



Transitioning to the New Normal

How has the transition to a virtual workplace been and how do employees handle working full-time in virtual teams?

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Executive Summary

This thesis seeks to explore how virtual teams experienced the transition to a virtual workplace and how they managed working full-time under extraordinary circumstances that caused them to work virtually involuntarily. The research was conducted qualitatively in the setting of a medium-sized established Norwegian company within the digital marketing sector. The use of data through observations and semi-structured interviews aim to shed light on the aforementioned research problem in relation to broader literature on virtual teamwork.

In the first section, the study identified how the virtual transition was experienced in the early phase, and with already established digital tools and equipment, the study showed that team members characterize it as having less difficulties and being more comfortable. The study also noted that virtual teamwork results in a greater physical distance from other team members, resulting in challenges with maintaining communication and building new relationships. Moreover, the study uncovered the fact that early formation of face-to-face contact and familiarity remains important for building trust. However, it was also seen that frequent communication and audio-visual communication technologies can help deliver more personal meeting experiences and thus increase the presence of social cohesion and trust within virtual teams.

In the study's second section, the key challenges and benefits that the established firm obtained by working virtually were identified. In this regard, challenges related to the lack of informal communication and social interactions were found to be significant in terms of team member's relations and wellbeing. Additionally, this research found that the virtual working environment poses new ways of working in regard to higher flexibility, but also blurs the lines between personal and work domains in which controlling the new era of work and staying motivated becomes more challenging to manage.

Preface

This thesis is written as a part of the Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration at the Norwegian School of Economics within the major of Business Analysis and Performance Management and comprises a total of 30 ECTS.

The thesis is written in collaboration with the RaCE research project. The participation in the RaCE research project has supported the research presented in this thesis greatly and provided it with valuable insights and perspectives. The development of this thesis has been truly an enjoyable and educational experience which has provided me with newfound knowledge and insights into a new and relevant topic that I hope will be of use to both practitioners and academics.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In light of the COVID-19 crisis, the use of digital tools and online communication has become increasingly important. While people have been gradually shifting to working virtually in the past decades, the pandemic has forced businesses and workers to work full-time remotely at an unprecedented speed. With the outbreak of COVID-19, virtual working has opened a new range of opportunities in terms of the way's businesses work and structure themselves with flexible working environments and improved work quality. In this context, Nydegger and Nydegger (2010) argue that these flexible workplace models allow for knowledge-sharing across the globe, foster cross-divisional collaboration, and provide higher cost saving opportunities. Similarly, the pandemic has resulted in a rapid transformation of new working environments where new technologies have fostered and shaped the world of virtual communication amongst teams (KPMG, 2020). However, with this change, businesses need to understand and support their employees in order to efficiently adapt to the new digitized working environment (Deloitte, 2020).

Despite the significant advantages virtual teams currently have for businesses, there are some challenging factors. Here, Nydegger and Nydegger (2010) state that the lack of physical interaction and non-verbal cues cause major problems. Further, research shows that a lack of trust, loneliness, ineffective communication, and cultural issues are prominent challenges in virtual environments as social interaction becomes more problematic (Wang et al., 2021). The absence of physical interaction makes virtual teams form new organizational structures where digital communication is used as the medium to connect with people. One of the many impacts of remote working is the increased utilization of virtual technologies in meeting the now new and different work context. As businesses are forced from their established operational working structure, they are exposed to a completely new working environment with technology as their teammate (Frost & Duan, 2020). The new setup of virtual teams involves a changing landscape with new workplace adaptation and different premises of interactions between team members. Consequently, the interactions in virtual teams and the challenges and benefits this entails are worth further investigation.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to a broader understanding of the virtual experiences of employees during the pandemic and shed light on how they handle working full time remotely. First, it should be noted that the rapid transformation of the workplace has led to a majority of employees working remotely. However, with the high levels of uncertainty and digitized working environments, businesses and workers face great difficulties in adjusting to their new workplaces. Moreover, it remains challenging to successfully facilitate remote working in order to build effective virtual teams. For these reasons, it is interesting to examine and investigate the key challenges and benefits virtual teams face as well as analyze how they experience transitioning to a new virtual landscape. Thus, in this thesis I will aim to shed light on the following research question:

How has the transition to a virtual workforce been and how do employees handle working full-time in virtual teams?

This research question lays the foundation of the thesis and forms the basis for a qualitative study of virtual teams in an established case company. By conducting semi-structured interviews and observations, a well-grounded database will be analyzed and discussed in relation to existing literature in an attempt to shed light on the aforementioned research question.

1.3 Motivation

The motivation for writing a thesis related to employees' experience of transitioning to a virtual workplace is strongly connected to the changing environment of increased globalization, better technological solutions, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the use of technological tools for communication has developed significantly during the past decades, which has led to new challenges for businesses and workers. These hardships have not yet been experienced at this magnitude before, and many parties do not know how to handle them. Meanwhile, as technological development leads to new ways of interacting, it also remains important to have updated research based on the specific time and situation. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an immense spike in uncertainty, particularly in regard to the new and changing workplace environment for the majority of

businesses. This master's thesis serves as a tool to uncover and analyze how employees have experienced this transition and how they handle working full time remotely. Although research has been conducted with these motives before, the working environment has undergone unprecedented change as a result of COVID-19 and hence, needs to be studied and evaluated once again.

1.4 Structure

This paper is divided into different chapters that aim to answer the aforementioned research question. The second chapter provides an overview of relevant theory from existing literature, while the third chapter explores the study and its methodology in a more in-depth manner. Subsequently, the fourth chapter presents the findings from the study before these are elaborated and discussed in chapter five. Last, chapter six discusses the limitations to the study and suggests areas for further research, followed by the conclusion.

2. Theory

The following chapter introduces a literature review on virtual teams and provides insight into the relevant theory that aims to elucidate the research question. It is structured into five main parts: definition of teams and virtual teams, virtual communication, trust, work-life balance, and social isolation. First, the literature's definition of teams as a concept is presented, before specifically focusing on the definition of virtual teams. For more in-depth theory, the communication aspect is then presented in terms of informal communication and communication efficiency before considering trust as an aspect within virtual teams. Following this, work-life balance within virtual teams is presented through the framework of boundary management and the topics of flexibility, structure, and self-discipline. Last, the literature related to social isolation and relationship building is outlined.

2.1 Definition of Teams

Teams have been an important part of an organization's work and business for many decades. However, the development of new technology and innovative ideas have changed how teams interact and work together (Benishek & Lazzara, 2019). Conversely, today's teams have evolved considerably from past decades according to the changing dynamic of work and team member interactions. These developments have led to a new era for teamwork in the workplace; hence, existing knowledge and practice of teams may not hold for current trends and tasks in organizations (Benishek & Lazzara, 2019).

Traditionally, teams have been considered to be tightly bound and intact as well as consisting of people solely from a single organization. Scholars have described teams as a group of stable and bounded individuals working interdependently toward a shared goal (Wageman et al., 2012). Teams are accordingly composed of two or more members with high interdependency and stable memberships, influenced by its context (Benishek & Lazzara, 2019). Similarly, teams today are coupled with members from different organizations with shifting memberships while using technology as a strong tool in their work (Benishek & Lazzara, 2019). With that change, stable and bounded membership has become far more diverse, dynamic, and self-determined but less the standard norm in teams (Wageman et al., 2012).

Hackman (2012) draws attention to recognizing teams as social systems dynamically engaging with the environment. Furthermore, he argues that teams might be temporary and change over time, while their members are interdependent for some common purposes. To further emphasize the specific features of teams, West and Lyubovnikova (2012, as cited in Benishek et al., 2019, para.5) argue that real teams are comprised of “coupled interdependence, agreed upon objectives, systematic reflexes or reviews of performance, clear boundaries, high autonomy, and specified roles”. A more explicit definition of teams is stated by Thompson (2015): “A team is a group of people who are dependent on each other in terms of information, resources and skills and seeks to combine their efforts to reach a common goal” (p. 20). With this concise definition, Thompson includes elements of high interdependence and common purpose from both Hackman (2012) and West and Lyubovnikova’s (2012) descriptions of teams and will consequently be used as a premise for the analysis later in the text.

2.2 Definition of Virtual Teams

Over the past decades, there has been a rapid growth of virtual teams in organizations, and this trend is only expected to continue in the future. The explosive growth in utilization of emerging technologies has led to virtual teams becoming more prevalent in organizations today and has outstripped both research and theory on virtual teams. Consequently, research suggests several definitions of virtual teams (Liao, 2017). Horwitz et al. (2006) define virtual teams as groups of people where team members are geographically distributed, work interdependently, and conduct their core work mainly through an electronic medium to share common goals. While teams have traditionally been seen as bounded and with stable membership over a time period, virtual teams often have more flexible boundaries and changing memberships (Wageman et al., 2012). To further emphasize, Thompson (2015) defines virtual teams as those working closely together without each member being physically present or working in similar time zones.

Although these definitions differ slightly in terms of their specific languages, they share certain features. The most important is related to the use of technology to communicate and connect rather than face-to-face interaction that is more present in traditional teams. Brochs-Haukedal (2017) considers this to be a key feature to virtual teams—namely that email, internet and other online technology allows team members to communicate without

interacting face-to-face. He therefore also states that members of virtual teams in some cases have never met each other physically. Another common feature is that individuals are dispersed in different areas and time zones, working on tasks with high interdependence to reach a goal (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Nydegger & Nydegger, 2010). Virtual teams therefore have the ability to work across distance, time, and organizational boundaries (Horwitz et al., 2006). Consequently, virtual teams represent a new way of working that brings together skilled people to utilize the company's competencies and maximize expertise, regardless of geographical boundaries and time constraints (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017).

2.3 Communication in Virtual Teams

In team communication literature, researchers have emphasized the defining characteristic of virtual teams as communicating primarily through virtual channels (Liao, 2017). As a result, research shows that virtual teams may take longer time to finish their tasks mainly because of the time delay associated with virtual tools and their nature (Marlow et al., 2017). In this context, Marlow et al. (2017) further highlight the technological issues related to using virtual tools and particularly focus on delayed audio or challenges in regard to interpreting text differently when not hearing the accompanying verbal tone. This is supported by Ford et al. (2017) who emphasize that technological issues can result in a dead end for virtual teams, which can then lead to challenges for team members to share input with each other. Consequently, the use of communication technologies increases external interruptions in which breaks in team members' attention or workflow is encountered (Rennecker & Godwin, 2005). Oeppen et al. (2020) argue that these types of interruptions prevent people from focusing on their work tasks, reducing the communication effectiveness. Nevertheless, while the virtual interactions can make it challenging to communicate, Rice et al. (2007) argue that establishing clear procedures remains fundamental for team members to communicate in a systematic and goal-oriented manner.

In terms of the communication process, virtual communication has also been perceived as more impersonal due to the limited degree of nonverbal cues and gestures (Purvanova, 2014). Furthermore, communication within virtual teams is often asynchronous as well as less interactive and relationship-oriented (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2011). Moreover, Marlow et al. (2017) argue that the absence of non-verbal cues within virtual teams may result in misunderstandings as it is more challenging to understand information accurately and the

possibilities for clarification are fewer. Despite the challenges related to virtual communication—asynchronous communication in particular—written emails or messages enables team members to accurately process and consider information before responding (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2011). Additionally, the use of virtual tools ensures that the communication content is also more available to everyone—in particular, team members to whom the content is related (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2011).

2.3.1 Informal and Face-to-face Communication

The absence of informal communication in virtual environments has profound effects on facilitating trust, enhancing collaboration, and building team relationships. The informal communication is characterized by face-to-face communication that primarily occurs during unplanned meetings in the hallway, by the coffee machine, or after meetings (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). Such informal contact plays an important role in collaboration, particularly in terms of strengthening the feeling of a sense of belonging to the team (Marlow et al., 2017). In this context, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) argue that spontaneous, informal communication further fosters the exchange of information and knowledge sharing as well as the giving and receiving of corrective feedback. As a result, the social ties and cohesion within the team also becomes strengthened, resulting in greater mutual trust and understanding. In contrast, the opportunities for informal interactions becomes limited in virtual working environments with less information exchanges and more formal communications with a focus on work-related tasks (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). Consequently, Röcker (2012) states that the lack of face-to-face in virtual teams results in less frequent interactions, lower social cohesion, and less personal contact between team members.

The lack of informal communication amongst virtual teams results in an increase in online activity, both in terms of audio- and audio-visual communication technologies. Although communication technologies are becoming increasingly important for businesses, they have limitations in fully supporting informal interactions and facilitating non-verbal cues. In this context, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) argue that the use of communication technologies is linked with different challenges but offers diverse capabilities to express verbal and nonverbal cues. More specifically, they emphasize that the presence of video when communicating helps when employees do not know each other well, but that audio-visual

technology masks both verbal and visual cues due to the lack of support for nonverbal interactions. Further, in the absence of nonverbal and visual cues within communication technologies, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) state that it becomes more challenging to infer the intentions of team members and interpret the information accurately. In particular, it becomes challenging to determine whether the written information is clearly understood during asynchronous communication (using text-based tools) due to missing social information and nonverbal cues (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020).

Furthermore, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) emphasize that communication tools and in particular, text-based tools often require more time and effort to craft messages and effectively communicate information. Nevertheless, while this might require virtual teams to put in extra effort, it also allows them to take more time to clearly think through a message before crafting it. As a result of this higher effort, more efficient, focused, and clearer conversations take place with better decision quality and greater satisfaction (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020).

2.3.2 Communication and Efficiency

The input-process-output framework put forth by McGrath (1964, as cited in Ilgen et al., 2005) explains team effectiveness through the processes that team members undertake to reach a desired outcome. The communication process within virtual teams can be described through a moderated version of the model—namely the input-mediator-output-input (IMOI) framework suggested by Ilgen et al. (2005). More specifically, the IMOI framework describes interactions between input and process as well as how communication is essential for team efficiency and performance. In this context, Marlow et al. (2017) describe how the communication process is influenced by other factors, particularly by team diversity and team and task characteristics. Furthermore, different elements of communication including frequency, quality and content are included in the aforementioned model and are all necessary for reaching targeted outcomes (Marlow et al., 2017).

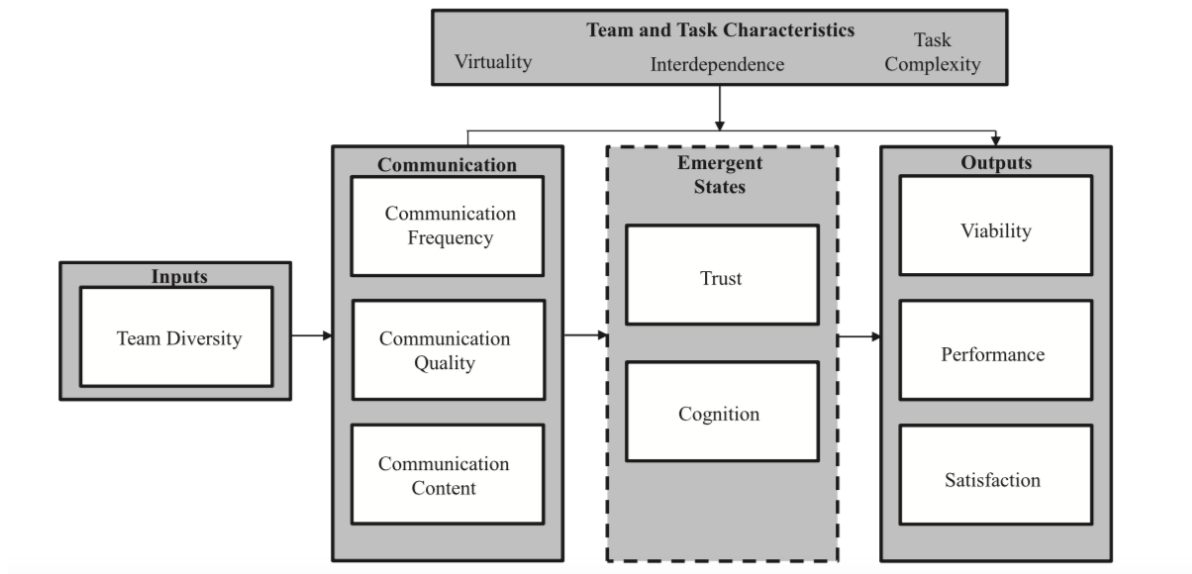


Figure 1: *Proposed Communication Process Framework in Virtual Teams (Marlow et al., 2017)*

Communication Quality

Marlow et al. (2017) argue that the role of communication quality has a significant impact on team outcome and plays an inherent role to the study of virtual teams. The communication quality can be defined as the extent to which the communication is clear, efficient, accurate, and understood between the team members. Additionally, they also emphasize the importance of communication quality in which the exchange of relevant information contributes to an increased shared understanding (Marlow et al., 2017).

Marlow et al. (2017) suggest two features of communication quality; communication timeliness and closed-loop communication. Communication timeliness refers to the quality of being able to complete tasks in time. Marlow et al. (2017) describe that this is particularly challenging in virtual team interaction because of the asynchronous communication in due to different time zones with limited opportunities for face-to-face interactions. As a result, messages may be received later than they were sent, and team members spend more time on completing their tasks in the virtual working environment, which further impacts their performance (Marlow et al., 2017). Another important aspect of communication quality is closed-loop communication, which can be defined as the degree to which a message from a team member has been received and clearly understood (Marlow et al., 2017). This aids in reducing misunderstandings between team members and mitigating challenges related to

audio delays and text messages within the nature of virtual tools. This is of particular significance in virtual teams where the lack of verbal cues and tone may result in increased misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Therefore, ensuring that communication is clearly understood while being delivered on time results in greater efficiency and team performance (Marlow et al., 2017).

Communication Frequency and Content

In team literature, Marlow et al. (2017) argue that a higher communication frequency does not always result in a greater team performance and emphasize that even with limited opportunities to communicate, some teams might be able to work more efficiently. To support this, they suggest that in familiar teams, when a shared cognition is present, team members are able to perform more efficiently even in complex conditions with lower communication frequency and less information exchange (Marlow et al., 2017). This shared cognition further enables team members to understand how other team members may respond in different settings even when they are unable to communicate. Furthermore, Marlow et al. (2017) also argue that relational-oriented communication content of a more interpersonal nature is specifically involved in creating cohesion and trust rather than task-oriented communication content with a focus on task completion. As a result, a higher communication frequency does not necessarily lead to a better team performance. Marlow et al. (2017) support this by explaining that when communication occurs through virtual tools, communication frequency may be higher than that of traditional teams, but as virtual teams may spend more time on determining how to decrease irrelevant communication, efficiency decreases. Furthermore, an unusually high volume of communication frequency may result in lower communication quality and thereby, delay the team processes and performance (Marlow et al., 2017).

2.4 Trust

Research into virtual teams has shown a positive relationship between trust and team performance (Ford et al., 2017). While trust has been defined in various ways, Schoorman et al. (2007, as cited in Ford et al., 2017, p. 27) describe it as “the willingness of one to be vulnerable to another based on the expectation by a trusting party that the party being trusted will perform a particular action important to the trusting party, regardless of the ability to

monitor or control the other party". Additionally, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) state that trust is important for holding a collaboration together, and more specifically, for team effectiveness and performance as it plays a crucial role in the degree of feedback sharing, asking for help, and the discussion of issues in an open manner. However, while trust has profound effects on team collaboration, it remains challenging to establish in virtual teams partly because of limited personal interactions with the absence of contextual cues, facial expressions, and tone of voice (Marlow et al., 2017). The lack of informal communication and personal interactions further makes it increasingly difficult to develop and maintain strong relationships in virtual teams (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020).

Moreover, in order to establish trust in virtual teams, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) emphasize the importance of developing non-work-related interactions and promoting social exchanges early on. Although these types of informal discussions often occur face-to-face, the presence of video calling tools allows body language and facial expressions to be seen, which particularly helps when relationships are weaker (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). Marlow et al. (2017) support this while emphasizing the importance of high-quality communication with frequent dialogues for developing trust and shared understanding. In line with communication quality, timely and predictable communication also remains important for establishing and maintaining trust in virtual teams. Here, confirming that messages are received, following up, and informing that messages are clearly understood contributes to engaging in closed-loop communication and is equally important in preserving trust among virtual team members (Marlow et al., 2017).

2.4.1 Trust and Performance

Research shows that trust is a key factor that enhances effectiveness and performance levels in virtual teams (Ford et al., 2017). Clark et al. (2010) characterize teams with a higher degree of trust to be more active, more focused on the achievement of the task, and providing more constructive feedback. This is supported by Brahm and Kunze (2012) who emphasize that within teams with high levels of team cohesion, team productivity increases partly because team members feel a sense of belonging to the team. In line with this, teams with higher team cohesion are also more effective in terms of higher workload sharing, clear task-specific communication, and less task-specific conflicts (Brahm & Kunze, 2012). However, in the absence of a clear context, limited opportunities for observation, and weaker

social ties, Breuer et al. (2016) argue that misunderstandings and conflicts are more likely to occur within virtual teams. For these reasons, they also emphasize that trust is of higher importance for the efficiency in virtual than traditional teams, making the former more dependent on it.

2.5 Work-Life Balance

New working environments that involve the increased use of virtual tools have led to a higher interest in how boundaries between work and non-work are created and maintained (Allen et al., 2021). The boundary management framework refers to the way individuals create, maintain, or change boundaries with the aim of organizing their professional work and personal life domains (Mellner et al., 2013). Allen et al. (2021) describe the segmentation or integration of boundaries that individuals create as a function of personal preferences, actual behavior, and environmental surroundings. In particular, they argue that those who have a preference towards integration are more comfortable with having less strict boundaries between work and non-work, while those who prefer segmentation like to keep their work and personal life separated. For example, employees who prefer segmentation may handle personal issues during breaks or leisure or have specified working hours during the day, while those who prefer integration are more comfortable with taking calls during leisure or working during the evenings and weekends (Mellner et al., 2013; Allen et al., 2021).

Additionally, Allen et al. (2021) emphasize that as per the boundary theory, the desirable state of being is when boundary management preferences are aligned with their environment. However, when working from home, individuals who prefer segmentation experience weakened boundaries and a misalignment in their preferences and environment (Allen et al., 2021). In this context, Lott (2020) argues that with such flexible working environments, the boundaries between work and home domains are blurred, making it particularly challenging for such employees to achieve a work-life balance. Thus, Allen et al. (2021) state that ensuring a fit between a person and their environment is important. Further, Shockley et al. (2021) emphasize that having workplace supplies, such as a dedicated home office space, is essential for remote workers to create physical boundaries and facilitate segmentation between work and non-work roles. Such an area can also create the physiological feeling of “being at the office” and strengthen the work-nonwork balance. Contrarily, individuals who

prefer integration are able to quickly adapt to the new working environment and more easily achieve balance between their work and personal life (Allen et al., 2021).

Allen et al. (2021) further explain that within boundary management, the number of individuals at home makes it challenging for people preferring segmentation to create boundaries that meet their own needs. Furthermore, sharing the workplace and home with the same people can be particularly challenging because of increased interruptions from nonwork matters and noise while working (Allen et al., 2021). As a result, individuals living by themselves find it less challenging to establish boundaries than those living with others (Allen et al., 2021).

2.5.1 Flexibility and Productivity

In the existing research on virtual working, Beauregard and Henry (2009) present the advantage of increased work schedule flexibility and time-planning autonomy. Although remote workers have flexibility in terms of planning and scheduling their days to best suit their preferences, research shows that they also work longer hours as opposed to office workers (Hill et al., 2003). To further support this, Hill et al. (2003) emphasize that increased autonomy is associated with increased motivation at work resulting in employees working longer hours. Furthermore, Beauregard and Henry (2009) argue that longer working hours may be subject to an increased availability for work and a reduction in commuting time resulting in greater work efforts. In addition, Tremblay and Genin (2007) state that the virtual workplace includes the possibility of a greater amount of control in which employees can choose their working hours depending on when they are productive during the day. Consequently, this flexibility leads to an increase in employee's job satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Beauregard & Henry, 2009).

Bentley et al. (2016) also emphasize the increased autonomy and control through which employees can decide where to work as well as create flexible workplaces better suited for them. Research shows that as a result of greater flexibility in terms of location, employees experience higher levels of job satisfaction and productivity and decreased turnover rates (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). This is supported by Martin and MacDonnell (2012) who also note the increased productivity as a function of working during peak efficiency hours and being exposed to less office distractions and interruptions from co-workers.

2.5.2 Structure and Self-Dicipline

In the literature of social cognitive theory, Bandura (1997) emphasize the importance of self-efficacy and individual belief and confidence to execute actions required to reach specified goals. He further argues that the role of self-efficacy beliefs in individuals are a function of the level of motivation, affective states, and actions in which individuals are able to complete a task. As a result, high perseverance related to self-efficacy results in greater performance, job satisfaction, and productivity (Cherian & Jacob, 2013). Furthermore, research suggests that job involvement and organizational commitment influence employee motivation, in which the antecedent to their motivation is their self-efficacy. Further, studies have shown that both self-efficacy and motivation are essential for performance, effectiveness, and efficiency in the workplace. (Cherian & Jacob, 2013).

In addition to self-efficacy, Bandura (1997) explain the importance of self-discipline for reaching target outcomes and goals. Later, Gorbunovs et al. (2016) defined self-discipline as the ability to regulate behavior, such as when an individual performs actions, they are able to recognize and identify what they should do, even if they do not want to. In this context, research has indicated the importance of academic self-discipline in order to reach target outcomes, maintain motivation, and preserve efforts (Jung et al., 2017). Building upon this, past studies have identified self-discipline as a predicator for long-term academic performance. To support this, de Ridder et al. (2012) explain that higher levels of self-discipline lead to greater performance and goal achievement. Further, Hofmann et al. (2012) argue that such levels also lead to better management of daily routines and consequent ease in the handling of tasks and overcoming of challenges. Furthermore, the ability to find the most suitable solution to a challenge is more present in individuals with high self-discipline as compared to those without (Gorbunovs et al., 2016).

2.6 Social Isolation and Job Satisfaction

Research shows that social isolation has been identified as a negative outcome in the workplace context of remote working (Bentley et al., 2016). Scholars define this phenomenon in the workplace as “professional isolation,” the belief that individuals lack interaction and social contact with their colleagues (Golden et al., 2008). In this context, Bentley et al. (2016) argue that this type of isolation occurs when an individual’s need to feel

socially connected with others is not fulfilled. To further emphasize, Baker et al. (2006) note that social isolation is a particular function of a person-environment mismatch because of inefficient support for virtual team members. Consequently, limited social interactions, inadequate task support, and feelings of isolation are more prevalent in the virtual context. Furthermore, remote working arrangements may pose constraints on the workplace environment and social interactions in which the quality and frequency of interactions are reduced (Baker et al., 2006). As a result, the lack of social interactions in the remote working context can lead to feelings of isolation, reduced job satisfaction, and reduced performance (Bentley et al., 2016).

Furthermore, virtual working environments may lead employees to feel like they are missing opportunities at the office as well as “out of the loop,” by which they are no longer sure about their place within the company and miss out on informal and interactive learning (Lal & Dwivedi, 2009). More specifically, in the long term, the relationships between remote workers deteriorates, impacting team cohesiveness and communication negatively (Lal & Dwivedi, 2009). Thus, as the degree of social interactions becomes limited, remote workers also feel disconnected from their co-workers and work tasks. Consequently, this can lead to a decrease in employees’ commitment towards their work as well as productivity and trust, enhancing the feeling of being left out from decision-making (Lal & Dwivedi, 2009).

In light of the self-determination theory, the psychological need for relatedness—namely feeling a sense of belonging to other people—plays an important role in attaining well-being and personal growth (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Further, recent literature shows that low relatedness as a result of being in quarantine during the pandemic can lead to lower satisfaction with life (Šakan et al., 2020). More specifically, Šakan et al.’s (2020) quantitative study revealed that satisfaction with life was dependent on that with relatedness. Although the study revealed that the effect of relatedness satisfaction was lower than the two other needs (autonomy and competence), satisfying this need as well as autonomy mediated in enhancing the satisfaction with life during the pandemic.

With regard to reducing the negative outcomes related to remote working, empirical research shows that organizationally derived support influences social isolation positively through effective virtual communication channels between the remote worker and the organization (Bentley et al., 2016). To further emphasize, Bentley et al. (2016) argue that social

interactions between the employees in the workplace such as rich communication, friendship, and knowledge sharing are important for ensuring job satisfaction and can lead to a decreased feeling of isolation.

2.7 Building Relations

Buss (1991) argues that the ability to identify with others through established relationships is regarded as a fundamental motivation in individuals where interactions must take place in stable environments. However, in virtual environments, individuals' ability to maintain the same degree of interaction solely through communication technologies becomes challenging. To further emphasize, Furst et al. (2004) argue that building relationships is more challenging when team members are located at different places, and only linked by means of communication technologies, which diminishes the communication frequency and increases the possibility for faulty first impressions. Furthermore, Peters and Manz (2007) state that the lack of face-to-face meetings also leads to challenges related to accurately interpreting facial expressions and body language. In addition, Marlow et al. (2017) emphasize that the lack of cues in virtual tools causes difficulties in conveying information, including tone and emotions, and inhibit the relationship development of virtual teams. Although the lack of cues when using communication technologies can impact relationship building over time, relational-oriented information can be shared via virtual tools as well (Marlow et al., 2017).

Moreover, Peters and Manz (2007) emphasize the importance of the early stages of formation in a virtual team in which face-to-face contact remains important in developing relationships between team members. Although virtual face-to-face communication has been regarded as an important aspect of virtual team effectiveness, they highlight the importance of the degree of familiarity between team members. This involves having knowledge of other team members as well as previous and current experiences with them. The authors emphasize that both the face-to-face communication and the familiarity between team members thus encompasses the depth of their relationship (Peters and Manz, 2007).

2.8 Summary of Theory

To summarize the theory section, it should first be noted that while several definitions of teams and virtual teams were presented, Thompson's definitions (2015) of them lay the premises for this paper as they include characteristics and features of the many definitions by other scholars and are relevant to this study. Following this, characteristics of virtual communication were presented before diving deeper into informal communication and interactiveness as well as efficiency in light of Marlow et al.'s (2017) framework of communication processes. Accordingly, literature regarding the establishment of trust in virtual teams and its impact on performance was presented and explained in greater depth. Finally, studies on work-life balance and social isolation as well as their significance in terms of job satisfaction and performance were described more comprehensively.

Despite the literature on virtual team interactions and characteristics of virtual teamwork, there seem to be theoretical gaps regarding how virtual team members experience the transition when being forced to work remotely full-time and how they accordingly handle it in such unprecedented times. Moreover, as the scope for new ways of working is continuously expanding through new communication technologies and flexible working environments, there is a constant need for new research that can perceive the problem from a new perspective. This study, therefore, aims to address the gap and provide the literature necessary to understand the transition to virtual working environments. In the following section, the methodological choices and insights into how this has taken place will be introduced and elaborated on.

3. Methodology

This section includes the methodology chosen for the paper. First, the research approach and design used will be presented before examining the data gathering methods and analysis in more detail. Finally, the method used will be evaluated, and ethical aspects related to the study will be discussed.

3.1 Research Approach

In this study, an inductive research design is the foundation for the analysis. Inductive research is characterized by the use of a variety of qualitative methods of analysis where a range of data can be collected and interpreted (Saunders et al., 2019). Saunders et al. (2019) describe this approach as optimal when there is little knowledge about the contexts in which events takes place and a deep understanding of the phenomena is needed. Consequently, this method is applicable as the aim of this study is to analyze virtual teams which transforms rapidly over time with its embedded technology. Furthermore, an inductive approach serves as a more appropriate tool as it starts with collecting data to develop theory rather than data following theory (Saunders et al., 2019). Moreover, developing an understanding of why something is happening instead of examining what is happening supports research into a continuously developing topic—such as virtual teams—with valuable and unique insights. In conformity with this, data was collected from both primary and secondary sources in terms of interviews and observations as well as questionnaires conducted by the case company. The data collected led to awareness and investigation of team members' experiences of working virtually—specifically the related challenges and benefits related. Consequently, the data that emerged shaped the focus and analysis of this study, while allowing for insights from previous research and literature to better answer the research question.

3.2 Research Design

Saunders et al. (2019) suggest three forms of research design: descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory. The aim of this study is to investigate virtual teams; experiences of transitioning to virtual workplaces in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the beginning of the process, it was not clear which direction should be followed, and therefore, the focus became searching

for emerging topics in the research area of virtual teams. Here, the quantitative data given by the company aided in narrowing the direction of the thesis and in developing a greater understanding of topics to be explored. However, the uncertainty around the nature of the problem made it important to have a flexible and open approach. For this reason, an exploratory study was preferred as there is limited research within this topic, specifically in uncertain times, and the aim is to develop an understanding of a problem that is adaptable to change (Saunders et al., 2019). Furthermore, the exploratory design allowed for the change in direction of the research as it progressed, and new information and data became available. In this manner, the exploratory design enabled the research to gain valuable insights on the topics studied while also narrowing the focus to look deeper into patterns and relationships (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.3 Research Method

A distinction that emerges in social science methodology is between qualitative and quantitative data methods (Johannessen et al., 2020). As the primary mode of inductive research is qualitative, this seemed like the most natural and appropriate approach for the research in question. In terms of qualitative methods in this study, both interviews and observations were used to obtain a deeper understanding of the cases being studied. In this context, Johannessen et al. (2020) describe qualitative interviews as conversations with structure and purpose that aim to explore opinions, behaviors, and experiences. In qualitative interviews, the interviewer has control over the situation by asking questions and requesting explanations when an answer is not fully understood or needs to be elaborated. Here, Johannessen et al. (2020) argue that qualitative interviews give interviewees greater freedom to express themselves and reconstruct events as compared to a structured questionnaire. Denscombe (2014) supports this claim by explaining that in-depth interviews offer information on the reasoning behind interviewees' answers and thereby, serves to offer a large coverage of insights to the researcher.

In contrast, the observation method is a matter of "interpersonal interaction" where data is collected through observing people's behavior in a natural or arranged setting within a group (Johannessen et al., 2020). The researcher is either indirectly or directly present in the data collection process through actively asking questions then and there (Johannessen et al., 2020). The main advantage of this method is its usefulness to study the behavior of

individuals who are not aware of what is going on themselves (Tjora, 2018). Therefore, Tjora (2018) argues that while interviews study what people say they do, observations study what is actually done. In this way, combining in-depth interviews with observation results in a variety of data that allows for a comprehensive study of the research in question. Moreover, with the use of observation, valuable insights can be uncovered, and data from depth interviews can be strengthened. The data collection process for this thesis spanned over three weeks and consisted of 10 interviews and four observations, in which the interviews were conducted prior to the observations.

3.3.1 Research Strategy and Objective

The objective of this research is to aid researchers and scholars with insights into how employees have experienced and handled the transition to a virtual workplace in a medium-sized established company. To better understand this, the research seeks to explore patterns, thoughts, and behaviors of team members when transitioning to remote working along with examining secondary data regarding their work experiences over time.

In the discussion of research strategies, a case study lays the foundation for the qualitative research methodology. Robson (2002, as cited in Saunders et al., 2009) defines a case study as a strategy where a unique phenomenon is investigated using multiple sources in a real-life context. The research strategy for this study surrounds an embedded case study with the aim of studying one established firm and its multiple teams. This is of particular interest given the exploratory design and qualitative methods being used with the ability to answer questions with “why,” “what,” and “how” (Saunders et al., 2009). Moreover, this case study enables the researcher to explore a phenomenon that few have studied before and allows for a broader understanding of the context of research (Saunders et al., 2019). Additionally, the embedded case study helps in gaining a deeper understanding of the subject being explored and the gathering of valuable insights of specific phenomena over time in its real-life context (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.3.2 Context

In the context of this paper, I focus on studying four teams consisting of members with different roles and positions in an established digital marketing company. The empirical research is narrowed to the case company and its operative business management. The

company was founded in Oslo in 2016, but is present in over 100 countries today. As the company serves many clients in various countries, teams consisting of overseas members work virtually and communicate through digitized communication platforms frequently. However, the majority of teams located in the same geographical area normally work full-time at the office. However, in light of the pandemic, the teams working physically have transitioned to working virtually full-time.

Moreover, team members use different communication tools depending on the purpose, but the most used tool for team meetings within the company is *Google Hangouts* and *Whereby*. Through the application platform *Whereby*, employees can communicate directly with each other in teams or with the entire company. The service further provides screens sharing for video presentation, a chatting function, and simple room links with no registration requirement (Whereby, n.d.). Meanwhile, the tool *Google Hangouts* is frequently used for scheduling and planning meetings. For written communication, the communication platform *Slack* is used for daily correspondence between team members, while email is used occasionally to communicate with external clients. Additionally, *Slack* enables employees to create channels, send messages, and share files to collaborate efficiently with their team members (Knapp, 2021).

3.4 Data Collection

This research includes triangulating multiple sources of data to bring evidence together and support arguments (Saunders et al., 2019). The data was collected through various collection techniques, including interviews, observations, and quantitative analyses given by the company. Combining semi-structured interviews with observations and data collected by a questionnaire provided the study with a deeper and enriched understanding of the phenomena. This presented the advantage of strengthening the qualitative research design with valid and reliable findings as well as adding depth, breadth and richness to the research (Saunders et al., 2019). This section of the thesis presents an in-depth analysis of the data collection methods and processes addressed in this study. The data quantities that lay the foundation of this thesis is shown in Table 1 below with the number of observations and interviews conducted for each team.

	Team 1	Team 2	Team 3	Team 4	Total
Observations	0	0	4	0	4
Interviews	4	2	3	1	10

Table 1: *Observations and Interviews for Each Team*

3.4.1 Selection

In the literature regarding the methodology, Johannessen et al. (2020) emphasize two types of selection strategies: probability and purposeful sampling. The choice of the selection strategy is dependent on the nature of the research question and objectives. Moreover, Johannessen et al. (2020) argue that the starting point for a sample in qualitative methods needs to be with purpose and not representativeness. Consequently, the sample strategy in this study involves purposeful sampling where samples are selected based on the researcher's own judgement rather than statistically at random (Saunders et al., 2019). More specifically, purposeful sampling involves deciding on a sample to explore the research question before selecting participants from the sample (Johannessen et al., 2020). In this study, the population is the established case company, selected for the specific purpose of meeting the objectives and providing the study with necessary information to answer the research question. The sample is selected from the established company and are characterized by being employees of the case company and members of a virtual team that has transitioned to working full-time remotely.

In purposeful sampling, selecting the appropriate selection strategy to address the research question, purpose, and objectives, remains important. In this context, Johannessen et al. (2020) describe various non-probability selection techniques, but selection with maximum variation lays the foundation of the selection strategy for this study. It involves selecting people that deviate from each other based on key characteristics (Johannessen et al., 2020). In this study, participants were selected from the sample based on variations in gender, geographical location, and departments in order to achieve a sufficient variation. This resulted in interviewees being selected from sales, growth, customer success, and administration, which represent four out of the company's five departments. In terms of

geographical spread, the sample is divided into three countries: Norway, Lithuania, and the UK. Among the interview participants, there were both women and men with different positions and roles within the company. This provided the study with richer and more comprehensive perspectives through which the research question was explored, and theoretical insights were gained.

Interview Respondents	Team
Interview Respondent 1	Customer Success
Interview Respondent 2	Growth
Interview Respondent 3	Sales
Interview Respondent 4	Customer Success
Interview Respondent 5	Customer Success
Interview Respondent 6	Admin
Interview Respondent 7	Customer Success
Interview Respondent 8	Growth
Interview Respondent 9	Growth
Interview Respondent 10	Sales

Table 2: *Overview of Interview Respondents (Due to anonymisation, location, gender and roles cannot be shown in the table)*

The aforementioned selection strategy resulted in a sample size of 10 interviews, which lies within the threshold of six to 13 interviews as suggested by Johannessen et al. (2020). Moreover, the sample size can be viewed as sufficient when additional data no longer provides new and forthcoming information to the research, referred to as “data saturation” (Saunders et al., 2019). During the interview process, the research question was discovered, and topics were explored in its entirety. Following the analysis of 10 interviews, data saturation was reached when new additional data provided little or any new information and allowed for the adequacy of sampling in relation to theory.

3.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Saunders et al. (2019) differentiate between structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews as relating to different levels of formality and structure: structured interviews are characterized by formality and organization; unstructured interviews are more informal and

open; and semi-structured interviews lie between the extreme points of unstructured and structured interviews with the characteristic of being non-standardized. The decision of which interview method is to be used depends on the nature of the research topic and design.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used for data collection due to the exploratory research design and nature of the research question. In a semi-structured interview, an interview guide is used as a starting point to gather information, but the order of questions and topics may differ depending on the flow of the conversation (Johannessen et al., 2020). In this context, Saunders et al. (2019) argue that this type of interview allows for the exploration of people's attitudes, opinions, and experiences through open conversations, allowing for new issues to emerge for exploration. In addition, the flexibility within semi-structured interviews gives interviewees the freedom to express themselves and focus on the themes they find interesting. Consequently, the researcher can ask additional questions to enable a greater understanding of topics or responses that have emerged from the interviewee. In this manner, valuable insights on the research topic and question can be addressed.

3.4.3 Interview Process

Before the interviews, a meeting with supervisors and the contact person was held to ensure a common understanding of the topic to be investigated. The interview participants were initially contacted through the contact person within the company with a brief introduction of the study, the qualitative methods proposed, and information regarding data anonymization. Following this, further correspondence with the interview participants took place through emails with the researcher and involved scheduling of the interviews and sending of the consent forms. Overall, 10 interviews were conducted and recorded with video footage for transcription at a later time. In this context, Saunders et al. (2019) highlight the importance of a sound time frame in which interviews are conducted. For this reason, the interviews lasted around 40–60 minutes, where the length of time required was conveyed in advance to the interviewees. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the interviews were conducted virtually instead of face-to-face. This also seemed natural as the participants within the company were using virtual communication platforms for their team meetings on a daily basis at this time. The interviews were held through the application software, *Zoom* with audio recording and video footage. This provided the opportunity to observe and gather

valuable information on participants non-verbal behavior (Johannessen et al., 2020). Here, it is worth noting that Johannessen et al. (2020) emphasize that information collected in virtual video interviews are as good as that from offline face-to-face interviews.

Moreover, before the interviews, all participants were emailed a consent form drafted by the RaCE program, in which information about the intended duration, video recording, and confidentiality agreements were explained (Appendix C). This was signed by all participants prior to the interview, and it ensured that they were informed that all data would be anonymized.

3.4.4 Interview Guide

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide as a starting point to encourage the interviewees to deliberate insightful information. In this context, Johannessen et al. (2020) note that an interview guide that is partly structured and open for adjustment gives a good balance between standardization and flexibility. Accordingly, the interview guide suggested by Tjora (2018) containing introduction, reflection, and closing questions was followed. This three-fold approach caused a natural flow in the conversation where the interviews always started with open questions regarding participants' background, role within the established company, and experiences related to virtual teamwork. The interviews were then followed by open reflection questions regarding their transition to virtual teamwork—more specifically their personal experiences and challenges when working virtually. In this way, the interview approach allowed for a greater understanding of the interviewees' overall experience related to virtual teamwork before diving deeper into the topics of communication, trust, and socio-organizational factors. This also gave interviewees the opportunity to prepare for more specific and reflective questions as the interview progressed. The closure section brought the interview back to a natural ending point where interviewees were thanked for their participation and asked whether they had any questions or concerns. In this way, the interviewees were encouraged to share any additional information if they wished to do so.

The interview guide was sent to the supervisors as well as the contact person from the company for any inputs, proposal for changes, or comments in the beginning of February. This allowed for a common understanding of the topics being addressed and gave flexibility

to discuss insights and topics of interest for the company. Moreover, the semi-structured interview approach allowed exploration of the research question from several directions and further gave insights into new topics that arose throughout the process. Following this, the interview guide was modified throughout the process as some questions seemed more interesting to explore while others appeared redundant. This resulted in a second draft (Appendix B) of the interview guide with only relevant and applicable questions in relation to interviewees' interest and focus. However, the interview guide was not strictly followed in all interviews to allow for interviewees to move back and forth between different topics as needed. In this way, the interview guide acted to create the structure for the interviewer and guide the interviewee while being open toward new and insightful inputs.

3.4.5 Observations

In qualitative research, observations relate to collecting and analyzing information through observing people in natural or arranged environments (Johannessen et al., 2020). The observations were exploratory in nature and aimed to understand the context of the setting and describe events and behaviors in its entirety (Saunders et al., 2019). The approach to observational research compromised different levels of structure and informality, where the observer adopted the role of observer-as-participant. In this role, the observer enters team meetings as an "outsider," primarily to observe and remained passive in their role (Saunders et al., 2019). The observer-as-participant stance enabled the participants to be aware of the observer's existence and purpose while the observer collected data. The identity of the observer was clearly defined to the participants early on, but they remained neutral in social interactions. This presented the advantage of being able to concentrate on the behavior, discussions, and interactions between team members (Saunders et al., 2019). Correspondingly, this type of observational research is unlikely to cause distractions and change the behavior of the teams being studied and rather seeks to adopt an analytical approach towards their behavior. Following this, a more natural and realistic representation of the teams were studied from an outsider perspective.

Overall, four observations of virtual team meetings were conducted through the analytical software application *Google Meets*. In order to capture the essence of information in its entirety, notes and comments were taken throughout the process. In this context, Saunders et al. (2019) discuss the importance of taking notes during the process to record the

observations in its entirety. Consequently, the observation data in this study is based on notes taken during the four observations. Each of the documents describe the events which occurred during the meeting, a subjective interpretation of these, and an evaluation of the meeting as a whole.

3.4.6 Secondary Survey Data

The company aided the data collection with quantitative surveys conducted at different time periods of the pandemic. The questionnaires were repeated with the same questions by around 20 people in the time frames of January 2020, April 2020, August 2020, and November 2020. Similar questionnaires sent by the company in the same time periods in 2019 supported the data gathering and allowed for comparing and analyzing the data over time. Through assistance from the company, this data aided in establishing an in-depth understanding of statements and topics that had developed significantly over time and accordingly was of higher interest to explore. Conversely, the secondary survey data was extremely helpful in shaping the interview guide questions and steering the data gathering. While the quantitative data is not included in the findings chapter of this thesis, it aided preparation for the interviews and helped navigate the focus of this research paper.

3.5 Data Analysis

This section discusses the data collection approach involving transcribing, coding, and analysis of the qualitative data. Here, Johannessen et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of the researcher analyzing and interpreting qualitative data as it is their subjective understanding that lays the foundation of the data analysis and interpretation. Throughout the process, the data was collected and explored from an inductive perspective to analyze the themes emerging as the research progressed. This allowed for the commencement of an open approach to the research to support theoretical sensitivity and establish clear relationships between the research question and findings derived from the data. Subsequently, the data analysis is divided into two parts: an initial data analysis and coding; and a more focused data analysis and coding to explore themes to focus on and draw conclusions.

3.5.1 Data Preparation

The audio recordings of the interviews were all transcribed manually in Microsoft Word. In terms of the transcriptions, the focus was not only on the words being spoken, but also the way in which they were spoken (Saunders et al., 2019). For this reason, non-verbal communication with regard to body language, laughter, or incomplete sentences were added to the transcription to secure a holistic view of the interviews. The interviewees' questions and comments were also included to the transcriptions to further capture accuracy and note information gaps. The additional contextualized information also ensured that important information besides the interview responses was extracted to interpret the recordings in their entirety.

3.5.2 Initial Data Analysis and Coding

The initial data analysis was begun early to shape the direction of the data collection. The analysis occurred both during the collection of the data as well as after to ensure accuracy and provide a holistic picture of the interview context. In terms of the initial analysis, notes and comments were added during the data collection process to trace the development of ideas and develop possible analytical directions. The interactive nature of the analysis allowed for early exploration within the research regarding which themes were to be focused on and the identification of relationships that emerged from the data collected. In this way, the direction and nature of the research question was formed in advance to the completion of data collection.

The initial coding took place after the transcription of the data and helped commence analysis by classifying codes that emerged from the interviews. In this context, Saunders et al. (2019) describe coding as lines, sentences, or paragraphs in an interview transcript that summarizes the meaning of that data. Further, Charmaz's (2014) approach to initial coding was followed throughout the process to define core conceptual categories and to ensure that the study remained open to theoretical possibilities in the discerned data. The initial coding began early on to build an incisive analytical framework, where data was labelled with sentences or short words that were later separated into categories. Such an initial coding practice aided the process of analysis and was extremely helpful in identifying relationships and developing theoretical categories as the research progressed. Conversely, new insights

emerged that helped create new conceptual possibilities for the data collected, which laid the foundation of the next phase of focused coding.

R: Do you feel like you are able to express yourself in the same manner as in-person?

17: [00:13:48] I think for me personally, because I have experience before remotely working, I don't personally feel that I am not able to express myself, but I definitely do feel that I am relying more on our tools to make sure that my point has gone across. So like I will double confirm with my manager about what we talked about in the meeting, so a lot of like, I guess like more following up is needed now from this, because you have a meeting and like I'll be taking notes and then I will confirm the notes with the co-worker you were talking with to make sure you're on the same page and I always try to say like the next step clearly in text on Slack somewhere because I think that helps with the communication as well. Or if there is a resource that I can quickly make for like my other co-workers, especially the newer co-workers, so I'll be in a meeting with them, like I am giving them some advice on the stage of the campaign they are in and take what I said to them and draft it in a document so in that way they have it as a resource so yeah.

R: What type of communication tools do you use?

17: [00:15:15] So we have Slack, and we have Whereby and Google Meetings for meetings. But I would also say that my team also communicates a lot on Facebook, but it's not work related at all, it's like funny shit, so that's like, I guess like we have a fun outlet on Facebook messenger where we send each other Tik Toks and memes and stuff, and then like at work we have like our official channel where we talk about, where we have to share the agendas and maybe like an issue there as well, and then also there is other channels we can use in Slack as well. So, if I have like a reading, like an article that I found was interesting I might share it in the article Slack or in the random, we have a random Slack as well, we can share things there too yeah.

Simran Kaur Virdee
relying more on tools

Simran Kaur Virdee
double check information

Simran Kaur Virdee
try to communicate more clearly

Simran Kaur Virdee
helping with resources

Simran Kaur Virdee
communication modes

Simran Kaur Virdee
informal communication

Simran Kaur Virdee
laughter

Simran Kaur Virdee
different channels for different purposes

Figure 2: Example of the Initial Coding with an Explanation of the Sentences in the Right Column

3.5.3 Focused Data Analysis and Coding

After the initial coding was complete, focused coding was performed to synthesize and explain larger quantity of data. Charmaz (2014) describes focused coding as a phase where initial codes are selected to sort, integrate, and organize the data. During this process, salient categories of the data from the initial phase were developed and refined or regrouped as new data emerged. This included color coding the initial codes into similar topics and regrouping them into categories in Microsoft Excel. After such a thorough process, exploratory themes were discovered, and codes were sorted again regarding these themes. In this context, Charmaz (2014) explains that focused coding is not exclusively a linear process, but rather an emergent process with the comparing and redefining of data as new insights arise. Hence, in line with this explanation, data sorting was an interactive process; after each interview, the data was sorted and thematically categorized, and ultimately organized into subsegments within these themes. Although this process was very time consuming and lengthy, it

contributed to gaining a deeper understanding of the data material to develop theoretical insights and theoretical possibilities (Charmaz, 2014).

I2: Like I feel very, we are all very similar in age, so I think we are all like very friendly with each other and on my specific team which is, we are 6-7 people, like I am really good friends. Like one of my best friends in Norway is a guy that I have met through work. But I think we all have very friendly relationships between each other.

Simran Kaur Virdee
Personal relationships

Simran Kaur Virdee
Relations

Simran Kaur Virdee
Social activities

Simran Kaur Virdee
Relations, team building

I2: it's a lot less I feel like, it's obviously a lot less, and we also do quite a bit of, our team does like team activities once a month. So, before lockdown and stuff we would always meet up in-person and do something in person, like bowling or going for drinks or something like that. We've actually been able to keep it up, but we do stuff virtually, like playing online games and stuff like that. Even like this Friday we are doing this paint and sip, like paint and have a drink. Yeah, a lot less, a lot less social activities and meeting up with people.

Simran Kaur Virdee
Team building, relations

I2: So I have like team specific ones, and we also have like these companywide ones, like this paint and sip on Friday and then, I think I have been, in general I like attending these events, so I think I usually do, but I think I would regardless, but I usually am trying to participate in any or all of them because I do crave, even if it is digital, it's still nice to have some interaction and see other people in a social aspect.

Simran Kaur Virdee
social virtual events

I3: I mean like, we have done like virtual stuff, like you know like your classic Kahoots and all those things. We are actually having like a paint and sip event tomorrow, you obviously have all the tech issues where you are not able to have like, you can't make a joke and have everyone understand you, because someone's internet is bad you know. But I think how I have experienced it, I think it has been good, the company in general has tried to make an effort to keep something social going, we are actually a social company, we are really young so that's been kind of important for us to try to do.

Simran Kaur Virdee
relation/teambuilding

Figure 3: *Example of Focused Coding part 1. Dividing the Data into Categories and Colour-coding it Using the Same Colour.*

Relations	1	So, you feel, and you don't know who is comfortable with what either. So, you don't want to presume that someone would be comfortable talking a walk outside, to do something, and they're not. It's a little bit about, you don't want to ask people to do stuff, because you don't want to presume that they are comfortable with it or not comfortable with it.	Don't know who is comfortable with what
Relations	1	So, I think the other issue is, that of course I go to my manager if I need help with something, but then she, it's a lot to put on someone else as well right, so I think that was also kind of difficult, is knowing when to put that on someone else and when to not.	Don't want to be a burden
Relations	1	And like we have two new team members that started in November, and you almost have to make a point to bring them into the conversation and to get to know them a little bit more. Because I never, like I have met the one girl two weeks ago because of the team activity we did, but the other girl I have not met in person yet. So, I think it's really hard to get to know new team members. Especially coming into a new team, and one that is close, like my team is very close, so we have a great dynamic, and for new people I think that's really difficult to kind of include them.	Hard to get to know new people

Trust
Relations
Knowledge Sharing and Feedback
Communication Modes
Frequency
Interactive

Figure 4: *Example of Focused Coding part 2. Structuring the Data into Topics in Microsoft Excel with an Additional explanation in the Right Column.*

3.5.4 Presentation of the Findings

The results of the data analysis are presented in “Chapter 4. Findings” and are composed of three subsections: transitioning to a virtual workforce, key challenges, and key benefits. The chapter is structured with each category and key findings presented together in descending order. To ensure anonymity, the interview respondents are identified with a random number without connection to the interview order. For citations where proper names are mentioned, this is replaced with parentheses “()” with an explanation of the person or company it applies to. Conversely, each finding is illustrated and supported through the use of interview citations and observation data before being discussed in the context of theory in “Chapter 5. Discussion.” The interview citations are written in italics with quotation marks, while explanations and descriptions of the context are noted with square brackets “[].” In cases where sentences are used partially and not in their entirety, this has been marked with “(…).” This is particularly in the case of segment fragments where the sentence is either incomplete in meaning or is missing a subject or verb.

3.6 Research Quality

This section discusses the quality of the research design using trustworthiness as a central concept to evaluate and assess the quality of the study. The quality of research is often judged as the criteria of reliability and validity but is often considered to be inapplicable in relation to qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2019). Many qualitative researchers have argued that reliability and validity in qualitative research is inherently different from that of quantitative methods, and quantitatively defined indicators should therefore not be used (Saunders et al., 2019; Cypress, 2017). Consequently, scholars have attempted to appraise the trustworthiness of qualitative research through parallel versions of reliability as well as internal and external validity (Saunders et al., 2019). In this regard, Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Cypress, 2017) replaced the concepts “dependability” with “reliability,” “credibility” with “internal validity,” and “transferability” with “external validity”. These concepts are analogues of reliability and validity in many ways but are more appropriate and fitting to demonstrate rigor and evaluate the quality of this qualitative case study.

3.6.1 Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Saunders et al., 2019) define credibility as when the respondents’ expressed views matched what they intended. Further, credibility is the extent to which the findings of the research are trustworthy and can be addressed by developing a thorough analysis to collect sufficient data (Saunders et al., 2019).

More specifically, the use of triangulation with multiple sources ensured rich, robust, and comprehensive consistency of findings, further adding credibility to the study. Moreover, combining the use of interviews, observations, and quantitative questionnaires for a large quantity of data allowed for a greater understanding of the overall phenomena. The data collection process consisted of analyzing the quantitative data early to ensure referential adequacy in the interviews. Additionally, interviews were transcribed in their entirety early in the process to capture accuracy and observe information gaps to conduct follow-up research. The interview participants were also part of different teams and held different roles, providing the research with multiple perspectives and ways of seeing the data. Further, the open interview structure allowed for first-hand information with questions being clarified or meaning of responses probed if unclear. Such a structure also provided the opportunity to collect rich qualitative data through topics discussed from a variety of angles.

Moreover, persistent observations of the same team were conducted to identify various characteristics, behavior, and aspects in sufficient depth to ensure further credibility to the research (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). In this process of “habituation,” the researcher was involved in prolonged engagement through observing the same team multiple times in the same research setting (Saunders et al., 2019). In this way, the researcher learned more about the phenomena from a variety of angles, while team members became familiar with the observation process. Additionally, persistent observations enabled greater understanding of the dynamics of the setting as well as the exploring of variables as they emerged in the observation.

Furthermore, the frequent discussions with the supervisors and researchers from the RaCE program throughout the study enabled peer debriefing. This provided the opportunity for a thorough analysis and aided in the establishment of different views and perspectives towards the data and data analysis (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). The data collection process and findings were later presented to the researchers in relation to a RaCE event with valuable and insightful feedback that was later integrated in the thesis.

3.6.2 Transferability

The transferability of the research relates to the extent to which the findings from the study can be transferred into other similar research situations and contexts (Saunders et al., 2019). The qualitative study was inductive and exploratory in its nature and intended to answer the research question through the sufficient data that was collected. In this context, Guba (1981) argue that for a qualitative case study, the purpose is not to be representative, but to maximize the range of information uncovered. Therefore, the liability of the researcher is in ensuring sufficient contextual information about the field work to assert transferability in the research.

Participants were selected for the study by the established company through a maximum selection strategy. Here, Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Pandey & Patnaik, 2014) describe “thick description” as a technique for achieving transferability; through this, only after a detailed description of a phenomena can a researcher start the assessment of the degree to which the conclusions that are drawn are transferable to other contexts. Following this, the established case company is presented in the “Context” section, while the selection

strategy and sample of the participants are present in the “Sample” section. This provides other researchers with the opportunity to judge and compare the transferability of the study to other settings on which researchers are focused (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.6.3 Dependability

A fundamental question in the study of research methodology is regarding dependability. The term refers to the degree to which the data collection methods will generate dependable findings that are consistent if the study was repeated by others (Saunders et al., 2019). In this context, Merriam (1995, as cited in Pandey & Patnaik, 2014) defines “audit trail” as a transparent description of the research process to establish dependability. To assist in this process, a detailed description of the data collection process, analysis, and interpretation was included in its entirety in this thesis. This provided an opportunity for the supervisors and RaCE program researchers to evaluate the process and findings of the study as well as provide critical feedback throughout the study to strengthen additional data gathering and findings.

3.6.4 Conformability

The concept of conformability refers to the degree to which the research findings are an outcome of the participants’ experiences and ideas in place of the researcher’s individual preferences (Pandey & Patnik, 2014). To address this issue, the research design was created in a clear way so as to ensure that personal values and opinions were disregarded to eliminate biases and preferences from the findings. Moreover, the supervisors provided important feedback for the interview guide and supported the study with valuable insights and advice. Further, the qualitative methods and processes in this study are transparent in their entirety with detailed description of the steps taken in the research, allowing other researchers to duplicate one or more aspects of the study.

The consent form by the RaCE program was signed by all participants to ensure that participants were informed about the purpose of this study, confidentiality agreements, and rights regarding voluntary participation. The anonymization of the data and how the data was used was communicated to the participants multiple times to ensure that they were aware of their privacy protection. This further acted to minimize the chances of participants

withholding information due to lack of trust and instead encouraged them to be truthful and honest.

3.6.5 Research Ethics

Research ethics are a critical aspect of the research project and were highly considered throughout the process. The guidelines from the national research committee (NESH) with three specific considerations were followed (Johannessen et al., 2020). This includes the interviewee's right for self-participation, the researcher's duty to respect the interviewee's private life, and the researcher's responsibility to avoid any damage (Johannessen et al., 2020). The first consideration involves the understanding that the interview respondents' right to decide for themselves as to whether they want to participate and withdraw at any time and without any reason. This was clearly expressed in the confidentiality agreement given to all participants in advance, as well as conveyed orally before the interview started. The second consideration involves respecting the participants' private lives. The interviewees could refuse to reveal information about themselves whenever they wanted, and the researcher emphasized on the fact that the information provided would remain anonymous throughout the process. The third consideration means that the researcher has a responsibility to avoid any form of damage to the participants. In terms of conducting the interviews, attention was paid in order to observe whether some topics were sensitive for respondents to ensure the least possible damage.

At the core of research ethics, another important aspect involves the data collection process and research tools. In this study, compliance with privacy and protection principles meant the data was stored electronically for only a limited time and password protected. Complementing this, all personal data with the exception of audio recordings were collected through a comprehensive confidentiality agreement sent out to all respondents prior to the data collection. Through the use of password protection, the audio recordings and transcription were stored on the computer in a way that prevented unauthorized access. Finally, it should be noted that the data material will be deleted from the computer and given in an anonymous format to the FOCUS program at NHH by the end of June 2021.

4. Findings

This section presents the research findings of the data analysis. The findings are structured thematically in different subsections and are presented with accompanying interview citations and observation data. The first part of the chapter presents the transition to a virtual workforce—particularly the communication, the virtual teamwork and the employees' experience of this. The second part of the chapter presents the challenges of trust, social aspects, work-life balance, and differences in communication in more detail as well as the benefits of flexibility and less workplace distractions. The section is concluded with a summary of the presented findings.

4.1 Transitioning to a Virtual Workforce

The semi-structured interview guide and questions were structured to obtain a deeper understanding of the employees' overall experience of transitioning to a virtual workforce. This was essential for the study to gain more in-depth information and learn more about the interviewees' overall experiences of working virtually. The data analysis covered valuable insights and has been divided into three categories: virtual team experience, roles and structure, and communication.

4.1.1 The Virtual Team Experience

The employee's experiences of working virtually were explored and analyzed in their entirety to gain insights and in-depth information. Primarily, there was less informal communication and socialization with colleagues, but positive experiences are also highlighted—namely increased flexibility and time to focus on individual tasks. First, it should be noted that the employees from the case company are solely part of one virtual team with different roles and responsibilities. Some of the teams have members in different locations, including the UK and Lithuania, where they worked remotely before, but are now restricted to meeting occasionally at the headquarters in Norway, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the pandemic has resulted in a rapid transformation of the workplace in which the digital and advanced technology already available within the case company made the transformation easy and adaptable for team members. An employee described it as

follows:

(...) I didn't have to pretty much do anything, I just picked up my screen at work and had everything that I needed at home, so I think the fact that we were pretty digitalized before kind of didn't make the transition that big.

Although the transition to the new working environment was perceived well amongst the team members, the transition went through different cycles in which the pandemic uprooted most of their routines and interfered with their motivation over time. The new era of work led to struggles with managing new constraints and hurdles amongst the team members:

(...) I feel like at the very beginning I was still kind of maintaining that really good morning routine. I would still kind of wake up and still go for a walk even though I am not going anywhere I am still going for a walk. But then later on its kind of became a little, just waking up an hour before you can actually open up your laptop.

The sense of excitement was high in the beginning of the virtual work phase, but employees shared the sense of tiredness and decreased motivation with time in correspondence with stricter lockdowns enforced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the uncertainty of not knowing when normalcy would return led to shattered expectations of regaining routine, decreasing the team member's motivation to a higher degree:

I think that most people had believed that we were going to see like, something improving, but then, when we had the lockdowns again after Christmas, I feel like a lot of people including myself got really, feeling the sense of Corona fatigue, like, we really want this to move on.

Moreover, the new remote working arrangement raised a vast array of challenges for team members, and they found the physical distance harder when being geographically dispersed. An employee that operates alone overseas described the feeling of being left out and the relationship with the rest of the team as distant:

I can highlight again that when you are working remote, and you have people sitting in different countries, (...) and the headquarters is where most of the people are, it's very easy to feel left out in that sense because you are not being taken into account.

This employee was not alone in relating the physical distance to other team members with the virtual teamwork. Several noticed a difference from working physically at the office as compared to working virtually from home: "I think just for our one-on-one meetings that we do quarterly, I think that's even kind of difficult because you are talking through a screen. It's much, its far less personal." Thus, the transition to working virtually has been experienced as less personal when communicating virtually rather than having face-to-face interactions. The consequence of a large physical distance is related to the opportunity to get responses straight away, which according to an employee, also impacts the efficiency level:

(...) I wasn't able to kind of turn to a colleague and ask a question and get a response right away, so my efficiency was definitely impacted, because I was waiting for responses from people to be able to finish the tasks that I was working on for example.

The larger physical distance also resulted in some virtual team meetings drifting between topics particularly in the beginning of the meetings. For some, this meant that the degree of social interaction with team members in virtual meetings acts to compensate some of the office talk: "(...) sometimes the morning meeting can run like 45 minutes, it's just because we chat about whatever, like non work related. But I do think it's very very very important cause people don't have that social (...)." For others, the meetings tended to have less small talk and were instead more structured and time bound. An example of this is cited by an employee: "I think we are quite structured in our meetings, like we're always quite efficient and concerned about the time we spend on meetings. Like we always have an agenda (...)." This is also supported by the observation data that meetings that start with an agenda, which is followed throughout the meeting, rarely exceed the time planned. Here, the degree of non-work-related communication between team members was also limited and lasted for only a couple of minutes before they continued with the agenda.

The lack of physical presence also appears to be positive in terms of how virtual teamwork is experienced among the employees. Some employees drew attention to greater flexibility along with less distractions and interruptions by colleagues. The majority of employees stated that there was more time to focus on tasks due to the lack of informal communication: “(...) like when you sit down you actually do stuff because there is nothing else to do. Like there is no like coffee machine or walking around with colleagues (...)” Furthermore, some employees enjoyed the calmness in the mornings, in which they can start work straight away without needing to spend time on commuting:

(...) not needing to spend like 30 minutes to commute (...), so obviously you are done when you are done, and you start kind of right away when you are ready in the morning. I also kind of like the calmness of it.

4.1.2 Roles and Structure

The shift to a virtual working environment underpins new ways of working and a change in the organizational mindset regarding the workplace. Thus, the focus of this study has been aimed at the team’s roles and responsibilities, and the team members’ discipline and structure concerning the work being done. This is important to gain an understanding of the new and changing environment in how teams operate. In terms of roles and responsibilities, the majority of employees describe that they mainly work independently and are only responsible for their work: “Well I have a lot of responsibilities under autonomy if you could put it that way.” The majority also prefer working on their own even if they work on projects: “(...) my way of working is usually to kind of define some responsibilities and ownership and divide it up and then I like to go back and work on it on my own.” One employee also mentioned that when working at home, there is more time to focus on one’s own responsibilities:

(...) as a manager or a leader, it’s easy to get focused on what the team needs done and what they need help on and then you are left to do your own stuff when it is 4’o clock and then everyone is gone, and then you can start focusing on your tasks. But that’s improving when you are at home, you can kind of focus more on your own responsibilities.

The nature of teamwork division also varies among the employees, and they might work on different projects outside of their roles: “I guess, like we’ve been working on these projects that we do outside of our role, so we work on different projects connected to the company’s OPRS (...).” As a result, team members also emphasized the challenges related to not having complete information regarding projects when they are not a part of them. However, setting aside time to share and update each other frequently remains important among team members to ensure visibility of tasks and engagement in the remote working environment:

Like there is still time for input, but all other conversations about the project is kind of unknown, and I think that is difficult. Because unless you are a part of the conversation you really have no idea what’s going on. But I do think, at least with my team, we have been pretty good at updating each other on...we set aside time to work on our projects and we make sure we update each other on what’s going on.

It should also be noted that the new workplace environment has given team members more freedom to schedule and customize their days in a way that best suits their needs. More specifically, the transition to a virtual working environment has led to employees having to structure and schedule their workdays to stay focused. Some employees shared common views on developing a routine and organizing the time spent: “But I had to be more structured and organize my time when I was home, just because it was easier to get distracted doing other things.” Meanwhile, for others, structuring the days was challenging as it requires more self-discipline and clear physical boundaries between work and personal life. An employee living with a partner described it as follows:

(...) So, it has to do with like discipline and like going back to your original tasks and looking at your to do list, I think like having, me and my partner we both work from home. So, (...), he has like his office space in that room like there, so first we had to kind of create a dynamic, so the rule is like now if I have my headphones on, he is not allowed to bother me.

As the employees want to separate their working hours from personal domains, several have also set time boundaries in terms of when to work and take time off, which reflects their usual office hours: “(...) what mostly changed is that I am stricter with my time at work, so

like at 12, I take lunch, like its marked down, or like if I am a little late, I take like the full hour.”

Even though the majority of employees had to structure their days in new ways, some found it hard to stay motivated and actually follow a routine. The team members found that their motivation to stick to planned schedules decreased as the lines between professional and personal life became blurry, and the time spent on commuting was replaced with more sleep:

(...) there’s so many times where I have been like, ok you know what I am going to wake up early the night before, you know I schedule out my day and try to make a routine, and then in the morning I am like why. Why would I get up early and do anything? Like there is no point of getting up early you know, there is like less of a point in, because I don’t have a commute anymore, and I can just wake up right before I start working.

Meanwhile, an employee at the office in Oslo mentioned that remote working had no clear start or end:

(...) like it’s not like a clear start or a clear end. It’s like you just work. Sometimes, I start at 10 and then I work until 8, like it’s not the same because you’re just at home anyway (...).

Others experience distractions when working from home as they struggle to stay focused on work and follow planned structures: “Or you could do something around the house right, like you could do laundry or you’re making lunch, so it takes longer to make lunch than it would at the office because maybe you are making a bigger meal.”

4.1.3 Communication

The nature of virtual teams merits a discussion of the differences in communication styles. More specifically, virtual communication behaviors were assessed and analyzed with regards to the frequency, interactiveness, and degree of openness. With regard to the communication tools, the teams use Slack, Google Hangouts, and Whereby frequently for internal communication depending on the purpose of the communication. The findings demonstrate

that the majority of interviewees communicated with their team members daily and particularly on the communication platform, Slack:

Yeah, so within our team we have a check in and check out within a Slack group, which is just our team members. So, everyone in the morning checks in and says what they are going to be working on that day and then you check out (...).

With regard to the different types of communication, the employees found verbal communication during video conferences less time consuming than written communication over Slack. As a result, verbal communication was preferred when an immediate answer is required:

(...) there is a lot more like, kind of spur-of-the moment meetings, where we would just jump on a video call to discuss something with somebody else on the team, because it's hard. It takes time to write down a long Slack message and stuff, so sometimes it's just easier to hop in a video call and talk.

Similarly, some employees mentioned that the response time when sending a message is longer than asking a question in person:

(...) But then if someone were just to ask you a quick question in person, you would respond right away. You would just be like, oh yeah, here is my answer to that. And it's much faster than having to type out, especially if your response is quite long—then you spend a lot more time typing out the response making sure that everything is clear (...).

As a consequence, employees share the belief that more written communication also implies less misunderstandings and clearer messages. An employee described it as follows: “In some ways, it's more in writing now than it used to be, and to me, that makes it harder to misunderstand, and its clearer, and you have like a written record on what we agreed.”

In terms of the satisfaction regarding communication frequency, the employees were satisfied overall. However, some mentioned that more virtual meetings result in less time to do the actual work: “I feel like morning meeting is enough, (...) I still need to get everything

done, so I feel like if I were to have more check-ins, it would kind of be a bit like an abruption of my workday.”

Moreover, one interviewee located abroad described the communication frequency as less satisfactory with limited social interactions and relational-oriented communication content:

(...) we speak as a team once a week, and that’s just not really enough frequency of interaction to kind of like build that up I guess and also when we do meet, we need to talk about work. We have like work stuff we need to chat about, so it’s very like, you don’t get all those smaller details on what’s going [on].

It should also be noted that employees experienced differences in interactiveness in virtual communication. In this context, the majority of employees found it hard to interpret and observe body language and expressions over screen: “(...) you don’t have the same social cues, whether that’s like sounds or some type of indication that somebody might be questioning something or just like their body language. It’s very hard to tell that through a video call.” Some employees also drew attention that to the fact it is easier to fake emotions over screen and consequently, miss movements and feelings:

It’s more easily to fake your emotions and your concerns virtually...like in real life, you would give more away with body language, and yeah, it would be harder to kind of not show it in the same way. So, I think it’s definitely something that maybe I don’t think about that much, but I think that we kind of miss each other’s movements and feelings a lot more than we have before.

As a consequence, some employees found it challenging to have the same understanding of how people are doing. In particular, one employee emphasized that it is also harder to know if other team members are doing well without seeing them throughout the day. Thus, it appears that employees crave a physical presence in regard to teamwork that cannot yet be replicated through present-day technology:

(...) so, you see them with a small thumbnail, and it’s just in the meeting, but in the office, you could pick up on stuff throughout the day, right? That would give you

indication if stuff is, if they are doing well or not, or you know if they leave early a day or come late a day, so that could also tell you that maybe something is not right.

Some employees, however, mentioned that the presence of video adds more sentiment and expressions and also helps them see and understand how people are doing to some extent: “Not to the same extent as physical meetings, but I don’t, I feel like as long as you are using video, it’s quite...you are able to like understand emotions and you can feel when someone gets upset.” The observation data further shows that the majority of team members had their camera on, making it easier for the others to engage, understand, and see each other’s reactions. Even though some employees found the communication to be more interactive with a camera on, they found it harder to know when to weigh in and when to not:

(...) it’s hard to just weigh in when you are doing it virtually because of these little lags and then all of a sudden, somebody talked—who’s that—and it’s a whole thing. Whereas, when you are doing it person or at the office it’s easier to, like socially, you can read the conversation better right when you are in person, cause you can feel like when the breaks are (...).

As a consequence of not seeing each other’s movements and social cues to the same degree, the majority of employees found interruptions to be more prominent in virtual communication. This is also supported by the observation data in which interruptions, technical problems, and delays between speaking and hearing were observed during some meetings.

(...) I think the only difference is basically like in person, you would easily time your comment. It’s easier to just follow up with something that somebody said, but for instance, in the virtual space, I think it’s easy to just when you try to speak, somebody else speaks, and then you get two people speaking at once.

Meanwhile, with regards to the virtual communication on Whereby or Google Hangouts, some employees emphasized that it was less intimidating to speak up more openly:

(...) say you have a really big important meeting, and you are meeting like the vice president of some big fancy brand like that, conversation is a lot less intimidating when you are sitting just at your screen looking into his living room.

However, the majority of employees found it easier to slip a comment due to challenges with audio conferencing technology and equipment. Further, an employee mentioned that it is particularly challenging to make the effort of unmuting the microphone and interfering in discussions to give input:

(...) I don't think you give your input as much and comment as much because it's more like a hazard to like unmute yourself and be like "Hey! Stop what you are saying," and then get your comment in. Instead of like when you are sitting in a room, its more noticeable and you are also...there's more of a conversation there.

As a result, employees drew attention to the idea that the likelihood of giving input is lower when attending larger meetings, in which it is also less noticeable if you do not speak up.

4.2 Key Challenges

Regarding the data collected, four key challenges emerged that potentially have a negative impact on virtual interactions and are related to trust, the social aspect, work-life balance, and communication differences.

4.2.1 Trust

The establishment and maintenance of trust in virtual teams are deemed to be important in ensuring efficient operations and building relationships between employees. With regard to trust, this seems to be challenging for virtual teams mainly because it seems more difficult to achieve a satisfactory level of trust in a virtual environment where people feel disconnected and communication is limited to online tools. However, trust as an aspect is important, partly because employees see it as a necessity for building personal relationships and expressing themselves openly. More specifically, regarding building sufficient trust in virtual teams, the majority of employees believed that having an open environment and allowing yourself to be vulnerable remains important to show trust:

I guess like, allowing yourself to be like vulnerable is a good way to show trust. So, you know, we have like new team members, and I guess like some of the ways I try to help them with their training is that, like if I have a problem at work or with a client I really, I try to share it with my group and share how I try to solve it because I feel that is helpful rather than projecting [that] I am always perfect and that nothing is wrong.

Moreover, several employees explained that trust should be established through insight into what other members of the virtual team are doing. In this context, an employee mentioned communicating and updating each other as key factors for establishing trust:

I think to keep everyone updated on what's happening. So, if there's changes in structure and company, like high level things, I always keep everyone informed. Like, I think information and communication is even more important now when everyone is sitting alone and kind of already may be feeling left out or by themselves.

One employee also stated that their degree of trust is the same for remote workers as the rest of the team due to the development of strong relationships:

(...) but then again (), the one () that we have in Riga, I have met () like physically two or three times, but I still feel like we have been able to develop the same relationship, just virtually. So, we have the same sense of trust that I have with the team members that I have been sharing office with for three years.

In terms of trust between employees, there is a shared belief that it has been difficult to know exactly what others are doing when working virtually, partly due to the lack of work visibility:

(...) there are like times when you start wondering, like when you don't see what they do or not do. So, if they deliver on something you have requested, you are curious to know what they actually spent their time on (...).

Thus, the opportunity to see people's actions and behavior is limited as opposed to when working at the office, and one employee drew particular attention to the fact that as a consequence, it is easier to question what they are doing:

So, we could see if someone was in the office, or wasn't in the office because their chair would be empty. So, if they're there, you are not really questioning what they are doing, right, because they are in the office, they're working. But online, you don't know what they are up to, so they could be working, or they could not be working. But if you don't hear from them, you're like what's going on, if that makes sense.

For the question regarding managers' trust in employees, there seems to be a consensus that the degree has been high when employees have been given freedom and autonomy:

(...) I think we were quite given a lot of trust because of course it could have flopped and for instance, that we would have no guests to participate in our series. But I think that project...we received a lot of trust from the management team.

Several employees also highlighted that the managers do not check in with them as often, but also noted that this signals a high degree of trust to deliver work:

(...) and that's micromanaging, and I think our managers are very good at not micromanaging. She doesn't check in on us throughout the day, if we are doing...what we are doing, she doesn't check (...). But I do think that the fact that she is not checking in on us like three times a day, kind of, is a sense of that she trusts us. She trusts us that we do what we do.

Nevertheless, even though several employees explained that trust has been a core aspect at the company, some mentioned that the transparency of senior management has been limited. In particular, one employee noted that in the early phase of transitioning, there was the uncertainty of not knowing what was going on, which could have been improved upon:

I think transparency have been one of the things I think could have been better—a little more transparency about where we are at the company...how things are going. I know that when half of my team was laid off, they did not know they were coming

back until a week before. I mean it was great they were coming back, but there just wasn't a lot of notice.

Further, the majority of employees mentioned that management has become more distant and in the absence of informal communication, it becomes particularly challenging to maintain the same understanding of what they are working on:

(...) but I do feel that I do not necessarily know what the executive management is working on. (...) but there is going to be more distance from the executives, and I do think that whereas when I was sitting at the office, I could have like these chats with like () and be like what are you working on today, and then I would get to kind of mingle and understand what they are working on (...).

4.2.2 Social Aspect

The social aspect between the team members and teams represents a challenge among employees working virtually, both because it seems more difficult not to be around people anymore and there is a disparity about how this can be solved. Further, the social aspect of work is of high importance for employees partially because it plays an essential role for their wellbeing and motivation. More specifically, most employees miss the feeling of being around people and the energy that this gives them:

I think that the social aspect and lack of interaction with kind of anybody...even though it's just riding the bus to work and just like being around other people. Even though it's [a] commute and it sucks, it still kind of gives you energy, I feel, just being around other people.

However, even though several employees did not feel motivated to the same extent anymore, they also shared the sense of feeling socially isolated and lonely, which was strongly enforced by the pandemic:

(...) like I am so lonely, but at the same time, I have no motivation to do anything. It's like the lonelier I get, the more I want to do stuff, but I just don't feel motivated to do it. It's like oh, like we could go for a walk, but it's just not the same as like

going and sitting in a café with someone or you know grabbing a drink with someone (...)

Here, several employees also drew attention to the feeling of loneliness that has become worse over time with stricter lockdowns:

Yeah, I think drawing on all those points, yeah definitely feel that. It has become worse because you know like in the beginning, I guess, Norway was pretty lax on regulations and stuff, and you know it was still ok to be like out and see people, but as the restrictions got stricter, then you saw less and less people, and that definitely affected the loneliness factor.

Regarding social interactions, the majority of employees mentioned that they missed having face-to-face conversations and found talking through screens to be less personal. Further, the possibility of not having smaller social conversations with people was challenging for several employees, and the feeling of working on your own was, thus, enforced:

I think, the biggest challenge was probably honestly, not a surprise, but kind of feeling like you are working on your own because you are not actually having the small talk...you are not actually having a coffee with someone...you are just kind of like, I guess I go on a walk for myself kind of thing.

One employee also noted that it is more challenging to discuss smaller tasks that would normally be discussed during informal conversations with colleagues at the office:

So, I think that's one of the negatives about home office—that small challenges can grow bigger because you don't have people around you to just kind of debrief with or discuss something that is not really necessary to set up a meeting, like a virtual meeting, about. So, I guess, the small kind of chit chat around your work tasks is kind of gone, and that's a negative, a big negative, I would say.

Additionally, the lack of social interaction also seems to have had some impact on the relationships among colleagues as several employees mentioned that it was more challenging to get to know new people:

(...) like I have met the one girl two weeks ago because of the team activity we did, but the other girl I have not met in person yet. So, I think it's really hard to get to know new team members.

One employee also noted that if there was no reason to talk to each other, it was also harder to get to know them partly due to the lack of smaller informal conversations:

(...) I would bring up the coffee machine again, that's probably how we get to know each other there. How do I, honestly, I think the answer is that I don't...I don't get to know them, which is sad, but again, haven't been a priority. We haven't had much of a reason to chat with each other, if that makes sense, because we are not working on the same things (...).

Some employees also highlighted that it has been difficult to build relationships with colleagues in the same way as before:

(...) I think, just being around people in the office and having those daily conversations and also socially (...), like you don't really get to know your colleagues in the same way.

As a result, some employees also drew attention to the fact that it is challenging to understand how other employees are doing at a personal level: "But now it's also harder to understand how they are doing personally as well because you don't have these small cues or body language to understand if they are doing ok." One employee also mentioned that when around people, it is easier to also see their struggles, but when working remotely, it is easier to also feel like the only one:

(...) but I definitely think, when you are with people, you feel like a sense of solidarity with them. You feel like we are all in this together. And you can kind of see people's struggles a little bit more if that makes sense, because you are around them. (...) But when you are not seeing people all the time, or you don't really get that anymore. I think it is really difficult. I think a lot of the time I felt like it's just me. I felt like there's got to be something wrong with me.

In terms of generating more social interactions, employees noted that the company and teams have facilitated virtual social events, which has been helpful:

(...) we did like painting together, I don't know what its named, but they shift out like what do you call it, brushes and paint, and we drink wine and paint together as a social activity, and that's pretty cool.

Even though the majority of employees found this to be adequate, they perceived it as different from physical events:

(...) But it's not like it used to be, of course not, but it used to be like Friday beers and waffles, and then whoever could, we would end [at] around 4, and then start hanging out or we would. People would be working and still joining on our conversations.

Several employees also drew attention to "Zoom fatigue," due to which they did not really enjoy sitting in front of the screen any longer to socialize:

Well at first, it was like, it was kind of fun to do the social events, but now I definitely think that Zoom fatigue is really happening. It's like a real thing for me because I don't really enjoy the like virtual after beers anymore. I know that's like a part of the Norwegian culture to do like the "lønningsspils" and stuff like that, but I don't enjoy, and I don't find it fun to just chat with six people on the internet anymore.

One employee also mentioned that when working the whole day in front of the screen, it is exhausting to extend the day in front of that screen, even if it is for socializing:

(...) Like then we kind of started implementing team activities remotely and all of that, which is great, but at the same time when you are, when you are spending most part of your day in front of the screen like, you don't really, like it's not that exciting to extend your day with a social part of it, even though it's not job related.

4.2.3 Work-Life Balance

One of the main findings of the study is related to the work-life balance and the challenges this brings to the employees in the case company. Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is, among other factors, important for employees' wellbeing and health as well as their productivity and performance. Regarding the question of whether this balance is clearly achieved, this seems to be challenging for most teams as not having separate boundaries for work and personal life makes maintaining motivation difficult:

(...) to actually go to an office and feel like you are going to work is like yeah, it's a bit different when you are home all the time. Before when I had home office here and there, it was fine, but now when it's like you are 24/7 in the same place and you also have the work here, then its, it doesn't feel like you're, it's not as motivating, you're not in that like work mindset if that makes sense. So yeah, that's also a big difference, to feel like you are not actually at work even though you are.

Several employees explained that it has been challenging to achieve work-life balance partly due to the lack of separate areas for work and free time:

(...) what's negative with the home office is that I live [in] basically a not big apartment, so it's basically two or three meters from being at work to eating dinner and to basically after work, sitting in the couch area (...).

One employee also noted that not having a separate office space makes it harder to stay in a routine:

(...) but the challenge for me is being in the same space as where I am living. So, I would ideally have a place outside my building or a co-working space or something like that so that I would, that I want the whole action of going to the office and going back, and I feel like that kind of sets me in a better routine.

Additionally, in the current virtual landscape, employees not only found it challenging to separate work and life, but also felt that the days blended into each other, which made it harder to stay motivated:

(...) but the days kind of just blend into each other, and yeah it makes life a bit more boring...I guess that's a negative. I have become a lot more lazy. You would assume that I have so much time to work out during this time, but it kind of, after you have been working from home for a while, you just kind of, I don't know, the days kind of just blend in together.

One employee also noted that the monotonous days and limited change of scenery have impacted not only motivation but also efficiency and creativity:

I mean, it almost feels so monotonous, like every day is the same. (...) You wake up, you work, you stop working, but you are still at the same place, there is no change of scenery. So, yeah, I think it's definitely has stunted both my efficiency and my creativity.

Another employee drew attention to going stir-crazy because of the prolonged confinement, which also made it easier to get distracted and do nonwork-related activities. Thus, the presence of home distractions acts as constant reminders of the blurred lines between personal life and work, and its allure can often be too hard to resist, making it challenging to stay focused and disciplined:

So yeah, you could get really easy distracted with everything really, cause then you are, because you get a little bit crazy about sitting in the same house 24/7, especially when you are socially distancing as well. So, you are not doing anything after either (...) so it's easy to be like, ok, but I am just going to go for a walk because I need some air, and suddenly it's been like two hours (...).

4.2.4 Differences in Communication

The virtual workplace has introduced several differences in communication, which have proven to be challenging for virtual teams. The lack of informal communication, the response delay, and the limited communication across teams seem to be key elements of virtual communication. In this context, the majority of employees highlighted that it has

been challenging to get inputs and access to the same information due to the lack of informal communication at the office:

“(…) So, like across the teams…so I had a conversation earlier today with () from the Growth team, and like I haven’t spoken with him for like 4 weeks. Normally he would be sitting at a desk right next to me, so I would just pick on things that he experiences and be able to be like “hmm that’s interesting,” (…) but now today it was like we had to recap a lot of other things in addition to that specific issue that he wanted to solve. So, that is like, the informal communication is something I miss (…).

Some employees also mentioned that the conversations in person are more insightful as employees are more in the loop in terms of what is going on and find it easier to reach out for help than when working from home:

I guess it’s a little bit, a little bit still difficult since the nature of my work is that we communicate a lot with the team and when you are in the office, you obviously kind of, you are more in the loop of what’s going on everywhere, so if someone needs help, you kind of pitch in and help out. If you need help, it’s easier to reach out for help as well (…).

Several employees also noted that the smaller issues that arise are easier to discuss at the office when it is possible to quickly turn to a colleague and ask a question:

(…) I think you know it’s so much easier to ask questions when you are sitting next to people. So, if something came up, (…) I think it’s so much easier when you are sitting in a team setting, and you can just turn to your team and be like “Hey, I have an issue, does anyone have a second to talk about it?” instead of trying to look into people’s calendars and schedule time and figure out a time to talk about it or sending a Slack message (…).

As a result, one employee found that the longer time related to asking questions also impacted the response time and efficiency levels:

(...) because I wasn't able to kind of turn to a colleague and ask a question and get a response right away, so my efficiency was definitely impacted, because I was waiting for responses from people to be able to finish the tasks (...).

Moreover, even though the majority of teams communicate outside of work, the lack of informal communication posed challenges as relationships are not built in the same way as at the office:

So, like meeting people that you have never met before, having physically meetings you get a forced informal communication, which is quite ok for external meetings. So, like you get to go to the coffee machine, talk about the weather, or whatever you want to talk about, and then you like establish, like now you are sitting down, (...) let's start the formal meeting. When we have external meetings virtually, it's much more let's get to it right away, so there is no room for informal communication the same way.

As a result, one employee mentioned that the communication across teams has become more challenging to maintain due to the lack of personable and organic interactions:

(...) the communication happening across teams have probably been more informal over the coffee machine or in lunch because they didn't necessarily need to have a meeting, because you saw them in the office and got an understanding of what's going on with them, and you know their teams and that has probably become harder.

In this context, another employee also explained that communication across teams became limited particularly when there was not really a reason to meet other teams than at the office informally:

I think the biggest impact is across a wider organization, I think, across the teams where you don't really have to meet them because you are not really collaborating on something or, like there's, but you would in the office still, just like informally (...) because it's harder to solve, because you don't really have a reason to meet them, but you still need to kind of feel that you are part of something big...to feel that you are visible to the wider organization.

4.3 Key Benefits

While there are some challenges with the adoption of the virtual workplace, there are also several advantages. The findings of the study show that the flexibility offered with a virtual workplace as well as fewer office distractions represent the main advantages of virtual teams.

4.3.1 Flexibility

In terms of flexibility and freedom, virtual teamwork is beneficial both because it includes the ability to adjust the days and hours spent working and allows for higher working performance. Regarding the flexibility aspect, several employees highlighted the benefits of location independence as they are able to work from wherever they want to:

But on the flip side, it's nice when you know, if we want to go to the cabin, we are able to kind of work from wherever, so that's been good. Just being able to take your work wherever you are (...).

Additionally, it was also mentioned that not only does the virtual home office offer flexibility in terms of geographical location, but also around scheduling workdays:

(...) but let's say for the project work, I have more flexibility if I actually want to do it early in the morning, or I want to do it you know after 5. So, that's been different though, because I feel like I am working the same hours, but it's a different set up because like you kind of find spaces in the day of when you are most productive for what type of work (...).

As a result, some employees structure their days differently from before to when they are most productive. Additionally, one employee highlighted that working remotely opens up the possibility to take larger breaks during the day to recharge:

(...) like I would much rather do like let's say, you are working for half a day and then you take an hour off and take a run or training, and then you kind of have a reset and go back to a couple of hours of work (...).

Another employee mentioned that the ability to take a break and come back refreshed also increases the level of productivity:

(...) And I also really like that if I am feeling tired, I can go and take a quick walk around the block and kind of like clear my head mentally and then like come back refreshed. That's probably good for productivity as well.

Meanwhile, another employee noted that the freedom they have when working from home also results in more time to do other activities, which also improves the quality of life:

(...) I like that I have more time for things that I did not have time to before, and what I mean by that is like life-admin, like when I was working in my old job that was always face-to-face, you know you are always behind on things like laundry. You come home and you don't have any energy to cook dinner, you are kind of drained just from even going there and back, whereas here I feel like with remote life it, I have a lot better quality of life in a way, like personally (...).

Further, the majority of employees drew particular attention to the elimination of time spent commuting and travelling, which they are now able to use to work longer hours:

(...) I prefer it over going to the office just because I can very easily get to work and don't have to spend time on a commute, commute about thirty minutes each way. So, working from home, I can use that time to work. But at the same time, I see that I am working more actually because of that.

4.3.2 Workplace Distractions

In the transforming context of working in the current times, the lack of distractions that usually take place at the office pose a benefit in remote working. The majority of employees expressed that workplace distractions in terms of being asked questions or overhearing conversations is limited when working remotely:

(...) as a manager, you do get interrupted and distracted a bit just because there's always people who would like your input or ask you questions, or you might just overhear something going on somewhere else that you feel like being part of or kind of contributing to, and you don't hear about it because it's not happening anymore in the office. So, that's why I think the distractions kind of has gone down.

Several employees also highlighted that they get more time to finish their tasks partly because of less social interactions at work:

(...) I actually get more time to do my tasks at the home office because again back to those social interactions, they are really really nice, but sometimes, yeah when you start talking with your colleague, suddenly 10 or 15 minutes goes by and then, yeah and then suddenly, you take smaller breaks...compared to when I am working at home, I think I have more focused chunks of time where I basically spend two hours that's only going to this task.

Similarly, as a result of the limited degree of social interactions at the office, some employees also noted that they are able to get more work done:

(...) but at the very beginning I could actually see the difference because I was doing the same type of tasks, and then I realized that actually all these coffees and chats in the office, they are taking up quite a lot of time. So, once this was kind of removed, I found myself, like ok, I am actually not as swamped with work, like when you sit down, you actually do stuff because there is nothing else to do.

With fewer workplace distractions in term of social interactions, some employees mentioned that they are able to stay more focused: "(...) it's much easier to stay focused because you don't have like something going on over there, or I don't know, someone wanting to come over and chat with you for a bit." Several employees also highlighted that as there are less interruptions at work, the efficiency level has also improved: "It depends on what you mean by efficiency because in terms of not getting interrupted in the work, my efficiency has improved. Like I am able to just work more efficiently because there are less interactions and less interruptions." One employee also noted that the time saved that was usually spent on

mundane tasks at the office also freed up a lot of time, in which it is easier to stay focused and be more efficient:

I think it's, like overall, its actually improved it. You don't realize how much time is lost in a normal way of working on like just getting to the office, getting from the office, finding a meeting room that is available that you can use. Like there's all of these things that you need to do between activities that take up a lot of time, and all of that is gone when you are working from home. So that frees up a lot of time and much less distractions. But for me, I think it has made me more efficient and actually focused on what I need to do.

4.4 Summary

In this chapter, findings from the data analysis have been presented to give a holistic view of the insights from the observations and semi-structured interviews. Among the main findings of the virtual transition, employees have experienced the transition itself as easy and comfortable but noted that their motivation has gone through different stages in correspondence with stricter lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. With regard to adjusting to the new era of work, the transition has indicated new routines and structures in which the self-discipline and motivation to follow these varies across employees. Meanwhile, in terms of interaction within the team, communication tools, including Slack, Whereby and Google Hangouts, are frequently used daily depending on the purpose of the communication. However, the overall communication in virtual teams takes place at different frequencies and degrees of interactivity.

In the next section, the main findings of the study were investigated in their entirety—more specifically, the key challenges and benefits that arise with virtual interaction. Based on the analysis, it appears that the lack of social and personal connection represents a significant challenge in virtual teams as employees experience higher degree of loneliness and decreasing motivation. The new virtual workplace also brings challenges with regard to achieving work-life balance because employees find it particularly hard to separate work from personal life, which also seems to impact the level of motivation among employees. Furthermore, the limited degree of informal communication and communication across teams represents a challenge for virtual teams and also makes it harder to build and maintain relationships to the same degree as before. Additionally, with regard to trust, it seems to be even tougher to establish in virtual working environments due to limited work visibility and transparency, but frequent communication as well as early formations of face-to-face contact act as critical steps to building the same. However, although there are some challenges with virtual teams, there are also some advantages with less workplace distractions and more flexibility in terms of structuring and scheduling workdays as desired in particular. Thus, while employees struggled with staying motivated and miss the social aspect of work, they found that it was easier to stay focused and work more efficiently at home.

5. Discussion

In this section, the findings presented in the previous chapter will be interpreted and discussed in relation to the relevant theory detailed in the literature review. Findings supporting existing organizational literature will be discussed and the most compelling findings that provide new insights as well as explain or oppose current literature will be analyzed. Subsequently, the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research will be outlined and discussed. The section will be concluded with practical implications of the research for the relevant theories presented.

More specifically, this thesis involves examining how employees have experienced the transition to working full time in a virtual workplace. An established case company was studied, and interesting findings were made related to the research question of *how the transition to a virtual workplace has been and how employees handled working full time in virtual teams*. In the following sections, findings related to the virtual team experience will be outlined, highlighting the key challenges and benefits faced regarding trust and relations, as well as discussing the related concepts of social interactions, isolation, and work-life balance and its flexibility.

5.1 The Virtual Experience

With regard to the transition to working virtually, the findings support the arguments in the literature that clear procedures are prerequisites for virtual interactions to be systematic and goal-oriented (Rice et al., 2007). The already-established digitalized platforms and tools were critical in facilitating the transition so that it was easy, and prioritizing clear agendas before meetings was essential to ensure that they were systematic and on schedule. Regarding the structuring of workdays, employees had to develop routines and habits when first transitioning to the new workplace, but found it harder to actually follow them primarily due to lowered self-discipline and motivation. Further, maintaining the same at home was challenging for employees in the case company as it became more challenging to keep work and personal life separated. These findings support the literature on self-efficacy and self-discipline that have found that motivation and affective states impact employees' belief and confidence to reach targeted outcomes and goals. Furthermore, the need for self-discipline to

reach goals and outcomes is also evident in this study's findings, as self-discipline is essential for employees to follow and control their daily routines as well as handle tasks and staying motivated. Thus, employees with higher self-discipline are consequently able to handle tasks more efficiently and reach their goals, leading to greater performance (Bandura, 1997). Meanwhile, employees struggling to follow their planned routines and structures found it difficult to stay motivated primarily due to blurred lines between their work and personal lives. In this context, Allen et al. (2021) note how employees preferring segmentation between work and nonwork roles are less comfortable with loose boundaries and consequently, do not adapt to virtual working environments well, thus reducing their work-nonwork-life balance. Contrarily, employees preferring integration between work and nonwork roles find the transition to the virtual workplace easier, improving their work-life balance. Consequently, employees' individual preferences regarding the distinction between work and personal life impact their ability to adapt to the transition of working full-time remotely.

Regarding the communication within virtual teams, it is worth emphasizing that communication frequency within the case company varies between the employees. While some communicated daily with others, geographically dispersed employees communicate with their team members only once or twice a week. As explained in the literature review, Marlow et al. (2017) note that high communication frequency can be important for the development of team processes, but it does not necessarily result in higher team efficiency. This is because some teams either have a stronger shared cognition in which the communication content is of a more interpersonal nature or communication takes place so frequently that it interferes with work, leading to teams operating more efficiently even with a lower communication frequency. Thus, the impact of communication frequency on efficiency is not clearly delineated (Marlow et al., 2017). However, it is clear that employee satisfaction levels are an active measure of the type of communication content—relational-oriented or task-oriented. While the employees located within the same country found the communication frequency to be more satisfactory as it entailed more relational-oriented content, employees overseas found the communication frequency less satisfactory due to more task-oriented content (Furst et al., 2004; Marlow et al., 2017). It is also important to note that as some teams already had remote workers located abroad before the COVID-19 pandemic, the lower communication frequency and challenges related to building relationships and engaging in relational-oriented communication may have already existed.

Nonetheless, as these separated teams now have an even lower number of opportunities to meet in-person due to the pandemic, their levels of communication satisfaction are much more likely to decline from what they were prior to the pandemic.

For the question regarding the team members' relations to digital communication tools, the findings are consistent with existing research regarding technological issues and more prevalent external interruptions with attention or workflow being disrupted (Ford et al., 2017). The relationship between audio delays to an employee's openness to speaking up is also evident in the findings. More specifically, employees particularly emphasized the more formal aspects of virtual communication, and the extra effort required when using communication technologies in particular, as factors that affect the decision to speak up. In line with the findings by Marlow et al. (2017), technological issues such as delayed audio and external interruptions seemed to make it more challenging for team members to provide their input. Consequently, due to the technological difficulties posed by digital communication tools, it was challenging for employees to understand when to weigh in during a conversation as they are concerned about interrupting or interfering with the communication flow. Furthermore, the increased external interruptions can prevent employees from focusing on their work tasks, and thus, reduce communication effectiveness (Oeppen et al., 2020).

On the other hand, findings from the study show that the technological aspect of virtual tools makes the environment more informal. With more casual settings, such as with employees being able to see each other's living room and personal space in the background of video calls, it can be less intimidating to speak up during meetings. Thus, this study draws new insights regarding openness to speak up when communicating virtually; more specifically, one employee mentioned feeling more comfortable speaking up because of the ability to observe team members' personal lives more than that of their work when communicating over screen. However, this poses a paradox in which the technological aspect of virtual communication leads to some employees experiencing barriers related to speaking up openly during virtual meetings, while others feel more comfortable doing so. On the one hand, the virtual working environment seems to create a more formal setting with communication occurring via virtual tools, while on the other hand, being at home and seeing facets of each other's personal lives creates a more informal environment. Although there is no definite

answer on whether it is easier to speak up when communicating virtually, employees' openness seems to vary depending on their individual preferences and comfort levels.

As described in chapter 2, the literature review, communication tools and their technological errors also impact response time (Ford et al., 2017), which seem to be true with both synchronous and asynchronous communication in the case company. More specifically, through the use of written communication in Slack, team members were met with longer response times after typing out a message as compared to quickly asking a question to someone at the office. Although the findings suggest that video meetings are perceived to be easier in terms of receiving a faster response, written communication using Slack seemed to have led to less misunderstandings and confusion among the employees. In line with Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020), the reason for this is that text-based tools often require greater effort to craft messages and think them through carefully before they are sent. Consequently, clearer and more focused conversations take place, which also increase the efficiency and satisfaction of communication (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz, 2020).

However, while it can be argued that written communications may improve efficiency, the findings provide a slightly variable conclusion with insights into how team members found longer response times to be inefficient primarily due to having to wait longer to continue with their work instead of asking and receiving an answer immediately. In line with Marlow et al. (2017), communication timeliness is of higher salience to virtual team interaction where written communication may be delayed— particularly when team members are in different time zones—thus, hampering planning and coordination processes. Therefore, when the case company employees work full-time remotely, they can accomplish lower response times and higher efficiency by ensuring that messages are delivered on time and clearly understood (Marlow et al., 2017).

For the question regarding interactiveness, the findings of this study support existing research that communication technologies have limitations in fully supporting and facilitating social and emotional cues. In this context, it can be challenging to interpret the meaning of communication due to the absence of body language, expressions as well as vocal and visual cues that are otherwise found in more interactive communication (Marlow et al., 2017). Furthermore, of the two forms of communication content in this study, written communication seems to be of a stronger task-oriented nature (Marlow et al., 2017). The

reason for this is that virtual teams generally exchange less relationship-oriented information (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2011). Moreover, as the findings show, audio-visual communication tools such as Whereby or Google Hangouts do not provide any assurance that relationship-oriented communication actually occurs. The findings rather indicate that virtual communication tools' impersonal nature made it more challenging for team members to maintain informal communication as well as understand how people are doing and see their struggles. Therefore, it follows, that the lack of visual and verbal conveyance of information, such as through tone and emotions (Marlow et al., 2017) inhibits relationship development and social cohesion, making it challenging for team members to feel a sense of togetherness at work and consequently, causes them to question the meaningfulness of their work.

Furthermore, in line with findings by Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020), the lack of support for nonverbal interactions also masks verbal and visual cues, which seem to lead to team members feeling that it easier to hide emotions over screen. Consequently, it is harder for others to fully comprehend and understand how people are really doing. Therefore, the absence of cues leads to more possibilities for misunderstandings and misinterpretations within virtual communication both with audio visual technologies and text-based tools (Marlow et al., 2017). However, despite Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) arguing that possibilities for such misunderstandings remain in text-based tools due to the lack of cues, the findings from the interviews indicate that they are lower than with synchronous communication tools. Therefore, closed-loop communication remains important in both written and oral types of communication (Marlow et al., 2017).

5.2 Trust and Relations

With regard to the findings presented in section 4.3.1 of chapter 4 on trust, there seems to be a consensus among the team members that it as a way to allow yourself to be vulnerable and express yourself openly (Schoorman et al., 2007, as cited in Ford et al., 2017, p. 27). Additionally, the connection between strong relationships and trust is also evident in the findings, and it can be seen that participants believed that teams where members keep each other informed of their work and struggles have greater levels of trust. In this context, understanding how people are doing seems to be challenging for them because of the following: first, limited work visibility when working virtually; and second, limited personal interactions due to the absence of contextual cues. Both of these factors are considered

important for increasing trust by Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020). Therefore, team members find it challenging to gather complete information regarding what other members are doing and how they are spending their time as opposed to when they are working at the office. Further, as Wang et al. (2021) emphasize, the lack of trust is consequently a more prominent challenge in virtual working environments with less social interactions and personal contact.

Moreover, the importance of clear communication was also emphasized in the answers to the question on trust, and the literature considers the early development of non-work-related interactions and social exchanges as an important part of establishing trust in virtual teams (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz, 2020). As mentioned in section 4.2.2 of chapter 4, the studied employees found it harder to build relationships in the same ways as before and in particular, with new employees. The findings are consistent with Furst et al.'s (2004) research that building relationships becomes more challenging when team members are located at different places with communications technologies as their only medium. The reason for this is the lack of face-to-face contact when working virtually, which also results in less frequent interactions, lower social cohesion, and less personal contact between team members (Röcker, 2012).

While the positive relationship between communication content of an interpersonal nature and building relationships is consistent with existing research, one employee's answer differed: they were able to develop the same relationship with full-time remote workers virtually and have the same sense of trust—despite only meeting them a few times physically—as with team members they had worked with physically for a longer period of time. This finding can be explained by the work of Peter and Manz (2007) who emphasize that the early formation of face-to-face contact and establishing a strong relationship as well as familiarity between team members increases the depth of their relationships. Later, in the switch to a virtual context, this functions as (Buss, 1991) a fundamental motivation for individuals to identify with others moving forward. The absence of early face-to-face contact can thus also explain the challenges related to establishing relationships with particularly new employees in virtual environments to the same degree as in physical working environments.

Furthermore, the organizational virtual teamwork literature emphasizes the use of audio and audio-visual communication technologies as essential for establishing trust, particularly

when relationships are weaker (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz, 2020). As mentioned in section 4.2.3 of chapter 4, the majority of team members had their cameras turned on during team meetings, making it easier to see body language, expressions, and reactions. In synchronous communication, as facilitated by audio-based and audio-visual-based tools, it can therefore be argued that while the use of cameras during meetings does not entirely compensate for the absence of physical face-to-face communication, it helps deliver a more personal meeting experience; thus, it increases the presence of social cohesion and trust within virtual teams. Overall, more synchronous and interactive communication contributes to stronger engagement and more trusting relationships between team members, although it must be emphasized that home-office conflicts and inferences can make the conditions for this difficult.

In line with Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) emphasis on the importance of informal communication for fostering trust, team members found an increased need for information when working virtually, as informal communication disappeared. The reason is that the spontaneous informal communication of a more interpersonal nature happening at the coffee machine or during lunch becomes limited in virtual working environments (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). Conversely, the formal communication focused on work-related tasks increases, which may inhibit relationship development and hamper the feeling of cohesion and trust (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020; Marlow et al., 2017). Further, the lack of informal communication and work visibility made it challenging for team members to understand what management and other teams were working on, particularly as such relational-oriented communication was usually shared and discussed during informal and minor conversations at the office. Consequently, the relationship within and across teams is negatively affected if team members are unable to maintain the same level of relationships when working virtually (Marlow et al., 2017). However, this effect seems to be more of a threat for the collaboration with the team's external relations, particularly across different teams. This is so because informal communication is often their only way of communicating; consequently, when there is no reason to communicate, relationships are inhibited, thus impacting the degree of trust (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020).

For the question on trusting employees, there seems to be a consensus regarding the high degrees of trust from managers with greater freedom and autonomy as well as less frequent check-ins after the transition. However, it remains unclear whether less frequent

communication between managers and team members are the most ideal for mutual trust development in the virtual context and more particularly, in maintaining team cohesion. This stems from the confounding nature of communication preferences as they are perceived and experienced differently based on individual need. For example, some may prefer higher communication frequency with their manager as they feel more isolated during virtual working hours and both need and want to be observed and acknowledged to a greater extent. In this context, empirical research has shown that organizationally derived support influences social isolation positively. Further, according to Bentley et al. (2016), social interactions with rich communication and friendship are important for ensuring job satisfaction and decreasing feelings of loneliness. Therefore, it can be argued that engaging in more informal communication within virtual teams are essential for developing shared understanding and mutual trust (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020).

Meanwhile, others may have already established strong relationships with their managers and may prefer fewer check-ins as too many would interfere with their work and possibly reduce their performance levels. Thus, here, a higher communication frequency might not necessarily result in higher efficiency (Marlow et al., 2017). To summarize, although fewer check-ins signals managers' trust in employees and allow for familiar teams to perform their jobs more effectively, it remains unknown whether this is the best for each individual depending on their preferences and needs. However, timely and predictable communication as well as engagement in closed-loop communication remains important for establishing and ensuring trust among virtual teams (Marlow et al., 2017).

5.3 Social Interactions and Isolation

The findings of the study provide new insights into how social isolation, particularly during lockdowns, impacts team members' motivation and wellbeing. The virtual teams in the case company struggled with feeling alone and not being around people physically, which became worse over time—particularly because of the enforcement of stricter lockdowns enforced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As Bentley et al. (2016) note, social isolation occurs when team members' need to feel socially connected with others is not fulfilled; this was more challenging when team members had to remain physically distanced and work full-time over screen. Thus, the full-time remote working arrangements due the COVID-19 pandemic placed constraints on the workplace environment, causing employees to have to

not only work alone from home but also not meet people outside of work to socialize. In particular, team members found it challenging to remain isolated because of the limited possibilities of being around people at all and the consequent absence of social interactions. As a result, team members found it challenging to stay motivated as being around people gives them energy, even if it is commuting to work or engaging in small talk with someone for short periods of time. Consequently, the lack of spending time around others may lead to feelings of isolation as well as reduced job satisfaction and performance as pointed out by Golden et al. (2008).

Furthermore, as shown in section 4.3.2 of chapter 4, the absence of the social aspect at work represents a key challenge in virtual teams as it has a negative effect on relationships at work. The new full-time remote working environments with limited social interactions and informal communication led to team members' feeling like they are working on their own. Subsequently, social isolation lowered motivation for several employees as work then felt less important as they were merely working alone and were unable to see other team members working. This is supported by the work of Lal and Dwivedi (2009) who state that the sense of feeling disconnected can decrease employees' commitment toward their work and enhance the feeling of being left out. For individuals for whom seeing other people working is essential for their motivation and team cohesion, the remote working environment may cause a person-environment mismatch (Baker et al., 2006). Thus, this can result in less task support and feelings of social isolation, which consequently lead to lower productivity. For others, seeing other people working may be considered as work disruptions, and consequently, the transformed workplace context poses benefits in terms of less workplace distractions, which are due to less interruptions from co-workers and increased productivity (Martin & MacDonnell, 2012).

The feeling of loneliness and disconnect from other team members among virtual teams during the pandemic can also be explained using the self-determination theory (Šakan et al., 2020). On the one hand, the unique pandemic context with forced quarantine and limited social interactions can result in lower relatedness as the feeling of not belonging with others can negatively impact wellbeing and satisfaction with life. On the other hand—while it is important to note that team members' satisfaction with life can also be weakened because the new ways of building relationships virtually with others was not a personal and autonomous choice—team members may also experience higher relatedness satisfaction due to the

increased opportunities of staying with their families at home. Although there is no definitive answer regarding the degree of relatedness satisfaction in this study, the findings support arguments in the literature that state that satisfying the needs for both relatedness and autonomy mediates the enhancement of life satisfaction and wellbeing (Šakan et al., 2020).

With regard to the social interactions, there seems to be a consensus regarding the confounding nature of virtual communication being less personal. Not only is the lack of social interactions—in particular face-to-face conversations and social conversations at the office—strongly missed, but team members also found it challenging to discuss smaller tasks when working remotely. Thus, the remote working context makes it more challenging for team members to debrief or discuss smaller issues that normally would have occurred over informal communication by the coffee machine or during lunch. Therefore, it can be argued that communication through virtual tools is often characterized as being formal with task-oriented communication content (Marlow et al., 2017). These findings are further supported by observation data, where it was seen that the meetings strictly followed the agenda with a focus on tasks that needed to be done, and only a couple of minutes were spent discussing relational-oriented content, such as what team members did during the weekend or how their weekend was. However, it should also be noted that while the focus of task-oriented content was more prevalent when working virtually, studies have shown that team members may share relational information via virtual tools, even though it might not necessarily be to the same extent (Marlow et al., 2017)

Although the possibilities for socializing have been limited during these unprecedented times, the case company has had both virtual and physical events, which have been helpful in satisficing team members' need for socializing and relatedness with others. However, the findings also illustrated that team members perceive virtual social events as different from physical social events due to the lack of face-to-face communication as well as the absence of contextual cues and emotions and in-person engagement. Furthermore, the level of activities that can be conducted remained inadequate in virtual events, with less room to conduct what is perceived as fun and engaging while connecting team members in the same way that in-person events do. Although virtual events had benefits in including everyone despite them being located at different places, the study provides new insights into how virtual events are also found to be exhausting for virtual teams. In particular, team members emphasized the sense of exhaustion felt from socializing over a screen after already having

engaged in screen-time over the entire day. Subsequently, although starved for socialization, they may still be less inclined to join virtual social events as compared to physical social events, thus diminishing relatedness satisfaction and enforcing feelings of loneliness even more.

5.4 Flexibility and Work-Life Balance

The findings of the study support the literature regarding the benefits of increased flexibility in the virtual working environment, both in terms of scheduling days as wanted and deciding where to work (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). The increased flexibility in relation to structuring and scheduling workdays—through which team members work during peak efficiency hours as well as decide on their working location—supports the findings that increased autonomy is associated with increased motivation and job satisfaction (Hill et al., 2003). In particular, team members found more freedom in structuring their days as best suited to their individual preferences with possibilities to take larger breaks during the day to recharge and come back to work refreshed and motivated further increasing productivity. However, it should be noted that team members had an ambivalent relationship in terms of enjoying the increased freedom but finding it difficult to structure their workdays. While some enjoyed the increased autonomy with their schedule, others found it particularly hard to structure their workdays and stay motivated as it was no clear start or end of work. Thus, increased flexibility can pose both challenges and benefits depending on individual preferences and self-discipline to follow a planned order (Hofmann et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the findings of this study support the arguments in the literature that show that the decrease in commuting and travelling times compensate for working longer hours, increasing work efforts and productivity (Beauregard & Henry., 2009). Additionally, this study also supports the existing literature on flexibility by showing that increased productivity is also subject to less social interactions and office disruptions interfering with team members' work, thus resulting in more time to complete tasks and increased focus on them (Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). Although less office distractions were prevalently mentioned by most team members, some also emphasized increased distractions due to work-home interference. In particular, with such flexible working environments, the boundaries between work and home domains are blurred, making it challenging for team members who prefer to keep their work and personal lives separate to achieve work-life-

balance and create boundaries that meet their needs. Moreover, in the context of being forced to work full-time remotely, as in this study, the issue of balancing work-life and work-home interferences became significantly challenging, and a higher autonomy also thus negatively impacted self-management of the home-work boundary.

Additionally, having a dedicated home office space to achieve work-life balance is also evident in the findings of this study as team members who prefer segmentation found it particularly challenging to establish a separate working space and facilitate segmentation between non-work and work roles. Therefore, it can be argued that the lack of creating physical boundaries can cause work quality or efficiency to be reduced; thus, motivation and performance can be hampered (Allen et al., 2021). Conversely, sharing the workplace and home with others may be more challenging for people preferring segmentation to create physical boundaries that meet their preferences (Allen et al., 2021). Therefore, although increased flexibility resulted in less office distractions and increased efficiency, home distractions and interruptions are also more salient for individuals who prefer to keep work and personal life separate, reducing both motivation and performance.

5.5 Summary of Discussion

In this section, the findings of the study have been discussed through existing and relevant literature. Overall, the findings are greatly consistent with virtual working literature, but offer relevant insights into the remote work experiences in the unique context of COVID-19. However, it is important to note that based on the research findings employees that involuntarily work full-time remotely under current extraordinary circumstances faced similar repercussions and advantages to employees who normally work full time remotely.

The first section discusses how team members experienced the transition to working full time remotely and how their ability to adapt to the new virtual working environment was dependent on self-discipline, clear structure, digital platforms, and individual preferences regarding the segmentation or integration of work and non-work roles. Next, discussing the role of virtual tools as the medium for communication provided insight on the importance of accommodating communications frequency to individual needs and differences. For some, virtual communication technologies have made it more challenging to speak up due to external interruptions and the perception of greater effort being required. Nevertheless, for

others, it creates a lower distinction between non-work and work roles through which team members feel more comfortable speaking up after seeing their co-workers outside of their professional work roles. Finally, it is evident that misunderstandings and misinterpretations can occur with both synchronous and asynchronous communication due to the absence of the accompanying verbal tone and visual cues. However, text-based communication reduces the possibilities of misunderstandings as it requires more effort and time to accurately write questions or responses.

Regarding the key challenges in virtual teams, the lack of social interactions and informal communication seem to be significant challenges, primarily due to their impact on the relationships between team members and their wellbeing. This gives rise to challenges for team members in terms of staying motivated and enforces the feeling of social isolation and loneliness. Moreover, in the absence of contextual cues, team members find it especially difficult to understand how their co-workers are doing. Further, the inability to bond over personal and professional struggles can make them feel more alone, reducing work visibility and producing a negative effect on levels of trust within the team. Although team members in the virtual working environment had limited work visibility, the use of audio and audio-visual communication technologies to establish relationships helped to build and maintain trust and relations within the team. Regarding building strong relationships, meeting face-to-face from early on in the team formation, establishing a sense of familiarity, and maintaining communication content of a more interpersonal nature also seems to have had a positive effect on the team members. More specifically, to build relationships and familiarity within the virtual context, holding social events virtually has also been helpful to some extent. However, these have been perceived as exhausting among team members as spending the entire day in front of a screen seems to drain energy rather than provide a boost.

Moreover, the virtual working environment poses benefits in the form of increased flexibility, resulting in augmented motivation and job satisfaction among team members, which is a finding supported by literature (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). Much of the increased flexibility is related to the increased autonomy and freedom around the structuring of the day as best suited for individual preferences as well as working from any location. Further, the shift to a virtual working environment with limited informal communication seem to lead to less office disruptions for virtual teams, increasing their focus and decreasing time spent on completing tasks, thus enhancing efficiency. However, for virtual teams, there

seems to be an ambivalent relationship in terms of experiencing a higher personal control over their schedule and work environment and being able to work and structure their days when they do not have the same schedule as their co-worker and work visibility is lower. In particular, with increased flexibility, there is no clear delineation between work and home, resulting in challenges caused by work-home interferences and interruptions; in this context, team members preferring segmentation between work and personal life find it particularly more challenging to achieve work-life balance.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research

The study inevitably has some limitations, which will be presented and discussed in this section along with suggestions for future research. First, the research is conducted based on qualitative data from a small sample size, which raises concerns about generalizability as the findings may not necessarily apply to teams outside the scope of study. The findings and discussions also need to be seen in consideration of the facts that the study was conducted based on a single company and that the generalizability is consequently limited. Considering this limitation, future research can therefore benefit from gathering data from multiple sources, not only through a greater sample size of interviews or observations but also through research on different companies across sectors and industries.

Second, it must be noted that the research was performed during extraordinary circumstances. Undoubtedly, analyzing virtual teams in this context was to some degree the purpose of the research, as it allowed for a new and unique opportunity to broaden literature on virtual teams and their new ways of working full-time remotely. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the unprecedented COVID-19 outbreak may have led to more pressure for team members, including concerns about the pandemic itself, loneliness, and social isolation as well as temporary restrictions, which may have impacted the research findings. Despite these distinctive conditions, I believe that the research and findings are significant for future virtual-working research and exploration. Here, it is worth noting that a report from McKinsey (2020) stated that the future of work after COVID-19 will be strongly influenced by a hybrid solution, in which remote work is expected to persist and impact the overall work environment. In this context, several companies including Telenor and Facebook have also announced flexible ways of working, in which employees have the freedom to choose to work from the office or remotely (Telenor, 2020; Nanji, 2021). Accordingly, further studies

regarding employees' experiences when working from home as compared to the office are needed to explore new ways of working. In particular, the value of studying employees virtual work characteristics within different time periods both during and after the pandemic remains important for understanding their holistic work experiences and distinct findings on this topic as influenced by the pandemic itself and those based solely on remote working. Similarly, it will be also be interesting to explore the antecedents and effects of working virtually more comprehensively.

Finally, in research, it is important to emphasize that there will always be elements of biases and errors in conducting interviews and observations. Similarly, the researcher's involvement in qualitative studies makes it difficult to avoid researcher bias entirely, but analyzing the data through the semi-structured interview guide, ordering the questions appropriately, and avoiding leading questions helped to limit biased answers to some extent, if not entirely.

5.7 Practical Implications

This section introduces some of the practical implications of this study through which insights on working virtually can facilitate remote work after the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, three lessons are listed that can impact the future virtual working experience.

First, the findings can aid organizations in how they can adapt to the new virtual workforce more efficiently. The findings revealed that having clear and established structures as well as being familiar with digital tools helps virtual teams in the adaption to a virtual workforce. However, the research indicated that for team members with lower self-discipline and for whom, being around people governs their motivation, it became harder to adjust to the flexible working environment and follow a planned order. Although further research is needed, this study revealed that virtual working might not be suitable for everyone, as a misalignment in individual preferences and environment reduces work-life balance and performance. For example, this study indicated that employees preferring separation between work and personal life are more likely to be impacted by at-home distractions and struggle with staying focused. Organizations can thus benefit from taking into account the fit between flexible work measures and individual persons as well as creating both physical and time boundaries, which are similar to working from the office. In practice, this involves creating

clear time management routines and building separate workspaces, making it easier for team members to stay focused and enhance performance.

Second, this research reveals that communication frequency should be decided based on virtual teams' preferences such that the information and relational need for each individual is fulfilled. Regarding communication types, findings indicate that on the one hand, written communication requires higher efforts in asking a question or crafting an answer, but leads to less misunderstandings and more efficient conversations. On the other hand, the findings also suggest that written communication increases the response time, which decreases efficiency. In an attempt to alleviate the issues of misunderstandings and response times, it becomes important for virtual teams to express themselves clearly in a timely manner as well as to confirm that communication has been received and understood. Furthermore, the findings indicate that technological barriers surrounding virtual communication makes it challenging for team members to know when to speak up during meetings. Through establishing systematic communication structures, the raising of hands virtually, and making an effort to include everyone in conversations, organizations can avoid interruptions in the virtual workplace and ensure a higher degree of openness to speaking up.

Third, the findings from the study also revealed key challenges with regard to working full-time remotely. In the absence of informal communication and social aspects, the findings indicated that there are impacts on both relationship building and wellbeing. Thus, virtual teams can involve informal communication in a virtual context and utilize new communication technologies such as Slack to communicate and socialize with each other to reduce loneliness. Additionally, organizations also need to consider having physical social events when feasible to allow for communication in an informal manner with relational-oriented communication content, thus aiding team members in building relationships and feeling a sense of belonging to the team. Moreover, the research reveals that face-to-face contact from early on as well as familiarity between team members aids in establishing and building trust in virtual teams. Therefore, physical meetings are also recommended, when possible, to help in building relationships between team members and across teams. Similarly, frequent updating and the use of audio-visual communication tools help in maintaining relationships and team cohesiveness and thereby, reduce the sense of isolation.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the following research question through qualitatively analyzing a medium-sized established company:

How has the transition to a virtual workplace been and how do employees handle working full-time in virtual teams?

In answering the first part, the research revealed significant findings on team members' experiences. First, already established digital tools and clear meeting agendas aided the transition. However, the ability to adapt to flexible working environments depended on individual self-discipline to create and follow routines and preferences on segmentation or integration of work and nonwork roles. Second, communication frequency varies depending on teams, but is largely decided among themselves. Moreover, interactiveness was found challenging in understanding how people are doing mentally and seeing their struggles. Nevertheless, audio and video communication helps to visualize contextual cues, but also prompts interruptions and technological issues, impacting team members' ability to speak up.

For the second part, key challenges and benefits related to virtual team interactions are discussed. The challenges regarding the social aspect are due to limited opportunities to socialize and the lack of informal communication, which impacted relationships and wellbeing. In particular, getting to know others, build relationships with new people and maintain the same degree of communication across teams was difficult. Additionally, establishing trust was challenging, but audio and video-based communication, and frequent updating between team members aids in creating social cohesion. Conclusively, the concept of work-life balance is a key challenge for working full-time in virtual teams where misalignment between individual preferences toward work, environment, and personal wellbeing exists, often harming work-life balance. Nonetheless, virtual workplaces present unique advantages including less office distractions and greater flexibility in scheduling and location, positively impacting efficiency.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Appendix A - First Draft Interview Guide

Introduction

- Thank interviewees for being willing to attend the interview.
- The purpose of this study is to gather information about collaboration in virtual teams in light of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as to look at the related experiences and challenges related to this.
- The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes.
- Both you and your department are anonymized and everything you say is confidential.
- The interview will be recorded (audio or video) to make a transcript later if the interviewee agrees to this.

General Questions

- Could you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?
- Could you tell me a bit about your role within the company and within the team/projects? (e.g., leader, marketing manager etc.)
- Could you tell me a bit about your experience related to working in virtual teams?

Transition to Virtual Teamwork

- Could you tell me a bit about how you experienced the transition from physical teams to virtual teams?
 - What were the biggest differences?
 - How did your experience of this transition impact your efficiency and or creativity?
- Could you tell me a bit about how the team worked together when you started to work virtually?
 - Was there a defined framework for the team's divisions of work and roles?
 - Did you make a plan for how you would work together in the teams?
- Could you tell me a bit about the virtual team meetings you attended?

- What communication tools are used in your teams? Which do you prefer and why?
- How often do you have meetings and has the frequency decreased or increased as compared to before?
- What challenges did you experience when you went from working physically at the office to virtually?
 - Why do you think this is the biggest challenges?
 - What do you believe is important in dealing with these challenges?

Communication

- How was the experience of communication with a virtual team compared to that with a traditional team? (e.g., frequency, interruptions, how you talk with each other)
 - Do you feel like you communicate as well as before? What have been the biggest challenges?
 - Was the communication interactive? (Do you feel like you sufficiently understand people's expressions, emotions, and moods in a virtual meeting?) (Follow up: Why/Why not? How has this changed over the past year? Could you share an example of this?)
 - Is information about roles, responsibilities, division of tasks and working methods sufficiently communicated in your team?
- How often do you communicate with other team members?
 - Do team members communicate outside of work? How have you experienced this?

Trust

- What do you believe is important to build trust in a team? /Could you tell me a bit about how trust is developed in virtual teams
- Could you tell me a bit about if it has been different to gain the trust of team members in a virtual team? (e.g., time, face-to-face, culture, communication)
 - How do you get to know people that you have not met face-to-face?
- In what way has the transition to virtual teams affected your relationship with management or team members?
 - Are you able to speak as openly as before?
 - Do you feel a personal connection to your team or management?

- How have you experienced the management and their role in the transition to virtual teams? What changes have you noticed?
 - Do you feel supported in your role at the firm? If yes/no, why?
- How are team members' attitudes towards sharing and receiving information and feedback as compared to before?
 - Has the degree of openness changed along the way?
- Do you trust your other team members to deliver quality work?

Socio-organizational Factors

- Could you tell me a bit about the degree of social interactions you experienced with your team when transitioning to a virtual workplace?
 - Do you meet outside of work either physically or virtually for social events? If no, do you miss this aspect? If yes, do you feel like this replaces the physical social events to the same degree?
- How do you experience the relationship with other team members?
 - When working virtually, have you spent time to build a shared team culture and a sense of belonging to the team? (Follow up: Could you share an example of this? Are you satisfied with this, or what is missing?)
 - Do you feel like you are able to express yourself in the same manner as in in-person meetings?
- Could you tell me a bit about if you experienced any kind of isolation or loneliness when you work virtually?
 - How has this evolved?
 - When does this occur and in what way does this impact the work quality?
 - What do you do to cope with it? What do you think is important for the managers or team members to do to tackle this?

Closure

- Is there anything you would like to add?
- Repeat that confidentiality and all answers will be treated anonymously.
- If a follow-up interview becomes necessary, do you mind being asked to participate in this?
- Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions.

8.2 Appendix B - Second Draft Interview Guide

Introduction

- Thank interviewees for being willing to attend the interview.
- The purpose of this study is to gather information about collaboration in virtual teams in light of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as to look at experiences and challenges related to this.
- The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes.
- Both you and your department are anonymized and everything you say is confidential.
- The interview will be recorded (audio or video) to make a transcript later if the interviewee agrees to this.

General Questions

- Could you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?
- Could you tell me a bit about your role within the company and within the team/projects? (e.g.,: leader, marketing manager etc.)
- Could you tell me a bit about your experience related to working in virtual teams?

Transition to Virtual Teamwork

- Could you tell me a bit about how you experienced the transition from physical teams to virtual teams?
 - What were the biggest differences?
 - How did your experience of this transition impact your efficiency and or creativity?
- Could you tell me a bit about how the team worked together when you started to work virtually?
 - How is the degree of collaboration?
 - Did the transition require that you need to structure your days more? How have you experienced this?
- Could you tell me a bit about the virtual team meetings you attended?
 - How often do you have meetings and has the frequency decreased or increased as compared to before?

- What is your perception of how well these meetings work? Is there anything that could have been done differently?
- What challenges did you experience when you went from working physically at the office to virtually?
 - Why do you think this is the biggest challenges? Could you share a specific example of where you have experienced this?
 - What do you believe is important in dealing with these challenges?

Procrastination and distractions

- Could you tell me a bit about whether you get distracted by other things when working virtually as compared to when working at the office?
 - What type of distractions impact your work?
 - How do you feel your own self-discipline is?
- How is the degree of learning of others now as compared to before?
 - Do you feel like you can utilize each other's skills and knowledge and learn from each other?
- How is the degree of procrastination compared to before?
 - When does this occur and in which circumstances?
 - Why does this occur?
 - Is this related to the workload?
 - What do you think is important to tackle this?

Communication

- What communication tools are used in your teams? Which do you prefer and why?
- How do you experience the communication with a virtual team as compared to a traditional team? (e.g., frequency, interruptions, how you talk with each other)
 - Do you feel like you communicate as well as before? What have been the biggest challenges?
 - Is the communication interactive? (Do you feel like you sufficiently understand people's expressions, emotions, and moods in a virtual meeting?) (Follow up: Why/Why not? How has this changed over the past year? Could you share an example of this?)
 - Is information about roles, responsibilities, division of tasks and working methods sufficiently communicated in your team?

- How often do you communicate with other team members?
 - Do team members communicate outside of work? How have you experienced this?
- How is the communication with other teams?

Trust

- What do you believe is important to build trust in a team? /Could you tell me a bit about how trust is developed in virtual teams
- Could you tell me a bit about if it has been different to gain the trust of team members in a virtual team? (e.g., time, face-to-face, culture, communication)
 - How do you get to know people that you have not met face-to-face?
- In what way has the transition to virtual teams affected your relationship with management or team members?
 - Are you able to speak as openly as before?
 - Do you feel a personal connection to your team or management?
- How have you experienced the management and their role in the transition to virtual teams? What changes have you noticed?
 - Do you feel supported in your role at the firm? If yes/no, why?
- How do you experience team members' attitude towards sharing and receiving information and feedback compared to before?
 - Has the degree of openness changed along the way?

Socio-organizational Factors

- Could you tell me a bit about what the degree of social interactions was with your team when transitioning to a virtual workplace?
- How is your relationship with other team members?
 - When working virtually, have you spent time to build a shared team culture and a sense of belonging to the team? (Follow up: Could you share an example of this? Are you satisfied with this, or what is missing?)
 - Do you feel like you are able to express yourself in the same manner as in in-person meetings?
- Could you tell me a bit about if you experienced any kind of isolation or loneliness when you work virtually?
 - Why do you think this occurs?

- How has this evolved?
- What do you do to cope with it? What do you think is important for the managers or team members to do to tackle this?

Closure

- Is there anything you would like to add?
- Mention confidentiality again and that all answers will be treated anonymously.
- If it becomes necessary to have a follow-up interview, do you mind being asked to participate in this?
- Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions.

8.3 Appendix C - Consent Form

Informed consent form –Participation in RaCE research program NHH Norwegian School of Economics

This research is a part of the RaCE project at SNF and NHH Norwegian School of Economics. One goal of the research program is to develop knowledge on the topics of international integration, managing knowledge workers, dynamic control systems, and change capacity.

I invite you to participate in an interview lasting 45-60 minutes. If you permit, the interview will be audio and video recorded and later transcribed. The audio file will be deleted after transcription and the transcribed version will be anonymized.

Personal information will be treated confidentially. Any information that could identify individuals will be removed (eg your name). Transcriptions will be allocated a code instead. Name and contact information, including this form, will be kept separate from any interview data. Only persons participating in the RaCE project at NHH/SNF will have access to the anonymized interviews. Your firm/organization will be anonymized. The project will be completed in June 2021.

Participating in the project is voluntary. You can withdraw at any time without any further explanation. If you chose to withdraw, all information about you and your interview will be deleted. In some cases, a follow-up study will be carried out. If so, you will receive new information and a new invitation to participate.

Your rights

As long as you can be identified in the data material, you have the right to:

- Access in which personal information is registered in your name
- To correct personal information about you
- To have personal information about you deleted
- To receive a copy of your personal information (data portability)
- To file a complaint to personvernombudet or Datatilsynet regarding use of personal information on you

On behalf of SNF/NHH, the Norwegian NSD has approved the procedures followed by the RaCE research project are in accordance with current rules and regulations for handling data.

By signing this form, you consent to participate in the study. If you have any questions regarding this invitation, or you wish to be informed about the results of the study, please contact me at the address below.

Kind Regards,

Simran Virdee

Email: Simran.virdee@student.nhh.no

Phone: +47 93 69 66 21

FOCUS Program, SNF

Norwegian School of Economics / Norges Handelshøyskole

Informed consent form:

I have received written information and I am willing to participate in this study.

Signature Date.....

Printed

name.....