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Autonomy in Virtual Work - Bringing flexibility or stronger forms of control?

A qualitative case study regarding perceptions of control in a financial consultancy department virtually

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Abstract

Title	Autonomy in Virtual Work - Bringing flexibility or stronger forms of control?
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Key Words	'virtual work', 'autonomy', 'control', 'communication', 'knowledge-intensive firms'
Purpose	The purpose of the study is to augment the understanding of how employees in knowledge-intensive firms experience control when working from home. The two research questions follow: " <i>How do individuals in knowledge intensive firms perceive control in the virtual context of working from home during Covid-19 compared to at the physical office?</i> " and " <i>How may the changed perceptions of control shape individuals' interpretations of autonomy and communication?</i> "
Methodology	The study is an interpretive and qualitative single case study. We conducted semi-structured interviews to collect the empirical material. We have used an abductive approach, which has allowed us to continuously alter between theory and empirical findings.
Theoretical Framework	Our literature review outlines existing research about knowledge workers and knowledge intensive firms. Additionally, existing research about different forms of control and how they interplay.
Conclusion	We conclude a shift in the relationship between the forms of control in the virtual context. Output control dominates behavioral control. Normative control inevitably becomes more vital. The changed perceptions of control further re-shapes the interpretations of autonomy and communication.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Problematization, purpose and research questions

The pandemic Covid-19 has created a large-scale social and economic shock which has shattered the traditional ways of working and communicating in organizations (Spicer, 2020). Organizations who previously operated in line with open plan workspaces, formal dress codes, and long hours in the office have now been forced to adapt to an isolated life in front of computer screens at home, working virtually (Spicer, 2020). When discussing virtual work, two central aspects appear - geographical spread and usage of technology (Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen & Hakonen, 2015), which correspond well with the current working from home-situation. Employees are distanced physically by geographical distance, and they communicate prominently through emails, phone calls, and video calls. The consultancy industry has previously been characterized by liberal activities, where consultants share offices and administrative support (Alvesson, 2004), but the pandemic, additionally, forced many consultancies to adapt to virtual work. With this new context where employees do not physically see each other, we ask ourselves how managers and consultants keep track of one another, specifically how control can be exercised virtually. Organizations have probably tried to adapt, even in this regard, by overseeing home office solutions. However, considering the recent outbreak on this large scale, they may not have found optimal solutions yet. With an evident scarcity of research, we aim to investigate the abrupt shift in the working environment by addressing how employees in knowledge-intensive firms perceive control in the new virtual context compared to when they worked at the office.

When researchers discuss knowledge workers and knowledge-intensive firms, they usually emphasize the need for a certain responsibility and autonomy in approaching specific tasks (Drucker, 1999; Alvesson, 2004). Stressing the need for autonomy somewhat implies that the need for management control is less prominent; it is rather exercised more flexibly (Alvesson, 2004). To further explore the perceptions of control, we aim to nuance the autonomy aspect from a virtual point of view where employees are able to work from many different locations, hence potentially facilitating more flexibility. Since there is yet relatively little research

conducted on the control theme during the pandemic, we will outline the traditional forms of control to investigate their relevance in the virtual context. Traditionally, control targeting employee behavior has been prominent in different workplaces, where managers exercise simple control by being at the same physical location as the employees (Edwards, 1981). Simple control aims to enforce specific rules and procedures to ensure the desired outcome by observing the employees closely (Kirsch, 1997), which may naturally be exercised differently when working virtually. Behaviors can also be controlled through technical surveillance, which can be described as “the use of technical means to inspect individuals, groups, and contexts in order to extract or create information respectively” (Marx, 2015). As technology usage is a prominent aspect of virtual work (Gilson et al. 2015), we will also explore how that is perceived virtually from a control point of view. One study that targets technological control virtually is one by Dimitrova (2003), who researched if it was necessary to invest in substantial control procedures and strategies for teleworkers. The study found that by giving the employees more autonomy in the virtual context, the employees worked more hours than the traditional office hours. Output control is another form of control, aiming to control the result rather than the behavior (Ouchi & Maguire, 1975; Eisenhardt, 1985). It has been argued to become more relevant and effectively utilized when behavioral control is not possible to the same extent (Rennstam, 2007). Given the virtual context resulting from Covid-19, it is highly relevant to investigate whether behavioral control still occurs, to what degree, and/or if other forms of control are more prominent. Another ubiquitously debated form of control, normative control, is a concept within critical management studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992). It involves controlling employees through their feelings, identifications, and self-images (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of research targeting how normative control can occur virtually. One study by Wheatley (2012) targets flexibility and how remote workers handle it. The study illustrates that the employees did not utilize the conditions for their personal gain, but rather worked more than they did at the office. Hence, normative control may have been prominent, motivating the employees to feel commitment, as Barley and Kunda (1992) suggest. The aforementioned different forms of control, namely behavioral, output, and normative, can simultaneously occur in a physical landscape (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004), but the question of how remains ambiguous in a virtual context. We will essentially investigate the different forms of control separately to address the interplay between the forms in a virtual context. By addressing this, the purpose of our study is to augment the understanding regarding how employees in knowledge-intensive firms experience the situation of working from home, prominently how they perceive control. Thereby, we aim to contribute

to the scarce literature within the field considering the new context. We formulate the first research question:

1. *How do individuals in knowledge-intensive firms perceive control in the virtual context of working from home during Covid-19 compared to at the physical office?*

Having investigated and processed our findings regarding the perceptions of control, we realized that the interviewees emphasized their interpretations of how autonomy and communication were changed in the virtual context. Having analyzed the findings further, we suggest that the changing interpretations of autonomy and communication may result from the changed perception of control. We will elaborate more on how throughout this study, but firstly, we formulate the second research question:

2. *How may the changed perceptions of control shape individuals' interpretations of autonomy and communication?*

1.2 Case Study

In order to study how employees in a knowledge-intensive firm perceive control when shifting from a physical to a virtual work environment, we conduct a qualitative case study of one company. The case company Lion Consulting (pseudonym) is a knowledge-intensive firm that has undergone the shift we aim to explore and is thereby a suitable company for our study. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study can capture the employees' subjective perceptions of the change from physical offices to virtual work. Lion Consulting is a global financial consultancy firm with around 300 000 employees globally. They prominently pursued their work in physical offices before the pandemic, even though they always have worked internationally across borders and time zones. The department that participated in this study operates in Sweden. Hence, the study is based on Swedish norms and standards.

1.3 Our contributions

This study offers the following contributions to the literature on knowledge-intensive firms as well as control: firstly, we depict complications of behavioral control virtually, i.e., replicating the frequent physical follow-up meeting that managers initiated at the office. They occur less frequently and appear to be more time-consuming as well as initiated somewhat more unobtrusively through informal coffee chats. Secondly, the realized complications with the behavioral control appear to result in domination of output control. Thirdly, we stress the inevitable increase in normative control, where consultants make assumptions based on previously established norms and go by the belief that everybody is working both much and late. An interesting complement to Müller's (2020) article about night work is highlighted since the consultants appear to utilize their flexibility of skipping work for a few hours to rather work more later at night. In this sense, we argue that the consultants may have developed a virtual mindset, where the new norm of escaping office hours prevails. Fourthly, we depict the interplay between the forms of control by exemplifying a customized Panopticon virtually, which we label Panvirtual. Fourthly, we illustrate how the changed perceptions of control subsequently appear to have shaped different interpretations of autonomy and communication. The autonomy is un/intentionally demanded to a greater extent since the managerial control is exercised more flexibly, but also since consultants appear to be reluctant to communicate as frequently virtually. Surprisingly enough, they communicate less, although everybody agrees that it is crucial in complex group works, which Alvesson (2004) claims. Lastly, we shed light on the scarcity of research regarding control in the new virtual context.

2 Literature review

Given the research questions, we present a theoretical foundation to provide an overview of the existing literature within the fields. Firstly, we describe characteristics and outline definitions of knowledge workers and knowledge-intensive firms. Thereafter, we turn to the vast literature regarding control and argue for the relevance of our study by investigating a different context, namely the virtual. The control chapter is divided into behavioral, output, and normative control, where we lastly discuss the relationship between the forms of control. See the structure in figure 1 below.

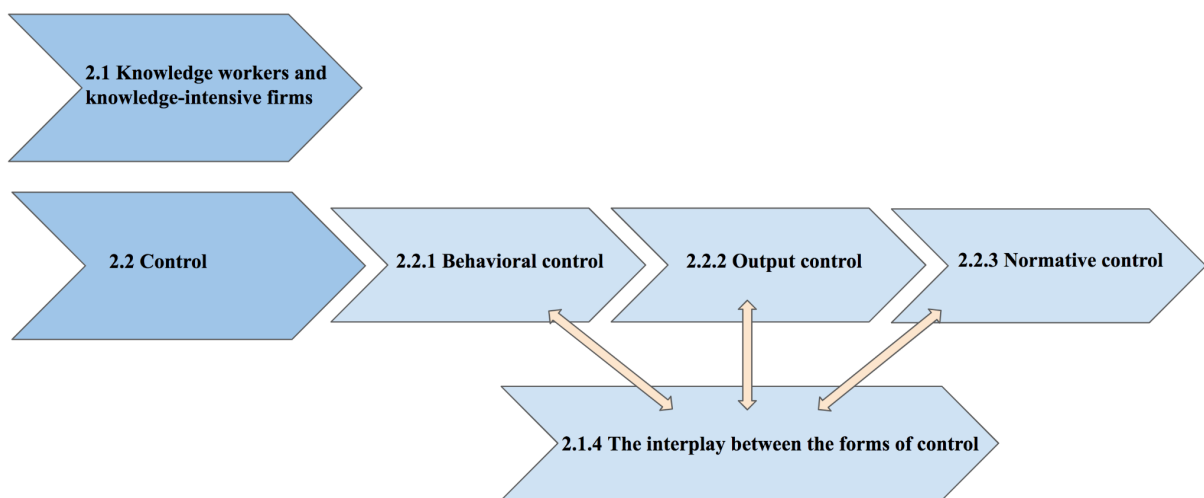


Figure 1. Illustration of how the literature review is structured.

2.1 Knowledge workers and knowledge-intensive firms

Since we aim to examine individuals' perceptions of control virtually, we first need to establish what characterizes the individuals and their workplaces. In order to do so, we draw upon theories of knowledge workers and the firms of which they work, namely knowledge-intensive firms (henceforward referred to as KIFs). Alvesson (2004) stresses the importance of acknowledging both knowledge workers and KIFs since they somewhat overlap, implying that in order to understand one concept, one needs to understand the other entirely. Firstly, we turn to the knowledge worker.

The definition of the concept of knowledge workers is relatively new, and the literature is scarce regarding the characteristics of the workers (Frick, 2011). Although researchers have not fully agreed upon a definition, many highlight the major importance of intellectual capacity (Alvesson, 2004; Davenport, 2005; Frick, 2011). Davenport (2005) defines knowledge workers as employees whose main capital is knowledge and gives some examples of accountants, lawyers, and consultants. Drucker (1999) conducted extensive research on the concept of knowledge workers and established different factors of productivity based on certain characteristics. Firstly, he mentions the type of task as an essential factor for productivity. The knowledge worker needs a certain degree of responsibility, autonomy, and possibility of managing themselves. Drucker (1999) further emphasizes that continuous innovation has to be a part of the work, both regarding the task and responsibility. The knowledge worker additionally needs continuous learning as well as continuous teaching. It corresponds to what many researchers refer to as knowledge-sharing, which is particularly important in KIFs (Jonsson, 2013; Nonaka, 1991; Sveiby, 2007). Drucker (1999) mentions that knowledge workers' productivity is not only about the quantity of output, but just as importantly, quality of output. The last of Drucker's (1999) factors is that the knowledge worker must be treated as an asset rather than a cost, mainly implying that the knowledge worker should want to work for their current employer in preference to other opportunities. The factors that are especially appealing and relevant to our study of how control is perceived are the autonomy aspect, the responsibilities they should be granted, and the continuous innovation implying that the workers have a certain freedom regarding how they choose to approach tasks. As previously outlined, we will investigate how these aspects are perceived in a virtual context, addressing control. Having determined some characteristics of the selection of workers we have interviewed in this study, we will turn to the type of companies they work in, namely KIFs.

Following the rapid expansions of management and IT consultancy firms, the research conducted on knowledge-intensive firms has sparked (Alvesson, 2004). Traditionally, consultancy work has entailed liberal activities, performed by individuals or small teams, where people share offices and administrative support (Alvesson, 2004). Considering the environmental jolt following Covid-19, the context of knowledge work has changed. Despite the vast literature on KIFs, there is a significant scarcity of research in the virtual context, a scarcity we intend to reduce by conducting this study.

Types of businesses that are usually mentioned when discussing KIFs are engineering and high-tech businesses as well as consultancy firms within the fields of management and accounting (Alvesson, 2001; Starbuck, 1992; Blackler, 1995). Starbuck (1992, p. 715) defines what signifies a KIF based on what inputs employees bring into the company:

“The term knowledge-intensive imitates economists’ labeling of firms as capital-intensive or labor-intensive. These labels describe the relative importance of capital and labor as production inputs. In a capital-intensive firm, capital has more importance than labor; in a labor-intensive firm, labor has greater importance. By analogy, labeling a firm as knowledge-intensive implies that knowledge has more importance than other inputs.”

Alvesson (2001, p. 864) defines knowledge-intensive work somewhat differently and emphasizes the work itself instead of the inputs:

“...firms where most work is said to be of an intellectual nature and where well-educated, qualified employees form the major part of the workforce. The company claims to produce qualified products and/or services.”

Alvesson (2004) also emphasizes that competence is the most significant dimension in KIFs. Alvesson (2004), moreover, elaborate on specific characteristics regarding the nature of work and how it is managed, which he claims are specific to KIFs. These include:

- Highly qualified individuals doing knowledge-based work, using intellectual and symbolic skills in work

- **A fairly high degree of autonomy and the downplaying of organizational hierarchy**
- **The use of adaptable, ad hoc organizational forms**
- **The need for extensive communication for coordination and problem-solving**
- Idiosyncratic client services
- Information and power asymmetry (often favoring the professional over the client)

Following our research purpose of perceptions regarding the shift to the virtual landscape, we will further elaborate on the three characteristics in bold, which we find most relevant to the virtual context. These are the fairly high degree of autonomy, ad hoc organizational forms, and the need for extensive communication. From a control point of view, we find it particularly interesting to investigate whether and how individuals perceive autonomy when they are not physically in the same office as their managers. Additionally, the organizational forms may have to be even more ad hoc in the virtual context. Lastly, the communication will almost exclusively occur virtually, and we stress the questions of how and what challenges may be a result of the forced change. Thereby, we omit the other characteristics that Alvesson (2004) mentions since we assume that they may not have changed significantly with the change resulting from the pandemic. The qualified individuals who use their intellectual and symbolic skills at the office will likely have to continuously do so, even virtually. Similarly, the idiosyncratic client services, as well as the information- and power asymmetry with the clients, may be relatively unchanged in the virtual context. Next, we turn to the first relevant characteristic, the importance of autonomy in KIFs.

As previously determined, knowledge work includes professional judgment in solving complex and sometimes unique problems. Alvesson (2004) emphasizes how the individual worker, or the team, often has the best general knowledge and insights into the problem area. Contrastingly to some organizations, managers in KIFs may have less understanding of what should be done in specific situations, although they may have more general experience (Alvesson, 2004). Considering the complexity of the work, output measurements may be less relevant and hard to perform (Alvesson, 2004). It requires a certain autonomy, where knowledge workers may carry more authority than the managers regarding certain tasks (Alvesson, 2004; Rennstam, 2007). Löwendahl (1997) strengthens the argument by stating that "expertise is multidimensional, is frequently not linked to seniority and administrative experience, and operational authority may be unrelated to hierarchical position" (p. 95). Alvesson (2004) adds on by arguing that

knowledge work involves high degrees of self-determination across hierarchical positions. Next, we will account for the characteristic of ad hoc organizational forms to explore the hierarchical authority in KIFs.

The reliance on self-determination and one-dimensional hierarchy, as well as the relatively weak position of top management in KIFs, may result in idiosyncratic organizational relations (Deetz, 1998; Hinings, Brown & Greenwood, 1991; Kunda, 1992). Although many knowledge-intensive organizations differ distinctly from bureaucratic principles, there are important exceptions (Alvesson, 2004). Alvesson (2004) further argues that traditional management principles, for instance, standardization and supervision, are challenging to apply and exercise. They are existent but less prominent in how they are exercised more flexibly, somewhat in line with the argument about autonomy (Alvesson, 2004). In a study of six public accounting firms, Covaleski, Dirsmith, Helan, and Samuel (1998), however, found that pressure of performance targets and control mechanisms put junior partners in a position of subordination as well as lack of autonomy. In that way, the relationships were more similar to ordinary organizations.

Alvesson (2004) elaborates on the importance of extensive communication in KIFs considering the organizational forms, task complexity, and need for coordination and problem-solving. Supporting Alvesson's argument, Deetz (1997) argues for the importance of active communication since the agreement on problem definitions and solutions are vital. Since some consultancy work entails giving advice, some projects are conducted by a single individual or a small team. However, frequently, there is a need to create shared understandings and expectations before client presentations, which calls for extensive communication (Alvesson, 2004). In the complex group works, which often occur, the identities in terms of how the consultants are placed and place themselves in the division of labor are often unsettled initially. Deetz (1997) additionally states that consultants often engage in negotiations to establish what needs to be done, how to go about it, and their responsibilities in the context. Having established definitions and possibly important characteristics of KIFs in a virtual context, we next turn to the control theme.

2.2 Control

Different forms of organizational control have been widely explored in business studies for decades. Control has been defined in several different ways, but a majority of the definitions appear to agree upon that it involves the exercise of power or influence in order to ensure sufficient resources and mobilize individual or collective actions towards a goal (Langfield-Smith, 1997). Cardinal (2001, p. 22) outlined an example of a definition: “any process by which managers direct attention, motivate, and encourage organizational members to act in desired ways to meet the firm’s objectives.”. Although the literature covers many different forms of control, it is common to stress one central aspect, alternatively by an organizational structure or in terms of a distinct dominating form of control. Mintzberg (1983) highlights five coordinating mechanisms that can be seen as the most basic structure elements, namely mutual adjustment, direct supervision, standardization of work processes, standardization of work outputs, and standardization of worker skills. Mutual adjustment regards the process of informal communication, which can facilitate coordination of work and knowledge sharing between workers as they adapt to each other. Organizations can also achieve coordination by direct supervision, having one individual taking responsibility for others’ work by instructing and monitoring their actions. In addition to the two previous coordination mechanisms, work can also be standardized, which implies that the work processes are specified or programmed. Outputs can also be standardized when the results of work, either the dimensions of the products or the performances, are specified. Mintzberg (1983) highlights that the last coordination mechanism is the standardization of workers’ skills, which occurs when the training to perform a task is specified.

Control usually involves the exercises of specifying, monitoring, and evaluating individuals as well as collectives and can focus on behaviors, output, and/or minds of employees (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004). The research of one type of phenomenon is often motivated by the need to have a focus, but in complex organizations, it can also be relevant to address different forms as simultaneously active (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004). Kunda (1992), for instance, stresses that elements of bureaucratic control, which is a type of behavioral control (Edwards, 1979), often remain although normative control may be prominent. In a case study by Kunda (1992), normative control was complemented and even supplemented by bureaucratic control. Additionally, Mintzberg (1983) argues that many organizations have standardized output measures, standardized work procedures, and standardized knowledge incused. In support of

Mintzberg, Alvesson and Kärreman (2004) argue that different forms of control can support and sustain each other rather than being subdued by a dominant form. Considering the new context of virtual work where there is a scarcity of research regarding control, we aim to draw upon the relevance of behavioral, output, and normative control to investigate how the interplay between the forms can take place virtually. We will first elaborate on the different forms separately to conclude the literature review with the interplay between the three.

2.2.1 Behavioral control

Behavioral control concerns close supervision and direct orders to employees (Ouchi, 1979), which used to be closely associated with assembly-line activities in workplaces (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019). It can also be described as a general hierarchical attempt to achieve a desired result by controlling individuals' behaviors (Ouchi & Maguire, 1975). Moreover, Edwards (1981) has outlined three main strategies within behavioral control. The three strategies address how they control employees' activities or behaviors and are labeled simple control, technological control, and bureaucratic control.

Simple control is the direct and personal control of work, usually performed by a manager (Edwards, 1981). For example, in a workplace where simple control is prominent, the manager articulates specific rules and procedures which are supposed to lead to the desired outcome (Kirsch, 1997). Traditionally, this type of control was common in small businesses where the assignments were highly repetitive, which resulted in employees feeling like cogwheels in a streamlined process (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019). In KIFs, typical simple control mechanisms could regard explicit work assignments or filing of project plans and project reports (Henderson & Lee, 1992; Kirsch, 1997; Pinto, Pinto & Prescott, 1993). Thus, the simple control mechanisms also require the supervisors to provide feedback and reward the individual's behavior, so they continue to comply with the rules and procedures (Kirsch, 1997; Snell, 1992). Hence, the employees are accountable for their actions regardless of the end result, again emphasizing the importance of feedback as a tool for compliance (Snell & Youndt, 1995).

Technological control develops from the physical technology in an organization, for instance, through the assembly line in traditional manufacturing companies (Edwards, 1981). Kärreman and Rennstam (2019) describe technological control as using technology and machinery to plan and control work processes. The authors explain that technological control helps eliminate social conflicts, typically when simple control is prominent. This is because the control source

is the technology rather than the person. Additionally, Barker (1993) argues that Edwards' three strategies are adaptations of each other, intended to counter the shortcomings of the previous. Technological control is hence argued to be an adaptation to counter disadvantages of the simple control since the latter proved to raise dissatisfaction and infer alienation among employees. However, technical control has also brought worker alienation within companies, resulting in worker protests, slow-downs, and assembly-line sabotages (Barker, 1993). Technical surveillance is another concept, which is related to technical control. Marx (2015) describes technical surveillance as the use of technical means to inspect individuals, groups, and contexts to extract or create information. The author further exemplifies and states that extract and create refers to the ability to "go beyond what is naturally offered to the senses and minds unsupported by technology or what is voluntarily reported" (Marx, 2015, pp. 735). An example of a study covering technological surveillance is Sewell, Barker, and Nyberg's (2012), who conducted an empirical study of performance management in a call center. Their research showed that the team leaders in call-centers controlled performance both directly from their desks, according to Edwards' (1981) definition of simple control, and indirectly through technical surveillance. Sewell, Barker, and Nyberg (2012) state that simple control was mainly facilitated by the small teams in the call centers, making it easy for the team leaders to observe the employees. However, with the help of technology, the team leaders could also indirectly surveil the employees' performances. The agent reports were, for instance, often viewed by the team leader and accessible on the team leader's computer screen. Moreover, Sewell, Barker, and Nyberg (2012) elaborate on two perceptions of technical surveillance, which can co-exist: caring and coercive. The former is related to enhancing motivation by showing employees recognition and ensuring a reasonable number of hours worked, which may benefit both employers and employees. The latter perception, coercive, is conceptualized as a tool to force people to perform and to increase the subordination of employees. It emphasizes and legitimizes the importance of control to protect the employees from unprincipled behavior such as free-riding on other employees (Sewell, Barker & Nyberg, 2012). A study by Dimitrova (2003) researched if it was necessary to invest in substantial technological control procedures and strategies for teleworkers working virtually. The employees were found to be in a significantly similar working environment virtually as in traditional workplaces. The study found that by giving the employees more autonomy in the virtual context, the employees worked more hours than the traditional office hours. Dimitrova's (2003) findings are further in line with Wheatley's (2012) research about home-based teleworking. Wheatley (2012) found that the remote workers handled the flexibility well and did not utilize the conditions for their personal gain by running

personal errands during office hours. It even showed that the remote workers worked more than they did in the office.

Furthermore, since technological control appeared to reinforce protests and sabotage in Edwards' (1981) assembly example, the bureaucratic form of control was developed to counter its shortcomings. Bureaucratic control evolves from the hierarchically based social relations, which entails rewarding compliance and punishing non-compliance in a methodical way (Edwards, 1981). Moreover, standardization, hierarchy, and centralizations are three essential pillars of bureaucratic control (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2019). Standardization regards how impersonal rules and procedures operate as policies in an organization and support different actors' behavior (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2019). Hierarchy regulates the formal positions, the work tasks, and centralization indicates a centralized decision-making process, where decisions prominently are made by the top management (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2019). Ouchi and Maguire (1975) conducted quantitative research on the distinction between behavioral control and output control by researching two retail department companies. They worked with three hypotheses: behavioral control, one for output, and the third originating from the first two. The hypothesis for behavioral control was that it was anticipated that a manager would rely more on behavioral control as it would help increase the understanding of means-ends relationships. The data resulted in an agreement with the hypothesis. It showed that behavioral control was used in response to both the need and the ability for direction and guidance. The more knowledge a manager had of the subordinate's tasks, the larger emphasis did the manager put on behavior control. Also, the results showed a decrease in behavioral control at each higher hierarchical level. The results from the last two hypotheses will be further elaborated on in the section about output control.

From a virtual point of view, behavioral control has been researched in the context of virtual teams. The discussion of control in virtual work and virtual teams has been discussed in other contexts, such as for self-directed teams and teleworkers (Piccoli, Powell & Ives, 2004). Piccoli, Powell, and Ives (2004) tested a hypothesis if virtual self-directed teams had higher coordination effectiveness than teams that worked under behavioral control. However, the study showed that the hypothesis was not supported and that the different teams achieved the same level of coordination effectiveness.

The overall findings suggest that behavioral control decreases in the higher hierarchical levels and that managers are more prone to exercise behavioral control the greater their insights are into the employees' tasks (Ouchi & Maguire, 1975). Considering the sometimes fewer insights the managers have into the employees' tasks in KIFs (Alvesson, 2004), we find it relevant to investigate how it occurs in KIFs virtually. Next, we will turn to the second form of control, namely output control.

2.2.2 Output control

Distinct from behavioral control, output control targets employees through deliverables of set objectives (Ouchi & Maguire, 1975; Eisenhardt, 1985). Output control is pervasive in situations where it is difficult to provide precise instructions or when the behavior is difficult to supervise (Rennstam, 2007). Instead, Rennstam (2007) argues that they transfer the responsibility to the employees to achieve specific results. Output control can be measured after the execution of tasks and is usually quantitatively measured (Rennstam, 2007). According to Snell and Young (1995), output control is about setting mutual performance targets, such as specific goals. The employee's evaluations are later on based on the achieved result, and they are acknowledged thereafter. According to (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019), output control could be seen as an indirect form of behavioral control and as very treasonous just because the responsibility shifts from superior to subordinate. In large organizations, it is beneficial to create market-like mechanisms, dividing the organizations' departments into smaller entities where they succeed by generating a set surplus (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019). An example of output control is in the sales industry, where a portion of the compensation is based on the outcomes in commission (Eisenhardt, 1985).

We return to the study by Ouchi and Maguire (1975), which aimed to distinguish between behavioral control and output control. They formed a hypothesis that managers would rely more on output control as the need to provide legitimate evidence of performance increased. Ouchi and Maguire (1975) studied managers who had additional supervisors to depict how the managers experienced the control depending on various factors, such as how involved the supervisor was in the manager's operative role. The gathered data supported the hypothesis, and the results showed that output control is emphasized by managers who feel the need to defend their position and where the supervisor is little involved in the managers' performance. Moreover, their study supports the suggestion that there is a distinction between behavioral control and output control, concluding that the two forms of control are not significantly related

to each other. It means that according to Ouchi & Maguire (1975), the two types of control are independent, and the usage of one does not mean less usage of the other.

Furthermore, given the current virtual setting, one may assume that the behavioral control is difficult to exercise, which stresses the relevance of further investigating whether and how output control potentially is exercised to a larger extent virtually than physically. The overall findings suggest that output control is more likely to occur when a superior is less involved in the employee's tasks, thereby emphasizing the results instead (Ouchi & Maguire, 1975; Rennstam, 2007). Moreover, Ouchi and Maguire (1975) argue that behavioral control and output control are independent of each other, implying both of them can exist to the same extent because they have different functions (Ouchi & Maguire, 1975). We aim to investigate and address the relationship between behavioral and output control in this study. Finally, we turn to the last form of control relevant to our study, namely normative control.

2.2.3 Normative control

As previously highlighted, behavioral and output control can be portrayed as value-neutral mechanisms and mainly attempt to coordinate organizational activities (Edenius & Styhre, 2009). However, Mir, Mir, and Upadhyaya (2003) argue that recent studies have emphasized the normative and subjective aspects of control to a greater extent. Such efforts can be exercised top-down, where managers can attempt to persuade employees to adapt to certain norms and values (Kunda, 1992; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). However, we will also outline how the control can be embedded in the social structure without being initiated by the management directly (Edenius & Styhre, 2009). Additionally, we draw upon a strong form of horizontal normative control, namely concertive control (Barker, 1993), to depict another perspective from the existing literature.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 622) define normative control as: "regulating employees' insides - their feelings, identifications as well as their self-image.". Kunda's (1992, p. 11) definition is partially similar, but considerably more specific: "the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions.". Ouchi (1980) argues that organizations can focus on hiring young and inexperienced employees to guide and align them with organizational objectives. It is similar to what Alvesson (2004) refers to as social-integrative management, where members are persuaded of the organization's greatness and thereby feel connected to the company.

Norms can generate “stability by setting socially determined expectations for behavior driven by morals and obligations” (Alexander, 2012, p. 796). Alexander (2012) further argues that the norms can create a sense of collective responsibility and mutual obligations, which can strengthen the importance of cooperation rather than acting selfishly. This dimension of individualism-collectivism refers to “the extent individuals ascribe their identity from the self rather than from their relationship to others in the group” (Alexander, 2012, p. 796). Barley and Kunda (1992) additionally state that subtle normative control has, in many studies, increased loyalty and commitment. To some extent, normative control may bolster autonomy since “employees could be trusted to act in the organization’s best interest” (Barley & Kunda, 1992, p. 383). Knights and Willmott (1989) argued similarly around subtle power relations, as employees internalize normative structures which, in their perception, strengthen their position or identity.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) researched identity regulation to investigate organizational control. They highlight how employees establish self-images and work orientations aligned with managerially defined objectives. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) further depict how managerial intervention can occur – both un/intentionally and in/effectively – to influence individuals’ identity and self-constructions of distinctiveness and commitment. A strong social identity is of particular importance among employees in KIFs (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). Different researchers advocate different approaches to shape the identity of knowledge workers, for instance, through symbols and rhetoric (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Nonaka, 1991). Symbols can be physical expressions, such as dress codes which can affect the social identity, and rhetoric can be slogans, values, and how they are communicated (Alvesson, 2001). Nonaka (1991) additionally supports that those management-initiated actions are vital in the spiral of knowledge. To some extent, perhaps through symbols and/or rhetoric, many share the perception that being a knowledge worker corresponds to being a hardworking and committed employee (Alvesson, 2004).

Wynn and Rao (2019) conducted a case study of a management consultancy to investigate flexibility policies. They argue that the flexibility policies to support work-life balance are increasingly utilized, but employees are reluctant to take advantage of the policies in the consulting industry. Wynn and Rao (2019) identify perceived control, which in this case refers to employees perceiving that they have control to manage their work-life conflicts. Many of the consultants in the study highlight that managing their own work-life conflicts is a test of their

professional attributes, implying that if they can manage the tough working hours, they are perfectly suited for the consulting industry. They, additionally, expressed how they may have to exit the consulting industry if they cannot. The authors conclude that the consultants' choice of rhetoric reframed overwhelming work demands as personal decisions. The case study targets identity but may also be an example of what Edenius and Styhre (2009) describe as management control embedded in social relations. They argue that normative control does not necessarily have to be enforced from management but rather be embedded through norms, values, and different procedures. Edenius and Styhre (2009) studied an insurance company that utilized different tools to monitor, control, and evaluate the performance of activities. These were embedded in different norms and procedures and not directly imposed by the management (Edenius & Styhre, 2009). Another interesting study within control was conducted by Müller (2020), partly targeting control and escape during nightwork in a factory and a hospital laboratory. Müller (2020) argues that the nightwork experiences enable deviant behaviors in different ways than dayshifts, where employees develop nocturnal mindsets. The individual mindsets shape and are shaped by others and form collective mindsets (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2002, cited in Müller, 2020). Müller (2020) depicts how the nocturnal mindsets emerge through the individual experiences and the collective dimension, i.e., the experiences of working in the organization at night. The mindsets justify a more relaxed or easygoing understanding of daytime rules, enabling them to escape compliance (Müller, 2020). We argue that Müller's (2020) argument partly corresponds to the control embedded in different norms and procedures but with a different angle. In this case, the norms that are relevant or active during the day are not part of the nightwork. Instead, other norms and behaviors are iteratively evolved over time, shaping a distinct collective dimension through the nocturnal mindset during nights.

Regardless of whether the management initially established certain norms, we ask ourselves what happens with the control that may be embedded in the social relations or norms, if the relations and the conditions abruptly change, as they may have done during the Covid-19 pandemic. We aim to nuance the understanding by examining how normative control is perceived in the virtual context of working from home, which we argue is a relatively unexplored field among the vast critical literature about normative control.

Norms can be initiated by management (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), but Kunda (1992) highlights that normative control mechanisms also can operate horizontally where members influence each other. An example of a well-known study of how normative control occurred

horizontally is one by Barker (1993), who labeled it concertive control. He observed a company which shifted their focus from bureaucratic control and implemented self-managing teams. Barker (1993) noticed that the teams were given close to complete autonomy with the only restriction of some guidelines and the company vision. Within these frames, the employees could elect their own representatives as well as determine how to plan and conduct their own work autonomously. The need for coordination somehow made the workers exercise control over one another horizontally. Barker (1993) concludes that the control by the peers was even more substantial than the previous bureaucratic control from managers. Barker's study may illustrate how behavioral control suddenly got dominated and even substituted by normative control. However, different forms of control can also work in tandem (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). Next, we will conclude the literature review with the interplay between the different forms of control.

2.2.4 The interplay between the forms of control

As previously touched upon, behavioral control, output control, and normative control can take place simultaneously (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019; Eriksson-Zetterquist, Müllern & Styhre, 2011). Below, we will depict a few case studies that have been conducted on different forms being active simultaneously in workplaces. However, there is a scarcity of research conducted from a virtual point of view, a gap we aim to reduce in this study. Rennstam (2007) conducted a case study of a tech company within the telecommunication industry, where the engineers worked almost exclusively autonomously. They had some contact with their bosses, but they rather asked colleagues for help when they ran into problems. The company had a procedure for reporting issues. The engineers were then supposed to highlight the problem and a suggested solution controlled and decided upon by managers higher up in the hierarchy. Rennstam (2007) argues that behavioral control is prominent indirectly but not in line with simple control. It is rather a form of technological control, where the technology is used to submit and control the issues. Moreover, the process is also in line with bureaucratic control, where the rules or procedures imply that certain behaviors should be exercised, for instance, that an issue, that is noticed, should be reported. However, the issue does not become an issue until the management has acknowledged the situation as an issue. Thereby, the normative control is evident in the example. The norm appears to be that the managers with a higher position are more suited to decide upon whether there is an issue or not. In this way, Rennstam (2007) argues that the different forms of control complement one another by being simultaneously active.

Another example of an interplay is Kärreman and Alvesson's (2004) case: Cages in Tandem. The first form of control that they identify is socio-ideological control, which involves softer control mechanisms through values, identities, ideas, and meanings. It hence corresponds to what many researchers refer to as normative control (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Casey, 1995). The other one is technocratic control, which has more bureaucratic characteristics of performance measures, standards, budgets, and hierarchy. Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) argue that the two forms are active simultaneously to create total control. They exemplify this by stating that a firm can have tight technocratic control while leaving the socio-logical control a little less prominent, which can be beneficial in repetitive work processes where the need for a certain behavior and output is vital. On the contrary, in a more flexible and innovative work environment, such as in KIFs, the socio-ideological control should be more prominent than the technocratic, where it is more important to ensure that the underlying thoughts are aligned with the company's objectives (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004).

One last example that we identified and connected based on the theories is related to Foucault's concept of Panopticon, which is elaborated on by Wechta (2020). Panopticon is an idea about surveillance in prisons, which is constructed so that a guard can surveil all prisoners without them being able to see the guard. The theory further implies that the prisoners behave well, not because they are watched all the time, but because they may be watched all the time. Foucault states that this awareness triggers everyday human behavior, keeping the subjects in constant self-control (Wechta, 2020). The Panopticon may be an example of simple control, within the behavioral, in combination with normative control. To some extent, the guard is surveilling, but not necessarily always, which stresses the relevance for normative control in the context, indirectly forcing the prisoners to behave by controlling their thought patterns (Wechta, 2020).

The overall findings of the existing literature suggest that the different forms of control can be simultaneously active by either complementing one another and partly substituting or dominating one another. Considering the prevalent scarcity of research in the virtual context, all studies outlined are from traditional workplaces. Nevertheless, we aim to investigate how the interplay between the different forms of control may occur virtually.

3 Method

In the following section, we present the methodology and approach of our research. In order to provide clarity and transparency for the readers, we systematically elaborate on the situations we encountered and the choices we made throughout the study.

3.1 Research context

We aim to study how individuals in knowledge-intensive firms, which usually work in physical offices, perceive control in the new virtual context. Therefore, we chose to conduct a single case study, which works as an empirical investigation that examines a specific phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2009). The organization in which we conducted this study is Lion Consulting, a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. Lion Consulting is a global financial consulting firm with around 300 000 employees. Due to Covid-19, Lion Consulting has enforced new guidelines regarding their office spaces resulting in the employees working from home instead of in the offices. The employees are used to working in an open landscape, and the environmental shift is, therefore, relevant to our study. The department we studied has around 20 employees, and we chose to contact 10 of the employees considering our study's limited scope. However, we emphasized to include participants representing the range from associates to managers to cover the dynamics between the different roles and their impact on certain perceptions.

3.2 Research approach

Our study is based on a qualitative approach, which according to Bell, Bryman & Harley (2019), is described as a research strategy where the importance of collecting and analyzing data is usually emphasized on words and not on quantification. Furthermore, this research study has an interpretive epistemological approach where the focus has been on individuals' perceptions and interpretations of their social reality (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). The interpretation of their social reality, also referred to as social constructionism, constitutes the ontological focus of the study. Social constructionism regards the individual's ability to create and construct a reality (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). It implies that reality is socially constructed and understood through acts of interpretation. People can construct realities based on norms, experiences, values, and identity (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). To augment

the understanding of the consultant's perception of control in a virtual context, we apply an interpretivist tradition in our method. The interpretivist tradition implies a further understanding of human behavior rather than a pure explanation of it (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). Moreover, Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2016) emphasize the importance of adopting the interpretive approach to embrace an empathetic stance to understand the social reality in how the organizational members perceive it, which is what we will do in this study. We, therefore, take on the role of active interpreters to understand the subjective meaning of the social actions in the organization Lion Consulting (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). Because of our interpretative perspective, we accept and acknowledge different perceptions of reality and no objective truth. Our study presents individual versions of social realities, which are constantly changing and therefore not definite. The interpretative approach enables us to explore and analyze the subjectivity in how the consultants at Lion Consulting express how they are affected by their social context. To do so, we assemble inspiration from a subcategory in interpretivism, symbolic interactionism. According to Prasad (2018), symbolic interactionism is about individuals' development of the self in social situations. Furthermore, Martindale (1981, in Prasad, 2018) describes symbolic interactionism as "the creation of meaning in social situations with the point of gravity being located in the self" (p. 19). It can also be depicted as the study of human meaning, where it assumes the meaning is made from symbolic actions constructed by the individuals in the society (Prasad 2018; Trost & Levin, 2004).

3.3 Research Design

The research design explains the type of approach used to answer our formulated research question. By the interpretive paradigm, this study will be constructed in line with qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). Alvesson (2010) mentions that social science typically cannot be investigated by analyzing numbers, but instead, one must make sense of a phenomenon related to human interaction through other methods. Qualitative research supports the exploration of understandings and meanings that organizational members ascribe to a social reality, which can be investigated through interviews (Creswell, 2014).

Our study follows an abductive approach that offers the possibility to apply theoretical and empirical approaches to our research problem (Philipsen, 2018; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). It means that we shifted between being guided by theory and viewing theory as an outcome of our research (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The abductive approach allowed us

to be adaptive and reflexive, such as altering between interview questions where we possibly noticed new recurring statements and themes that had not been observed in advance. Furthermore, the abductive approach allowed us to adjust the theoretical framework in our study as the empirical data developed (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). We started with the aim to study identity and ended up analyzing different control mechanisms because our empirical material revolved prominently around that theme. For our research, we aim to broaden the understanding of how individuals perceive forms of control in a virtual context. With the abductive approach, we were receptive to new interpretations from the collected data and ways to analyze what was going on virtually. That is furthermore how we intend to contribute to the existing literature.

To conclude, we followed a qualitative case study approach based on semi-structured interviews with 10 members from the chosen and studied organization. Our chosen organization Lion Consulting thereby only serves to explore how employees may perceive control virtually in the new working environment. Our research design provided us with rich and detailed empirical material, making a case study the appropriate research method to answer our set research question.

3.4 Data Collection

The data collection process is structured as a case study, which means an intensive study of a single case, e.g., an organization (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In our study, through semi-structured interviews. Bell, Bryman & Harley (2019) label interviews as the most frequently used method to collect data in qualitative research. Interviews helped further our understanding of how the consultants view themselves and their social world, supporting the interpretative method of our study. There are two types of data that can be assembled in data collections of research studies, primary data and secondary data (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). Primary data is defined as original data collected for a specific research purpose and goal (Hox & Boeije, 2005). Our study will exclusively administer primary data collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 consultants from Lion Consulting to gain an augmented understanding of how they perceive the shift in environment and the control remotely within the consultancy firm.

When conducting semi-structured interviews, the approach is defined as having an overall direction and structure, yet the interview tone should be relatively conversational and informal (Hair, 2007). Therefore, we created an interview guide that had the purpose of making sure that the interviews still had structure and that the intended topics of interest were covered. The topics of our interview guide were the change to virtual work and leadership. Moreover, the interview guide helped provide a sense of security in the interviews. We could steer the interview in one direction but were also flexible in letting the interviewees lead us towards interesting topics. Furthermore, it gave us the chance to ask follow-up questions individually to each consultant, which provided a good understanding of their perception regarding the discussed topics. By asking the consultants to elaborate on their statements and provide examples, we encouraged them to give us deeper insights and thoughts that they may not have thought of before, without directing or guiding the questions for the interviewees.

We had one contact person at Lion Consulting, allowing us access to the department. We chose to contact 10 consultants because of the limited time we had for the study, but our idea was to complement with more interviews if a data saturation was not accomplished (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). However, after conducting about eight to nine interviews we started to experience a prevailing saturation in the data. Hence we decided to conduct 10, in total, to ensure that we did not miss out on any appealing data or experiences. After completing the 10 interviews, we were satisfied with the data we had collected, and, in our perception, we had achieved data saturation. The chosen 10 participants did all receive an email from us explaining our purpose for the study and asking if they were interested in participating in a one-hour long interview. Upon our request for the interviews, we promised the consultants that they and their firm would stay completely anonymous, which we believe contributed to a high degree of acceptance of our request. Thereafter, dates for the interviews were set. Before the interviews began, we made sure to get acceptance from the interviewees that they approved a recording of the interviews, which everyone complied with. By recording the interviews, we could focus on follow-up questions instead of taking notes, which is highlighted as necessary by Bell, Bryman & Harley (2019). The recordings further made it possible to transcribe the material to ensure that the citations in the study were accurate. Furthermore, the recordings made it possible for us to go back and listen to the interviews at a later stage in order to gain an updated understanding of how the respondents' tones were in certain statements. All interviews had to take place via Google Hangouts due to the current restrictions. The setting of the interviews is of high importance in a qualitative study (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), and we tried to get as

many aspects as possible with Google Hangout. Using video calls instead of just phone calls allowed us to see facial expressions and part of the body language during the interviews, which allows a more nuanced understanding of the interviewees' perceptions. Moreover, we regard the digital interviews as a positive contribution to our study. It has given us an insight into how the respondents communicate with their employees in the current situation, as the communication mainly occurs via digital channels. We have thus been able to observe how the consultants present themselves through the camera to get an overall impression of their temporary work environment, which was valuable in conducting the study. Furthermore, to keep the employees' and the company's anonymity, we have chosen to call the company Lion Consulting and have given the 10 employees gender-neutral names, Francis, Jessie, Kim, Lee, Alex, Andie, Billie, Erin, Jamie, Logan. Applying gender-neutral names is important since males dominate the department to a high degree.

3.5 Data Analysis

We decided to approach our analysis according to Rennstam and Wästerfors' (2018) ideas, since they would give us the best condition to detect intriguing findings in the collected material. The authors present three necessary actions when processing the empirical material: sorting, reducing, and arguing (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), sorting the empirical material is the first step in analyzing the empirical material and has a high significance for the analysis. With this in mind, we have sorted the collected material repeatedly according to the themes that we had identified in the material. This has been done in several different rounds since the categories were established because the context and meaning may become more evident on each occasion. Furthermore, after each completed interview, we discussed the interview content and analyzed observations and thoughts raised during the interview. By identifying actions, facial expressions, and reactions during the interviews, we were attentive to things beyond what was expressed. According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), those kinds of observations are essential and can help develop an engaging analysis.

Furthermore, coding the material has given us a thorough overview of the empirical material and contributed to analytical confidence, which Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) point out is essential when handling data. We colored the material to categorize it, where the colors

symbolized different themes that we identified. The themes we used were based on the interview guide and were; prominent issues resulting from the virtual context, flexibility due to the virtual context, and different forms of control. Creating the themes made it easier to identify a common thread in the interviews and to identify similarities and differences in the respondents' experiences of the new virtual working environment (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019). Furthermore, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) highlight the importance of giving the empirical material justice and that previous perceptions and interpretations will potentially affect the collected material's view. It, therefore, becomes important to twist and turn the empirical material to open up for new thoughts and perspectives, which we have done by discussing the respondents' answers and by returning to the material at different stages to be able to see the material from new perspectives. As a result, we have been given a chance to identify things that, at first glance, were not considered interesting and can be considered to be beyond obvious. This led us to realize that our material had answers to more than our original research question. The first research question: *“How do individuals in knowledge-intensive firms perceive control in the virtual context of working from home during Covid-19 compared to at the physical office?”* led us to investigate the control aspects in our empirical material. However, when the material had been analyzed several times, we realized that the new control aspects additionally affected autonomy and communication. The empirical material showed many examples of the consultants' different experiences in communicating with each other and how they worked more independently now in the virtual context than before. Hence we formulated the second research question, following: *“How may the changed perceptions of control shape individuals' interpretations of autonomy and communication?”*

After the first part of the analysis was completed, sorting the empirical material, the next step was to reduce the material. It is an equally important part of the process because it allows us to focus on what we considered to be most interesting and relevant to our study. Rennstam and Wästerfors' (2018) highlight the importance of focusing on themes beyond the obvious, which we have tried to do. When sorting the material, we focused on removing the parts which were too apparent and thereby not considered interesting.

We implemented a categorial reduction, which according to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), means that the material is sorted based on categories. Additionally, we finally determined the categories: virtual barriers, virtual flexibility, and virtual control. These categories would be important for the purpose of the study and enable an answer to the first research question.

Furthermore, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) emphasize the importance of understanding how reduction may reduce interesting material and keep the study focused. Thus, the reduction of the material has been an ongoing process during the study, where we have continuously returned to the material. It is important to continuously make assessments and delimitations in the choice of empirical material. However, it is also important to retain the material as it could become interesting at a later stage when the study has taken more form (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The design of our study has been a process where we picked out additional quotes from the empirical material on several different occasions and stages. This indicates that the process of reducing the collected material has been continuous in order not to miss out on interesting findings and points of view, in line with Rennstam and Wästerfors' (2018) recommendations.

Lastly, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) emphasize the importance of being able to argue for the material that has been selected from the collected data. Our starting point in interpreting the empirical material has been existing literature in the field of control and knowledge-intensive firms. This, in order to argue for our chosen empirical data, also referred to as theorizing (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Theorizing has been our focus when processing the material as the purpose of the study is to broaden the relevance of existing literature. It is important to present what the material reflects and how this can be interpreted (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). Furthermore, as we conducted the analysis, we used an approach developed by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) called 'excerpt-commentary unit.' When analyzing in line with excerpt commentary units, the main focus is on reporting an analytical point presented through excerpts from the qualitative interviews. The method presents four stages in structuring an analysis, where the first stage is the analytical point. It includes an introduction to the topic presented in the empirical material, and the following stage is orientation, meaning a short introduction to the following empirical material. The third stage is where the empirical excerpt is presented, followed by an analytical comment about the presented empirical material (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). Moreover, our analysis aims to make new theoretical contributions in the form of nuancing the understanding from a slightly different perspective. This study aims to broaden the relevance of existing literature within control to understand how it occurs in a virtual environment in knowledge-intensive firms. Thus, our study has contributed to a nuanced view of control and the difficulties and opportunities that follow when knowledge-intensive firms start working virtually instead of in physical offices.

3.6 Credibility and trustworthiness

Credibility and trustworthiness are essential in qualitative research to ensure quality throughout studies (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Since there is a discrepancy in the perception of the social reality, a critical aspect in research is respondent validation. It refers to the importance of aligning the researchers' interpretations of the data with the respondents' intentions (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In conducting the interviews, we have emphasized asking follow-up questions to ensure that situations have been interpreted correctly and contributed to a deep understanding of the consultant's experiences. The following is an example of a follow-up question asked to an interviewee: "You mention that you are more flexible now when working from home; would you like to elaborate on how exactly?". Questions of this nature were consistent throughout the interviews in order to be able to demonstrate that our perceptions are consistent with the respondents' expressions of their experiences. At the first contact with the respondents, we ensured that they would receive a completed copy of the study to demonstrate that our perception of the studied social reality is in line with the respondents'.

Another critical aspect in trustworthy research is to what extent the study is transferable, how applicable the findings of a research are to other contexts. Within qualitative research, the method entails studying a limited number of people, which could be problematic for transferability, hence creating difficulties in applying qualitative research to other contexts (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Nevertheless, in this study, the literature review structure has been essential in demonstrating transferability. We have aimed to give a detailed overview of existing literature in the field of control to demonstrate what statements have been made and what conclusions have been drawn. Furthermore, we have presented the empirical material as clearly and detailed as possible.

To demonstrate the reliability of the study, the pursuit of transparency has permeated our work process. To ensure reliability and transparency to the highest extent possible, we have presented the research context and approach as thoroughly as possible in our method section. Moreover, our chosen concepts which the analysis is based on, are closely described in the literature review.

3.7 Limitations

The relatively small sample used in our study can be a possible limitation. Even though we tried to get an even span of consultants from every hierarchical level, we have a majority of junior consultants participating. In addition to the relatively uneven division of consultants, we have chosen a small department within the firm. This department does not necessarily represent how relationships and division of labor occur in the rest of the firm, which should be noticed when discussing the transferability to other KIFs. Therefore, it could reduce the opportunity to generalize the results of our study (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Qualitative research faces critique regarding the generalization and the liability regarding the inability to consistently generalize results (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). There are two ways to generalize research: statistical and analytical generalization (Yin 2009). The latter is most common in qualitative studies, and it is also how we intend to contribute with our study. This is because we research an already studied phenomenon but in a different context. The findings in our study were related to already existing theories, and thus our study proposed expanding on theory and not generalizing statistics (Yin, 2009).

Another limitation of the study could be the interviewees and their transparency. Even though we ensured complete anonymity for both the interviewees and the company, it is hard for us to know how transparent the answers were. We aimed to create an informal and safe atmosphere for the interviewees to comfortably share their experiences. Since the interviews were conducted over Google Meets, it is harder to create a personal connection in one hour. Furthermore, all interviews were held and recorded in Swedish, which was intentional to maintain a relaxed atmosphere in the interviews. Since all of the interviewees and ourselves have Swedish as a first language, it would most likely limit any potential misunderstandings. However, we then had to translate all of the quotes from Swedish to English, creating a possible limitation in the translation process. However, we discussed each quote and the main points of the quotes thoroughly to establish as accurate translations as possible.

4 Empirical Analysis

In the following section, we present the empirical material of our research. We have collected the empirical material through qualitative interviews, and this chapter presents quotes from the 10 conducted interviews, which we find relevant to this study's purpose. The analysis is categorized into four parts. The first part is a case description to provide a clear context and conditions for the analysis. Furthermore, the analysis is structured by the identified problems or barriers the consultants face in the virtual context. Thereafter, we will investigate the perceived benefits of increased flexibility, which appears to occur when working from home. Lastly, we will explore the consultants' and managers' perceptions of how control occurs in the virtual environment. Figure 2 below illustrates how the empirical analysis is organized.

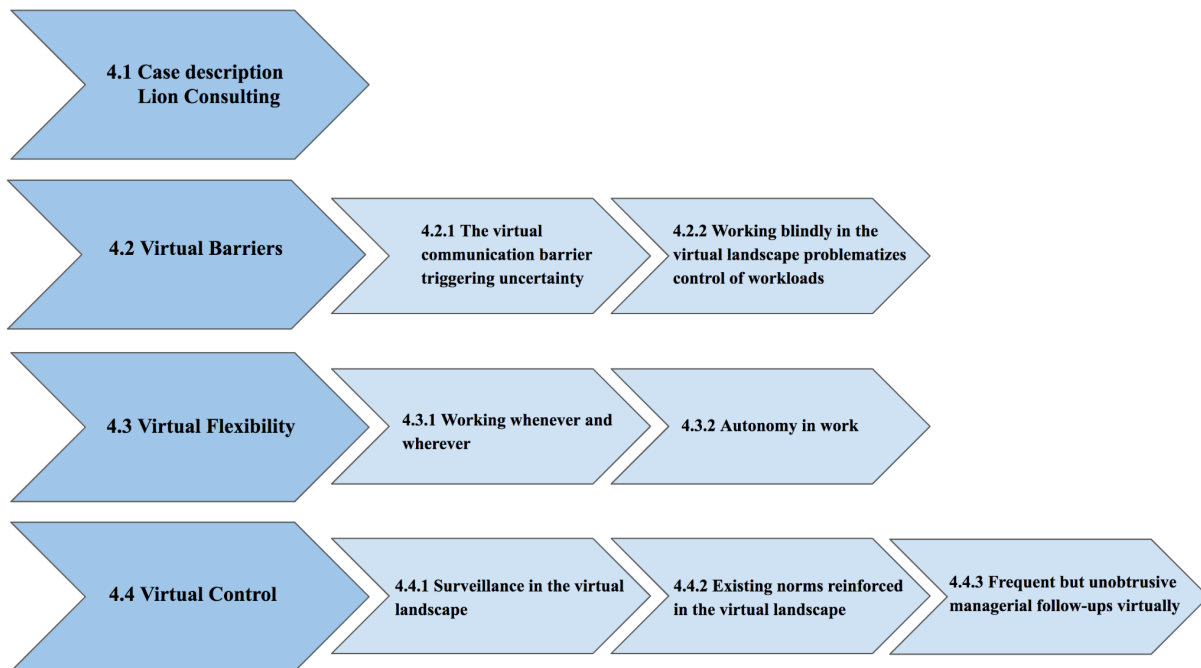


Figure 2. An illustration of how the empirical analysis is structured.

4.1 Case description Lion Consulting

Lion Consulting is a financial consulting firm that operates worldwide. The department that participated in this case study operates in Sweden and has around 20 employees. The organization is structured in a traditional hierarchical way, with numerous hierarchical pyramids. Each pyramid has a different partner, management teams, and service lines, but still low thresholds in-between the levels. The department we studied has six core levels of employees: associates, senior associates, manager, senior manager, directors, and partners, where participants in this study range from associates to senior managers.

Due to Covid-19, Lion Consulting has enforced rules on how often and many employees are allowed to be in the office simultaneously. They have encouraged their employees to work from home to the highest extent possible since March 2020, which currently counts to more than one year. The consultants have been allowed to borrow home equipment such as computer screens and office chairs from the workplace to create as good conditions as possible, working from home. However, the new working environment now consists of each individual's home, and communicating with co-workers, managers, and clients occurs through virtual communication channels such as Google Hangouts, chats, or phone calls. The new ways of working appear to have created barriers for Lion Consulting in the context of controlling and communicating with each other. The barriers we identified are the complications of controlling workloads when working remotely and a virtual communication barrier triggering uncertainty to reach out and communicate with each other. These will be elaborated on in the next part of the analysis with the purpose of setting the foundation of the following sections about flexibility and control.

4.2 Virtual barriers

4.2.1 Working blindly in the virtual landscape problematizes control of workloads

The barrier of not being physically at the same location appears to problematize the ability to recognize how much other consultants are working. Before, the employees could see their colleagues from their desks and how they were working. Either intensely or going on many coffee breaks, for example. Now, the managers who prominently distribute assignments and tasks experience challenges in delegating to the junior employees. Logan, who has a managerial position, further explains a perception of the current situation:

“If you sit in the office, you see if someone stays in the office until midnight every day. Then you recognize that the person may be a bit overworked. But now, when everyone is at home, it is more difficult, both for me as a project manager and for the managers to keep track of how much the staff actually works.” – Logan

Alex, who is more junior, adds on to Logan’s statement, telling us: *“No, we actually do not know that now. When we sat in the office landscape, it was quite clear who of us had nothing to do. The small actions that were noticeable in an office environment, such as who always came into the office first, never took a long lunch, and was always the last one to leave, are now way more problematic to detect in the virtual environment. Jamie adds on regarding the difficulty of distributing new work to the most suitable consultant effectively:*

“If an ad-hoc assignment then comes up, it would be natural to delegate to the person who obviously does not have as much to do. However, when everybody is at home, you do not have the same overview. Then it may occur that you delegate to the person you know can handle it, and then it may end up in the lap of somebody that has already a lot of work.” – Jamie

The argument strengthens the point regarding the barrier, preventing managers as well as consultants from recognizing the workload of each other. It further implies that there may arise an imbalance in workloads between consultants since the managers may, in line with Jamie’s argument, delegate to the person they know can handle it, regardless of the current workload. As another result of the barrier, many may work a lot more than is recognized. Alex reflects:

“...sometimes it is hard to see who stayed up late working last and has done it frequently for a period of time. There are probably many who work quite a lot without it being visible, which, of course, is a hell of a shame.” – Alex

We find Alex’s statement relevant and interesting for two reasons. Firstly, he recognizes the barrier of not being able to control the workload to the same extent, and secondly, the implications that somebody may be working a lot more than others without anybody noticing. Moreover, the physical distance of being apart creates a distance in communication; the consultants are no longer able to walk over to a person’s desk and ask them a question. Therefore, the next section will further explore how the communication between consultants has been affected by the physical distance.

4.2.2 The virtual communication barrier triggering uncertainty

The virtual context appears to have created a threshold for the consultants in their everyday communication. Usually, the consultants at Lion Consulting talked to each other extensively at the office about their ongoing projects and daily issues. Now, new routines regarding how the consultants communicate with each other have been set. Jamie elaborates on how the new routines appear to include less communication between co-workers. Instead of reaching out continually as in the office, the new way of working appears to be by collecting thoughts, ideas, and problems and then discussing them all at once.

“You collect a bunch of problems that you have encountered, and then you try to resolve them all at once instead. However, if you had been in the office with each other, I think you would have more regularly reconciled task by task, so to speak.” – Jamie

Jamie tells us that the new habit of bunching together tasks and problems appears to be easier and less time-consuming than initiating phone calls with every encountered thought and question. On a similar note, Kim tries to solve obstacles independently first rather than picking up the phone to initiate what may become a long, somewhat inconvenient phone call:

“You can send a chat or pick up the phone and call a colleague, but most of the time you try to simply solve it yourself or maybe you feel that it may not be so important after all. Then I think, I rather bring it up another time when it is more convenient” – Kim

To some extent, the consultants appear to be reluctant to reach out since the timing may not be suitable or because they fear that the process will take too long. Additionally, Andie elaborates on how it is harder to get ahold of managers now than before. It is partially confirmed by Logan, who has a managerial role in the firm:

“It’s harder to get hold of people. Before I could just walk past the office where my boss was sitting. Now, I have to call him/her, e-mail him/her, and maybe (s)he will not answer.” - Andie

“Unfortunately, it becomes much more complex when you have to schedule a meeting in the calendar, or you have to write in the chat to make a status call. Earlier, you could do it by going to the relevant desk and asking ‘Is it going well, do you have anything to do?’” – Logan

The new virtual environment has caused employees to create new ways of working because they have been pushed to a certain point of independence, being isolated from the team. In the situations mentioned above, the distance between the consultants is evident and apparently somewhat problematic in the sense of communicating effectively and smoothly. In addition to the problems arising with formal communication, informal communication also appears to have been negatively affected by the new virtual settings. Shifting most of the communication to chat or e-mail has opened up for more interpretations and misunderstandings, now compared to before. Erin elaborates on some thoughts about it:

“A normal chat can be interpreted as quite cold, especially compared to physically. It may not be interpreted in the same way at all. So, you lose a lot of nuances, I would say, when the physical presence disappears. (...) It can cause misunderstandings and may tear on the relationships long-term.” – Erin

Following the difficulties of nuancing written messages, the consultants acknowledge that their relationships with some co-workers have become more strained following the shift. The situation appears to cause misunderstandings and irritation, at least in Erin’s perception. In addition to this, Alex explains how the decreasing communication sometimes has caused details to fall between the cracks:

“It’s clear that certain things sort of fall between the cracks if communication is lacking. In addition to that, we do not talk as often as before and when you express yourself in emails, it will not be quite the same flow.” – Alex

Jessie further explains how the effort of picking up the phone again after just having finished a longer call sometimes is just too complicated, especially if the concerned person has a lot to do. Erin adds on to Jessies’ statement:

“But definitely, it has been times when you may have wanted to discuss something but you refrain to do so because you do not have the strength to take that discussion in the moment or you do not want to bother the person again” – Erin

Miscommunication and a reluctance to communicate are two of the most prominent issues that the consultants face in the new virtual setting. As mentioned above, the unavailability is hard to track, resulting in consultants unsuccessfully trying to contact each other. Additionally, as opposed to verbal communication, online messages bring the risk of misinterpretations, which appears to cause fractions between consultants. However, even if the communication between two consultants is successful, implying no misunderstandings or irritation, the virtual setting seems to make the communication process rather complicated and enervating, judging from the consultants’ perceptions. The complicated procedure further seems to create a reluctance to reach out in the first place. Jamie elaborates on how the reluctance to communicate can become a problem for the employees:

“Say that someone is sitting with a complicated model in Excel, or that you have got some really bad data to work with. Then I think, new employees now, they really bite into it and try to solve it on their own. This means that they may have to sit 6 hours overtime instead of solving it quickly with help from a more senior co-worker”. – Jamie

The reluctance to reach out to a more senior co-worker for help is an example of how the communication barrier may work. As mentioned earlier, the consultants do not want to bother each other, which results in less communication. This section has aimed to set the foundation for the rest of the analysis, providing the reader with a context of potential problems. To conclude, we identified the barriers of difficulties to control each other’s workloads and a different communication method, including communicating less than before. Next, we will turn

to how the consultants perceive the new environment in terms of flexibility and autonomy when working from home.

4.3 Virtual flexibility

4.3.1 Working whenever and wherever

Even if the virtual context brings several boundaries and complications, the consultants additionally emphasize that it facilitates flexibility. Suddenly, the consultants are not bound to the office where they can sometimes experience distractions and instead work from wherever they want. Additionally, many emphasize how they save time on commuting, can do different activities during the day, and catch up on work later at night. In that essence, they can pretty much work whenever they want to. The consultants experience silence and increased productivity when working from home. Logan explains perceived freedom to work from any location (s)he desires:

“Of course, it brings a freedom that you can work from other locations and have great days while being in another city with your family, for example.” – Logan

The consultants are more or less allowed to work from anywhere except the office, which appears to bring flexibility and a sense of freedom. Working from other places brings the opportunity to spend time with family and friends. Billie mentions that it is relatively boring to sit at home, but that (s)he becomes more productive since he can avoid long chats with colleagues, which in turn may prevent her/him from working. Andie adds on to the argument about avoiding distractions when working from home:

“It is of course relatively boring to be at home, but I am able to do more stuff in a shorter time span. You do not talk to colleagues as much, which sometimes happens at the office, where you can get hold up in long chats during the afternoon when you are starting to get tired. It is definitely calmer and quieter at home.” – Billie

“You are pretty effective when you are at home, you do not get disturbed. You basically get things done quicker since you can avoid all distractions.” – Andie

We find it interesting that the consultants feel more productive, being physically distanced from one another. The informal chats that may be valuable from a social aspect may also take the shape of distractions. The well-being aspect in the pandemic is outside the scope of this study, but we particularly want to illustrate how the freedom of location can bring a perception of flexibility. Additionally, the consultants are freer to dispose of their own time. Kim exemplifies the experience of flexibility and balance in her life when working from home since less emphasis is put on time and presence:

“It’s much more flexible now. I feel better, I have more time to work out and I feel more engaged in work when my private life also comes together. I would probably say that there is a little more focus on the result when working from home than there is on time and presence. (...) We report the number of hours we worked a day and that does not show whether it is from 8-5 or if I take a break during the day. Essentially, it is more about following up on what I performed during those hours.” – Kim

Although the consultants have a certain number of hours they must work according to the contract, they can now distribute them more freely and gain more power to manage their own schedules. The increased focus on the result instead of the behavior becomes evident, which appears to bring a feeling of flexibility. As long as the consultants do their hours, they can do them whenever they want to. Alex and Billie strengthen the argument:

“The office hours are basically gone, which implies that the working hours change a lot. If the weather is amazing, one may skip work for a few hours during the day and get back to it during the night instead.” – Alex

“I think it is nice from home. If you have an errand to run, you can do that without anybody questioning where you are.” – Billie

Working from wherever and whenever appears to bring a great deal of flexibility. Although the consultants have to do their hours and perform well, they have more opportunities to dispose of their own time, without anybody questioning where they are. How the control aspect is affected will be elaborated on in a later section, but first, we will turn to another aspect of flexibility, namely autonomy in work.

4.3.2 Autonomy in work

As elaborated on in chapter 4.2.1, the new era of working from home appears to have created a barrier for the managers to oversee and control the work the junior employees do. It is no longer possible to walk by a person's desk or look over someone's shoulder to see how the work is progressing, making it hard for both managers and consultants to know and control how each person's workload is. Therefore, the managers have now had to enforce new routines in distributing and controlling their junior colleagues' work. Now, anticipating needs and giving the junior employees time to reflect and work through the tasks in peace are examples of changes regarding distributing tasks. Lee further elaborates on how giving the consultant relatively free reins to take on assignments is a good start in the process, which Logan further supports and elaborates on:

"I now usually say, you can do and present it exactly as you want to as long as it meets the expected quality and illustrates what it is supposed to." – Lee

"You do not demand that a task is done exactly according to a certain methodology. Rather you ask, the requirement is that we do this analysis, can you do it? And then they get a lot of freedom in how to conduct that analysis, and then you have to go through it together so that it seems reasonable." - Logan

Lee and Logan appear to give the consultants flexibility and the opportunity to embrace a high degree of responsibility regarding their own tasks. The managers assign a greater degree of autonomy to the consultants now, compared to in the office. The degree of autonomy, however, appears to depend on the competence of the consultant in question. Jamie exemplifies:

"And it is well based on their feeling that, now there is a lot of material to work with, this consultant is quite independent, he gets in touch when he needs help. Then I do not have to pressure him and check in all the time. Then there may be another person who may not be as independent to focus more on." – Jamie

By being able to let the individuals be more independent and prone to tackle problems with reason, the managers make time to stay closer to the consultants who need their support instead. Lee, additionally, recognizes an increase in autonomy in the virtual environment. Lee implies that there has been a significant decrease in the number of questions (s)he received and

answered on a weekly basis compared to before. This also enables new learning opportunities by steering the consultants towards autonomy, by phrasing questions more openly and analytically. Logan explains how (s)he pushes his junior employees to reflect more independently when they go through the material instead of micromanaging the details through their work process:

“Another example is, the last time we did a project. I said to my team ‘to go through the work, think for yourself – what is interesting here? What should we take with us and ask the company, do you think?’ Then they got to look through the data, they got to analyze what it meant, think for themselves and come to the conclusion that these points are important and what we want to understand better. And then there is room for a discussion, ‘okay, you have highlighted these things, it seems quite reasonable, but have you thought about this for example?’” – Logan

Logan tells us that they go through the work somewhat differently now, which (s)he perceives gives the junior employees more flexibility in their work. The managers agree that the junior consultants now need to work more independently, which in turn leads to more flexibility for them in their work now than before. According to the managers, the junior consultants can work longer periods now without getting interrupted, which is agreed upon by all of the junior consultants. As a junior consultant, Andie explains it the following way: *“No, but he lets me work until I reconcile, so I can work in peace until then.”* Kim further elaborates on it:

“It’s more about the task getting done and then how we got there is not as important these days as when you sat in the office. Because then there were much more frequent follow-ups and now, I get to sit and work in peace and quiet and then I publish my material, deliver it.” – Kim

As emphasized by Kim, the focus now is more on achieving results than on how the daily work is performed. The virtual work environment has created a new sense of flexibility for the junior consultants, but also a perceived freedom. For instance, Billie mentions:

“It is not so often that that person gets involved, I write to them when it is ready. I never end up in a situation when someone asks me when my work is done.” –Billie

We argue for the increased flexibility since the consultants now, to a greater extent, are able to independently finish their work before the managers conduct follow-ups. Hence, the

responsibility is put on the consultant to ask for advice instead of the other way around. However, a factor in the new flexibility and autonomy that remains unchanged is the pressure put on them by the clients, which does not appear to have changed in the virtual setting. Erin elaborates on how (s)he needs to adapt to the customers' expectations.

“But also, there is not much freedom. I cannot go and do a lot of analyzes that the customer has not paid for. Then they will probably not be so happy.” –Erin

On the one hand, the consultants are somewhat inhibited from utilizing the flexibility in how they choose to approach the work due to the clients' demands and expectations. On the other hand, there appears to be another factor inhibiting the consultants from utilizing the flexibility. Kim mentions how she sometimes prefers to have clear frames and instructions:

“Well, I am pretty careful sometimes with how I approach the task, since I do not want to risk having to do it again, if it is not in line with my manager's expectations. Then I usually double-check because I sometimes prefer clear guidelines regarding what I am supposed to do.” – Kim

Kim appears to be somewhat reluctant to utilize the flexibility since the way of approaching may not be in line with what the manager, and essentially the client, is expecting. Instead, Kim prefers clear guidelines over flexibility in order to avoid extra work. Regardless of whether all employees exploit the flexibility or not, they appear to perceive the opportunity of more autonomy when working from home than they did in the office. Much because they have less contact with their managers and because they have to complete tasks more independently now, in their isolated working environment. Moreover, it is evident that it is harder for the managers to control the junior employees' behavior as they now have more autonomy. Therefore, in the next chapter, we will further explore how control may be perceived in the new virtual setting.

4.4 Virtual control

4.4.1 Surveillance in the virtual landscape

With the abrupt changes from office work to virtual work at home, a shift in how surveillance occurs appears to have taken place. Managers can no longer step by the consultants' desks to check and ensure they are on the right track. On the contrary, different ways seem to naturally have substituted or complemented the surveillance that previously took place at the office. Kim acknowledges the perception of limited possibilities regarding surveillance physically and the impact, from a consultant point of view:

“My project leader does not currently have the same insights into the work I do, and it was much easier to gain that awareness at the office, making it easier to detect errors early if I were to work in a completely different direction than they would expect. So I definitely think it is important to have these frequent follow-ups.” – Kim

Following the difficulties resulting from physical absence, the project leaders appear to have found other ways of keeping track of the consultants, how much they work and how their projects progress. Jamie elaborates on how project leaders possibly can detect whether and how much the consultants are working by virtually checking presence and absence:

“Well, as a project leader you kind of notice the people who are up working late on complicated tasks. Firstly, we have Google Hangouts where you can see a green dot on the consultants being online, which is a way of knowing if they are still up working. Additionally, you often receive a message in the chat here and there asking for feedback: ‘Do you wanna take a look at the work I did? Do you think it works like this?’ On the contrary, you experience radio silence until the next day from the consultants finishing work early. Apart from that, I guess one does not know. Well, I guess it may also be the case that the person who doesn't make a sound is actually just focused, working by themselves.” – Jamie

At the same time, as the project leaders may have some indications, given from Jamie's argument, showing how much and when the consultants are or are not working, the quality of the surveillance appears to be problematic to determine. On the one hand, a consultant being online may imply that they are working. However, in practice, that person may do something

entirely different on their computer while still being online, able to ask and answer questions in the chat. On the other hand, similarly to how Jamie is arguing, consultants being offline may still be working peacefully by themselves. The perception regarding complications of ensuring certain behaviors is evident. Billie and Alex mention another way of which the managers keep track of work through the time reporting, subsequently having the possibility to evaluate the number of hours in relation to results:

“Now, the manager keeps an eye on me through my time reports and so on. Basically, making sure it all goes in line with the plan.” – Billie

“We assign all our hours to a certain project and adding too many hours will obviously be visible in relation to the results.” – Alex

The difficulties in determining certain behaviors while being physically apart have been prominently acknowledged throughout the different interviews. Alternatively, the managers can keep track of time in relation to results. Certain analyses and presentations of data are thereby easier to evaluate than the actual behaviors that may form the basis for a certain result. Nevertheless, the potential evaluation appears to stress a perception among the consultants that their performance may be evaluated in relation to how many hours they assign to a project. Andie further strengthens the argument by acknowledging the importance of performing in order to report time with a good conscience:

“But it is very clear that I also must have accomplished something in order to report time with a good conscience.” – Andie

In addition to the surveillance initiated by project leaders or managers, colleagues can also surveil each other. Similar to how managers can see when people are online, colleagues can equivalently pursue the same evaluation. Jessie mentions the folder of which contains all the shared documents and how (s)he can see when somebody edited it last:

“Then we have this folder where all shared documents are, saved as a shared drive on my computer. If we then have one data book each and both are on the shared drive, I can see every time colleagues update it. Then I may see that it says 00:32 and then I know that they were up late, working, so to speak.” – Jessie

Whether and how colleagues make judgments of how much others are working will be elaborated further on in section 4.4.2 about norms, but what is important to consider in this paragraph is prominently the ability that peers have to surveil each other. Another interesting activity evolving from the remote work is a review to check how much work different peers have on their tables. Andie describes how the activity which appears to have become a tradition was initiated by consultants and not managers:

“Like ‘Should we not go for a review where everybody says what they are up to and if one has too much or too little on their table?’ and then it suddenly became a tradition. (...) It is not like it was initiated from the management team.” – Andie

The review was hence initiated from peers with the purpose of keeping track of the different workloads that colleagues have and what they are up to on a weekly basis. Especially intriguing in this context is the unwillingness among consultants to express that they have too much to do, regardless of their actual workload. Many of the consultants mention that the workload has been really high for the last couple of months, but they do not express it openly for some reason. Kim mentions the general perception which seems to permeate the opinion regarding high workloads:

“Well, people never really say that they have too much to do.” – Kim

Exactly why this perception is reoccurring among the consultants may vary between different persons and personalities, and we intend to further explore the reason by highlighting different norms in the next section.

4.4.2 Existing norms reinforced in the virtual landscape

The fact that the consultant role implies hard work and late nights may not come across as unexpected for many. Although an acceptance of the situation appears to permeate the views among the consultants, there are differing opinions about what impact working late nights may have. On the one hand, hard work resulting in increased performances appears to trigger motivation and a sense of team spirit to some. On the other hand, many highlight negative aspects of consultants being overworked and yet continue to embrace more work. We claim that norms which to some extent were established before the pandemic remains and are further reinforced virtually. First, we will turn to the positive aspects, and secondly, the negative.

4.4.2.1 The will of saying yes to more work in contribution to the team spirit

Some of the consultants underline an acceptance of the tough situation along with the perception that high workloads can strengthen the team spirit. Logan states:

“Well, the workload has been pretty much the same for years, and I believe it can be rather positive for the team-spirit to work a little extra.” – Logan.

Additionally, Jessie underlines how the state of having much work on one’s table is manageable and even fair when knowing that everybody else is caught up in the same situation:

“Nobody works themselves to death. Well, if I feel that I have hell of a lot to do, then everybody else probably has that too, so it is distributed fairly well.” – Jessie

The acceptance of the tough situation of having ‘hell of a lot to do’ appears to be due to a sense of belonging in the team and the feeling of how crucial it is to contribute. The perception of everybody working equally hard for the team to reach the goals seems to trigger motivation, at least for Jessie. Interestingly, it is only an assumption, which appears to be triggered by the norm of working much and late. As outlined previously, there are virtual boundaries partly obstructing consultants from actually knowing how much others work. It is rather based on a feeling, which Logan elaborates further on, stressing the positive team spirit and benevolence within the team:

“Well, it feels like everybody in our team wants to do a great job and help each other out. Then you even prefer the situation of working late nights all week, in order to do well as a team. We

kind of have that mentality in the group, where we support and help each other. You basically are aware that there sometimes is a lot to do, and sometimes less, it is just how our job is.” – Logan

Being able to maintain a strong team spirit where everyone is working their asses off for the team’s success can, of course, be interpreted as something extraordinary, even close to a workplace-utopia. Especially if everybody conforms to the norm of working late nights and accepting the conditions, even if they are tough. Jessie further strengthens the argument of the team spirit by describing the perception of how everybody, regardless of position, works equally hard. (S)he further implies an irritation that possibly would occur if people do not comply with the norms and pull their straws to the stack:

“I feel that everybody is working hard. The project leader is working at least as hard as I do. If I am up until 01 AM, he is probably up until then as well. That is great, cause then I know that nobody is only chilling while I have to do all the shit, but rather, we work together, and it does not really matter which position you have. You work in a team and the team will accomplish things together. Nobody should have to work their asses off while somebody else is downtown drinking wine.” – Jessie

Whether or not everybody is working equally hard for the team is hard to determine virtually, but at least that appears to be the perception among a majority of the consultants. The team spirit may partially have enhanced, but we ask ourselves the question of how long it will work and continuously be strengthened virtually or if it will eventually collapse. The acceptance appears to be partly because of the pandemic context and the fact that the challenging situation is beyond anybody’s control. However, the effectiveness of remote work is outside the scope of this study, but we scrape the surface of negative perceptions of high workloads as well, as opposed to the enhanced positive team spirit.

4.4.2.2 The reluctance to say no to more work although a saturation prevails

Kim mentions the awareness in the team regarding high workloads but also acknowledges the acceptance in the context with the argument that there is no room to whine about it:

“My colleagues have probably known that it has been tough for me, but it is how the job is. It implies late nights sometimes and there is a deadline to adjust to and then it is really just about

getting it done. (...) Well, I think it is about a certain mentality within the team that it is expected of you to get stuff done and in some periods, the workloads are heavy and then you simply cannot whine about it.” – Kim

The fact that it is tough sometimes and that the consultants generally accept the situation is evident. What is particularly interesting and even astonishing is the unwillingness to say no to more work, regardless of how much they already have on their table. One reason may be the motivation to contribute to the team and the fear of being insufficient as a team-member. Andie highlights a perception about expressing that one has too much stuff to do:

“Well, it does not really help if somebody is saying that they have too much. There is only an upside if there is somebody having a little less to do.” – Andie

Saying no to more work may illustrate that one cannot handle the pressure and does not contribute enough to the team. The only way to satisfy a colleague who is delegating more work is to say yes, even if the workload is already high. Once again, the consultants are passionate about contributing to the company’s success, and the feeling that they indirectly inhibit it when possibly saying no is evident. Many of the consultants mention that taking on more work is voluntary, but we argue that some sort of pressure exists, implicitly pushing the consultants to work overtime. Alex exemplifies:

“In our team, I think we are good at asking if it is fine to work overtime. It is not a demand, but well... expected.” – Alex

Although there are no explicit requirements to take on more work, it is clear that certain expectations guide the consultants in deciding whether to take on more responsibility and work late nights. The degree of voluntariness may further be questioned when Logan mentions what impression saying no may bring:

“Well, if somebody would say no to staying over late if they are going to a handball game for example, one may think that the person should perhaps change jobs. That is because we have a job which results in nights sometimes getting ruined, and the weekends as well. One needs to be aware of that and I would say people accept that, in general.” – Logan

Considering the general acceptance of the tough conditions among the consultants, it appears that most are fine with staying over late and working overtime. Logan implies that it would not be accepted in the group if somebody would deviate from the norm and, for example, finish earlier and go to a game. What is a bit surprising is the fact that it is supposed to be voluntary. By all means, the consultants may be able to say no, but it could also result in judgments from the other consultants in line with ‘the person should perhaps change jobs.’ Although an acceptance exists and most seem to stay late, many appear to share the opinion of a negative impact resulting from it all, that people may work too much. Lee and Logan exemplify:

“Well, we work in an industry where people do not say no, unfortunately.” – Lee

“Unfortunately, I guess you usually are too nice, trying to push more work in with a shoehorn. Then you have to work late nights, which is not good for anybody, really. It is a tough trade-off.” – Logan

When discussing the acceptance of the high workload with the consultants, the word ‘unfortunately’ frequently arises. At the same time, as they feel the strong team spirit and want to contribute to the team’s success, many seem to realize that it may be too much to handle sometimes. Nevertheless, everybody keeps it up, does not whine, and instead embraces more work. The behaviors and attitudes are further in line with the norm of being able to handle a high workload without complaining. The norm may further be reinforced virtually, considering that the reluctance to communicate is evident virtually. Logan elaborates further:

“There is always a risk that people may say that they have a low workload and that they can help out with more work, when they in fact may have a lot to do already and just want to appear as if they have everything under control.” – Logan

A majority of the consultants recognize the high workload as well as the negative impacts they perceive and yet continue to accept more work. Although they recognize the challenging conditions, they do not want others to believe that they cannot handle it, but rather have the impression that they have everything under control. Andie supports the argument by stressing:

“I would probably never mention it if I had too much to do, I would probably just keep working and get it done.” – Andie

Whether the reluctance to say no is because of the will to contribute or the fear of not being able to determine fully. Nevertheless, we argue that the virtual situation is an important factor in the context. It namely appears to be harder to raise concerns and say no virtually compared to at the office. First off, managers do not have the same insights into how much different consultants are working, and the risk for imbalance increases. Since this imbalance is hard to recognize unless nobody speaks up, raising potential concerns becomes vital. Yet consultants restrain themselves from mentioning it. Erin highlights a reason to why, related to the physical absence:

“Half a year may have passed since I last worked with the person and if it is a project leader it is absolutely not as easy to communicate and say ‘well, you know what? I do not think this is working.’” – Erin

Everybody seems to agree that potential imbalances are unfortunate, but few raise the concerns of such imbalances. The unwillingness to complain and deviate from the norm of not being able to manage the high workloads is once again noticeable. When the consultants receive the request to take on more work, the answer will usually be a yes, in line with the norm. To some extent, the request implies a choice, but Francis elaborates on how he feels about getting such a request:

“Well, it is absolutely phrased as a question, but it is not really a question since they keep track of how much you have to do.” – Francis

Considering the virtual boundaries, it has previously been determined that it is more complicated for managers to keep track of the consultants' work, but the essence here is related to the perception among the consultants, in this case Francis's. To what extent and how managers or project leaders can keep track and control the consultants' work virtually will be elaborated on in the next section.

4.4.3 Frequent but unobtrusive managerial follow-ups virtually

Previous to the pandemic, the consultants worked physically close at the office, where it was easy for managers to keep track of project statuses and how the consultants' work progressed. With the sudden shift to virtual work, the opportunity was somewhat inhibited, although the importance of keeping track remained. The managers hence faced the challenge to stay up to date on the progress in a different way. Especially apparent in the context of Lion Consulting is more frequent, but somehow more unobtrusive or informal follow-up meetings to maintain control. It appears that the managers want the consultants to feel free and take ownership of their own work while keeping a close eye on the progress. Once again, we draw upon the difficulties that the virtual context infers by showing how the managerial follow-ups occur informally. Kim reflects upon the frequent coffee breaks that the managers initiated shortly after having started working from home with the perceived purpose of keeping track:

“When we started to work from home, we had a lot of coffee breaks and stayed in contact very frequently, but it was probably mainly to ensure that everybody did what they were supposed to do.” – Kim

The perception of being controlled is evident, but particularly interesting is that it appears to be in more informal contexts than when being at the office. Coffee breaks imply informal chats, which basically could be about anything. However, Kim emphasizes that it feels like the purpose is to remain in control of peoples' behaviors and progress in certain projects. The managers, Logan and Lee, confirm that the follow-ups take place more frequently to ensure certain behaviors and that the team is focused on the right things:

“It ends up being a lot of follow-up meetings in the projects that you are responsible for in order to make sure that your team has things to do and that they keep their focus straight.” – Logan

“It may be more calls, more booked meetings, reviews of material so to speak.” – Lee

With more frequent follow-up meetings, it is clear that the managers are doing what they can to keep track of certain behaviors. However, it appears to be a bit more problematic and time-consuming virtually. Andie and Kim both describe the processes and how they perceive them to be important, but also complicated and time-consuming:

“We usually talk it through first, what to do, so that I can keep track. Then I do it, then I show him, and then he comments on it, and lastly, I change accordingly. That’s what we keep on doing back and forth until we are satisfied. Or until he is satisfied, I guess.” – Andie

“I probably have just as many, if not more, follow-up meetings now when we work digitally because it is important. Before we could simply talk about one or two slides, but now we have to be present in these hangout-meetings and go through the presentation page by page.” – Kim

By keeping in touch virtually over phone calls and chats, the managers appear to execute certain attempts to control behaviors, but it gives the impression of complexity. Communicating back and forth about details and going through the pages one by one appear to be comparatively more time-consuming than how the processes worked at the office. Although there appear to occur attempts to control behaviors, the control attempts seem to happen more unobtrusively. Jessie mentions how a typical follow-up can take place virtually:

“The project leader asks about the status of certain powerpoint slides, for example like: ‘can I put the slides in now? Anything new that I can review?’” – Jessie

Although the managers attempt to do follow-ups frequently, questions such as ‘can I put the slides in now’ imply a certain urgency for Jessie to wrap it up, but at the same time, the manager is not directly intruding on the work. Jessie still has ownership and can simply answer the question about the status and keep working. Lee further emphasize how he varies his follow-ups depending on the consultant he follows up on:

“Consultants that I may know do not perform as well, I have to be more involved with. Then I ask for clearer, closer, faster and more frequent follow-ups to continuously steer them in the right direction to avoid surprises at the end. After all, the deadlines we work with are strict.” – Lee

Lee attempts to stay closer and be more involved in order to control behaviors and secure that they are on the right track. Interestingly, he is trying to stay close, yet he is so far away. The virtual boundaries are present and require phone calls and chat messages instead of stepping by the consultants’ desks at the office. It, however, appears to be important for the managers not

to stress the consultants in their work. The autonomy is still vital, although the managers want to keep track of the progress. Lee mentions that he is not stressing the consultants by chasing them down:

“Then you make sure to book an appointment so that you do not stress-chase them.” – Lee

Lee’s comment illustrates more involvement, but as unobtrusively as possible. To some extent, it appears that the managers want to keep control without disturbing the consultants, especially virtually. At the office, it may be perceived as a nice gesture to step by the desk once in a while to ask how everything is going, compared to calling many times during a day. Although the managers seem to be trying to control behaviors, they acknowledge that it is much harder virtually. Hence, the focus appears to have shifted a bit from behavioral focus to a greater emphasis on goals. Logan elaborates:

“People may work different times as well. Maybe one has their partner at home, working at the same time and may then need to adjust the working hours back and forth. Then we may have clear deadlines, setting it for a particular day. Everybody then works for it, and if you then get the report on that day you simply know that they did their job. One cannot really keep track of what people do all the time, but one needs to structure it with communication and clear goals.”
– Logan

As elaborated on in the sections about flexibility, the consultants experience a certain freedom, being able to structure their day differently, doing laundry, or hanging out with their partners to subsequently work more later at night. The managers appear to accept the conditions as long as the results are aligned with the expectations. As Logan acknowledges, it is more problematic to keep track of what everybody is up to at all times and emphasize that the delivery of the rapport and the result is more important. Next, we will lift our findings to an abstract level by relating them to the existing literature presented in the literature review.

5 Discussion

In this section, we will lift our empirical findings to an abstract level by discussing them in relation to the existing literature. We will begin with the arguments about control and elaborate on how the perceptions of behavioral, output, and normative control appear to change in the virtual context. Thereafter, we will address the theories about knowledge workers as well as KIFs, and argue for how the changed perceptions of control shape the perceptions of autonomy and communication.

5.1 Behavioral control dominated by output control

Following the environmental jolt of Covid-19, the consultancy work, which traditionally was characterized by people sharing offices and administrative support (Alvesson, 2004), has significantly changed. The managers and consultants no longer operate in the same physical landscape and have had to adapt to the new conditions. By not physically seeing each other, it appears to be harder to track how everyone's work is developing in detail. It further results in a difficulty to exercise behavioral control, close supervision, and direct orders to employees (Ouchi, 1979). Several examples of this have emerged from the empirical material, where consultants state that their project manager does not currently have the same insights regarding how they conduct the daily work. Alex, for instance, states: "When we sat in the office landscape, it was quite clear who of us had nothing to do" and Billie: "If you have an errand to run, you can do that without anybody questioning where you are." Even though the managers do not have the same control or possibilities to supervise the consultants closely, they can control and surveil through technology, in line with Kärreman and Rennstam's (2019) argument. In line with technological control, the consultants tell stories of how managers keep track of time reports and how it is possible to watch each other through shared documents. The consultants emphasize the increased importance of time-reporting and shared documents in the virtual context. Andie exemplifies: "It is very clear that I also must have accomplished something in order to report time with a good conscience." The quotes are suggesting that there has been an increase in the usage of technological tools to control the consultants' work. The increase in controlling through technology is similar to how Edwards (1979) argued for the shift from simple control to technological control when the former had limitations. Even if the consultants apprehend a decrease in being directly controlled, the technological tools seem to

facilitate new opportunities for managers to control the operative behavior (Barker 1993). By editing and viewing shared documents, the managers can still directly comment and give feedback on the consultant's work when it is still ongoing. Even though these opportunities exist, and the consultants are aware of them, it appears that the managers do not necessarily utilize them to a great extent.

Additionally, in the virtual setting, the managers try to increase the surveillance with the help of other technological tools, such as video calls. Our interpretation is that since they are now limited to the computers and cannot observe the consultants in the office anymore, they predominantly rely on surveillance through video meetings. As suggested by Sewell, Barker and Nyberg (2012), surveillance can be perceived as both coercive and/or caring by employees. When Lion Consulting shifted to a virtual setting, the managers enforced a lot of virtual coffee breaks. This initiative suggests an informal meeting, but as Kim elaborates: "it was probably mainly to ensure that everybody did what they were supposed to do", which further exemplifies the perception of coercive surveillance where managers may have initiated the coffee breaks to ensure performances. It also implies an attempt to control the behavior (Ouchi, 1979; Edwards, 1981), or at least monitor the consultants' behaviors frequently. Sewell, Barker and Nyberg's (2012) argument that coercive and caring surveillance may co-exist, but we would like to add one aspect to the argument. As exemplified in the virtual coffee breaks, they were presented as caring through the informal setting a coffee break implies. Nevertheless, they were prominently perceived as coercive by the consultants, who mainly felt controlled and surveilled in a new way. We argue that the virtual setting may cause a shift in the dynamics of coercive and caring surveillance, implying that surveillance may be perceived as coercive to a more considerable extent in a virtual setting. Additionally, managers appear to try to create new moments to practice simple control in the virtual context. We argue that it is apparent in the situations where the managers ask for updates, unobtrusively, for example, during virtual coffee breaks. We argue that they, thereby, try to exercise simple control virtually.

Although the managers make several attempts to exercise behavioral control virtually through, for example, frequent managerial follow-ups, they also state that it is difficult and more time-consuming. Logan, for instance, expresses the following: "Unfortunately, it becomes much more complex when you have to schedule a meeting in the calendar". Therefore, despite all the attempts to control the behavior through technology and surveillance, we can identify a new trend in Lion Consulting's way of exercising control - an increased output control. As

mentioned by Kim: “It’s more about the task getting done and then how we got there is not as important these days as when you sat in the office.”. The manager Lee exemplifies it similarly: “Now, I usually say, you can do and present it exactly as you want to as long as it meets the expected quality.”. We argue that both managers and consultants understand the difficulties with behavioral control in a virtual context and hence put more emphasis on output. When enforcing output control, the focus is on the result rather than every step towards it (Ouchi & Maguire, 1975; Eisenhardt, 1985). Therefore, the new virtual setting has not changed the conditions for output control to the same extent as for behavioral control. It does not matter that the managers cannot see the consultants anymore because the responsibility of the assignments has tiled over onto the consultant instead, similar to how Rennstam (2007) and Kärreman and Rennstam (2019) argued. The manager rather reconnects after the work is done, similar to the independence Rennstam (2007) refers to.

Our study’s results find an alignment between managers and consultants, where both parties admit more focus on results than how to get there. Hence, we argue that the increase in output control results from the new virtual context and thereby the difficulties in exercising behavioral control virtually. Ouchi and Maguire’s study (1975) showed independence between behavioral and output control, implying less usage of one does not necessarily mean increased usage of the other. In the case of Lion Consulting, the results, however, suggest that the shift in the environment has affected and limited the usage of behavioral control, and at the same time, placed a greater emphasis on the usage of output control. This means, according to our study, in the new virtual context, behavioral control has been dominated by output control.

5.2 Normative control inevitably reinforced in the virtual context

As emphasized throughout the study, the consultants experience certain problematizing conditions which appeared to arise virtually, conditions which we label virtual barriers. Among them is the barrier which inhibits consultants from keeping track of how much other colleagues are working virtually, compared to previously at the office where they easily noticed imbalances in workloads. Nevertheless, in line with the norm of working many and long hours, most consultants assume everybody is working equally hard, even if they do not have any

concrete insights to base the argument on. Jessie, for example, states, “If I feel that I have hell of a lot to do, then everybody else probably has that too, so it is distributed fairly well.”. In line with the argument outlined in the first section about norms, the consultants feel a certain motivation arising from conducting hard work together as a team. It further corresponds to Barley and Kunda’s (1992) argument about subtle normative control bringing loyalty and commitment. What is particularly astonishing in the case of Lion Consulting is the unawareness regarding how much colleagues actually work. At the office, they could easily notice and be boosted when the entire team worked hard, but virtually, they simply make the assumption and keep working hard based on that. We believe that it may be due to two different reasons. Either because of the strong will to contribute to the team and being perceived as a valuable team member or the fear of being an insufficient team member. The positive aspects of desiring to contribute to the team within Lion Consulting may be in line with Alexander’s (2012) argument about norms creating a sense of collective responsibility promoting the importance of cooperation instead of acting selfishly. Alexander (2012) also discusses the dimension of individualism-collectivism, illustrating the degree of which individuals in the team ascribe their identity from the self rather than from their relationships to others in the group. In the case of Lion Consulting, it appears that collectivism is dominating to a great extent. Andie’s argument regarding “It does not really help if somebody is saying that they have too much. There is only an upside if there is somebody having a little less to do” depicts the prominent focus on collectivism over individualism within the team. It is, moreover, expressed that it is voluntary to work overtime, “not a demand, but well... expected”. Hence, there are no explicit requirements to work overtime or take on more work, but the expectations, both from the management and peers, influence the consultants to take on more work and work late nights. As Kim expresses, “It is a heavy workload sometimes and then you simply cannot whine about it.” The occurrences within Lion Consulting are corresponding to Barker’s (1993) case to a great extent. In Barker’s case, the behavioral control got dominated by and almost substituted by normative control, where the pressure from the peers outweighed the bureaucratic management principles. The strong peer control is evident in Lion Consulting when discussing what would happen if a peer deviated from the norm of staying over late. The consultants expressed how such a person “perhaps should change jobs.”. Among this collectivism and peer pressure, the consultants appear to agree that the demanding workloads may not be suitable for anybody. Logan mentions, “I guess you usually are too nice, trying to push more work in with a shoehorn. Then you have to work late nights, which is not good for anybody, really.”. Although the consultants may believe that it is not beneficial for anybody, they yet continue to

embrace more work, regardless of their current workload. We argue that the identity aspect of normative control plays a significant role in the process.

A strong social identity is of particular importance within KIFs (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004), and a prevalent perception is that a knowledge worker is a hardworking and committed employee (Alvesson, 2004). Saying no to more work may imply that they cannot handle the pressure and do not contribute enough to the team, which a consultant should do, in line with the perceptions at Lion Consulting. As Logan expresses, many may say that they can help out with more work when they, in fact, have a lot to do but “just want to appear as if they have everything under control.” It is, moreover, similar to what Wynn and Rao (2019) found out about consultants in their study. Namely, that consultants perceive the challenging conditions and long working hours as a test of their professional attributes. If they can manage it, they are suited for the industry, but if they cannot, they are not and may as well leave.

However, we also, somewhat surprisingly, identified aspects of escaping from the traditional behaviors or norms, which corresponds to Müller’s (2020) research where the employees escape into the night. In Müller’s (2020) study, the individual and collective experiences of working at night enabled a nocturnal mindset, which differed from the one during the day. Thereby, the employees escaped managerial control, which was not present to the same extent during the night. In our study, many consultants utilize the flexibility of working whenever, escaping the office hours as Alex mentions: “If the weather is amazing, one may skip work for a few hours during the day and get back to it during the night instead.” Hence, the consultants deviate from the traditional office hours by working at different times, thereby escaping the traditional way of working. However, we argue that the new norms of working whenever are developed similarly to how the nocturnal mindsets develop in Müller’s (2020) study. The deviating behaviors appear to be a part of a virtual mindset of working whenever in Lion Consulting.

Discussing Lion Consulting in the virtual context with the existing literature as a foundation, it is evident that extensive forms of normative control are occurring virtually. We argue that the normative control, which was prominent at the office regarding long working hours and staying over late, may have been further reinforced in a virtual context. Primarily since consultants have no clue about how much others are working, but mainly assume that they work equally hard. This may be both due to the similarities with concertive control (Barker, 1993), as well

as the perceptions of identity regarding how a consultant should be, as well as work. Lastly, we will turn to the interplay between the forms of control by relating the findings in Lion Consulting to the existing literature.

5.3 The interplay between the different forms of control in a virtual context

As previously highlighted, behavioral-, output- and normative control can be simultaneously active (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). In their study *Cages in Tandem*, Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) argue that softer control mechanisms through values, identities, ideas, and meaning can take place together with the bureaucratic characteristics within behavioral control of performance measures and hierarchies to create total control. They also emphasize the higher relevance of the softer mechanisms in contexts where innovation is important in KIFs. Our findings in Lion Consulting partly confirm Kärreman and Alvesson's (2004) ideas, but we nuance the understanding by outlining how the shift in the different forms of control may have taken place in the virtual context.

As the reader probably remembers, the behavioral control was apparent at the physical office before the pandemic. The managers stepped by the consultants' desks to check in regularly and ensure that the work was on the right track. We identified several attempts from the managers to virtually pursue these measures, but somehow more unobtrusively and informally. Kim, for instance, mentions the coffee breaks to stay in contact frequently virtually to "mainly ensure that everybody did what they were supposed to do.". Nevertheless, the managers started to realize the difficulties of ensuring quality in the behavioral follow-ups. Logan mentions, "Now when everyone is at home, it is more difficult, both for me as a project manager and for the managers to keep track of how much the staff actually works." Following this realization in the new context, the managers started to loosen up the behavioral control by instead emphasizing results, what Kärreman and Rennstam (2019) refer to as output control. Lee mentions that "You can do and present it exactly as you want to as long as it meets the expected quality and illustrates what it is supposed to.". The statement depicts that the how is less important since the consultants now can do it pretty much however they want to, as long as the results align with the managers' expectations. Moreover, all hours that the consultants' work are reported

and assigned to certain projects, and Alex emphasizes that “adding too many hours will obviously be visible in relation to the output.”. Controlling the output is obviously an example of output control, but in this case, it is done through technology since everything is done virtually. Hence, it may also be an example of technological control (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019), but in this case, not of behaviors, but rather output. The normative control aspect becomes evident if one pays attention to Andie’s statement: “It is very clear that I also must have accomplished something in order to report time with a good conscience.”. Since the consultants will be evaluated based on the output, we argue that the consultants appear to be affected by the normative control through perceptions of high expectations within the team. Both from managers and peers related to identity and the norms, which we elaborated on in the previous section. To conclude the discussion, we will provide an example of an interplay between the forms of control based on Foucault’s idea of Panopticon. In our case, it, however, differs, once again, by illustrating the virtual context.

5.3.1 Panvirtual – a customized virtual Panopticon

To freshen up the reader’s memory on the existing theory, Panopticon is an idea of how guards can surveil and control prisoners. The theory suggests that the prisoners are kept in constant self-control and behave well, not because they are watched all the time but because they may be watched all the time (Wechta, 2020). They can namely not see when and if the guard is watching, but they are aware that somebody may be watching. We argue that behavioral control, more specifically simple control through direct surveillance (Edwards, 1981), is evident. Moreover, the normative aspect of controlling the prisoners’ thought patterns (Kunda, 1992) is evident since the control and awareness that somebody may watch them puts them in constant self-control. In the case of Lion Consulting, we draw upon the idea and how it, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, can happen in a consultancy virtually.

Jamie mentions Google Hangouts, “where you can see a green dot on the consultants being online, which is a way of knowing if they are still up working. (...) On the contrary, you experience radio silence until the next day from the consultants finishing work early.” This opportunity of seeing when other consultants are online corresponds to the technical form of behavioral control (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019), but a little differently compared to the traditional theory. The consultants, namely, experience the virtual barrier of not being able to see what the others are doing. However, they rather assume that being online implies working and being offline implies not working. That further depicts the difficulties of ensuring the

quality of behavioral control virtually, since somebody may very well be online, doing something else on their laptop. Similarly, somebody that is offline may very well be working by themselves in peace. In the case of Lion Consulting, it is, however, not only one side who can control the other, as in the Panopticon, but everybody can control each other. Jessie, additionally, mentions “this folder where all shared documents are, saved as a shared drive on my computer. If we then have one data book each and both are on the shared drive, I can see every time colleagues update it. Then I may see that it says 00:32 and then I know that they were up late, working”. Jessie’s example illustrates both possibilities of output control as well as normative control. The consultants can see the results directly online and can thereby control the results or the output. Since the norms of working much and late are evident, we argue that the expectations that everybody is complying with the norms further pressure the consultants to perform and comply. The normative control hence becomes evident since the consultants cannot technically confirm it in the virtual context. The outlined perceptions of control appear to have changed the interpretations regarding autonomy and communication, which will be elaborated on in the next section.

5.4 New interpretations of autonomy and communication in the virtual context of working from home

As a result of the changed perceptions of control, we argue that the perceptions of autonomy and communication have changed. Firstly, we will elaborate on the requirement to operate more autonomously, which is a result of the behavioral control being dominated by output control along with the expectations from managers to take more responsibility. Secondly, we will depict how the reluctance to communicate may be a result of the virtual context and requirement of autonomy.

Since the support from management is limited compared to at the office when everybody could easily ask for help by walking over to somebody’s desk, the consultants have to operate more autonomously. Jamie, for instance, mentions the perception that many now instead “try to solve it on their own”, implying that they “may sit 6 hours overtime instead of solving it quickly with help from a more senior coworker”. At the same time, the consultants additionally get to take more responsibility and experience more autonomy, which is another critical factor within KIFs (Drucker, 1999; Alvesson, 2004).

The knowledge-worker needs a fairly high degree of autonomy and the opportunity to manage themselves (Alvesson, 2004). Additionally, Drucker (1999) underlines how the possibility of continuous innovation regarding the tasks and responsibilities has to be evident. In the case of Lion Consulting, the managers are facilitating autonomy by providing freedom in how the consultants approach tasks. Logan mentions, “then they get a lot of freedom in how to conduct the analysis” and Lee states, “they can do and present it exactly as they want.”. Lee and Logan additionally mention that the consultants have a higher degree of autonomy and responsibilities regarding their own tasks, compared to the situation at the office. This is argued for by stating that employees do not reach out and ask as many questions in the virtual environment as before the pandemic. Drawing on our argument about how some consultants may try to time-consumingly solve the problem by themselves, instead of reaching out, the autonomy may bring both positive and negative aspects. “Now I get to sit and work in peace”, is a frequently occurring comment among the consultants regarding the new context. It, however, appears to demand the need to be able to work more independently, as some of the managers express. Although autonomy is necessary in KIFs (Alvesson, 2004), it may not only be interpreted as something desirable but also as an inevitable necessity. The demands from the clients are pretty much the same, according to the consultants. Erin mentions: “I cannot go and do a lot of analyzes that the customer has not paid for.” That is further in line with Alvesson’s (2004) argument about the consultants’ need to constantly satisfy the clients in the ‘idiosyncratic client services’. Nevertheless, the demands from the management requiring consultants to work more independently in the virtual context have changed, and Kim mentions how that does not necessarily have to be desirable: “I usually double-check with my manager because I sometimes prefer clear guidelines regarding what I am supposed to do.”. By demanding or preferring guidelines, Kim somewhat differs from the typical knowledge worker who desires autonomy (Drucker, 1999; Alvesson, 2004). Although many knowledge-intensive companies are distinct from bureaucratic principles, there are exceptions (Alvesson, 2004). Alvesson (2004) further argues that the traditional supervision by management is more difficult to apply in a KIF and that it usually occurs more flexibly in line with the concept of autonomy. The study from Covalleski et al. (1998) showed that the pressure of performance targets and control mechanisms from management put junior partners in a position of subordination and fewer opportunities for autonomy. In our study, it appears that the same principles are affecting Kim. (S)he adds to the statement: “Well, I am pretty careful sometimes with how I approach the task since I do not want to risk having to do it again if it is not in line with my manager’s expectations.”. Although

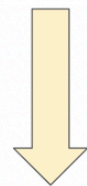
the consultants at Lion Consulting may experience higher degrees of autonomy, inevitably or desirably, where their operational authority may be unrelated to their hierarchical position (Løwendahl, 1997), they still need to adapt to the clients' and managers' expectations. Next, we will turn to the importance of extensive communication to elaborate on the shift resulting from the virtual context.

The need for extensive communication for coordination and problem-solving is evident in KIFs (Alvesson, 2004). The work-tasks at Lion Consulting are pretty much the same as before, involving complex group-works, giving advice to clients, and having a shared understanding about the approach before presentations. With such conditions, Deetz (1997) argues that the communication aspect is highly relevant. However, almost exclusively, all communication occurs virtually nowadays, and the consultants at Lion Consulting experience a few inconveniences. It is, for example, harder to get a hold of people according to Andie: "before I could just walk past the office where my boss was sitting, I now have to call him/her, email him/her, and maybe (s)he will not answer." Additionally, Erin mentions that "a normal chat can be interpreted as quite cold, especially compared to physically.". With chats and emails, the consultants hence lose the nuance, compared to being physically at the same location, being able to ensure that the messages are interpreted in line with the intention behind. The result from these inconveniences in Lion Consulting is rather surprising, particularly if one keeps the importance of extensive communication in KIFs in mind (Alvesson, 2004). The new routines, namely, appear to make the consultants reluctant to communicate as extensively. Instead of continuously bringing up ideas and problems as they arise, they "collect a bunch of problems" that they encountered and then "try to resolve them all at once" instead, as Jamie mentions. Additionally, the consultants can be reluctant to reach out because they doubt the importance of the problem and whether it is worth it to go through the inevitable inconveniences through calls, emails, and chats. We find it particularly interesting how the virtual context appears to revolutionize the way of communicating and how it changes the consultants' perceptions about communication. They all appear to agree that communication is crucial, but the inconveniences simply appear to outweigh the importance of receiving help or bringing up an issue, at least based on the consultants' perceptions and actions. Additionally, the expectations from managers to solve tasks more autonomously, may reinforce the reluctance to communicate, since the consultants do not want to "disturb the managers". Next, we will conclude the discussion by depicting our theoretical contributions in a table.

5.5 Our theoretical contribution illustrated in a table

The model describes how the variables were pre-pandemic, contrasted to how they are perceived, now, during the pandemic when working virtually from home.

	Pre-Pandemic	During Pandemic (Virtually)
Behavioral Control	Frequent, natural follow-ups in person by stepping by the desks, checking what is up.	Attempt to pursue the same, if not more, follow-ups virtually, but the context inhibits and problematizes the quality of the behavioral control.
Output Control	Large emphasis on results and output.	As a result from the difficulties controlling behaviors, the output control naturally gained increased significance. Not to say that output is more important than before the pandemic, but we identified a relative increase in output control in relation to behavioral control.
Normative Control	Norms established regarding working much, late nights and never complaining about the tough conditions. Norms of which are deeply rooted within the industry.	The consultants have limited ways of controlling who follows the established norms virtually. The consultants are convinced that everybody is still working equally hard and late at night based on assumptions of the previous norms. However, a new norm of taking breaks during the days is evident and likely collectively developed in a new virtual mindset.
The interplay between the forms of control	All forms of control are simultaneously active. Behavioral control through physical follow-ups, strong emphasis on output and strong norms established.	Intentional dominance of output- over behavioral control due to the realized difficulties in determining or controlling behaviors. Inevitably, the normative control is even more prominent following less physical interaction. Panvirtual as an illustration of how the interplay may occur in consultancies virtually



The perceptions of control further shaping the interpretations of autonomy and communication virtually

	Pre-Pandemic	During Pandemic (Virtually)
Autonomy	Relatively high degrees of autonomy, within certain frames of authorisation. Work-tasks are clear based on certain hierarchical positions.	Inevitable increase in autonomy following the domination of output control, implying more responsibility, both resulting in consultants perceiving flexibility to approach tasks their way, but at the same time higher demands and pressures to perform.
Communication	Strong need for extensive communication, in line with how Lion Consulting operated pre-pandemic.	Extensive communication exhausting when occurring virtually, leads to reluctance to communicate for consultants at Lion Consulting. Thereby leading to less communication between the consultants.

Table 1. Illustration of the results of the study

6 Conclusion

This section is divided into three parts, where we first explain and elaborate on our table of theoretical contribution to answer our research questions. In that way, we nuance the identified differences between perceptions of control pre-pandemic and during the pandemic and how it may have affected the interpretations of autonomy and communication. Moreover, we elaborate on the practical implications of our study, both from a managerial and consultant perspective. Lastly, we acknowledge the limitations of our conclusions and suggest future research.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

The study's purpose was to augment the understanding regarding how employees in knowledge-intensive firms perceive virtual control when working from home compared to at the office. We return to our research questions, which we will answer in this section:

1. *How do individuals in knowledge-intensive firms perceive control in the virtual context of working from home during Covid-19 compared to at the physical office?*
2. *How may the changed perceptions of control shape individuals' interpretations of autonomy and communication?*

We will begin by addressing the first question regarding the perceptions of control virtually to compare how control was perceived before the pandemic. Secondly, we will illustrate the implications that the changed perceptions of control appear to have had on the interpretations of autonomy and communication.

Table 1. Illustration of the theoretical contribution

In this study, we contribute to the literature on KIFs and control by addressing the new context, nuancing how control can be perceived virtually. Firstly, we will outline the different forms of

control separately and how the perceptions may change, to subsequently conclude with how the interplay between the different forms may take place virtually.

With the common setting of sharing offices and administrative support (Alvesson, 2004), behavioral control in Lion Consulting was exercised prominently through frequent follow-up meetings in person where the managers stepped by consultants' desks, asking how the projects were progressing. The physical setting facilitated the processes of ensuring what consultants were doing at pretty much all times since managers could physically follow up and see how work was progressing. In the virtual setting, however, these frequent follow-up meetings appear to be more problematic to conduct. The managers try to replicate the direct control by scheduling frequent virtual follow-up meetings, but we underline a few critical differences. Firstly, the managers are not able to conduct them as often as before. Secondly, it appears to be more time-consuming. Thirdly, the managers appear to emerge as unobtrusively as possible, emphasizing that they do not want to stress-chase anybody and instead let them work in peace. They do, however, have access to technological tools through the Google Platform to see who is active or not. However, as previously elaborated on, it is problematic to control the behaviors and assume that people are working just because they are online. Instead, managers put more emphasis on results, which is in line with output control (Ouchi & Maguire, 1975). We do not claim that results or output control are more important virtually than before. The expectations of high performances, namely prevail, both from clients and managers. However, we argue for a relative increase in the output control compared to behavioral control, i.e., the behavioral control has been dominated by output control. We illustrate the shift by strengthening Rennstam's (2007) argument that output control can be of more significance when behavioral control is harder to ensure. How consultants conduct their analyzes is of less importance now, although the managers attempt to follow up through the virtual follow-ups. They rather emphasize the importance of the results and that they look like they are supposed to do.

We, moreover, suggest that there has been an inevitable increase in normative control, with the shift from the office to the virtual landscape. Consultants can no longer sufficiently ensure if peers comply with the norms of working late and much (if one ignores the way of seeing if somebody is online or not). Instead, the consultants appear to be affected by the previously existing norms by assuming that everybody still follows them. We argue that the loyalty and commitment result of normative control (Barley & Kunda, 1992) is prominent in the case of Lion Consulting. The consultants emphasize the team spirit and the importance of contributing

to the team, which may bolster the assumption that everybody is working equally hard for the team. Additionally, we argue that the fear of not living up to the consultant identity of working much (Wynn & Rao, 2019) may pressure the consultants to work late and overtime. Interestingly enough, many of the consultants, however, appear to escape the office hours, similarly to how the employees escaped into the night in Müller's (2020) article. In that sense, they comply with the norms of working late with the exception that they possibly are off some hours during the day. They do not, in that sense, necessarily deviate from the norm. The norm is rather re-created in the virtual context accordingly with the consultants' experiences and collective understanding while working from home.

We, additionally, acknowledge that the interplay between the forms of control has been active pre-pandemic. However, we argue for a changed relationship between the forms, as for significance and prominence virtually. Not only in line with the intentional output over behavioral domination but additionally, the unintentional and somewhat inevitable increase in normative control when the consultants are unable to see each other and ensure how much others are working. We exemplify this interplay by stressing the customization of a Panopticon (Wechta, 2020) in a virtual context by what we label Panvirtual. In the virtual context, everybody has the possibility of technically surveilling everybody, as opposed to the context of Panopticon. The consultants at Lion Consulting can both see whether other consultants are online or not, but also what others update in certain shared documents. In that way, the consultants have some insights into when others are online, how much they are working, and the output others are producing. Although the opportunities to surveil are limited, consultants are aware that they may be surveilled. Repeatedly, we stress that the normative control aspect of certain expectations may reinforce the perception that everybody is working equally hard.

Having answered the first research question, we turn to the second in order to depict how the changed perceptions of control appear to have influenced the interpretations of autonomy and communication in KIFs.

The possibility of having a certain degree of autonomy and responsibility in tasks are essential factors within KIFs (Drucker, 1999; Alvesson, 2004). Before the pandemic, the consultants at Lion Consulting experienced autonomy by having a certain degree of responsibility regarding approaching tasks and conducting certain analyses. However, it is evident that the degree of autonomy is further reinforced in the virtual context. We argue that the complications regarding

the exercise of behavioral control and thereby the prominent increase in output control are significant in the context. Since the managers put relatively little emphasis on behaviors and rather focus on results, the consultants become more flexible and gain responsibility to conduct tasks more autonomously. Additionally, the consultants stress that they do not currently reach out as much because they do not want to disturb and take other colleagues' time in vain. The managers further admit that they do not receive as many questions now virtually compared to at the office. To some extent, the consultants appear to thrive by having more autonomy. However, the reluctance to reach out for help may be significantly unproductive, particularly if consultants sit six hours with a task that could have taken five minutes with managerial support. This reluctance to reach out somewhat becomes problematic. Moreover, some consultants stress that they prefer having guidelines to ensure that their work aligns with the managerial expectations. In that sense, autonomy may bring undesired complications in the form of deficient communication. Since communication is vital in the context of KIFs, considering, for instance, the prevalence of complex group works (Alvesson, 2004), we find it particularly interesting that communication has decreased. The consultants appear to be reluctant since the process is perceived to be complicated and time-consuming through phone and video calls. The theoretical contribution further calls for practical implications, which will be elaborated on in the next section.

6.2 Practical implications

The theoretical contribution additionally brings some practical implications for KIFs to consider in the virtual context. Although it may seem obvious to some readers that the output control may be more important than behavioral control when employees work from a distance, isolated from each other, we aim to nuance the complications and what it may implicate in practice. Virtual follow-ups, as well as technical surveillance, may be interpreted in different ways, both in line with coercive- and caring technical surveillance (Sewell, Barker & Nyberg, 2012). When initiating behavioral follow-ups, managers may want to consider and emphasize the caring intentions of doing what is best for the team, and in that way, legitimize the control and facilitate acceptance. The informal follow-ups during the coffee break may be perceived as control regardless, but it may still be something to prefer over stress-chasing employees down with phone calls to ensure that they are on the right track. Moreover, managers should acknowledge the importance of output control and let the consultants experience autonomy and a sense of responsibility in their tasks.

The inevitable autonomy may, however, bring both positive and negative implications for both employees and managers. Firstly, managers need to be aware that the need for autonomy becomes greater in the virtual context where behaviors are not as easily followed up on. They will hence not be able to control behaviors to the same extent as in physical offices. Important to recognize is also that some individuals, perhaps a majority in KIFs, thrive when working autonomously and value freedom. However, some prefer guidelines, which would benefit from clear directions and a little less autonomy.

Lastly, we want to emphasize the implications of communication. From a managerial perspective, we argue that it is essential to facilitate an atmosphere where employees feel like they can reach out regarding problems. It is likely not preferred or beneficial for any stakeholder to let employees sit six hours with a task because they are reluctant to reach out and communicate regarding the complications. Additionally, employees would benefit from realizing the importance of reaching out when facing problems, although the process may be interpreted as rather time-consuming and complicated. After all, everybody agrees that communication is vital, and yet surprisingly many are reluctant to communicate. To conclude the chapter, we will, next, elaborate on the limitations of our conclusions and suggest further research.

6.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

Keeping in mind the limited time and scope of our study, we would like to offer some suggestions for future research. Our study covered the perception of control in a virtual context in comparison to a physical work environment. We are aware that our findings have limited possibilities of being generalized. Considering our limited sample of 10 interviewees, the findings can be useful to understand how it may occur in the new virtual context in similar KIFs. Empirical generalization is, however, not possible. Therefore, it would be interesting to add to our research by investigating the effectiveness of the perceived changes. For example, whether and how much the decrease in communication and increase in autonomy changed the effectiveness or productivity for the consultants. Since virtual work may become more common throughout KIFs, it would be highly relevant to investigate these aspects.

Moreover, our study focused on several forms of control and nuanced how they interplayed with each other in a virtual context. We are aware that our contributions are relatively broad and that we were not able to deep-dive into the different forms of control to the same extent if we would have emphasized one form instead. Considering the scarcity of research in the new context, we wanted to contribute broadly and then further encourage future research to address the forms separately.

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Appendix 1 Interview guide

Introducing questions

1. Please tell us a little bit about yourself. Who are you and what do you do at Lion Consulting?
2. What does the organizational structure look like at your department?
3. How long have you worked here? What is your role?
4. Please describe a regular day at work, now remotely?

Change to virtual work

1. Do you want to tell us a bit more about the journey, i.e. from when you worked at the office until you started working from home? How did you adapt? What are the biggest differences compared to when you worked at the office?
2. What is your opinion regarding working virtually from home in the future?
3. Can you take us through a follow-up meeting and how it occurs virtually compared to before?
4. Do you feel like the demands have changed? For example regarding work tasks and deadlines?
5. What about the allocation of work tasks and responsibilities? How does that occur now?
6. Have you experienced any problems in the transition? (*Only asked if we did not get enough information from question 1.*)
7. How do you currently gain motivation and inspiration from your managers while working from home?
8. Do you think your job is as fun as before?
9. What kind of rituals do you have at Lion Consulting? For instance, coffee breaks, dinners or afterworks?
10. Do you experience any changes regarding the informal contact between you and your colleagues?
11. How would you describe teamwork in a project? What kind of role do you enter in the group in relation to the others?

12. How do you perceive that the relationships with your colleagues have been affected long-term, when working from home?

Leadership

1. Who do you turn to for advice and why? What triggers you to ask someone for help? What kind of suggestion do you seek? How often? *(Both vertical and horizontal)*
2. How is the collaboration with your manager in your tasks/projects? To what extent is your manager involved in your work? How do you perceive it? *(Examine their perception and feelings about it, what does the leader/follower relationship look like?)(what is the wanted involvement vs the actual involvement, do they comply well with feedback? do they appreciate the managerial involvement or not?)*
3. How do you help each other succeed? *(Make sure they motivate horizontally) (Do they mention competing or collaborating?) (Informal relationships interesting as well)*
4. Would you like to tell us what kind of freedom you have in your work? If possible, please provide examples on what kind of initiatives you can possibly take. Does it vary between project/clients and in different tasks?