1.4 Definition of Terms

The terms 'remote team (RT)' and 'virtual team (VT)' is consistently utilized throughout this study. For the purpose of this study, RTs and VTs will be defined as one or more employees engaging in team-based work in a separate workspace than their colleagues and/or manager(s). Such as working from home, from another city, or from separate spaces in the office setting. The employee(s) are not physically present at the same location as their colleagues or manager(s) and the communication finds place virtually.

The virtual platform Teams is mentioned by several respondents throughout the study. Given that it was the only virtual platform mentioned, this platform was used as an example consistently throughout the study. However, this does not imply that we exclude other virtual platforms.

1.5 Structure and Methodology

To explore the complexities of virtual leadership and remote team management, this study adopts a qualitative research design, using semi-structured research interviews as the primarily data collection methods.

1.6 Limitations and critique

The sample size of the study conducted of 7 respondents representing specific regions or sectors. This can potentially cause limitation in diversity and perspectives. By representing a broader geographic area, a more comprehensive understanding could be provided.

With a sample size of 7 respondents, it is plausible that data saturation was not achieved. Incorporating an eighth respondent could have provided additional valuable information.

Longitudinal changes in virtual leadership may not be captured, due to the cross-sectional nature in the study. By conducting follow-up interviews or studies over a longer period, the limitation could have been addressed to a greater extend.

Efforts were made to maintain objectivity. Despite this, data collection and analysis may have been influenced by researcher bias. Reflexivity and peer debriding were conducted to mitigate bias, but the potential impact cannot bed entirely eliminated.

Technological barriers or limitations may have occurred, as the data collection relied on virtual communication tools. The quality of data gathered may be affected by issues such as platform usability pr connectivity issues.

Information presented by the respondents regarding their own experiences and perceptions may be a subject to bias, such as recall bias or social desirability bias. To mitigate this limitation, triangulating data from different sources and employing mixed-method approaches may be effective.

Efforts regarding ethical concerns were made, and the respondents are anonymously presented. Despite this, ethical concerns may still exist, especially regarding sensitive topics related to leadership and dynamics in organizations.

2. Theory

2.1 Self Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a psychological framework developed by Deci and Ryan (1985). The theory is based on the factors that influence human motivation and personality development, focusing on innate growth tendencies and psychological needs. It explores the motivations guiding individuals' choices when external influences are minimal, rather focusing on internal drive and values.

Originating in the 1970s, SDT emerged from research comparing intrinsic and extrinsic motives, revealing the significant role of intrinsic motivation in shaping behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985). However, it was not until the mid 1980s, with the publication of "Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior" by Deci and Ryan (1985), that SDT gained formal recognition as a robust empirical theory (O'Hara, 2017).

Central to the development of SDT, was the investigation of intrinsic motivation, wherein individuals engage in activities for their inherent interest and satisfaction rather than external rewards (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Deci and Ryan (1985) identified three fundamental intrinsic needs crucial for self-determination: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. According to their theory, these psychological needs underpin self-initiated behaviors and are essential for individual psychological well-being and overall health.

The autonomy aspect of SDT refers to the innate desire to feel a sense of control over one's actions and choices. According to the study (Deci & Ryan, 1985), individuals with a high level of autonomy feel they are acting of their own volition rather than being controlled by external forces. However, this does not imply complete independence from others; rather, it reflects a sense of psychological freedom and the ability to act according to one's internal will (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomy-motivated individuals experience heightened performance, well-being, and engagement, and according to the study (1985), are unlike those who operate under external control.

The competence aspect of SDT involves the need to feel effective in one's interactions with the environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This means having the ability to master tasks, solve problems, and achieve desired outcomes. When individuals perceive themselves as competent, they are more likely to engage in activities and pursue goals that are personally meaningful to them (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The study by Deci & Ryan (1985) revealed that unexpected positive feedback enhances intrinsic motivation by fulfilling individuals need for competence. SDT underscores the importance of internal growth and motivation in fostering meaning-making, well-being, and value discovery. Conversely, it was observed that negative feedback has the opposite effect, reducing intrinsic motivation by undermining individuals' sense of competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The relatedness aspect of SDT pertains to the need for meaningful connections and relationships with others. Humans are social beings, and satisfying the need for relatedness involves feeling understood, valued, and connected to others in a supportive way (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This inclination towards interpersonal interaction, often referred to as belongingness, was shown in the study (Deci & Ryan, 1985) that it plays a crucial role in psychological well-being.

SDT also distinguishes between different types of motivation along a continuum, ranging from intrinsic motivation to extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic motivation involves engaging in an activity for the inherent satisfaction or enjoyment it brings, while extrinsic motivation involves engaging in an activity to attain some separable outcome or reward (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Within extrinsic motivation, SDT further distinguishes between autonomous motivation, where individuals engage in activities because they value them or find the personally meaningful, and controlled motivation, where individuals feel pressured or coerced into engaging in activities (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

2.2 Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory (SET) is considered a significant theoretical perspective in social psychology (Cook & Rice, 2003, s. 53). The theory was formulated by Homans (1961), Blau (1964), and Emerson (1962, 1972), and addresses how individuals act in interaction with others to achieve the greatest possible reward. Homans defined social exchange as *the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least to persons* (Cook & Rice, 2003, s. 54).

Central to SET is the concept of reciprocity (Emerson, 1976), wherein individuals strive to maintain a balance between giving and receiving in social relationships. This often involves resources such as time, energy, support, and other goods (Emerson, 1976, s. 337). The primary motivation behind these exchanges is to desire maximize rewards, both in terms of tangible rewards such as money or other material possessions, as well as social rewards, such as status and recognition (Emerson, 1976). Concurrently with maximizing rewards is the desire to minimize costs, such as time and effort. The theory suggest that social interactions can function akin to economic transactions (Blau, 1964), wherein individuals exchange resources within the anticipation of receiving benefits as a consequence.

SET also addresses how individual' behavior in social contexts is shaped by the significance of expected outcomes (Blau, 1964). Based on past experiences and own perceptions on fairness, people form expectations about outcomes resulting from various ways of acting in social interactions. However, the theory also emphasizes the importance of social norms, cultural values, and institutional structures in shaping the dynamics of different relationships (Blau, 1964). The concept of fairness and justice (Emerson, 1976) is an important perception for individuals, and SET emphasizes how people are sensitive to the ratio of inputs to outputs in social interactions. Inequity perceptions may lead to the feeling of dissatisfaction or resentment (Emerson, 1976), and it is therefore important to maintain a sense of equity and balance in relationship with others.

Overall, SET aims to give insight in how people act and navigate in social interactions, with the goal of minimizing costs and maximizing rewards (Emerson, 1976). Ultimately seeking to enhance their well-being and satisfaction in relationships (Emerson, 1976).

3. Method

3.1 Research method

With the ongoing rise of virtual leadership and the increasing use of virtual teams (STAMI, 2021), combined with the changing preferences among leaders concerning virtual leadership (Thompson, 2023), this study seeks to delve into leaders' experiences and viewpoints on the matter using a qualitative method. Qualitative methods offer a nuanced understanding of individuals' experiences and perspectives, allowing to uncover the underlaying dynamics shaping leadership and team interactions (Busch, 2013). The flexibility of qualitative research methods facilitates an interactive approach to data collection and analysis, allowing to uncover novel insight and contribute to the advancement of theoretical knowledge in this field (Busch, 2013). Through the adoption of the methodology, in terms of a semi-structured research interview, this study aims to provide valuable insights for practitioners and organizational leaders navigating the challenges of leading and managing remote teams effectively.

3.2 Data Collection

The study primarily employed semi-structured qualitative research interviews for data collection, a methodological choice carefully considered for its effectiveness (Longhurst, 2016). Central to the research is the aim to gather personal insights and experiences from leaders. Supplementary sources, such as internet articles, previous research, and literature, will complement the primary data obtained from these interviews. Qualitative interviews were chosen for their ability to capture informants' cognitive, affective, and attitudinal responses regarding the subject matter (Lotherington, 1990), allowing for an exploration of perspectives in the informants' own words.

The semi-structured interview format involves the predevelopment of an interview guide, inspired by Holmberg and Manse (2021), provided to respondents beforehand (attachment 3). This ensures both parties are familiar with the questions, fostering a conductive environment (Moe, 2021). During the interview, predetermined questions served as a foundation, with follow-up inquiries tailored to respondents' responses, facilitating deeper exploration of relevant themes (Moe, 2021). Despite its resource-intensive nature, this metho effectively

extracts nuances information, including personal experiences, reflections, and unique perspectives on phenomena (Moe, 2021).

3.3 Time Perspective

The time constrains surrounding the task render a cross-sectional study the optimal choice. By collecting data at various time points, it could have been possible to analyze whether there are changes in respondents' experiences and perspectives related to the research question over time. To mitigate this potential limitation of cross-sectional studies, emphasis was placed on the respondents' reflections on their own experiences and perceptions over a period, as well as any changes the respondent may reflect upon during interviews.

3.4 Ethics

This study adheres to Sikt's guidelines (sikt, 2024) for conducting a project anonymously. To ensure the anonymity of the study participants, no personally identifiable data is presented within the study. Data collected during participant interactions is solely in the form of notes and has no trace of personal information.

3.5 Respondents

The study has gathered information from 7 respondents through research interviews. All respondents are leaders in various organizations, both in the private and public sectors. They come from different regions of the country: Northern Norway, the West Coast, the East, and the South-West. To ensure a comprehensive and diversified dataset, deliberate effort were made to recruit respondents representing a range of professional backgrounds, experiences, and age demographics. All participants consented to partake in the interviews, and they were duly informed of the anonymization process implemented for confidentiality purposes.

3.6 Data analysis

To uncover responses relevant to the research question within the data collected from the semi-structured research interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted (Clarke & Braun,

2022). Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step approach to thematic analysis, the process began with both authors thoroughly familiarizing themselves with the transcribed interviews. Subsequently, respondents' answers were systematically coded into various themes. Individual categorizations and themes were then discussed and compared to ensure their alignment with the research question.

4. Results

In the analysis of the interviews, three major themes emerged, which are presented in table 1: *Strategies in virtual communication, maintaining engagement in VT/RT, and trust in organizational dynamics.* Further elaboration and explanation of these themes will be provided in the subsequent sections.

Table 1	Themes, Dimensions and Codes	
Themes	*Dimensions*	*Codes*
Strategies in virtual communication	Effective communication structure	Guidelines for meetings
	Compensation for physical interactions	Team building
		Culture of breaks
	Positive work environment	Response in meetings
Maintaining engagement in VT/RT	Optimalization of technology	Technological challenges
	Environmental factors	External factor
		Internal factors
	Individual factors	Well-being
Trust in Organizational Dynamics		Building trust
	Importance and role of trust	Maintaining trust

Theme 1: Strategies in virtual communication

All respondents highlighted the importance of effective strategies in virtual work environments. Having a clear structure in virtual meetings was described as essential for optimizing virtual communication. Virtual tools like Teams have become integral to remote collaboration, and according to respondents, it's essential to integrate them with existing leadership tools. As stated by a respondent:

> *Maintaining social connections and providing opportunities for breaks are crucial for maintaining motivation and productivity.*

Respondents talked about how regular check-ins with each team member, both individually and in small groups, help build relationships and address any concerns or challenges they may face. According to their experience, understanding individual needs and preferences are essential for effective leadership in remote settings.

Several respondents explained that they have established clear rules for how they want the communication to be in their meetings. One respondent stated:

> *Together with the team I lead, I have developed guidelines for how we want communication to take place during virtual meetings.*

From the interviews, it is evident that a good structure for how communication should proceed in virtual meetings is necessary. A lack of structure leads to irritation and frustration among meeting participants, as it results in interruptions and comments or hand-raising going unnoticed. One leader stated:

> *In virtual meetings, comments and hand raising can lead to irritation and withdrawal if not managed properly.*

As a counterpoint to this, another respondent enthusiastically explained an effective initiative they have implemented as a part of the strategy to foster effective communication and maintain a positive work environment. As one respondent stated:

In virtual meetings with my team, we have actively utilized the response feature within the platform we use. It allows us to send applause, thumbs-up, thumbs-down, or other icons, among many others.

Leaders also emphasized the importance of compensating for the lack of physical interaction. Team-building activities for fostering positive atmosphere among employees, as well as simpler measures like scheduled virtual coffee breaks together, were among the compensations mentioned. All respondents highlighted the importance of knowing their employees well, and several said these compensations and measures are highly necessary for good work culture. A leader said:

I know that several of my employees often spend hours in meetings and in front of the screen. That's why I like to include some mandatory breaks in my meetings. I notice that we all benefit from it, and it's nice to catch up a bit together.

Some participants expressed the importance of organizing social gatherings and establish good physical connections with everyone in the team. Meanwhile, other leaders felt that current digital strategies and situation were successful and don't see the need for regular physical meetings.

A factor regarding communication that all leaders emphasized was the importance of having the camera on during virtual meetings. Several leaders expressed a challenge related to employees often avoiding turning on their cameras. In smaller meetings, with 8 or fewer participants, it is evident that leaders have clear expectations that everyone should use their cameras. Most of the leaders find it more challenging to get everyone to use their cameras in larger meetings, with over 10 participants. This because all the attendees will not be visible on the screen simultaneously. Furthermore, they expressed uncertainty about the employees' outcome and engagement in meetings, especially when they cannot see or read their body language. One leader stated:

In smaller meetings we always have the cameras on. It's a mutual agreement within the team, and we all find it pleasant and important to be able to see each other when we talk. It's not very rewarding to speak to a screen with only names and no faces. I

notice that in larger meetings involving multiple departments or teams where we have typically 10-40 participants, many turn of their cameras. Then it becomes challenging for me as a leader to be sure my employees have grasped and understood the content of the meeting. In some cases, I've had to ask people to turn on their cameras.

Communicating goals and visions were another aspect emphasized by the leaders. One leader clearly expressed the challenge of conveying the vision and common goals to the team in various projects. Another leader also noted that employees perceive the threshold for sending emails about minor matters and quick information, which would have been mentioned in passing in an office setting, as too high and too formal. Consequently, they refrain from sending that email. Expanding on this, the respondent also emphasized the significant challenge of addressing complex and more advanced issues virtually. The respondent stated:

I find it harder to foster a sense of unity in the team, as we cannot have kick-offs and other team-building activities prior to new projects. This also make it challenging to ensure that everyone is on the same page in terms of reaching the goals, especially when we also loose body language and the atmosphere in the room.

The challenges associated with motivating employees and working towards a common goal, according to several respondents, are also linked to challenges in implementing changes. One of the leaders explained that when there are difficulties in communicating the goals and vision for projects, it becomes even more challenging to introduce changes. One respondent stated:

Change is a difficult process to begin with. People are generally afraid of change, and when it is not totally confirmed to me as a leader that employees understand our goals and vision, which I see as crucial, implementing change becomes even more challenging.

Theme 2: Maintaining engagement in VT/RT
Maintaining engagement for employees in virtual settings is described by all leaders as both important and challenging. Technology, environmental, and individual factors, can play a significant role in how employees maintain engagement.

When asked about virtual tools, the need for reliable technology equipment was highly stressed. The participants highlighted several beneficial reasons for the usage of virtual communication, and underlined how it is crucial for the technology to work like it is supposed to. The respondents shared that there rarely are any issues with the practical aspects of technology, as today's equipment is very reliable. However, one emphasized that if a problem were to arise, it would be utterly destructive for collaboration. As a respondent stated:

> *We have progressed so far with the development of technology that it is assumed there will be no problems. Yet, when a problem does arise, it is one of the greatest challenges we, as leaders of remote teams, face.*

Several leaders stated negative experiences from hybrid meeting solutions, where some members are physically present in a room while some are joined virtually. One highlighted power dynamic, indicating that it could be challenging for remote participants to participate fully in meetings, compared to those physically present. A leader stated:

> *It is no question that there is a big difference in physical and virtual presence. So, after my experience, a meeting where some members sit beside each other while other on a screen, does not work. If one employee cannot attend physically, I then prefer everyone on screen. I find it fair, as everyone will feel equally included.*

The participants noted the efficiency gained from using virtual platforms like Teams, particularly for quick chats, contrasting it with the formality and potential oversight associated with email communication. One emphasized time-saving benefits and the ease of document sharing facilitated by virtual meetings. One respondent stated:

> *It is much easier for contacting your team members for any question or consultation now than before. I feel like it is a lower threshold for chatting on Teams, than send a mail or walking to their office. It is time saving and contributes to a higher level of collaboration.*

One stressed the importance of reliable technology, and highlighted the advantages of virtual brainstorming sessions for converting physical drawings or whiteboards sketches into digital formats for further discussion. One expressed confidence in their success, attributing it to the

centralized storage of documents and information on platforms like Teams, which eliminates the risk of information loss associated with previous technology-related issues.

They mentioned challenges related to large virtual gatherings, where it becomes difficult to gauge participants engagement without visual cues, potentially limiting inclusivity and hindering the interpretation of non-verbal communication cues.

According to the respondents, virtual meetings make it easier than before to get distracted. They acknowledge that this is a big challenge, and rules and strict expectations for behavior in online meetings is perceived as necessary. Pretending to be engaged, multitasking, not being fully present, and not paying attention, are common distractions. As a respondent stated:

> *It's easy to engage in other activities when not actively participating in discussions, such as checking emails or working on other tasks. There's less pressure to focus when not physically present, especially in larger teams when you are not visible on the screen.*

A busy schedule can lead to distractions from phone calls, emails, or interruptions in the office, and it is pointed out that mobile phones and computers are major distractions. As stated:

> *During physical meetings, mobile phones are usually kept away to signal importance and respect. In virtual meetings this is easier to get away with, especially when people have several screens they work with, it is hard to know what they pay attention to.*

However, during remote work, external distractions like household chores or TV can interfere with work, especially during the covid-19 pandemic. One respondent stated:

> *As in every meeting, there can be some topics that are more uninteresting than others. It's easy to get sidetracked or lose focus when no one is watching, leading to a lack of seriousness.*

It is essential to remain vigilant and ensure that everyone is engaged, especially in virtual meetings. Participants share that the degree of distractions varies. They have experienced that in smaller teams, distractions are minimal, as it's easier to monitor and hold members

accountable during meetings. However, in larger teams, distractions are more common, especially without cameras and disruptive noises. As stated by a respondent:

> *I notice that in meetings with many participants, engagement is often lower than in smaller meetings. I think can be due to both internal and external factors. Cameras is more frequently turned off in larger meetings, and there is minimal responsiveness from some participants.*

Individual factors can also be held responsible for employees' lack of engagement. One respondent expressed the importance of knowing how the employees are doing personally. This seems to be particularly challenging since there is little to no face-to-face interactions, and it is not as easy to observe each other's well-being virtually. One respondent mentioned that they actively conduct employee surveys, where employees answer a range of questions, including those related to their well-being. This is one of the tools the leader uses to identify any individual factors contributing to reduced engagement. A respondent stated:

> *It is difficult to know how the employees are doing when we don't have the physical contact that often provide more insight into this. Over virtual platforms, it is more challenging to connect with each individual employee on an interpersonal level. The best tool I have is to conduct employee surveys.*

Theme 3: Trust in Organizational Dynamics

The respondents also highlighted the importance of having clear strategies to establish and maintain trust. They actively work on fostering trust by setting expectations for team members to fulfill their responsibilities and show interest in the teams' goals. It was pointed out that only stating that trust should exist, is not sufficient. As explained by the respondents, good communication contributes to trust within a team. To accomplish this, a leader conducts regular team-building activities to foster cohesion within the team. These gatherings focus on internal team dynamics, using activities like diversity icebreakers. Understanding each other's communication styles, personalities, and preferred feedback methods is accentuated incredibly important. This understanding helps build trust by knowing how to interact with each other effectively. As stated by a respondent, as a leader, they offer freedom within responsibility,

allowing team members to work on tasks according to their preferred schedule. One respondent stated:

> *I think it is important to keep the team informed and involve everyone in the decision-making process. I would say both taking and giving responsibility is one of the main keys to get team members to feel valuable and will contribute to trust.*

Based on answers from respondents, trust can be defined as the ultimate currency. Trust forms the basis of influence and plays a vital role in organizational dynamics. As stated by respondents, trust is characterized by the ability to rely on someone's reliability and dependability, indicating confidence in their actions and intentions.

As expressed by respondents, trust is crucial for fostering motivated employees who enjoy their work and are more inclined to contribute to the success of the team. Trust is by the leaders emphasized as very important, not only in virtual settings but also in physical ones. Participants underline that factors vital for trust in physical environments become even more critical in virtual contexts. As stated by a respondent:

> *Clear and honest communication is particularly important in virtual settings, as body language is not visible.*

Participants also underlined the importance of mutual trust for collaboration in the team. It involves mutual understanding of competence, getting to know each other, and trusting that people will do their best. Employees must trust that the tasks assigned by their leader are important and correct. Leaders must also trust that the employees will fulfill their responsibilities. Several participants mentioned that mutual trust means feeling secure enough to both provide and receive constructive and positive feedback. This demonstrates that leaders value feedback and that employees' opinions matter. Stated by a respondent:

> *It is important for a leader to give feedback, but also to expect and request it.*

Trust is acknowledged by the respondent as a broad concept that requires considerable effort to cultivate and maintain. The respondent stated:

Building trust requires reciprocal efforts, as one must invest doubly to earn the trust of others.

Explained by participants, building trust involves understanding employee's personality traits such as knowledge, status, and experiences. Establishing psychological safety is expressed as challenging but crucial. Several of the respondents experienced that people in their team held back when feeling uncertain. Stated by a respondent:

When team members feel comfortable laughing and enjoying each other's company, they tend to be more productive and committed to their work.

Presented by respondents, a lot of teams consist of a diverse range of people with varying backgrounds and levels of education. This can create challenges in building relationships and trust within the team, which some respondents classified as impossible over digital platforms. Limited opportunities to get to know each other well can lead to issues. A leader stated:

As a leader of a team consisting of random people, there's often a significant disparity in maturing, age, and prior knowledge, which can create challenges of the development of the necessary familiarity.

Trust entails both being able to trust others and being trusted oneself. In environments where individuals may lack academic backgrounds, such as those with training coursed or vocational qualifications, trusting highly educated individuals was stated as a difficulty. The respondent believes this is related to the reluctance to share all experiences and questions with individuals possessing higher levels of education or experience, fearing to appear unintelligent and incompetent.

Respondents clearly expressed that trust is crucial for fostering motivated employees who enjoy their work, and are more inclined to contribute positively. One respondent highlighted the importance of trust in remote teams. Employees have more freedom; hence it is crucial that everyone is aware of their tasks and trusts that all parties are fulfilling their responsibilities. The respondent further stated:

For me, it is important that my team does not feel monitored by me as a leader, but for this reason, expectations must be clear.

Leading a team without full visibility of everyone's tasks underscores the significance of trust. By the respondents, trust is considered fundamental for team dynamics, as it enables members to rely on each other and collaborate effectively. Uncertainty among team members can hinder productivity, emphasizing the need to trust in one another's abilities and commitment to excellence.

Respondents stated that working in a team towards a specific goal provides a sense of purpose and motivation. Further stated that online teamwork will save a lot of time, and sometimes contribute to closer cooperation on tasks. The ease of collaborating online with people from different locations can be motivating, compared to the stress of communicating to meet the team. A respondent stated:

When having to ask someone a quick question, or wanting feedback, I have experienced that this is easier over chat. For some, this leads to closer collaboration, as the threshold for sending a message via chat in Teams is lower than physically meeting in one's office for smaller requests.

Respondents highlighted the need to cultivate a safe and open relationship to foster this low-threshold collaboration among team members in remote work teams. Missing out on body language cues is a challenge, and as stated by a respondent, in-person meetings serve as a catalyst for building stronger bonds. Setting goals for occasional in-person meetings strengthens team cohesion. As stated by the respondent:

Virtual meetings tend to be more formal, and missing out on casual conversations and bonding over non-work topics can be demotivating.

5. Discussion

One respondent stated that kickoff events and team-building exercises are essential for project motivation, but virtual alternatives are not as effective as in-person gatherings.

Based on the interviews with the respondents, the perception emerged that the majority of leaders have successfully managed to adapt to the digital transformation brought about by the fourth industrial revolution, including virtual leadership. However, the findings were not entirely positive. This section of the study will discuss the challenging findings, in alignment with self-determination theory (SDT) and social exchange theory (SET). The theories aim to complement each other to provide the best possible explanation of the phenomena and findings.

Communication strategies

All respondents emphasized the importance of a good communication structure. They agreed that virtual communication requires a different communication structure than physical communication. A study conducted in 2020 (Maloney, Freeman, & Wohn) addresses how the absence of face-to-face communication is highlighted as a significant challenge. It presents that it can easily lead to misunderstandings, due to the difficulty in interpreting body language virtually (Maloney, Freeman, & Wohn, 2020).

There were variations in how long the leaders had been leading virtually. It was clear that those who lead their employees only physically in the office before the Covid-19 pandemic, faced greater challenges in creating an effective communication structure compared to the leaders who, for other reasons, had been leading virtual teams for several years. However, all leaders experience a norm for how communication should take place in virtual contexts. Some had also established clear guidelines for communication in virtual meetings.

Despite leaders acknowledging the importance and necessity of guidelines, deviations or deficiencies in the guidelines occur. As one of the leaders mentioned, the lack of structure for raising hands and commenting on content in meeting leads to irritation and withdrawal. The lack of system creates an imbalance in the exchange of resources, which, in SET, is a fundamental principle underlying human relationships and behavior. According to this theory, it is essential that individuals receive recognition for their efforts. When one has worked for

something and, for example, presents findings or similar in a meeting, it is crucial for that individual to receive feedback. If this person feel like they are getting nothing in return, and little recognition and response on the work they have put in, motivation for the work diminishes.

In response to these challenges, a leader stated that they utilize response icons integrated into the software during virtual meetings. This to provide feedback akin to what one would convey through body language. A study demonstrated that incorporating such measures into the communication strategy can be beneficial for the coordination and learning of the team (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). Based on the perspective given by the leaders, it is perceived as crucial to maintain clear and direct communication through virtual platforms. By providing opportunities for interaction and feedback through virtual platforms can, in accordance with SDT, create a sense of belonging and cohesion within the team. Feedback among team members, and with the leader is essential for fostering trust and a positive environment (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999).

For respondents needing to arrange virtual team-building activities and shared virtual coffee breaks, addresses the need for belongingness. Belongingness, also known as relatedness, is one of the three fundamental psychological needs in SDT. One respondent recounted how employees often spend hours in virtual meetings without social breaks. By allowing employees to form connections with each other and foster a positive atmosphere, endeavoring the need for belongingness.

Several leaders expressed challenges related to employees not activating their cameras during meetings. Turning off cameras may lead to the impression that there is a closed communication loop (Communication Theory, 2010). A underlaying reason for this reluctance among employees may stem from employees' self-consciousness or uncertainty regarding their appearance or surroundings (Dihn, et al., 2021). Worries about being judged or assessed based on their appearance or environment can erode their sense of competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985), resulting in feelings of inadequacy or discomfort. This will, as stated by respondents, result in unmotivated employees, and create challenges in communicating structures within the team.

If this is the case of one or more employees, it can trigger a chain reaction. Relatedness is evident in the desire for human connection and social interaction (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Seeing one's colleagues is important for feeling a sense of belonging and maintaining positive relationships with coworkers and supervisors. If one or more employees choose to turn off their cameras, this may lead others to follow suit due to the feeling off missed relatedness. However, if employees choose not to use the video camera, this can further result in them feeling less seen, validated, and may potentially affect their self-confidence and engagement in the meeting situation. Encouraging meeting participants to use the camera can contribute to their sense of competence. Being seen and seeing one's colleagues can embrace the feeling of visibility and recognition, validating employees' contributions and expertise.

Another point highlighted in connection with the importance of effective communication structure is the challenges associated with getting goals and visions communicated in virtual teams. Relatedness is a fundamental requirement for individuals (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and the need to feel connected to the workplace's goals and visions play a crucial role. In traditional work settings with a physical office, team-building and face-to-face activities are a commonly used tool in the implementation of new goals and visions, to engage employees to instill the feeling that these goals are as much theirs as they are the companies'. When employees understand the purpose and significance of the work they are doing, they are more likely to feel motivated and empowered to pursue common objectives (Vasilescu, Barna, & Epure, 2023).

However, the challenges with conveying goals and visions in virtual settings can impact employees' sense of competence. Competence, as described by SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), refers to individuals' belief in their capability to effectively perform tasks and achieve desired outcomes. Inadequate communication or understanding of goals can undermine employees' confidence in their abilities to contribute meaningfully to the team's objectives. This can lead to frustration and disengagement, hindering motivation to achieve the team's common goals. To prevent this, it is assumed that an effective communication structure that ensure goals and visions, are conveyed to employees with an engagement that ensures their sense of competence and relatedness.

Maintaining engagement in VT/RT

In the contemporary landscape of virtual teams and remote work, maintaining engagement is essential for achieving organizational success (Kohntopp & McCann, 2020) (Kohntopp & McCann, Leadership in Virtual Organizations: Influence in Workplace Engagement, 2020). SDT and SET complement each other well in providing perspectives on this challenge.

For leaders to be effective and achieve the desired results, they depend on positively influencing their employees (Knight, 2023). The essence of remote leadership lies in employing diverse tools, technologies, and communication channels to effectively manage remotely situated or geographically dispersed employees (Ferrazzi, 2014). Reliable technology was emphasized, by a respondent, as one of the key factors for leaders to succeed in virtual communication. As one of the leaders primarily emphasized, technology is rarely a challenge, but when it is, is it one of the biggest problems they can face. This suggests that when technology works smoothly, the autonomy aspect of SDT is present, as the employees can rely on the tools to facilitate their work independently. In a situation where the technology is not working, the autonomy aspect of SDT is challenged. Without reliable technology, implementation of virtual communication is not possible. The employees may feel a lack of sense of control of their own actions, and are heavily controlled by external forces. This goes against the fundamental point of the autonomy aspect of SDT.

The rise of technology has necessitated a move towards transformational leadership, where leaders inspire innovation and adaption in the face of constant change (Axon, Friedman, & Molloy, 2019). Digital leaders must not only understand technology but also leverage it strategically for organizational success (elev8, 2024). Hybrid meetings, where some employees are physically present at the office while others join remotely, have been considered as a solution for facilitating meetings. However, all respondents agreed that hybrid meetings present significant challenges and are rarely pursued as a preferred meeting format. This can effectively be explained by explained by SET. As articulated by one of the respondents, hybrid meetings pose a risk of imbalance in resources, such as attention and participation. Remote participants may perceive that those physically present receive more immediate attention and are more actively involved in discussion than they are. This sense of inequity among remote participants has the potential to diminish their engagement in the meeting.

The evolution of leadership styles with technological advancements underscore the importance of adaptability and innovation. Leaders seem to seamlessly integrate technology into their strategies while recognizing the enduring significance of human connections. The leaders were enthusiastic about how technology foster engagement among employees by leveraging the interactive features of virtual platforms, such as chat services, screen sharing, and digitizing physical documents, they believed that engagement could be enhanced. By utilizing interactive features, leaders aimed to create a reciprocal exchange.

However, one of the respondents chose to emphasize the difficulty of executing complex and large tasks virtually. The leader mentioned acquaintances who were granted special permission to hold physical meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic to address complex issues that couldn't be resolved virtually. By acknowledging the challenges of conducting complex tasks virtually, leaders recognize the importance of maintaining a fair exchange of resources and support within the team, to achieve a common goal such as the complex task.

Distractions are common occurrences is remote work and in virtual meetings (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). An email that needs attention, a finished laundry cycle, or a friend's Facebook status were all distractions familiar to the respondents. Multitasking with such distractions and not being fully present in virtual meetings, means that the autonomy aspect of SDT is not fulfilled, as employees feel compelled to engage in other activities instead of focusing on the meeting. A multitude of distractions can also challenge SDT's principle of competence. When one feel that the team does not value their effort, and not able to contribute with their expertise, it becomes more difficult have effective focus and motivation on work tasks and meeting content. The influence on the SDT principles suggests that motivation and engagement are affected to the extent that work feels more laborious and less meaningful.

Daft (2015 quoted in (Kohntopp & McCann, 2020)) argues that engaged employees start with supportive and inspiring leaders. Several of the respondents highlighted the lack of face-to-face interactions, attributing this to be the cause of the reduced ability to assess employee well-being. They emphasized how individual factors can be significant reason for declining engagement among employees. To best assess employees in virtual platforms, one leader regularly conducted employee surveys. The study conducted by Kohntopp & McCann (2020) demonstrates that engaged leadership, in accordance with providing employees tasks that

vary, challenges, and the opportunity for growth, are factors that positively influence employee engagement.

Trust in Organizational Dynamics

It is widely acknowledged that trust plays a pivotal role in the workplace, with several studies supporting the statement (Krapivin, 2023). Nevogt (2021), revealed that trust is a fundamental element in fostering creative, collaborative, and innovative teams. The findings from these studies are not surprising, considering that trust is essential for any functioning human relationship (Hancock, et al., 2023). In the workplace, trust holds particular significance as it facilitates successful completion of tasks and encourages individuals to take responsibility for any errors (Saunders & Ahuja, 2006).

Managing a remote team presents additional challenges in building trust (Yusuf, 2012). The absence of face-to-face interactions makes it challenging to foster genuine connections, as limited visibility makes it harder to detect emerging issues, risking leaving team members feeling isolated and unsupported (Bakken, 2018). Results indicates that when working in virtual settings where interactions are limited, the need for relatedness, or connection with others, becomes particularly crucial. This correlates with the relatedness principle in SDT, stating the human need for the feeling of having meaningful connections with people in their society. Further, the results show that the difficulty in building trust virtually can hinder the fulfillment of this need, leading to feelings of insecurity and reluctance to fully engage in collaborative efforts.

According to statements given by respondents, disparity in backgrounds and levels of education within teams can further exacerbate these challenges. Individuals may perceive barriers to forming meaningful relationships and trusting their peers, especially those with higher levels of education or experience. This statement, given by respondents, explained how the reluctance to share experiences or questions with individuals perceived as more educated or experienced, may stem from concerns about the competence principle of SDT. The reason for the reluctance is, as assumed by the leaders, the concern of appearing unintelligent or facing judgement. As a result, trust may be compromised, leading to decreased motivation and engagement among team members.

VTs typically have a different organizational structure compared to more traditional teams (Saunders & Ahuja, 2006). Evident by studies (Hacker, Johnson, saunders, & Thayer, 2019), the presence of aligned and shared goals in VTs, tends to correlate with higher levels of trust. Also, as highlighted by these studies, clear and well-defined roles play a pivotal role in VTs. Such roles enable team members to focus their efforts on tasks within their designated responsibilities, accurately assess the performance of others, and consequently foster rapid trust formation (Hacker, Johnson, saunders, & Thayer, 2019). For this to be possible in virtual teams, where autonomy and freedom are prevalent, results indicate that trust becomes even more critical for ensuring that team members feel empowered to fulfill their responsibilities without micromanagement. The respondents emphasized the importance of clear work distribution and guidelines for everyone in the team, to avoid any confusion regarding the expectations of other team members. They believed that this helped in building trust within the team, as knowing what others expect of you enables you to easily demonstrate your trustworthiness to the team.

A study from (Zak)2017 reported various benefits of a trustworthy team, such as reduced stress, increased energy levels, and enhanced productivity, decreased absenteeism, and higher life satisfaction. Clear expectations and communication are essential for establishing trust and promoting a positive team dynamic (Redmiles & De Souza, 2013). The respondents pointed out that virtual meetings easily become very formal, with a specific agenda and limited room for topics outside the main theme. Formal virtual meetings might hinder the fulfillment of the relatedness aspect of SDT. Casual conversations and bonding over non-work topics is believed to fulfill the need for relatedness as they help individuals connect on a personal level. When these interactions are lacking, it may demotivate individuals as they feel a sense of disconnection from their colleagues. Moreover, a respondent highlighted the importance of team members feeling comfortable with one another, and being able to laugh and enjoying each other's company. This aligns with SDT as it indicates the fulfillment of the need for relatedness. When team members feel comfortable and enjoy each other's company, it is believed to fosters a sense of connection and belongingness, thus promoting their intrinsic motivation and commitment to their work.

Ultimately, trust serves as the foundation for effective collaboration and successful outcomes in virtual work environments, underscoring its significance in remote team management. Understanding the importance of trust in virtual teams is crucial (Yusuf, 2012).

Leaders play a crucial role in establishing trust in VTs (Nevogt, 2021). With greater geographic and temporal distance, team members often perceive each other as more abstract and psychologically distant (Redmiles & De Souza, 2013). Therefore, factors that facilitate anticipation of other team members behaviors and actions is believed to foster trust. Familiarity with fellow team members is particularly crucial for various aspects related to multidimensional trust (De Jong, Dirks, & Gillespie, 2016). The underlining importance given by the participants, on strategies described for fostering trust within their team, resonates with the three principals of SDT.

Empowering team members to work according to their preferred schedule and involving them in decision-making processes, is believed to support their need for autonomy. Assumed by respondents' insight, understanding each other's communication styles and personality traits contributes to a sense of relatedness and strengthens interpersonal bonds within the team. Additionally, the importance of psychological safety aligns with SDT's emphasis on supportive social contexts for optimal motivation and well-being. Through the interviews it was highlighted that it is crucial to create an environment where team members feel comfortable expressing themselves and providing feedback.

As VTs offer the advantage of being free from geographical constraints, it is to believe that organizations might consider expanding the size of VTs. However, numerous studies suggest that building trust becomes more challenging in larger VTs (Redmiles & De Souza, 2013). This was consistent with the information provided by the respondents, who informed that their experiences with large virtual teams correlated with a lot of challenges. It was elucidated that their experiences with large virtual meetings lead to challenges in building trust and motivation. They explained how there is a maximum number of faces visible on a screen simultaneously, and consequently, it is difficult for the leader to ascertain that everyone has their camera on, and to ensure that all participants are fully engaged. This can lead to members becoming very anonymous, resulting in individuals feeling less valued. Based on the respondents' experiences, this can result in a team with reduced cohesion, diminished motivation, and less interest for the team's goals.

From a SET perspective, the emphasis on establishing and maintaining trust reflects the importance of balanced social exchanges within teams. Trust serves as a valuable resource that individuals invest in and expect returns from in form of reliable behavior and mutual support. From respondents' experiences, it is necessary to invest significantly more than into

the trust exchange than they can expect back. One leader stated that they must demonstrate twice as much trust as they anticipate receiving in return. Such an attitude, according to the respondent, was deemed imperative for fostering trust development.

The efforts described by leaders to foster trust through clear communication, regular team-building activities, and empowered strategies align with SET principles of reciprocity and mutual benefit. Leaders invest in building trust by setting expectations and providing opportunities for team members to contribute, creating a positive exchange environment where trust can flourish.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to *identify the primary challenges associated with virtual leadership and management of remote teams*. Through interviews, thematic analysis, and discussion of the presented findings, a wealth of information has been gathered to address this research question.

The fourth industrial revolution has practically compelled leaders to adapt and constantly keep up with technological changes. Technology is rarely a challenge for leaders in the virtual realm, but if technological problems arise, they are perceived to be the most significant issue associated with virtual work.

Effective communication has been highlighted as a paramount challenge. Respondents have emphasized the need for a communication structure tailored to virtual contexts. The lack of face-to-face interactions poses challenges in interoperating non-verbal cues, potentially leading to varying degrees of misunderstandings. The challenge seems to arise further in meetings with 10 or more participants. Here, not all participants will be visible on screen simultaneously, making it challenging to elicit response from everyone.

Hybrid meetings are also considered a primary challenge for leaders. Results show that when some attendees are digital while others are physically present, it creates power imbalances and uneven resource exchange.

Leading virtually means you do not have completely oversight of the employees' work process. Respondents stated how distractions easily arise when working virtually. This is perceived as highly challenging, as it leads to greater disparities in exchange processes, and employees losing focus to a greater extent. The results conduct that leaders need to be engaged and provide employees with varying tasks, challenges, and fostering opportunities for growth. It is deemed crucial to make sure the individual factors are fulfilled, to make sure employees stay engaged despite distractions.

The final major challenge uncovered in the study concerns the establishment and maintenance of trust. In virtual settings, building trust is understood as more challenging due to the lack of physical interactions. This has a negative consequence for the relatedness- and competence

principles of Self-Determination Theory. Results indicate that building and maintaining trust requires balanced social interactions within the team. As trust is perceived as fundamental, leaders must invest significantly in building trust.

Overall, the primary challenges associated with virtual leadership and management of remote teams include: establishing and maintaining an effective communication structure; maintaining engagement; building and sustaining trust; ensuring balanced exchange processes; and meeting the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and belongingness.

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8. Attachments

Attachment 1

	Nettskybrukere											
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Virtuelle møterom												
500-999 ansatte	45,5	28,6	55,0	53,8	66,7	66,7	75,0	77,3	81,8	95,5	95,7	95,2
1000 ansatte eller flere	31,6	55,6	47,6	68,6	62,9	73,0	78,9	80,5	95,5	91,8	95,9	100,0
Kommunikasjon, intern og ekstern (tale, chat (tekst), e-post)												
500-999 ansatte	36,4	50,0	55,0	46,2	57,1	55,6	65,0	86,4	77,3	95,5	95,7	95,2
1000 ansatte eller flere	26,3	38,9	33,3	48,6	60,0	59,5	65,8	70,7	84,1	95,9	93,9	96,2

Ny rapport: Dette mener ekspertene blir viktig i fremtidens arbeidsmiljø

Eksperter på nordisk arbeidsmiljø har vurdert hvilke faktorer som fortjener spesiell oppmerksomhet i fremtidens arbeidsmiljø.

Digitalisering og ny teknologi vil påvirke arbeidsmiljøet til mange fremover. Foto: Chris Montgomery/Unsplash

Moderne arbeidsliv sies ofte å være inne i en «fjerde industriell revolusjon» som i stor grad er drevet av raske teknologiske fremskritt. Men teknologi er ikke den eneste endringsdriveren. Demografiske endringer, globalisering og klimaendringer er også megatrender som bidrar til å påvirke fremtiden for arbeidsmiljøet vårt. Samfunnet og arbeidslivet gjennomgår kontinuerlig forandring, og den pågående Covid-19-pandemien gjør sitt for å akselerere takten.

Samler ekspertens synspunkter

For å utforske utfordringene og mulighetene det nordiske arbeidsmiljøet vil møte i fremtiden, har STAMI, som en del av det nordiske prosjektet Future of Work gjennomført en Delfi-studie med eksperter på det nordiske arbeidslivet. Studien samler synspunkter fra 53 eksperter i Norge og Danmark, med representanter fra partene i arbeidslivet, arbeidstilsynene, konsulenter, forskere og bedriftshelsetjenester.

– Målet med studien var å samle inn, beskrive og evaluere enighet om synspunkter fra ekspertene om hvilke arbeidsmiljøutfordringer og -muligheter som vil være spesielt relevante det kommende tiåret, sier forsker Jan Olav Christensen, som har ledet Delfi-studien og er prosjektleder for STAMIs bidrag til Future of Work.

– Spesielt retter vi oppmerksomheten mot det psykososiale arbeidsmiljøet, siden det er relevant for alle arbeidstakere, legger han til.

Høy enighet

Som en del av studien svarte ekspertene på spørsmålet om hva de mente kom til å være viktig for fremtidens arbeid og arbeidsmiljø.

Svarene ble deretter strukturert av forskerne i henhold til etablerte drivere av endring: teknologi, demografi, globalisering og klimaendringer. I tillegg ble temaene «ferdigheter/kompetanse» og «politisk, sosial og kulturell utvikling» lagt til for å dekke innhold i de innsamlede uttalelsene.

Christensen forteller at enigheten blant ekspertene var generelt høy, og at det kom frem få kontroversielle synspunkter. Ekspertene fremhever at arbeidsmiljøet vil bli grunnleggende påvirket på mange måter fremover. De fleste av disse endringene er allerede i gang, og mange av dem har blitt forsterket av Covid-pandemien. Det er verdt å legge merke til at forskerne ikke så noe dominerende pessimisme eller optimisme i ekspertenes vurderinger av hvordan arbeidsmiljøet vil påvirkes fremover.

– Både muligheter og utfordringer ble trukket fram. Dette gir grunn til å tenke at det er et stort potensiale for å håndtere de ulike utfordringene, påpeker Christensen.

Autonomi og tilgjengelighet viktig fremover

Han fremhever arbeidstakeres opplevelse av kontroll over arbeidssituasjonen sin (autonomi) som et eksempel på en arbeidsfaktor som kan legge grunnlaget for meningsfulle og sunne jobber hvis den prioriteres i utformingen av fremtidige arbeidsplasser.

Følelsen av alltid å måtte være tilgjengelig (telepress), utfordringer forbundet med bruk av ny teknologi (technostress) eller utmattelse etter digitale møter (video call fatigue), er eksempler på relativt nye og fremvoksende utfordringer knyttet til teknologier som brukes i arbeidet.

– Men vi må huske at de samme teknologiene også kan brukes til å motvirke de negative effektene, ved at de gir økt mulighet for fleksibilitet og egenkontroll over arbeidssituasjonen.

Når man tar i bruk nye teknologier og måter å arbeide på er det ifølge forskeren derfor viktig at man både tar hensyn til utfordringene og drar nytte av mulighetene.

Hjemmekontor på godt og vondt

Covid-19-pandemien har ført til at noen av utfordringene ekspertene nevnte, har blitt særlig relevante etter at studien ble gjennomført. Spesielt gjelder det fjernarbeid, som for eksempel hjemmekontor.

– Digitalisering og bruk av informasjons- og kommunikasjonsteknologi til arbeid og private formål har gjort det mulig å tilpasse seg nye omstendigheter raskt, men bringer også med seg spørsmål om hvordan vi definerer grenser Fleksibilitet kan absolutt føre til økt selvstyre og frihet, men det kan også skape utfordringer som sosial isolasjon, svekket sosial støtte fra ledere og kolleger, og problemer med å balansere krav fra arbeid og privatliv, påpeker Christensen.

Vil få konsekvenser for arbeidshelsen

Han er ikke i tvil om at kommende endringer i måtene vi arbeider på, kan ha betydelige konsekvenser for arbeidshelsen.

− Om endringene fører til økt eller redusert produktivitet og helse, er avhengig av hvordan de potensielle utfordringene møtes. Derfor er kunnskap om spesifikke faktorer som kan øke eller redusere risiko avgjørende for å sikre et bærekraftig arbeidsmiljø, understreker forskeren.

På spørsmål om han kan peke ut en god retning, svarer Christensen:

− Retningslinjer og praksiser som bevarer arbeidstakerens kontroll over arbeidssituasjonen, forhindrer utslettelse av grenser mellom arbeid og privatliv, opprettholder og styrker sosial støtte til ansatte på hjemmekontor, forhindrer «technostress» og «telepress» og legger til rette for livslang, positiv læring vil mest sannsynlig styrke både arbeidshelsen og produktiviteten.

Arbeidsmiljøets fremtid er avhengig av utviklinger som kan påvirkes av nåværende praksis. Oppmerksomhet og bevissthet på problemstillingene som diskuteres i denne nye rapporten, kan derfor gi lovgivere, beslutningstakere, myndigheter, arbeidsgivere og arbeidstakere et bedre grunnlag for å håndtere kommende utfordringer.

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Attachment 3

INTERVIEW GUIDE

General questions

1. Describe your role within the company.

2. How much experience do you have with virtual leadership?

3. What is the main reason you conduct virtual leadership?

4. Could you provide a description of the type of teams you lead in a virtual capacity.

5. What are your thoughts in regards of virtual leadership? What is the best? What is the most challenging?

Communication and cooperation

1. Do you believe that, as a leader, you have succeeded in establishing an effective communication structure and a positive working environment for remote team members? Why or why not?

2. What challenges in team communication arise from the reduction in face-to-face meetings?

3. With your experience, is there any communication challenges within the team regarding both linguistics and/or body language?

Trust

1. What is your definition of trust?

2. How significant do you perceive trust to be, and what are the underlying reasons for its importance?

3. Do you face any issues in the terms of establishing trust?

4. How would you describe mutual trust?

5. How do you actively work towards fostering mutual trust between the team and the leader?

Motivation

1. What do you consider to be the primary challenges associated with motivation? This includes both your own motivation and that of your team members.

Distractions

1. What do you consider to be the most prominent/distinctive distractions in remote-working teams?

2. To what extent do distractions occur in remote-working teams?

Are here any aspects of virtual leadership and remote teams that we haven't addressed that you believe would be pertinent for us to be aware of?