



**CHALMERS**  
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# Digital Disconnect: Navigating Leadership in Hybrid Work Environments

A Case Study Exploring Leadership Challenges in Remote and Hybrid Teams within Project-Based Organisations

MASTER'S THESIS IN DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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## Abstract

Remote or hybrid work has become increasingly popular in recent years, mainly driven by the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic and technical advancements. The construction industry, traditionally reliant on physical presence, is among the sectors significantly affected by this shift. This poses new challenges for leadership, particularly in areas such as communication, motivation, and conflict resolution. This study investigates how such challenges manifest in a large, project-based construction organisation and explores how leadership can adapt to mitigate them. A specific focus has been put on how certain complex challenges emerge in a hybrid work environment. Feedback practices, performance monitoring, and conflict resolution were identified as examples of these that were particularly relevant to this research. The research conducted in this thesis is based on a mixed-method approach, consistent of a case study at a Scandinavian construction company that included 23 semi-structured interviews and a survey with 45 respondents. The findings underscore the importance of setting clear expectations, maintaining consistent and transparent communication, and establishing boundaries to ensure effective leadership in remote or hybrid settings. Many of the participant emphasise the continued need for social interaction and trusting relationships, in spite of the physical distances. Both for continued engagement in teams and for overall wellbeing and a functioning work-life balance. The study concludes that successful remote leadership demands a conscious, flexible approach that is supported by digital tools, regular routines, and individualised strategies. Finally, some practical recommendations are presented, based on participant input and literature findings, to support leadership development in project-based organisations, working in a hybrid environment.

Keywords: leadership, remote work, hybrid work, project-based organisation, construction



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Ellie Byström & Matilda Nivemark |  
Gothenburg, May 2025



# Glossary

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Svenska</b>
<b>PBO</b>	Project-Based Organisation	Projektbaserad organisation
<b>SDT</b>	Self-Determination Theory	Motivation genom självbestämmande
<b>OCB</b>	Organisational Citizenship Behaviours	Organisatoriska medborgarskapsbeteenden
<b>HR</b>	Human Resources	Personalresurser
<b>GDPR</b>	General Data Protection Regulation	Dataskyddsförordningen
<b>AI</b>	Artificial intelligence	Artificiell intelligens

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# 1

## Introduction

The introduction chapter provides a background on remote and hybrid work in project-based organisations (PBOs), with a specific focus on feedback and difficult situations within these settings. A case study with a company has been used to highlight the issues presented within a project-based organisation in the field of construction. It then presents the aim of the report, the research questions, and the delimitations, followed by an overview of the structure.

### 1.1 Background

#### 1.1.1 Hybrid and Remote Work

In recent years, remote or hybrid work has become increasingly popular, with the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and driven by technical advancements (Venkatesh, 2020). The role of technology in our daily work context has become undeniable, and several organisations have moved towards almost entirely remote or virtual work. After the pandemic, many businesses in the construction industry have shifted their focus toward hybrid work, recognising it as a balanced approach that combines the benefits of remote work, such as increased productivity, reduced commutes, and better work-life balance, with the advantages of on-site collaboration (Kim et al., 2024). Some businesses also found that providing the option for remote work and a flexible hybrid model helped in attracting and retaining employees after the pandemic.

However, providing a balance between the physical and virtual elements of a new hybrid model is key in producing a work method that can sustain employee engagement and productivity whilst maintaining overall employee health (Zapata et al., 2024). Some elements in decision-making and overall organisational development still occur best in an on-site format, providing support for a hybrid method that combines flexible remote work with in-person interactions. To consider employee autonomy and personalised working methods is critical for the company to create a scheduling format that still recognises employees as individuals, physically and mentally, and adapts to the needs of different people.

### 1.1.2 Leadership in a Hybrid Setting

While remote work offers flexibility and additional opportunities, it can also involve unique difficulties for leadership (Shi et al., 2024). According to Martin et al. (2024), remote leadership faces six key challenges: structural limitations, constraints related to digital platforms, difficulties in communication and collaboration, social distancing, the balance between trust and control, and lastly, the challenge of the work environment, regarding mental health and work-life balance. To address these issues, leaders should aim to create clear policies, guidelines and communication strategies for behaviours and use that consider employees' needs and abilities in remote work settings. These strategies should also align with the organisation's developmental requirements, both in terms of production goals and employee growth. Investing in education, training and fit-for-purpose technology, along with well-structured and user-friendly IT systems, are other ways that a leader could influence the performance of a remote team. Additionally, incorporating social interactions beyond work-related tasks can foster employee engagement in remote teams. Encouraging self-leadership and distributed responsibility allows employees to take initiative in process development, particularly during virtual activities, further enhancing motivation and collaboration (Martin, et al., 2024).

Similarly, Forslund (2019) discusses several specific challenges that leaders must address when managing virtual teams. Including electronic communication difficulties, the risk of technological inadequacies, decreased employee engagement due to physical distance, and the potential for favouritism. When some team members work remotely while others remain in a shared physical workspace, there is a heightened risk that information exchange occurs locally, excluding off-site employees. The author noted that leaders must be aware of these issues to avoid undermining the already fragile basis of trust within remote teams. One strategy to strengthen trust is to hold one or more in-person meetings at the start of a project, even if the team will primarily work remotely. Additionally, fostering independent decision-making and autonomy is crucial. If a team requires constant instruction from a leader, they may not be well-suited for a hybrid or fully remote work environment

### 1.1.3 Project-Based Organisations

The Project Management Institute defines a project as a “temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result” (Project Management Institute, 2017, p. 4). Organisations that structure their work primarily around projects are typically referred to as project-based firms (Lindkvist, 2004). While this project-based approach allows for flexibility, it also brings the risk of fragmentation. When projects operate independently, different functions within the organisation can become disconnected, leading to a loss of overall coherence, both in a remote and on-site capacity. This disconnection can create challenges for learning and development across the entire company. Managing a project-based firm can be difficult, particularly due to the high level of autonomy and governance granted to each project structure

(Lindkvist, 2004). There has been limited research published on the effects of hybrid work structures on project-based organisations as a whole, offering a gap for additional resources.

Construction is no exception to these complications as the industry is dominated by project-based productions (Vrijhoef & Koskela, 2005). One-off productions of projects are a frequent occurrence, and ever-changing coalitions of firms are not out of the ordinary. These fragmentations of the industry have influenced the managerial aspect of construction. According to the Project Management Institute (2017), project managers are responsible for creating an environment that fosters teamwork and supports the team's development through motivation and guidance. Additionally, a project manager must consider the broader context of their team's environment, acknowledging the challenges related to knowledge sharing and people integration, especially in large, cross-functional projects. When planning for communication and knowledge management, it's also essential to consider the involvement of multiple organisations or departments (Project Management Institute, 2017).

#### 1.1.4 Company Collaboration

The study is conducted in collaboration with a leading construction and civil engineering company that operates within a project-based structure, offering a practical context to complement academic perspectives. This partnership provides additional data for a more comprehensive understanding of both theoretical and applied approaches to leadership in a hybrid work setting. In collaboration with the Department of Infrastructure at the case company, the study explores leadership practices within a large organisational setting that continuously operates in a hybrid format. It also examines how leadership adapts to project structures that evolve over time, ensuring that the findings are reflective of the dynamic nature of project-based industries. Overall, the collaboration with the case company enhances the relevance of the research and contributes to the development of effective leadership strategies in hybrid work environments.

## 1.2 Aim

This thesis aims to investigate the leadership challenges that can arise in hybrid work environments, with a particular focus on how they manifest within PBOs. Using a case company from the construction sector, the study explores context-specific challenges that are likely relevant to similar organisations. Special focus is given to the management of conversations that are presumed to be more complex in a remote setting, namely, feedback and conflict resolution. Ultimately, the study seeks to identify and analyse the obstacles leaders face when managing dispersed teams and to explore strategies for effectively addressing them in a hybrid context. As hybrid work models become increasingly common, understanding the unique leadership challenges

they present is essential for ensuring effective team management, communication, and long-term organisational performance.

### 1.2.1 Research Questions

The following three research questions have been formulated to investigate the aim of the report. The first question regards the challenges of remote work, within the case organisation, as experienced by employees in different roles and levels in a hybrid work setting. The second research question explores how the project-based nature of the organisation influences the occurrence of feedback and conflict resolution challenges in hybrid teams. These challenges are addressed separately from those in the first research question, as their connection to the project-based context is of particular relevance to this study.

*RQ1: What are the primary leadership challenges faced in managing hybrid teams within a project-based construction organisation, and how do these challenges manifest in practice?*

*RQ2: In what ways do issues related to feedback and conflict resolution emerge in hybrid teams operating in a project-based organisation?*

Building on the insights gained from the first two questions, the third research question shifts the focus from identifying challenges to exploring how they can be addressed within the case company. Specifically, it examines whether any mitigation efforts have already been implemented and considers how further improvements might enhance performance, coherence, and communication in remote or hybrid work teams.

*RQ3: What strategies can be implemented within the case company to mitigate the identified challenges in hybrid work environments?*

## 1.3 Delimitations

This study is primarily focused on the leadership challenges experienced within a single organisation, and as such, the results may be limited in their generalisation to other organisations or industries. The company operates across Scandinavia; however, this study will specifically focus on its operations within Sweden. This may limit its relevance for other regions. Nevertheless, the literature encompasses a wider geographical area, which can, to some extent, strengthen its applicability.

Furthermore, the scope of the research is limited to the leadership aspects most frequently faced by a selected group of participants. As a result, it may not encompass the full spectrum of challenges that may arise in similar settings. The study's ability to explore strategies for effectively managing the identified challenges is highly dependent on the specific challenges uncovered and the extent to which leaders can

influence them. The interview and survey participants encompass a variety of roles and levels available within the company, although not equally dispersed and where not every role is accounted for.

The aim is to analyse and interpret the findings and propose recommendations to handle the discovered challenges. The intention is not to implement any new structures or to research their effectiveness. Lastly, it is valuable to note that the circumstances regarding remote work are ever-changing, with new technical solutions being invented, entailing that some of the results of this report may not be applicable in the future. The time frame in which data is collected and analysed is restricted from January to May 2025.

## 1.4 Sustainability

This thesis explores leadership challenges in hybrid work settings within a project-based construction organisation, a context that is increasingly relevant to sustainability transitions in the built environment. Remote and hybrid work models have the potential to reduce environmental impact by limiting commuting and office-related energy consumption. Social sustainability is also addressed through the study's focus on inclusive communication and fair leadership practices, which promote well-being and engagement across dispersed teams. Economically, the findings may support more resilient and efficient organisational practices by identifying leadership strategies that maintain productivity and collaboration without relying on constant physical presence. The research contributes to the broader shift toward sustainable organisational practices in the construction industry.

## 1.5 Report Structure

This report begins with an introduction that presents the background, objectives, and scope of the report. This is followed by a methodology section describing the approaches, tools, and processes used to collect and analyse data, with a focus on transparency and reproducibility. The theoretical chapter provides an overview of relevant theories and prior research to establish a foundation for the following sections. Furthermore, the two results sections present the collected findings in a structured manner, supported where necessary by visual aids. These findings are then analysed in the discussion chapter, where connections are made to the objectives and prior research, while also addressing the implications of the findings and any potential limitations. Finally, the conclusion summarises the key insights and provides recommendations for practical applications as well as suggestions for further research. This structure ensures that the report is logically organised and easy to follow.



# 2

## Methodology

The following chapter introduces the chosen methodology for the thesis, entailing how data was gathered, analysed, and interpreted. Commencing with a general overview of the research methodology and approach, accompanied by an explanation of how the interviews were conducted and how the survey was designed and implemented. Lastly, adherence and consideration of ethical standards are discussed, followed by a critical reflection on the chosen method.

### 2.1 Research Process

The research utilised a mixed-methods approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods, in the form of interviews and surveys (Bryman, 2016). The qualitative aspects created favourable conditions for a thorough investigation of the complex themes, such as leadership challenges, behaviours, and perceptions in a remote environment. The interviews were conducted with individuals within the case organisation, gaining personalised and specific results, which may catch nuances overlooked by the surveys. Moreover, the quantitative method provided measurable data, enabling the identification of trend patterns and assessment of the generality of perceptions, granted by the wider distribution of surveys across a larger participant pool. As such, a mixed method allowed for depth and range, offering an extensive understanding of the subject, which is appropriate when addressing a complex topic, such as leadership challenges in a hybrid setting (Bryman, 2016).

The process was initiated with a literature review adhering to an abductive research approach, where relevant scholarly literature was investigated in parallel to interviews and a survey. Contributing to a more comprehensive analysis of the challenges of remote work at the company, while also constituting the base for formulation of the research objectives and questions for the interviews and survey. Upon finalising the interview guides, the data collection was initiated with selected participants within the organisation. Thereafter, the interview data was transcribed, and its contents were analysed using thematic and narrative analysis to identify recurring themes and noteworthy stories. The survey data was examined through statistical methods to discover generalisations across the organisation. Finally, the qualitative and quantitative findings were compared and synthesised to answer the aim and subsequently draw conclusions for improved actions to address the found challenges.

### 2.2 Literature Review

Leadership is a topic that is discussed at great length in various settings. It covers a lot of topics such as leadership styles, effective practices and how to adapt these across different industries and in varying organisational structures. Remote work has also been extensively studied before, and there has been an especially large pool of data since the pandemic. The impact remote work has on, for example, communication, team dynamics and engagement are all topics that have been researched previously. However, the consequences of leadership in a remote setting do not seem to have been researched to such an extent within project-based organisations, and more specifically, not in the construction sector. By taking a stand in literature on leadership and management processes, specific challenges were identified within the studied company, and a narrower approach specified. Particularly aspects that address challenging leadership situations, such as conflict management and handling constructive feedback, are areas that have not been widely explored. This study intends to fill these gaps by investigating the challenges leaders face in remote or hybrid settings within the context of a construction company.

To gather relevant literature for this study, a comprehensive search was conducted using multiple academic databases and search engines. Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Scopus were key resources for finding peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and industry reports related to leadership, remote work, and project-based organisations. When possible, the resources were tailored to the construction sector, but often they provide a broader management concept that has been adapted to the constraints of this report.

### 2.3 Interview Study

The interviews were semi-structured and conducted with key personnel in the case organisation, both project managers, team leaders, and employees, to explore leadership challenges in a virtual setting while gaining insights into the interviewees' personal experiences. The semi-structured format was chosen for offering flexibility while also maintaining consistency for comparability across participants (Bryman, 2016). Allowing for a deeper exploration of unexpected topics and the possibility for elaboration on specific experiences. The participants were randomly selected using convenience sampling, meaning easily accessible participants, utilising a list of potential participants provided by the case company's Human Resources (HR) Department. The selection was based on the criteria of administrative employment at the company, regardless of their current remote or in-person context. Some attention was given to ensuring that a variety of roles and responsibilities were represented. Presuming that all personnel working an office job have some virtual interactions and previous remote work experience, especially during the pandemic. All potential interviewees were contacted via email with information regarding the study's purpose,

participation requirements, and ethical considerations; it was noted that participation in the interview was entirely voluntary. The sample size came to 23 interview participants, which was deemed sufficient, especially given the inclusion of a supplementary survey study.

The interview questions were designed based on emerging and recurring themes in the literature review on remote leadership, as outlined in the following section. They were tailored to align with the research questions and further redefined through discussion with the academic supervisor. The interview question guide can be found in Appendix A. The interviews were mainly conducted online via Microsoft Teams, with three interviews occurring in person at the case company's office in Gothenburg. They took place between March and April 2025, with each interview lasting approximately forty minutes. The list of participants and their roles, as well as the location and date of each interview, is presented in the table below. The interviews were recorded and transcribed at the time of conduction using the built-in AI technology in Microsoft Teams, with verbal consent from the participants. The interviewees were informed that they are free to withdraw their consent at any time, without providing a reason, until the thesis is published. The interview data will be stored in Google Drive, and while the specific security measures of the software are not verified, the accessibility is limited to authorised individuals only. Additional steps were taken to guarantee confidentiality throughout the theses, anonymising personal identifiers and linking quotations solely with the labels outlined below, which correspond to the interviewees' role within the company. The anonymisation of interviewees also allowed for the ability to freely express their concerns and opinions.

**Table 1.** List of interview participants and their roles within the company, including date and format of the interview.

Label	Date	Format
<b>Operational Units</b>		
<i><b>Regional Manager (RM)</b></i>		
RM 1	2025-03-21	Online
<i><b>Operations Manager (OM)</b></i>		
OM 1	2025-02-26	Online
OM 2	2025-03-06	Online
OM 3	2025-03-12	Online
OM 4	2025-03-13	Online
OM 5	2025-03-26	In person
<i><b>Project Manager (PM)</b></i>		
PM 1	2025-02-24	Online
PM 2	2025-02-28	Online
PM 3	2025-03-05	Online
PM 4	2025-03-12	Online
<i><b>Project Engineer (PE)</b></i>		
PE 1	2025-02-28	Online
PE 2	2025-03-05	Online
PE 3	2025-03-12	Online
PE 4	2025-03-20	Online
<i><b>Site Supervisor (SS)</b></i>		
SS 1	2025-02-26	Online
SS 2	2025-03-12	Online
<b>Support Functions</b>		
<i><b>Administrative Roles (AR), like HR, Finance, and Purchasing</b></i>		
AR 1	2025-03-06	Online
AR 2	2025-03-14	Online
AR 3	2025-03-17	In person
AR 4	2025-03-18	Online
AR 5	2025-03-19	Online
AR 6	2025-03-19	In person
AR 7	2025-03-26	Online

## 2.4 Survey Study

A survey was distributed within the organisation to collect data on communication and collaboration in remote environments, alongside perceived leadership effectiveness and associated challenges. The survey offered an opportunity to research different attitudes and opinions across subdivisions within the Department of Infrastructure at the case company, with added anonymity and convenience. Both employees with and without a managerial title were asked and encouraged to respond to gather insights into leadership at different positions within the company, as well as with different levels of influence. By reaching out to as many individuals as possible within the organisation, the increased volume of empirical data enabled more accurate conclusions to be drawn both within and across projects and subdivisions. The surveys were completely anonymous, allowing for unrestricted expression of opinions. The survey data was obtained from 45 individuals, and no one that partook in the interviews was included.

The layout of the survey questionnaire was designed to cover a variety of question structures. Some answers were provided with a Likert scale, whilst others offered a multiple-choice answer with the possibility for respondents to add options if necessary. The number of open-ended questions was limited for the data to be easily readable and adapted to statistics, while still allowing for commentary from respondents. The open-ended questions were offered as optional, follow-up alternatives to allow for a broader understanding of the subject.

Before the survey was sent out to participants at the company, it was sent out to a small group of test subjects who could give feedback on its readability and structure. These test subjects work in a hybrid environment and while their answers were not included on the final report their assistance helped to ensure a more valid response from the surveys distributed within the case company and to gather insights into how the survey could be better adapted to give answers related to the research question. With this method and in consultation with the supervisor of this report, the survey was refined, and the final format can be found in Appendix B.

## 2.5 Empirical Analysis

Given the dual data collection methods of interviews and a survey study, the analysis incorporates both qualitative and quantitative approaches. These are described separately below to ensure clarity in methodology and interpretation.

### 2.5.1 Qualitative Analysis

The analysis of the data collected from the interviews and open-ended questions of the survey study followed a qualitative thematic approach to recognise recurring themes and patterns within the data (Bryman, 2012). Systematic and categorised coding

ensured that the analysis process of the collected data was structured and transparent. An abductive coding process was employed to investigate pre-determined key themes identified in the literature review, while also allowing new themes to emerge organically (Thompson, 2022). This approach blends both theory-driven and data-driven methods, drawing on elements from both deductive and inductive coding. Furthermore, a narrative approach was used to complement the data by providing illustrative and noteworthy examples as given by participants (Bryman, 2012). This approach enables individual experiences and perspectives to provide deeper insights, which aim to capture the complexity of the research objectives. The interview data was manually colour coded in Google Docs and transferred to a Google Sheets to support the analysis. This aided the categorisation and visualisation of the large set of data. The interviews were independently coded by the two authors to enhance the reliability of the analysis.

### 2.5.2 Quantitative Analysis

For quantitative data provided by the survey study, a statistical analysis was instead adopted to identify trends, patterns, and relationships among the responses. The survey was created and distributed via Google Forms, which provided a basic statistical summary of the collected data. These findings were then thoroughly reviewed to ensure reliability and validity. All survey questions, except the open-ended ones, were mandatory to minimise missing data and enhance consistency between responses. The results are primarily presented using percentages to illustrate response distributions. Where relevant, the results from the quantitative analysis were compared with the qualitative findings to identify converging and diverging areas, thus contributing to a more comprehensive analysis of the topic.

## 2.6 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted with careful attention to ethical considerations. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were respected throughout the study, ensuring transparency and clarity. Appropriate measures were implemented to maintain secure data handling, and informed consent was obtained from all participants, as previously outlined. Although no significant ethical issues were identified for this project, it was crucial to acknowledge that ethical concerns might have arisen within certain topics discussed. For example, Martin et al. (2024) discussed issues of balancing trust and control in remote leadership settings. As authors, we wish to emphasise that we do not intend to infringe upon anyone's privacy or interfere with the company's internal control measures, nor do we aim to impact the trust between employees and leaders.

In the context of this report, artificial intelligence (AI) tools have been used to aid in the writing process, specifically in improving sentence structure, generating ideas, and providing suggestions for clearer communication. These are, for example, ChatGPT

and Grammarly. However, whilst these tools may have enhanced the clarity of text, careful considerations have been made to ensure that the results are something that the authors can stand by and that convey accurate facts. In terms of critical thinking or academic originality, no concepts have been introduced by AI tools that have not been critically examined by the authors to ensure that no plagiarism or wrongful depiction of facts has been made. This is to make sure that the contents of this report accurately reflect our understanding of the subject and remain reliable and original.

In the process of transcribing interview data, all form of open-source AI is avoided to protect the integrity and anonymity of the participants. All transcription has been made using integrated functions in Microsoft Teams, supported by manual correction. The information shared with any other source has been made anonymous to ensure that the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is thoroughly followed. Instead of using AI for coding, digital tools provided by Google, such as Docs, Sheets, and Forms, were utilised for their respective functions in manually sorting and analysing data throughout the process.

## 2.7 Discussion of the Methodology

The chosen methodological approach, which combines both qualitative and quantitative data collection, contributes to a thorough analysis of the thesis's research objectives of remote work leadership. The qualitative aspects, including interviews and optional open-ended survey responses, contribute to exhaustive insights into personal experiences, capturing nuances that might be missed in a strict quantitative approach. In contrast, the quantitative survey data facilitate recognition of patterns and wider generalisability among a broader audience. Despite the dual methodology's strengths, several limitations must be considered. While interviews, especially in a semi-structured format, offer flexibility in gathering rich data, they also introduce challenges regarding replicability. Additionally, interviewer bias could reduce the data's objectivity by unconsciously influencing the responses. The interview's limited anonymity could further make participants feel uncomfortable in sharing sensitive or personal information, reducing the data richness.

Interviews and surveys are subject to response bias, where interviewees may answer in a manner deemed socially acceptable or avoid affirming negative information. Sample size is another factor to consider. A very small pool could generate unreliable results, while a large sample size instead increases time for coding and analysis. Although unlikely in this case, increasing sample size indefinitely is unrealistic. Moreover, the data interpretation can be affected by the researcher's background and expectations, thus, subjectivity is mitigated by dual coders. Language barriers may cause inaccuracies and misinterpretations in the data. Finally, sampling bias can impact the sampling pool selection, where certain population members are more likely to be chosen, inducing skewness.

A key limitation in a survey is the questionnaire design, where ambiguous or leading questions may invoke misinterpretation and thus inaccurate or inconsistent responses. Lengthy or complex surveys could affect answer quality and completion rates, especially if certain groups are less inclined to respond, causing non-response bias. Such a group could be those with negative experiences, resulting in a lack of representation and asymmetry.

The overall study limitations could be attributed to the size of the case study, where one company may limit generalisability. However, due to the large company and vastness of data collection, combined with literature across various industries and countries, the results are possibly applicable on a broader scale. Nevertheless, the range of literature could conflict with the context of this report, which focuses on a Swedish construction company. Furthermore, the magnitude of issues brought forth by the literature is impossible to address thoroughly within the report's allotted time. Yet, the overall findings contribute to research within remote leadership, particularly in the construction industry.

Information about formal leadership roles and titles were included in both the interview and survey questions but due to time and scope constraints these topics have not been further investigated in this research. The chosen method has provided data that could support such investigations and give an indication of attitudes across different roles if one would have the time to delve deeper into the subject.

The choices made in terms of methodology directly impact the depth and scope of the study findings. The combination of interviews and surveys provided a nuanced understanding of remote work leadership. However, given the limited sample size, the findings should be interpreted with vigilance, especially if applied beyond the studied context. As such, future research could strengthen the study by incorporating a larger-scale survey across different organisations and countries or studying a larger time span to track changes over time.

# 3

## Theoretical Background

The following chapter presents the theoretical background relevant to the research questions. It provides an overview of leadership practices and examines the implications of operating in a hybrid work setting to deepen the understanding of these topics. Furthermore, it explores issues and insights from previous literature on related subjects, offering a foundation for the analysis in later chapters.

### 3.1 Leadership Theories and Styles

As mentioned in the introductory section of this report, leadership at a distance poses unique leader challenges (Shi et al., 2024; Forslund, 2019). Forslund (2019) discusses the need for leaders to create trust and support independent work where possible for a remote team to work optimally. However, the author also brings forth the idea that not all types of leadership are meant for a remote or virtual situation. For example, if the group requires more of an instructional leadership that guides them more closely, the group might not be able to adapt as well as others to a remote working environment. In the following rubrics, two different leadership styles will be highlighted and their theoretical relationship to a remote or hybrid workplace will be introduced. These are not the only ones applicable, but they highlight aspects that can be important for a leader to consider in a hybrid or remote team.

#### 3.1.1 Transformational Leadership

A large theoretical standpoint on leadership is the transformational leadership and its counterpart, transactional leadership (Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2010). From a leadership perspective, one is not excluding the presence of the other, but they work in different ways. The transactional leadership is aimed at speaking to an individual's self-interest and a transactional exchange of work for compensation, often in monetary terms (Yukl, 2012). This form of leadership does not necessarily mean that the employees are engaged or enthusiastic about their work. Creating motivation and engagement is, however, a strategy that transformational leadership is more inclined to use. By making employees aware of the importance of the task at hand and creating an environment where they are more driven by the groups or organisations' success than self-interest, the transformational leadership creates an environment where employees feel more trust, admiration, loyalty and respect for their leader and as such perform on a higher level. As mentioned above, these two concepts can be successfully

utilised in union to create an effective leadership style. However, the effect of including a transformative approach increases motivation and ultimately results (Yukl, 2012).

Transformational leadership, while often considered a face-to-face interaction, can also occur at a distance, especially in today's increasingly digital and geographically dispersed work environments (Forslund, 2019). However, Forslund (2019) argue that this mode of leadership presents unique challenges, as leaders must find ways to inspire, motivate, and foster commitment among subordinates despite physical separation. Boccoli et al., (2024) suggest in their research that traits of transformational leaders can still be perceived positively by their colleagues, whilst remaining at a physical distance. Their results indicated that the supportive behaviours of a transformational leadership style were well regarded by their subordinates and that the overall quality of the relationships between leader and subordinate does not necessarily need to decrease in quality due to distance. When a leader engages in motivating behaviours and inspires their teams, they can continue working on their shared goals while on a distance. Constructive feedback and providing a positive outlook on the future are also factors that a remote transformational leader should consider for a successful interaction (Boccoli et al., 2024).

#### 3.1.2 Situational Leadership

When working with a geographically dispersed team, another effective model to consider could be situational leadership (Alzate Restrepo et al., 2024). Alzate Restrepo et al. (2024) concluded that the principles of situational leadership can be applied in both traditional and virtual team settings, provided they are properly adapted to the team's needs and maturity level. Situational leadership is a flexible leadership model that argues that an effective leadership approach adapts to the situation in which it is used and to the readiness of the follower (Waller et al., 1989). To adapt, consider both the capacity and capabilities of the team, but also the willingness to attain goals and accept responsibility. Shifting towards situational leadership provides the leader with the flexibility and autonomy to meet team members at their respective levels and assign tasks that match their capacity (Alzate Restrepo et al., 2024). For teams spread across different locations, where some members work remotely more frequently than others, situational leadership proves effective in both on-site and distributed contexts. This adaptability is especially beneficial in hybrid settings and within organisations working with mixed teams. Such an approach can meet both the demands of the task and foster the professional and personal development of employees, provided the leader tailors their style to the specific needs of the team and the situation. When applied correctly, situational leadership is essential in supporting effective, communicative teams that perform on a high level (Alzate Restrepo et al., 2024).

Overall, a situational leadership approach that considers the individual differences within the workforce has a positive impact on both work motivation and job satisfaction (Aslam et al., 2022), two areas that will be discussed further below. It can

also foster trust and respect within teams, something that leaders must consider when managing both remote and on-site teams. Adopting a situational leadership style can motivate employees to complete their tasks with enthusiasm and achieve success and by incorporating situational elements, leaders can build teams that are not only committed to their work but also capable of formulating a shared vision for their goals and being mindful of the risks in their work environment (Aslam et al., 2022).

## 3.2 Communication in Remote and Hybrid Work

One of the most important skills of a leader when working with remote or hybrid teams is the communication proficiency of said leader (Amorim, et al., 2023). In a project-based organisation, the communication aspect also becomes critical, and where teams work together remotely, the digital aspects further amplify the need for skilful communication. It is a skill required of a leader to increase a remote team's effectiveness and productivity (Amorim, et al., 2023).

Management plays a crucial role in shaping employee performance, behaviour, and overall well-being, areas where effective communication can have a significant impact (Aslam et al., 2022). Job satisfaction and motivation among team members are also closely linked to transparent and open communication channels, ensuring that managers can effectively engage employees across different locations and roles (Aslam et al., 2022; Ding et al., 2024). The complexity of a remote team in the construction sector further highlights the need for strong communication channels to ensure the success of the team and bridge the gaps in a cross-functional setting (Kim et al., 2024).

With the emergence of new and faster digital technologies, there is a risk for employees in all work settings to experience what is known as information overload (Smith & Mounter, 2007). There might be an expectation for instant responses when communicating online, which puts extra requirements on the information to be direct and to the point. The quantity of information received by people in management positions poses a challenge (Klus & Müller, 2021). The possibility to transmit vast amounts of information in a short timespan through electronic channels creates the need for management to properly organise and distribute tasks amongst personnel to effectively utilise the data given. Strong organisational skills can mitigate the perceived issues of information overload (Klus & Müller, 2021), but the challenge remains that communication frequency and quantity are often bad for an individual's well-being (Shockley et al., 2021). Whilst information frequency correlates positively to performance, it is unlikely that the benefits from a small gain in performance outweighs the risks of increased burnout over time. Shifting the focus from information quantity to information quality in communication channels can be favourable for both performance and burnout (Shockley et al., 2021).

In partially remote or hybrid settings there is the risk of geographically distant members of the team not sharing the same level of communication as those that might

collocate at some points of the process (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021). Members in such mixed teams may experience friction due to these differences in communication and that may in turn be affecting performance negatively. Challenges in communication can also arise from the differences in non-verbal cues given during face-to-face interactions and in remote settings (Lee, 2021). Virtual team members can miss out on facial expressions, body language, gestures, as well as tonality, inflections and social interactions that are all part of collocated communication. It is especially important to consider these factors when it comes to written communication, as this form of communication has little to no possibility of conveying non-verbal cues. Posing a very real risk of misinterpretation to occur, which in some cases could further damage virtual teams (Lee, 2021). One area in which the lack of body language perception could specifically hinder the management of a team is when it comes to giving and receiving feedback (Manuel & Mabaso, 2024). Here, there is a risk of managers being dissuaded from providing feedback entirely due to their inability to properly read the reactions and non-verbal cues given by a colleague.

Integrating communication training and problem-solving as a part of the routine for an organisation could help to accomplish more effective communication within teams (Sagar et al., 2021). Training programs on how to maintain open communication in virtual or hybrid teams can also be beneficial for managers in remote scenarios (Van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2022). Allowing for an open channel approach can facilitate daily interactions between employees and, in turn, prevent individuals from feeling deprived of social interaction (Van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2022). It is, in addition to the efforts mentioned above, also important to discuss expectations when it comes to communication (Shockley et al., 2021). To set adequate expectations of communication quantity is important when it comes to building high-quality relationships and exchanges where both the social and work-related needs of everyone are considered. This goes for both those in a managerial or leadership role as well as for those in a subordinate position (Shockley et al., 2021). Another effort is to work with virtual tools in an effective manner, utilising videoconferencing where possible to allow for visual connections to be made and for managers to observe the reactions and non-verbal cues given by colleagues (Manuel & Mabaso, 2024).

#### 3.2.1 Technology and Digital Tools

If there is no possibility for a physical meeting, the gap needs to be bridged using technological tools and aids (Gustavsson, 2011). Although the technology does not provide any guarantees for the meeting's success rate, it becomes a condition of their existence. A group phone call or video chat makes it possible for a live interaction to occur. However, the technology might be insufficient or malfunctioning, leading to other complications and delays to occur during the get-together (Forslund, 2019). Team members may choose a tool they are familiar with, but some technologies are more suitable for certain things, and choosing the incorrect one could imply issues (Youssef et al., 2023). Various communication technologies offer different benefits,

where one is information-rich and able to transmit nonverbal cues, while others are quick and easy. The intricacy of a team's communication requirements also varies, as such, the delivery method should be decided based on the objective.

To allow for openness and inclusivity, the entire team should be included in critical communications and decisions (Youssef et al., 2023). The team can outline terms for collaboration, which technologies are used in specific situations, standard forms, expected reaction time for requests, and communication categories to be shared with everyone. One way of managing group meetings in a remote capacity is by forming certain group rules that could apply to this specific setting (Gustavsson, 2011). By forming a standard protocol of having a moderator controlling the agenda and order of speakers, interruptions could be mitigated, and everyone could get a chance to get their opinion heard. By using tools that can either integrate document sharing or a chat function, issues with misunderstandings and miscommunications could possibly be mended.

### 3.3 Team Dynamics and Collaboration

An important aspect of the work environment, that influences a team's commitment to achieving organisational goals, is group dynamics (Pianese et al., 2023). According to Pianese et al. (2023) the group dynamics include a job dimension, in their words, "having trustworthy and competent colleagues", and an emotional dimension, i.e. feeling a connection to the team and the organisation. In both a remote and an on-site setting, the manager oversaw fostering trustworthy relationships within a team and, as such, contributing to the feeling of a better work environment. Overall, an organisation is responsible for implementing structures that encourage social interactions and the overall establishment of shared norms, values and beliefs amongst a remote team. These interventions by the organisation and management can ensure coherence and consistency in behaviours in a team and positively impact the overall perceived dynamic (Pianese et al., 2023).

The shift towards a more virtual setting has shifted the traditional concepts of collaboration, communication and performance of a team, creating an overall shift in team dynamics (Yasmee et al., 2024). By replacing the face-to-face interactions with virtual meetings, emails, and other online messaging tools, team dynamics and management styles must adapt to keep up with the changes (Kilpatrick & Bilderback, 2024). Building a strong team within a virtual environment can be challenging for project managers who need to do so with limited power and control (Lee, 2021). However, having a virtual team is by no means entirely negative. A well-managed virtual team with a proper collaboration tool can outperform an on-site team as well as achieve an improvement in employee productivity (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021).

### 3.3.1 Conflict Management and Emotional Intelligence

Within the context of remote work, emotional intelligence has become an increasingly important factor that impacts individual performance and team dynamics as well as the overall success of the organisational (Yasmeen et al, 2024). The definition of emotional intelligence is the capability to recognise and manage your own emotions and understand those of others. In doing so, it enhances interpersonal relationships and encourages effective communication within a team. The authors argue that given the limited face-to-face interactions in a remote environment, the potential for miscommunication and misunderstandings is heightened. Emotional intelligence can overcome this by fostering a supportive atmosphere where the emotional cues of others are recognised, and the vocalisation of their needs is enabled. It can further bridge gaps, build trust, and encourage empathy.

The study by Yasmeen et al. (2024) found compelling connections between emotional intelligence, virtual work dynamics and team collaboration. It was also found that it is linked to enhancing leadership effectiveness, particularly in remote environments. Research indicates that higher emotional intelligence in teams positively impacts their ability to navigate remote work challenges, like feelings of isolation, reduced morale, and miscommunication. Organisations can foster a more harmonious and productive environment, which in turn will enhance communication and collaboration. Yasmeen et al. (2024) further stated that by integrating training programs aimed at emotional intelligence, effective communication, and conflict resolution, companies can increase overall employee satisfaction and engagement. Additionally, creating a culture that values adaptability and resilience is crucial in the complex environment of remote work, encouraging collaboration, feedback, and shared decision-making. The authors suggest regular workshops and team-building activities to enforce these skills and create interpersonal connections. Continuously assessing and redefining leadership practices will ensure alignment with evolving demands. Emotional intelligence was established to be a strong predictor of success, not only for operational effectiveness, but also for continuous success in the future in a broadening competitive landscape.

## 3.4 Employee Engagement and Motivation

Motivation is defined as the process that determines an individual's degree of focus, intensity, and perseverance when working towards achieving a set goal (Judge & Robbins, 2012). There are multiple theories on motivation, one of which is the self-determination theory (SDT), which argues that people prefer to feel in control over their actions, meaning that anything that shifts a previously pleasurable task to be perceived as an obligation, rather than an actively chosen task, will erode motivation. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations formulate the basis of SDT and drive behaviours. Intrinsic motivation is driven by internal rewards like enjoyment and satisfaction of personal growth, whereas extrinsic motivation is guided by external rewards like pay, recognition, or avoiding punishment. Kilpatrick and Bilderback (2024) underlined the

weight of promoting intrinsic motivations by supplying workers with autonomy, growth opportunities, and meaningful feedback, especially in a remote work setting where sustaining motivations can be demanding. Furthermore, the goal-setting theory emphasises the significance of setting clear, specific, and challenging goals to foster motivation and performance (Judge & Robbins, 2012). Simply stating a goal like “doing your best” is insufficient as it lacks clarity, making it difficult to determine what “you best” entails or to determine when the goal is reached. Kilpatrick and Bilderback (2024) stated that effective virtual leaders should set clear expectations for their teams to succeed.

Another theory is that of self-management, which is more a motivational technique than a management or leadership style (Yukl, 2012). Self-management involves creating strategies for an individual to better influence and affect their work and behaviours. By taking responsibility for their success, they become less dependent on a guiding or motivating leader. A leader’s role in this process can be to foster such behaviours, particularly when a subordinate lacks intrinsic motivation. This can be achieved by teaching self-management strategies or serving as a role model for effective practices. Yukl (2012) notes that when subordinates perceive themselves as more autonomous and actively engaged in their roles, they tend to contribute more to the team effort and work more efficiently.

Job engagement, which refers to the investment of an employee’s physical, cognitive, and emotional energy into their job, is pivotal in motivation (Judge & Robbins, 2012). Studies show that companies with highly engaged employees are more successful compared to those with disengaged teams, including increased productivity, reduced employee turnover, and safety incidents. A key factor to impact engagement is the extent to which the employee believes it is meaningful to engage in work, which is linked to job characteristics and access to adequate resources for efficient work. Alignment between the individual’s values and the organisational values also heightens engagement. The authors argue that leadership behaviours that inspire a strong sense of purpose also increase employee engagement. Several studies have indicated that situational leadership increases motivation in subordinates (Aslam et al, 2022). It inspires employees to complete their jobs successfully, vigorously and with devotion to their roles. Thus, better leadership is further linked to increased productivity. Additionally, studies have shown that recognition has a significant role in employee engagement, where an employee’s perception of recognition accounts for 56% of their overall work engagement (Lee, 2021). In a traditional work setting, recognition can take different forms, including a handshake, verbal thank you, celebratory lunch, or awards displayed in the office. In virtual environments, on the other hand, recognising employees’ contributions is more challenging, thereby increasing its significance.

In a remote work environment, digital presence has become an important indicator of involvement and commitment, shown by active participation in virtual meetings, timely communication, and task responsiveness (Kilpatrick & Bilderback, 2024).

However, the absence of physical interaction can result in feelings of isolation and disconnect, which sequentially affects employee engagement and motivation. To prevent this, organisations must actively foster a sense of community and connectedness in virtual settings. Creating opportunities for social interaction and team building, via regular virtual social events, recognition programs, and informal chat groups, can help maintain team cohesion and reinforce employees' engagement.

Robbins and Judge (2012), summarised five key factors for motivating employees, such as using firm and specific goals and following up with feedback on tasks performed, and linking rewards to performance. It is important to incorporate a system for equity where employees can perceive how certain traits and differences in performance are linked to rewards, like salary and job assignments. Furthermore, recognising individual differences, such as cultural differences, is crucial. Equally important is understanding what matters to each person to individualise goals and rewards, thereby maximising their motivational potential. Lastly, allowing employees to participate in decisions that impact them, for example, work goals, solving problems, or choosing benefit packages, can contribute to increased productivity, commitment, motivation, and job satisfaction. Lee (2021) further suggested that career development and a relationship with the manager is an important motivating factor that tends to engage employees.

#### 3.4.1 Performance Management and Feedback

With the shift towards remote and hybrid arrangements, organisations have had to reconsider their management and monitoring strategies (Kilpatrick & Bilderback, 2024). There is a strong consensus that performance management is a necessity, now more than ever (Manuel & Mabaso, 2024). Performance management should change towards an outcome-based objective, focusing on results over inputs and physical attendance. However, this transition introduces challenges for managers, as instead of overseeing the day-to-day activities, they now must track deliverables. Frequent check-ins, continuous performance feedback, and clear communication concerning expectations are valuable for maintaining productivity in virtual teams. Performance management ensures employees increase organisational value by working efficiently and focusing on the right goals and strategies (Kilpatrick & Bilderback, 2024). Moreover, performance appraisal affects employees' bonuses, salaries, and career progression, further warranting the re-evaluation of traditional performance management strategies to guarantee fairness. As a result, organisations have amended human resource practices, like hiring, training, and performance management, to comply with remote conditions. For onboarding in a virtual team, one strategy is to designate a mentor to the new employee, enabling a smooth transition, quicker understanding of the new environment and the possibility to ask questions (Sagar et al., 2021).

The lack of face-to-face interactions between employees and managers in a virtual work setting presents significant challenges (Sagar et al., 2021). Contrary to traditional working environments, managers cannot directly observe employee behaviours in a virtual environment, making trust an important mechanism for control and coordination. As such, one of the most considerable challenges managers encounter in remote working arrangements is balancing trust and control (Manuel & Mabaso, 2024). While optimal performance is governed by the managers' ability to trust and empower others, some workers expressed an increased disconnect from their managers or exaggerated micro-managing. Furthermore, trust is imperative for performance management, given that a strong subordinate-manager relationship induces higher satisfaction and acceptance of performance appraisals. The authors state that the likelihood of employees perceiving their evaluation as fair increases when the manager accurately comprehends their performance, takes an interest, and supports their development.

In addition to trust, a structured process for monitoring and accountability is important in a virtual setting (Lee, 2021). Managers must identify and document all changes to the project and provide clear guidance, organisation, and coordination to ensure progress is tracked efficiently. Frequent electronic project updates, weekly status meetings, and risk assessment updates assist project success. Another essential aspect of success is allowing for flexibility. A set of rules regarding attendance at meetings, consequences if not attending, and expectations for email and phone call response time needs to be set. Furthermore, constructing a system for members to report progress is a structured and measurable way to provide responsibility and accountability. Utilising a collaborative database for documentation and scheduling can further aid accountability and transparency. The accountability of a virtual team should align with that of a traditional team, the work should be completed within the deadline, scope, and quality standards. Project managers play a fundamental role in following up on missed deadlines and requesting consistent status reports.

Effective performance management requires good communication skills, especially active listening (Manuel & Mabaso, 2024). Managers must also be attentive to what is unsaid, as mentioned previously, one major challenge in remote environments is the limited ability to read body language, making delivering feedback more difficult. Video conferencing allows for visual connections, enabling managers to observe reactions, thus helping to bridge this gap. Research has revealed that video calls can be as effective as in-person interactions. Additionally, employees generally appreciate direct feedback on their performance, which enhances transparency and limits misunderstandings. When managers offer direct feedback, employees often feel more comfortable discussing encountered difficulties.

Performance management is evolving, shifting away from control and measurement towards frequent feedback (Manuel & Mabaso, 2024). Therefore, it should not be restrained to annual or bi-annual reviews but should be an evolving process with

continuous conversations about goals and progress, particularly in remote settings. Managers must establish performance management routines that encompass discussions with both individuals and teams. Furthermore, team meetings have proven to be an essential component in performance management, fostering unity, trust, and accountability while also contributing to a forum for members to communicate, collaborate, and provide feedback.

#### 3.4.2 Trust

Trust is an important aspect in teams for performance and productivity, regardless of an in-person, remote, or hybrid work setting (Sagar et al., 2021). It has been identified as crucial for effective communication, collaboration, project quality, and thus contributing to the success of construction projects (Pak & Afshari, 2023). Trust refers to the psychological state which allows a person to take a chance and be vulnerable to another in favour of having positive expectations of the outcome, despite a lack of control over the situation (Judge & Robbins, 2012). The concept is highly related to leadership and breaking it can have detrimental effects on group performance. A leader's task is in part to collaborate with people and solve problems, as such an important aspect is to gain knowledge of existing issues. Trust and trustworthiness regulate a leader's access to such information and cooperation.

Robbins and Judge (2012), found that trust between employees and supervisors has considerable advantages, like encouraging risk-taking, either on their own accord or on the supervisor's direction. Secondly, trust facilitates information sharing, creating a safe environment where opinions are respected and considered, and people are more willing to speak up. Trusting groups are more effective, deriving from trusting members' proneness to helping each other, which in turn facilitates increased trust. The opposite creates an environment of suspicion, which will ultimately destroy the group. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly for organisations, trust enhances productivity. Higher performance ratings are closely associated with the employee trusting the supervisor. Responses to mistrust are often information concealment and self-centred pursuits.

Trust holds a vital role in virtual-led teams, acting as a mediator for team collaboration (Greimel et al., 2023). While remote leaderships introduce unique challenges, research indicates no significant differences in trust levels between remote and in-person work settings, nor between culturally homogenous or heterogenous teams (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021). However, for virtual teams, trust is particularly affected by open communication behaviours, timely responses, and feedback. Contradicting to the research by Garro-Abarca et al. (2021), Sagar et al. (2021) indicate that virtual distance could decrease trust by as much as 83%, emphasising the heightened importance of trust-building strategies and proactive leadership. Thus, transformational leadership could play a critical role, as it generates higher grades of trust, increasing team confidence and ultimately team performance (Judge & Robbins, 2012).

Developing and maintaining trust remains one of online leaders' most challenging tasks (Judge & Robbins, 2012). Without face-to-face interactions, identification-based trust, mutual understanding of each other's intentions and desires, is especially hard to achieve. Cultural and language barriers can further complicate virtual interactions, leading to misunderstandings which undermine trust, cohesion, and team identity (Sagar et al., 2021).

### 3.5 Workplace Culture

The definition of workplace or organisational culture is a system of shared beliefs held by members of the organisation that differentiates one organisation from another (Judge & Robbins, 2012). Workplace culture can be defined using seven main characteristics, each of which can vary in degree, ranking from high to low. The first one is innovation and risk-taking, which reflects how strongly the organisation encourages innovative ideas and risky actions. The second is attention to detail, indicating the degree to which employees are expected to be analytical and detail oriented. Outcome orientation measures the manager's result orientation over the method used to achieve them. People orientation entails managers' consideration of employees in decision-making. Team orientation is the degree to which work activities are primarily structured around teams or individuals. Aggressiveness indicated the level of competitiveness within the organisation compared to a more easy-going approach. Finally, stability indicates the focus on maintaining current operations versus pursuing growth.

Remote work disrupts conventional concepts of autonomy and control, prompting a re-evaluation of organisational norms and values (Kilpatrick & Bilderback, 2024). The evolution of workplace presence subsequently changes the organisational culture, inducing a requirement for redefining what it means to be present, engaged, and productive. This affects performance measurement and reward systems, but also the cultivation of a sense of community and belonging among the employees. Sustaining a cohesive culture in a remote environment is difficult; the deficiency of shared physical space can hinder the development of a united organisational identity with common values. To overcome this, Kilpatrick and Bilderback (2024) suggested that companies need to articulate and intentionally reinforce their culture via clear communication, incorporating cultural values in policies and practices, and through leadership role modelling. Recurring virtual conference meetings, employee input opportunities, and transparent leadership communication help strengthen a sense of shared purpose and cultural solidarity.

Kilpatrick and Bilderback (2024) declared that leadership holds a significant position in fostering a positive remote work culture. Leaders of successful teams must adapt their management style to the demands of a remote environment while also prioritising empathy, trust, and flexibility. They should communicate clearly and consistently, set

clear expectations and provide support and necessary resources. Additionally, the leaders' model desired behaviours and attitudes, shaping a remote culture that appreciates responsiveness, accountability, and results rather than physical presence.

#### 3.5.1 Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is highly linked to organisational culture in the sense that it evaluates the employees' attitudes towards the organisation's set characteristics (Judge & Robbins, 2012). Job satisfaction is linked to several organisational attributes, including job performance, customer satisfaction, absenteeism, employee turnover, and workplace deviance. Satisfied workers are more inclined to be productive, while they also increase customer satisfaction and loyalty. Absenteeism is moderately but consistently linked to job satisfaction, where lower satisfaction with the job situation increases the possibility of absence from work. The connection with employee turnover is stronger than that of absenteeism but is likewise affected by the availability of alternative job prospects. Antagonistic relationships with coworkers concerning job dissatisfaction forecast a multitude of undesirable behaviours in an organisation, including stealing, substance abuse, excessive socialising, and tardiness. Furthermore, a moderate association has been found between organisational citizenship behaviours (OCB), that is, behaviours that are unrelated to an employee's formal job requirements, which enhance the workplace environment. Judge and Robbins, (2012), argue that happy workers are more inclined to go beyond normal expectations, talk positively about their work, and help others. However, it is further dependent factors beyond job satisfaction, such as reciprocity, mood, and certain personality traits.

Various factors affect job satisfaction, including working conditions and hours, salaries, career advancement opportunities, leadership style, work design, and stress level (Aslam et al., 2022). Employees' satisfaction is highly connected to their expectations and the benefits they obtain from the job environment. Out of these factors, leadership plays a significant role, given that supportive leadership that provides advice, praise, and assistance in problem-solving enables a more satisfied workforce. Research has found that intrinsic motivation is positively related to job satisfaction, increasing the importance of leadership in fostering employee motivation and engagement. Situational leadership was found to be positively and significantly linked to job satisfaction, as well as trust, respect, and pride among employees. The authors note that incorporating these attributes can aid leaders in strengthening employee commitment, risk awareness, establishing a shared vision, and the value of that vision.

While workforce satisfaction does not inherently guarantee prosperous organisational performance, managers should still be vigilant towards their employees' attitudes and satisfaction as it contributes to higher effectiveness and satisfied customers with higher profits as a reward (Judge & Robbins, 2012). The authors state that retaining content

and high-performing employees is about more than money, creating an interesting and challenging work environment is the most important aspect.

#### 3.5.2 Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance refers to the equilibrium between a person's responsibilities in their professional and personal life (Patil et al., 2024). Despite offering flexibility and better time management, remote work has introduced additional challenges in terms of obscuring the border between work and private life. Patil et al. (2024) found mixed perceptions of the effects on work-life balance, where some expressed positivity, and others experienced the negative fallout of increased workload and issues of unplugging from work and setting boundaries.

It is important for employees and organisations alike to balance the responsibilities of work and personal lives (Kilpatrick & Bilderback, 2024). The authors expressed that employees who receive support in balancing their professional and personal lives tend to be more engaged, productive, and satisfied. This includes offering flexible work hours, supplying resources for mental and physical health, fostering a considerate culture towards work-life boundaries and promoting frequent breaks and time off. However, Buonomo et al. (2024) found no meaningful, indirect or direct connections between leader support and work-life balance. Instead, the research underscored encouraging strong social connections and establishing employee satisfaction to foster well-being and work-life balance. The study by Patil et al. (2024) suggested that organisations need to proactively consider the challenges posed to work-life balance by formulating clear and realistic expectations for communication and workload.



# 4

## Interview study

Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings from the interview study at the case company. Together with the following chapter, which covers the survey results, it forms the main results section of the thesis. This chapter highlights key themes and perspectives shared by interview participants, based on their experiences and reflections. The findings provide a clear overview of the data and form the basis for the upcoming discussion chapter, where they will be further explored and analysed.

### 4.1 Challenges with Hybrid Work in PBOs

In this section, results from the case study regarding the challenges of hybrid work in project-based organisations will be presented through a thematic division of topics.

#### 4.1.1 Communication in Hybrid Teams

Almost all the interviewees (n=21) acknowledge difficulties with digital communication, mostly due to misinterpretation. The common consensus is that while misinterpretations occur in in-person conversations as well, they are more prevalent in digital settings. When communicating in text formats, tonality, expressions, and the meaning behind a statement can be lost. Several of the respondents (n=8) remarked on the lack of body language in written communication. On top of facial expressions, they could, for example, be leaning into the conversation with engagement or keeping their arms crossed for withdrawal. Having video or voice available helped interpretation, but a physical setting was still preferred. The issue was described as follows:

“You can write as many exclamation marks as you want, and it’s still hard to know. Is it good or bad? Or what do they really mean?” – SS 2

“There’s just so much more when you meet in person. You pick up on body language, and communication happens in so many ways beyond just words.” – OM 5

Another aspect mentioned is the lack of spontaneity in digital communication. Informal break-time does not occur to the same extent, and thus, some topics and ideas may be overlooked. To engage in informal discussion felt more forced in a

digital setting. Similarly, some (n=3) mentioned that thoughts arising after meetings can go unaddressed due to a lack of convenient follow-up channels.

*“It takes so much longer because then I either have to write on Teams or send an email. It becomes much more energy-consuming. It’s not spontaneous anymore. ... and then suddenly I have a long list of calls to make because everything becomes so slow-moving when it’s not spontaneous.” – PE 1*

Sensing the atmosphere in a conversation was also mentioned as harder digitally. Three of the respondents mentioned that when you engage in a video meeting, it can be hard to know when to interrupt or join a conversation for a natural transition. Some (n=4) felt that video meetings tended to make the discussions feel a bit more mechanical in nature.

*“It does make things a bit easier when you can put a face to someone before making that call. You get a sense of what the person is like. Over distance, it becomes difficult, joking remotely is a 'no-go' when you haven’t felt each other’s pulse.” – PE 1*

Though it might be difficult to recognise when misunderstandings occur, a few (n=6) of the interviewees advised not to let it gnaw at you and to reach out if you are unsure. Patience and not taking things too literally in text format were also mentioned as mitigating efforts. Some (n=5) added that complex discussions are better carried out in person, or with video or audio, to reduce misconceptions. Also added was that misinterpretation became more prevalent when already in a conflict. On a related note, some people were noted as more inclined to be misinterpreted, thus, it might be helpful to understand who you are currently conversing with to try and reduce potential conflicts. It was also mentioned that it may only be a question of trial and error:

*“How should I phrase an email, or will this person appreciate it if I call them at these times? How tactful do I need to be? And it’s really difficult because you can definitely learn it digitally, but you’ll probably learn more from your mistakes, overstepping a few times along the way.” – PE 2*

Emphasis was put on the need for extra attention in written communication and refraining from being too confrontative. Avoiding assumptions and having a colleague proofread when sending something ambiguous was advised. Also mentioned was that written text is saved, and not to write something you later cannot support.

Conveying technical information or carrying out particularly complex discussions in digital forums was another issue that came up in the interviews. Having the ability to share documentation and screens helped, but sometimes, it was considered inadequate. Mentioned by a few (n=6) was that written discussion can be more time-consuming than an in-person discussion, where back-and-forth discussions could be infuriating, and a phone call could offer a faster response. That said, two interviewees appreciated the opportunity email provides to reflect and clearly formulate their views. Lastly,

being given information digitally was seen as better than not receiving it at all and having a fast route of communication with on-site staff was seen as greatly beneficial. Video was used to transmit images of technical issues and to resolve them remotely.

#### 4.1.2 Technology and Digital Tools

Many (n=11) mentioned persistent issues with the technical aspects of digital platforms, mostly poor connectivity, sound, and video quality. Some (n=5) described encountering people who dislike enabling video or accidentally unmute and disturb during presentations. Still, four of those who reported issues also noted a clear improvement since the pandemic in 2020. Larger meetings inflicted further problems, both with video transmission and viewing presentations, as well as making out who was present or currently speaking. When only a few partook remotely, the risk of exclusion increased. Several respondents (n=7) also expressed a lack of digital implementation in the industry, one said:

*“But if you look at how digitised the different industries are, I think outdoor activities or something like that, is less digitised than we are...” – AR 5*

Despite improvements in technicality and digital competence, some (n=3) still found it challenging to teach others remotely. At times, a video meeting was sufficient, but in other cases, physical presence was necessary to provide guidance, something a few of the younger participants (n=3) found frustrating. It was also noted that tools had to be simplified to be efficiently used in production.

One advantage of digital tools is that they provide a broader network of information and simpler solutions for reaching various individuals. Taking a short video meeting was preferred over travelling long distances, and this approach has become more widely accepted. Video transmission was also mentioned to help reduce disconnection among geographically dispersed colleagues. On the other hand, the convenience of email led to information overload, with respondents receiving too much or irrelevant information. Additionally, long email chains were noted as hard to filter through, and a few (n=3) reported issues with extracting and receiving the correct information. Ensuring all documents were attached was another challenge with email communication.

In general, people expressed that they were satisfied with the tools and technologies available to them. Desired development included being able to share multiple screens and interacting more in presentation mode. Further anticipated tools included artificial intelligence (AI), and while there was interest in using AI, the company was noted as slow to explore these opportunities.

### 4.1.3 User-abilities

Connected to the digital tools, a question regarding user abilities also emerged during some of the interviews (n=9). Interviewees alluded to there being some implementation issues and a variation in skill level when it came to using the provided digital toolsets.

*“It’s easy to forget that we need to get everyone on board. When we do, a lot of things fall into place. You can’t just sit around discussing BIM in five dimensions and implementing schedules and models when there are still people using those old Dora phones. So that, I think, is the biggest challenge. And that’s what we’re trying to handle now. It’s not exactly fun if you’re really passionate about digital tools and excited about VR and all the new tech, and then suddenly have to take a step back and teach old-timers how to use a phone. It takes some patience.” – PE 2*

It was commented that generally, younger generations adapt more easily to new technology, while older generations may need more support and are sometimes reluctant to learn. It was expressed as some being “comfortable” with their current methods, seeing no reason to alter a system that works. The pandemic was attributed to driving acceptance and skill in certain digital platforms. Yet, a lot of the teaching fell to the younger employees. From another perspective, the ease of digital communication was seen as a risk for younger generations, potentially impacting their social skills.

### 4.1.4 Team Dynamics and Collaboration

All interviewees agreed that a physical connection was beneficial when working remotely and helped strengthen relationships. A few (n=6) mentioned that casual conversations fostered informal connections, which in turn improved collaboration. When working remotely, some (n=3) described that informal check-ins, meetings without performance demands, and distanced “fika”<sup>1</sup> breaks positively impacted their team spirits. Such specific routines were noted as important to maintain team cohesion and ensure the well-being of the group, especially when a team member worked primarily remotely. Overall, the notion that the people were important was clear:

*“It’s the people in the project who are the project, they’re the ones you interact with. That’s what you remember after the project is over, at least in my case. It’s that, and the atmosphere in the project, that linger far longer than any technical details.”*

– AR 6

Underscored was the importance of nobody being too big or small to help in a group task, and if you are present at a work site, you can help with tasks not assigned to you. Also expressed was that it is more fun to win as a team. When working individually, a few (n=2) disclosed that they can feel excluded from celebrating milestones.

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<sup>1</sup> “Fika” is a Swedish coffee break, often accompanied by pastries and conversation.

Additionally, respondents highlighted the importance of a leader being present on-site, willing to contribute to manual labour, and ensuring the team can deliver.

*“Then it’s important for morale that you are ONE team, on-site. Just like a football team. The coach can’t be in Malibu. No, we’re doing this together.” – PM 1*

Important to consider, was that everyone functions and copes with their emotions and needs differently. Learning others’ patterns is difficult remotely, as some individuals may be naturally more reserved, while others remain open, even in a digital setting. Having a relationship with those you later encounter in a remote environment was described as helpful to get a broader understanding. On top of that, being able to process information together with others was mentioned as challenging in the digital world. Casual conversation in transit was seen as a way to ease tension. The lack of digital, informal channels for dialogue was seen as a potential issue for the organisation. Furthermore, three participants noted the positive effects of having check-ins at the start of a meeting to ensure participation.

A few interviewees (n=3) also mentioned team dynamics in terms of both personal and professional development. Online settings made it harder to recognise needs and build personal connections. It was harder to know when or where to provide feedback when you had little to no physical interactions. Collaborative processing of ideas was viewed as a key to progress.

*“I genuinely believe that the great ideas come when you work together and, well, just knead the dough together, so to speak, and suddenly, you end up with a damn good loaf in the end.” – OM 2*

Not all meetings or tasks were viewed as effective in an online setting. Shorter information transfers or check-ins were seen as potentially more efficient online, saving time and cost. However, for decision-making and larger discussions, a physical setting was preferred by nearly all respondents (n=19). Some (n=5) noted that in-person meetings lowered the threshold for participation and increased engagement. A sense of purpose and feeling valued were also identified as critical for meaningful contributions. Given the teams’ geographical dispersion, online meetings were considered essential, though being invited to all meetings was seen as unnecessary. Participants emphasised the importance of selecting meetings carefully and attending only relevant portions of longer sessions.

#### 4.1.5 Social Distancing

Most participants (n=18) agreed on the importance of physical interaction. Many (n=10) stated that virtual interactions are functional but not as effective as physical ones, often due to the lack of spontaneity and informality, as well as the challenge of creating meaningful relationships through virtual communication alone. As mentioned, casual chats at coffee breaks were highly appreciated.

*“Quite a few, sometimes even big, problems get solved over a cup of coffee. And it’s not that people don’t drink coffee when working remotely, but there are very clear synergy effects when you’re actually working together on-site.” – OM 2*

It was explicitly stressed that visible and accessible leadership on-site can make a significant difference. Their absence for long periods did not go unnoticed amongst the on-site crew.

*“They say that as a manager, you don’t want to be like Jesus, you have to actually exist.” – OM 4*

While physical interactions are important, a large majority (n=17) also noted that it is not required daily; connections can be maintained by meeting periodically. About half of the participants (n=13) believed that physical presence is most important at the beginning of a relationship, as it sets a foundation to stand on. One person disagreed, saying that physical meetings are important, but the chronology is less so. Additionally, even when everyone is working remotely, a perceived barrier was noted between those who are geographically closer and those farther away, as short-notice, in-person meetings become more difficult.

Social distancing can be accompanied by feelings of isolation and loneliness, which in two of our respondents’ cases led to leaving their employment. Two other participants expressed contrary views, stating that talking to people online was sufficient to meet their social needs. Nonetheless, the social dimension of work was highlighted as particularly challenging in remote settings. The geographically dispersed nature of the organisation was noted to reduce the incentive to go into the office, as the number of colleagues physically present had drastically decreased since the pandemic. A reflection was that it may have been different had everyone been present at the office.

### 4.1.6 Employee Engagement and Motivation

Many participants (n=16) described how digital meetings decrease focus and engagement, especially without an active role or assigned speaking point. Several (n=9) noted that larger meetings tend to lower engagement, whilst one-on-one meetings typically sustain full attention. Engagement was also influenced by time of day, topic relevance, and length, with long meetings often described as draining.

A few (n=3) mentioned that addressing people directly forces them to engage and provides an opening to share their thoughts. On a similar note, frequent check-ins were described as a way to increase motivation, perhaps even more so if the person has a lighter workload. Engagement also depended on contribution, and having too little to do could be destructive. Getting people to commit to task responsibility was also seen as easier in in-person settings, and people could more easily evade the question digitally. Another observed behaviour was multitasking during meetings when cameras and audio were off. One participant noted frequent emails sent throughout

meetings, suggesting divided attention. Whether this is more common in a remote setting versus on-site is debated amongst the participants; several (n=12) believe this to be true, while a few (n=3) noted similar behaviours in physical gatherings. Opinions on this behaviour differed; some saw it as disrespectful, others as efficient. A few (n=3) felt stepping away during digital meetings was more acceptable than in physical ones. It was suggested that meetings could be more effective if attendance were limited to relevant parts or by adjusting agendas for availability.

Sustaining motivation and focus while working from home is another divisive topic. A small portion (n=3) of participants expressed having difficulties in this regard, while the majority (n=15) had no issues or even claimed increased effectiveness. Self-discipline was noted as a crucial factor, along with motivation stemming from appreciation for the flexibility and enjoyment of one's work. Celebrating milestones and working together for a common goal was valued, whilst it was mentioned that a celebratory cake was difficult to share remotely. Additionally, emphasis was put on that it is the leader's responsibility to foster such an environment, physically and digitally.

*“You have to make sure to have fun at work together. I don't mean that you should go go-karting every other day, but you need to create an environment where employees enjoy doing things together. Create the conditions so that the team you've built can win together.” – OM 2*

Food was further described as an effective incentive through a situation where a group of seventy blue-collar workers flawlessly adhered to workplace safety regulations when promised “smörgåstårta”<sup>2</sup>. Engagement was also reported to drop when tasks fell outside one's typical role, and for some, it depended on being supervised. One example was shared where the on-site workforce lost motivation as soon as the leadership left. This person also noted that they believe remote leadership is challenging to implement effectively with on-site projects and staff.

#### 4.1.7 Trust

A few (n=5) participants discussed trust, with some variation in perspectives, but a shared sense of its value. Frequent interactions and close relationships were mentioned as important in building trust, and thought to facilitate communication, especially on difficult topics. Trust was also a key factor in building safe environments and fostering growth in teams. However, such trust can be harder to attain virtually, as highlighted below:

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<sup>2</sup> “Smörgåstårta” is a Swedish savoury sandwich cake. Often served at larger celebrations, like at an office party.

*“At its core, a group is built on the need to establish trust among its members, and strong trust within a group is essential for individuals to feel safe challenging one another in different ways and providing space for mutual development, regardless of their roles. Such strong trust cannot be built digitally; it requires in-person interaction.”* – OM 1

Lastly, the importance of trusting leaders was mentioned, regardless of whether the setting is remote or in-person. That a manager must trust their team members’ words unless proven otherwise. On the other hand, it was also acknowledged that a manager must trust their instincts; a sense that something is off could require further investigation. Nevertheless, trust should always serve as the foundation. A manager’s lack of trust in their team was said to foster an unhealthy work environment.

### 4.1.8 Work-Life Balance

Roughly half of the interviewees (n=11) acknowledged that balancing work and private life has been a challenge, and a majority of those (n=9) expressed that they regularly work after hours. While some (n=7) do not personally view it as a problem, not everybody agrees. A common view was that higher-level roles often come with greater challenges in maintaining balance.

There were both positive and negative aspects mentioned concerning virtuality and work-life balance. Some of the positives included being able to move without changing jobs, working effectively and undisturbed from home, and enabling flexibility. On the other hand, several (n=5) participants expressed that working from home often induces fewer breaks and continuing to work while sick or caring for a sick child. Despite providing economic benefits, one respondent mentioned that these practices may elicit long-term health problems. The notion of constant availability is also divisive. Some (n=5) feel a consistent expectation to remain accessible while others (n=4) do not view the availability as a problem, but instead as an opportunity.

Generally, the interviewees recognise that the issue is difficult to handle. Some (n=2) have found peace through experience within their role, while others (n=3) believe that self-discipline is crucial, maintaining boundaries by limiting availability beyond work hours. Another suggestion was to have a designated home office, to maintain routine and distinction. The company also acknowledges the question to be important and is constantly discussing mitigating efforts. One interviewee believed it to be bigger than the individual and the company, described as follows:

*“The individual cannot solve the problem on their own; it is helpful if the company provides guidelines, but it is ultimately a societal issue.”* – PM 2

## 4.2 Performance Management, Feedback, and Conflict Resolution

This section presents findings related to performance management, feedback, and conflict. These issues are discussed in Chapter 6 in connection with the second research question and are therefore treated separately from section 4.1 and other interview-identified challenges.

### 4.2.1 Performance Management, Monitoring, and Accountability

Three of the interviewees agreed that monitoring project progress can be difficult in virtual settings. Conducting informal check-ins or random sampling was said to be easier physically. A casual conversation in passing was said to be sufficient for a status update. Two participants added that it was rarely an issue and that employees are continuously trusted to perform, on-site and remotely. Personal responsibility came up in connection with this, with some requiring closer monitoring and feedback than others. Mentioned was also that it became particularly difficult to gauge development with newer staff, occasionally resulting in unsatisfactory work. In close project teams, it was noted that knowing each other's strengths supports effective task allocation, collaboration, and willingness to seek help.

The interviewees suggested several potential reasons for underperformance, such as the individual being unaware of or misunderstanding expectations. Therefore, when underperformance occurs, the first step is to identify the cause and determine how to address it. One respondent highlighted the manager's responsibility in providing employees with the right conditions to succeed.

*“My basic assumption is that it's either because they haven't understood or because the conditions for succeeding in their tasks are lacking. Whatever the reason may be, it's my job as a manager to ensure that employees have the right conditions to succeed. ... You can't just blame the employees if things don't turn out the way you expect, that's when you're heading in the wrong direction.” – PM 2*

Various strategies for managing underperformance were brought up, with strong support for addressing matters in person. The suggested approaches involved video at virtual meetings, clear meeting structures, and defining goals, deadlines, and follow-ups. There were, however, some concerns raised that deadlines ensure completion but not the quality of work. A proposed solution was to set earlier deadlines to allow time for adjustments and to work with creative problem-solving.

### 4.2.2 Conflict Management

Many (n=15) found conflict management challenging, especially in a virtual setting. It was preferred to handle it in person for quicker problem-solving, easier follow-ups and

fewer misunderstandings. Some (n=5) who preferred physical conflict resolution still considered digital meetings an acceptable alternative, particularly for less severe conflicts. Noted was the importance of then having cameras turned on. A smaller number (n=2) had no preference regarding handling conflicts in person or online.

Whether conflicts' frequency and severity were heightened by virtuality was a conflicting topic. Some (n=3) view it as a major contributing factor, whereas two individuals instead suggested that they would have stronger reactions in person, leading to fewer conflicts in digital settings. Some (n=3) felt remote work allowed issues to fester, while others (n=2) believed distance offered a useful perspective. That conflicts were more frequent online with people that you have not interacted with as much physically, and that conflicts are more common in stressful periods, were other themes brought up, regardless of virtual or in-person situations. Strategies for resolution include defusing the situation, engaging in open discussions and addressing the issue directly.

### 4.2.3 Feedback

15 out of 23 participants preferred to receive and give constructive feedback in person. A large portion of that group (n=11) highlighted the difficulty of interpreting feedback online due to the lack of body language, even with video available, comprehension and reactions were hard to assess. Extra planning and attention went into ensuring effective and respectful feedback digitally. The idea that individuals may be less receptive to feedback online was also raised. Through text, it was believed that information was easier to move past without fully understanding it. Two respondents argued as follows:

*“If you're going to get something out of it and actually learn, I'd say the best way is to be there in person. That way, you can also get a feel for the atmosphere, what works and what doesn't.”* – PM 3

*“The tricky part is probably getting comprehension and conveying the core thought or underlying message in the feedback, especially if you're trying to be constructive.”*  
– OM 5

However, a small number of respondents (n=2) argued that receiving feedback was sometimes easier in digital settings than in person. They noted that communicating via digital forums could facilitate more direct exchanges, particularly when delivering negative feedback. Added was also that particularly difficult feedback could be best received virtually to allow for the recipient to step away and process their emotions privately. All forms of feedback were described as best received when direct, concrete, immediately after an event, and if based in a mutual relationship between the parties.

It was agreed that positive feedback was better suited to a digital format; they found it just as easy to give online as in person. However, for some respondents (n=5), having the option to type feedback made it easier to express, while others (n=3) found the lack

of spontaneity in online communication challenging. Similarly to constructive feedback, observing reactions online was seen as harder, and the risk of one-way communication was brought up. Several (n=7) participants noted that the construction sector struggles with providing both positive and negative feedback and could improve in this area.

*“If you're going to work in this industry, you really need to have a strong sense of your own value. I mean, it might actually be a good thing to reflect on more generally in the construction industry, that there are so many thankless roles.” – PE 1*

## 4.3 Actions and Strategies

This section presents strategies from the interview results for addressing remote work challenges.

### 4.3.1 Involvement

A recurring theme in the interviews was the influence of the case company's involvement policy. Three of the interview participants discussed that involving everyone is harder to execute in a digital environment, as highlighted below:

*“We talk a lot about involvement and that kind of thing at [the company]. You want the threshold for getting involved to be as low as possible. When you're in a digital setting, especially with many people, it can sometimes feel a bit harder to express an opinion, at least in my experience.” – PE 2*

Similarly, 11 out of the 23 interviewees also mentioned issues with getting their opinions heard in digital meetings. Strong speakers tend to overtake the meetings, while quieter individuals may be more reserved, particularly in hybrid settings where in-person attendees outnumber remote ones. When presentation slides could overshadow remote participants' videos, the risk of them being overlooked increased. A concern was raised about this "out of sight, out of mind" issue, where remote attendees were rarely addressed. Suggested solutions included a need for reserved individuals to speak up more and outgoing participants to give more space sometimes, especially in online settings where natural interventions are harder to detect. The following quote discusses this:

*“It's more about simple things, like understanding each other. Letting someone finish what they're saying, showing mutual respect, and being humble, that goes a long way.” – OM 4*

Overall, the interviewees expressed that the company's philosophy of involvement eased remote work, compared to experiences at other firms. Involvement in information transfer and potential use of competences was discussed as important.

Those who worked remotely were sometimes forgotten in teams, and reminding others to utilise their skills fell to management. Emphasis was put on that remote work does not exclude you from being able to assist others and help with daily tasks.

### 4.3.2 Leadership

Seven respondents brought up leadership in the interview process. A common theme was needing simultaneous structure and freedom, through clear expectations, to ensure effective work. Strategies used by those who effectively manage leadership in remote settings were mentioned as follows:

*“Those who manage remote work well delegate in an inclusive way. They make sure no one is left out. It’s combined with on-site visits. One or several tasks are delegated, then they let a day or two, maybe even a week, go by, and after that, they visit the site the following week to see how things are progressing.” – AR 4*

Whilst important, two other respondents also mentioned that it can be hard to engage people at a distance and to maintain personal connections, which makes it hard to distribute work appropriately. Noted was that leaders need proximity to a team to identify those who may need extra support and those who can effectively manage their own time. Similarly, a leadership issue with remote work that was brought forth was being physically present, even when primarily working from another location. Being seen in the project environment and engaging with project staff was seen as important, even without having direct business to attend to there.

Another theme raised in the interviews was the importance of being open and “putting yourself out there”. To foster trust and unity within a team, the leader must be willing to create an open, genuine work environment. If achieved, this mutual trust was seen as beneficial for remote work. It was expressed that leaders must actively engage with their team, sharing tasks and showing interest in others’ perspectives. Similarly, leaders being open to feedback was highlighted, not simply on factual matters, but also on their leadership. Leadership approaches vary; what suits one does not suit another. The company offers leadership training to help leaders assess their strengths, weaknesses, and roles within the group.

### 4.3.3 Title and Role

Several interviewees (n=5) expressed that their role or specific tasks within the company influenced their ability to perform effectively in a remote setting. Certain positions, specifically project-related, are expected to be primarily present on-site and include tasks that cannot be performed remotely. For others, the flexibility to work remotely is a prerequisite for their position, where they have responsibilities for multiple projects simultaneously. However, it was also mentioned that whilst some can work remotely, perhaps they should not. Regardless of role, being on-site helps when a situation occurs and facilitates a better understanding of the day-to-day operations.

Additionally, concerns of unfairness for various roles and individuals were voiced, where some do not have the physical space to work remotely. It was suggested that the company could benefit from setting guidelines to clarify remote work possibilities, ensuring a fair working environment.

#### 4.3.4 Availability and Support, and Appreciation

Nearly all participants (n=22) mentioned availability and support, with over half (n=12) expressing expectations for colleagues or leaders to be reachable during the day. While immediate responses were not seen as necessary, a callback or indication of when a reply could be expected was enough to feel supported. A few (n=2) preferred chat functions whilst others (n=3) would rather use a phone. Video calls were seen as a good alternative, but sometimes too formal and structured. Additionally, just as a manager had to be responsive, employees also had to contribute to the relationships and reach out.

*“It's also kind of my own responsibility to speak up when I need something. It doesn't help if I walk around wondering why my manager isn't calling me. Well, then say something if you need something.” – AR 4*

Several participants (n=6) felt appreciated when given relevant information, opportunities to influence the company, and recognition for their presence. Being contacted by managers reinforced this, signalling that remote work did not mean being forgotten. Three respondents suggested regular appointments to provide a known timeframe for non-emergent questions and underscored the importance of sincere follow-up and not simply asking questions to be polite. Feeling heard and cared for made it easier to raise concerns and feel supported. However, too frequent interactions could shift the sentiment to monitoring and distrust. For new hires, physical proximity was seen as important before they learned the operations and who to contact. Digital communication was valued for improving access to knowledge without the need to relocate. Additionally, clear role expectations and mutual respect for each other's competencies were underscored as important for feeling appreciated.

#### 4.3.5 Organisational Culture and Guidelines

The studied company is described as a decentralised organisation with minimal standardised guidelines for hybrid work, aside from general etiquette rules. Although several respondents (n=6) considered having the camera turned on during online meetings to be an unspoken rule. The company's approach offers significant freedom, perceived both positively and negatively. Four interviewees desired clearer guidelines on hybrid work conduct and expectations, in their absence, various groups create their own solutions. Some (n=3) also emphasised that while they believe in a hybrid structure, a discussion about acceptable behaviour is needed. Others appreciated the current case-by-case approach, offering greater flexibility for senior employees while

junior staff are expected to be more physically present. Views on digital tool policies also varied; some preferred group-specific practices to increase acceptance, while others (n=2) suggested common guidelines, especially for appropriate response time.

# 5

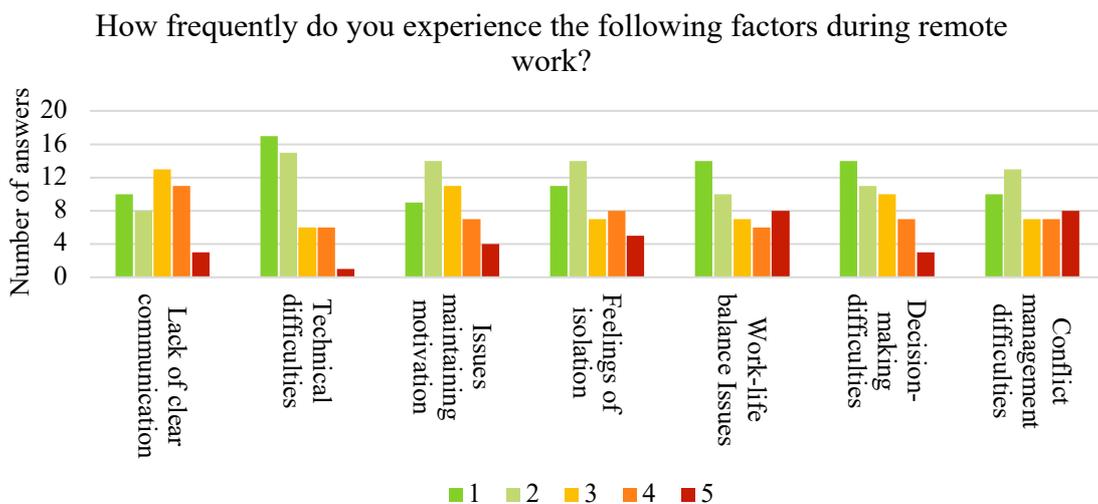
## Survey Study

Chapter five continues the results by presenting the empirical findings from the survey, including both closed and open-ended questions. The data is illustrated through figures and descriptive text, highlighting introduced key topics and, together with Chapter 4, forming the basis for the upcoming discussion.

All 45 participants in this survey are affiliated with the same PBO but represent diverse roles, including project staff, managers, and support personnel. Of these, 42.2 percent hold formal leadership roles, overseeing between 1 and 40 individuals. None work exclusively remotely, about half primarily work from the office, and the rest follow a hybrid model. Among the hybrid workers, about 30 percent spend more time in the office than remotely, while the opposite is true for the remainder. Regardless of location, collaboration in digital environments is common; 40 percent of respondents interact remotely daily, 33.3 percent several times a week, and only a small number report doing so rarely.

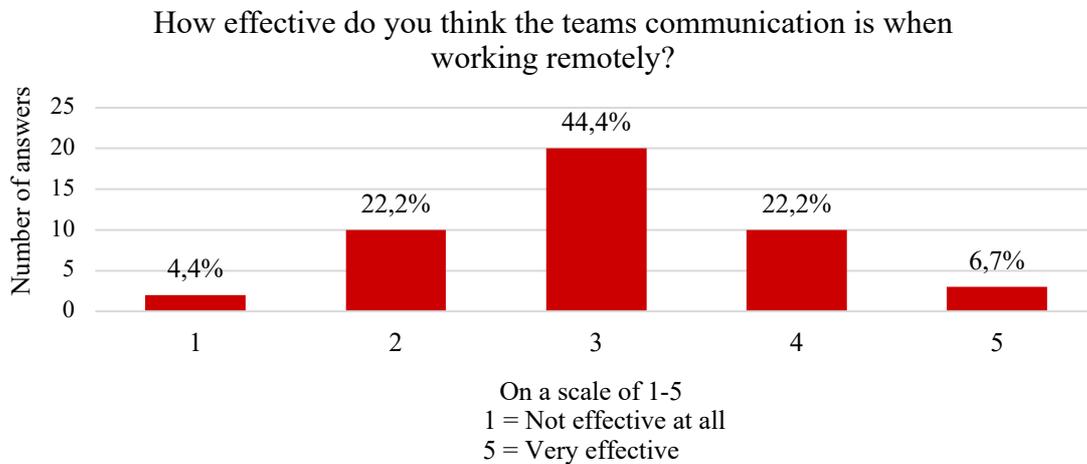
### 5.1 Challenges with Hybrid Work in PBOs

The participants were asked how often they encounter various challenges when working remotely, and to rate them on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). The diagram below shows a varied response pattern.



**Figure 1.** Responses from 45 participants on the perceived frequency of challenges related to motivation, communication, technology, isolation, work-life balance, decision-making, and conflict management in remote work.

The diagram in Figure 2 depicts a normally distributed curve for the perceived effectiveness of the remote team's communication. Most answers fell between 2-4, translating to satisfactory efficiency.



**Figure 2.** Responses from 45 participants on the perceived effectiveness of team communication during remote work.

Highlighted were concerns about the limited body language in virtual conversations, where smaller gestures get lost, affecting how messages are perceived. On a similar note, clearly expressing oneself in writing was occasionally deemed difficult. Concerns were also raised regarding the lack of informal discussion, which complicated asking questions and increased response times. Additionally, information could also be lost entirely for those not physically present. Conversations in remote meetings were seen as challenging, particularly when some participants are co-located and others join virtually. This introduced difficulties in reading the room and speaking up, especially for those online, which led to feeling overlooked. Similarly, certain meetings require physical presence for effective communication. To combat these digital communication issues, a few (n=3) participants proposed recurring in-person meetings, facilitating asking small, but potentially important questions. Regularly scheduled video meetings can also be beneficial for maintaining team cohesion.

### 5.1.2 Technology and Digital Tools

Survey responses indicated an organisational shift towards digital work since the pandemic, resulting in improved efficiency. The transition was credited to digital tools, and although technical difficulties remain, according to Figure 1 above, they were not so prevalent. One specific risk of disorganised digital meetings, where multiple participants speak simultaneously, was noted. In regard to the most common communication forums, 41 out of 45 survey participants reported email as one of their most used forms of digital communication, and 40 out of 45 chose phone calls as an option.

### 5.1.3 Team Dynamics and Collaboration

Out of the 45 respondents, 60 percent had experienced difficulties collaborating remotely. Six participants described a decreased sense of belonging while working remotely, which was especially attributed to the lack of spontaneous conversations and breakroom chatter. Reading people and building relationships were also areas described as more difficult virtually.

It was noted that not all individuals can work effectively remotely; it requires a certain degree of self-discipline. While many (n=5) appreciate the flexibility that remote work offers, especially in terms of time preservation, it requires effective communication to maintain balance. The hybrid setting was viewed positively for enabling undisturbed work, although some tasks were seen as better suited for on-site work. Weekly meetings, structured schedule and clearly defined expectations, while allowing for transparency, were mentioned to mitigate the negative effects of hybrid work. Additionally, being treated with respect and having an open and accepting environment encouraged well-adjusted teams. Occasional physical activities were suggested to strengthen the team spirit. Most respondents (88.9%) strongly or very strongly believed that initial physical meetings improve remote collaboration.

### 5.1.4 Social Distancing

Most participants (77.7%) considered meeting physically important or very important. Open-ended answers highlighted physical presence as essential for building trust and ensuring project success, with leaders expected to demonstrate engagement by being on-site.

### 5.1.5 Employee Engagement and Motivation

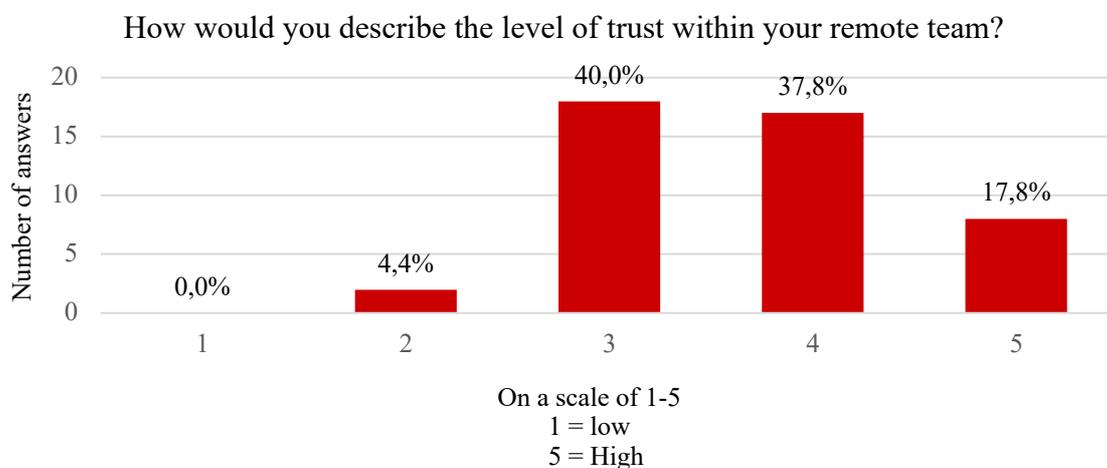
A third of respondents had noticed a difference in the team's motivation and engagement remotely. For some (n=3), motivation increased with the flexibility offered by remote work, by reduced commuting time and contribution to greater work-life balance. Access to a good work environment at home was also seen as crucial for sustainable remote work. Along with this, several respondents (n=5) underscore the significance of clearly stated goals and expectations, and regular progress reviews and attentive leadership for successful remote work. Most respondents in the survey (n=27) stated that clear goals and expectations facilitate motivation remotely, clearly followed by a sense of purposeful work (n=21). Fourteen individuals found frequent feedback from leaders motivating, while four noted opportunities for collaboration. Discipline, rather than motivation, drives many individuals, while some struggle to stay motivated remotely and choose to abstain.

Two participants mentioned that they had faced scepticism from colleagues when working remotely, despite regularly communicating with them virtually, independent of location. In some groups, there was an expectancy of physical presence, as it was

believed to foster engagement and team spirit and failure to meet this expectation could eventually result in exclusion from the group.

### 5.1.6 Trust

As seen in Figure 3 below, most respondents (77.8%) perceived the level of trust within their remote teams as either moderate or moderately high, and 17.8 percent rated it as high (5). Three participants described the importance of leaders trusting their employees and reducing control, fostering respect and inclusivity. In the open-ended questions, a belief that remote workers are unproductive surfaced, as well as the notion that clearly communicating remote activities could reinforce teamwork and a sense of shared responsibility.



**Figure 3.** Responses from 45 respondents regarding the level of trust within their remote team.

### 5.1.7 Work-Life Balance

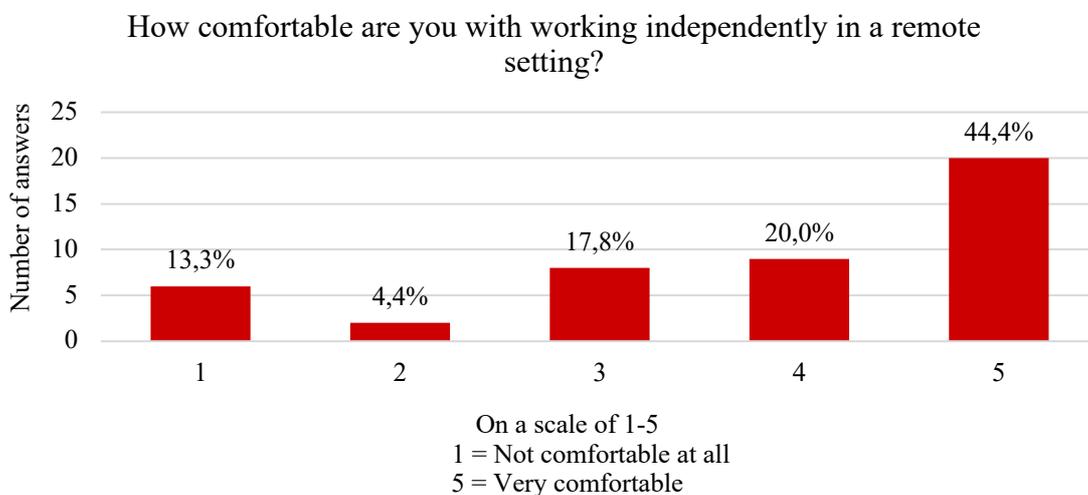
Opinions were divided on whether hybrid work improved work-life balance. Two individuals expressed it as a challenge to maintain boundaries between work and personal life, feeling pressured to respond after hours. Three others highlighted improvements in well-being through reduced stress and enhanced work-life control. Many (n=6) appreciated the flexibility offered by hybrid work, especially when it came to decreased travel. Two responses report that working from home increases productivity and focus, especially for introverts who can feel drained by open office landscapes. While remote work offers many advantages, the importance of clear communication was underscored, especially during extended virtual collaborations. Additionally, having a designated and secluded area when working from home was seen as crucial, though not feasible for everyone. This raised questions about the employer's responsibility in remote work settings, particularly regarding work environments and insurance.

## 5.2 Performance Management, Feedback, and Conflict Resolution

This section presents survey results on performance management, conflict resolution, and feedback, tied to the second research question, and is thus separated from Section 5.1.

### 5.2.1 Performance Management, Monitoring, and Accountability

Figure 4 shows that most respondents (64.4%) feel very or fairly comfortable working independently remotely, and 17.8 percent are neutral. Trust was noted as important, given the difficulty of monitoring performance remotely.



**Figure 4.** Responses from 45 participants regarding their comfort level with working independently remotely.

### 5.2.2 Conflict Management

Of the 45 survey participants, only 13.3 percent reported that remote work exacerbated conflict management. They expressed an inability to satisfactorily resolve a disagreement virtually. Physical meetings generate a different perception of trust, and taking advantage of all possible cues minimises misunderstandings. Noted was also the possibility of virtuality creating conflicts by excluding individuals from the discussions. Most respondents (n=28), prefer to handle disagreements physically, closely followed by direct and open discussion through video meetings (n=24). Several (n=10) expressed handling conflict in writing, and a handful (n=3) opted for phone calls. Also mentioned was situation-dependent handling, mediation through a third party, such as the HR department, or avoiding conflicts entirely.

### 5.2.3 Feedback

11 of 45 participants had experienced issues with providing or receiving feedback digitally. Some (n=6) noted that the limited contact made the feedback unnatural and

impersonal. A shared physical workplace enabled direct feedback, with follow-up questions and facial expressions. It was brought up that remote feedback often only addresses major issues, overlooking smaller ones. Most respondents (n=28) opted for oral feedback in person as one of their preferred ways of receiving feedback when working in a hybrid setting, especially important for complex matters as the distance limits comprehension.

### 5.3 Actions and Strategies

This section presents strategies for addressing remote work challenges, based on the survey results.

#### 5.3.1 Involvement

Key elements for cooperation included clear communication and goals, mutual respect, regular check-ins, and inclusive task division. It was also stated that a team is only as strong as its weakest link, making every member equally valuable. One respondent shared that their manager supported them by maintaining regular contact, even without direct collaboration, making them feel included.

#### 5.3.2 Leadership

Clarity was highlighted as a key leadership quality regardless of remote or physical setting, pertaining to expectations, goals and follow-ups. Building successful teams was seen as dependent on open and honest communication, where issues can be brought up early. Good leadership was exemplified by the ability to adjust their approach in response to feedback. For certain task, a physically present leader was preferred, being physically absent often or regularly arriving late could negatively impact respect in a team. 27 individuals considered building trust the most prominent challenge for a hybrid leader. To combat this, it was suggested that leaders engage more personally with their staff, encouraging informal, non-work-related conversations.

#### 5.3.3 Title and Role

Some roles were seen as better suited for remote work than others, where leaders supervising a specific project site must be physically present and department managers could be remote. They should, however, visit the site frequently. Regardless of role, working remotely at the beginning of one's career was viewed negatively, as it takes experience to manage one's workload. Determining when a situation needed physical attention and when tasks were better performed remotely was perceived as crucial for effective leadership. A physically absent leader was described as unable to observe the building process and connect with the workers. Team disconnect was a specific concern for many of the participants (n=24).

#### 5.3.4 Availability, Support, and Appreciation

A common theme was the importance of inclusive communication, ensuring that everyone could express their opinions. Suggested solutions include “going around the room” in meetings or scheduling continuous and structured check-ups at least once a week, ensuring that everyone is updated. However, several (n=4) participants described primarily working independently, with communication occurring as needed and underscoring that the leader is never further than a quick phone call away.



# 6

## Discussion

This chapter presents a reflective analysis of the study's findings, structured around the same three main topics as in the empirical data results. The discussion draws on a more accumulated view of the data, allowing for a broader analysis of the recurring themes. The aim is to deepen the understanding of the identified challenges and how they interconnect, while also linking them to relevant theory.

### 6.1 Challenges with Hybrid Work in PBOs

Effective communication remains an important part of successful collaboration, especially in hybrid PBOs. The findings of this study highlight several recurring challenges, supported by previous research, that underscore the complexity of communication in the construction sector.

Consistent with Kim et al. (2024), the interview results show that communication digitally requires extra attention. Carrying out a digital conversation seems to be an issue for many reasons, where the lack of non-verbal cues poses as one of the biggest. As described in the literature, the discrepancies in non-verbal cues pose a challenge for virtual team members (Lee, 2021). Both interview and survey respondents supported this and added that a lot of information gets lost when there is little emotional connection made in conversations. These challenges emphasise that effective digital communication is not only a technical concern, but also a social and relational one. Without the nuances of in-person interaction, intentions may be misread, leading to hesitancy or strained collaboration, especially in teams where trust and cohesion are still being built.

Another theme that emerged from the results sections was the issue of setting realistic and agreed-upon boundaries when it came to information sharing. In line with the research by Smith and Mounter (2007), some interviewees expressed concern about the response times that digital communication enabled and its potential impact on both their own and others' long-term health. Shifting focus from quantitative to qualitative communication was in the literature described as favourable for both performance and burnout, and this was also reflected in the data collection (Shockley et al., 2021). Mentioned was the need for extra clarity and afterthought when typing a response, as opposed to when a conversation occurred in person, which could possibly increase the quality of communication. By being extra attentive, the risk of misunderstanding and

ultimately the need for later mediation is reduced. A physical meeting at the start of the project was also believed to have mediating effects and could help to build stronger relationships early on.

Additionally, on the topic of communication, Garro-Abarca et al. (2021) point out that geographically dispersed teams may have unequal access to key information. This was echoed by several of the study participants who noted that employees working remotely during parts of the process, often miss out on side conversations or impromptu decision-making. The lack of informal "coffee machine" chats can delay problem-solving and lead to a misaligned team, both in terms of knowledge sharing but also socially. The open channel, that a break discussion can offer, is not one that naturally occurs in an online setting and a point that many in both the interviews and survey touched upon. As mentioned by Van Zoonen and Sivunen (2022), these open communication channels can be a tool to prevent individuals from feeling socially isolated, and it was clear from the data collection that those conversations were a valued part of the social dynamics.

The results indicate that motivation and engagement are important topics regarding remote work. While most find maintaining motivation during independent remote work uncomplicated, many describe decreased engagement during online meetings. Especially without an assigned speaking point or when not being called upon for questions. This is in line with the study by Gustavsson (2011), who argues that controlling the agenda for the meeting, limits disruptions and allows for everyone to get their opinions heard. Working with other things, simultaneously, during online meetings was a recurring theme, yet it is scarcely acknowledged in the literature. The participants' opinions vary concerning this, where some argue for increased efficiency, and others find it disrespectful. This could point to a potential leadership challenge, where setting clear expectations for participation in virtual meetings may be necessary to balance productivity with respect and engagement.

Kilpatrick and Bilderback (2024) and Judge and Robbins (2012) underscore the significance of setting clear, challenging goals and providing ongoing feedback to enhance motivation. This aligns with the empirical findings, where more than half of the respondents indicated that clear goals and expectations are key motivational factors, and about a third noted that frequent follow-ups and feedback from their leaders boosted their motivation. Similarly, slightly less than half noted that a sense of purposeful work was important, an observation also reflected in several interviews.

The notion that performance-based rewards can enhance motivation (Robbins & Judge, 2012) is also supported by the data, which identified food as a frequently used incentive. A related theme was the idea of fostering motivation through enjoyment and celebration at work, which emerged from the interviews. This suggests that not all motivation is purely outcome-driven; social and emotional aspects of the work environment can also play a critical role. The literature further highlighted the motivational value of allowing employees to participate in decision-making, as this

promotes job satisfaction and commitment. This was evident in the interviews, where participants described involvement as helpful for accepting guidelines. Additionally, the importance of individualising motivation was reinforced by the findings, while some employees are energised by being on-site, others are motivated by the flexibility offered with occasionally working from home.

Yukl (2012) introduced the self-management theory, where an individual takes responsibility for their success, thus becoming less dependent on a guiding and motivational leader. The current study underscored the need for self-discipline while working remotely, rather than motivation, which appeared harder for some individuals to maintain. The self-determination theory, as presented by Judge and Robbins (2012), states that motivation decreases when a previously enjoyable task starts feeling like an obligation rather than a choice. This might help to explain why reaching out through digital channels felt particularly energy-consuming and burdensome for some, it shifts from being a spontaneous interaction to a perceived obligation in remote contexts.

Although trust is a central theme in the literature, it did not emerge as a clear theme in the present study. Still, when asked specific questions about trust, a few notable concerns emerged. Trust is described as an important aspect in teams, creating an environment for growth, consistent with the findings of Sagar et al. (2021). Judge and Robbins (2012) supported this and added that trusting group members are more prone to share information, speak out, and help each other, which fosters additional trust. This ties into the aspects of collaboration and problem solving, something that requires access to information about existing challenges, which is largely governed by trust. When trust is lacking, performance tends to decrease due to information concealment and pursuit of self-interest (Judge & Robbins, 2012). This also points to the invisible but critical role of psychological safety in team dynamics, where a lack of perceived trust may hinder openness, engagement, and knowledge-sharing. Especially in hybrid environments, where informal cues are reduced, being intentional in building and maintaining trust becomes even more essential to team performance.

The findings display a belief that knowing and understanding someone increases trust and facilitates more effective communication, in line with the theory proposed by Yasmeen et al. (2024), claiming that emotional intelligence has become increasingly important in a remote context for overall success. Meaning, recognising and managing your own emotions and understanding those of others. The literature by Robbins and Judge (2012) further identifies that trust and mutual understanding can be difficult without face-to-face interactions, which can explain the study participants' hesitancy towards building relationships solely through virtual interactions. On the other hand, the survey findings show a perceived moderate to high level of trust within hybrid teams, which indicates that such issues could be sporadic or effectively managed with occasional physical connection.

Colleagues' perceptions of remote workers being unproductive emerged in both the survey and interview studies, highlighting the need for open communication to foster

trust and a sense of teamwork and shared responsibility. The literature by Garro-Abarca et al. (2021) corroborated this by stating the importance of open communication and timely responses for trust in virtual teams. It was described in the interviews as harder to manage performance remotely which also ties into this importance of open communication and opportunities for progress assessment. In connection to the study results, Pianese et al. (2023) also emphasise that trustworthy colleagues and a sense of connection to the team and organisation are crucial for the group dynamic.

Moreover, trust seems to be linked to the value of physical interactions and social distancing. The results stress the importance of in-person meetings, and while virtual interactions function just fine, physical ones are described as superior. Creating meaningful relationships appears to be especially difficult done remotely, although a strong consensus was of its increased importance at the initial stages of a relationship. This highlights a potential need for hybrid models to prioritise early in-person meetings to lay a strong foundation for collaboration. The findings further underscore the non-necessity of meeting daily upon forming an initial relationship. Expanding on this, the findings show that social distancing from your team can be accompanied by feelings of isolation and loneliness, which aligns with the previous study by Kilpatrick and Bilderback (2024). For some individuals in the study, virtual interactions are sufficient to meet their social needs, whereas for others, solitude led them to leave the company. This illustrates the importance of individual differences in remote work preferences and implies that a one-size-fits-all approach to team interaction does not work.

The results of this study provide further evidence supporting the mixed perceptions of work-life balance and the generated challenges (Patil et al., 2024). Anxiety over constant pressure for reachability and difficulty disconnecting from work are common negative examples. Noted advantages include flexibility, increased effectiveness and a greater sense of control over their work environment, which can explain the perceived improvements in well-being. Although the possibility of long-term health issues, from a lack of breaks while working remotely, should not be overlooked. While most acknowledge the ambiguous lines between work and private life, not everybody views it as a problem, but instead as an opportunity to get information and address issues before they escalate. Not mentioned in the literature is the notion that higher-level roles are more prone to having difficulties in disconnecting from work. The differences in opinions further demonstrate that everyone is unique and requires distinct circumstances to thrive.

## 6.2 Performance Management, Feedback, and Conflict Resolution

This study highlights the challenges of managing performance in remote settings, particularly due to the absence of informal monitoring opportunities, such as random sampling. This difficulty, in line with the findings of Sagar et al. (2021), emphasise that trust becomes a central mechanism for control when direct observation is limited. The literature further describes how evolving work models require a redefinition of what it means to be present, engaged, and productive (Kilpatrick & Bilderback, 2024). In line with this, Manuel and Mabaso (2024) advocate for a shift towards outcome-based performance management, prioritising results over inputs and physical attendance. The strategies identified by participants for addressing performance management challenges, including frequent check-ins, ongoing feedback, and clear expectations, are consistent with the recommendations found in previous research. This appears particularly critical for employees who struggle with self-management, suggesting that hybrid work models demand not only trust but also proactive managerial strategies to ensure accountability and sustained performance.

Even though the survey study found a clear pattern of employees feeling comfortable working independently remotely, underperformance occurred occasionally. Underperformance was mostly attributed to unclear expectations or a lack of awareness of performance shortcomings. In close connection to what was described in the study by Judge and Robbins (2012), which state that efficient work is linked to access to adequate resources, the current study assigns such responsibilities to the managers. Previous research has primarily focused on timely performance, whereas this study also highlights the difficulty of ensuring the quality of outcomes, suggesting earlier deadlines to allow time for adjustments. The findings show a clear preference for holding corrective conversations in person whenever possible. However, when such conversations must take place virtually, having cameras on was considered important to capture visual cues and better gauge how the message was received.

Lee (2021) highlights the benefits of frequent project updates and weekly status meetings for project success, a finding supported by the present study. However, the results of this study suggest that the optimal meeting frequency should be adapted to the specific project context rather than standardised, implying that flexibility plays an important role. While Lee (2021) further proposed general rules for meeting attendance and associated consequences, participants in this study expressed mixed attitudes regarding the effectiveness of such rigid structures, regardless of setting. This suggests that overly strict policies may not work in dynamic environments. Nevertheless, the previous research and the findings of this study both point to the value of regulating expectations for email and phone response times, as well as utilising collaborative databases for documentation and scheduling. Underscoring transparency as a crucial component for project flow and trust in hybrid work environments.

A manager's understanding of their employees is an essential aspect of setting reasonable expectations and allocating tasks effectively, as highlighted in the interviews. This finding aligns with Manuel and Mabaso (2024), who emphasise that employees are more likely to perceive evaluations as fair if the managers demonstrate a genuine understanding of their individuality and support their development. Together, these insights underscore the significance of strong manager-employee relationships, particularly in hybrid settings. A deeper understanding enables more realistic and tailored task allocation, which not only reduces the risk of underperformance but also fosters trust, engagement, and motivation while mitigating dissatisfaction.

On a related note, as performance management is evolving, shifting from control towards feedback, managers must establish routines that include continuous discussions with individuals and teams (Manuel & Mabaso, 2024). Managers must also be attentive to what is unsaid through reading body language, making delivering feedback remotely difficult. Unlike previous studies, which found that video calls bridge this gap and may be as effective as in-person interactions, this study demonstrates challenges in gauging how someone receives the feedback and thus prefers physical settings. It appears that minimising one-way communication and, therefore, making it more rewarding, additionally influenced this preference for in-person discussions. While some participants perceived typed feedback, such as emails or messages, as easier to overlook and less effective, others appreciated the ability to take time to process challenging input. Additionally, several noted that written feedback can be easier to formulate clearly and thoughtfully, which may contribute to more constructive communication. The variation in responses could indicate that preferences for feedback channels are highly individual and context dependent. This highlights the importance of adaptability and emotional intelligence from the perspective of managers in hybrid settings. When providing feedback, leaders may need to consider the nature and sensitivity of the feedback and situation, as well as the individual's preferred communication style. Knowing and understanding the recipient could potentially make the feedback process easier.

The current findings coincide with the notion that remote work may reduce the frequency and immediacy of feedback, with feedback often being reserved for more serious issues while minor concerns are overlooked. This tendency appears linked to a lack of spontaneity and fewer informal opportunities to offer feedback in virtual settings. These results align with Manuel and Mabaso's (2024) study, which emphasised the value of timely, specific, and event-related feedback in fostering effective communication. Their findings further suggest that direct feedback not only promotes transparency and reduces misunderstandings but also encourages employees to share challenges more openly. Together with the impression of the construction sector being generally bad at conveying both positive and negative feedback, this highlights the need for intentional and structured channels for regular feedback.

In contrast to earlier studies that addressed feedback in general terms without distinguishing between positive and negative forms, this study explicitly differentiated the two. While the study participants were conflicted concerning how to best convey negative feedback, positive feedback was generally perceived as better suited for a digital format. This insinuates that positive feedback may not require as much emotional sensitivity as negative feedback, making it more adaptable to online settings. Giving praise virtually can be both effective and efficient, maintaining motivation and recognition without the need for in-person interactions.

While the literature does not explicitly address conflicts separately from feedback, this study identifies conflict as an issue that may require specific attention. Although most participants prefer to handle conflicts physically, in an open and direct manner, virtual meetings were deemed an acceptable alternative, especially for less severe conflicts. As for feedback, cameras were also noted as an important mediating factor for conflict management, limiting misunderstandings when utilised. These findings coincide with those of Yasmeeen et al. (2024), which underscored the influence of emotional intelligence and recognising emotional cues when face-to-face interactions are limited. Emotional intelligence can strengthen relationships and improve communication practices, thereby fostering trust (Yasmeeen et al., 2024). This may help address the observed discrepancies in trust between remote and in-person conflict resolutions, as well as reduce the potentially heightened risk of conflicts in remote interactions, particularly with individuals with whom no prior basis for understanding has been established.

The relationship between virtual settings and possible escalation of conflict remains underexplored in the literature, and the present findings offer a divided view. Some participants highlighted how overlapping conversations and the absence of non-verbal cues in digital interactions can complicate communication and amplify misunderstandings. Others, however, viewed virtual formats as equally effective for resolving disagreements, or even less emotionally charged due to the distancing effect of screens, suggesting that fewer conflicts arise overall. Echoing study participants concerns about virtual feedback on minor issues being overlooked, minor conflicts may similarly go unaddressed in remote settings, potentially escalating into more significant disputes over time. Taken together, this highlights that the relationship between remote work and the prevalence or escalation of conflicts remains complex. Thus, it may be pivotal to be proactive in addressing potential conflicts, guaranteeing that even minor issues are addressed before they accumulate.

### 6.3 Actions and Strategies

Potential mitigating efforts for the challenges of remote work include aspects such as company policies, leadership practices, and overall team dynamics. The specific case company included in this study reported that they worked extensively with the concept

of involvement. Something that appeared to positively affect the overall possibility of working remotely. As highlighted by several sources in the literature (Judge & Robbins, 2012; Youssef et al., 2023; Kilpatrick & Bilderback, 2024), fostering inclusivity through open communication, shared decision-making, and value alignment plays a key role in enhancing employee engagement. These efforts also strengthen team commitment, job satisfaction, and a shared sense of purpose in hybrid and remote teams. This aligns with the opinions of those who participated in both the interview and the survey study. While there was still progress to be made, many of the respondents saw positively on the companies' work with involvement and attributed it to easing the process of working in hybrid teams.

Although positive towards involvement and current company guidelines, the respondents had opinions on its efficiency virtually. While for the most part perceived as adequate, some still felt that it was hard to get your point heard in meetings and to feel included when working more in a remote capacity. The concept of "out of sight, out of mind" emerged during some of the interviews, and the view was that it could be an advantage for the company to keep working actively with involving measures. Connecting to the findings of Lee (2021), regarding recognition for one's work, this may be linked to employees' overall work engagement and connect to possible issues staying engaged in online settings.

Also important to note, as highlighted in the results, is that everyone in a team is responsible for reaching out and keeping up the connections. Whereas a manager has a formal responsibility for their team, it was expressed that they should not be solely responsible for the day-to-day communications. Advocating for oneself and your needs seemed harder in a remote setting but all the more important. For some, being geographically dispersed as a team could mean that the team cohesion and sense of teamwork suffered. Furthering the need for those connections to be strong and to be upheld from all different members. Furthermore, being a new member of a team seemed to have extra dimensions regarding this. Being able to grasp the different dynamics of a group and get a sense of the usual proceedings felt harder remotely and perhaps required some physical introductions to be made before such arrangements could work out. In line with previous literature, having a mentor in the virtual world might help (Sagar et al., 2021), but may not offer a complete solution to all the different nuances of integration.

On an organisational level, the consensus seemed to be that it was very appreciated to have a rather decentralised structure, while there could still be the need for certain guidance when it came to remote work. Corresponding to the survey findings, it may be beneficial for a company to properly address the challenges of remote work through clear guidelines and regulations. The survey results revealed that some individuals within the organisation held negative views or expressed concerns about the productivity of employees working remotely, with one remarking that people had become too comfortable in this arrangement, implying a risk of complacency. Clearer

company guidelines could mitigate these concerns and promote a more consistent use of remote work across the organisation, ensuring all employees have equal understanding and opportunity to benefit from it. The interviews echoed similar ideas, though not as explicitly. A more cohesive stand on remote work was suggested to reduce discrepancies between roles, while allowing for adjusting the guidelines or schedules to specific circumstances.

Even though the study participants didn't focus much on specific leadership styles or theories, they were still reflected in how leadership was described in the collected data. For employees to succeed, leaders were mentioned as having to provide clarity and structure while also fostering a culture of freedom with accountability. In line with Klus and Müller (2021), strong organisational skills may benefit a leader in instances of remote work, to alleviate the burden of a high information flow and to set clear expectations. For a leader to succeed in a remote or hybrid team, it is also important to communicate openly and honestly, thus setting a positive example that may encourage others, especially when face-to-face interactions are limited. This kind of communication can help leaders lead well and create strong team connections, even when occasionally co-located.

The study results highlighted additional qualities needed by leaders to successfully manage remote teams. Key areas included the ability to motivate and engage employees, as well as the importance of building personal relationships with colleagues. This study's empirical findings indicated that it is easier to lose connection in a remote setting, making it essential for leaders to pay extra attention to maintaining engagement and interpersonal bonds virtually. Previous research emphasises the positive impact of leaders who can motivate their teams (Aslam et al., 2022; Boccoli et al., 2024), with interpersonal connections acting as a facilitator (Lee, 2021). Interviews and survey responses suggested that creating opportunities for interaction outside of work tasks, such as informal activities or discussions, can help strengthen relationships between colleagues and managers. In line with Yasmeeen et al. (2024), this study's results also suggest that fostering team cohesion and promoting open communication channels can enhance collaboration and support a healthier work-life balance.

As mentioned previously, most participants prefer addressing feedback and conflicts in-person meetings, perceiving it as more difficult and less personal to receive virtually. While feedback does not necessarily need to come from someone in a leadership role, participants stated that it tended to become less spontaneous in remote contexts. As a result, leaders may carry greater responsibility for ensuring that feedback still occurs regularly with remote team members. When constructive conversations and conflict resolution must be handled virtually, it is especially important to approach them with extra grace and sensitivity. This often demands a highly attentive and adaptable leadership style, which can decide when a matter should be handled in person rather than remotely. Such capability requires strong leadership

skills, particularly those associated with transformational or situational leadership, where adaptability plays a central role in enhancing performance in remote work environments (Alzate Restrepo et al., 2024; Waller et al., 1989).

A potential link may be drawn between a project-based construction company's reluctance to handle complex issues remotely and the very nature of its project-focused structure. The results show that projects always take precedence, and many considered it essential to maintain close ties with both the work and the project teams, partly to sustain mutual respect, and partly to stay informed about daily operations. The perception that remote workers risk losing credibility or respect from their on-site peers complicates the management of difficult situations. Addressing such matters remotely may not lead to the desired outcomes and could further distance the project team from a remote manager. As such, it was suggested that all project-related managers should make regular site visits to maintain strong connections with on-site staff.

Adaptability may also be essential when supporting employees in balancing their professional and personal lives. Leaders who support their employees' well-being in these areas are likely to foster a more satisfied and engaged workforce (Kilpatrick & Bilderback, 2024). According to Judge and Robbins (2012), happy workers are more inclined to exceed expectations and assist colleagues. However, it may not only be up to the leadership to support well-being, but they could also be highly dependent upon social connections at work (Buonomo et al., 2024). This indicates that the previously mentioned initiatives of after-work activities and opportunities for social interaction are even more important.

# 7

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate how leadership challenges emerge and affect the daily operations in hybrid environments within a project-based organisation (PBO). The research is particularly focused on how feedback and conflict resolution are currently handled in hybrid teams, and in what way these are impacted by the lack of physical presence. Lastly, the study intended to provide concrete actions that can be taken to improve leadership and strengthen team collaboration in hybrid contexts. This is to provide an understanding for leaders and practitioners of PBOs on how to adapt their leadership approach to meet the demands of hybrid work and ensure that communication and collaboration continue to function effectively. Based on this, the following three research questions were formulated:

*RQ1: What are the primary leadership challenges faced in managing hybrid teams within a project-based construction organisation, and how do these challenges manifest in practice?*

*RQ2: In what ways do issues related to feedback and conflict resolution emerge in hybrid teams operating in a project-based organisation?*

Building on the insights gained from the first two questions, the third research question was formulated as follows:

*RQ3: What strategies can be implemented within the case company to mitigate the identified challenges in hybrid work environments?*

Concerning RQ1, the main challenges experienced in managing hybrid teams within the project-based construction organisation largely aligned with those identified in the theoretical background. Communication emerged as the most significant obstacle in remote work, impacting other areas of virtual collaboration. Additional challenges included team dynamics, collaboration, engagement, trust, and work-life balance. While issues pertaining to conflict, performance management, and feedback were also relevant, they are addressed separately in the following research question. A lack of well-established and open communication channels appeared to be the biggest driver of misalignment within teams, whereas those with clear communication strategies often resolved multiple issues simultaneously. Effective communication was associated with higher levels of satisfaction, engagement, and, thus, team cohesion. Although similar, some discrepancies were noted between the prerequisites for remote

work in a construction-focused context and those commonly described in the literature. This is likely impacted by the on-site nature and urgency of construction projects. While certain roles have adapted to remote work, particularly since the 2020 pandemic, others still require a physical presence on site.

Participants considered remote work a tool for maintaining a healthy work-life balance. By reducing commuting, the digital environment carries benefits of time preservation, but also for social and environmental sustainability. The possibility of occasional remote work appeared to increase overall employee satisfaction, with some highlighting the ability to stay close to family whilst remaining at their current employment. The flexibility of virtuality also facilitates access to competences not otherwise locally available, enabling collaboration across geographical distances and potentially improving availability. However, fundamental guidelines and clearly defined expectations were seen as helpful for aligning team members. It was noted that construction remains a highly on-site profession where much learning occurs through physical presence, an aspect that should not be overlooked. Whilst flexibility is appreciated, there remains a responsibility to sustain connection with the project team and to be present for one another.

For RQ2, the empirical findings suggest a general hesitation toward using digital tools for feedback and conflict management. Most participants expressed a strong preference for in-person interactions, with some avoiding feedback altogether if it had to be delivered remotely. It was also noted that the industry overall struggles with providing feedback, regardless of format, indicating that this might be an organisational issue and a primary challenge to address. Establishing clearer routines or normalising feedback could help reduce these challenges. The reluctance to manage sensitive matters remotely may stem from the industry's on-site dependency, where projects always come first. This environment shapes communication norms, influencing where and how feedback and conflicts are addressed. Many individuals begin their careers on-site, potentially reinforcing a preference for face-to-face problem solving. Additionally, cultural expectation of open dialogue and "freedom of speech" within the industry was also an identified theme, which might make in-person forums feel more natural or effective. Transitioning to digital settings introduces unfamiliar dynamics, possibly causing feelings of discomfort when managing conflict remotely.

## 7.1 Recommendations

Although it is difficult to propose definitive strategies, given the varied opinions and the need for a partially individualised approach, this thesis offers some practical recommendations in response to RQ3 and to support the continued implementation of remote work in PBOs.

Firstly, it is suggested that increased emphasis be placed on the importance of providing both positive and constructive feedback, delivered either remotely or in person, and across all levels of the organisation. This could also be a way to address issues and concerns directly, before they escalate, and open a venue for handling corrective conversations in a digital setting. To promote engagement and social cohesion within hybrid teams, companies should implement structured, regular check-ins on an organisational level. This includes professional and informal forums where a greater sense of community could be reinforced, as the importance of connecting physically within teams remains one of the biggest concerns. Having the opportunity for regular social interaction with colleagues and leaders has been identified as a key factor in enhancing satisfaction and overall engagement.

Furthermore, clear, company-wide guidelines for remote work could help reduce tensions between employees who prefer flexible work arrangements and those who perceive remote work as less productive. These guidelines can include specifying how often remote work is appropriate and explaining why occasional on-site presence is important, such as when new hires need to integrate with the team. The notion of involvement, which is deeply rooted within the case companies' culture, appears to help mitigate some of the challenges with geographically dispersed teams. Nonetheless, further improvements can be made, and it remains essential that managers continuously reinforce these structures in remote settings. On a similar note, a leader encouraging transparency about individual responsibilities and daily tasks reduces mistrust in remote work. Open communication, clear task division, clear expectations on availability, and shared platforms for distributing work strengthen team alignment. However, these efforts may also necessitate ethical considerations to balance transparency with personal integrity and privacy

Ultimately, it is important to consider the formulation of norms regarding availability, especially outside of regular working hours. It appeared that it may not be an issue for some, but it is still important to discuss and clarify expectations. Clear communication may help to better support work-life balance and prevent the development of unsustainable habits. For new employees or those in junior roles, this clarity is particularly important in setting boundaries and avoiding burnout. Even employees who do not currently perceive availability as an issue may benefit from clearer norms that support disengagement when needed, eventually promoting long-term well-being and productivity.

## 7.2 Future Research and Development

Following the research conducted in this thesis, some areas of future research have been noted as a potential continuation of research around hybrid work in PBOs in the construction sector.

Introversion and extroversion came up in the data collection and could be a topic for future research concerning the topic of the thesis. Assessing how different personality types perceive remote or hybrid work, as well as how they cope with the different challenges posed by it. Other personality aspects could also be further investigated, such as leadership styles and traits, and their impact on the working conditions. Similarly, cultural differences within a workforce could also be further explored to decipher whether that affects the view on hybrid work. This research pertains to a Scandinavian company operating within Sweden and with a predominantly Swedish staff; as such, many of the cultural values and norms are shaped by this environment. Other regions or specific cultural groups may interpret hybrid and remote work differently and experience different challenges.

During the interview process, the aspect of generational discrepancy emerged, specifically whether age and or generational belonging impacted the attitude towards or aptitude for remote work, though it was not further explored in the subsequent data analysis. Participants reflected on the contrast between those who have grown up in a fully digital era versus those who have adapted to digital tools later in life. This raised questions about potential differences in their ability to engage effectively in remote work, as well as whether their perspective on remote work varied. On a similar note, the effect of remote or hybrid work on senior versus junior roles could be additionally investigated. Although the collected data included information about formal leadership roles and responsibility over subordinates, this aspect was not analysed in depth due to time and scope constraints. However, there were indications that certain roles viewed remote work more favourably, whereas others experienced challenges resulting from the lack of physical presence. It would be valuable to examine how remote work affects different roles and explore strategies for effectively addressing the associated challenges.

The literature and empirical data highlighted the theme of information sharing and the risk of information overload. Further research could investigate the information flows to a greater extent and their role in the hybrid environment, including the potential benefits of different information-sharing platforms. A particularly relevant topic today is the use of AI in remote working environments. Future studies could explore the challenges and opportunities this presents, along with its potential to enhance the effectiveness and overall experience of remote work, and how it might support management in combating some of the identified challenges.

Lastly, the limited perspective of a single contracting company opens opportunities for broader investigation. Comparing these findings with insights from other stakeholders in the construction industry, such as additional contractors, clients, and consultants, could provide a more encompassing picture of the perceived challenges and mitigating strategies in hybrid work in the construction sector. Additionally, examining cross-functional collaborations within geographically dispersed teams may provide further valuable insights. The perspective could also be expanded by including PBOs from other industries. While the current results may be generalisable across sectors, such comparisons would help confirm this and support broader applicability.



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# A

## Interview Guideline

### **Opening Questions**

- May we record and transcribe this interview? (The transcription will only be available to the authors of this thesis, and all recorded material will be deleted upon its completion.)
- Is it okay if we mention your professional role in the thesis? (Your name and other identifying information will be excluded.)

### **Background & Context**

- Can you introduce yourself, including your background and your current role at the company?

### **Remote Work & Physical Interaction**

- How much of your work is done remotely? How often do you interact with your manager/your team in a digital environment?
- Have you encountered any challenges related to remote work?
- Is it important for you to meet your team in person? If so, how? Do you think initial in-person meetings can strengthen collaboration in remote work?
- What types of meetings work best digitally, and which ones need to be in person to be effective?

### **Critical Situations**

- How do you prefer to give and receive feedback and performance evaluations in a remote or hybrid environment? Have you encountered any challenges in this?
- Can you share an example of a difficult feedback situation in a digital setting? How was it handled?

- Have you been in a digital environment where feedback was given smoothly and effectively? What made it successful?
- How do you handle underperformance or lack of engagement in a virtual work environment
- How do you approach conflict resolution in a remote team? Have you experienced a situation where remote work made conflict resolution more difficult?
- Have you ever misinterpreted someone's tone or intention in a digital conversation? How did you handle it?

### **Leadership & Actions**

- Have you had a leader who effectively handled challenges related to remote work? What did they do that worked well?
- Do you feel that your manager is available and supportive in a digital work environment? If yes, what have they done to support you?
- What makes you feel most included and appreciated in a remote team?
- How do you ensure your team stays engaged and motivated while working remotely?
- Which digital tools or platforms have been most helpful to you when working remotely?
- Have you encountered any challenges in using them effectively, and how have you dealt with those challenges?
- Are there any specific features you feel are missing in digital tools to better manage remote work?

### **Closing Questions**

- Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't discussed yet?

# B

## Survey Questions

### **What is your professional role?**

- Project staff (e.g., site supervisor, site manager, project manager)
  - Manager with personnel responsibility (e.g., operations manager, estimating manager, design manager)
  - Support resources/staff (e.g., project/contract engineer, surveying technician, procurement, business development, operations development)
  - Other
- 

### **Do you have a formal responsibility role over other individuals in your organisation?**

- Yes
- No

### **If yes, approximately how many people are you responsible for?**

---

### **Roughly, how is your work time distributed?**

- 100% remote work
  - Hybrid (more remote than in-office)
  - Hybrid (more in-office than remote)
  - Fully in the office
- 

### **How often do you collaborate with colleagues and leaders in a remote environment?**

- Daily
- Several times a week
- Once a week
- A few times a month
- Rarely

---

**How common do you find the following factors during remote work?**

Please rate each statement on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = Not very common and 5 = Very common.

- Difficulty staying motivated
- Lack of clear communication
- Technical problems
- Feeling of isolation
- Difficulty maintaining work-life balance
- Difficulties in decision-making
- Difficulties with conflict management

---

**Are there other common challenges or situations in remote work that you have experienced and would like to share?**

---

**How important is it for you to meet your team in person?**

Please rate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = Not at all important and 5 = Extremely important.

---

**Do you believe that initial in-person meetings strengthen collaboration in remote work?**

Please rate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree.

---

**What are the biggest challenges leaders face in managing remote teams?**

Select up to two options.

- Ensuring team engagement and motivation
- Maintaining clear and consistent communication
- Building trust and strong relationships
- Managing performance and accountability
- Supporting employees' work-life balance
- Other

**Have you had a leader who effectively handled the challenges of remote work?**

- Yes
- No

**If yes, what did they do that worked well?**

---

**How effective do you think the team's communication is during remote work?**

Please rate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = Not effective at all and 5 = Very effective.

---

**Have you experienced difficulties collaborating remotely?**

- Yes
- No

**If yes, how was it resolved?**

---

**How would you rate the level of trust within your remote team?**

Please rate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = Low trust and 5 = High trust.

---

**Do you have any suggestions for how a leader can promote respect and inclusion in a remote team?**

---

**How comfortable are you working independently in a remote setting?**

Please rate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = Not at all comfortable and 5 = Very comfortable.

---

**What challenges do you experience when working independently?**

Select all that apply.

- Hard to stay focused and productive
- Unclear expectations
- Too little support from leaders or colleagues
- Feeling disconnected from the team

- Other

**What keeps you motivated during remote work?**

Select up to two options.

- Regular follow-ups and feedback from leaders
  - Clear goals and expectations
  - Opportunities for collaboration
  - Strong sense of purpose in my work
  - Other
- 

**Have you noticed a difference in team motivation and engagement during remote work compared to office work?**

- Yes
- No

**If yes, what factors influenced this?**

---

**Do you have suggestions on how leaders and organisations can better support motivation in a remote or hybrid environment?**

---

**What digital communication tools do you use most?**

Select all that apply.

- Email
  - Chat functions (in Teams, etc.)
  - Video meetings
  - Project tools (Bluebeam, MAP, etc.)
  - Phone calls
  - Other
- 

**How do you prefer to receive feedback during remote work?**

Select all that apply.

- Written feedback (email, chat, documents)
- Verbal feedback via digital tools (video call, phone)
- Verbal feedback in person

- Group discussions or team meetings
  - Other
- 

**Have you experienced challenges in giving or receiving feedback remotely?**

- Yes
- No

**If you answered yes in the previous question, please elaborate.**

---

**How do you handle conflicts in a remote team?**

Select all that apply.

- Direct and open discussion via video call
  - Written communication (email, chat)
  - Mediation from a third party (leader, HR)
  - Avoid conflicts altogether
  - Address in person at the next meeting
  - Other
- 

**Have you experienced a situation where remote work made conflict management more difficult?**

- Yes
  - No
- 

**If yes, how was it handled?**

**Is there anything we haven't covered in this survey that you would like to share?**

For example, about remote work, leadership, or anything else related to the study

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