

# Psychosocial Work Environment and Learning Opportunities in Remote Work

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A hermeneutical study about managers' and employees' experiences

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## Abstract

Level of work:	Master Thesis, 30 hp
Pages:	56
Title:	Psychosocial Work Environment and Learning Opportunities in Remote Work – A hermeneutical study about managers' and employees' experiences
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Date:	2021-06-03
Summary:	<p>Remote work is becoming more and more common among employees on today's labour market. Previous research show that remote work both have positive and negative effects on the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities. This study aims to generate deeper knowledge of how managers and employees are affected by and deal with remote work in relation to the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities. The focus has been on the leader-member relationship, the work situation and learning opportunities. The investigation has been conducted from a hermeneutical perspective and with an abductive approach. To collect data, semi-structured interviews with participants at Tetra Pak have been done. The result of the study shows that remote work leads to decreased social and informal interactions which seem to influence the leader-member relationship, the feeling of belongingness, cooperation, and informal learning. It appears that it is particularly important to support and motivate employees in these new conditions and establishing a clear communication strategy as well as strong relationships. Also, some employees tend to work more when doing remote work, thus, managers must reconcile the workload of employees regularly. Future research could investigate how digital tools can be utilised in remote work to create social cohesiveness and informal learning.</p>
Keywords:	Remote work, distance leadership, psychosocial work environment, mental wellbeing, LMX, job demands, job resources, workplace learning.

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## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to extend my appreciation to Tetra Pak, my contact person Harladur Gudjonsson, the participants of the study, and all other people involved. Thank you for your contribution and for enabling this research project to be carried out. It has been incredibly interesting and inspiring to take part of your experiences and the way you work with questions regarding leadership and the psychosocial work environment at Tetra Pak.

Secondly, I would like to give my gratitude to my supervisor Maria Löfgren Martionsson who has guided and encourage me during this project. Moreover, I would like to thank my classmates for their support and for our discussions that we have had throughout the project.

*Lina Holmbeck*

# 1. Introduction

Since the start of the 21st century and up until today, organisations have been forced to quickly adapt to constantly changing circumstances. The knowledge-driven economy has formed a complex and competitive environment that push organisations to rethink and renew the organisation of work as well as the practices of employment. As a result, most organisations have expanded their organisational boundaries by implementing a distributed strategy, aiming to reach talents and customers around the world (Montgomery, 2016). In this transformation, the information and communication technology (ICT) has been crucial as it has allowed organisations to establish teams independently of geographic position, time, or organisational boundaries. One trend that characterize these changes is the implementation of remote work, also called teleworking, distributed work or distance work (Brunelle & Forti, 2021). Remote work is becoming more and more common among employees on today's labour market (Nordengren & Olsen, 2006). Particularly during the last year that have been influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic (Brunelle & Forti, 2021).

As the new forms of communication technologies are being introduced in workplaces and organisations keep expanding their operations geographically, the need to lead people through digital channels have increased. Consequently, the practice of leadership at distance or in virtual spheres has become a crucial part of the daily work of managers (Torre et al., 2020). Remote work implicates new challenges and questions regarding leadership, communication, and motivation. It requires that managers know how to reach and motivate employees regardless of where or when they work (Nordengren & Olsen, 2006). In short, this virtual shift has changed the context of leadership and organisational structures, and thus how leadership is exercised (Montgomery, 2016).

In the same way that remote work has increased among employees, research about remote work has grown since researchers requested a better understanding of the dynamics and complexities of remote work (Brunelle, 2013). Previous research on the topic is mixed and a bit complicated. Studies imply that organisations with flexible work arrangement report better productivity, work climate and access to talents. Also, reduced absenteeism, turnover and costs (Brunelle, 2013; Allen et al., 2015). Regarding the employees, flexible workers report greater wellbeing, work-life balance, performance, motivation, satisfaction and less stress and work-family conflict (Kazekami, 2020). However, research also indicates that remote work has negative outcomes such as negative impact on employee productivity and their stress levels. Moreover, the absence of face-to-face interaction with managers and colleagues have been found to be associated with social isolation (Schall & Chen, 2021). Social isolation is discussed to be the biggest challenge with remote work (Brunelle & Forti, 2021). These difficulties and challenges imply that remote workers need support to maintain psychological wellbeing and motivation. In this context, the role of leaders becomes essential. They must ensure a good work environment for remote workers (Orsini & Rodrigues, 2020).

The work environment is an important topic for organisations. The last decade, the psychosocial aspect of the work environment has been highlighted by key actors in Sweden such as The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (2021). Every third day they publish articles concerning work environment to underline the importance for organisations to

take actions. This is a result of the high rate of work-related mental illness in Sweden (ibid.). In virtual spheres, the question of learning and development also becomes crucial as organisational learning is essential for organisations of the knowledge-driven economy (Montgomery, 2016). For instant, Van der Maulen et al. (2019) found that knowledge sharing might be negatively affected in remote work due to reduced social interactions.

Given the number of people who are working remotely, and the challenges presented by previous research, I believe it is relevant to consider the way remote work influence the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities. Scholars have linked employee wellbeing with positive organisational as well as individual outcomes. The organisational outcomes include increased profitability, productivity, and lower turnover rates while the individual outcomes include increased job performance and physical health (Vega, Anderson & Kaplan, 2015). Hence, knowledge about how remote work influence the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities can provide insight into how organisations could impact employee wellbeing across distance and thus organisational outcomes. Furthermore, this knowledge is relevant in order to understand the role that leadership plays in these questions and what properties of remote work that poses unique leadership challenges within the context of the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities.

Scholars imply that it is important to pay attention to employee's perception of remote work and suggest this perception as central for understanding leadership dynamics (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Also, Brunelle (2013) states that the immediate manager plays an important role in the relationship between employees and managers, thus they should focus on maintain a good quality relationship with their employees. Hence, this research will focus on the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities in remote work by interviewing remote workers and their immediate managers at Tetra Pak. Tetra Pak is one of the companies that encourages their employees to work from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, hence, it is relevant to conduct the research in this organisation. This study can add value to the research field by investigating distance leadership, remote work, the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities on a deeper level, and by focusing on one specific organisation. The knowledge produced in this research is not possible to generalise, still it can be used as a tool for further research of the field. Moreover, the study will add knowledge to the literature by including the perspective of two stakeholders.

### ***1.1 Aim & Research Questions***

The aim of this study is to generate deeper knowledge of how managers and employees are affected by and deal with remote work in relation to the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities. To meet the aim, three research questions have been developed:

- In what way does remote work influence the relationship between leader and employees?
- In what way does remote work influence the work situation of employees?
- In what way does remote work influence opportunities for formal and informal learning?



## ***1.2 Delimitations***

In order to delimit this research study, I have decided to focus on the psychosocial effects of the work environment, therefore the physical work environment will not be investigated. There are several factors that may influence how a person experience the psychosocial work environment. For example, factors that are not work related, like a person's lifestyle and family situation may impact the received work environment. Because of a limited amount of time, these factors have not been further explored in the study. The factors that will be included, when discussing the psychosocial work environment, are support, motivation, influence, learning and development along with self-control (job demands). Although the psychosocial work environment mainly is connected to psychology, I believe this research project has educational relevance since it emphasizes the pedagogical aspect of the psychosocial work environment and include a leadership perspective as well as a focus on learning opportunities. The choices I have made to narrow the subject are based on my pedagogical standpoint. In line with my research questions, this thesis focuses on the relationship between manager and employees, the overall work situation and the learning opportunities in remote work. Hence, leadership and learning are two central themes in this study which is significant for educational research.

Regarding remote work, I define this as occurring when employees work away from the office more than 50% of the time. Often remote work means that employees perform the work from home (Nordengren & Olsen, 2006). Nordengren and Olsen (2006) also state that the word distance may have several meanings. In this study I refer to the geographical distance when mentioning the concept.

## ***1.3 Background***

This project has been conducted as a case study at Tetra Pak in Lund where I have interviewed managers and employees of four different teams. Tetra Pak is a multinational company that is world leading in liquid food processing and packaging. The company was established in Sweden in 1951. Today it is operating in 160 countries with around 25,000 employees (Tetra Pak, 2021).

Tetra Pak has recently implemented a global project concerning mental wellbeing to increase the awareness in the organisation and provide employees with support and information regarding this issue. The mental wellbeing project emphasis that *it's okay not to be okay*. Apart from raising awareness among employees and giving them suggestions on how to cope with their own wellbeing, the project includes training managers in risk assessment and in how to conduct conversations around wellbeing. Additionally, it involves support if or when burn out situations occur. As a part of this project, Tetra Pak offers their employees a Global Employee Assistant Programme (EAP). Through this program employees can get assistant in various matters. Also, the programme provides managers with coaching on how to support their employees at work.

Since the spring of 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, Tetra Pak in Lund, decided to transform from the traditional work mode to remote work in those cases it was possible. This means that most white collar employees conduct most of their work from home.

## 2. Previous Research

In the literature about distance leadership in relation to wellbeing, some scholars have defined their own understanding of wellbeing while others have used Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Nijp et al., 2016; Orsini & Rodrigues, 2020; Brunelle & Fortin, 2021). SDT is about the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Previous research has shown that when leaders are needs-supportive, employees internalise the value of their work efforts and are more motivated, thus improving performance as well as wellbeing and work satisfaction (Gagné et al., 2018).

In a pilot study, Poulsen & Ipsen (2017) examined how distance managers work to ensure employee wellbeing and organisational performance within the domain of inter-organisational distance work. Inter-organisational work means that the employees are working at the customers' location. The result of the research indicates that employees experience distance work both positively and negatively. The positive aspect is that the job is flexible and so it offers a high level of autonomy as well as the potential for personal growth (through the fulfilment of self-actualization). The negative aspect is that they experience frustration in forms of loneliness and isolation. Also, the result implies that the distance management practices covered not only activities but also capabilities. This finding suggests that employees highly value intangible practices (capabilities) such as listening, understanding and acknowledgement. Moreover, trust emerges as an important factor and the authors underline that it is important to address employees' basic physiological needs to ensure motivation (Poulsen & Ipsen, 2017). However, Nijp et al. (2016) found that remote work not necessarily lead to changes in psychosocial job characteristics (ibid.).

In a theoretical overview, Johnson, Dey, Nguyen, Groth, Joyce, Tan, Glozier and Harvey (2020) examined how changes in technology at work will impact employee wellbeing and mental health in the workplace. The authors summarize that research today underlines some work factors that have been found to be associated with an increased risk of mental health issues. These are poor job design, high job demand, low job control and high effort-reward imbalances. To improve mental health, jobs must be designed in a way that help balance or respond to high demands by offering the right resources. Resources that are clearly linked to work-related wellbeing are control, support, high quality feedback as well as learning opportunities (ibid.). This discussion refers to the Job Demand-Resource theory by Bakker and Demerouti (2007) that have been used in previous research on the topic.

Furthermore, how remote work influence employees have been investigated by exploring the psychological and practical effects of technology (Grant, Wallace & Spurgeon, 2013). In their study, the authors identify a set of generalisable themes that can be applied to inform about the psychological aspects of remote work. The result of the research demonstrates some apparent consequences for remote workers and their managers. It is important that remote workers don't become "invisible workers" as they still need support even though they perform well on the job. The authors recommend managers to communicate frequently with remote workers, not only concerning work matters but also about psychological issues such as over-work, stress and managing boundaries between work and home. The components that were found to be important were trust, working practices, skills and competencies as well as the remote workers' mental health. In short, the findings of the study indicates that communication and support from colleagues is essential to ensure successful remote working and to balance the psychological aspects

of wellbeing. Building relationships and interacting with others were also found to affect the psychological wellbeing. Hence, social support and belonging to a supportive community at work is vital (ibid).

Correspondingly, distance leadership and remote work have been examined in the light of the relationship between the leader and the employee (Brunelle, 2013; Norman, Avey, Larson & Hughes, 2019; Wong & Berntzen, 2019). Several of these studies have applied the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. For example, Norman et al. (2019) examined what factors that affect the trust between the leader and the member when working from a distance. The result of the study implicates that employees' perception of a leader's level of media knowledge is a factor that influence followers' trust of their leaders. As such, it is necessary for leaders to develop technical skills. This is also a way to avoid misunderstandings and technical issues when communicating (ibid.). Research about distance leadership and remote work have been conducted in quite different ways. Some scholars have included a wider perspective of leadership by involving several leadership styles. Other scholars have concentrated on one specific style, in most cases the transformational leadership. The fact that transformational leadership have been used frequently in studies about remote work is not a coincidence. The theory of transformational leadership was developed around the same time as when the internet was introduced. Also, it is a type of leadership that focuses on leading change which is characteristic for technology and today's organisations, thus transformational leadership is relevant for examining remote work (Macauley, 2018).

Companies increasingly use new technologies to make leadership more effective. These technologies play an essential role in influencing the leadership, acting as a facilitator, and increasing its strength. Based on the new ways of practicing leadership, it is made clear that technologies offer useful support in widening and strengthening relationships within teams. Behind this notion, there is an idea that leadership itself asks for support and seeks new opportunities (Torre & Sarti, 2020).

After summarizing the research articles into different categories, it became clear that most studies regarding distance leadership and remote work have focused on team performance and are conducted from a performance perspective. Only a few studies examine the effect that distance leadership have on employee wellbeing. This gap is something that scholars have underlined before (Poulsen & Ipsen, 2017). However, employee wellbeing or employee mental health is investigated in most articles about the influence that remote work, in general, has on employees. Moreover, Liao (2017) describes that most studies, in the context of virtual teams, have focused on how the leader influences team processes and outcomes while the research on how distance leaders influence each member individually is clearly lacking. Based on these gaps in the literature, I believe it is relevant to include the wellbeing perspective when examining the influence of distance leadership. This will provide further knowledge about the impact distance leaders have on individuals, and the role that leaders play in the context of remote work. Also, it will provide an understanding of which components that are important for the psychosocial work environment of remote workers and how leaders might influence it. To include a pedagogic perspective, I will also emphasis learning opportunities in remote work.

## **3. Methods**

*This chapter will include a presentation of the methodological standpoints and the approaches that has been used in the study. Initially the scientific standpoint of the study and the chosen methodological approach is presented. This is followed by a description of how the interview guides and the sample were generated and how the study in its whole was conducted. Furthermore, qualitative aspects of the research as well as ethnical aspects is discussed. Lastly a discussion of the methodology is comprised.*

### **3.1 Methodological Standpoints**

#### **3.1.1 Hermeneutical Perspective**

This research project is conducted from a hermeneutical perspective that seeks to interpret and to understand. Hermeneutics can be used to feature peoples' experiences of various phenomenon (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017) as it seeks to understand peoples' socially constructed reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The perspective implies that the researcher shifts between theory and empirics when examining other peoples' experiences of the chosen phenomenon (Bryman, 2011). This study aims to generate deeper knowledge of how managers and employees are affected by and deal with remote work in relation to the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities. Hence, it is relevant to gather information about how the participants experience following phenomena: the psychosocial work environment, remote work, distance leadership and learning opportunities. To answer the purpose, I strive to find subjective narratives which make it possible to gather deeper data. My intention is to let the participants speak freely about their own experiences within the research area. This entails that an interpretative approach is suitable for this research project (Fejes & Thornberg, 2015).

The subject of interpretation in hermeneutics is text – either written, spoken or figurative text (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). In the process of interpreting and understanding, the hermeneutical perspective proposes that the parts and the whole are intertwined with each other. This notion is central for the perspective and is described by the hermeneutical circle. The hermeneutical circle suggests that the parts and the whole constantly must be compared and put in relation to each other. To understand the whole, one must understand the parts, likewise, to understand the parts, one must understand the whole. In short, the parts and the whole can only be understood in relation to each other, hence they are connected in a circular way (Perneckey, 2016). When interpreting and understanding the material, the context in which where the text took place is essential. Moving between the parts and the whole thus implies a continuously contextualisation and de-contextualisation as well as a continuously totalisation and de-totalisation (Ödman, 2017). By shifting between these elements, the researcher can gain a deep understanding of both (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017).

The hermeneutical circle also exists of a correlation between preunderstanding and understanding. This circular process implies that understanding is attained when the preunderstanding of the researcher is united with new knowledge that generate new interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). Therefore, the preunderstanding of the researcher is a critical element within hermeneutics as it will influence the way the researcher interprets things and reach understanding.

As for the view of knowledge, the hermeneutical perspective belongs to the interpretative paradigm which focus on the individual as well as on interpretation and understanding of the individual's experiences of the world. The aim is to get a deeper understanding of how the individual view the world, based on their own perspective (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). This is in line with my purpose.

### **3.1.2 Preunderstanding**

In hermeneutical research, it is important that the preunderstanding of the researcher is clearly stated, and that the researcher relates to it throughout the whole research project. The preunderstanding is often viewed as an asset within the perspective, however, it can either be an advantage or a disadvantage for the researcher. On the upside, it provides a bigger frame of reference in which the parts and the whole can be compared to each other (Westlund, 2015). Also, it offers a certain direction to the seeking of patterns in the empirical material (Ödman, 2007). On the downside, it may cause a distance between the researcher and the phenomenon that is examined as this point of direction may make it difficult for the researcher to discover distinctive aspects (Westlund, 2015).

As a researcher in this study, I entered the project with a broad knowledge of the topic. I am studying a master's program in Human Resource Development & Labour Relations, and thus have almost five years of theoretical experience from this area. Since my major is education, I have focused on the pedagogic aspects of the work life such as leadership theories, and concepts about learning and development. Furthermore, I have experience of doing remote work myself, and therefore I have some ideas of how this work mode may influence the psychosocial work environment.

In the beginning of the project, I had an initial meeting with my contact person at Tetra Pak who told me about the company and how they work with mental wellbeing, leadership and the work environment. Additionally, I had one introductory meeting with two key figures at Tetra Pak who are experts in questions regarding the work environment and leadership. This gave me deeper insight of the organisational context and the strategic plans on the topic which I used as inspiration when creating the interview guides. My preunderstanding has also been useful during the interviews as it assisted me in asking additional questions that added value to the research. Moreover, my preunderstanding has influenced the way I have made interpretations in this study. In order not to restrict myself, I have aimed for a neutral attitude without valuation statements throughout the whole project. Though, it is impossible to be completely objective which needs to be taken into consideration while reading this study.

### **3.1.3 Abductive Approach**

When conducting scientific research, the relation between theory and empirics is central. In this matter, researchers can adopt either an inductive or a deductive approach. Applying an inductive approach means that the research proceeds from empirics, intending to generate theory, while the deductive approach means that the research proceeds from theory, intending to test a hypothesis through empirics. On the basis of these approaches, a third approach has been formed. The abductive approach is described to involve attributes of both the inductive and the deductive one. However, it is not a simple mix between the two. Rather, it contributes to whole new elements and aspects (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017).

This research is done with an abductive approach as it fits the aim of the study and works well with the hermeneutical perspective that, in itself, does include clear features of abduction (Perneckey, 2016). An abductive approach allows the researcher to have an open mind about the idea of reality, while simultaneously making assumptions about how reality looks like (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Also, it allows the empirical material to gradually develop while at the same time, the theoretical frame is modified. With the help of theoretical concepts, the researcher digs deeper into the empirical material while simultaneously developing the theory (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). In this way, the theory can help uncover new underlying patterns in the empirics (Ödman, 2017). Hence, the theory can be considered a source of inspiration for finding new patterns that contribute to the understanding of the issue that is being studied (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017; Fejes & Thornberg, 2016). Adopting an abductive approach, let the researcher base his or her understanding from the dialogue between theory and empirics (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017).

## ***3.2 The Implementation of the Study***

### **3.2.1 Qualitative Interviewing**

The empirical data in this study has been collected through qualitative interviewing. This method intends to provide understanding of the world from the perspective of the research subjects and is often applied when investigating varieties of human experience. Qualitative interviewing allows the interviewees to speak freely about their life situations. Also, it makes it possible to establish a close interaction between the researcher and the interviewee (Kvale, 2006). By conducting qualitative interviews, I have been able to collect detailed and specialized information (Mason, 2018), and so gained a deeper understanding of the participants experiences of the psychosocial work environment, remote work, learning opportunities and distance leadership. In total 12 interviews were held with both managers and employees at Tetra Pak during a time period of three weeks.

In qualitative research, the researcher must understand that he or she is a part of his/hers socially constructed world. This requires admitting, self-examining and investigating the interaction between the researcher and what is being studied (Alvesson, 2011). I have considered this by reflecting over my role as a researcher and how it may influence the participants which is presented in the discussion of this chapter. Also, by clarifying my preunderstanding of the research area.

There are different kinds of approaches in qualitative interviewing. In this study I have conducted semi-structured interviews which entails asking relatively open questions within certain themes chosen by the researcher. Thus, the interviewees are allowed to speak quite freely around the chosen themes (Denscombe, 2016), letting the interview to become intensive since the interviewee can concentrate on questions or themes that are of importance for him or her (Fejes & Thornberg, 2017). This demonstrates that semi-structured interviews involve flexibility. Flexibility is also apparent in another sense as this form of interviewing let the researcher include interesting themes that emerge in early interviews in later interviews (Bryman, 2011). Bryman (2011) describes that if the researcher enters the investigation with a fairly clear focus, rather than a general idea of wanting to do research on a certain topic, semi-structured interviews is often a good option. This because the researcher can address specific issues while still being fairly open (ibid.). Since I enter this study with a somewhat extensive preunderstanding and thus a quite clear emphasis, I believe semi-structured interviews are appropriate in my research.

Before conducting the interviews I prepared two separate interview guides, one for the managers and one for the employees. I organised the questions in the interview guide for the employees by dividing them in three different themes: communication and relationships, the psychosocial work environment in remote work, and supporting factors in the work environment. The same three themes were included in the managers' interview guide, including one extra concerning distance leadership. As the study proceeded, the questions in the interview guides did change slightly. For example, an interesting point regarding knowledge-sharing between colleagues was brought up in my first interview. I made sure to add a question about this in the interview guides which turned out to be important for my result. The interview guide helped me structure the interviews and ensure that all relevant questions were asked (Bryman, 2011). Thanks to the form of semi-structured interviews, I was also allowed to change the order of the questions and ask additional ones in some cases, which did provide me with interesting answers and a good flow of the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

The interviews with the managers lasted between 45 minutes and 55 minutes while the interviews with the employees lasted between 35 minutes and 45 minutes. This was in line with the estimated time. I started all interviews by reminding the interviewees of the purpose of the study and what it meant to participate in it. Thus, I informed them that their answers will be handled with confidentiality and that they have the right to stop their participation in the study at any time. This is consistent with "informed consent" according to Cohen et al. (2007). Also, I asked the participants for their consent to audio-record the interview which all interviewees approved.

### **3.2.2 Video Interviews**

Because of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic it was not possible for me to meet the interviewees in person and conduct the research interviews face-to-face. Instead, all interviews were held as video interviews via Microsoft Teams. This digital communication medium is used at Tetra Pak and therefore all participants were familiar with this software program. I believe this was an advantage since they knew what to expect and were comfortable talking in this digital forum. This belief is supported by Bryman (2011) who states that familiarity with the software decreases the risks that come with video interviewing.

According to Bryman (2011) video interviews are akin to face-to-face interviews. Research shows that it is as easy to create a trustful relationship in the interview as if the researcher and the interviewee met in person. Video interviews provides flexibility for both parties regarding when and where the interview is conducted which is convenience for the interviewee, and time and cost saving for the interviewer. This may encourage more people to participate in the study. However, video interviewing does have some limitations. For example, there might be technical issues which may distract or make it difficult to perform the interview (Bryman, 2011).

When conducting the interviews in this research I managed to avoid technical issues in all interviews except for one. In this one interview the technical issues delayed the start of the interview with 10 minutes and then the last 5 minutes of the interview had to be held over the phone instead of via Teams. These issues were a bit distractive since it interrupted the discussion and stole some time. However, I do not believe it affected the interview in any major way as the interviewee was very understanding and I did have time to ask all questions anyway. Though it can be argued that I could have gotten even richer answers if it was not for the technical issues.

Kvale & Brinkmann (2014) points out the importance of the research interview being held in an environment where the interviewee feels safe. Thanks to the flexibility and convenience that comes with video interviewing, all participants had the opportunity to decide where they wanted to conduct the interview, for example in their living room or home-office. Hence, the interviews could be conducted in a comfortable environment for the participants.

### **3.2.3 The Sample**

As the purpose of this study is to explore the psychosocial work environment and distance leadership from both an employee perspective and a leader perspective, both employees and managers were interviewed. To begin with, 4 managers were chosen by my contact person, and then 2 direct reported employees of each manager were picked out by the managers themselves. Hence, a total amount of 12 participants were selected for the interviews. This is in line with the number of interviews that usually is conducted in qualitative interview studies (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The reason why I decided to interview 2 employees of each manager was to avoid that the personal relationship between the manager and the employee got too much attention. By including more than one employee, the result of this study does not depend only on one single relationship.

The participants in this research have been selected through purposive sampling. This means that the sample is selected in relation to the research questions and that the participants are chosen based on certain criteria (Bryman, 2011; Cohen et al., 2007). Using purposive sampling, let the researcher create a sample that corresponds to his or her needs and interests, for example, by choosing participants who can be assumed to have knowledge and insight of the research area (Cohen et al., 2007). Hence, the criteria selected for the sample guarantee that the research question can be answered (Bryman, 2011). The sample in this research has been based on two certain criteria. Firstly, the participants must hold a job with conditions in line with remote work, meaning that they work on another location than at the office more than 50% of their work time. Secondly, the participants must have possessed their current roles for a minimum of 1 year. This criterion guarantees that they know what it means to work remotely but also that they have had the chance to experience different actions and efforts concerning the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities.

The purpose of conducting the interviews is not to accomplish data that is representative. Rather it aims to generate a contextual understanding and study experiences of a specific case which most qualitative interviews intend to do (Clarke & Dawson, 1999). For this reason, I did not determine any specific criterias regarding age, gender and work area. However I did ask my contact person for a variation in the sample as it is recommended for the researcher to consider the two key principles of representativity and quality selection when doing the sampling. Representativity creates width and variation in the sample while quality selection ensures that the sample exists of people with qualifications relevant for the research. Taking these principals into consideration helps the researcher to ensure that different types of people are permitted to speak. In this way the researcher can minimize the risk that a specific group is being over representative and that this result in a selective picture (Alvesson 2011). In the sample of this study, there is a variation of the participants regarding gender, age, and work area. The division between men and women were equal among the managers. As for the employees, three participants were



women and five were men. The age of the participants varied between approximately 30 and 60 years.

### **3.2.4 Pilot Study**

Before the interviews were conducted with the participants, I did a pilot study including two pilot interviews. One pilot interview was done with an acquaintance who is a remote worker, testing the interview guide for the employees. The other pilot interview was done with an acquaintance who is a distance leader, testing the interview guide for the managers. These people were chosen to participate in the pilot study since they are comparable to the participants in the sample for the main study. This is in line with what Bryman (2011) suggests. Pilot studies help the researcher to determine the adequacy of instructions to the interview (Bryman, 2011) and allow the researcher to notice errors in the interview guides. Also, it is a way to practice taking on the role as an interviewer (Clark & Dawson, 1999; Bryman, 2011). By doing the pilot interviews I was able to consider and apply these questions. For example, I added a description of a few concepts in the interview guide and adjusted the order of some questions to create a better flow. Practicing to conduct the interviews also made me feel more confident which provided me with the courage to make deviating steps from the interview guide when necessary.

### **3.2.5 Recording & Transcription**

All interviews were audio-recorded after the participants had given their consent. Audio recording permits a comprehensive examination of what is said in the interview and makes it possible for other researchers to control the empirics. This helps to neutralize accusations that the analysis might have been influenced by the values and biases of the researcher (Bryman, 2011). By recording the interviews I was able to focus on the interviewee and the situation rather than on composing notes. This allowed me to be present and perceptiv of the interviewees' feelings which is essential for the flow of the discussion and for eliciting relevant information (Denscombe, 2016).

The point of departure in hermeneutical research is often from text (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). In this study, text refers to transcriptions of the interviews I have conducted. All interviews have been transcribed in its entirety in close connection with the occasion of the interview. Since an interview is a social interaction not only including words but also body language, pauses and tone mode, these components should be included in the transcriptions as they may provide information to the research (Cohen et al., 2018). In line with this, I made comments in the transcriptions regarding the interviewee's way of communicating which helped me to get the most out of the social interaction.

Transcribing is an important part of the interpretation and analysis process as reflections and thoughts about the study begin to take place when putting the empirical material in writing. Hence, the process of analysing and interpreting data starts at this stage (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). When transcribing the interviews I started to reflect over possible themes in the empirics, as well as similarities and differences in the interviewees' answers. These reflections and thoughts were written down which assisted me in the further processing of the data.

### **3.2.6 Processing of Data**

The hermeneutical perspective lacks a universal work model regarding the process of how to analyse and interpret the data. The approach that the researcher chose to adopt is

dependent on the preunderstanding of the researcher, and from which notions he or she enters the study. Yet, there are certain approaches to consider. For instance, Westlund (2015) states that the researcher should adopt a listening approach by facing the data with an open mind, allowing oneself to be steered into new pathways that may not align with the directions of the original research questions. Rather than overwhelming the text with questions, it should be allowed to speak for itself (ibid.). Since this study has been conducted with an abductive approach and I did not have a set theoretical framework when processing the empirical data, the circumstances for me facing the data with an open mind have been good. In fact, I did change my research questions after compiling the empirical data. Moreover, the theoretical framework has been developed in parallel with the empirics.

When doing qualitative research, the researcher is faced with the challenge of creating meaning from a big scope of data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). This was managed by identifying different themes in the text and by comparing the parts and the whole which is in line with hermeneutical research (Perneckey, 2016). To start processing the empirical material I began to read through all interviews with the managers one by one. While reading I made comments in the text about what they said and about my own thoughts. Also, I marked parts in the text that I found interesting and that interviewees seemed committed about which is in line with Westlunds (2015) suggestions regarding that the researcher should approach the data with responsiveness and imagination. This helped me notice stories that seemed of importance for the interviewees and to discover several themes in the material. After picking out the themes I made a mind-map where the managers' answers were connected to the different themes. In this way, I was able to compare and read the interviewees' answers in connection to each other, and create a clear overview of the material. The same procedure was done with the interviews with the employees. Then, the data collected from the managers was viewed in relation to the data collected from the interviewees.

Once the material was compiled, I read it through again, asking myself: *what do they actually say?* This helped me reach a deeper understanding of the data and allowed be to further develop the themes. In the processing of data I constantly switched between the parts and the whole. In this study, the whole refers to the overall psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities. To make interpretations, I considered how the interviewees' experiences in a specific situation was connected to the whole. In the same way the whole was subsequently put in relation to specific stories. During this stage I also had to determine which data to include and which data not to include based on the research questions and the aim of this thesis.

### **3.3 Quality**

#### **3.3.1 Quality Indicators**

There are several ways to examine the quality of qualitative research. In this study I have used Guba & Lincoln's (1989) quality indicators. The authors discuss trustworthiness as existing of four criteria. These are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. *Credibility* refers to establishing a match between the realities constructed by the study's participants, and the realities constructed by the researcher. Guba & Lincoln (1989) suggest several techniques for verifying credibility. The most crucial tool is to conduct member checks. Member checks means that the researcher presents his or her understandings to the participants of the study which allows the participants to correct

errors in the interpretation and guarantees that their constructions are being represented correctly. Because of time limitations, both from my aspect and the participant's aspect, it has not been possible for me to conduct member checks. However, I did ask following-up questions during the interviews to confirm the participants answers when needed, which helped me to ensure that I had understood them accurately. The second criterion, *transferability*, is attained when the researcher provides a clear and comprehensive description of the context in which the study took place. I considered this criterion by describing Tetra Pak's organisation and the conditions that apply for the participant's general work mode and work environment.

*Dependability* refers to reliability and concerns the stability of the data over time. To verify dependability, I have presented all methodological decisions I have taken in this study and argued against why they were taken as well as why they were relevant in my case. This allows others to explore the process and recognise what factors that have influenced the decisions and interpretations made. The fourth criterion for trustworthiness is *confirmability*. Confirmability involves ensuring that data, interpretations, and outcomes of the investigation are rooted in actual contexts and people rather than simply being constructions made by the researcher. The researcher should avoid influencing the data with his or her personal values and biases as far as possible (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In order to show rigorously and objectivity, I have clarified how the data in this study has been processed. Also, I have adopted a reflective approach throughout the whole project which has allowed me to reflect over the way I may have influenced the investigation as a researcher.

Reflexivity means that the researcher reflects on how his or her own background, beliefs, attitudes, and values affects the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In short, it entails a critical reflection of how the researcher constructs knowledge. Reflexivity aims to limit subjectivity by providing the reader with information about the author of the research, and by discussing which factors that may have influenced the implementation of the academic investigation (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). For example, it demands the researcher to clearly address problems in the empirical investigation such as the relationship between language-reality, the meaning of the preunderstanding, and the position of the political context of the research. The point of reflexivity is to question weaknesses in the research and break it down into smaller parts (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). Hence, reflexivity aims to improve the quality and validity of the research, and to recognise limitations of the knowledge production by being transparent to the reader and bringing awareness of problems (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). As mentioned above, I have discussed in what way I may have influenced this study as a researcher. In hermeneutical research this is especially important since it is about interpretations. Hence, I have presented my preunderstanding of the topic and discussed how it may have affected my interpretations of the parts and the whole as well as my interpretations of empirics and theory. However, reflexivity is not necessarily focused only on the production of knowledge in research, but also on the overall research process. Guillemin & Gillam (2004) describe that there is a useful connection between reflexivity and ethics. This will be further examined in the following section.

### **3.3.2 Ethical Aspects**

In this section I have included two dimensions of ethics. The first one is procedural ethics which refers to set guidelines of ethical requirements regarding the methodology of the

research. The second one is “ethics in practice” which refers to everyday ethical issues that arise while conducting the research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

I have used the Swedish Research Council’s (2017) research ethics principles which are based on the criterion of protection of the individual. This criterion aims to protect inappropriate insight of an individual’s life situation, and to protect the participants of the study from physical or mental harm, humiliation, or violation. The criterion includes four requirements: the information requirement, the consent requirement, the confidentiality requirement, and the utilization requirement. The information requirement states that the researcher must provide the study’s participants with information about the purpose of the study, how it will be conducted and which conditions that apply when participating. Also, the researcher must notify that it is voluntarily to participate and that they can decide to stop participating at any time without consequences. The consent requirement explains that the researcher must seek consent from the study’s participants before conducting the research. It clarifies that the participants hold the right to determine for how long and under what circumstances they wish to participate (Swedish Research Council, 2017). In this research, I have considered these requirements by providing the participants with the appropriate information before the interviews were conducted. At first, I sent out an email to all participants prior to the interview where the information was clearly stated (Appendix 1). Then, I repeated the information in the beginning of the interviews and asked for their consent to participate as well as to audio record the interview.

The third requirement, the confidentiality requirement, entails giving the participants as much confidentiality as possible, and managing the information about them carefully to ensure that it does not leak to other parties or people. To fulfil this requirement, I have handled the collected data and the information about the participants with care by keeping it to myself and storing it in a safe place. Furthermore, I have avoided to share detailed information about the participants in the study and consciously decided how to present the result. Lastly, the utilization requirement states that the collected data is not allowed to be used for other purposes than those of the study (Swedish Research Council, 2017). I will take this requirement into account by erasing all audio recordings and transcriptions when the study is completed.

When discussing ethical aspects of the research, one matter is whether the gathered data is sensitive to the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Based on the subject of this study, I believe that the data can be perceived as both sensitive and not sensitive. It is common to have discussions about the psychosocial work environment, learning opportunities and activities in the workplace with colleagues or friends, however these discussions might lead into more personal conversations concerning mental wellbeing which can be assumed to be sensitive. I did experience this during some of the interviews. To address this issue, I have done my best to ensure that the answers are handled with confidentiality by not systematically presenting detailed information about the participants and not clarifying who said what in the result. Also, I carefully decided which data to include and which not to include in the result. These actions are in line with Eldén’s (2020) suggestions. Though, it cannot be fully guaranteed that the participants stay confidential as personal stories still may be recognized by colleagues, employers, or acquaintances.

As for ethics in practice, Eldén (2020) states that good research demands a continuously ethical reflection. She describes that complicated ethical questions arise in the field and often has little to do with the set principles. To manage these questions, the researcher

must apply a continually discussion with the research setting and understand the specific context and situation in which it takes place (ibid.). This is similar to the connection between reflexivity and ethics that Guillemin & Gillam (2004) discuss. They suggest that “reflexivity is a helpful conceptual tool for understanding both the nature of ethics in qualitative research and how ethical practices in research can be achieved” (p. 262). As mentioned earlier, I have applied a reflective way of thinking throughout this project and been transparent to the reader about how it has been conducted. Thus, ethics in practice has been considered in this thesis.

### ***3.4 Discussion***

When conducting video interviews it is not possible for me as a researcher to control the environment. In some interviews there were things happening around the interviewee which meant that they had to get up and close the door, or leave the “room” for a little while to help someone in their home. This resulted in some shorter interruptions during the interview which most likely could have been avoided if conducting face-to-face interviews. Interruptions during the interview might make it difficult for the interviewee to fully focus on the interview situation and to maintain a good flow in the conversation. Although, I did perceive the participants as very present during the interviews. Video interviewing also means that the researcher relies on the technical tools to be working and if technical issues occur it may not be possible to regulate. This is of course a risk when conducting digital research interviews. Maybe I could have gotten more out of the interviews if they were held at Tetra Pak’s office in Lund. Though, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews because of the current national restrictions that follow of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The managers in this study were aware of which employees that participated. This involves a risk regarding confidentiality as it is easier for the managers to recognise the employees’ answers. I have addressed this issue by not presenting the result based on each individual. Rather I have clustered the answers and presented a summary of the empirics which makes it difficult to follow the sayings of one specific employee, and consequently to identify certain individuals. However, some individual statements and are presented after carefully consideration. The fact that the managers were aware of the employees participation might have influenced how the employees answered the questions. Although I did inform all participants, including the employees, that the collected material will be handled with confidentiality, they still might be afraid that their answers will be identified by the manager. This could have affected the degree to which they felt comfortable showing dissatisfaction with the relationship or communication with manager or with the actions taken by the manager. As such, it cannot be guaranteed that the interviewees have been honest when answering the interview questions as they may have their own bias. Besides the example mentioned above, the interviewees are representing Tetra Pak and so they possibly want to present a good picture of the company, meaning that they are less prone talking about problems. This needs to be taken into consideration while reading this thesis. Moreover, it is important to consider that I may have influenced the interviewees answers as they might want to confirm what they believe I am looking for and thus help be with my research.

Another thing that must be discussed is the fact that all interviews in this study has been held in Swedish. As all interviewees were Swedish, I decided to conduct the interviews in their native language to get the most out of their answers. To reduce possible limitation

in the translation, I processed the data in Swedish and did not translate the material until I had the final draft of the result ready. Still, it could be argued that translating direct quote may result in losing nuance in the interviewees statements.

In this study I have been an external actor at Tetra Pak which means that I do not have access to a complete picture of how the organisation functions, or which procedures and structures that exists within it. Hence, I have had limited insight of the organisation's operation. This can be considered to restrict my interpretations of the collected data as a comprehensive insight of the organisation might help to create understanding of the investigated phenomena. However, it can also be considered as an advantage since it involves me having an open approach towards the organisation.

As mentioned earlier, there are several factors that have affected my interpretations in this study, for example my preunderstanding of the research area and my personal background. If someone else were to conduct the same study it certainly would have resulted in a different outcome since that person would have other frames of reference. However, I do not strive to present one truth in this research but rather several descriptions and analyses about how managers and employees are affected by and deal with remote work in relation to the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities.

## 4. Results & Analysis

*In this section, the collected data from the interviews with employees and managers will be presented. The empirics has been divided into four main categories (communication and relationships, cooperation, work situation and learning opportunities) which can be described as factors influencing the psychosocial work environment. Also, these categories are included in the responsibility that leaders have towards employees in an organisation. Each category includes subcategories in which narratives of both employees and managers are presented. To help the reader navigate between these, statements given by the employees is presented to begin with, followed by statements given by the managers. At the end of each main category, a final section is included. This involves a description of my own interpretation and analysis of the data which is a way to adopt a hermeneutical approach (cf: Fejes & Thornberg, 2015).*

### 4.1 Communication & Relationships

In this category, aspects of communication and relationships is included. The first subcategory describes how communication and interaction occur in the workplace and how the respondents experience this. The second subcategory puts focus on how digital meetings are perceived by employees and how they are organised by managers. Lastly, the third subcategory describes the relationship between manager and employees. Based on the collected data, it appears that the communication and interaction among people mainly occur through digital channels in remote work, meaning that face-to-face meeting rarely take place. My understanding is that communication is an important factor influencing the psychosocial work environment as it affects the way employees and managers are able to reconcile things and build relationships.

#### 4.1.1 Interactions & Communication Channels

In the interview material of the employees, it is clarified that all employees interact with their manager in similar situations. They explain that the interactions occur during individual meetings, team meetings and in between these. The individual meetings are called one-to-one meetings. How often these meetings occur varies between once a week, once every other week or once a month. The one-to-one meetings are held as video meetings via Microsoft Teams were both parties have their camera on. As for the team meetings, the frequency of these varies between the teams. Like the individual meetings these occur once a week, once every other week or once a month. The team meetings are also held as video meetings via Microsoft Teams. Additionally, the managers arrange casual meetings for the team where the employees are given the opportunity to chat about other things than work. Often these meetings are in forms of a virtual coffee. Sometime the managers arrange After Works or outdoor activities.

“...about a week ago, we had a barbeque that the manager organised. Unfortunately, not that many that could make it [...] but it was really nice! And it was fun to meet the others in person and hang out outside.” (Employee)

It appears that the employees appreciate the casual meetings where they can discuss non-work-related topics and have fun together. Some employees express a desire for more meetings like this. In the narratives of the employees, it is clarified that they miss the social interactions and informal meetings that used to take place at the office.

Apart from the digital meetings, the employees explain that they mainly use the chat to ask quick questions or have shorter check-ins with the manager. It seems like the employees have become more comfortable using the digital tools, and that these nowadays are used by most people in the same way.

”For the younger generation, the chat function is ‘second nature’, but for older people it was not as common, however, now it is much more common that you just write in the chat – it is a bit about sending a message that can wait until the other person can reply.” (Employee)

From the interview material, it can be displayed that the employees have different experiences regarding the frequency of communication with the manager and colleagues. Some describe that the amount of communication is the same as before while some explain that the communication has been reduced.

When the managers talk about how and in which settings communication takes place in remote work, they mention similar things to those displayed by the employees. In their statements, it is demonstrated that they perceive the amount of communication with their employees as the same as before remote work was introduced. However, they also explain that they would have interacted more with their employees if working at the office. Hence, it appears that the scheduled interactions are the same whereas the spontaneous and more informal interactions has been reduced.

Regarding interactions in general, it seems that managers believe this is depending on the type of work that employees have.

”I believe that it is depending on what type of job you have, if you have a job where you execute a lot of work task then it may become quite lonely working from home. (...) then I guess there are days when you only have a 1 hour meeting and that is the only time you speak with someone else.” (Manager)

Furthermore, both employees and managers give the impression that they perceive the digital tools as well functioning for communication. Though, employees are considering whether to use the camera during digital team meetings which will be further discussed in the following subcategory.

#### **4.1.2 Digital Meetings**

From the employees’ stories, it is evident that there is a big difference in the experience of the meeting depending on whether the video camera is used or not. All employees give the impression that they prefer to use the video camera. However, some express a struggle in feeling comfortable using the camera if not everyone in the meeting does. This because these situations make them feel pointed out. Furthermore, it seems like the employees have the impression that it has become a “thing” that some people simply use the camera and others do not.

”...actually, we are not very good at using the video camera [...]. And now you see it in the group, [...] there are three people that has decided ‘we always have the camera on’, so they have their camera on although the rest don’t. And it is very clear that some always have it [the camera on] and some never have it.” (Employee)

From the organisation’s point of view, there are no guidelines regarding whether the camera should be used or not, rather it is up to each person to decide. Like the employees, the managers imply that video meetings and video calls are preferable. It seems like the managers experience that using the camera improves communication and makes it more personal. Also, some state that it reduces the distance. Moreover, they explain that using the camera is a way to show that you are present during a meeting. However, it appears that



the managers have different ideas about how to lead digital team meetings. One idea is that the manager should make clear that all team members must use the camera by setting up internal guidelines for the team.

“...when we have department meetings, I have started to state, clearly state, that I want everyone to have their camera on. And I believe that, as a leader, it is important to show that way.” (Manager)

Another idea is that the manager should let the employees decide whether they want to use the camera or not while the manager him/herself always has the camera on. One manager mentions the importance of showing employees respect, and further explains “*not everyone buys it [using the camera] but at least we are almost there*”. Thus, it appears that the managers are trying to show employees consideration by not setting up any guidelines regarding the camera. Overall, all managers seem to have a similar vision of how a video meeting in group should function, where the starting point is that all participants use their camera. On the other hand, as described, two different methods of how to lead the group to get there is demonstrated. Either managers give clear directions, or they give employees space to decide for themselves and trust that they voluntarily follow the manager’s example.

In the two subcategories above, the communication and interactions among employees and managers have been discussed. From the collected data, it appears that the changed ways of communication and the lack of face-to-face interactions may affect the relationship between manager and employees. Hence, this will be further examined in the following section.

### **4.1.3 The Relationship Between Manager and Employee**

Regarding the relationship between manager and employee, the employees’ stories demonstrate a perception that they do not believe the relationship has deteriorated due to the distance. Of course, the employees have different types of relationships with their manager. Some illustrate a close relationship where they often talk about non-work-related things, while others describe their relationship as formal and mainly focused on work. Based on the narratives told by the employees, it is possible to distinguish that they generally experience a good relationship with their manager. However, a perception is portrayed that one loses nuances in communication because of the distance, and that the relationship with the manager has become more formal.

“...it is quite formal. We have set time periods for meetings and such [...], and of course, you call your manager every now and then. But this informal contact, that you used to have at the office, kind of disappears.” (Employee)

From the data collected, it also appears that the managers experience a good relationship with their employees. They explain that the relationships have not been affected in any major way due to the distance. The fact that the managers had established good relationships with most of their employees before remote work was introduced, is presented to be an explanation to this. Furthermore, the managers illustrate difficulties in getting to know new employees and creating trust in these relationships.

“So, I cannot say that it has changed much. I have one employee that I recently hired, and of course I would have met him more often than I do today if I had been at the office. Therefore, it surely will take longer to build a relationship with him since we only have formal meetings through the digital channels.” (Manager)

#### **4.1.4 Interpretations**

Based on the material presented in the subheadings above, it is clarified that the managers have established a clear strategy for when the communication between them and the employees is supposed to take place. My understanding is that the one-to-one meeting plays a crucial part in the interaction between employees and managers. Moreover, the team meetings along with the informal meetings seems to be important meeting points for employees to connect both with each other and with the manager. Hence, my understanding is that managers have a significant responsibility to make sure that the communication as well as the interactions are functioning in the best way as possible.

It is possible to distinguish a dilemma among the managers about how to establish a strategy for leading the group towards the goal were all participants, in a digital meeting, use their camera. The managers do not seem to be aware of the insecurity that employees feel when guidelines on how to behave in a meeting is lacking. In the narratives of the employees, it is demonstrated that they prefer to have clear guidelines regarding the video camera.

Some employees state that the frequency of communication with the manager has reduced. Hence, there are mixed experiences regarding the frequency of communication between the managers and the employees. This might have to do with the fact that the one-to-one meetings are held within different intervals or with the fact that manager and employees have different types of relationships.

Continuing on this topic, all employees and managers express that they have a good relationship to one another, thus they have a similar experience of this matter. In the interview material, it is evident that the distance reduces managers' prospects of getting to know new employees as it takes longer to build trust and establish a relationship when only interacting through digital meetings of the formal kind. Hence, my understanding is that the informal interactions as well as the physical meetings are important for building relationships. Probably, this has to do with the fact that one can be more personal in these situations. As such, it could be understood that the lack of informal and physical meetings likewise may lead to problems in already established relationships. Although it does not appear to be a problem in the organisation today, it is possible to believe that it might become one later. Based on this discussion, my understanding is that the managers neither have the same prospects of maintaining a good relationship with employees in remote work. Therefore, it may require more of managers to guarantee that relations are maintained.

In conclusion it seems like the frequency of communication as well as the type of communication affect the respondents' relationships. In this chapter the focus has been on the relationship between manager and employee. In the following chapter the focus will rather be on the relationship between the employees themselves.

## **4.2 Cooperation**

From the data collected, it becomes clear that interactions and relationships between colleagues likewise are essential for employees when discussing the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities, thus this chapter concerns cooperation. The first section involves employees' and managers' experiences of cooperation in remote work, whereas the second section puts focus on how managers work to ensure that collaboration among employees take place.

### 4.2.1 Experiences of Cooperation

From the employees' statements, it is possible to distinguish three perceptions of how cooperation with colleagues operates at distance. One view is that there were difficulties with cooperating in the beginning, when the organisation first transferred to remote work, but that the cooperation nowadays works well since operational routines have been identified.

"I believe it took us some time to reach a good stage, but now it feels as if everyone is so used to it, so there are no problems anymore. It is almost as if you have forgotten what it feels like to sit together in the same room, writing on a white board. You find ways around, and things get done the way they should. I would say that it still works just fine." (Employee)

Another perception is that the cooperation with colleagues has deteriorated which is explained to be caused by several factors. The employees state that it is not possible to achieve the same dynamic in the group when collaborating in digital platforms, and that they often speak all at once since it is difficult to tell when others are about to talk. Also, they describe that it is more difficult to be creative and come up with new ideas on how to, for example, solve a problem or develop a new concept.

The third idea that appears in the interview material, is that the cooperation has improved with colleagues that are located in other areas of the world.

"In a way, it has almost improved, because our group is widely spread [geographically] and this way of working from home forces you to work with these Teams meetings. So, in that sense, it is almost better, because it feels more natural compared to before when you only turned to the colleagues at the Swedish office. That you can say, is something positive." (Employee)

Similar to the employees' statements, it appears that the managers experience that the cooperation between employees has been reduced and made more difficult, however, not to a degree that causes problems. The managers illustrate that they experience cooperation to be operating well in remote work, yet the distance makes it more difficult in some respects, specifically when it comes to cooperation among employees that do not work in direct relation to one another. One manager explains that "*you lose the unofficial creation of ideas*" and state that the lack of spontaneous meetings thus results in missing opportunities for cooperation. Also, the managers express a concern that the lack of this informal contact between colleagues, in the long run, could damage the employees' relationships and so conditions for cooperation. It is clarified that they perceive cooperation and good relationships among employees as essential. Moreover, it is illustrated that the managers work actively to ensure this is attained which is further examined in the following section.

### 4.2.2 Approaches to Promote Cooperation

From the interviews, it is possible to identify several ways in which managers work to promote good collaboration and a good relationship between employees. One way, that can be distinguished from the interview material, is that the managers try to act as coordinators when an employee faces a problem. This is done with the intention of ensuring that the employee gets in touch with the right person who can help, and thus pair employees to collaborate and solve the problem together.

"I try to connect them through technical/actual challenges that appear in their project. Even though the projects are different, there are some common threads – problems that arise in one situation that might arise in another situation. So, I tell the person 'make contact with them over there, they have the same problem' or 'if you contact that guy, you probably can collaborate to speed up the process'. Thus, I put a lot of effort into trying to find the contact points, and in that

way, get them to collaborate, and this is almost easier through a chat or similar, so it is very easy to accomplish, maybe even easier than if we did not do remote working.” (Manager)

Another method that emerges, is to create an arena where employees can meet and share their challenges. According to the managers, this is mainly done during the team meetings, where they let employees talk about the status of their work and if they have encountered any problems.

”Then we try to have one point where we share our challenges. So, every time there is someone who shares, for 20-30 minutes, what they are working on and what challenges they are facing at the moment, to create awareness among the others, and then people can have a more informal contact about this.” (Manager)

Furthermore, the managers state that they compliment employees who contact others for help and that they highlight successful cooperation in the group. Also, it appears that the managers try to promote good cooperation and good communication between the employees by ensuring that they continuously meet and talk to each other. A manager clarifies the importance of guaranteeing *"that there is life in the group chat"* but also that you have social activities where employees can meet in an informal context.

### **4.2.3 Interpretations**

Based on the interview material, it can be understood that the distance causes some difficulties for collaboration to succeed, partly due to the technical tools, partly because the employees do not feel as creative and do not get the same energy or inspiration from each other. Possibly, this could affect the outcome of the collaboration. Also, it appears that the lack of interactions between employees leads to lesser cooperation since they miss out on opportunities to work together.

Furthermore, it appears that remote work has created opportunities to improve the collaboration with colleagues who usually do not work at the office in Lund. This can be considered advantageous in those cases where team members are located in different parts of the world. Additionally, my understanding is that remote work has forced employees to get acquainted with the digital tools, which makes it possible for employees to feel that it is natural to collaborate with colleagues digitally, regardless of where they are located.

It seems that remote work somehow reduced the social contact points that employees normally have as they do not interact with people whom they do not work with directly. On the other hand, it is illustrated that employees find it easier to contact colleagues that are located at other locations than their home office. However, this involves colleagues that do work with the same things as the employees themselves. Consequently, it can be stated that the interaction with colleagues outside the team is diminished in remote work.

It may be understood that the manager’s method, to consciously put together employees, is even more important in remote work as employees lack the natural meeting points that one normally has at the office. Consequently, employees have limited opportunities to find the right person to turn to, and so it seems like the requirement of support from the manager increases. As the managers seem to have a good overview of the team members' challenges and knowledge, my interpretation is that they are in good positions to handle this task. In addition, there appears to be adequate tools for reaching out to people in the organisation, which is noted in the managers' statements. Thus, this coordination appears to be a suitable way to create opportunities for good collaborations in remote work. In the same way, it seems particularly important to create an arena where employees can meet

during remote work. My understanding is that this is a way to give employees the opportunity to take the initiative for cooperation themselves.

Furthermore, the managers describe that they compliment employees who collaborate. I understand this method as a way of showing employees that they appreciate this type of behaviour, and thus encouraging others to do the same. Additionally, creating opportunities where employees can meet in an informal context seems to be an approach to build relationships within the group, which in turn creates favourable conditions for the employees' cooperation. In the same way, it seems that collaboration itself, contributes to building relationships between employees. In summary, it can be stated that the managers' work to promote good cooperation is not only about ensuring that work tasks are being handled but also about ensuring that employees are there to support each other.

The relations between employees clearly are important for the psychosocial work environment as it allows employees to have fun at work as well as to help each other. Building on the topic of communication and relations, which has been presented in the first two chapters, the following one concentrates on the overall work situation and support.

### ***4.3 Work Situation & Support***

The overall work situation of employees and how support is provided and perceived, represent another important part that influences the psychosocial work environment. The first section in this chapter includes the respondent's perception of the workload as well as how the managers work to guarantee that it is balanced. The second section is about which support employees are provided from their manager and colleagues whereas the third section puts focus on feedback. Lastly, the fourth section includes how employees perceive their motivation at work and how managers act to foster motivation and inspiration in the workplace.

#### **4.3.1 Workload**

The employees describe that they have great opportunities to impact the work and drive change and that these conditions have not changed in remote work. As such it seems that they experience a great amount of autonomy. In fact, it appears that they are given even more opportunities to regulate the work when it is conducted in remote work. However, this seems to affect the workload in some cases. Regarding the workload, it is possible to interpret a common perception among the employees that this usually works well. They talk about the workload as relatively balanced rather than problematic. From the interview material it also appears that the employees do not perceive that the workload has changed due to the distance. However, they highlight several difficulties in regulating the workload as well as the working hours in remote work. Some employees state that it can be challenging to disconnect thoughts about work in the evening as there are no clear boundaries between when the work begins and ends.

"You might start a little earlier and then, since you have your computer at home, you might work a little longer and think 'tonight I may log in to my computer and do some last changes'. Mentally, you don't let go of the job in the same way as you did before when you physically left the job." (Employee)

Additionally, some employees demonstrate that they tend to work more nowadays, than what they previously did at the office, as they are more efficient when working from home. One employee clarifies: "*... then you tend to push more into the calendar because*

*you think 'I have time to do this', and it becomes a stress, so it easily turns into more work."*

Furthermore, one of the employees, who has only worked at Tetra Pak for a couple of years, talks about a pressure to constantly show others that he/she is working, by fear of appearing lazy. This seems to result in the employee taking lesser breaks and doing more work.

"...since you work from home you don't know if you work to little or to much, thus one puts quite a lot of pressure on oneself to be constantly productive. At the office, the whole team might went out for a coffee at some point, now you think 'nobody sees that I take a break, maybe they just think that I don't do my job'. [...] You feel that you must be 100% active whilst at the office, it is more up and down, and people see that you are doing your job, so you don't feel the pressure to actively show that you are working." (Employee)

In line with the employees' stories, it is demonstrated in the interview that the managers are aware of these problems. Namely, they explain that remote work entails a risk for high-performing employees. Furthermore, they describe several methods that they use to ensure that employees have a balanced workload. This task is highlighted by the managers as one of the most important points in ensuring a good psychosocial work environment. One method that can be distinguished in the managers' statements, is to be clear about what needs to be done and to help employees to plan their work.

"We have a great structure where we clarify 'in the long run, we will do this – these are our strategies', and then we break it down into an operational plan where we have measurable goals and activities that show more concretely 'this is what should be done'." (Manager)

The same manager further explains that the operational plan is a tool for prioritizing work tasks, which can be said to constitute another method of ensuring a balanced workload. An additional method that emerges in the interview material, is to dare asking questions about how much employees actually work. This is described to be important partly as it is a way for managers to follow the employees' workload and identify warning signs, and partly as it is a way to make employees, themselves, aware of how much they work.

"Every time we meet, I ask about the currently status of the workload, it kind of moves in waves. And I try to do that, so they can become aware of it and reflect over it themselves, but also so that I can notice early signs if things are starting to move in the wrong direction regarding the workload, and consequently do something about it. If it becomes to much for a long period time, you sometimes must act." (Manager)

The employee's workload clearly seems to be an important aspect when discussing the overall work situation and the psychosocial work environment. Moreover, it appears that the support provided employees, is another important one. This will be further examined in the following section.

### **4.3.2 Support from Manager and Colleagues**

Based on the employees' stories, it is possible to distinguish a common experience that they are satisfied with the type of support they receive in their job. It appears that the opportunity to receive support in remote work is perceived as equivalent to the opportunity to receive support when working at the office. From the interview material, it is made clear that the opportunity to get in touch with the manager and quickly receive help, is a crucial form of support in remote work. Namely, some employees explain that they become more frustrated when things go wrong regarding work tasks or digital devices. The employees illustrate that they experience the manager's availability as good, and that

they easily can get in touch with the manager when needed. The employees clarify that they receive support from their manager by, for example, brainstorming ideas, discussing how tasks can be re-prioritized or by getting help to make contact with the right people in the organisation.

”It is probably pretty basic, we simply reason and talk about them [the problems]. Also, we try to address the right person to help in this, because it can be more difficult to network when you work from home (...) – ‘Who has the knowledge that we need to move on? And who do we need to involve if there is an allocation of resources?’. So, there is a lot of discussions about who we can get help from.” (Employee)

Moreover, they describe that the manager supports them by informing where they can turn for help if feeling mentally ill.

”Then, I believe my manager has been a good support. He has always been very informative regarding what the company does, and how you should act to seek help if you feel that you need it. It has probably never been unclear for me what you need to do if you don’t feel well.” (Employee)

Another important support in remote work, that is highlighted by the employees, is the possibility to turn to colleagues.

”You try to help each other. This way of thinking was probably contained in the Tetra Pak-culture before as the standard is pretty high... If someone sends you a question, it is pervaded in the corporate culture that you should do your best to help and reply, and if you can’t answer the question yourself, but know who can, then you make sure to explain ‘no, I am not familiar with this area but you can talk to these people and you can get help over there’. And I suppose this works as good as before, and that, I believe is a pretty good support.” (Employee)

In the statement above, it is illustrated that the employees receive support by asking questions and helping each other. Although the employees give the impression that they generally experience this kind of support as well functioning, the interview material signifies perceptions that it is not as easy to ask quick questions and receive quick responses.

”That, I believe is tough, that you don’t really have these quick, small things continuously. You can’t just walk over to someone and ask: ‘is this right, is this wrong, how should I think in this situation?’, instead you must schedule a meeting. And then, it becomes a much bigger thing, it is no longer a quick question...then you almost need an agenda for the meeting.” (Employee)

In line with the employees’ statements, it appears that the managers experience that they have a responsibility to help employees in both work-related questions and in questions regarding mental wellbeing. When managers talk about how they support employees at work, they focus on the aspect of being available and on creating a safe environment where employees feel comfortable sharing their problems. They explain that it is important to show oneself as reachable and to clarify for employees that they can make contact at any time.

”So I believe that this thing about being available and making them feel that they [the employees] can talk to me. It is hard to know if you have succeeded but this is the kind of climate I strive to establish.” (Manager)

Among the managers, there seems to be two different ideas about how they experience their own accessibility during remote work. Some describe that their accessibility has not been affected and that it is equivalent with how it was before, while some explain a feeling of being even more accessible today.

Furthermore, the managers highlight that it is especially important talking about mental wellbeing in remote work, since it is more difficult for managers to notice signs of illness

when they do not meet in person daily. It appears that the managers perceive that a greater responsibility is being placed on employees to act when they are feeling unwell. Moreover, they talk about the mental wellbeing project at Tetra Pak and explain that they strive to normalise the stigma around mental illness. Some managers mention that they bring up the topic once a month during the team meetings. One manager also describes that he/she shared personal things with the group when the manager himself/herself went through a difficult time.

”...I am also a representative for the board at Tetra Pak, and then one must have the courage to show oneself as vulnerable and sensitive.” (Manager)

As described in this section, support may be provided to employees in various forms. It is evident that the support provided from both managers and colleagues is essential. I understand support as being a tool that helps employees handle the work situation by balancing the workload, helping them manage work tasks and making them feel confident talking about their mental wellbeing. Thus, it seems that support is a prerequisite for a good psychosocial work environment. Another type of support that is highlighted in the collected data is feedback. Feedback rather focuses on the development of employees. As this is an important aspect from an educational point of view, I have decided to present it separately in the following section.

### **4.3.3 Feedback**

From the interview material, it can be assumed that feedback is something employees are provided with continuously. The employees explain that they receive feedback from their managers during one-to-one meetings, team meetings and performance reviews. Also, they say that their managers contact them through the chat or the phone to give shorter input, for example after the employee has given a presentation. The employees' statements, indicates that some are satisfied with the amount of feedback they receive today, whereas some are dissatisfied. Thus, it appears that the employees have diverse experiences of feedback in remote work. Some employees express that the amount of feedback provided is the same today as when they worked at the office, whereas some state that they receive less feedback. Whether the lack of natural meeting points is an explanation for why the feedback has decreased, is a matter the employees reflect on.

”I can imagine that it is more difficult for my manager to gather feedback, because neither do they have the same informal discussions. And so, these small, instant things do not reach my manager, and thus it does not reach me.” (Employee)

Furthermore, the employees discuss that feedback likewise is received from colleagues. However, it seems that feedback mainly is provided by the manager. From the interview material, it is possible to distinguish two different perceptions regarding this type of feedback. Some employees talk about the digital tools as an enabler for providing feedback quickly and easily, and give the impression that feedback from colleagues has not been affected due to remote work. This suggests a perception, among the employees, that feedback from colleagues still works well. Another perception that appears, is that feedback from colleagues has been affected negatively since remote work has diminished the amount of feedback.

”Also, I feel that these small things, small comments, like when people give presentations and so on, if you meet physically in these situations you often give instant feedback – ‘good presentation’, or something short. And you may not do that as often when you work remotely. It works just as fine, really – writing a short message in the chat, but often people do not take that



initiative when you are not physically present. I have noticed that both for me and for others, such small things might actually matter a lot.” (Employee)

After comparing the employees' stories about feedback with the managers', it seems that both parties have a shared vision of how and where feedback should be provided. The managers give the impression that they care about providing the employees with proper feedback and some express a desire to provide employees with additional feedback. One method that the managers use to provide good feedback, is by talking to other people in the organisation who work closely with the employee. One manager explains that this is done, for example, in connection with the annual performance review.

“Then we spend a lot of time collecting feedback from people around them and also from me, then I compile this feedback and they [the employees] get a larger package with feedback on various parameters.” (Manager)

It appears that the managers' overall perception of giving feedback at a distance, is that it is both easier and more difficult. The managers explain that they easily can convey positive as well as constructive feedback over phone calls or via the chat. Though, the distance makes it more difficult to follow up the feedback, which is considered as highly important among the managers, especially when constructive feedback has been provided.

”In a way, it is easier [to give constructive feedback], [...] I feel that it is less threatening to do it over video – it delivers in a safe environment. What I miss out on, is this quiet follow-up, because most of the time you want to see how people react afterwards by looking at their body language – ‘what it is happening, how do they receive this feedback?’. That, I completely lose, so I have to call the next day and try to get a glimpse of what it looks like and find out if the attitude has changed. But it's harder, because I get nothing for free anymore.” (Manager)

It appears that feedback is essential both according to the employees and the managers. Moreover, it is clarified that feedback is something that influences employee's motivation to work. This, among with other things, will be further examined in the following section that puts focus on motivation in remote work.

#### **4.3.4 Motivation**

From the interview material, there seems to be differences in how employees perceive their work motivation in remote work. Some describe that they experience the work motivation as unchanged, whereas some illustrate the work motivation as being negatively affected. Why remote work has resulted in diminishing work motivation seems to be because employees experience that they receive less feedback and response in their daily work.

” When you don't see other people, you sometimes feel that you are in your own little bubble. If you want to focus, that is great, but this thing when you don't receive the instant feedback or input, when you don't get a response on what you are doing, then you can feel a bit isolated in a way. And that might affect the motivation.” (Employee)

Also, it appears that the employees do not believe it is as fun to work remotely as they lose the social interactions with colleagues and do not feel the same team spirit. One employee highlights the importance of *“feeling that you have a drive together and deliver together”* and another one explains:

”It is important that you are open and share information, also that you continuously explain what is going on at work, so that you get a feeling of being included in the team.” (Employee)

Something that becomes clear from the employees' statements is that having a good feeling in the team and good relations with the manager as well as with colleagues is essential.

Namely, they talk about "*a pleasant atmosphere in the working group*" and "*having fun with colleagues*" as important motivating factors. Other motivating factors, that can be distinguished from the interview material, are having interesting work tasks, enough work tasks, autonomy and that one understands how one contribute to the big picture with one's part.

When managers talk about how they operate to motivate their employees in remote work, they mention efforts that focus on achieving similar conditions as those addressed by the employees. The managers explain that they try to place the employees' work in a larger context and "*expand the world*" so that employees understand that their work is important for the bigger picture. Also, it is clarified that the managers strive to create a fun atmosphere in the team, for example by introducing fun elements during meetings and by arranging informal activities for the group. An additional aspect, highlighted by the managers, is the importance of showing appreciation for their employees and aiming to inspire them to continue doing their best even though the situation (Covid-19 pandemic) might be tough.

"Motivate – primarily to highlight extraordinary work, when they succeed in a collaboration, a customer relation, or in a meeting where you improve instruments. So, I try to visualise for the whole group that things are happening, and even outside the group – so if something has happened in the US..., that you make progress more personal so that it becomes clear that it is possible to influence and amaze even in times of a pandemic." (Manager)

Another manager states that during each team meeting, the group has one point on the agenda where they discuss what should to be celebrated. This is also a way to highlight good performance and motivate employees to work. In short it appears that the managers use several methods for motivating and inspiring their employees. Putting this topic in a wider context, it becomes clear that motivation is a factor that affect employees work situation and thus the psychosocial work environment.

### **4.3.5 Interpretations**

According to narratives of the respondents, it can be stated that remote work leads to employees being faced with new obstacles in regulating their workload. At present, it does not seem that these difficulties have resulted in a workload that is too high, but it is imaginable that they could cause problems in the long run. Based on the employees' stories, it is also possible to discern a picture of the employees experiencing a greater responsibility to work the set hours and to perform on the job. Perhaps it is because they want to show the managers that they manage to take on this responsibility or perhaps they just have a strong drive to perform at work. Moreover, the statement from the newer employee indicates an uncertainty about what is a normal workload and work performance, which possibly is due to the employee being new in his/her role. Based on this, it can be understood that it is highly important for managers to reconcile the employees' workload continuously in remote work, especially regarding high-performing employees and those who are relatively new to the job. It appears that the managers today are actively working with this on a general level, however, they do not mention anything in particular about the workload of new employees, rather they focus on the risk concerning high-performing employees.

During the interviews, it becomes clear that the employees experience the support from their manager and colleagues as crucial as well as well-functioning. It is clarified that the managers support employees both in matters concerning work tasks and in matters

concerning mental wellbeing. Regarding the support from colleagues, it appears that the corporate culture has been a contributing factor to why it works well in remote work. However, my understanding is that remote work requires employees to be more active and driven in asking questions and contacting others for help. Since employees do not run into their manager or colleagues at the office, it is more difficult for them to ask quick questions, additionally more difficult to notice that someone needs help. Thus, I interpret this as meaning that employees have a greater responsibility to contact their manager or colleagues when problems arise.

Since most of the support are given by the manager, it appears that it is particularly important that the manager has time to help employees. Hence, my understanding is that the manager's availability is a decisive factor regarding how employees are able to obtain support at work. Based on the interview material, it becomes clear that remote work does not lead to managers becoming less accessible, rather some managers feel more accessible. Thus, the conditions for managers being able to support their employees seems to be good. Moreover, as the employees perceive their managers as available, it emerges that the managers have succeeded in conveying to their employees that they are available even though it is not visible in the same way as when they physically where at the office.

It can be stated that the managers strive to give the employees good and continuous feedback and that they have a set strategy for how this should be done. Besides basing the feedback on their own experiences, the managers describe that they, on certain occasions, collect feedback from others in the organisation. Conceivably, this result in a more nuanced and comprehensive picture than if the managers had only based the feedback from their own thoughts. However, as one employee reason, it can be thought that the distance is an obstacle for managers to gather feedback about employees as they do not have the same social interactions with others in the organisation. Thus, my understanding is that managers do not have the same conditions to obtain spontaneous comments on the employees' work. Perhaps this is an explanation for why some employees are not happy with the feedback they receive. Also, it appears that the decreased communication between manager and employee is an explanation for this problem.

Furthermore, the managers seem to experience that it works quite well to give feedback through the digital tools. However, as there is no natural meeting point in remote work, it becomes clear that managers must make an additional effort to follow up on how employees receive constructive feedback. Following up feedback, also appears to be a way for managers to discover warning signs and avoid misunderstandings between the manager and employee. Additionally, the employees describe a perception that feedback from colleagues fulfils an important function. Though, there are mixed opinions regarding whether digital tools make it easier or more difficult to provide feedback. The discussions indicate that it is important that the manager encourages employees to comment on each other's work, but also that the manager helps to create opportunities where feedback can be shared between employees.

In accordance with the topics raised by the employees when talking about motivation, it can be stated that it is important that managers consider the changed work situation employees find themselves in when working remotely. As the employees clarify that receiving feedback and input are motivating factors, it appears that they have a need of feeling that they are being seen, heard, and confirmed at work. This can be considered to be especially important when they are sitting isolated at home and do not have the same

social interactions with either their manager or colleagues. Based on the employees' stories, it can also be stated that good relationships in the group, good collaboration with colleagues and a sense of involvement are important for their work motivation. Given the reduced communication between colleagues, my understanding is that a greater responsibility is being placed on managers. This responsibility is about creating conditions for the sharing of information and for the creation of relationships within the team, to ensure that employees' motivation is not negatively affected in remote work. At present, it seems that managers handle this responsibility well.

I understand the managers as being aware of how the changed work situation may affect the employees' motivation. In addition to bringing fun elements into the work, building the team, and placing the employees' work in a larger context, the managers also highlight the importance of encouraging employees to continue working. This is done by inspiring, raising successes and showing appreciation. An example that illustrates this well, is the statement from the manager who describes how the team, every week, brings up things to be celebrated. Celebrating things in the group does not only seem like an opportunity for the manager to show employees appreciation, but also an opportunity for employees to show appreciation for each other.

The overall work situation includes several factors. In this chapter I have focused on workload, support, feedback, and motivation which all are factors influencing the psychosocial work environment. The work situation, along with communication and relationships may be described to act as a basis for other organisational outcomes. For instant, it influences the conditions for learning. This topic is further examined in the following section.

#### ***4.4 Learning Opportunities***

This chapter concerns learning opportunities. The first section involves formal learning whereas the second section involves informal learning. In both sections the employees and the managers perceptions of learning opportunities are discussed. From the collected data it appears that learning opportunities play an important part when discussing the psychosocial work environment as it is a way to guarantee that employees have the right resources to handle the job as well as to develop in the roles. Additionally, it seems that knowledge sharing between colleagues is crucial in this matter.

##### **4.4.1 Formal Learning**

Based on the interview material, it becomes clear that the employees experience that there are great formal learning opportunities in remote work. They report that Tetra Pak offers a large range of courses and educations, both internal and external, long, and short. The employees give the impression that they experience these digital courses and educations as well-functioning. However, they also illustrate a perception that certain educations would have been better if they had been physical. Namely, some employees explain that the discussions could had gotten better in those cases. Moreover, it is possible to distinguish a difficulty about knowing which course or education to take.

"I believe that, theoretically, there are great opportunities within Tetra Pak as an organisation, but I am very bad at using them, because I do not really know what to do or which courses to take." (Employee)

The employees further explain that they need more guidelines and tips from others in order to make a good choice in this question. These input and guidelines were previously

given to them naturally at the office when they chatted with colleagues, but nowadays there is no such possibility.

In accordance with the employees' experiences, it appears that the managers experience the formal learning opportunities for employees as good in remote work. The managers give the impression that the opportunities for this type of learning have not been affected due to the distance as several courses and educations have been offered digitally even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, they talk about an overall strategy within the organisation, that exists to ensure the continuous learning for each individual.

"Also, we have a new strategy at Tetra Pak, the 2030 strategy, and within this, learning is an important part. Among other things, this means that you should spend 2 hours a week on learning, so it is quite new, and it has been properly promoted. Even higher up in the company, they have been open talking about how each person learns, and that you should take own initiative for your learning – you are supposed to use these 2 hours a week continuously." (Manager)

Although there are great learning opportunities at Tetra Pak, the managers highlight that opportunities for learning do not, by automatic, imply that learning actually takes place. They explain that the employee must have the right attitude and mindset to get the most out of the course or education.

"Not everyone is thrilled, and I have to push – that one, in some way, must adapt to the technology, you must take part in this zoom meeting as if it were a training room – with that mentality and with the notebook next to you, and dare to use the video camera. We are working on it, because there are some who find it harder thinking of it as an education. They see it as just a boring video meeting, and consequently, do not take advantage of the opportunities and the discussions that one could have had with the other participants." (Manager)

The above statement from the manager indicates a concern that employees do not believe in digital education as much, which seems consistent with the employees' stories as they, for instant, say that certain discussions could have been better if they were physical. The interview material shows that managers try to address this problem by encouraging their employees to enter the digital educations in the same way as when they are held physically. Moreover, it is illustrated that managers ensure that employees have the right technical knowledge as this, likewise, is a prerequisite for a successful education.

In this section, formal learning has been discussed, however, learning also takes place in other settings that are more of the informal kind. From the interview material it can be identified that this type of learning – informal learning is crucial when discussing learning importunities. In the following section this topic is further examined.

#### **4.4.2 Informal Learning**

The employees mainly talk about competence sharing and information sharing when discussing informal learning. The employees explain that competence sharing occurs in two different ways, either it is spontaneous, or planned/structured. Although it is evident that the employees sometimes struggle to remember what to tell or what to ask, when having structured meetings intended for competence sharing, it appears that they, at large, find these situations as rewarding.

"I believe that the barrier to getting there [competence sharing] is a little higher. Still, I do not think that once you are there and have the time, then I do not believe that the exchange of competence is limited." (Employee)

The statement above, also indicates that the lack of social interactions at work lead to a higher barrier for sharing competence spontaneously. The employees explain that since

they do not meet at the office and have regular chats, it is not possible to achieve this. If knowledge is supposed to be shared, it is required to be planned and structured. Hence, it appears that the employees experience spontaneous competence sharing as insufficient in remote work.

"You do not receive the information that you usually get, or can ask someone – 'You talked about this, what can you tell me more about it?'. You miss out on that and it is very important, much more important than most people think. What is really important are these quick questions, when you see someone walking through the landscape or you run into them, then you just 'Right! I was supposed to ask you this'. Today you don't have that opportunity.'" (Employee)

Moreover, it appears that informal learning takes place when the employees interact with colleagues at the office whom they do not work with directly. Though, it becomes clear that these interactions barely happen in remote work as they do not have natural meeting points. Hence, it seems that sharing of knowledge among colleagues outside the team or project group has been decreased.

In accordance with the employees' statements, the managers give the impression that structured/planned competence sharing normally is well-functioning in remote work, whereas spontaneous competence sharing has been negatively affected.

"It does not work quite as good as before. I believe that parts of the contacts that starts the process of competence sharing, they have been informal, and so they are suffering." (Manager)

The managers further highlight the importance of relationships when it comes to competence sharing. From their statements, two main methods for how to foster informal learning can be identified. The first method is to encourage employees to share their experiences and to create meeting points where they can meet to do so.

"I try to make sure that we share our knowledge with each other, that one take advantage of what one has learned from a project. So, regularly, we try to meet and share our experiences and challenges." (Manager)

The other method is to act as a coordinator where the manager pair employees to solve problems together based on their knowledge. Both these methods have been brought up previously in this chapter when discussing how managers work to promote cooperation.

#### **4.4.3 Interpretations**

Based on the collected empirics, it becomes clear that both managers and employees believe that there are great formal learning opportunities at Tetra Pak. This can be proven partly in the form of organisational conditions, such as the company offering a large range of digital courses and educations, and partly in the form of a request from the board that employees should regularly spend time on learning. These conditions can, themselves, be said to constitute a condition for managers to be able to ensure that workplace learning takes place even in remote work. At present, it seems that the managers manage this task well. However, it can be stated that the distance, to some extent, causes difficulties for successful educations as the employees do not always have the right mindset when they enter a digital education. Also, the employees express an uncertainty about which educations they should attend, as well as a desire to get more input and tips from colleagues in this matter. My understanding is that the employees are feeling quite lonely in the decision to choose between the profound number of courses and educations. In accordance with the statements from one of the employees, this may lead to employees failing in utilizing the learning opportunities in the best possible way, and in employees not being as motivated to attend the trainings.

Therefore, it appears that one important task for managers, is to motivate employees into entering digital trainings with the right mindset and to ensure they have the right technical prior knowledge. Today it seems like the managers are actively working with this matter. However, it appears that managers are not aware of the uncertainty employees feel regarding choosing which training to take. I cannot comment on who is responsible for the employees finding appropriate trainings, but it is conceivable that the manager, in remote work, has an important role in creating opportunities where employees can meet in order to give them the right conditions to start a conversation about this.

As for informal learning, it appears that this mainly takes place by competence and information sharing among colleagues. Hence, relations and interactions among employees seems to be crucial in this matter. From the interview material, it can be stated that employees and managers share similar experiences of how informal learning is functioning in remote work. Both parties make clear that structured competence sharing operates well, whereas spontaneous competence sharing has been negatively affected. Overall, it seems that informal learning is not as easy to accomplish in remote work since employees do not have the same social interactions with each other. When the spontaneous social contact among people at the office disappears, and it is no longer possible to easily ask quick questions over the desk, many opportunities for competence sharing or exchange of ideas are lost. The circumstances that come with remote work, consequently, requires informal learning to be planned and structured. Also, it means that employees rarely interact with people whom they do not work with directly. Hence, my understanding is that the condition for informal learning is limited in remote work. This also indicates that managers have a more important role to play in ensuring that informal learning takes place. At present, it appears that the managers handle this task well, for example, by letting employees talk about their work and their challenges during the team meetings and by finding contact ways to pair employees when someone has a problem. Still, it seems that the employees experience lacking opportunities where knowledge and ideas can be exchanged with colleagues.

## 5. Theory

*In this chapter, a theoretical framework of relevant literature on the topic is presented. To begin with, a description is given about how I gathered and selected the theories, then it is explained how the theories are connected to each other. Following, I present the theoretical framework which is divided into three main themes, these are Leadership, Work Situation and Conditions for Learning.*

### 5.1 Literature Search

I have searched for relevant research articles in the database of Lund University, Lubsearch. Also, I have searched in specific databases such as Emerald and Business Source Complete in order to find literature in specific contexts and from specific perspectives. The search terms I have used when screening for literature on the topic remote work are: *distributed work, teleworking, virtual teams and distance work*. These terms have been combined with several other search terms such as: *leadership, distance leadership, e-leadership, wellbeing, psychosocial work environment and workplace learning*. In short, I have strived to select literature that is relevant for this thesis and that offer an understanding of the complexity of the different theoretical themes rather than only presenting positive or negative aspects.

The searching of previous research has mainly been done in English, as the supply of literature is bigger in English than in Swedish. However, some searching for local literature have been done by using the same terms but in Swedish. In order to find articles that have been published recently, I occasionally used a filter to only screen articles published from year 2017 and later. This was necessary to find the newest research. In this study I have included research articles and sources that are both older and newer which provides a mixture of previous research. Additionally, some older literature has been necessary to include as they are the primarily source. For example, Graen & Uhl Biel (1995) and Bass (1999) which many scholars still refer to.

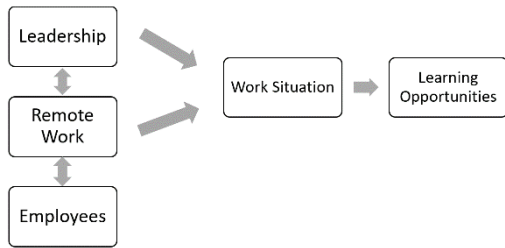
The literature on the field is mainly done from a psychological perspective and most research articles are published in psychology journals. Some articles were found in journals within Human Resource Management and some within the field of Business Management. Only a small amount of the literature has been done with a pedagogic/educational perspective. Previous research has been both quantitative and qualitative, however, qualitative research is the most common approach. My understanding is that the literature exists of both theoretical and empirical research. In this research I have included both types. Additionally, the literature used in this research comes from a variety of places. Mainly scholars have been published in Canada, the UK, and the US while some scholars are from European countries.

### 5.2 Theoretical Framework

My understanding is that remote work influences employees and the conditions for leadership. At the same time employees and leadership influence each other. Similar to this, remote work and leadership have impact on employee's work situation which consequently have impact on learning opportunities. Based on this understanding I have developed a theoretical framework. How this framework is connected is presented in the model below. The parts that are included are necessary to discuss in order to understand the whole. More precisely, to generate deeper knowledge of how managers and employees



are affected by and deal with the remote work in relation to the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities.



## 5.3 Leadership

In this section I define the concept of leadership and describe its history. Then, distance leadership, transactional and transformational leadership is further examined. This is followed by the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory which puts focus on the dyadic relationship between a leader and individual followers.

### 5.3.1 Definition of Leadership

Leadership is a complex concept that has been defined in several ways by researchers. According to Yukl (2013) leadership is viewed as an influential process, in which one or several people try to influence others. This influential process occurs naturally among members of the organisation that are part of a social system. Hence, leadership is understood as a social process rather than a specific or formal role (ibid.). Similar to this, Northouse (2018) describes leadership as “a process where one individual influence a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 6). In most definitions of the concept, the emphasis is on leadership as an influential process where the leader should influence in a way that leads to favourable outcomes of the process.

How to organise and lead the work in an organisation is described by Andersson, Crevani, Eriksson-Zetterquist and Tengblad (2020) to include three different dimensions – management, leadership and employeeship. Management refers to formal requirements that are assigned people with the help or organisational hierarchies. Thus, a manager is not an informal leader but rather a person that has an official position from which he or she can influence others (Andersson et al., 2020). To narrow the theoretical framework, I have decided to treat management as a part of leadership in this study.

Furthermore, Alvesson and Svenningsson (2019) describe leadership as something that is practised between people. Hence, it can be understood as a relation and as something reciprocal. The leader and the follower are intertwined in a mutual and voluntarily interaction that is built on meaning and understanding. According to the authors, a person becomes a leader when one or several people allow themselves to be influenced by his or her. Thus, they draw a connection between leadership and followership (ibid). This is similar to the idea presented by Andersson et al. (2020) regarding the link between leadership and employeeship. However, this connection does not only include employee’s relationship with the manager and employer, but also their relationship with other employees as well as the responsibility that can be exercised independently of the manager. When a leader makes decisions, it is the employees who turn the decision into action. Hence, leadership is dependent on employees’ efforts, meaning that employees represent a crucial element when discussing leadership (ibid.). I will not discuss this deeper in this

study, however, it is necessary to understand that leadership occurs in relation to other people.

### **5.3.2 History of Leadership**

Traditionally, theories about leadership have been about identifying personal qualities and characteristics of a leader. These theories are described as belonging to the “trait approach” which assumes that some qualities and characteristics are good leadership qualities, and that successful leadership is connected to the right traits. This view of leadership was dominated until the 1940’s when the focus shifted to rather concern behaviour and style as an attempt to catch the actual behaviour of leaders in relation to their subordinates. At the end of the 1960’s this theory was supplemented with the “contingency approach” which is about situation theory, seeking to specify leadership based on different situations. Around the 1980’s and the 1990’s, a new type of leadership was introduced called transformational leadership. In contrast to the previous theories that is grounded on a rather instrumental exchange (transactional leadership), transformational leadership is connected to a higher purpose and inspirational commitment. This type of leadership is associated with moral and emotional commitment, visions, and charisma (Alvesson & Svenningsson, 2019). In summary, theories of leadership have gone from focusing on individual and style to focus on process and relations (Andersson et al., 2020).

### **5.3.3 Leadership at Distance**

Distance leadership, e-leadership, or digital leadership refers to those leaders who conduct most leadership processes through electronic channels. When discussing distance leadership scholars often put focus on communication skills and the ability to use the digital tools (Torres & Satir, 2020; Avolio et al., 2001). It has been described that:

“effective e-leaders should be individuals who are competent in virtual environments, aware of current ICT tools, capable of choosing them in an appropriate manner, and possess the technical competencies to adopt and use the ICTs selected” (Torres & Satir, 2020, p. 5).

According to Nordengren and Olsen (2006), a successful leader is required to have empathy and social skills. Moreover, it is especially important that distance leaders know how to organise and structure the work as well as to motivate employees over time. In remote work, the need for reconciliations is higher than in regular work modes since it allows clarification of the work status and avoid potential miscommunication (Nordengren & Olsen, 2006; Liao, 2017). Hence, distance leaders must have regular interactions with employees and follow up on their duties without being too controlling. Nordengren and Olsen (2006) further explain that leaders, in remote work, has a responsibility to guarantee that everyone is participating and to set up routines for how to communicate within the team (ibid.). Scholars has suggested that the leadership, in remote work, should be shared which means that employees, to a greater extent, share the responsibility, guide each other, and participate in decision-makings (Liao, 2017). In addition, Liao (2017) suggests that it is crucial that virtual leaders focus on creating a good social cohesiveness within the team as well as good relationships between team members since nurturing good relations between employees has been shown to promote good cooperation and a good work environment (ibid).

### **5.3.4 Transactional and Transformational Leadership**

According to Bass (1999), transformational and transactional leadership are different. However, one process does not automatically exclude the other, rather they are

complementary. Transformational leadership is stated to increase the motivation and performance among followers to a greater extent than transactional leadership. Though, effective leaders use a combination of both leadership types (ibid.).

#### **5.3.4.1 Transactional Leadership**

The strategy to motivate followers in transactional leadership is to appeal follower's self-interest and exchange benefits. In this form of leadership, the relationship between the leader and the employee is built on an exchange process of performance and reward. Transactional leadership may result in followers fulfilling the duties requested by the leader, however it is not expected to generate enthusiasm and commitment to task objectives. Transactional leadership includes three types of transactional behaviour: contingent reward, passive management by exception and active management by exception. Contingent reward behaviour involves the leader clarifying what must be accomplished to receive awards and then rewarding followers for completing the tasks. This is a way to increase task motivation. The second behaviour, passive management by exception, involves the leader using contingent punishments and other activities to correct subordinates when they do not meet performance standards. Finally, active management by exception includes the leader looking for mistakes and implementing rules to avoid future mistakes (Bass, 1999).

#### **5.3.4.2 Transformational Leadership**

In contrast, transformational leadership involves leaders creating empowered working environments and helping employees to increase their performance. A transformational leader aims to develop his/her followers, help them reach their full potential and get them to work beyond their self-interest. Hence, followers of transformational leaders are motivated to do more than what was originally expected of them (Bass, 1999). This type of leadership style is established on solid relations between employees and the leader (Hansson et al., 2006) and is highly associated with followers having trust in the leader (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

Transformational leadership is described to include four dimensions of transformational behaviour. These are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Idealized influence involves the leader being a respected and admired role model by his/her followers. Also, it includes the leader envisioning a desirable future and demonstrating how it can be reached. Inspirational motivation is displayed when the leader behaves in ways that motivate others and generate enthusiasm. This is done by communicating clear expectations as well as objectives. Intellectual stimulation involves the leader promoting intelligence and rationality to help employees become more creative and innovative. Lastly, the fourth dimension, individualized consideration, is displayed when the leader pays attention to the needs and the potential for developing others and provides followers with support and coaching in this matter. For example, by encouraging interactions with others, establishing a supportive climate where individual differences are respected and being aware of individual concerns (Bass, 1999).

In a study about leadership and remote work by Huang, Kahain & Jestice (2010), it is shown that transformational leadership is helpful for creating a cooperative climate whereas transactional leadership is helpful for building task cohesion. Task cohesion refers to shared commitment to the group task. Findings of the research indicate that task cohesion and cooperative climate are essential factors for achieving performance and

satisfaction among employees. This implies that a combination of transformational and transactional leadership is crucial. Moreover, the authors highlight that transformational leadership may help ensure that work tasks and the team are salient for employees as it puts focus on the team as a whole and in achieving tasks together. This is especially important in the context of remote work since the distance that occur in virtual spheres tend to diminish the significance of the team and teamwork for employees (ibid.).

Transformational leadership has been shown to be an effective form of leadership. However, scholars have criticised this theory (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). For instant, Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) state that transformational leadership is flawed. They argue that a clear definition of the concept is missing, and that the theory fails to explain why it consists of different dimensions and how these dimensions combine to form transformational leadership. Moreover, Alvesson & Einola (2019) argue that transformational leadership is a type of heroic leadership and that there is an ideological nature of the concept. They explain that leadership is always described as something “good” and if it turns out to be something bad one claims that the true concept was not present. Thus, you never blame the concept (ibid.).

### **5.3.5 Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory**

Leader-Member Exchange theory (LMX) examines the relationship-based approach to leadership. It concentrates on the perceived quality of the dyadic relationship between a leader and individual followers. A high quality LMX relationship is characterized by high levels of mutual trust, interactions, and support, as well as high degrees of exchange where both parties contribute with resources the other party find valuable (Graen & Uhl Biel, 1995). Within this theory, a high-quality LMX relationship is desirable since it has shown to have positive impact on leadership effectiveness and several performance indicators such as job satisfaction, commitment, employee performance, job atmosphere, and turnover intention (Wong & Berntzen, 2019; Graen & Uhl Biel, 1995; Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer & Ferris, 2012). Scholars have shown that early leader-member interactions are important for developing a high-quality relationship since the relation develops quickly (Nahrgang, Morgenson & Ilies, 2009). Thus, it is important that leaders arrange a face-to-face meeting when a new employee joins the team or in the beginning of a project (Wong & Berntzen, 2019). Graen & Uhl Biel (1995), describe LMX as both a transactional and transformational leadership process.

Research has shown that distance between individuals generates challenges regarding communication and difficulties to understand other people. Also, it has been displayed to create emotions such as feelings of social isolation and insecurity which are likely to impact the nature of relationships (Brunelle, 2013). Correspondingly, Brunelle’s (2013) study about leadership and mobile working, shows that there is a negative correlation between physical distance and the quality of the leader-member relationship. Additionally, the findings indicate that the level of transformational leadership adopted by the leader moderates the correlation between physical and psychological distance and the quality of the leader-member relationship. Hence, transformational leadership is shown to mitigate the negative effects of the distance (ibid.). The findings of Brunelle’s study support the idea that the leader’s leadership style is a key factor for maintaining a good quality relationship between employees and managers and for succeeding in remote work (Brunelle, 2013; Puranova & Bono, 2009).

Scholars about LMX has also examined the importance of trust in virtual settings. In a study by Norman et al. (2019) it was shown that communication, openness, honesty, and integrity were the most important factors for developing trusting relationships between leader and followers. The authors explain that interpersonal interactions have been displayed to influence the level of trust in leader-follower relations. Thus, they claim that trust is difficult to maintain in virtual organisations since the traditional physical and social elements that are necessary for establishing trust cannot be utilised in those settings. Moreover, the results indicate that the digital tools must be used appropriately to the message and that periodic face-to-face interactions are necessary in the long run to create trustful relationships (Norman et al., 2019).

To maintain a high-quality LMX relationship, followers must perceive the relationship as rewarding. Otherwise, they may not see the importance of the exchange relationship (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Wong & Berntzen (2019) argue that providing support and being confident in the abilities of one's employees is more difficult for leaders when communicating digitally. The authors discuss that the physical distance and the dependence on digital communication may prevent employees from orally contacting their leaders for quick informal feedback. When making contact in writing, the feedback is perceived as more formal which means that opportunities for informal interactions are lost and that the leader, as a result, might become less salient for employees. The findings of their research support this belief and show that it is important to consider the task interdependency as well as structures for team interactions. Also, the study indicates that when electronic dependency and task interdependency is high, transformational leadership is not likely to nurture a high LMX quality. The authors suggest that distance leaders should strive to assert their values so that employees understand the importance of the relationship. Moreover, it is essential that leaders show employees that they are present (even though it is not physically) which can be done by taking an active role in the team, for example by initiating group communication and discussions of ideas. Hence, showing a virtual present and interest, may allow leaders to stay close to the group and show themselves as salient for the team by offering guidance (ibid.).

## **5.4 Work Situation**

In this section I present the Job-Demands Resource model and Self-Determination Theory which describes motivation and wellbeing in relation to basic psychological needs.

### **5.4.1 Job-Demand Resource Model**

The Job Demands-Resource (JD-R) model identifies how two specific sets of working conditions, job demands and job resources, may influence job strain and work engagement among employees. The model assumes that the two sets of working conditions can be found in every organisational context. Hence, the model can be applied to various occupational settings, regardless of the particular demands and resources involved. Within the theory it is believed that job strain is a result of a disturbance of the balance between the job demands employees are exposed to and the resources they are provided (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

“Job demands refer to physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or physiological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs.” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p.312). High work pressure, emotional demands and a

physically unpleasant work environment are some examples of job demands (ibid.). The second set of working condition, job resources, considers to which degree individual employees are being offered resources by the job. It refers to “those physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that may: (1) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, (2) be functional for achieving work goals, or (3) stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Schaufeli et al., 2009, p. 894). Job resources can be identified at the organisational level at large (e.g. salary, career opportunities), or in the interpersonal and social relations, which, for example, refers to team climate and support from managers or colleagues. Also, job resources can be located in the organisation of work (e.g. role clarity, participation in decision making), and at the level of tasks, which, for example, concerns skill variety, task significance, autonomy and performance feedback (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

One important aspect of the JD-R model is that it involves two different processes, suggesting that job demands stimulate a health impairment process, whereas job resources stimulate a motivational process. In the health impairment process, employees’ mental and physical resources may be consumed if the job is poorly designed or if it includes persistent job demands such as, work overload. Consequently, this may result in reduced energy and health problems. In the motivational process, it is assumed that job resources have motivational potential and thus lead to high work engagement, low cynicism, and excellent performance. Job resources are essential for creating motivation among employees, partly because they foster growth, learning and development among employees, and partly because they are instruments for accomplishing work goals (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

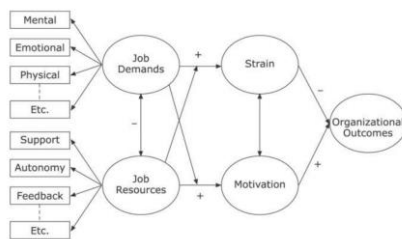


Figure 1. The Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 313).

Different job resources may act as buffers in different ways. For instant, a high-quality relationship with one’s manager may lessen the degree to which job demands impact job strain. Also, support and appreciation provided by leaders, can help employees to see demands from another perspective and assist employees to cope with job demands and enable performance. On the contrary, job autonomy may be important for employee well-being as greater autonomy is related with more possibilities to cope with situations that are stressful. Regarding social support, this might help employees to achieve work goals since support from colleagues can help ensure that the work is done in time. Hence, it may lessen the impact work overload has on job strain. Lastly, constructive feedback from managers may help employees to work more effectively. Also, it improves the communication between manager and employee. Moreover, employees tend to maintain their work motivation when they are evaluated for good performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The JD-R model has been criticised as it does not include personal resources such as personal characteristics. Some researchers suggest that personal resources should be

included in the model as it may have motivational potential like job resources. However, the model fails to elucidate the relationship between job resources and personal resources and health-related outcomes which is viewed as a limitation (Airila et al. 2014).

The JD-R model is a straightforward model that can be used to understand how job demands and job resources relate to each other and how the balance between them affect employee wellbeing. As I aim to examine the psychosocial work environment, focusing on factors such as motivation, learning opportunities, autonomy and support this theory is relevant for my study. The JD-R model can help to understand how the work situation is affected in remote work and how managers and employees deal with it.

### **5.4.2 Basic Psychological Needs**

Self-Determination Theory (STD) is about the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. According to the theory, people's motivation depends on how they perceive the work environment as supportive of their basic psychological needs. Autonomy is about feeling that one has choices and agrees with work tasks, competence is about feeling a sense of self-efficacy, and relatedness is about feeling a sense of connectedness or belonging with important others (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Orsini & Rodrigues (2020) present some suggestions for how to work with SDT in remote work. Factors that are important for achieving *autonomy* are trust, open communication, and flexibility. Also, the leader should make sure that employees feel responsible for their work tasks and that they experience opportunities to influence decisions. To ensure *competence* and that employees feel efficient at work, the leader is required to provide guidance and create clear structures so that the workload is balanced (ibid.). Namely, work overload as well as work underload has been associated with burnout. Moreover, it is necessary that the leader understands that individual have different prerequisites for working remotely and adjust the support on the basis of these conditions. As for *relatedness*, the leader must engage in creating strong relationships in the workplace and make sure that communication is maintained, both at the level of the team and the individual. For example, this can be done by having regular meetings and common platforms for collaboration. Orsini and Rodrigues (2020) describe that this psychological need is the most challenging one to meet in remote work, since the lack of face-to-face interactions may result in less verbal support and social isolation which make it difficult to establish close relations. In short, the authors claim that meeting the psychological need of employees is crucial to manage remote work in a successful way (ibid.). This is supported in the study by Gagné et al. (2018) which shows that when leaders are needs-supportive, employees internalise the value of their work efforts and are more motivated, thus improving performance as well as wellbeing and work satisfaction.

## **5.5 Conditions for Learning**

In this section I present literature on the topic of conditions for learning. To begin, I define the concept of learning and learning conditions. Then I present theories about leadership, socialisation, space of action and remote work in relation to learning.

### **5.5.1 Definition of Learning & Conditions for Learning**

The concept learning has been defined in several ways in the literature. For example, Ellström (1992) explains that learning is a durable change in individuals that is a result of his or her interplay with the environment. Similarly, Illeris (2015) defines learning as a

process that leads to lasting changes of capacity among living organisms. Although there are various ways to define the concept, a common idea is presented in the literature concerning that learning refers to a lasting change in individuals (Wallo, 2008).

Scholars normally talk about formal and informal learning when discussing workplace learning. Formal learning refers to planned and object oriented activities and is associated with classroom-based education whereas informal learning refers to learning that occurs outside of the classroom. This type of learning is normally unstructured and can be integrated into daily activities at work, for example through coaching, consultation or participating in networks. Informal learning can either be incidental or intentional, for the most part it occurs spontaneously. Formal and informal learning are understood as completing each other and it is required that there is an integration between these two (Ellström, 1996), however around 80% of the workplace learning is informal (Marsick & Watkins, 2018). Conditions for learning refers to the factors that are important for promoting an integration of learning and work. Different scholars have defined different factors that are of importance. As an attempt to limit this research I have decided to focus on four conditions for learning which are consistent with the focus of this research. These are leadership, socialisation, space of action and remote work.

### **5.5.2 Leadership as a Condition**

Leadership constitutes a crucial organisational function that influences learning opportunities as the process facilitates individual as well as collective efforts for learning and achieving shared organisational goals. The impact leadership has on learning opportunities is both direct and indirect since it involves leaders' direct actions and communication with employees as well as the leaders creating favourable learning conditions and implementing suitable supporting activities and structures (Yukl, 2013). Hence, leaders have a significant influence on the learning environment. Similar to this Eaurt (2007) describes that the manager has a major influence on workplace learning and culture. According to the author, the manager is responsible for developing a culture of mutual support and learning. However, the managers should not provide all the support themselves, instead they should promote employees to help each other (ibid.).

There are several ways in which a leader can create a supportive learning environment. The leader should be open to new ideas given by employees and make sure they are provided with enough resources and opportunities to try these out. Showing encouragement for employees to develop and implement new initiatives is crucial for enabling employees to use their learning at work (Lancaster & Di Milia, 2015). Moreover, unexpected mistakes should be seen as an opportunity to learn. For instance, employee's ability to solve problems and be innovative may develop if the leader presents a difficult work task as being an educational challenge rather than being an unfeasible assignment (Garvin et al., 2008). In addition, Wallo (2014) brings up that the leader must create a learning environment that fosters different types of learning. To do so the leader must shape work tasks that are challenging for the employees and make sure that they can learn from each other through these tasks. Also, evaluation is a factor that fosters learning. Hence, the leader must evaluate employees regularly and identify possible developmental needs and opportunities (ibid.).



### **5.5.3 Socialisation as a Condition**

Informal learning at work is a process that often takes place in social contexts. Eraut (2000) describes that this type of learning mainly occurs through consultation such as discussions and meetings and through collaborations both within and outside the team. He views social relationships as opportunities where employees can receive feedback and support (ibid.). Support and feedback are often highlighted as crucial aspects of learning. Hence, increasing opportunities for consultation and cooperation with colleagues may help to nurture the quantity and quality of workplace learning (Eraut, 2007). This focus on the social context of informal learning is similar to the way Marsick and Watkins (1990) discuss the concept. They explain that informal learning develops through social interactions. According to Froehlich et al. (2017), these interactions may be demonstrated by information-seeking, feedback-seeking and help-seeking, which subsequently are understood as crucial components of informal learning (ibid.). In addition, a study by Nugroho (2018) implies that knowledge sharing and a collaborative culture are important elements for learning to take place.

### **5.5.4 Space of Action as a Condition**

Space of action refers to the extent an individual are allowed to interpret and chose work tasks, objectives and methods to deal with these. Also, it includes the freedom an individual has to evaluate the results achieved. Space of action determines which type and to what degree learning can take place since the lack of it prevent learning. As such, space of action constitutes a crucial condition for learning. Both objective space of action and subjective space of action is necessary. The former refers to time and space, whereas the latter emphasis on the individual having enough knowledge to use the space of action, for instant through motivation and self confident. In short, the design of the work and organisation as well as individual´s knowledge are required to achieve learning. Allowing space of action may also be a method for managers to increase employees participation at work which is connected with learning opportunities (Ellström, 1996).

### **5.5.5 Remote Work as a Condition**

In remote work, the learning mainly occurs through digital channels. E-learning makes it possible to organise trainings in new more flexible forms. However, the conditions for learning certainly change by information and communication technology. Svensson et al. (2014) highlight that it is important to support employees in e-learning, for example by providing the right technical tools and by developing a study plan that suits the individual (Svensson et al., 2004). As for informal learning, Van der Maulen et al. (2019) found that knowledge sharing might be negatively affected in remote work because of the lacking social interactions. Mainly this negative affect concerns areas such as innovation, creativity, and development. The authors state that knowledge sharing decreases when employees do not meet physically at the office since they do not have the same opportunities to take part in a network where knowledge is being shared (ibid.).

## **6. Theoretical Interpretation & Discussion**

*This chapter includes a discussion of the empirical material in relation to the theoretical framework. This discussion is done by comparing theory and empirics, and by examining how the empirical material relates to the theoretical concepts. To make it easy for the reader to follow the text, this chapter is divided into three parts which are represented in the research questions of this study. These are: Relationships, Work Situation and Learning Opportunities.*

### **6.1 Relationships**

This part aims to discuss the material by focusing on the relationships between manager and employees. The discussion is based on my first research question: In what way does remote work influence the relationship between leader and employees? The opening aspect of this discussion is distance leadership as it allows me to discuss the question in relation to the specific working conditions of remote work, such as digital interactions and communication channels.

#### **6.1.1 Distance Leadership**

In the result it appears that managers have established a clear strategy for when and how the communication should take place. Hence, the managers have set routines for how to communicate within the team which Nordengren and Olsen (2006) mention as included in the responsibility of a distance leader. The employees give the impression that they, in general, experience the communication as well functioning in remote work which support this picture. Though, it appears that employees are not confident using the digital tools in some situations. For example, the employees who are not given clear guidelines on how to participate in a video meeting do not feel comfortable using the video camera. This signifies the importance of managers, giving clear directions on how to use the digital tools and on how to communicate. Further it implies that managers are facing a dilemma about how to establish a strategy for leading the group in digital meetings where all participants use the camera. According to Torres and Satir (2020) distance leaders must be aware of current ICT tools and know how and when to use them based on the manner. Although there seems to be strategies for how to communicate in general, it may be understood that managers struggle to adopt the appropriate digital tools in some situations and that the communication strategy, consequently, might need to become even more detailed.

This topic can also be discussed in relation to transactional and transformational leadership. Some managers give clear directions that all employees should use the video camera, whereas some managers rather give employees space to decide for themselves and hope they will follow the manager's example. Leading by example, and showing employees what is a desirable behaviour, can be clearly linked with transformational leadership. Likewise, giving clear directions on what needs to be done can be linked with transactional leadership (Bass, 1999). Hence, it seems that managers either adopt a transactional or transformational behaviour. In this matter, it appears that employees appreciate when the leader gives clear directions in digital meetings and explain how they should behave, otherwise employees tend not to use their video camera. This indicates that transactional leadership is important in some respects.

Corresponding to the statements of Nordengren and Olsen (2006), the managers of this study do have regular interactions with their employees. For instant, through one-to-one meetings, team meetings and shorter check-ins in between these. However, research implies that the need for reconciliations is higher in remote work than in regular work mode (Nordengren & Olsen, 2006; Liao, 2017). According to the interviewees, the interactions between manager and employees have not increased, rather some give the impression that it has decreased, especially considering informal interactions. Based on these findings, the frequency of interaction appears to be essential in remote work. Hence, this could be viewed as a problem in the organisation since employees are at risk of misunderstanding communication and feeling confused by their work tasks (ibid.). Consequently, it may also be understood as a risk for creating and maintaining a close relationship between manager and employees.

How managers handle the ICT tools may be understood as a condition for the way they are able to interact with their employees and thus, the way they are able to create and maintain relationships with them. The utilization of communication channels appears to be an important question when talking about the relationship between manager and employees as the physical interactions have been replaced by digital interactions. As such, it seems particularly important that managers use the appropriate communication channel and interact regularly with their employees to ensure a quality relationship. To get a better understanding of how the relationship between manager and employees is established, I will discuss this matter in relation to LMX theory in the following section.

### **6.1.2 LMX**

Scholars imply that distance between individuals are likely to impact the nature of the relationship and that there is a negative correlation between remote work and the quality of the leader-member relationship (Brunelle, 2013). Moreover, research has shown that it is challenging to establish trust in leader-member relations in remote work since it requires traditional physical and social elements (Norman et al., 2019). Despite this, it does not appear that the leader-member relationship has been noticeable negatively affected at Tetra Pak. Both managers and employees give the impression that the relationship between them is good although they do not meet in person nor in informal settings as much. The fact that good relationships was established before remote work was introduced is mentioned as an explanation for this by the managers. This may be understood by the findings of Nahrgang et al., (2009) who suggest that early leader-member interactions are important for developing a high-quality relationship since the relation develops quickly. Possibly, the conditions for creating quality LMX relationships has been good before when manager and employees could meet face-to-face at the office. The suggestion by Nahrgang et al. (2009) might also explain why managers find it difficult to create relationships with new employees whom they have not met in person. Wong & Berntzen (2019) clarify the importance of having face-to-face meetings in the beginning of a project or when a new employee joins the team. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, this has not been possible in most cases. During regular circumstances, managers probably would have a physical introductory meeting with new employees. This is an example of a challenge that follows of the pandemic.

Although managers and employees give the impression that they experience their relationship as good, it is illustrated in the result that it has changed in some ways – it has become more formal, and the interactions have decreased. According to Wong and

Berntzen (2019) this distance, that is created in remote work, might be a risk for the leader-member relationship. The authors describe that remote work might lead to challenges in maintaining high-quality LMX relationships because manager become less salient in the eyes of employees. If the task interdependency of employees is high, they are at risk of perceiving the relationship with the managers as non-rewarding (ibid.). In this study, the employees seem to have quite a lot of autonomy and task interdependency. This implies that the conditions for creating a quality LMX relationship in remote work is affected. Hence, it is important that managers attempt to show employees that they are valuable and that they are virtual present (Wong & Berntzen, 2019) which seems to be the case at Tetra Pak. This may explain why managers highlight accessibility as particularly important in remote work.

It seems like the one-to-one meetings provide an opportunity where managers can show interest as well as highlight the importance of their support for individual employees. Hence, the one-to-one meetings may be understood as crucial for maintaining a quality LMX relationship. How often the one-to-one occur differs between the employees. Based on the discussion above it may be understood that less frequent meetings may result in negative outcomes for the LMX relationship. On the other hand, adjusting the frequency may also be a way for managers to meet the need for support from individual employees. Being aware of individual concerns is described as important in transformational leadership (Bass, 1999).

In the result, employees give the impression that the relationship with the manager is an important element. This imply that managers have succeeded in making employees understand that the leader-member relation is significant. Still, the issues regarding the reduced frequency of interactions and the less informal relationship with the manager remain. As such, it appears that the conditions for creating a quality LMX relationship are reduced in remote work since interpersonal interactions have shown to positively influence the level of trust in leader-member relations (Norman et al., 2019). The authors also state that periodic face-to-face interactions are necessary in the long run to create a trustful relationship (ibid.).

In short, the literature supports my understanding that informal interactions and physical meetings are important for building relationships. Hence, it can be stated that remote work influences the relationship between leader and employees by making it more formal and by deteriorating the conditions for establishing a quality LMX relationship. This implies that it is particularly important for distance leaders to focus on establishing and maintaining a quality and trustfull relationship. As Brunelle (2013) states, adopting transformational leadership might help mitigate the negative effect of the distance in remote work. Thus, it can be discussed that transformational leadership is important for maintaining a good quality relationship in remote work (Brunelle, 2013; Puranova & Bono, 2009). Continuing on the topic of leadership styles in the context of relationships, I will discuss transformational and transactional leadership in the following section. This may provide insight to the leader-member relationship as the manager's way of leading the team and creating engagement likewise can be understood as an attempt to show employees that the relationship is of importance.

### **6.1.3 Transformational & Transactional Leadership**

Transactional leadership has been discussed as important in the previous sections, for example regarding establishing clear directions when communicating and by creating task

cohesion (Bass, 1999). Moreover, the managers statements indicates that they use transformational leadership when leading from a distance. For instant, they aim to establish a supportive climate by showing themselves as accessible and creating areas where employees can meet and support each other. Also, they encourage employees to interact with each other. These actions are in line with individualized consideration which is one transformational behaviour (Bass, 1999). Moreover, the managers seem to have a focus on the individual and in including employees in decision-makings both regarding their own work and regarding others, for example by letting employees share what they are working with during team meetings and by encouraging new ideas. Other examples of managers adopting transformational leadership is when they bring up what to celebrate in the team meeting or when they present accomplishments in the organisation to demonstrate that it is possible to amaze even in times of pandemic. The reason for these actions appears to be to motivate others and generate enthusiasm which is in line with transformational leadership according to Bass (1999).

It may be understood that the managers of this study do not have the same prerequisites for being transformational leaders as this type of leadership emphasis on charismatic aspects. As described, a distance is created between manager and employees in remote work which seems to impact the way they communicate and thus the conditions for establishing a quality relationship between leader and employees. Still, it seems especially important that leaders use transformational leadership in remote work as employees give the impression that they need more personal and informal interactions, as a contrast to the mainly formal forms of interactions. This is supported by Brunelle (2013) who states that transformational leadership might help mitigate the negative effects of the distance. Moreover, Brunelle (2013) and Liao (2017) mention that transformational leadership is crucial for ensuring a quality leader-member relationship. My understanding is that adopting a transformational leadership may help managers to convince their employees that they are salient.

However, it should be discussed that transformational leadership is criticised for being inconsistent as it fails to provide a clear definition of the concept and explain how the different dimensions are connected (Alvesson & Eionola, 2019). As such, it might not be possible to say that managers' behaviours and activities, for sure, can be classified as transformational leadership. Although, they indicate that this type of leadership is being practised. This discussion further indicates that successful remote work and a good psychosocial work environment cannot be achieve through adopting transformational leadership only. There are other factors that influence these outcomes as well. Hence, transformational leadership cannot be said to be the only answer.

In short, it appears that both transformational and transactional leadership are important for creating and maintaining a quality relationship between manager and employees. Transformational leadership is described to reduce the distance and ensure that employees find the leader-member relationship as salient whereas transactional leadership shows to be vital when setting strategies for how to communicate in digital meetings which impact the way managers are able to interact with their colleagues and thus are able to create and establish a quality relationship.

In summary, the relationship between manager and employees have been affected in remote work as the ways of interacting has changed from physical interactions to digital interactions. When managers and employees are not working at the office, they do not

run into each other as often, thus spontaneous meetings are diminished when working from home. In addition, employees tend to find the relationship with the manager as less significant if they handle all the work themselves. These new conditions result in managers meeting new challenges when trying to ensure a quality relationship with their employees. Mainly it appears to be important that managers make sure to have regular interactions with employees and ensure that they understand the importance of the relationship as a quality relationship requires that employees find it as rewarding. A quality relationship between manager and employees seems to be important as it sets the stage for how leaders are able to practice leadership and thus influence the work situation of employees. For example, by providing support, feedback and making sure that the social aspects are functioning. In the following topic, I will discuss the work situation of employees further and discuss how it is connected to the psychosocial work environment.

## ***6.2 Work Situation***

This part aims to discuss the material by focusing on employee's work situation. The discussion is based on my second research question: In what way does remote work influence the work situation of employees? This topic is divided into three parts which have been identified as included in the work situation, these are support & feedback, workload, and social aspects. The first section concerns support and feedback which allows me to discuss the importance of support and feedback and how it is provided in remote work. This is done by drawing connections to the JD-R model and SDT.

### **6.2.1 Support & Feedback**

The support provided by managers in this study, can be understood to constitute job resources according to the JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). In the result it is demonstrated that managers support and help their employees in various ways. Why it is important to offer different kinds of support is explained by the JD-R model which suggests that different job resources may act as buffers in different ways. For example, the authors state that a good relationship between manager and employee may help employees view job demands from another perspective (ibid.) This may explain why both employees and managers find the leader-member relationship as important and implies that the relationship could be viewed as a type of support for employees. Moreover, the result implies that colleagues likewise play an important part in providing employees with support. Namely, employees describe that they ask each other questions and help each other to move forward. Like the support provided by managers, the support provided from colleagues can be understood as job resources according to the JD-R model (ibid.). Bakker and Demerouti (2007) describe that interpersonal and social relations like this might help employees to balance the job demands which suggests that cooperation and interactions at work are important when discussing the psychosocial work environment. For instant, they claim that support from colleagues can help ensure that the work is done in time which may explain why employees find the cooperation with colleagues as important. It does not appear that the conditions for providing support has changed at Tetra Pak since employees, in general, seem pleased with the kind of support provided by managers and colleagues.

In the result it is illustrated that managers try to motivate and inspire their employees by showing appreciation. This is in line with the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) as it suggests that appreciation constitute a type of job resource which stimulate a

motivational process. It appears that managers try to motivate their employees in several ways which may also be understood as a kind of support.

Moreover, performance feedback is mentioned as a job resource which implies that feedback likewise is an important factor for employees to maintain a balance between job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007.). In the empirics it is demonstrated that employees consider feedback as important for feeling motivated at work. Feedback may be understood as a necessity to meet the need of competence in SDT (Orsini & Rodrigues, 2020) which may also explain why employees as well as managers value this. Based on this discussion, it seems that the organisation would benefit from promoting employees to give each other more feedback. At present, feedback from colleagues does not appear to constitute a significant part of the feedback provided. Hence, I see a potential for the organisation to develop in this question. My understanding is that leadership plays a crucial part in providing employees adequate job resources. Although employees themselves have a responsibility to help each other, it is the leader's responsibility to create the right conditions for this to happen which is supported by Liao (2017).

Although it is crucial that employees are provided with job resources to balance the job demands, it can be discussed that job resources are not the only elements that help them deal with job demands. As Airila et al. (2014) suggest, employee's personal resources may also help to manage the job demands. Thus, it could be understood that employees who face the same problem might need support of different degrees as their personal resources varies. Hence, it seems especially important that managers consider the individual to understand what kind of support is needed in the specific situation. This could be linked to transformational leadership (Bass, 1999).

Support and feedback appears to be crucial for helping employees balance the job demands they are facing at work since it provides them with help and encouragement. In addition, feedback is necessary for employees as it allows them to develop and feel efficient at work which is required to meet the psychological need of competence according to SDT. Thus, support and feedback can help create understanding for the work situation of employees in remote work. Another theme that generate knowledge to this topic is workload. This will be further discussed in the following section where I review workload in relation to the JD-R model and in relation to the managers prospects of managing this issue.

### **6.2.2 Workload**

In the result, the managers highlight that workload is one of the most important issues regarding the psychosocial work environment. This may be further understood with the help of the JD-R model. Bakker & Demerouti (2007) describe work overload as a type of job demand. As job demands, according to the theory, stimulate a health impairment process, it appears to be an important aspect for the mental wellbeing of employees. Based on the theory, my understanding is that the higher the workload is, the more support and help is required of employees as there must be a balance between job demands and job resources to avoid job strain. This may explain why managers find it important to continuously ask their employees about the workload, as information about this help managers determine how much support and help that is required. In the result, it is illustrated that managers support their employees by helping them prioritize work tasks and plan the work. This seems to be a way for managers to guarantee a balanced work load and a good

psychosocial work environment. Since the employees demonstrate that they find the workload as mostly balanced, it appears that the managers are succeeding.

However, it seems that managers are worried to miss signs of work overload as they do not interact with their employees as much as when working at the office. In that way it appears that it is more difficult for managers to notice if employees are dealing with job demands. Hence, my understanding is that managers do not have the same prerequisites for reconciling the workload, neither employees have the same prerequisites to handle the workload as they face new challenges when working from home. This implies that it is highly important for managers to keep track of employee's workload in remote work and provide support when needed.

Additionally, the result shows that employees experience a great amount of autonomy and that they believe they can drive change which can also be seen as job resources, both at the level of the organisation of work and at the level of tasks (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). According to SDT, autonomy is also one of the basic psychological needs which is necessary to meet for creating work engagement among employees. This may explain why they value autonomy.

The JD-R model and SDT may help leaders understand how employees experience the work environment and provide them guidance on how to ensure a good psychosocial work environment. It is crucial that leaders can identify which job demands employees are facing since this knowledge allows them to ensure that employees are provided with enough job resources. This implies that a close relationship between leader and member is important and that regular reconciliations must occur so that leaders are able to follow the workload of their employees. Also, leaders should consider that the basic psychological needs are met. In the following section I will put focus on the basic psychological need of relatedness since the social aspects have been highlighted as important in this study. Also, I will include collaboration in the discussion since it can be understood as a way to create relatedness.

### **6.2.3 Social Aspects**

In the empirics it is demonstrated that good relationships, good cooperation, and a sense of involvement are brought up as motivational factors by employees. This can be connected to the need of relatedness in the SDT (Ryan & Deci 2017.). According to the authors, people need to feel connectedness or belonging with important others (ibid). In this study this can be applied to the employees as having a need to feel belongingness to their manager as well as their colleagues. My understanding is that managers have an important role for creating conditions where employees can communicate as well as meet to share information and build relationships within the team. This is in line with the responsibility brought up by Orsini and Rodrigues (2020). It appears that managers handle this matter by having regular team meetings and occasionally other types of social activities where employees can meet in informal settings. Also, they encourage employees to interact with each other. Still, it is displayed that employees miss the social interactions that usually take place when working at the office, and that they do not always feel the same team spirit. Hence, it seems that the need of relatedness is difficult to meet in remote work due to the lack of social interactions, which is also suggested by Ryan and Deci (2017).

Like described in the result, I believe good relationships between colleagues result in favorable conditions for cooperation. At the same time, collaboration seems to be a way



where employees can establish relations and connect. In contrast to the need of relatedness, scholars show that remote work might affect the way employees value the team and teamwork negatively (Huang et al., 2010). In the result it appears that remote work causes some difficulties for successful collaboration. This may be understood as a risk since Huang et al. (2010) state that the significant of the team and teamwork for employees tend to diminish in remote work. As such, it can be understood that the manager has an important role to promote collaboration in remote work which is supported by Huang et al. (2010). The authors further explain that transformational leadership has been identified as helpful for creating a cooperative climate and for ensuring that work tasks and the team are salient for employees (ibid.). In the result it is illustrated that managers promote cooperation in several ways, for example they act as coordinators to put together employees, they allow employees to share their challenges during team meetings and show appreciation for those who interact with others and take initiatives for cooperation. Like Huang et al. (2010) suggest, these methods can be understood as connected to transformational leadership (Bass, 1999). In addition, the managers make sure that employees stay in touch with each other and that they meet in informal settings. This could be understood as an attempt to build the team and strengthening relationships. Also, it could be seen as an attempt to show employees that the team is of importance. Moreover, Huang et al. (2010) imply that transactional leadership is important for achieving task cohesion which can also be understood as a way for managers to show employees that the team is important.

In the result, employees give the impression that cooperation is an important element. Hence, it appears that the tendency mentioned by Huang et al. (2010) is not present in this research study. This may imply that managers have succeeded in making employees understand that cooperation is significant. Still, the issues regarding the reduced frequency of cooperation and less informal interactions with employees remain. As such, it appears that the conditions for creating a cooperative culture and social cohesiveness are reduced. However, employees illustrate that cooperation with colleagues who work in other countries has increased. This implies that remote work, in some respects, has resulted in new opportunities to cooperate as it allows employees to expand their network.

In summary, remote work lead to significant changes regarding the social aspects of work which means that it becomes more difficult to create a cooperative climate and meet the need for relatedness. At Tetra Pak it appears that cooperation still works quite well across distance although cooperation has been reduced to some extent. The managers seem to put a lot of focus on making sure that the social aspects are functioning in remote work which is consistent with the suggestions from the literature. Employees show appreciation for these actions, however, it appears that they still request more informal interactions.

Based on the discussions above it is clarified that remote work influence the work situation of employees in several ways. By discussing the empirical material in relation to the JD-R model is it possible to distinguish that managers have a crucial role to ensure that there is a balance between the job demands and the job resources. Viewing the material from the perspective provided by STD, indicates that much is about ensuring that employees feel motivated at work and that their basic psychological needs are met. The amount of support provided do not seem to be affected in remote work, however, there are signs that feedback has been reduced to some extent. In addition, employees seem to experience a great amount of autonomy and flexibility in remote work which they value. Though, there seems to be tendencies for work overload, especially for high performing employees and new employees, however, this does not appear to be a problem at Tetra

Pak at the moment. Finally, it is possible to identify big changes of the social aspects of work since the physical and social interactions are reduced and employees consequently do not feel the same team spirit. This indicates that there is a challenge to meet the need of relatedness among employees, especially in times of the Covid-19 pandemic when face-to-face meetings are not an option. However, managers provide several methods for how to nurture social cohesiveness and cooperation. Moving on from this topic, I will put focus on learning opportunities in the following part. Learning opportunities will be discussed in relation to the work situation as this can be understood to constitute conditions for learning.

### **6.3 Learning Opportunities**

This part aims to discuss the material by focusing on the conditions for learning in remote work which influence the learning opportunities. The discussion is based on my third research question: In what way does remote work influence opportunities for formal and informal learning? To begin with I will discuss formal learning such as digital trainings.

#### **6.3.1 Formal learning**

In the result it is presented that Tetra Pak offers numerous online trainings to their employees and that there is a specific learning strategy within the company that encourages employees to spend two hours on learning every week. However, as the managers mention, it is not guaranteed that learning actually takes place although employees are being offered to participate in learning activities such as training programs. This indicates that it is important that employees are provided with support in this question. It is illustrated, that managers provide support at present, for example, they explain that they attempt to make employees join digital trainings with the right mindset, encourage them to enter those as if it were a classroom, and make sure they have the right technical tools. This is in line with the support suggested by Svensson et al. (2014) and Yukl (2013). However, some employees struggle to choose the right trainings and feeling motivated performing them online. Thus, it seems that employees sometimes struggle to identify developmental needs of their own. Perhaps managers need to discuss the developmental needs with employees more so that they are provided with some guidance regarding which courses or educations to take. For example, this could be done by developing a study plan (Svensson et al., 2014).

From an organisational perspective, the conditions for formal learning is as great in remote work as in regular work mode. However, it appears that employees need more guidance and encouragement to choose appropriate trainings and feel motivated performing them digitally. Thus, it is necessary they are provided with the right support. As described by Ellström (1996) formal learning must be integrated with informal learning. This topic will be further discussed in the following section.

#### **6.3.2 Informal Learning**

Employees seems to experience that there are lacking opportunities where knowledge, information and ideas can be shared with colleagues. Overall, the lack of interaction between direct colleagues and other colleagues at the office appears to create challenges for informal learning to take place which consequently have a negative impact on the possibilities for informal learning. This is similar to the findings by Van der Maulen et al. (2019) and confirms the idea by Eraut (2007) who states that social interactions play an

important part in informal learning. Marsick & Watkins (2018) explain that around 80% of the learning that occurs in the workplace is informal, additionally, Ellström (1996) claims that informal learning mainly occurs spontaneously. Hence, I understand this issue as problematic since it may have a significant impact on the employees learning opportunities. The conditions for learning are clearly influenced by remote work as the social interactions does not happen in the same way as when working at the office. Therefore, employees are not given as many opportunities for engaging in social contexts.

My interpretation from the result is that managers, therefore, have a bigger responsibility to create favourable learning conditions in remote work which is supported by Eraut (2007). Also, Yukl (2013) claims that leadership is a crucial organisational function that influences learning opportunities in different ways. This strengthens my understanding regarding managers having a crucial role in this question. In the result it is demonstrated that managers strive to create informal learning by letting employees share their work status and challenges during team meetings, and by acting as coordinators when employees face problems. Hence, it appears that they actively work to bring employees together so that they can cooperate and learn from each other. In this way it seems that managers aim to create a learning culture of mutual support which is in line with what Eraut (2007) discuss. Moreover, it appears that managers show encouragement towards employees who dare to bring up new ideas in the team. This is consistent with the suggestions by Lancaster and Di Milia (2015) who describe this encouragement as a necessity for employees to use their learning at work. Additionally, connecting employees through challenges may be understood as a way to ensure that employees learn from each other through their work tasks as well as a way for managers to present difficult work tasks as learning opportunities rather than unfeasible assignments. This may help improve the informal learning as it motivates employees to take on challenges and become innovative (Garvin et al., 2008; Wallo, 2008).

Moreover, Ellström (1996) mentions space of action as a condition for learning. According to his statement, managers must make sure that employees are allowed space where they can use their knowledge, also they must have the right knowledge to utilise this space. I believe that managers have an important role in achieving this. At present, it seems that managers at Tetra Pak strive to provide employees autonomy and encourage them to bring up new ideas. Thus, these actions may be understood as creating space of actions that promote learning opportunities within the organisation.

Support and feedback are mentioned by scholars as important factors for learning (Eraut, 2007). In the result it appears that some employees are not pleased with the amount of feedback that they receive, hence this indicates that learning opportunities might be affected in remote work. Feedback may also be used to evaluate employees which Wallo (2008) describes as important when discussing learning. It appears that managers use feedback for evaluation as they describe that feedback is collected from others in the organisation when having annual performance reviews with employees. Thus, performance review appears to be a tool that managers use for developing employees and make sure they are learning at work.

In short, the conditions for achieving informal learning appears to be reduced since employees cannot meet spontaneously in remote work and thus do not have the same opportunities to share information and knowledge. As informal learning constitute the majority of the workplace learning this appears to be problematic. As such, it seems particularly

important that managers focus on connecting employees, encouraging interactions and making sure that employees are given space of action so that informal learning can take place across distance. At Tetra Pak it seems that the managers are focusing on these matters.

In summary, the conditions for formal learning do not seem to be affected in any major way in remote work, although employees seem to require more support and encouragement. However, the opportunities for informal learning appears to be reduced since employees do not have the same social and spontaneous interactions when working remotely. This signifies the role of the social context in informal learning. As such the work situation of employees seems to affect the opportunities for learning. The discussion also highlight the importance of leadership and implies that managers have a crucial role as they can influence the work conditions and thus improve the opportunities for learning, for example by providing feedback and guidance and promoting cooperation. This discussion has been divided into three separate sections. However, it is possible to connect them to each other. This will be done in the following section where I also connect the findings to the aim of this study and discuss it in relation to previous research.

## 7. Final Reflections

In short, it can be stated that remote work may result in reduced interactions in the workplace and in employees becoming more isolated, especially if the job is characterised by high task interdependency. As such, they might find the team, teamwork and the leader-member relationship less significant. This is problematic in several aspects. Firstly, cooperation is crucial for making employees feel relatedness and for informal learning to occur. Secondly, the leader-member relationship is highly important as it influences the way managers can practice leadership, and thus, act or implement activities to ensure a good psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities. Hence, it appears that it is crucial for managers to promote cooperation and assert their values so that employees understand the importance of the relationship. In the empirics, it appears that employees experience cooperation and the relationship with the manager as important. This may be understood as indicating that managers at Tetra Pak have succeeded in this matter. Though it is clarified that it is challenging for managers and that employees still request more social interactions. In addition, it appears that the work situation has changed since feedback and support must be provided over digital channels. It seems that support can be provided as before, however, it is displayed that the distance has resulted in lesser feedback in some situations. Also, employees seem to experience a great amount of autonomy and flexibility in remote work. Still, it appears that they face new challenges in regulating the workload and that managers do not have the same prerequisites to ensure that it is balanced. Thus, it is important that there is a regular dialogue regarding the workload so that managers can find out what kind of support is needed to balance the job demands. When discussing the work situation, much appears to be about motivating and engaging employees at work. Moreover, the work situation appears to influence the conditions for learning. Formal learning opportunities appear to be the same if employees are provided with enough support, however, it emerges that informal learning is more difficult to achieve since employees do not meet spontaneously nor as often. Hence, the role of the managers appears to become more important in this matter. In conclusion, this research highlights the importance of leadership in remote work as it seems to have great influence on the leader-member relationship, the work situation and the learning opportunities. These parts are crucial for ensuring a good psychosocial work environment and favourable conditions for learning.

The aim of this study is to generate deeper knowledge of how managers and employees are affected by and deal with remote work in relation to the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities. By answering the three research questions, it has been possible for me to discuss this matter. For example, reviewing managers' actions and behaviour in relation to leadership theories have provided insights of how they work to establish a good psychosocial work environment and favourable conditions for learning. Additionally, connecting employees' experiences of remote work in relation to the JD-R model, STD and learning theories have provided insights of the basics of the psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities, and how these affect employees. In addition, interviewing both managers and employees have allowed me to compare their experiences and the relation between them, which likewise has generated nuanced discussions and consequently a deeper understanding of the aim.

When putting the findings of this study in relation to previous research it confirms much of what has been stated by showing on both positive and negative outcomes of remote

work. For instant, it implies that social isolation might occur and is a big challenge in remote work (Schall & Chen, 2021; Brunelle, 2013). It strengthens that communication and support from colleagues and managers are essential to meet psychological aspects (Grant et al. 2017). Additionally, it shows that building relationship within the team is important, and particularly the leader-member relationship, so that employees do not become “invisible” (Graen Uhl Biel, 1985; Grant et al., 2017). Likewise, the study suggests that managers do not have the same prerequisites to establish and maintain a high-quality relationship with their employees in remote work (Brunelle, 2013). As Paulsen and Ipsen (2017) state, the findings imply that employees find remote work as flexible, allowing autonomy. Also, my study confirms that transformational as well as transactional leadership is necessary to achieve a good psychosocial work environment and learning opportunities. I had expected to find more data showing that the psychosocial work environment is clearly disturbed by remote work, but as Nijp et al. (2016) suggest, remote work does not necessarily mean that the psychosocial work environment is affected. It appears that the managers and employees have found ways to deal with the changes and challenges that come with remote work, although some things could be improved as discussed above. The findings of this study further suggests that managers do not have the same prerequisites for developing a cooperative climate, though it is shown that the digital tools may result in new opportunities to cooperate with people across distance. Furthermore, this study found that high performance employees and new employees tend to work more in remote work.

Knowledge of how the psychosocial work environment is affected in remote work can help organisations to manage the difficulties that appear in remote work. As such they are able to increase the wellbeing of employees and thus the organisational outcomes. In this reasoning, learning opportunities can be understood to be included. Also, learning opportunities are crucial for organisations to keep up in the knowledge-driven economy (Brunelle, 2013; Allen et al., 2015; Montgomery, 2018; Kazekami, 2020).

In this study I have based the investigation on my own definition of the psychosocial work environment. Since this is a complex and wide concept, without a cohesive definition, this was necessary to delimit the study. This affects my study since it makes it difficult to compare with research investigating the same concept. Moreover, the participants at Tetra Pak had only been working remote for about one year when the interviews were conducted. Perhaps, it is not possible to state how remote work influences the leader-member relationship, the work situation and the learning opportunities yet. It can be argued that remote work must take place for a longer time in order to see its affects. Though, this study provides insights of the topic that could be useful in future research.

### ***7.1 Suggestions for Future Research***

It appears that much of what has been discussed above is connected to communication and the digital tools, which become crucial in remote work. Thus, it would be interesting to put focus on communication in digital spheres and how this influences employees’ perception of the work. For example, future research could investigate how digital tools can be utilised in remote work to create social cohesiveness and informal learning. Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate how to establish a leader-member relationship in remote work when new members join the organisation since this was shown as problematic in this study. In addition, it would be interesting to examine the concept of

employeeship in remote work since it is connected to leadership, learning and relations within the team.

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# **Appendix**

## ***Appendix 1: Information Letter***

***Welcome to contribute with your knowledge in a study about distance leadership/remote work in relation to the psychosocial work environment!***

My name is Lina Holmbeck and I am studying my last year at the Master's programme in Human Resource Development and Labour Relations at Lund University. This semester I am doing my master thesis in pedagogics which is about distance leadership/remote work in relation to the psychosocial work environment. The aim of the study is to examine how employees experience the psychosocial work environment in remote work and how managers work to establish a good psychosocial work environment when leading from a distance. The research project will be done as a case study at Tetra Pak and I will conduct separate interviews with employees and their immediate manager.

### ***Important information regarding your participation***

The estimated time for the interview with employees is 45 minutes and 1 hour for the interview with managers. I appreciate you taking this time. During the interview I will ask questions where I want you to freely speak about your own experiences about remote work/distance leadership in relation to the psychosocial work environment. I prefer to audio-record the interview to simplify the processing of data. The recordings will only be available for myself and will be deleted once the thesis is completed. The study considers the research ethical principles according to the Swedish Research Council and your answers will be treated with confidentiality. The participation of the study is of course voluntarily, and you can, at any point, choose to end your participation.

Please contact me if you have any questions regarding the study or your participation.

Best Regards,

Lina Holmbeck

## ***Appendix 2: Interview Guide – Managers***

### **Communication and Relationships**

- How does the communication work between you and your employees across distance?
- How often and in what settings are you in touch with your employees?
- How do you perceive your opportunities to be an available leader at distance?
- How do you perceive the relationship with your employees in remote work?
- How do you make sure to create and establish trust in the relation?
- How do you perceive your employees' collaboration with each other?
- In what way do you work to stimulate good communication and good cooperation between employees?

### **The Psychosocial Work Environment in Remote Work**

- How do you ensure a good psychosocial work environment when employees work remotely?
- What risks and opportunities related to the psychosocial work environment do you see in remote work?
- How do you, together with your employees, deal with the challenges and problems employees face in their daily job (regarding work tasks and mental wellbeing)?
- How do you motivate and inspire your employees in remote work?

### **Distance Leadership**

- In what way does remote work influence the practice of leadership?
- What qualities, behaviours and skills are important in a distance leader?
- What challenges and opportunities comes with distance leadership?
- What is required of you, as a manager, to ensure a good psychosocial work environment? (personal qualities and behaviours)

### **Support and Learning Opportunities**

- In what way do you support your employees in remote work (regarding work tasks and mental wellbeing)?
- How do you provide your employees with feedback?
- What are the opportunities and challenges of providing feedback across distance?
- How do you, together with your employees, set up objectives for them?
- What opportunities do your employees have to impact their own work and drive changes?
- What learning opportunities do your employees have in the context of remote work?
- What are the opportunities to share competence in remote work?
- In what way do you promote learning and development among your employees when they work remotely?

### **Final Questions**

- Are there knowledge or routines in the organisation to prevent and handle psychosocial illness?

- In what way are you, as a distance leader, able to catch signals about employee's psychosocial health?

## ***Appendix 3: Interview Guide – Employees***

### **Communication and Relationships**

- How does the communication work between you and your manager across distance?
- How often and in what settings are you in touch with your manager?
- How do you perceive your opportunities to get in touch with your manager?
- How do you perceive the relationship with your manager in remote work?
- How do you perceive the cooperation with your colleagues in remote work?
- Which formal/informal communication channels are offered to have discussions and support each other?

### **The Psychosocial Work Environment in Remote Work**

- What components are important for you to enjoy your work?
- How do you perceive the psychosocial work environment in remote work?
- How do you perceive your work motivation when working remotely?
- In what way does your manager take actions to ensure a good psychosocial work environment?
- Do you believe that your manager can help to improve the psychosocial work environment further? If yes, in what way?
- Which qualities of your managers do you find particularly important in remote work?

### **Support and Learning Opportunities**

- How are you provided with support in your job (from manager/colleagues)?
- In what way does remote work influence your opportunities to receive support?
- How do you receive feedback at work (from manager/colleagues)?
- In what way does remote work influence your opportunities to receive feedback and appreciation?
- How do you, together with your manager, set up objectives for yourself?
- How do you perceive the balance between job demands/workload and the resources offered?
- What opportunities do you have to impact your own work and drive changes?
- How do you and your manager deal with the challenges you face in your daily work?
- How do you perceive your learning opportunities in remote work?
- How do you perceive the opportunities to share competence with others in the organisation?



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