



## **The Impact of Leadership in a Remote Work Environment: Retaining Employee Engagement**

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## Abstract

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<p>This thesis is a research-based study, and the main topics of the thesis are leadership and employee engagement, and how leaders are retaining employing engagement in remote work. Remote work became a norm at the beginning of 2020 due to COVID-19 and even now, post-pandemic, it is still a current topic. Today in 2023, working on-site at the office is allowed. However, many have continued to work from home which has forced leaders to implement new leadership strategies and improve existing strategies.</p> <p>Anyone has the potential to be an effective leader, but successful leadership requires a number of skills that complement one another. Employee engagement and remote work are closely connected to leadership – especially since the pandemic. Leadership strategies have had to be modified to correspond with the needs of remote employees and ensure the retention of employee engagement despite the location of the leader and employee.</p> <p>The objective of the thesis is to examine the impact remote work has on leadership in Company X, if and how employee retention is being maintained as well as what implementation strategies for leadership are being determined to retain employee engagement in remote work. In addition, Company X wanted to investigate what factors would motivate the research participants, assistants, to work from the office more often. Company X allow hybrid working but encourage employees to work more on-site than from home.</p> <p>The research was conducted in January 2023 through a semi-structured, electronic survey. A total of 20 assistants participated in the research. The findings of the study show that Company X assistants are mainly satisfied with Company X and its operations as well as the general work atmosphere. However, the research recognises that there is a lack of frequent feedback and communication from Company X leaders which has posed challenges during remote work. Communication is particularly crucial in remote work since leaders are not physically seeing their employees.</p> <p>The recommended solutions for the research findings are for Company X to improve leadership and employee retention strategies. Every employee is different and should be seen as an individual to better comprehend their preferred ways of working and therefore, different approaches and strategies should be implemented to ensure maximum employee retention. For example, an underperformer requires different retention strategies compared to an average performer or top performer. Additionally, the proposed solutions provide information about how to motivate Company X employees to work more from the office instead of from home.</p>
<b>Key words</b> Leadership, remote work, employee engagement, employee retention

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## 1 Introduction

According to several sources of research, policies for remote work were formulated and adopted by companies over two decades ago but it wasn't until year 2020 that working remotely became a norm due to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Now in year 2023, remote work is still very much on the surface and is here to stay, producing new challenges to both leaders and employees. Employees are relying on their leaders to provide enhanced support and engagement more than ever before whereas leaders are having to reinvent strategies and methods to ensure employees are engaged and motivated. Employee engagement from the retention perspective is important in any circumstances but is highly topical in remote work.

Leadership – whether it is remote leadership or on-site leadership – plays an important role and has a significant impact on employee engagement. Employees feel more motivated, connected, and confident when their visions and goals are aligned with those of their leader and organisation. Frequent feedback and open communication from leaders result in growth at all levels of an organisation (Paulsen 2021) and employees feeling a sense of psychological meaningfulness in the workplace. Building trust and a mutual vision between leaders and employees is always important, but especially in remote work where leaders do not have the possibility to communicate face-to-face with their employees. Leadership is closely connected to employee engagement and remote work: leadership strategies have had to be modified to coincide with the needs of remote employees to ensure employee engagement is successful regardless of the geographical location. Leadership, employee engagement, and remote work will be discussed in further detail in chapters two and three.

A survey conducted by McKinsey states that many employees feel anxious and burned out, and that they have not been sufficiently informed about their leaders' intentions for working conditions following COVID-19. According to employees, few leaders are communicating clear expectations and policies, and the cause of employee anxiety is not being properly addressed. Even if their ideas have not fully formed, organisational leaders must interact with their employees more frequently as they map out the way into the post-pandemic world. As a result of effective communication, employee well-being and productivity have increased in organisations that have developed more detailed policies and methods for the future workplace. Even if leaders are unsure about post-pandemic working conditions, employees need additional assurance about them. (Alexander, De Smet, Langstaff & Ravid 2021.)

As mentioned, many employees are experiencing anxiety and have not received as much support from their organisation as they should have – during as well as after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although each employee has their own personal experience of remote work, according to another

research by McKinsey, certain similarities concerning career paths have emerged. Trust, social cohesiveness, and purpose are in high demand among employees. Employees desire a sense of belonging and that their efforts are valued as well as genuine collaboration within their team. There is a desire for defined roles and responsibilities and opportunities for development and improvement. McKinsey research indicates that the probability that an employee will want to remain in an organisation is eight times higher for those who report having a positive employee experience than for those who report having a negative experience. (Emmett, Komm, Moritz & Schultz 2021.)

After experiencing remote work, employees want flexibility, and it is important for leaders to observe what employees want for the future. McKinsey research shows that over half of employees responded that they would like their organisation to implement more opportunities for hybrid work which combines working on-site and working from home. With the assistance of a hybrid model, an organisation can reduce expenses, improve organisational performance, and maximise talent. Maximising as well as recognising talent is especially important since the McKinsey research reported that over a quarter of respondents would consider searching for opportunities in other organisations if their current organisation was to fully return to on-site work. (Alexander & al. 2021.) Employee retention and talent recognition are important no matter the circumstances but have become particularly crucial for organisations during and post COVID-19. Employee retention as well as different retention strategies will be presented and explained in further detail in subchapters 3.3 and 3.4.

During the pandemic, the whole Company X workforce was working remotely and communicating to one another solely through Microsoft Teams, an online business communication platform. Today, although many employees have returned to working on-site, many still prefer fully working from home or taking advantage of hybrid work opportunities. Company X does not have a policy regarding working from home, so in other words, every employee can quite freely choose whether they work on-site or at home. However, the importance of on-site working is emphasized and highly encouraged.

In this thesis, the main topics examined are remote leadership and employee engagement from the retention point of view, but particularly how team leaders at Company X are performing without physical contact to their team members, and what skills they are using to retain engagement. In addition, how to motivate employees to work more from on-site – the office – is also an important topic for Company X and will be introduced in chapter five, research results. Researching these topics will provide valuable knowledge and improvement recommendations for the commissioning company, Company X, who will be presented in the next chapter.

## 1.1 Overview of commissioning company

Company X is a professional service firm founded in the 1900's that operates internationally and currently employs roughly 400 employees. Company X's clients are other companies and being the client's primary advisor as well as working on matters of significance is particularly important to the commissioning company. Company X is located in Central Helsinki, Finland.

Company X emphasises that it recruits individuals with unique backgrounds and experiences to ensure a diverse work environment compiled of creative, insightful talent. Since every employee has their own career goals, Company X strive to accommodate individual career paths as well as to provide solutions that support the integration of work and personal life. In addition, Company X emphasise the importance of their effective leadership since it plays an immense role in creating a culture of talent recognition, transparency, feedback, and team building. Focusing on diversity, individual career paths, and effective leadership helps Company X to attract and retain talent, increase employee engagement, and meet the needs of their clients. Providing tailored career opportunities and recognising talent are two key drivers of employee engagement that will be further explained in subchapter 3.1.

## 1.2 Background

Leadership and employee engagement are wide topics. Over the past couple of years, the remote work perspective of both topics has been extensively covered, however, it is notable that there has been less discussion about the effect of remote leadership on retaining employee engagement. The need for retaining employee engagement, especially in a remote work environment, has naturally risen and brought new challenges due to COVID-19. The fact that this area of leadership as well as employee engagement have not been studied more piqued my interest which led to choosing this particular topic for this thesis. Also, the thesis topic was chosen due to my personal interest in leadership, and how leaders are retaining employee engagement in a remote working environment.

Not only does my interest in this topic originate from leadership and the lack of attention being paid to the retention perspective of employee engagement, but also from multiple conversations I have had with fellow colleagues as well as what I myself as an employee have experienced. In addition, the topic of the thesis and the research results are beneficial to me since it helps to understand the employee's point of view as well as the aspects of being a good, efficient leader even under extraordinary circumstances. Although employee engagement is very much a current topic, not enough is being done to retain engagement in remote work, causing employees to seek new opportunities elsewhere.

### 1.3 Objective and delimitation of thesis

The objective of the thesis is to examine the impact remote work has on leadership in Company X, if and how employee retention is being maintained as well as what implementation strategies for leadership are being determined to retain employee engagement in remote work. The purpose of the thesis is to provide Company X leaders with an insight into how successful their approach to remote employee engagement and retention is, and to enable them to improve their performance. It is also important to discover which factors drive employee engagement which is why these factors are introduced in subchapter 3.1, and later discussed in subchapter 6.1 where conclusions of the research results are presented. By recognising which factors drive and have a positive impact on employee retention in a remote work environment it is possible for leaders of Company X to increase successful employee engagement levels and retain existing talent. In addition, recognising those factors will raise preparedness levels should other extraordinary circumstances occur again. The research problem and additional investigative questions will be explained in further details in chapter four.

This thesis focuses on how Company X leaders are retaining employee engagement in a remote work environment and does not provide information from the perspective of leaders — solely employees. All research participants work in assistant roles within a professional service firm, and therefore the research does not provide information from assistants in other fields, such as veterinary, real estate, or medical assistants. In addition, this thesis does not research any further aspects of leadership in other working environments, such as on-site environments, nor does it focus on any other areas of employee engagement besides retention.

Leadership is often confused with management, but they are not the same: management refers to the operational side of an organisation whereas leadership focuses on influencing others to achieve organisational goals and objectives (Fiverr 2022). This thesis focuses solely on leadership and particularly what impact remote work has had on leading a team from a distance instead of at the typical office environment.

### 1.4 Thesis type and research method

This thesis uses qualitative research. The research method used is a semi-structured, electronic survey that together with the qualitative research enables open-ended questions that can be led into further detailed responses to receive additional, valuable data. However, it is notable that the first two questions of the survey are closed questions using a five-point Likert scale. The data was collected through an anonymous, Webropol survey sent by email to the research sample, Company X assistants, to ensure reliable results.



The survey was sent to Company X assistants to discover as well as to get a wider perspective of how remote work has introduced a need for leaders to implement new employee engagement and retention strategies. As mentioned, a Webropol survey was used, and a total of 20 responses were received. After closing the survey, research results were meticulously analysed to determine a clear research conclusion. Open-ended questions were used as the research method since it provides a clear structure and an opportunity to collect extensive information from the respondents.

## **1.5 Structure of thesis**

This thesis is built of six main chapters. The first chapter of thesis is the introduction to the study explaining the background, introducing the commissioning company, the objective and delimitation as well as the thesis type and research method. In the second chapter theoretical framework begins, introducing leadership, leadership styles and characteristics and Zappos' core values. In chapter two, remote leadership is also discussed as well as remote work and the challenges inflicted by it. The theoretical framework continues in the third chapter, introducing employee engagement and the key factors that drive employee engagement, also from a psychological perspective. In addition, employee retention and retention strategies for different performers are presented.

The fourth chapter introduces the empirical part of the study which leads to explaining the methodology and theory conducted for the research. The fourth chapter also presents a detailed explanation of the data and research collection methods. The key findings and conclusions are presented in the fifth chapter which also reflect on the hypotheses that were discussed in chapters two and three. Ultimately, conclusions and recommendations are introduced in chapter six as well as the assessment of the research validity and reliability. A self-evaluation of the entire thesis process and learning experiences conclude the final chapter.

## 2 Leadership

Leadership can be defined in several different ways, but one of the most common definitions is that leadership is a process where an individual or individuals influence others to achieve the objectives and goals of an organisation (Fiverr 2022). In other words, leadership is influencing other people's behaviour to act and accept what needs to be done to ensure organisational operations are executed in accordance with the goals. In addition, leadership is centred on competency and its development, motivating others, providing direction, building trust, establishing shared goals, and commitment (Saksi 2016). According to Fiverr (2022), four key elements can be drawn from the definition of leadership:

1. Socially influencing, being competent and inspiring others to act.
2. Being receptive.
3. Recognizing there is more than one path or style of leading to take towards accomplishments.
4. Impossible to influence others without a desired result or mutual objective.

As a result of the mentioned key elements of leadership, anyone has the potential to be an effective leader, and leadership skills can be applied to any position, field, or organisation within the business or community. The abilities being utilised when collaborating with employees to accomplish a common goal are referred to as leadership skills, and it is possible to develop those skills at any stage of a career. Successful leadership requires a number of skills that complement one another, such as serving and supporting employees, having a vision, taking risks, and identifying strengths and weaknesses. A leader with strong leadership skills does not assume that they should be served, but rather they serve their employees by showing continuous supervision and support as well as recognition for work being executed. Having a shared vision with employees and a will to take calculated risks are also important aspects of leadership: employees feel inspired, optimistic, and enthusiastic of the fact that their leader has confidence in including them in vision setting as well as decision-making. (Fiverr 2022.) Some researchers contend that leadership skills are innate, but most agree that leadership can be taught and learned, although emphasizing that the path to leadership is individual.

Leadership is needed to push an organisation in the right direction, at the right time, and at the right speed. In robust organisations, power is widely distributed through leadership. Today, leaders gain power by sharing information, openly communicating about organisational culture and values, and respecting employees as well as being interested and knowledgeable of what is happening in the frontline. When a leader brings out the best potential and genuinely shows respect towards employees, they too receive their share of appreciation. The best talents work in organisations where leaders value their personnel and give them keys to success; leadership is about assisting others, and all significant results are achieved as a team. (Saksi 2016.)

In today's world, dictating orders to employees in exchange for an obedient following is shifting to the past, and more and more organisations are operating on the principles of self-direction which can be seen as a low hierarchy and decentralised decision-making. Employees are being given more power to plan their work tasks and set goals, making decision-making more agile and enabling quicker reactions to possible changes. At the same time, it is giving leaders the opportunity to redefine their own necessities and field of tasks. The leadership of the future is above all enabling the success of employees, and the organisation too. (Mäkelä 2020.) Although leadership is needed throughout an organisation, Saksi (2016) suggests that the modern power of a leader is based on voluntary following, and a genuine assessment of one's capability to be a leader.

Every leader has their own style of leading which is used to adapt to the situation of the organisation or personal goal. However, leaders must comprehend the existing situation of the organisation or personal goal to become more successful. By being aware of different leadership styles as well as the strengths, weaknesses, and suitability related to these styles, it allows a leader to operate in a manner that best suits their personality. (IMD 2022.) Awareness of different styles is beneficial to the people being led and also to the organisation which is why leadership styles are introduced in depth in the following subchapters.

## **2.1 Leadership styles**

A leadership style is a leader's behavioural approach when leading a group of people (Cherry 2022c). A leader's leadership style typically reflects on a synthesis of various characteristic-related aspects, such as their family relationships, emotional intelligence level, and personality. Understanding one's leadership style is crucial because it helps to develop skills as well as to determine the impact it has on those who are directly influenced. Every leader has their own leadership style, and different styles are needed for different situations and employees. (Ismail & al. 2015, 87.) Ever since the 1930's, researchers have investigated leadership styles and developed theories to give a better understanding of different styles of leading. The most common styles will be covered in further detail in subchapters 2.1.1 – 2.1.3.

### **2.1.1 Delegative leadership**

Delegative leadership, often referred to as "laissez-faire", is a less invasive leadership style adopted by leaders who focus on delegating the initiative to team members (Ismail & al. 2015, 89). In other words, a delegative leader focuses on their own position and tasks and allows their team members to have more responsibility in matters related to determining goals and making decisions. The delegative style of leadership is most effective when employees are driven by successful independent working, they have a high level of education, knowledge, and experience and they show

reliability towards their leader and organisation. There are several advantages of delegative leadership, such as occasional independency, freedom, and presumably, employees show more likeability towards their leader. (Ismail & al. 2015, 89.) Delegative leadership is an unfavourable style of leadership when a leader is unable to provide regular feedback, they delegate an immoderate amount of initiative to team members, or if their absence creates insecurity amongst team members. As a result, team members are likely to feel unsatisfied, lack team spirit, and in worst case scenarios, resign. (Ismail & al. 2015, 89-90.) The delegative style of leadership is also known to produce the least productive workers, creating minimal results as well as critical deficiency in obligated roles and responsibilities (Anbazhagan & Kotur 2014, 62-70).

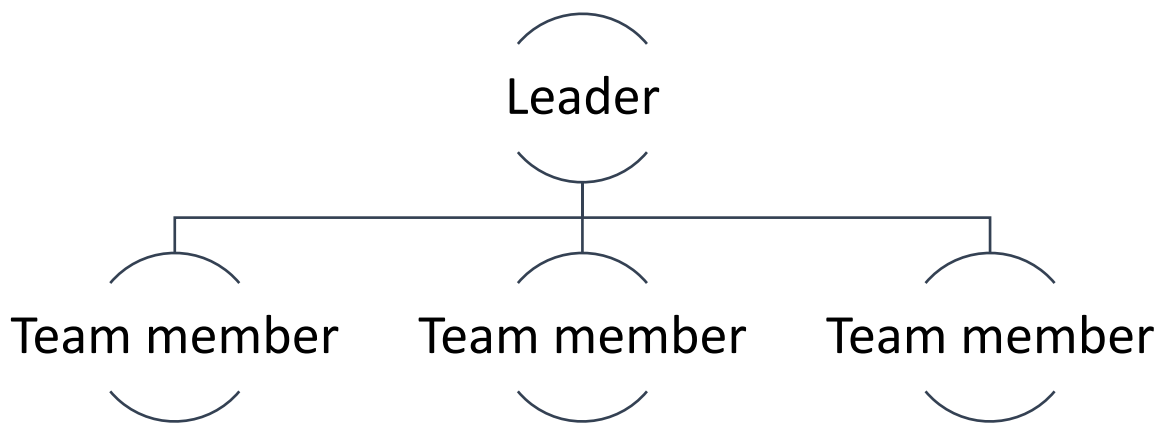


Figure 1: Delegative Leadership style (adapted from Ismail & al. 2015, 89-90)

Figure 1 represents the approach of the delegative, also known as laissez-faire, style of leadership. A delegative leader focuses on their own position and tasks related to it, allowing team members to have more — sometimes too much — initiative. Delegative leaders allow their team members to be responsible for making decisions, determining goals and furthermore, be independent.

### 2.1.2 Autocratic leadership

Leaders who adopt the autocratic leadership style are independent decision-makers and have a clear vision of how things should be handled, giving little authority to their team members. Autocratic leaders, also known as authoritarian leaders, have a barrier between themselves and their team members, creating visible division as well as high expectations and rules that must be abided by without further explanation. As a result, autocratic leaders are in command of every system-

related aspect, such as planning, monitoring, and controlling tasks, while relying on rewards and punishments as employee motivators. Employees tend to fear autocratic leaders, and therefore do not dare express their opinions, nor offer any advice. Due to the lack of independency, employees are dependent of their leader, lack self-confidence and initiative, and are not able to show their talents. (Ismail & al. 2015, 87-88.) In other words, talent recognition is non-existent since the achievements of employees are not emphasized or encouraged by an authoritarian leader.

Although the autocratic style of leadership has been heavily criticized, depending on the situation, task type, and characteristics of team members, it can be beneficial. Since autocratic leadership is a strong, powerful style of leading, it can be useful in teams that are lacking direction or in the past, have experienced poor, weak leaders. Once the team has a knowledgeable, goal-oriented leader who is in full control and sets clear roles, there is an equal contribution towards tasks, and better results are delivered. This particular style of leadership is used, for instance, in the military force where team members experience a huge amount of pressure and stressful situations. An authoritarian leader relieves pressure by allowing team members to concentrate solely on their own performance and assignments, so their resources are not being used to resolve other matters. (Cherry 2022a.)

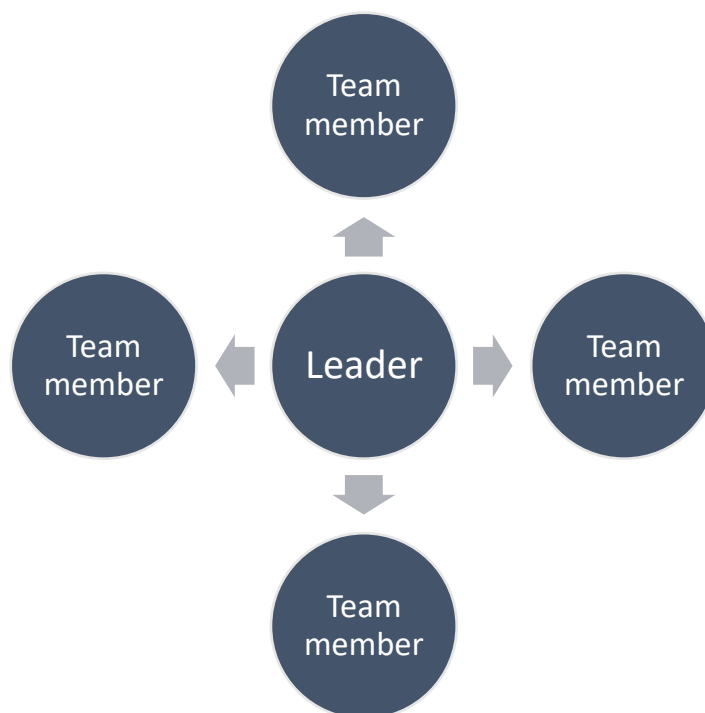


Figure 2: Autocratic Leadership Style (adapted from Ismail & al. 2015, 87-88)

Figure 2 describes the process of communication and feedback between autocratic leaders and their team members. As it can be seen, this figure clearly demonstrates that the communication flow goes in only one direction and therefore, team members of autocratic leaders do not have the authority to express opinions, make decisions, or give feedback. In other words, autocratic leaders do not take their team members into consideration, nor do they delegate any form of power onwards.

### **2.1.3 Other common leadership styles**

Democratic leadership, also known as participative leadership, is typically an effective style of leading that can be applied in any organisation. Democratic leaders share responsibility in decision-making and emphasize the importance of their team members' contribution, resulting in committed and engaged employees. Democratic leaders encourage team members to express ideas and opinions to ensure equality within the group, and while this process allows an open flow of discussion, democratic leaders are always available to provide direction and control. Although the democratic leadership style results in high productivity and committed employees, it can lead to poor decision-making. Since team members of democratic leaders are actively involved in making decisions, factors such as lack of knowledge and unclear roles can arise in democratic leadership. Due to these factors, the quality of contribution can be poor in decision-making, and the uncertainty of roles can lead to miscommunication and failed projects. (Cherry 2022b.) In other words, democratic leadership works best when team members are proficient in their roles, and eager to provide others with their knowledge.

Transactional leadership, also known as managerial leadership, is a leadership style that focuses on emphasising the importance of performance, results, and the existing, overall structure of an organisation. Since leaders who opt the transactional style of leadership are result-oriented, they are usually found in organisations where deadlines are strict, and resources constrained. Transactional leaders are not typically found, nor would their style of leading be appropriate, in organisations where initiative is encouraged. As mentioned, structure is important in transactional leadership which is why this style is beneficial in multinational organisations where people do not speak a mutual language: structure helps people act in accordance with requirements and to complete tasks successfully. (STU 2014.) Transactional leaders rely on rewards and punishment to motivate and direct others, so when team members deliver good results or achieve goals related to the organisation, they are rewarded. Transactional leaders do not encourage creativity or seek for the opinions of team members; therefore, transactional leadership is most effective in situations or tasks where the problem is clearly defined, and the focus is solely on accomplishing that situation or task. (Cherry 2022c.)

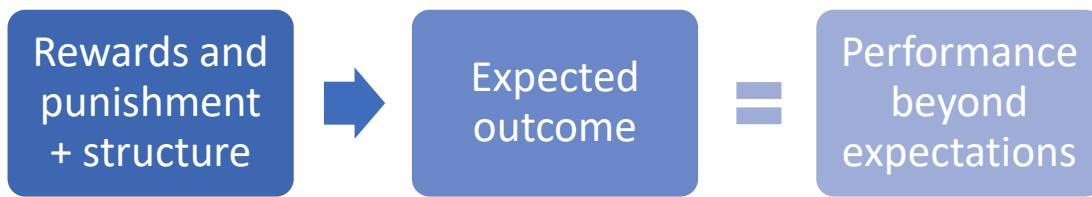


Figure 3: Transactional Leadership style (adapted from Cherry 2022c; STU 2014)

Figure 3 demonstrates how transactional leadership lays emphasis on the transaction between the leader and subordinates. Transactional leaders use a structured system of rewards and punishment for direction as well as motivation in order to reach the desired outcome of work tasks, leading to subordinates performing beyond expectations and eventually achieving the outcome.

Transformational leadership is quite the opposite to transactional leadership since it focuses on involvement, positive influence, assistance, and loyalty. In other words, transformational leaders collaborate with their team members to identify needed change, resulting in employee motivation and low retention as well as help them perform beyond their capabilities. Transformational leaders recognize individual talent and performance and are open to ideas of their team members. For these reasons, there is open communication between the leader and team members, and also opportunities for team members to receive more authority and advance to a higher level. (Cherry 2022d.)

Transformational leadership is effective in organisations where change is required but not in new organisations where structure is non-existent since transformational leaders work to change the system (STU 2014). The concept of transformational leadership is presented below in figure 4.

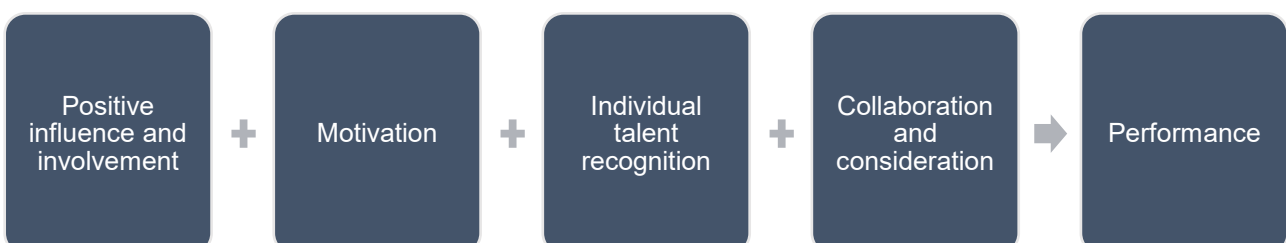


Figure 4: Transformational Leadership (adapted from Cherry 2022d)

## 2.2 Characteristics and Zappos' core values of leadership

The world of 2020 requires a leader's leadership behaviour to create and reinforce a collaborative, authentic, customized, innovative, and social environment in the workplace. These five main characteristics of leadership are being identified as requirements for being a leader in the world of 2020 and are very much on the surface. Implementing a collaborative approach is important, so in other words, a leader has the ability to work comfortably in intercommunication situations and deliver a cooperative attitude. A leader's collaborative approach focuses on the whole organisation, not solely on their own team or business. A leader of 2020 recognizes talent, provides opportunities for growth and development as well as offers feedback and guidance, simultaneously mentoring and coaching the team both face-to-face and virtually. A leader's digital confidence and the ability to speak the digital language enables fluent communication with the next generation and gives a sense of connectivity as well as makes decision-making more efficient. As it is important to be digitally proficient, it is also important to accept diversity and be globally aware; in other words, to be a global citizen who prioritizes social responsibility and recognizes skills of different cultures within the organisation. (Meister & Willyerd 2010, 186-200.)

Depending on the organisation or leader, the core values of leadership can differ. According to Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos, many organisations introduce core values that are too scripted or impose arrogance, resulting in the values being either forgotten or possibly abandoned the next day (Meister & Willyerd 2010, 202). As mentioned, different leaders have different core values, however, Meister and Willyerd (2010, 203) chose to introduce the ten unique core values produced by the employees of Zappos:

1. Deliver WOW Through Service
2. Embrace and Drive Change
3. Create Fun and a Little Weirdness
4. Be Creative, Adventurous, and Open-Minded
5. Pursue Growth and Learning
6. Build Open and Honest Relationships with Communication
7. Build a Positive Team and Family Spirit
8. Do More with Less
9. Be Passionate and Determined
10. Be Humble

Zappos' core values encourage transparency and accessibility in leadership, and their organisation culture promotes partnerships and working as a team. The core values of leadership and organisation culture of Zappos have been recognized and praised worldwide, resulting in Zappos placing number 23 in Fortune magazine's 2009 100 Best Companies to Work For (Meister and Willyerd



2010, 202). Although these values are of only one company, it is notable that leaders who follow these values perform better in the long run and impact a strong, healthy culture at the workplace.

To define the mentioned core values of Zappos, delivering WOW through service is related to exceeding expectations in every interaction a leader has — whether it is with a co-worker or customer. Embracing and driving change allows leaders and their organisation to differentiate from their competitors as well as evolve fast and adapt quickly to possible changes, leading to competitive advantage. The third important core value of leadership embraces showing individual personalities and diversity in work tasks and having a bit fun in the workplace. By encouraging everyone to be themselves, it allows people to become more innovative and think outside the box, resulting in increased employee engagement and better performance results. In addition, approaching challenges with an open mind as well as being adventurous and creative in decision and solution-making are important values, but so is making mistakes and willing to learn from those mistakes. (Zappos Insights 2022.)

Allowing employees to grow in the personal as well as professional sense is important. Not all employees recognize their own potential which is why encouragement and inspiration from leaders is necessary. Furthermore, openness and honesty build strong relationships and develop emotional connections with employees, leading to accomplishments exceeding original expectations. Transparency is important not only in positive matters, but also negative matters, resulting in a positive, healthy work culture. Leaders play a big role in enabling and supporting employees' success by removing possible obstacles and eliminating any barriers that may be dividing leaders from employees. Leaders not only lead a team, but set an example by being one of the team members that continuously seek for improvements on how to become more efficient as well as innovative, requiring passion and determination. By believing in the decisions being made, actions being taken, and in the organisation in general, a leader positively has an impact on employees which creates inspiration and motivation. In addition, cultivating humility, respecting every individual as well as pursuing fairness help leaders to become more attuned with the feelings of employees, resulting in employee commitment and engagement. (Zappos Insights 2022.)

### **2.3 Remote leadership**

Due to COVID-19, leaders from organisations worldwide experienced an array of new challenges in 2020, having to quickly adapt to the new normal which was leading remotely. According to Mattiske (2020, 88) regardless of the geographical location, a leader should operate and communicate effectively, continuously build trust, show respect, and influence employees from a distance. Also, supporting employees' initiative, coordinating operations, and even creating trends are aspects of being a remote leader. Remote leadership requires new strategies as well as mindsets, but it also

presents opportunities to improve the creativity and efficiency of an organization. Since leaders are not physically seeing team members on a daily basis, the relationship focuses more on communication that is implemented through frequent check-ups and conversations. When the communication is done correctly, it results in increased, meaningful connectivity with team members that ultimately leads to a culture of trust. (Kahla 2022.)

Although successful communication and trust are particularly important in remote leadership, adapting to the circumstances and embracing new, remote work practices is the key to overcoming challenges and effectively leading a remote team. Remote leadership does not differ a lot from on-site leadership, but it does require more focus on team members, trust, and work culture. Since it is not possible to show facial expressions and body language or hear the tone of voice, a remote leader engages more consciously with team members to avoid disengagement and disconnectedness. (Kahla 2022.) All things considered, remote leadership is still a growing notion that is becoming more common, yet still causes uncertainty about how it should be approached, and how matters related to being a remote leader should be tackled. As said by Mattiske (2020, 28), if an existing, remote leader is making all the same decisions as when leading an on-site team, they are making the biggest possible mistake.

## **2.4 Remote work**

Remote work, also known as work from home or telecommuting, is defined by Cambridge dictionary as an employment arrangement where an employee works outside of their traditional office environment, typically at home, or at some other location. This definition is applied in this thesis and as a result, remote work is established as work which, under normal circumstances, would be performed in an office environment, but due to COVID-19 has now changed into working from home or another location. As a result of coronavirus pandemic, remote work has been playing an immense role in the majority of organizations worldwide, leading to less physical contact with co-workers and leaders at the workplace. Remote work implies challenges which will be explained in the next chapter.

### **2.4.1 Challenges of remote work**

In the beginning of year 2020, the coronavirus pandemic forced a considerable number of people to start working from home although many had never before had the opportunity to do so. After three years, organisations have realised that the majority of their employees no longer wish to work a full 40-hour week at the typical office environment, but rather from home (Buffer 2022). There are several individual differences related to remote work that are influenced by factors such as work experience, personality, working conditions, and even family situations at home which is why

remote work can be difficult to implement and therefore presents challenges. It is notable that the challenges of remote work depend on the type of organisation, business, work, and tasks involved, but it is important for any organisation to be aware of the challenges and learn to overcome them. (Työterveyslaitos s.a.)

Increased cybersecurity risks, social isolation, poor workplace communication, and productivity issues, not to mention stress and burnout, are all some of the many challenges employees are facing due to working remotely. Although remote employees have different, online channels to communicate through when encountering issues related to technical glitches or work in general, it can be time-consuming waiting for remote help, resulting in decreased productivity and a feeling of stress and panic. The lack of physical contact and social interaction with fellow colleagues as well as the lack of involvement in organisational matters are leading to isolation, having a detrimental effect on social skills. Remote work can also cause difficulties on how to separate work from personal life which leads to the feeling of working non-stop, ultimately affecting an employee's general state of health and in worst case scenarios, resulting in burnout. In addition, working from home requires adaptation from the family especially in situations where a remote-working employee does not have a designated, quiet workspace to ensure maximum concentration on work tasks. (Työterveyslaitos s.a.) Improper work ergonomics is also related to workspace challenges since not every employee has the possibility to acquire proper office furniture and equipment due to the lack of space or even their financial situation in the event of an organisation not providing financial support for the employee.

Buffer's 2022 State of Remote Work (2022) study shows that although 97% of respondents would recommend remote work to others, 40% are working more than when on-site, 52% feel less connected to their co-workers, and 24% are experiencing loneliness. Also, 45% of respondents feel that career progression is more challenging which suggests organisations are finding it difficult to provide career growth opportunities in remote work. Career development opportunities have an immense impact on successful employee engagement as well as employee retention and therefore will be further explained in chapter 3.1. According to the results of Buffer's 2022 State of Remote Work (2022) study, the majority of people enjoy working from home, but an alarming number of people are experiencing isolation, less connectivity, increased workload, and decrease in career growth opportunities. In other words, people are still working in remote work conditions and experiencing remote work situations which require improvements as well as for organisations to rebuild strategies. To overcome challenges related to remote work, organisations need to consider how increased remote work is changing organisational operations and leadership practices as well as how remote personnel can be supported (Työterveyslaitos s.a.).

### 3 Employee engagement

The Merriam-Webster dictionary describes engagement as an emotional involvement or commitment and therefore, employee engagement is referred to as the emotional connection or commitment an employee has towards their organisation and goals related to their work. However, there are several definitions for employee engagement: some may say it is related to motivation or satisfaction whereas others refer to it as being one hundred percent dedicated to the organisation, and to the organisation only. Employee engagement is not just about satisfaction, motivation, or commitment. An engaged employee has a clear vision of the path they want to take towards their own future, as well as the dedication to understand and achieve the goals of the organisation to ensure success. (Marlow, Masarech & Rice 2012, 2-7.)

According to State of the Global Workplace 2022 report, only 21% of employees are engaged at work, stating that money is the sole motivator and otherwise, they cannot find significance in their work, nor do they feel optimistic about their future. Employee engagement must be defined in terms of a relationship between each employee and organisation, otherwise, it is difficult to find the purpose of engagement as well as to include it in a business strategy (Marlow & al. 2012, 19). To create a more engaged workforce, it is important to understand not only the common key drivers of employee engagement, but also drivers from the psychological perspective. Key drivers and psychological drivers of employee engagement will be explained in subchapters 3.1 and 3.2.

Employee engagement is often associated with existing employees, but it is prominent already during the recruitment process since various things can be done in recruitment to determine how committed the employee is to the organisation and its operations in the future. When recruiting talent, the organisation often gives an assurance to an employee, for instance, about career advancement opportunities, additional training, and other benefits. When the promises are realistic and the organisation is able to fulfil them, the employee is already more committed and engaged. Additionally, a significant factor of an employee's long-term commitment to the organisation is related to how their values align with the organisation's values and culture. Employees are typically more devoted and engaged when they believe that the organisation's values align with their own. As a result, the compatibility of an employee's values and working methods are taken more into account during the recruitment process. (CrediNord 14.2.2022.)

High levels of employee engagement promote talent retention, less absenteeism, and increased productivity, leading to an overall improvement of organisational performance (Sharma 26.6.2020). It is not surprising that engaged employees deliver better results: when an employee thrives at work, they naturally do their best to achieve the goals of an organisation. There has always been correlation between engagement and financial results, but the phenomenon has only recently

begun attracting more attention. The reason being that the requirements regarding the employer are changing; in the past, a workplace has simply been a source of income, and whether an employee enjoyed their work or not was irrelevant. Today, work is much more. For many employees, their own work is a way to recognize and execute their identity, interests, and values as well as feel a sense of meaningfulness. (Kangas 25.1.2021.)

Especially in today's specialist jobs, long careers spanning many decades are being replaced by portfolio careers. The reasons for this can be seen, for instance, as a loss of confidence in an organisation's ability to offer long careers or as the desire of the younger generation to attempt new challenges and seek different jobs. (Matikka 6.4.2021.) Both academics and HR professionals who are researching the employee engagement topic agree that employees who are engaged and committed to the job task and organisation produce better results. Therefore, employees who feel engaged are indeed valuable, and Matikka (6.4.2021) states that the compensation costs of a productive employee can very well rise close to 200% of their annual salary. It is inevitable that a successful organisation is a sum of its employees, and without the competent personnel and their contribution, even the best product or service will not conquer the world.

### **3.1 Key drivers of employee engagement**

In business, the drivers of engagement are often neglected, especially during tough times or unexpected circumstances, such as the pandemic. The organisation's only focus is on survival, when in fact they should be paying attention to engagement. According to statistics, organisations with high level of employee engagement see a growth in their levels during tough times whereas those who are less involved see their employees leave. Every organisation is different, and therefore the key drivers may differ, however, one that is widely agreed on is leadership which will be covered in this chapter.

As mentioned, key drivers of employee engagement can vary, however, it is notable that despite the organisation, communication plays a significant role in every aspect of employee engagement. Without open, effective communication, employees are likely to lose dedication as well as commitment towards their employer, resulting in failure and delayed growth of the organisation. One of the most important factors of communication is to create a two-way flow of information throughout the organisation, so in other words, feedback and other communication should not happen solely between people in high positions but across all levels of the organisation. Establishing a two-way flow of communication ensures employees have the information they need to perform successfully, creates a healthy work environment, and improves human relationships. Communication has an impact on employees' emotional life and also on their thoughts about the organisation, leader, and colleagues. When communication is effective, employees know what is expected of them and

understand the reasons and methods for doing their own tasks, resulting in appreciation towards the work role. (Srivastava 2016.) In other words, it is important to implement a clear communication strategy that covers expectations, reasons for actions, goals, and the correct handling of feedback. This way, communication can be shaped into a strategic tool of which the positive effects reach both employees and leaders.

Recognition has an impact on how employees contribute towards an organisation and if implemented correctly, can create engagement (Marlow & al. 2012, 13). Employee recognition does not necessarily involve monetary compensation as it can also refer to non-monetary incentives such as verbal praise, tangible rewards and gifts, and flexibility. Besides having an immense impact on employee engagement, recognition also helps retain employees and leads to higher levels of performance – especially if an individual is recognised on a more personal level (Hastwell 9.9.2021). Typically, recognition creates a sense of value and appreciation, but it is notable that recognition can also inflict discomfort for individuals who intentionally avoid the public eye (Marlow & al. 2012, 14). In other words, employees have different preferences which is why it is important that leaders see employees as individuals to help understand and demonstrate the preferred styles of recognition.

Employees need to know how they are achieving in their work tasks in order to build their existing knowledge through formal or practical training for career development opportunities (Marlow & al. 2012, 16). Training and career development opportunities are critical components of employee engagement no matter the organisation and have a positive impact on organisational performance levels (Sharma 26.6.2020). If an organisation does not provide career development opportunities, it can cause uncertainty as well as a sense of being unidentified. Work is an important part of a person's identity and when an organisation solely focuses on matching individualistic skills to organisational demands, it does not provide a sense of identity or belonging. By implementing career development with a more personal approach and strategy, employees experience meaningfulness as work, ultimately driving employee engagement as well as employee commitment. Each employee has personal goals for their careers which means career development initiatives need to be characterised according to individual needs. (Trevor-Roberts 2021.) Consistent investment in employee training and development leads to employees recognizing that the organisation is interested in employees' professional advancement, resulting in higher levels of employee contribution and evidently engagement. (Sharma 26.6.2020.)

Over the past few years, employee engagement has been highlighted as a positive result of effective leadership. Leaders are aware that good employee engagement and treating people appropriately delivers business results, but little attention is being given to the engagement processes

executed by leaders. Employees are becoming disengaged with dependent, unaccountable jobs and furthermore, when leaders are coming across as not trustworthy enough (Corey & Elliott 2018, 4-5). For a leader to earn and build the trust of an employee, any divides that may be influencing separation between a leader and their employees should be broken down (Corey & Elliott 2018, 73). In addition, it is important for a leader to show competency and credibility to ensure employees have confidence in their leader as well as a sense of security (Sharma 26.6.2020). Leadership is one of the most significant drivers of employee engagement, and by leaders showing strong leadership, employees are able to reach their full potential while also feeling loyal towards the organisation.

Being aware of what drives employee engagement is important since it has a positive impact on retaining and motivating employees. Alongside the key drivers mentioned in this chapter, demanding work tasks that have purpose and are challenging enough also lead to employee engagement and retention, and motivate employees to produce good, quality results. At the same time, if the significance of work tasks does not emerge in daily work or if the implementation of these tasks is challenging, it can be unmotivating. Low motivation and commitment to the work task leads to poor productivity and unwanted consequences, resulting in higher employee turnover. Leaders of organisations have an important role of listening to employees and showing gratitude. In addition, it is important that employees are aware of the importance of their work in terms of the success and growth of the organisation as well as the social impact. (Matikka 6.4.2021.)

### **3.2 Psychological drivers of employee engagement**

Encyclopaedia Britannica describes a psychological, behaviour-related drive as the motivation that results from a physiological, or in this case, a psychological need which serves as an internal stimulate, encouraging an individual to satisfy that particular need. According to Kahn (1990) meaningfulness, safety, and availability are three primary psychological drivers associated with engagement or disengagement at work.

Psychological meaningfulness refers to the sense of getting positive or significant contributions of the job, such as autonomy, feedback, rewards and recognition, or development opportunities, in return for performance at work. Psychological meaningfulness is a strong contributor to an employee's level of performance as well as their personal investment in work tasks. An increase in feedback or job challenges has a positive effect on employees since it gives the feeling of receiving something in return for work-related accomplishments. Higher levels of engagement are directly correlated with meaningful work, and it also affects how satisfied employees are with their jobs and how committed they are to the organisation. (Bergeron, Buckman, Crawford & Rich 2014, 60-62.) In other words, when employees experience a sense of purpose in the workplace, they have a

psychological meaning to what they are doing which subsequently filters into other spheres of life and adds to a person's overall sense of life purpose.

Psychological safety is the ability to share opinions, feelings, or concerns with a positive outcome and with a feeling of interpersonal fearlessness. An employee lacks psychological safety when work situations are unpredictable, humiliating, or intimidating, or if they are unable to share different views. Factors such as job security and organisational justice play a significant role in ensuring an employee is psychologically safe and providing support and assurance for their self-investment. (Bergeron & al. 2014, 62-63.) In other words, employees who feel psychologically safe dare to take risks and feel vulnerable in front of other team members, continuously improve their performance, have a higher level of engagement and they rapidly learn through experiments. The environment and culture of an organisation are represented by psychological safety: lack of psychological safety leads to employees who are not committed which ultimately results in an organisation's loss of utilising its talent.

Psychological availability is described as the degree to which an individual is prepared to personally engage at a specific time, for instance, individuals who are available believe they have the capacity and preparedness to devote their intellectual activity and emotional resources into role performances (Bergeron & al. 2014, 67-71). In addition, psychological availability is a number of organisational strategies that are combined to ensure that employees are committed to the organisation's corporate goals and values as well as being positively prepared to contribute towards the success of the organisation while fulfilling their personal goals. Outside life, insecurity, and physical and emotional energy are all factors that influence psychological availability. Therefore, for an employee to feel psychologically available, they must sense a feeling of security, develop confidence about their capability and self-consciousness, and ensure they fit in the social system. (Bergeron & al. 2014, 67-71.) In other words, factors that drive the psychological availability of an employee in the workplace are emotional and social support from leaders; lack of such support can result in disengaged, unavailable employees.

Factors of the three psychological drivers resulting in employee engagement are presented below in Figure 5.



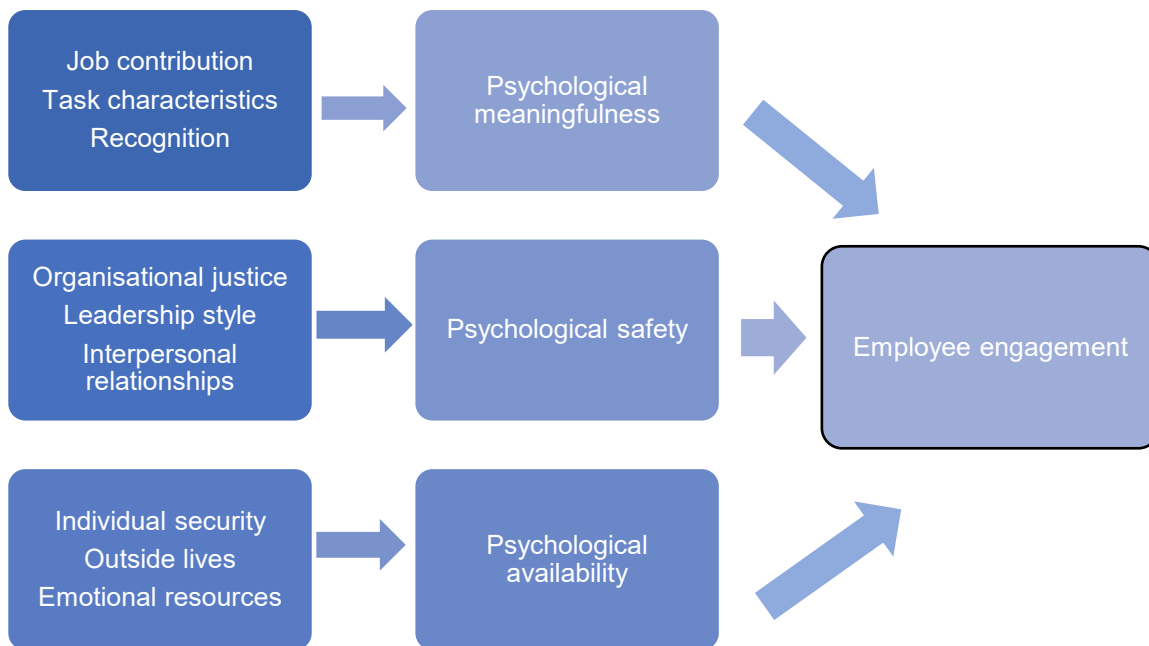


Figure 5: Psychological drivers in Employee Engagement (adapted from Kahn 1990; Bergeron & al. 2014, 60-71)

### 3.3 Employee retention

Armstrong and Taylor (2017, 197-198) define employee retention as a positive outcome of employee engagement where an organisation has the ability to keep their best, existing employees and prevent them from leaving. When talented employees leave an organisation, one of the biggest losses is not only reduced productivity but high personnel turnover which can have a negative influence on an organisation's reputation as well as harm their ability to fulfill objectives. Research indicates that key causes for high personnel turnover, in other words poor employee retention, are insufficient employee benefits, poor compensation and company culture, the sense of not belonging with fellow team members, and lack of recognition and development opportunities. On the other hand, although increased profits and a fair, equal company culture have a positive impact on employee retention, enhanced engagement from the communication perspective can nowadays be crucial for retaining existing employees. It can be particularly important to communicate career development and management initiatives to retain a current workforce and motivate people to work and perform to the best of their abilities. (Srivastava 2016.)

### 3.3.1 Retention strategies for different performers

For most organisations, retention is a high priority, and to ensure maximum retention, it is critical to keep in mind that different employees require different strategies. It is unlikely that high-performing talent shares the same motivators as mid-performing talent and similarly, underperformers require completely different retention methods. Top performers thrive and stay engaged when they are being given demanding tasks and new targets to work towards, allowing them to advance in their career and accomplish achievements. Since top performers are career-oriented, they become experts in existing areas which is why it is important to provide continuous training as well as new challenges and skill opportunities. In addition, including top performers in succession planning prepares them for future leadership roles and also has a positive impact on retention as they already have a clear vision of their position in the organisation. (Basumallick 2021.)

Mid-performers, also referred to as average performers, are the most common type of performers found in organisations, and therefore have the biggest impact on productivity levels. Average performers are not as career-oriented or challenge-driven as top performers, but rather prefer personalized benefits and perks, adequate leadership, and social recognition systems. When compared to top performers, average performers lack self-motivation which is why adequate leadership is crucial since it leads to higher levels of motivation and satisfaction. In addition, average performers strive for social recognition as well as praise for their work contribution. By implementing a social reward and recognition system, average performers feel a sense of appreciation and are less likely to transition to other organisations. (Basumallick 2021.)

As for underperformers, there can be several reasons as to why they are not productive: some are hidden gems, also known as employees having hidden potential whereas some may be working in the wrong department or lacking appropriate training. Identifying the reasons for underperformers' low levels of productivity is important since it can be linked to poor employee engagement which is why employee engagement surveys play a big role. By conducting surveys, an organisation has the opportunity to recognise the causes of poor performance and address any issues before it is too late. If the survey results portray inadequate training, underperformers should be provided with a chance to update their skills to ensure they continue working for the organisation for a longer time. Additionally, it is the organisation's responsibility to produce an accurate job description to prevent employees joining the organisation with completely different expectations from what the job actually is. (BasuMallick 2021.)



Figure 6: Different performers (adapted from Basumallick 2021)

Figure 6 presents four types of performers that are found in organisations. A top performer delivers exceptional results and puts high effort into delivering those results whereas an average performer settles for standard, mediocre performance. In other words, an average performer achieves nothing less or more than the level of performance required to accomplish the objective of a position. Underperformers, also known as poor performers, provide poor results and put little effort into completing work tasks, however, potential hidden gems can be found amongst underperformers. Hidden gems are not productive but still put high effort into accomplishing tasks assigned to them.

In addition to retention strategies for specific performers, an organisation must also take into account strategy implementation to improve employee retention on a general level. To avoid wasting recruiting and training investment, it is essential to invest in the right talent from the start and

clearly explain the organisation's expectations and goals for the position. Furthermore, providing adequate training gives a positive impression of the organisation as well as defines not only organisational expectations, but also policies and benefits. Unsuccessful training can cause an employee to dissociate from fellow team members and the company culture, leading to the exploration of their options elsewhere. Besides training, feedback and consistent recognition and career development opportunities encourage long-term goal setting as well as drive growth at all levels of an organisation, ultimately reducing retention risks. (Paulsen 2021.)

One of the most effective ways to anticipate employee turnover is employee engagement. Many of the retention strategies mentioned in this chapter correspond to factors of employee engagement due to the fact that employee engagement is the main determinant of optimising employee retention. Almost all aspects of an employee's work life as well as an organisation's retention strategy directly and demonstrably affect employee engagement which is why engagement should be frequently assessed through employee feedback surveys: employee feedback provides an organisation with a clear understanding of the issues that have an impact on retention rates. By showing employees that their feedback is being acknowledged and implemented into strategies and plans, potential leavers remain in the organisation, resulting in successful employee retention. (Radley 22.6.2022.)

## 4 Conducting the research

This chapter presents the research of the thesis, including methodology, research type and research objective as well as how the data was collected and analysed. To acquire high quality answers and properly understand what impact remote leadership has had on retaining employee engagement, the research for this thesis was conducted using a qualitative research approach and semi-structured, open-ended survey questions. The qualitative research supports the theoretical basis of the thesis as well as solves the research problem.

### 4.1 Methodology and research type

In addition to the open-ended questions, two, five-point Likert scale closed questions are presented which represent a quantitative research method. The Likert scale is a rating scale commonly used in surveys, and it consists of a number of different statements or a question that express both a negative and a positive attitude towards the matter in question. The respondent evaluates statements on, for instance, a five-point scale, using the following response options: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), agree (4), strongly agree (5). (Peda.net s.a.)

Quantitative research is based on describing and interpreting the research subject using statistics and numbers whereas qualitative research involves collecting non-numerical data, such as text, to better understand the qualities, features, and meanings of the research subject from a comprehensive perspective. Although the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods is often emphasized, both methods can be applied in the same study and to explain, albeit in different ways, the same research subjects. (Jyväskylän Yliopisto 2021.)

Qualitative methods can be used in surveys by presenting open-ended questions. Most open-ended survey questions have text fields that allow unique answers rather than research participants having to choose from a list of predetermined answers. This method gives participants the freedom to fully express themselves, providing in-depth information that can be used to learn about possible issues or ad hoc queries. The information received from open-ended questions can be used to support any numerical data collected in the survey, however, often direct quotes from participants' comments form more effective statements than averages or percentages. (Survey-Monkey s.a.)

Semi-structured surveys offer the possibility of open-ended questions which allow detailed responses from the research participants rather than just scratching the surface. In semi-structured surveys, the questions are planned in advance and are the same for every respondent, but there are no predetermined options. In contrast to a structured interview where the response options are

set in advance, a semi-structured is more flexible but still follows a set structure. (Näpärä 12.4.2017.) In other words, semi-structured surveys provide the advantage of acquiring a thorough insight of individualistic experiences, compared to quantitative methods where numbers represent research participants. Ultimately, semi-structured surveys offer a deeper understanding to research participants' experience about remote leadership as well as remote employee engagement and retention strategies. Therefore, choosing qualitative research and semi-structured survey questions instead of a formalised list of questions allows Company X assistants to express themselves in depth, resulting in Company X getting a more comprehensive point of view of the current situation.

## **4.2 Research objective**

The objective of the research is to discover and understand how team leaders from Company X are utilising their leadership skills in remote work, if the change from on-site to remote work has affected the level of employee engagement with their employees and if their employees feel retained. Thus, the main research question is to find out how team leaders have performed by retaining their employees from an engagement point of view and in a remote work environment. The main research question also raises additional investigative questions:

1. Which strategies and actions need to be modified or improved to maintain a higher level of retention?
2. How engaged and motivated do employees feel based on the performance of their team leaders?
3. What factors would encourage and motivate employees to work more on-site instead of from home?

The research intent is to provide Company X team leaders with knowledge they can utilise in their remote leadership strategies as well as tools to retain employee engagement and lead their assistant teams better in a remote work environment. In addition, the research information provides Company X team leaders with informative results produced by their employees to help deal with any necessary improvements. The research result is also aimed to give Company X assistants an opportunity to anonymously address improvement areas and other ideas as well as possibly influence the implementation of new strategies and developments.

## **4.3 Data collection and analysis**

The purpose of the research is to provide an answer to the research objective with the use of the additional investigative questions mentioned in the previous chapter. Before conducting the research, 15 survey questions were drafted on a separate document while simultaneously reflecting on the theoretical section of the thesis to ensure correspondence between the two. Once the initial questions were prepared, they were presented to Company X leaders. Several meetings were held and as a result, a few questions were modified, and seven questions were removed to ensure the

questions obtain the research objective. Ultimately, the survey was built with an electronic survey system Webropol and included a total of eight questions. The Webropol survey was sent to all assistants based in Helsinki.

Before sending the survey to the research participants, a test link of the survey was sent via email to a Company X leader to ensure no technical issues occurred and all survey questions were visible. Once a response was received confirming the survey link functioned, a cover note along with the survey link was sent via email on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2023 to the research participants. The cover note introduced the writer and the topic of the thesis as well as a short explanation on the research objective. In addition, participants were notified of the survey being anonymous. Although all research participants' native language is Finnish, all survey questions were presented in English since Company X requires English language proficiency in work-related tasks. Also, English was chosen to avoid possible translation mistakes had the questions been presented in Finnish. All participants voluntarily participated in the research and were given a 12-day timeframe, until 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023, for responding to the survey to avoid feeling rushed or pressured of replying immediately.

All research participants work in assistant positions within Company X and have all experienced working remotely since year 2020. The research sample was chosen to specifically understand what impact remote work has had on leadership as well as how remote leadership has affected factors and drivers of employee engagement and retention. Factors and drivers of employee engagement and retention were presented in chapters 3-3.3.1. It is notable that aspects such as age, gender, and work experience were not considered relevant to this research or when choosing the research sample and therefore, were not included in the Webropol survey questions.

Since the survey was built with Webropol, all answers from participants were automatically saved in the Webropol system and will be analysed in the next chapter. Additionally, as the research is conducted using semi-structured questions in a survey, all participants were presented the same questions. The survey can be found in this thesis as Appendix 1.

## **5 Research results**

This chapter presents background information of the research participants as well as the actual research results. The employee survey included eight main questions that were topic wise linked to one another, therefore, it was necessary to divide the findings into separate categories: remote work and its impact on leadership, remote work and its challenges and separating it from home, and current motivators and retention factors. The survey was open on Webropol and the link which was sent via email to all legal assistants was valid from 20<sup>th</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023. All research results are presented anonymously.

### **5.1 Background information of participants**

To increase the credibility of the research, general background information of the participants is introduced. As mentioned in chapter four, age, gender, and work experience of the participants were not considered relevant to the research or research results – solely information and experiences regarding remote leadership, employee engagement, and employee retention.

All participants have been working remotely since year 2020 – some more than others. Company X has not presented a specific policy concerning how many days assistants should work at the office, however, working at the office is highly encouraged. All participants have permanent employment relationships and work in assistant roles on a daily basis from Monday to Friday. In addition, all participants work in the geographical location where the research is being conducted, in Helsinki Metropolitan area. Assistant trainees did not participate in the research since they have been working at Company X for a short period of time, and therefore do not yet have knowledge or experience of all the working sectors.

### **5.2 Findings of research results**

The findings of the research results are presented in this subchapter. As mentioned, although all the questions were linked to one another, the findings were divided into three separate categories to ensure there is a clear understanding of the responses. There were several similarities in the responses received from Company X employees, but there were also some differences that will be explained in further detail. A total of 20 employees working in assistant roles responded to the survey.

#### **5.2.1 Remote work and its impact on leadership**

Most of the employees believed that their leader's style of leading has changed in remote work compared to regular, face-to-face office work. Some employees have experienced loneliness and a



feeling of being detached from their leader as well as the workplace. A significant part of internal communication and informal conversation has decreased, and many employees feel that their leaders do not ask them frequently enough how they are doing. One employee expressed that their leader has had to learn to be more independent and that employees may not be as available when working remotely than when at the office. Although many employees responded that their leader's style of changing has changed in remote work, some said it has not changed. Some also said they do not have a basis for comparison since they started working during the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that they have been working remotely and are continuing to do so.

Employees showed more differences in opinion when asked how successfully factors of employee engagement have been implemented by their leaders. According to 10 % of employees, communication was excellent whereas 40 % thought it was good, 40 % average, and 10 % poor. Positive work culture was one of the strongest factors with 30 % responding that it was excellent, 45 % good, 15 % average, and 10 % poor. The third factor of employee engagement mentioned in the survey question was strong leadership and 15 % believed it was excellent, 25 % good, 40 % average, and 20 % poor. Most of the employees had similar opinions about how successfully frequent feedback was implemented by their leader since 5 % responded that it was excellent, 15 % good, 50 % average, and 30 % poor. Along with positive work culture, autonomy was also a strong factor. According to 25 % of employees' experiences autonomy was excellent, 30 % good, 25 % average, and 20 % poor. Transparency was in 15 % of employees' opinion excellent, 40 % good, 30 % average, and 15 % poor. The last factor of the second survey question was employee involvement, and 5 % of employees thought it was excellent, 45 % good, 40 % average, and 10 % poor.



Figure 7: Company X leaders' implementation of employee engagement.

Figure 7 presents how Company X leaders have implemented factors of employee engagement. Most of the employees agreed on positive work culture being a strong factor, but otherwise the question divided opinions.

### **5.2.2 Remote work, its challenges and separating work from home**

The majority of employees responded that they do not have difficulties separating their free time from work. The responses indicated that turning off the computer and phone notifications after work have been adequate actions for switching off and separating themselves from work. In addition, many who work remotely have breaks during their workday and remove themselves from their workspace once their working hours have been completed. Going outdoors to get some fresh air and allowing the brain to rewind after working from home also turned out to be a popular way for employees to separate work from their free time. Employees who mainly work on-site expressed that physically leaving the office helps to leave work-related matters at work and not take the matters home with them.

There were several similarities when employees were asked about what has been most challenging when working remotely. Most of the respondents replied that communication, keeping in touch with fellow colleagues, getting to know colleagues from other business areas, and the lack of social interaction have produced the biggest challenges in remote work. Poor work ergonomics also turned out to be an issue when working remotely since not everyone has the possibility to create a peaceful workspace with appropriate office equipment. Many expressed that they prefer handling conversations face-to-face because it is easier to ask questions – especially if the matter is complex – and they can see the other person's facial expressions. Based on the responses received from employees, remote work imposes several challenges that were also mentioned in the theoretical part in subchapter 2.4.1.

### **5.2.3 Current motivators and retention factors**

According to the responses received, 100 % of Company X employees agreed that they are especially motivated at work by fellow colleagues, compensation, and the work environment. Career opportunities divided opinions since 5 % of employees disagreed that career opportunities motivate them at work, 28 % neither agreed nor disagreed, 39 % agreed, and 28 % strongly agreed. Employee benefits motivate 94 % of employees, rewards and recognition 94 %, and job content 89 %. In addition, one assistant was motivated by workplace flexibility regarding the working hours, location, and methods. All in all, all factors of motivation that were mentioned in the first survey question received a median of 4.4, indicating that Company X employees are mostly motivated at the

workplace. The results of what motivates Company X employees the most at work are presented below in Figure 8.

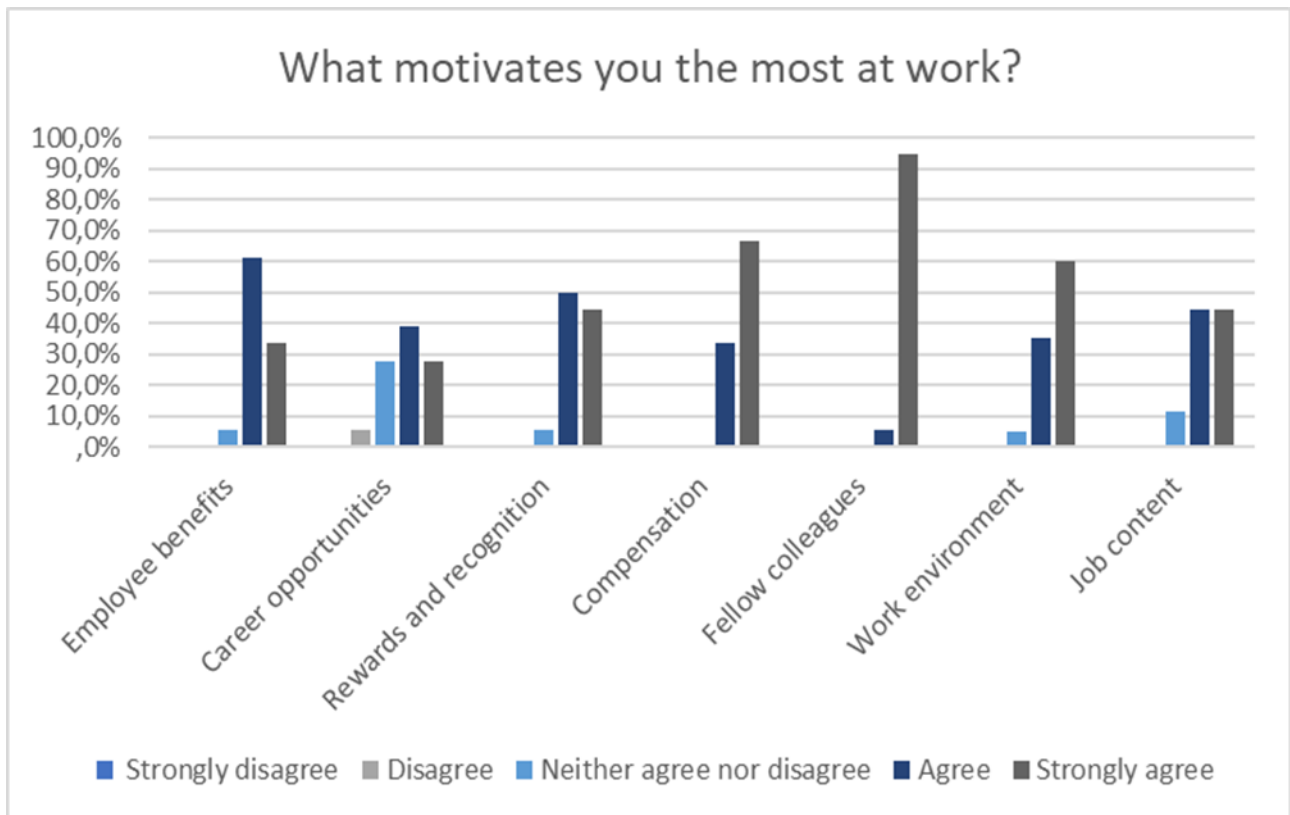


Figure 8: Company X employees' motivation factors at work.

Fellow colleagues, employee benefits, compensation, and versatile work tasks were among the main factors which are motivating employees at work and keeping them in their current job. Many expressed that the work tasks are interesting and challenging, and each day is different which maintains employees' motivation towards the job. Employees also mentioned that reasonable compensation and comprehensive employee benefits have a positive influence on employee motivation – especially during busy periods. In addition, flexibility and having the freedom to choose whether to work remotely or on-site were motivation factors which are keeping employees in their current job. Psychological safety was also introduced: employees are not punished or degraded for making mistakes or speaking up with concerns or ideas which maintains a positive work atmosphere as well as helps with professional and personal development. All in all, employees were mainly satisfied and motivated in their current job.

Company X especially wanted to investigate what would motivate employees to work at the office more often. Some of the employees responded that they work from the office most of the time, and others mentioned that nothing would motivate them to go to the office more frequently. However,

having a shorter commute and more informal face-to-face encounters with fellow colleagues were factors mentioned by several employees. Especially if there is a quieter period at work, many hoped there would be more gatherings or joint lunch breaks. The lack of parking spaces was also introduced: because there is a limited amount of parking spaces and not everyone has the opportunity to use public transportation, they choose to work from home. In addition, situations concerning personal life have an impact on how much employees work from home. Employees with smaller children and whose spouses work out of town expressed that they master the family life alone during the week which can feel overwhelming. In these situations, working from home makes life slightly easier since there is no need to use extra time for commuting. According to the responses received, getting more help during the week from the spouse would encourage employees to work more from the office.

## 6 Discussion and evaluation

This chapter introduces the conclusions and recommendations based on the research results received from Company X assistants. There were differences of opinion in almost every answer, but the recommendations are formed solely on the main areas of development that arose in the research results. The reliability and validity of the research is also explained along with an assessment of the writer's thesis and learning process.

### 6.1 Conclusions

The objective of this study is to discover how Company X team leaders have performed by retaining their employees from an engagement point of view and in a remote work environment. In addition, Company X wanted to investigate what factors would motivate assistants to work from the office more frequently.

Research participants, the assistants, are generally motivated in their current job and do not have the need to search for other opportunities elsewhere. Fellow colleagues, the work atmosphere, and compensation and employee benefits were the main repeated factors which motivate assistants. This indicates that the work culture at Company X is mainly positive, and assistants enjoy working in their current positions, also because of the versatile, challenging job content. Company X provide a reasonable, competitive salary and comprehensive employee benefits which motivate assistants – especially during more intense, busy periods. Additionally, Company X regularly organise joint breakfasts and other events to bring people together, also outside of work. Flexibility is appreciated since Company X has not defined specific rules for hybrid working, so in other words, assistants have the freedom to choose where they can work. Career opportunities divided opinions but since no additional clarification was presented, it is not clear if Company X assistants are receiving enough opportunities to advance in their career or not. Each employee has personal professional goals which is why career development paths should be characterised to employees' specific requirements (Trevor-Roberts 2021). However, not every employee wishes to advance in their career, and they are satisfied with their current position and work tasks.

The responses varied when assistants were asked about how leaders have implemented particular factors of employee engagement. Although the general work atmosphere and culture at Company X is mainly positive, assistants expressed their concern for areas of improvement. The majority of assistants responded that frequent feedback is either average or poor, indicating that leaders do not provide feedback to their employees as often as they should. Providing frequent feedback reduces retention risks (Paulsen 2021) and helps employees acknowledge how they are performing in their work tasks. Additionally, an increase in feedback gives an employee the feeling that they

are receiving something in return for performance at work (Bergeron & al. 2014, 60-62). Strong leadership, communication, and employee involvement received more poor or average results than good or excellent results. Frequent feedback, communication, and employee involvement are all aspects of strong leadership and if these aspects are not fulfilled by the leader, an employee lacks psychological meaningfulness. Although compensation, employee benefits, and positive company culture have a positive impact on employee engagement and retention, communication can nowadays be crucial for retaining existing personnel and motivating them to perform to the best of their abilities (Srivastava 2016).

According to most of the respondents, Company X leaders' remote style of leading has, although not drastically, changed compared to face-to-face, on-site leading. Many assistants mentioned that their leaders do not regularly ask them how they are and that their leaders have become almost invisible. In addition, Company X leaders have had to learn to be more independent and realise that assistants may not be as available when working remotely than when working at the office. Although there have not been major changes in Company X leaders' style of leading, some remote leadership strategies require improvements to ensure assistants receive enough guidance when working remotely.

Company X assistants have found working remotely fairly challenging but have not had issues with separating remote work from their free time. The main challenges Company X assistants are facing in remote work are connected to the lack of communication, social isolation, and poor work ergonomics. The lack of social interaction and involvement in organisational matters contribute to isolation which has a negative impact on social skills (Työterveyslaitos s.a.). During busy work periods, many do not have the opportunity to contact their colleagues or have informal conversations which would increase their work motivation. Assistants also find it more difficult to contact their leader since internal messages can easily be dismissed or drowned among other messages. Otherwise, assistants do not find it challenging to switch off after remote work, regardless of whether they have a work phone or not. Most assistants work at the office, but some prefer working from home, and wish to keep it that way. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many got used to working full-time from home and now, post-pandemic, are experiencing difficulties transitioning back to working from the office. Based on the responses, many assistants find the commute to work too time-consuming but would consider working from the office more often if the working hours were shorter. Also, more informal encounters and catch-ups with fellow colleagues would be appreciated.

All in all, Company X assistants are motivated and mainly satisfied with how Company X operate and implement employee engagement and retention strategies. Company X offer its assistants a good salary, extensive employee benefits, and flexibility in working. The work atmosphere is

unique, and the work tasks provide enough variability and challenge to maintain assistants' interest towards the job. However, according to the research results, leadership, autonomy, and overall communication were presented as the main areas of development for Company X. Autonomy and feedback are aspects of psychological meaningfulness and strongly contribute to employees' level of work performance (Bergeron & al. 2014, 60-62). Also, although flexibility in working was highly appreciated by most assistants, due to personal life situations, some are still not satisfied with the current work plans. Recommendations and how these results could be applied in the future will be presented in the next subchapter.

## **6.2 Recommendations**

Communication is a crucial aspect of strong leadership. Kahla (2022) mentions that due to remote work and leaders not seeing their employees on a daily basis, it is particularly important to conduct frequent check-ups and conversations. Based on the research results, one of the main areas of development for Company X is communication, and if there is a lack of communication, it can decrease meaningful connectivity between the leader and employee. Communication is a significant key driver of employee engagement, and it is important for a leader to establish a two-way communication flow between themselves and their employee. When communication works both ways, it ensures employees have the necessary knowledge for successful performance and enhances interpersonal ties. In addition, effective communication results in employees having a clear vision of what is expected of them as well as a clear understanding of why they are performing the work tasks they have been assigned. (Srivastava 2016.)

The writer suggests Company X leaders conduct quarterly, face-to-face feedback sessions with their employees and focus on asking how their employees are doing on a weekly basis. If there is a need to provide feedback before the quarterly feedback session, a shorter session could be held to tackle the matter immediately. In addition, the writer recommends that Company X conduct employee surveys more regularly in order to address any possible issues in good time. Employee feedback received through employee surveys provides an organisation with a clear understanding of ongoing issues, and when employee feedback is acknowledged and incorporated into strategies and plans, employee retention is increased. When leaders implement a clear communication strategy that covers feedback and expectations of the employee, it has a positive effect that reaches both the leader and employee. Therefore, the writer also suggests that Company X leaders implement a communication plan and abide by the plan to ensure their employees are receiving an appropriate amount of guidance and feedback. If the current leaders' schedule does not allow them to focus on communication and strategies and plans related to it, a senior member of the assistant team could be appointed as team leader, and therefore be in charge of communication.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is important for leaders to ask how their employees are doing at least on a weekly basis to ensure employees do not consider their leaders to be invisible. Therefore, the writer recommends that if an employee has sent their leader an internal message and the leader is unable to respond immediately, it is essential that the leader informs the employee about the current work situation and does not dismiss the message. By keeping employees posted and up to date not only allows employees to make necessary adjustments to their own work schedules and tasks but results in a culture of trust and psychological meaningfulness.

In addition to the lack of communication, Company X assistants have experienced social isolation during remote work, and many hoped for more informal catchups with fellow team members and joint events with colleagues from other business areas. Therefore, the writer suggests that teams have brief weekly meetings equipped with remote access where employees can exchange a couple of words and ask each other how they are doing. Teams at Company X have weekly meetings where they discuss work matters, but it is equally important to have informal meetings to avoid remote employees feeling socially isolated. Company X organises monthly joint breakfasts and lunches, but employees hoped for more interaction with colleagues from other teams. The writer recommends that Company X organise more events – either smaller or bigger events – outside of working hours to allow employees from all business areas to informally socialise.

Lastly, some employees expressed that they would consider working from the office more often if they had a shorter commute, shorter working hours or if their personal life situation allowed it. Based on the responses received, the writer suggests Company X leaders incorporate more individualised work plans for employees to ensure higher levels of employee engagement and retention. It is critical for leaders to keep in mind that different employees require different approaches (Basumallick 2021) and to view each employee as an individual to better comprehend the preferred forms of working. Examples for an individualised work plan could be different working hours instead of the usual office hours or longer working hours but less working days a week. Also, dividing the working hours throughout the day could help employees with their personal life situations and result in increased motivation and productivity: for instance, working a certain number of hours in the morning, having a longer break in the afternoon, and then continuing work in the evening. The writer is aware of Company X employees' job description which is why the aforementioned approach would not be possible to execute for every employee at once. However, rotating and allowing one or two employees a week to work more freely could be possible and have a positive impact on employees. Employee engagement and retention are high priorities for organisations which is why it is important to acknowledge that not every employee shares the same motivators as others (Basumallick 2021). Therefore, by implementing personalised work plans would allow Company X to retain existing talent and increase levels of employee engagement. Also, the usage of



individualised work plans would support employees to develop the required skills and advance professionally within the organisation.

### **6.3 Reliability and validity of the research**

Validity and reliability are two metrics that can be used to evaluate the quality of qualitative research. In qualitative research, validity refers to if the methods, processes, and data have been appropriate for that particular research. It is important to consider whether the research question, choice of methodology, data analysis, findings and conclusions are appropriate for the intended result. Also in qualitative research, consistency is the key to establishing reliability in the research. A margin of error is acceptable as long as the methodology and theoretical basis produce data that will give a coherent result. (Leung 2015.)

A great amount of attention and time was put into analysing the data and theoretical background gathered for this study. To ensure the credibility and authenticity of the research, the writer used several sources of reference to support the theoretical background of the research. Obtaining reliable, relevant information for the topic of the thesis proved to be challenging, but it was successfully accomplished. In addition, the employee survey questions were developed while simultaneously reflecting on the theoretical basis and research questions to ensure the research objective will be achieved. It is unlikely that the same research result would have been obtained in 2020 since employees were not yet familiar with working from home nor had they experienced remote leadership. Consequently, conducting the research in 2023 as well as having 20 research participants made the research results reliable.

The writer applied the qualitative research method using semi-structured survey questions to receive detailed perspectives of the research problems, but it is notable that all research methods pose issues such as consent and confidentiality. All research participants voluntarily participated in the research, and they were all informed of the anonymity of their responses. The survey was anonymous to encourage as many responses as possible without research participants feeling any pressure about their names being exposed and connected to their responses. The writer is familiar with most of the research participants, but all answers were anonymously transferred to the online survey platform and handled with maximum confidentiality, solely by the writer. Although the employee survey was anonymous, it was disposed of after the writer had completed the thesis writing process.

#### **6.4 Assessment of thesis process and reflective learning**

I started the thesis project in September 2022, but due to work, studies and other complications, the main workload was done during November 2022 to February 2023. The plan was to finish the thesis by March 2023 since I did not want to feel rushed, and I wanted to dive deep into the topic to deepen my knowledge. I am happy about the schedule and believe I was able to write the thesis at a suitable pace alongside work and studies. Although I had known for some time before the thesis process that I wanted to write about leadership, I had difficulties narrowing down the research topic. Ultimately, I decided I wanted to learn more about remote leadership and employee engagement from an employee perspective since it is very much on the surface. Also, I had my own remote working experience, and I am pursuing my career in leadership which made the topic even more interesting.

The thesis writing and research journey has been challenging but rewarding. Careful theoretical background research was crucial to improve the study and uncover the necessary components needed for the research. I recognise that I have acquired an unbelievable amount of valuable knowledge that has helped me understand both the leader's and employee's point of view. In addition, the knowledge I now have is beneficial for my future career and when the time is right, can help me become a good leader on-site and off-site.

One of the biggest challenges was finding reliable, relevant information. Although leadership, remote work, and employee engagement are all current and well-known topics, it was surprisingly difficult to make sure all used references are trustworthy and valid. Presenting the topic to Company X and getting the company's approval for the topic did not pose any challenges. However, deciding what questions to include in the employee survey was fairly time-consuming and required a lot of brainstorming. Both Company X and I wanted the questions to accurately correspond with the research objective as well as the theoretical basis to ensure the research provides answers to the research problems and objective.

Despite facing some challenges during the thesis process, I am happy with the result and believe the answer to the research objective was achieved. The result of the research provides Company X with an extensive amount of information about how their leaders are performing remotely and how engaged their assistants are. In addition, Company X are now aware of what areas of remote leadership and employee engagement should be improved to ensure minimum employee turnover and higher levels of employee engagement.

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## Appendices.

### Appendix 1. Employee survey

#### 1. What motivates you the most at work?

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
Employee benefits	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Career opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rewards and recognition	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Compensation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fellow colleagues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work environment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Job content	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Something else, what?

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#### 2. How successfully have the following factors of employee engagement been implemented by your leader?

	1 Very poor	2 Poor	3 Average	4 Good	5 Excellent
Communication	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Positive work culture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Strong leadership	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Frequent feedback	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Autonomy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Transparency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Employee involvement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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**3. How has your leader's style of leading changed in remote work compared to regular, face-to-face office work?**

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**4. What has been most challenging whilst working remotely?**

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**5. What methods have you used to separate work from your free-time during remote work?**

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**6. What factors are motivating you in your current job? Why?**

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**7. What factors are keeping you in your current job? Why?**

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**8. What would motivate you to go to the office more often?**

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