Leading Without Leading

The Impact of Reluctant Leadership on Knowledge Workers

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Abstract

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Purpose	The purpose of this study is to investigate how reluctant leadership impacts followership in the context of knowledge-intensive firms. In this study, we seek to identify how the leader, followers and their situation mutually influence each other in the context of reluctant leadership.
Methodology	The paper is based on a qualitative single case study and is primarily based on interpretive research traditions. The empirical data is generated through semi-structured interviews with a manager and his subordinates, as well as an observation of a team meeting and analysis of internal documents.
Theoretical Perspective	Our literature review presents existing research about leadership, with a focus on reluctant leadership, followership, as well as knowledge-intensive firms and knowledge workers. Additionally, we present Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership as a framework to combine the theory.
Conclusion	We conclude that reluctant leadership does impact followers in giving them more autonomy in their work, but also negatively affects collaboration, communication and knowledge sharing. Furthermore, we have determined that both the leader, followers and situation can support or reinforce reluctant leadership.
Keywords	Reluctant leadership, Followership, Knowledge workers, Knowledge-intensive Firms, Remote work, Organizational behavior

Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In today's rapidly changing and highly competitive business environment, leadership plays a critical role in the success of any organization (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). The ability of leaders to inspire and motivate their followers is essential to achieving organizational goals, particularly in knowledge-intensive firms where creativity and innovation are key drivers of success (Hislop, 2005). However, not all leaders are equally effective in their leadership practices. Some leaders may be hesitant or reluctant to take on leadership roles, which can have negative consequences for their followers and the organization as a whole (Doyle, 2016).

Reluctant leadership is a leadership style that is characterized by a lack of confidence or a reluctance to take on leadership responsibilities (Doyle, 2016). Leaders who are reluctant may be unsure of their abilities or may feel uncomfortable taking charge in situations that require decisive action. This leadership style can have negative consequences for followers, such as decreased motivation, lower job satisfaction, and decreased productivity. Moreover, in knowledge-intensive firms, where creative and innovative ideas are crucial to success, reluctant leadership may have an even more significant impact on followership (Hislop, 2005; Doyle, 2016).

Knowledge-intensive firms are organizations that rely heavily on the expertise and creativity of their employees to succeed (Hislop, 2005). These firms are characterized by a high degree of specialization and a focus on knowledge-based work, such as research and development, consulting, and technology. In these firms, effective leadership is critical to achieving organizational goals, as leaders must be able to inspire and motivate their followers to generate creative and innovative ideas.

Despite the importance of leadership in knowledge-intensive firms, little research has been conducted on the impact of reluctant leadership on followership in these organizations. Previous research has identified several factors that contribute to reluctant leadership, including a lack of

confidence, a fear of failure, and a preference for collaborative decision-making. However, the impact of reluctant leadership on followers in knowledge-intensive firms is not well understood.

This research aims to fill this gap in the literature by investigating the impact of reluctant leadership on followership in a knowledge-intensive firm by conducting a single-case study of 'GloTech Consultancy'. GloTech Consultancy is a cover-name for a Nordic consultancy company that operates internationally in more than 30 countries and employs almost 18,000 employees, however our focus will be on a single department within this company consisting of eight consultants and their manager. This department is a fairly new acquisition of the company, and is being managed by a person who fits the description of a reluctant leader. By identifying the factors that contribute to reluctant leadership and the impact of this leadership style on followers, this research can provide insights into the unique challenges facing leaders in these organizations and strategies for overcoming these challenges.

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

This study aims to understand how the behavior of leaders who are hesitant or unwilling to take on leadership roles affects their followers in organizations that rely heavily on knowledge-based work. It builds on the literature on leadership, reluctant leadership, followership, and knowledge-intensive firms. These topics are all tied together through the use of Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership, which will serve as a backdrop to our discussion. On a broader level, this study addresses issues such as knowledge sharing and collaboration as a consequence of leadership. Therefore, we hope to contribute to the research of leadership and followership in knowledge-intensive firms by exploring the implications of reluctant leadership while inspiring further research within this rather unexplored topic. This leads us to the following research question:

"How does reluctant leadership impact followership in a knowledge-intensive firm?".

1.3 Main Findings

Based on the data, the main findings are that reluctant leadership can negatively impact both collaboration, knowledge sharing, social interaction and communication within a department. This is mainly caused by the reluctant leader pushing his followers to become more autonomous in their work rather than depending on him for guidance and direction. However, this has heavily impacted the leader-follower relationship, which in turn has resulted in the employees of the department viewing him as more of a colleague or peer rather than a leader figure causing them to take on some of the leadership tasks themselves.

We found that since leadership is created from the interaction between leader, followers and the situation, each of these elements play a role in either enabling or counteracting reluctance (Hollander, 1978). Therefore, it is important to have a holistic view on the topic in order to ensure meaningful leadership for the followers of a reluctant leader.

1.4 Research Outline

This thesis consists of five chapters following this introduction. Firstly, in the literature review, we will present the theoretical background and provide an overview of the literature in order to give the reader a deeper understanding of our topic and its field of research. Secondly, in the methodology chapter, we will describe the methodological grounding for our research which includes the philosophical grounding, research approach, data collection and data analysis. Thirdly, we will present our empirical findings and our analysis of this data. Fourthly, we will discuss this data in relation to the knowledge presented in our literature review and the context of our research question. Finally, in the conclusion, we will elaborate on the theoretical contributions as well as practical implications, while reflecting on any possible limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

Leadership is a crucial component in organizations, as it provides direction, motivation, and guidance to individuals and teams towards achieving their goals. In today's knowledge-intensive economy, effective leadership has become increasingly important for the success of both knowledge-intensive firms and knowledge workers (Mládková, 2012). Despite this, not all leaders are willing or enthusiastic about taking on this kind of responsibility. Reluctant leadership, a phenomenon that has gained increasing attention in recent years, refers to individuals who have advanced into leadership roles but lack the desire or necessary skills for the job (Doyle, 2016).

Due to the way the role of being a leader has traditionally been idolized, most literature is centered around a top-down approach on how the leader can influence their followers in order to either support their personal goals or the ones of the organization (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). However, literature taking a more follower-centric approach to leadership is scarce and, in comparison to traditional leadership, fairly unexplored.

Followership is an important aspect to consider in understanding the dynamics of leadership. While effective leaders have to be able to motivate their followers to achieve shared goals and objectives, followers can likewise influence the leadership process through their attitudes and behaviors (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). This leader-follower dynamic changes in knowledge-intensive firms, where the knowledge workers, due to the specialized and valuable knowledge they possess, express a need for autonomy, recognition and knowledge sharing. Therefore, effective leadership plays a critical role in creating an environment that supports knowledge workers' creativity and productivity (Hislop, 2005).

Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership provides a useful theoretical perspective for examining the complex interactions between leaders and followers in different contexts, since it emphasizes the importance of both personal and situational factors in shaping leadership and followership behaviors (Hollander, 1978).

In order to grasp the concept of leadership in a knowledge-intensive firm, this literature review will first discuss the notion of leadership with a particular focus on both reluctant leadership and leadership in relation to followership. Then, the concept of followership will be elaborated on. Thirdly, it will address and discuss knowledge-intensive firms and knowledge workers, and their need for leadership and knowledge sharing. Lastly, Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership model as a method for analyzing the complex nature of leadership will be presented.

2.1 Leadership

Leadership has been widely researched, discussed and conceptualized in the past several decades (Khan, 2016; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). The term leadership is often used interchangeably with management, and it is therefore difficult to distinguish the terms throughout the literature. However, Maccoby (2000, p. 57) defines it as: "Managers are principally administrators - they write business plans, set budgets, and monitor progress. Leaders on the other hand, get organizations and people to change." According to him, management duties can be delegated to different people in the team, whereas leadership takes one person, the leader, to motivate, inspire, build trust and energize relationships.

Due to the popularity of leadership, numerous theories and definitions exist in the literature. In order to classify these, many theories have emerged in the 20th and 21st century including: The Great Man, Transformational, Transactional, Laissez Faire and Situational leadership theory (Khan, 2016). According to Khan (2016), leadership styles and theories never become obsolete or irrelevant but are instead adapted and re-shaped to fit the various situations a leader might find themselves in. However, the idea of leadership styles has been critiqued for being one-dimensional and oversimplifying the complex nature of leadership, whereas leaders in praxis tend to switch between styles depending on the situation at hand (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017).

Another view on the topic is trait leadership that, on the other hand, emphasizes the personal qualities and characteristics that make individuals effective leaders. Trait theorists believe that

certain innate characteristics, such as intelligence, personality traits, and physical attributes, make people better leaders than others, and that great leadership skills therefore are difficult, if not impossible, to learn (Collins, 2001; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). While trait leadership was initially popular, it has faced criticism for its oversimplification of leadership and that it ignores the importance of situational factors and the role of followers in the leadership process (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). However, despite these criticisms, trait leadership continues to influence both leadership research and practice, especially in leadership assessment tools and the identification of new potential leaders (Luria *et al.*, 2019).

In general, most literature is centered around a top-down approach on how the leader can use their skills and power to influence their followers in order to either support their personal goals or the ones of the organization (Khan, 2016; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). However, while literature taking a more follower-centric approach to leadership is scarce and, in comparison to traditional leadership, fairly unexplored, more recent literature has shown an interest in seeing followers as active element of constructing leadership (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017; Brown, 2018).

Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) argue that followers and leaders are interdependent, and that leadership therefore is a mutual process in which both parties influence and shape each other's behavior. Furthermore, they suggest that followers have agency and can make choices that affect both the direction and outcomes of leadership. This view is supported by Uhl-Bien, Marion and Mckelvey (2007), who emphasize that because of the complex interactive dynamics in the leader-follower relationship, leaders have to actively engage with their followers in order to effectively be able to lead them.

However, not all leadership acts in a hierarchical manner with superiors exercising leadership upon subordinates. Instead, leadership can exist in a more collaborative context such as shared leadership or distributed leadership (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). When practicing shared leadership, each employee takes ownership and responsibility for their contribution to the organization. In effect, shared leadership enables every employee to carry out their work without the oversight from a superior. Likewise, employees performing distributed leadership share leadership responsibilities and accountability among each other rather than giving it to a single

individual (Georg von Krogh, Ikujiro Nonaka, and Lise Rechsteiner, 2012). It promotes leadership as a flexible property, avoids the typical leader-follower dynamic, and distributes responsibility based on expertise on a given task, project or context.

In some cases, leadership does not exist in a leader-follower relationship. Instead, some people choose to work independently by becoming autonomous or a self-leader (Manz and Sims, 1987; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). These workers, while still being an active and contributing part of the organization, choose to be responsible for planning, executing and monitoring their own work. According to Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017), autonomous workers are mostly present in knowledge-intensive firms since they, due to their qualified education and specialized knowledge, are fully capable of working more or less on their own with only occasional support from others.

2.1.1 Reluctant leadership

Although the role of being a leader has traditionally been idolized, some individuals find themselves leading others despite having little or no desire to do so. While the literature on reluctant leadership is scarce, one of the earliest mentions of the topic was put forward by Peter and Hull in their book "The Peter Principle" (1969). They discuss how the hierarchical structure of most organizations pushes people who prove themselves as good followers to inevitably be promoted to a leadership role regardless of them having an adequate skillset or desire to be a leader. According to Doyle (2016) this phenomenon is especially prevalent in knowledge-intensive firms, where technical experts might feel more comfortable in their area of expertise and therefore are reluctant to take on a leadership role.

Having a reluctant leader can have several negative impacts on an organization, department or team. Firstly, they may struggle to provide a clear direction and vision, which in turn can lead to frustration among team members as well as cause uncertainty and lead to missed opportunities (Schweiger and DeNisi, 1991). Furthermore, reluctant leaders might be resisting change, especially if it involves stepping out of their comfort zone, causing them to be hesitant to

embrace new technologies or ways of working (Molinsky, 2017). Lastly, they might struggle to inspire and motivate their team members, which can have a negative impact on team morale and lead to low engagement in the workplace (Latham and Pinder, 2005).

However, reluctant leadership does not necessarily have to result in a negative outcome, and can even, in some cases, prove to be an advantage. Doyle (2016) emphasizes that despite the leader's lack of desire for their position, it is entirely possible for them to develop their leadership skills and mindset and thereby become a good leader for their followers. Likewise, reluctant leaders can be even more impactful than those who have actively sought out a leadership role, as they are more focused on the goals and mission of the organization rather than being concerned with personal power or recognition (Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Covin and Slevin, 1991).

2.2 Followership

The term followership in relation to leadership was popularized in the 1988 Harvard Business Review article "In Praise of Followers" by business professor and management consultant Robert Kelley (1988). Being a follower has historically been viewed as the negative opposition to leadership despite the relationship of dependency they have on one another and the fact that people in organizations are followers more often than leaders (Crossman and Crossman, 2011; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017).

Followership is a broad term referring to someone who follows someone else, which is usually some form of leader, and it has often been referred to in management literature as a synonym for a subordinate (Crossman and Crossman, 2011). Although there is currently no commonly accepted definition of the term, Kelley believes followership can be defined as a person who is not in a leadership role who actively participates in performing independent, critical thinking and who engages in the tasks that aim to achieve the organization's goals (Kelley, 1988).

The literature on followership is divided into two categories; a role-based view, which identifies followership and leadership as the role or behavior an individual expresses in a hierarchical context, and a constructionist view, that challenge the leader-centric way to understand

followership and instead proposes that both leadership and followership is created through a mutual relationship (Khan, Busari and Abdullah, 2018). Following the role-based view, two main followership models are recognized within the literature; The Kelley Followership Model and Ira Chaleff's model of The Courageous Follower (Kelley, 1992; Chaleff, 2009; Khan, Busari and Abdullah, 2018).

Kelly believed that organizations should strive to cultivate effective followers. His model identifies and defines the different types of followership according to the level of activity and behavior (Kelley, 1992). It has two main dimensions: independent critical thinking and active engagement. By the use of this framework he identified five types of followers:

> **Sheep:** According to Kelley (1992 and 2008), sheeps are the types of followers who are both passive and lack independent thinking. They are completely reliant upon their leader for direction and motivation and only deal with the tasks assigned to them.

> **Yes-People:** These followers are energetic and participating, but generally allow the leader to think and act for them. Therefore, they do not contribute much as they are mostly dependent on their leader or group.

> **Alienated:** Alienated followers are more independently thinking, but are not interested in contributing positively towards the organization. Furthermore, they often show resistance to change since they view themselves as the main critical opposition to their superiors.

> **Stars:** These are considered the most effective or exemplary followers. They possess both critical thinking and participate actively in ensuring the organization's success. Kelley (2008) further explains that, in an organizational context, leaders often refer to star followers as "my right-hand" or "go-to".

> **Pragmatics:** Lastly, the pragmatic followers are generally reactive to the situation at hand. While they try not to engage in non-essential tasks, they also will not let the leader or organization leave them behind. Overall, they are motivated by maintaining the status quo.

In Chaleff's model the followers are likewise categorized by the two dimensions: the level of support from followers to their leaders and the degree of challenging the leaders behavior (Chaleff, 2009). On the basis of this, Chaleff has proposed four styles of courageous followers:

Partner: Partners support the leader but also challenge them where they deem necessary. Generally, these followers want to be treated as equals to the leader, while also respecting the leader's position of power.

Implementer: Implementers provide high support but low challenge. They are usually the most liked follower type, from a leader's perspective, as they work effectively without having the need to challenge their leaders. However, this also means that it is unlikely for the follower to react on- and inform the leader of mistakes.

Individualist: These followers naturally like to challenge and convey their thoughts. They are generally not very supportive of their leader, and due to the amount of critique, the leader might feel forced to silence or side-line the follower in order to maintain a productive working environment.

Resource: Lastly, the resource followers are lacking in both support and challenge. They usually purely perform the tasks assigned to them by the leader, which in turn makes it difficult for them to contribute to the organization.

When instead examining followership from a constructionist view, Shamir's co-production approach (2007) and DeRue and Ashford's approach (2010) are generally the most influential within literature on the topic (Khan, Busari and Abdullah, 2018). Shamir proposed his perspective on the constructionist view based on leader-member exchange theory (Erdogan and Bauer, 2015), Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), and Hollander's (1993) idea of an active follower's role. It explains how leaders and followers jointly produce leadership outcomes as a result of their leader-follower relationship. The follower's role is to strengthen the goals, visions and behaviors that are essential for both the group and organizational success. This, in turn, empowers the followers to not just be passive recipients of leadership, but instead become active contributors.

DeRue and Ashford's approach (2010) is based on the identity work of Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann (2006) and Snow and Anderson (1987) and Blumer's (1986) social interactionism. It likewise explains leadership and followership as a co-constructed phenomenon and proposes that they are developed through an interactive and mutual action of granting and claiming identities in order to form the roles of leader and follower. The relationship will then be constructed when claims and grants are matching. If they are instead mismatched or disconnected, neither leadership nor followership will be constructed.

This is supported by Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) who emphasize that good leader and follower relations are seen as based on mutual trust, win-win and a clear sense of responsibility. Therefore, if the superior is not deemed deserving of their followership, subordinates can more or less choose not to take a follower position. Instead, they may draw on other sources than a leader in order to obtain cultural direction, meaning and support such as coworkers or more distant peers. This refusal of acknowledging their subordinate as a leader can result in resisting leadership relations and interactions, for example not going to the manager with leadership ambitions for advice or support and not appearing too enthusiastic when participating in leadership-centered meetings (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017).

In an organizational context, followership has been found to have significant implications, and promoting a positive work environment, encouraging commitment and supporting collaboration between leaders and followers ultimately leads to improved organizational outcomes (Organ, 1988; Uhl-Bien, Marion and Mckelvey, 2007). Firstly, followership is positively associated with job satisfaction as individuals who feel effectively led and who actively engage in following are more likely to feel satisfied in their jobs. Furthermore, followership can be a great factor in creating a positive work environment through fostering trust and collaboration between leaders and followers which in turn increases job satisfaction (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Additionally, followership can foster organizational commitment, since people who feel well led are more likely to commit themselves to the organization. Likewise, followers who are committed are then more likely to want to stay in the organization and actively engage positively in ensuring the organization's success (Uhl-Bien, Marion and Mckelvey, 2007). Finally, followership has been found to be related to organizational citizenship behavior, which is the

voluntary behaviors that employees partake in that contribute to the general well-being of the organization (Organ, 1988). This includes volunteering for extra work, helping colleagues and taking on additional responsibilities.

Overall, the topic of followership is gaining traction within both management and organizational literature and is now of way greater interest to researchers compared to just 15 years ago. However, it is still a topic lacking attention especially in comparison to the great amount of attention paid to leadership in general (Crossman and Crossman, 2011).

2.3 Knowledge-Intensive Firms and Knowledge Workers

Since the 1960's knowledge-intensive firms have been of interest to organizational researchers as this new form of corporation started to take over from the more traditional goods-centered economy (von Nordenflycht, 2010). There is no generally accepted definition of knowledge-intensive firms, however, Miles *et al.*, (1995) defines it as organizations that possess the three following characteristics (Muller and Doloreux, 2009):

- They rely heavily on professional knowledge.
- They are either the primary sources of information and knowledge *or* they use knowledge to produce intermediate services for their clients' production processes.
- They are of competitive importance and supplied primarily to business.

In addition to this, (Grant, 1996) identifies four key attributes:

- They possess specialized knowledge.
- They have a high level of organizational learning.
- They are flexible and adaptive.
- They have a strong customer focus.

These organizations consist of knowledge workers, also known as 'qualified labor', rather than manual workers (Drucker, 1969; Alvesson, 2004). According to Drucker (1993), knowledge workers can be defined as individuals who possess the knowledge, skills, and expertise that are critical to an organization's success. The dependency that both knowledge-intensive firms and knowledge workers have on the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge requires them to actively seek knowledge sharing and development in order to stay competitive and generate value for their customers (Grant, 1996; Muller and Doloreux, 2009).

Several factors influence knowledge sharing in knowledge-intensive firms. Firstly, an organizational culture that both values and knowledge sharing and encourages collaboration can help create an environment where employees are more likely to engage in knowledge sharing activities (Hislop, 2005). Secondly, leaders who actively endorse and demonstrate the importance of knowledge sharing can further encourage their employees to share knowledge (Mládková, 2012). Lastly, personal motivation and intrinsic factors can also influence knowledge sharing due to their sense of professional pride or desire to contribute to the collective growth and success of the organization (Hislop, 2005; Deci, 2017).

One study conducted by Huysman and Wit (2002) found that knowledge sharing had a positive effect on the level of innovation in knowledge-intensive firms. They concluded that knowledge sharing facilitated the transfer of both explicit and tacit knowledge, where especially the tacit knowledge was found critical for the level of innovation within the organization as it combined expertise with experience. Furthermore, due to the tacit nature of knowledge, it might be challenging to lead or manage this particular group of workers as their subordinates can not observe and control the essential knowledge and know-how that is constantly being produced and utilized by these individuals (Mládková, 2012).

In general, the way leadership is conducted can have a significant impact on knowledge workers and their creativity, knowledge sharing, productivity and general job satisfaction (Mládková, 2012). Multiple studies have found that one of the most effective ways for managers to drive engagement and motivation in knowledge-intensive firms is through goal-setting, recognition and feedback (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2002; Amabile and Kramer, 2011). Generally, knowledge workers are motivated by a variety of factors that go beyond the traditional extrinsic motivators such as salary, bonuses, and benefits. Intrinsic motivators, such as meaningful work, autonomy, and opportunities for personal and professional growth, are often more important (von Nordenflycht, 2010; Deci, 2017).

Relative to traditional workers, knowledge workers often demand a large degree of autonomy in their work. Autonomy is also important for the motivation and general well-being of knowledge workers. One element of this is that they need a large degree of freedom in their work to effectively make decisions about how to approach their work and to experiment with new ideas, approaches and solutions (Oldham and Cummings, 1996). Additionally, autonomy is shown to contribute to job satisfaction by reducing the amount of rules, decentralizing the decision making and being included in firm-level decisions (Coff, 1997; von Nordenflycht, 2010).

Because of their specialized knowledge, which makes them of great value to their employer, these workers also possess a certain amount of power. Therefore they can, to a large degree, expect and demand influence on the leadership being imposed upon them (Newell, Scarbrough and Swan, 2009; von Nordenflycht, 2010). This also proposes a managerial challenge of retaining and directing these skilled employees as they are in a strong bargaining position since their know-how and skills are scarce and often transferable across competing firms (Teece and Pisano, 2003; von Nordenflycht, 2010).

2.4 Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership

Hollander's transactional leadership model was developed by E. P. Hollander in 1978 to explain how leaders, followers, and situations interact to shape leadership outcomes, and has since been refined and expanded upon by numerous scholars in the field of leadership studies (Hollander, 1978).

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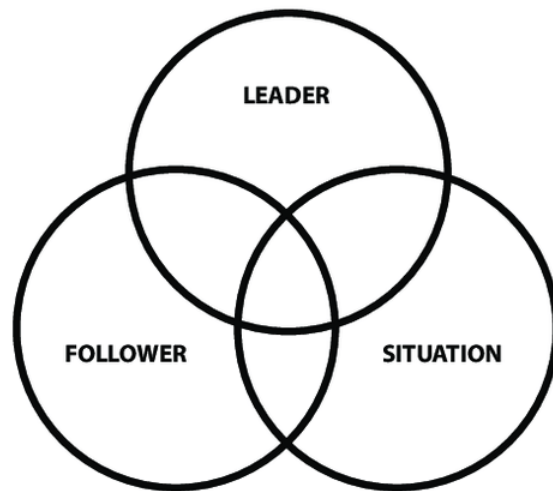
Figure 1: Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership (Hollander, 1978)

Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership (1978) proposes that leadership is a social exchange that involves the leader, the followers, and their situation. According to him, the key to effective leadership is the relationship between a leader and followers and the ongoing transaction between them. A transaction refers to a process that involves mutual influence between two parties, with social exchange being a fundamental aspect of their relationship and both of which have a dynamic quality. In other words, it is a relationship between the leader and followers that involves a "fair exchange" where both parties provide and receive something of value. (Hollander, 1978) For example, when the leader receives greater status and influence from providing benefits to the group, the followers expect the leader to provide direction, clarify the situation, and set goals aimed at achieving effective performance (Hollander, 1978). Furthermore, the leader-follower relationship relies on trust and perceptions of fairness as crucial components and is built over time (Hollander, 1978).

The model consists of three key elements that have already been mentioned: the leader, the followers, and the situation, each of which is complex in itself (Hollander, 1978, p. 8). In the model presented above, the social exchange between a leader and followers occurs within a particular situation, in the overlapping intersection known as the locus of leadership (Hollander, 1978). Although the leader holds significant influence and social status, it is worth recognizing that a leader and a follower are not inconsistent with each other. A leader is also to some degree a follower (Hollander, 1978). The leader is not the sole source of initiatives and benefits for the group or organization (Hollander, 1978). Furthermore, the followers can also assert influence and make demands on the leader, which can further impact the relationship between the two parties and affect the overall success of the group or organization (Hollander, 1978).

According to Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership, being in close association with the leader is a significant factor in exerting influence. This association serves as a leverage point for greater influence, which is a key function of the leadership structure (Hollander, 1978). If the leader is not meeting expectations, the followers may become less cooperative and more resistant. However, if the leader fails to perform well, the leader still can maintain some following. (Hollander, 1978)

The leader has a complex role and it includes responsibilities such as maintaining the group, defining the situation, setting goals, and providing stability. Additionally, when considering Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership, a leader is also a person who brings their personality, perceptions, and resources to achieve goals. (Hollander, 1978) Regarding the other main elements of Hollander's transactional approach, the followers contribute their own personalities, perceptions, and resources to the leadership, and support the leader's position and activities (Hollander, 1978). For followers to remain within the group and feel content, it is necessary for them to have a satisfactory sense of being fairly rewarded (Hollander, 1978). Whereas, the situation refers to the environmental or contextual factors and includes the nature of the task and resources and the physical setting in which the leader and followers are operating such as the size and structure of the group (Hollander, 1978). These factors impact the dynamics of the leader-follower relationship in Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership.

Over the years, the transactional framework has been applied in numerous studies and theoretical developments. For example, Bass and Bass Bernard (1985) expanded upon the framework to propose a transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes the leader's ability to inspire and motivate followers to achieve higher levels of performance. Additionally, Küpers (2007) built on the theory by further exploring the relationship between leadership and followership, and suggesting a more integrated approach that emphasizes the interdependence and mutual influence between the two concepts by understanding the situational and contextual factors that shape them.

Despite the wide use and recognition of Hollander's transactional framework in leadership research in the past 40 years, several limitations of the framework need to be considered:
Firstly, there is no clear cause-and-effect between the different parts of the framework making it difficult to fully grasp the complexity of leadership (Yukl, 2013). Secondly, it fails to address the impact power and influence has on the leader-follower relationship, omitting a crucial factor in leadership (Podsakoff and Schriescheim, 1985; Yukl, 2013). Lastly, the framework mainly focuses on observable behavioral acts of the leader and follower and therefore lacks to capture some of the emotional and contextual factors impacting leadership (Shamir and Howell, 1999).

3. Methodology

In the following chapter, the methodological grounding for our master's thesis will be outlined. The chapter begins with introducing the philosophical grounding and the chosen qualitative research approach. Furthermore, we describe the research context and provide some information about the background of our case organization as part of the research approach. Then we will present an overview of the process used for collecting and analyzing data. Following this, the chapter concludes with an assessment of the quality of the research. In addition, we will also provide any limitations associated with the chosen methodology.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

We will use Symbolic Interactionism as our main research tradition for gathering and analyzing our qualitative data. Symbolic Interactionism focuses on the process of interaction between individuals and the meanings they attach to their actions and to the objects and symbols in their environment (Prasad, 2017). The central idea of Symbolic Interactionism is that human beings are active agents who create and modify their social reality through their interactions with others. It assumes that meaning is not inherent in objects or actions, but is socially constructed through communication and interaction.

In line with the tradition of symbolic interactionism, the interview questions will be essentially based on *how* the participants make sense of certain situations, how they construct their identities, and how they negotiate their roles and relationships within their social context (Prasad, 2017). This aligns with the aim of this research study. Furthermore, by keeping the interviews in-depth, open-ended and semi-structured, it allows the participants to have significant control over the direction of the interview, which again will support the fundamental elements of Symbolic Interactionism (Prasad, 2017).

As a secondary research tradition, we will use the Hermeneutic tradition to gain a better understanding of the company's leadership and people strategies in relation to the literature. The Hermeneutic tradition aims to understand human communication in the interpretation of texts as

a continuous movement between a text and its context. Furthermore, it seeks to understand how individuals make sense of the world around them (Prasad, 2017).

In order to analyze the specific leadership and people strategies, we will identify key concepts and themes emerging from the data. This will involve conducting a close reading of the strategies themselves, as well as any supporting documentation or communication that accompanies them. We will here pay close attention to the language used, as well as any symbols, images, or other forms of communication that are used to convey meaning. Afterwards, we will consider the historical, social, and cultural context in which they were developed, as well as the interests and perspectives of the individuals and groups involved in their creation by identifying the underlying meanings and assumptions that shape their narrative.

3.2 Research Approach

After comprehending the philosophical foundation of our research, we continue with explaining our research approach in the following. As mentioned earlier, our research adopts an interpretive approach in order to gain a deeper understanding on how reluctant leadership impacts on followership in a knowledge-intensive firm. To effectively answer our research question and conduct a data analysis, we decided that the most appropriate way to do this would be to carry out semi-structured interviews within a single-case study. Focusing on a single organization in a case study enables us to conduct a more in-depth exploration of an organizational phenomena when contrasted with studying multiple organizations (Harley, Bryman and Bell, 2018).

Regarding the research approach, there are two primary approaches for conducting a research, namely deduction and induction (Bryman and Bell, 2007). An inductive approach seeks to identify theoretical concepts by analyzing empirical findings, while a deductive approach aims to validate a theory through the use of empirical findings (Bryman, 2012). In addition to these two research approaches, there is also an abductive research approach which combines characteristics from both induction and deduction. Abductive as a research approach begins with the observation of an unexpected or surprising fact, and then proceeds to develop a plausible theory

that explains how this fact could have occurred (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Abductive research approach provides an ability to link the empirical findings and existing theoretical frameworks, while also allowing freedom to create possible new theories. For our study, we adopted an abductive research approach that combined elements of both inductive and deductive reasoning. This approach is consistent with our chosen qualitative research methodology. We conducted two rounds of interviews with our respondents to gain a deeper understanding of how leadership and leader-follower interactions were experienced within their knowledge-intensive team. During the first interview round, we asked open-ended interview questions that allowed our respondents to provide us with data on what was happening in their department. We then analyzed this data to identify specific patterns that emerged from their responses. This approach was more consistent with an inductive research method that seeks to derive theoretical concepts from empirical findings (Bryman, 2012). For the second interview round, we used a transactional framework of leadership (Hollander, 1978), as it seemed appropriate considering our single-case study and research question, to test the patterns that emerged from the first round. By doing so, we tried to confirm or invalidate our initial findings using a deductive approach. This approach allowed us to link our empirical findings with existing theoretical frameworks. Overall, the abductive research approach allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of how the case study's followers experienced leadership and leader-follower interactions.

3.2.1 Research Context

Before proceeding with the data collection, it is important to have a full understanding of the background of the case organization. In order to ensure the anonymity of the organization and the interviewees working for this particular company, we have chosen 'GloTech Consultancy' as a pseudonym for the organization. To further add, it should be noted that the pseudonym 'GloTech Consultancy' was chosen as a combination of the words 'Global Technical Consultancy,' to reflect the fact that the global technical consultancy company fitted the organization, and does not have any additional connotations.

3.2.1.1 Background of the Case Organization

To address our research question, we obtained access to a department within a Nordic consultancy company from which we gathered all the empirical data necessary for our analysis. Our case company 'GloTech Consultancy' is an international consultancy company with headquarters in a Nordic country. The company has experienced significant growth in past years and currently employs almost 18,000 employees and operates in more than 30 countries worldwide. The company's primary mission is to empower its stakeholders by delivering sustainable and innovative solutions through the development and improvement of business models. GloTech Consultancy has multiple main areas of expertise including energy, environment and infrastructure solutions, as well as general management consulting. This, together with being one of the largest consultancy companies in the region, has led to their involvement as the main contributor to several prestigious projects both domestically and internationally.

Our study will specifically focus on a single department within GloTech Consultancy. This department is fairly young, as it was acquired by GloTech Consultancy just five years ago. It consists of eight employees and their manager, and its employees are a mix of older, senior engineers and newer engineers who are only a few years out of university.

3.2.1.2 Single-case Study Design

To gain a better understanding of leadership in knowledge-intensive firms, we conducted a qualitative case study of a department within GloTech Consultancy as our research subject. Considering the size and complexity of this organization, we chose to limit our study's scope to a single department. As a result, we opted to utilize a single-case study design for our research. A single-case study design is a suitable approach when seeking to thoroughly and comprehensively explore a particular topic (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Additionally, the case study is a relevant strategy for gaining a rich and detailed understanding of the research context and processes (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007 cited in Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Hence,

the single-case study design was selected for our research as it aligns well with the nature of our research question and objectives. However, it is important to recognize that the particular design of our case study may have certain limitations. Case studies, in general, have faced numerous criticisms regarding the lack of rigor, external validity, and generalizability (Takahashi and Araujo, 2019). While single-case study design can provide valuable opportunity to explore a phenomenon (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012), the former criticisms could also be potential downsides for our research as well. However, better accuracy and generalization in research could be achieved through the use of multiple case designs (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, cited in Takahashi and Araujo, 2019). To accomplish the goals of this study, we are considering the advantages to offset any limitations. In addition to this, we will be using multiple different data collection techniques, also called triangulation, to cross-check the empirical findings and enhance the credibility of our research (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019).

3.3 Data Collection

The data collection is presented in the following chapter. The qualitative study was conducted with semi-structured and in-depth interviews as the main empirical data. Observation and secondary data analysis were chosen as additional data collection methods to support the main data collection method. Any limitations regarding the data collection methods were also briefly discussed.

3.3.1 Sampling and Selection of Interviewees

When searching for a suitable research company for our study, we were fortunate enough to make contact with the case company through one of our acquaintances, who provided us this opportunity to contact the team manager. After having an initial meeting with the manager and explaining the details of our research project, we were given the opportunity to conduct our research within their department. As mentioned earlier, the case department primarily engages in knowledge-intensive work and is carried out mostly by technical engineers. Additionally, it is

worth noting that the case department size has been acknowledged in our study as well as the fact that it could be a possible limitation to have a smaller sample size of participants. However, having a smaller scope of participants in our study allowed us to conduct more in-depth interviews, which ultimately provided richer and more detailed insights into our research topic. This approach was not only feasible given the size of the single department, but it also allowed us to work more closely with the participants and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences within their team in a knowledge-intensive firm. As this aligns with our research question and objectives, we decided to continue with this particular company.

The team of this department is relatively small, altogether eight employees and the manager. Therefore, snowball sampling was chosen to be our sampling strategy to select the interviewees for our research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). The participants volunteer to be part of the research rather than being chosen in this type of sampling strategy (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). We decided that the selection process of participants is carried out by the manager of the team, who could identify those individuals who will both meet the criteria for suitability and express a willingness to take part in the research project. Furthermore, the chosen group of interviewees consist of individuals with different job positions within the team as well as their manager, and who have been working in this global technical consultancy company for different lengths of time. However, in this case the snowball sampling strategy is non-random because the initial contact is responsible for selecting and establishing the contacts and this may cause issues with the reliability of the study (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Whereas, according to Lee (1993 cited in Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012, p. 289), the issue of bias can be significant for samples like these, as respondents tend to select individuals who resemble themselves, leading to a homogeneous sample. As the selected sample constitutes more than half of the team and the case team is already relatively small, the risks associated with this type of sampling strategy were probably avoided.

The overview of the conducted interviews is presented in the table below.

Name of the employee (pseudonyms)	Total length of the interviews (round 1&2)	Date of the interview round 1	Date of the interview round 2
Brian (the manager)	59 min	2023-03-06	2023-04-14
Chris	52 min	2023-04-27	2023-04-27
David	49 min	2023-04-05	2023-04-18
James	56 min	2023-03-30	2023-04-20
Robert	40 min	2023-03-06	-
Samuel	58 min	2023-03-06	2023-04-17

Another possible limitation is considering the sample size of the research as we only had six respondents in our research. Altogether we conducted eleven interviews as one of the employees did not participate in the second round of interviews for unspecified reasons. However, after conducting half of the interviews, we noticed a recurring pattern in the respondents' answers. Therefore, further interviews did not reveal any new insights regarding the research topic. This suggests that the research was close to the theoretical saturation (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Nevertheless, we used other data collection methods, such as observation and secondary data, to support and ensure that our research would be as valid as possible.

3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The qualitative research method was chosen for this study and therefore the semi-structured and in-depth interviews were selected to be our main source of data. Conducting research interviews helped us to gather valid and relevant data considering our research question and objectives of

the study. Additionally, conducting research interviews also helped us to redefine our research question and objectives (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with six employees, including the manager of the team, from the case company GloTech Consultancy. The semi-structured interviews offer flexibility, allowing interviewers to ask follow-up questions during the interview based on respondents' answers (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019) as well as encourage two-way communication between the interviewee and interviewer. The interviews were predetermined regarding the questions, however, conducting semi-structured interviews allowed for more flexibility for the respondents to answer the questions as the questions were formulated to be open-ended (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). In addition, another feature of semi-structured interviews is the use of a list of themes and key questions, which we incorporated into our interviews (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012).

We decided to conduct two interview rounds with each of the participants. Altogether, we formulated four interview guides. Two of the interview guides formulated especially for the manager of the team and the other two for the employees. The first interview guide for the manager included 15 questions for the first interview round and 23 questions for the second interview round. Whereas, the interview guides for the employees included 20 questions for each round. The interview guides for both the manager and the employees were generally similar with small differences made to ensure the relevance for each group. The appendix contains both the list of interviewees and all of the interview guides. Furthermore, all the interviews were conducted in English, which was the common language spoken. However, if an interviewee preferred to answer in their native language, they were given the opportunity to do so, as one of the authors shared the same language. In general, the interviews lasted approximately between 40 and 60 minutes, depending on the interviewee's length of answers.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy of the study. We chose to conduct all the interviews online via Microsoft Teams, which had both advantages and disadvantages. Although online interviews allowed for the participants to attend the meeting from geographically different locations and provided greater flexibility in scheduling interviews around respondents' availability, conducting online interviews left us unable to read nonverbal

cues such as body language. It is also important to notice that as the participants were aware of the general topic of our study, namely leadership from the employees' point of view, and therefore, it might have influenced the respondent's answers as the topic area regarded their own manager. To conduct the interviews, we adopted different roles to help us to observe the interviews better. One of us dedicated their attention to observing and taking notes from the interviews, while the other one took the role of an interviewer and focused on conducting all the interviews. Both during and after, we were determined to look for overarching themes from the interviews and, in addition, connect them to the selected leadership theories and concepts.

3.3.3 Observation

As for the second data collection technique in our research, we decided to use observation. More specifically, we selected participant observation as it allowed us to both observe and participate in the activities of the case department, effectively becoming part of their organization as researchers and therefore also meeting our research needs (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Regarding our research roles, we chose to employ the observer-as-participant method (Gill and Johnson, 2010, cited in Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012) for conducting participant observation. This way our identity as researchers was clear to everyone and the purpose of our observation was known (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). In addition to this, we focused on doing descriptive observation which means that the physical setting of the meeting was observed and described (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). For data collection, we made notes of what was happening during the observation.

In the initial meeting with our case department's manager, we reached an agreement to conduct interviews and have an opportunity to observe some of their social situations, such as team meetings. The main reason to conduct observations was to gather additional support for the semi-structured interviews as well as to observe and get more information of the leader-follower interaction in action. Due to a limited time scope, we were only able to observe one meeting. This particular meeting was held in Microsoft Teams and it lasted approximately 45 minutes. The online meeting allowed participants to attend the meeting from geographically different

locations. Furthermore, the meeting was attended by all eight members of the team and the manager. The purpose of the meeting was to go through the resource plan in their system. Additionally, the aim of the meeting was to discuss the employees' ongoing projects, upcoming tasks, and potential areas for mutual assistance. Moreover, the meeting was conducted primarily in a language that only one of us authors was fluent in, making it difficult for the other one to fully comprehend the discussion. Other than this constraint and the fact that we could only make a single observation as well as that our study could have been limited by the possibility that participants' behavior could have been influenced by their awareness of being observed, there were no further limitations on our observation.

3.3.4 Secondary Data

As the final step in our data collection process, we chose to analyze the leadership strategies detailed in the case company's annual report in addition to the interviews we conducted. The use of documentary data helped us to further understand how the leadership strategies at GloTech Consultancy can be related to a leadership approach that has already been defined. This helped us to better answer our research question and achieve the objectives of the study. Furthermore, this brought additional insights and context to support the research findings.

This particular data was obtained from the global technical consultancy company's annual report from the recent year, specifically from their "Employee-management relations" and "People strategy" sections. These two leadership strategies were selected because of their relevance to the content of our study. Collecting and analyzing data helped us to improve and deepen our understanding of the company's leadership strategies. Additionally, it served as a basis for comparing our research question and empirical findings.

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Data Cleaning

In the following, the data analysis process will be described considering the semi-structured interviews. Firstly, all conducted interviews were transcribed with the use of the software immediately after each interview with the respondent. This was done to ensure that new or interesting information and perspectives from the respondent could be added into the following interviews to further explore the topic (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). In addition, we had relatively detailed observation notes from the interviews, which served as helpful summaries as well as describing the things *not* being said in the interviews such as body language, tone of voice and pauses. Finally, we organized our data in a way that made it easy to analyze. This was done by categorizing the data into themes with an inspiration from Grounded Theory in order to capture the main ideas and concepts (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

3.4.2 Grounded Theory

All in all, we gathered a rather significant volume of data, which is an occurring challenge when conducting a qualitative study and especially semi-structured interviews (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Another challenge in considering qualitative study is that it can be relatively complex in nature (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Therefore, we decided to be inspired by Grounded Theory as a structure for analyzing our data. In summary, Grounded Theory aims to generate a theory or explanation about a particular phenomenon, based on data that is systematically collected and analyzed (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

We started the analysis process by sorting the transcriptions of the interviews as this is a way to spend time with the data as well as familiarize it better (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). To begin our data analysis process, both of us researchers got together to discuss the collected data. We carefully reviewed the transcriptions and field notes, identifying and highlighting recurring themes and patterns that were the most interesting for us for further exploration. We specifically looked for themes that we considered relevant to understanding the impacts of reluctant

leadership on followership within a knowledge-intensive firm. Furthermore, this process provided an overview of our data collection and helped us to clarify our empirical findings. Additionally, it also allowed us to examine potential relationships between the themes we identified during the initial categorization (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018) and consider them in relation to the existing literature. The categories used in the analysis were primarily developed from the collected data and are referred to as data-driven categories as they emerged during the analysis of the data or were based on the actual terms used by the study's respondents (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, cited in Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012).

After sorting the material, we needed to conduct a process of reduction, which means that we needed to reduce the selected categories into a more manageable quantity (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). To ensure clarity and coherence in our research, it was essential to narrow down our focus to specific categories, as attempting to include all categories would be impractical (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). We removed categories that were less significant or relevant for us considering our research question and that were less interesting. Furthermore, we decided to conduct a verification process by revisiting the material and rereading the transcriptions to ensure our categories would be relevant.

Lastly, we followed a similar data analysis process to examine both the observation of the team meeting and the leadership strategies from the case company's annual report. For the analysis process of the observation, we identified similarities and linked them to the primary categories that were selected during the main analysis process. Likewise, for the analysis process of the company's leadership strategies, we analyzed them to provide a basis for comparison with our research question and empirical findings.

These categories and concepts, and the links between them, will then be used to, in combination with our chosen literature, to explain our research question: *"How does reluctant leadership impact followership in a knowledge-intensive firm?"*.

3.5 Research Limitations

While we have already discussed some of the limitations of our study, it is crucial to highlight the most predominant ones, particularly in light of our methodological approach.

As previously mentioned, we decided to conduct qualitative research, specifically a single-case study. However, it is important to recognize that this type of research has potential limitations associated with it. Case studies, in general, have been criticized for lacking rigor, external validity, and generalization as mentioned earlier (Takahashi and Araujo, 2019). Furthermore, qualitative research is frequently criticized for its inability to draw generalizations, particularly when based on a small sample from a single case study, as in our research, which can make it challenging to create statistical generalizations (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Despite these potential limitations, the single-case study design was the best way to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in the case organization and answer our research question. It has also been suggested that a single-case study design can be beneficial when studying a single person or a group of people (Yin, 2003 cited in Gustafsson, 2017). With our research, we were still able to provide new knowledge regarding the impacts of reluctant leadership on followership in a knowledge-intensive firm.

Our study may have been limited by the possibility that participants' responses were influenced by their awareness of being observed. Since the respondents knew the main topic of our research and the interview questions were related to their manager and themselves, this may have influenced the respondents' answers to be more cautious, which could have affected the validity of our empirical findings. Therefore, there may have been a potential risk of social desirability bias in our study, which means that respondents may have answered in a way they perceived as socially acceptable or what they thought we wanted to hear (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). This could have affected the reliability of our empirical findings as well. Additionally, it is possible that respondents may have glorified themselves and their role during the interviews, which may have influenced their ability to provide an objective perspective (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2017).

As previously stated, our research had a limitation with regard to the semi-structured interviews and observations, which were all carried out remotely using the Microsoft Teams platform. This meant that we were unable to read nonverbal cues, such as body language, especially during the observation of the meeting, as some participants chose not to turn on their cameras. Another limitation was language-related. The online meeting was conducted primarily in a language that only one of us authors was fluent in, making it difficult for the other author to fully understand the discussion. Although the main interviews were conducted in English, respondents were given the option to reply in their native language if necessary. However, since neither we nor most of the interviewees were native English speakers, some nuances of communication may have been lost due to our limited ability to express our thoughts as effectively as we can in our native languages. Furthermore, we were also unable to conduct more than one observation of team meetings in the case organization due to limited time constraints, which may have affected the study's validity.

3.6 Ethics and Confidentiality

Taking into account ethical principles and confidentiality, we wanted to ensure that all participants felt comfortable participating in the study while simultaneously ensuring the richness and accuracy of our collected data. Since we are solely collecting qualitative data from a single department within a company, we were especially careful to ensure that our research would not interfere with their work environment or manager-employee relationship due to breaches of confidentiality. However, due to the nature of this paper and our research question, we have made a conscious choice to specify what data has been collected from the manager of the department. Despite this, they have otherwise been anonymized and will not be identifiable by anyone not directly participating in the study.

Each participant was fully informed about the research process and their rights as research subjects. Consent was obtained from each participant for the interviews to be audio- as well as video-recorded. We also ensured that participants were aware that their identity would remain anonymous in the study. In addition, participants were informed that they could refuse to answer

any questions that made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe. All of this information was made explicit at the beginning of each interview.

In order to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees, we have refrained from including specific details about them, such as age, length of employment and specific work tasks. During the data analysis stage, we made a careful selection of the statements and comments by avoiding including overly personal descriptions in order to reduce the risk of identification of the participants.

4. Empirical Findings and Analysis

Our primary source of information for answering the research question and achieving the study's objectives were qualitative interviews with the manager and employees of our case department, as well as the observation of a team meeting. We also analyzed the leadership strategies of the case company to provide a basis for comparing our research question and empirical findings.

In the following chapter, we present our empirical findings on the impacts of reluctant leadership on followership in a knowledge-intensive firm. The chapter is structured into three main themes that emerged from our data analysis of semi-structured interviews. However, before introducing the three main themes, we focus on the concept of reluctant leadership in the context of the case company. It will be an introduction to the concept of reluctant leadership in the company and provides a basis for the themes. Thereafter, the first theme is introduced, which explores the social aspects that are lacking within the case team. The participants of the study described the case team as an "island", using this metaphor to highlight the case team's isolation both from each other and the whole organization of the company. The second theme examines the positive and negative aspects of flexible work structure and the paradox it creates. Lastly, the third theme highlights the barriers that exist to effective leadership in promoting knowledge sharing within a team. In the following sections, we will elaborate on each of these themes by providing concrete examples from our data analysis. Through our analysis of these three themes, we hope to gain insight into the complex interplay between leadership, followership, and knowledge sharing in the context of a knowledge-intensive firm.

Furthermore, the findings of the content analysis will be presented with the help of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (1995 cited in Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018) excerpt-commentary-unit method which is a qualitative research technique. The method is based on four elements. Firstly, to create an analytical point where we briefly outline what we intend to show. Secondly, to create an orientation, where the empirical excerpts are introduced. Thirdly, present the empirical excerpts, and finally, give an analytical comment, where we use the excerpt to strengthen our analytical point. (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018) It has been suggested that the method can also

be used more flexibly, without strictly following the prescribed order (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). This will guide our use of the method in our own analysis.

4.1 Reluctant leadership - The initial desire to not be a leader

In our empirical findings, the concept of reluctant leadership emerged early on during our interviews. We discovered both the disadvantages and advantages of reluctant leadership on followership, which we will present in detail in the following section. Additionally, we will explore other noteworthy findings that emerged during our analysis that are relevant to this topic.

4.1.1 The negative and positive aspects of reluctant leadership within a knowledge-intensive firm

The following excerpt from the first interview with Brian, the manager of the case company, highlights the potential impact of job requirements, and how it can lead to reluctance and potentially hinder effective leadership.

> *"When I first joined GloTech Consultancy, I didn't expect to be a leader. The condition of my employment was that I wouldn't be involved with personnel or economics. However, within just three months, circumstances led me to take charge of both areas, as it made logical sense to do so." - Brian, the manager*

In the excerpt, Brian expresses his initial hesitancy or reluctance toward being a leader at GloTech Consultancy. It suggests that he did not have the desire or interest to be a leader in the first place, but ended up in the position due to job requirements. This can be interpreted as a potential constraint on effective leadership, as the person may not be fully invested in the role. Furthermore, he elaborates this further:

"It's not really in my nature. I prefer to let people lead themselves and see how it goes. This approach allows for flexibility and the chance to help others improve by giving them second chances. I value adaptability and believe it to be a strength of mine." - Brian, the manager

The excerpt aligns with the former statement of his. This highlights Brian's approach to leadership, which involves allowing his followers the freedom to take the lead and learn from their mistakes in the case of failure. While this approach can lead to negative consequences, such as poor performance or preventable mistakes due to insufficient guidance and support, it is important to recognize that this can also have positive outcomes. This leadership approach encourages the followers to take ownership of their work and develop their skills. This can potentially encourage the followers to be more self-sufficient and proactive in their work.

The manager was transparent about his initial reluctance to lead, and some of the followers have also noticed this. Several statements can be seen to confirm this. The following excerpts reveal similar thoughts about their manager's leadership:

"It's clear that Brian wasn't initially keen on taking on a leadership role, and this is noticeable. It's also apparent that he's relatively new to the position." - Samuel

"Here, you have to be your own boss and plan and structure your own work." - James

"With so much freedom comes the responsibility of self-structuring and self-motivation." - Chris

It can be seen that Samuel's statement aligns with Brian's thoughts of becoming a leader in the case department and suggest that the manager's lack of desire for leadership was apparent. James's statement of having to be his own boss and plan and structure his own work indicates that the manager's leadership approach involves less active guidance and support. In addition,

Chris's statement suggests that the manager's approach may prioritize follower autonomy and self-motivation as having so much flexibility at work.

It is also worth acknowledging that Brian generally talks about his employees as his colleagues. This could potentially be seen as an aspect of reluctant leadership as it suggests a desire to be seen as an equal and colleague rather than a leader to his followers. In the following excerpt, Brian explains that he does not differentiate between himself as a leader and his employees as colleagues, which may suggest that he does not see leadership as a central part of his job. However, he also acknowledges that there may be certain situations when he may need to be exercising authority, which indicates that he recognizes the importance of leadership. In general, Brian sees himself as a peer rather than a superior. This is presented in the following excerpt.

> *"I don't make a distinction between being a leader and a manager when it comes to one-on-one relationships with team members. However, it's important to not become too close, as there may be situations that require discipline. Nonetheless, we still socialize and enjoy ourselves, and in fact, I feel like we're all just peers, except for the age difference." - Brian, the manager*

In general, the employees share the same perspective as Brian. They see him more as a colleague than a stereotypical leader with a superior-subordinate relationship. This is evident in the excerpts from Robert and James.

> *"Personally, I do not consider Brian my superior, we have a peer relationship. I work independently and I am not being managed." - Robert*

> *"At times, Brian can come across more like a colleague who happens to have some leadership responsibilities, rather than fitting to the stereotypical perception of a traditional boss." - James*

Robert's statement that he does not consider his manager as his superior and instead views him as a peer supports the idea that Brian's leadership style is more collaborative and less hierarchical. This type of approach can potentially be seen as consistent with reluctant leadership. Furthermore, James describes the manager as having *"some leadership responsibilities"* rather than being a stereotypical leader. These comments suggest that the manager's leadership style is more hands-off, allowing followers to take charge of their own work and structure their own tasks. These can also suggest that Brian's approach to leadership is well-received by his team and that they appreciate his informal and approachable management style.

Another interesting insight that emerged from the empirical findings is that there may be a disconnection between Brian's leadership approach and how his employees perceive his leadership style. While Brian sees himself as both task- and relationship-oriented, his employees appear to perceive him as more task-oriented. Brian expresses his leadership approach as follows when asked if he thinks his leadership approach is more task- or relationship-oriented or both:

> *"From my perspective, it's a combination of both. More often than not, the employees proceed with tasks without needing support and then I just focus on the atmosphere instead." - Brian, the manager*

Whereas, Chris and Samuel described it to be more focused on being task-oriented:

> *"Brian is more passionate about his tasks than leadership." - Chris*

> *"I would agree that Brian is primarily task-oriented, which is quite common in the consultancy industry." - Samuel*

Chris describes Brian as being more passionate about his tasks than leadership, while Samuel notes that Brian's leadership style is primarily task-oriented. Samuel also acknowledges that this may be due to the nature of consultancy work in general. These statements suggest that Brian's approach to leadership may be more task-oriented than he realizes or acknowledges, which could

impact how his employees view his leadership effectiveness. In addition to these perspectives, one of the employees also highlighted Brian's role as both as a leader and manager:

> *"Brian is both a leader and a manager. He is a hands-on man, an executor! I would estimate that he spends only about 10% of his time on management and leadership, while the rest of his time is dedicated to project work. He's highly productive and could be described as both a soldier and a general. Sometimes I feel sorry for him because he has a 50+ hour work week because he does management and leadership outside of his other full-time duties." - Robert*

The excerpt highlights that Brian is seen as both a leader and a manager, indicating that he is taking on both roles within the organization. Furthermore, it also suggests that he is highly involved in project work, spending only a small amount of time on management tasks. This may indicate that Brian is more comfortable and enjoys working on tasks rather than leading people, or there is a lot of work to do in the department in general. The excerpt also highlights that Brian is a productive and efficient worker who is seen as both a soldier and a general within the organization. It suggests that Brian may not have initially wanted to take a leadership role, but is currently doing so due to necessity. Overall, this excerpt can be seen to align with the concept of reluctant leadership.

However, when asked by the employees if it is important for them and their department's success to be led by someone with the same background as Brian as opposed to someone with a management or business background, James' answer indicates that he appreciates his knowledge and experience.

> *"Brian's engineering background is especially valuable in the smaller department where his expertise is needed for various projects. In a larger department, his role as a manager may be less critical. Generally, I appreciate that a manager knows the tasks." - James*

James explains that Brian's engineering background is considered important for the success of his department, particularly due to his knowledge and experience in the field. His response indicates that he values a manager who is knowledgeable about the tasks and responsibilities of the department, rather than having a business or management background. However, James also notes that the importance of Brian's engineering background as a leader may be less significant in a larger department. This excerpt can be seen highlighting the potential benefits of having a leader with a background and expertise that is relevant to the work being done by the team.

Furthermore, when asked from the respondents if they have felt motivated or inspired by their manager, Chris *"could not think of any time that he felt inspired or motivated by Brian"* and Samuel's excerpt states similar:

> *"He is not setting an example, nor is he actively inspiring or motivating others." - Samuel*

This illustrates that Brian is not generally a source of inspiration or motivation for his employees. Moreover, this suggests that he may not be exhibiting the qualities of an effective leader, such as inspiring and motivating his team. However, Samuel points out that Brian can be inspiring when he expresses his technical knowledge.

> *"It is inspiring when Brian shows his "nerdiness" to the team, which makes people impressed." - Samuel*

This further supports the earlier excerpt from James that expressed his appreciation towards having a leader who has the technical knowledge and experience. This also illustrates that Brian can be inspiring whenever he shares his technical knowledge with the team, suggesting that he has the potential to be an effective leader in certain areas.

Another interesting insight that occurred from the data is regarding providing feedback to Brian about his leadership approach. All of the employees stated that they have not given any feedback considering what kind of leadership they would need from him.

> *"I don't give detailed feedback to Brian. I find it more suitable to discuss such matters during social gatherings that take place outside of work, as I feel more at ease in such settings" - Chris*

> *"I don't really give feedback to Brian. I don't feel like I am qualified to judge his performance as a leader. I'm still settling into the team. Additionally, the informal atmosphere of the workplace does not make it feel natural to give feedback. However, I would like to have a more democratic and actively participating leader." - Samuel*

> *"Occasionally, I provide Brian with feedback, but it is typically focused on specific projects or tasks. I do not give feedback concerning his managerial abilities" - James*

The above excerpts illustrate that the employees are reluctant to provide feedback to Brian on his leadership style. Chris finds it more comfortable to give feedback on such topics during social gatherings outside of work. Whereas, Samuel does not feel qualified enough to judge Brian's leadership approach and does not think it is natural to give feedback in the informal workplace atmosphere. In addition, Samuel says that he would like to have a more democratic and actively participating leader, which suggests that he may have some dissatisfaction with Brian's current leadership approach. James does provide feedback to Brian, however, it is only focused on specific projects or tasks. This could potentially limit Brian's ability to improve and develop as a leader. Furthermore, a culture of open communication and feedback is important so that leaders can continuously improve and ensure their leadership approach is effective.

Another surprising insight that was observed considers the employees' desire for greater recognition from Brian.

"I would like to have more social gatherings and opportunities for feedback. I also hope for more acknowledgement and celebration of achievements." - Samuel

"Brian is great at the work-related areas, however, he lacks in the field of personal life matters." - James

These excerpts highlight the employees' need for better recognition and appreciation from their manager. Samuel suggests that he would like to have more social gatherings and opportunities for feedback, as well as more acknowledgment and celebration of achievements, indicating that the current situation is lacking in these areas. On the other hand, James mentions that Brian is competent in work-related areas but lacks in personal life matters. Although James does not mention recognition, it is possible to infer that he may desire more support in personal matters, which could potentially contribute to a more positive work environment. These excerpts emphasize the importance of recognition and support from leaders in promoting employee satisfaction.

This serves as a basis for our three main themes in regard to our research question of *"How does reluctant leadership impact followership in a knowledge-intensive firm?"*. This brings us to our first theme, which focuses on the absence of a relationship-oriented approach to leadership. In our analysis, this theme emerged as a metaphorical "island" that highlights the disconnection between leadership and relationship-oriented within the context of our study.

4.2. "Island" - Missing social aspects of work-life

One of the most interesting insights that emerged during the interviews, was the metaphor of "island", which can be seen as a potential result of reluctant leadership and refers to the missing social aspects in the team. In the first excerpt, Samuel uses the metaphor of "islands" to describe his perceptions of the social dynamics in the case team. This quote highlights the topic of social isolation among team members.

"Feels like the colleagues are lots of different "islands"." - Samuel

Samuel's excerpt indicates a lack of cohesion among colleagues. We found that the use of the metaphor is an effective way to communicate the abstract concept of social disconnection in a clear way. The following discussion and exploration of this metaphor will provide more insight into how it occurs in the case department.

When we asked Brian about how the culture of working as a team has been promoted, even when members of the team are working from home, he mentions that there is no actual effort to promote working as a whole team because people are typically working in smaller groups of two or three when they work on projects.

"It's not very often that we are together as a full team. Usually, two to three team members work together on a project. However, we hold meetings and follow a structured process to move the project forward. As a team, we support each other in this way." - Brian, the manager

The above excerpt suggests that Brian finds the current working arrangement sufficient as there is no real focus on being together as a team since he believes that his employees are doing fine. This, however, implies that there is little or no motivation to change the current situation. Brian's response highlights the lack of emphasis on building a cohesive team culture within the organization. This lack of focus on team-building could have potential impacts on the overall performance of the team, especially when working remotely. Furthermore, this can be seen as a

form of reluctant leadership as the leader is hesitant to take on a proactive role in shaping the team culture. In the following excerpts the employees' responses highlighted the lack of cohesiveness in a team culture.

> *"A professional connection is typically established through our weekly Monday meetings or when collaborating in groups of two or three on a project. We usually don't talk with people who work on other projects." - Chris*

> *"We typically work independently in silos, occasionally working in pairs such as my current project. When working in pairs, we figure out our way of working together and it's independent from the rest of the department." - Samuel*

The dissatisfaction with the current working arrangement and lack of cohesion within a team can be seen in the above excerpts. Chris suggests that team members mainly connect with each other through Monday meetings or when working on the same project in small groups. However, he also indicates that there is little interaction between team members who work on different projects. This lack of collaboration could potentially limit the team's ability to share knowledge, which we will discuss more during our third theme. Furthermore, in the excerpt from Samuel, he notes that the team mainly works in silos, which means working as a part of insular teams, with little interaction between other team members outside of their small working group. This indicates a lack of proactive leadership in promoting teamwork which can be seen to align with the concept of reluctant leadership. Samuel's further excerpt illustrates the relationships between the team members as follows:

> *"There is a professional relationship between the colleagues. We are talking about each other's lives but it's pretty limited. Banter in the office is somewhat limited. This may be attributed to the fact that not everyone is physically present in the office, or it could be due to colleagues needing time to warm up to each other." - Samuel*

This suggests that there is a lack of social interaction within the team, with limited discussion about personal lives. Samuel believes that this could be due to the fact that team members may need to "warm up" to each other. This lack of social interaction could contribute to the social isolation observed within the team. Moreover, Robert mentions that Brian may be too accepting of people working remotely, as this could lead to a lack of collaboration within a case team. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

"There is a lack of collaboration due to the high number of people working from home, and although this has been brought to Brian's attention, he has yet to take action on this feedback." - Robert

In the next theme "The benefit of working from home paradox", we will be discussing more about this flexibility to work remotely. Robert further mentions that Brian has not acted on feedback that he has received related to a lack of collaboration, indicating a reluctance to take action to address the issue. Furthermore, during the Monday meeting, which was focused on going through the team's resource plan in their system, Samuel expressed his excitement about traveling for his projects. When Brian asked who he would be traveling with, Samuel replied that he assumes he is going alone. Brian's brief response of *"Oh, okay then"* could suggest a lack of interest or concern towards the social dynamics within the team as well as highlight potential lack of promotion of a sense of community within team members.

Moreover, when asked by the respondents how they think that the culture of the department differs from the general culture of GloTech Consultancy, the metaphor of "island" emerges again. James and Chris provide further insights into this with their following excerpts:

"It's difficult to identify the GloTech Consultancy culture as our department feels like a small island within the larger company. Our department is not as good as other departments to implement "GloTech Consultancy's work practices" and there is no established framework in place to ensure their proper implementation." - James

"I believe there is a significant difference in terms of the level of connectivity and relationships between the departments. However, this is just my presumption and I cannot be certain about the situation in other departments. Nonetheless, I feel like in other departments the employees are closer." - Chris

James mentions in his excerpt that it is difficult for him to identify with GloTech Consultancy's culture because his department feels like it is existing separately as an "island". Furthermore, he highlights that there is a problem with the implementation of GloTech Consultancy's work practices in the case department. He also mentions the absence of a framework to ensure their proper implementation. This further suggests that there may be a lack of clarity and direction in terms of implementing the company's work practices. On the other hand, Chris suggests that connectiveness between employees varies across departments, however, he feels that other departments' connectiveness between employees is closer than his own. These excerpts suggest that the case department may be lacking a strong sense of community within the broader organization of GloTech Consultancy. Additionally, the comments from James and Chris are further supporting the earlier excerpts that there may be a lack of proactive leadership in promoting a cohesive culture, and that this is impacting the level of connection and collaboration between departments.

In addition to the lack of collaboration within the team, there also seems to be a lack of social gatherings or meetings within the team. This can be seen in Chris's statement where he suggests that the team primarily gets together through Monday meetings and that there have only been a few instances where they have had social events.

"Monday meetings are the main way to get together. Additionally, there have been a few instances where the team has had an in-person meeting lasting four hours to discuss ongoing projects, followed by a social event. It is not a lot. " - Chris

This lack of social gatherings could be impacting the team's ability to build strong relationships, which can be important for teamwork and overall job satisfaction. The excerpt highlights the

team's limited opportunities for socializing outside of work-related meetings and events. Chris's comment that *"it is not a lot"* suggests that he and potentially other team members may desire more opportunities for both social interaction and team building activities.

Interestingly, another insight that emerged during the interviews came from Chris.

> *"I believe that the department's lack of social life may be related to the lack of women in the team. No one takes responsibility." - Chris*

Chris's statement suggests that there is a lack of women in the department, and he believes that this could be also a contributing factor to the lack of social life within the team. Chris compares his job to his earlier job experiences, where women were more likely to take responsibility for organizing social events. This statement could be seen as problematic as it assumes that all women are more proactive in organizing social events. However, it does suggest that there may be a need for more diverse perspectives within the team to promote social connectiveness and improve team coherence.

Overall, it is important for leaders to recognize the importance of social connections and work actively towards creating a more connected work community. This could lead to better job satisfaction as Chris mentions in his interview:

> *"So there could be more done to improve the relationships among colleagues in the department, which could lead to higher job satisfaction. Currently, the relationship between colleagues is not bad, but there is room for improvement, and this could be achieved through more outside work events." - Chris*

This statement suggests that building stronger relationships between team members could improve the work environment and therefore improve job satisfaction. This insight highlights the importance of building strong relationships within teams, not only for the social well-being of employees but also for their overall job satisfaction. The lack of cohesion within the case team

has been identified as a potential impact of reluctant leadership, which is reflected in the "island" metaphor used to describe the team's social disconnectiveness. The excerpts from the respondents can be seen to support this.

This provided us with a great transition to our next topic. As mentioned earlier, Brian allows his employees the benefit of working from home. However, this may also act as a barrier to social interactions and potentially create an even stronger "island" for the employees. This issue is particularly relevant given that Brian has received feedback about it. Therefore, the employees' flexibility to work from home leads us to the second theme of our empirical findings, "the benefit of working from home paradox", which will further connect the themes together.

4.3 The benefit of working from home paradox

We will continue exploring the paradox phenomenon that emerged during the employee interviews. Paradox as a term refers to aspects that are contradictory yet connected and exist at the same time and endure over time (Smith and Lewis, 2011 cited in Schaefer, in press, p. 238). In the department, there occurred a paradox between the flexibility to work from home and at the same time wanting to be at the office and needing to have more structure from the manager due to a lack of knowledge sharing in the office environment as well as the lack of social aspects as described during the previous theme. During the interviews, most of the respondents expressed their great appreciation for having the flexibility to choose to work remotely from home or at the office. However, they also brought up their feelings of dissatisfaction towards this, which made it relatively paradoxical. This will be further illustrated and supported by the excerpts presented in the upcoming section.

As mentioned earlier, Brian gives his employees a lot of flexibility, allowing them to have the opportunity to decide whether to work at the office or remotely from home. However, Robert illustrates the possible reason for this as follows:

"He is attempting to improve the work environment by providing what I would call soft benefits. An example of this is my current work-from-home arrangement, which is a result of his efforts to enhance the workplace culture." - Robert

In the excerpt, Robert is providing his perspective on why Brian allows his employees the flexibility to work either at the office or remotely from home. Robert suggests that Brian is offering what he calls "soft benefits" to his employees. Robert also mentions that he is working from home as a result of this flexible work arrangement. This suggests that he finds this benefit valuable and is making use of it. Moreover, this excerpt highlights Brian's approach to employee benefits, which prioritizes flexible work arrangements to help attract and retain employees. However, some of the employees have given their informal feedback to Brian regarding the lack of social interaction and collaboration within the team as discussed in the previous chapter. Despite receiving the feedback, Brian has not made any changes to the current situation. He has mentioned that he is not very much into conflicts, and this could be one possible explanation for his reluctance to confront conflicts.

"I hate conflicts and I try to avoid them. However, looking back, I realize that I could have been more assertive and addressed issues that arose, even if it meant facing conflicts." - Brian, the manager

Brian's reluctance to seek out conflicts may be limiting his ability to address the concerns raised by his employees and improve the team's collaboration. The above excerpt may suggest that he is a reluctant leader as he is hesitant to confront issues or address concerns raised by his employees. It would be beneficial for Brian to consider the feedback provided by his employees to improve the team's dynamics in general. Especially, when considering how Brian illustrates the current situation when asked him how has the culture of working as a team been promoted even though some of the team members are working from home:

"We rarely have the opportunity to be together as a full team, except for department meetings where we discuss projects and occasional social events." - Brian, the manager

Brian's excerpt suggests that there may be a lack of team cohesion and collaboration, as the team does not often work together as a full group. The main reason could be the flexible work arrangements that allow team members to work remotely from home. However, Brian's reluctance to seek out conflicts and address the concerns considering the lack of collaboration raised by his employees may be limiting his ability to promote a strong team cohesion and address any issues that may be contributing to the lack of collaboration.

Another interesting insight that emerged from the data several times is that the employees reported a difference in their manager's leadership approach when they are working from home compared to when working at the office. According to the employees, Brian tends to do small check-ins and have informal and spontaneous chats during the day while working at the office, which is not the case when they are working from home. Furthermore, the employees are having better collaboration when at the same time at the office. This has been illustrated as follows:

> *"When we're working in the office at the same time, we communicate about what we're doing. However, when working from home, the only opportunity for communication is during the Monday meetings. Additionally, we have Personal Development Plan - meetings every three to six months with Brian where we talk about goals for ourselves and the department." - Chris*

> *"We have quite an open culture with lots of talk, especially when we are all in the office. In the office you get the small-talk and check-ins. However, when working remotely, we typically only contact each other when we need something. Despite this, there is a positive relationship between colleagues when we are physically present in the office." - James*

> *"Working together at the office enables colleagues to identify issues with projects and offer help." - Samuel*

The above excerpts support the earlier observation that the team lacks collaboration when working remotely from home. Chris and James suggest that Brian's leadership approach is different depending on whether they are working at the office or remotely from home. When working at the office, Brian tends to have small informal chats with the employees and engage in more frequent check-ins besides the scheduled more formal Personal Development Plan - meetings that take place every three to six months. However, when working remotely from home, communication mainly occurs during the regular meetings and there is little informal conversation or check-ins. Chris's excerpt also highlights that there is not much communication between team members when they are working from home, as also discussed during the previous theme, which may be limiting their ability to collaborate effectively. Whereas, James's excerpt suggests that there is a good relationship between the team members when working at the office. Samuel's excerpt also suggests that there may be more opportunities for communication and collaboration when the team is working together at the office. He also highlights the benefit of being able to notice issues with projects and address them more quickly when working together at the office. James's comment supports this idea, as he notes that there is a more open culture with lots of talks when the team is in the office. All of the excerpts suggest that while the team may have a good relationship when working in the office, there may be challenges in maintaining communication and collaboration when working remotely. Furthermore, the respondents' comments may suggest that the team's collaboration may be affected by Brian's leadership approach and the lack of informal communication and check-ins when working remotely from home. However, Brian also noted the positive sides of working at the office as follows:

> *"A few weeks ago, there happened to be five of us in the office at the same time without any prior planning. This unexpected situation created a great working atmosphere and sparked new ideas. We started collaborating, which resulted in better outcomes. This experience proved that personal interaction and face-to-face communication can have a significant impact on our work." - Brian, the manager*

Brian highlights the positive aspects of working at the office, such as the interaction that can lead to new ideas and collaboration within the case team. This excerpt further supports the idea that the team's collaboration and cohesion may be affected by the lack of informal communication and check-ins when working from home. However, it is important to note that although Brian has not acted on the feedback given about the lack of collaboration within the team, he does recognise the importance of interaction and collaboration.

As mentioned earlier, there are only regular online meetings to attend and there is only contact between employees when there is a need for information. The negative sides of working remotely from home have been described by Chris, David and, Samuel as follows:

> *"To foster better connections within the department, there should be more internal efforts to bring people together, especially since many are working remotely. This is important because currently people are working on different tasks without much awareness of what their colleagues are doing."* - Chris

> *"Brian does not do the small "check ins" when working from home."* - David

> *"It's challenging to get a healthy dialogue between colleagues when calling on Microsoft Teams. Brian occasionally calls, but it's quite rare. There is certainly more interaction when we are in the office. I have noticed that the leadership style is generally less interactive when I am working from home."* - Samuel

The excerpts made by the respondents support the fact that there is a lack of collaboration and cohesion within the team when working remotely from home, particularly between the manager and the employees. Chris suggests that more work needs to be done to connect the people in the department, especially since many of them are working from home. He also highlights that people are doing different tasks and not knowing what each other is doing, which suggests a lack of communication and collaboration among the team members. David notes that Brian does not do the small check-ins when working from home, which suggests that Brian may not be as

proactive in engaging in small check-ins with his team members when working from home. Whereas, Samuel notes that it is more difficult to have a healthy dialogue between colleagues when working remotely and that there is generally less interaction with Brian when he is working from home. Therefore, Brian's leadership approach may be limiting the team's ability to collaborate effectively when working remotely from home, which can be seen as consistent with the concept of reluctant leadership.

In addition, another interesting point was made by Chris in relation to the sharing of knowledge while working in the office:

"If we are in the office we share knowledge." - Chris

Chris's comment suggests that knowledge sharing is possibly more common and easier to achieve when the team is physically present in the office. This may be due to the more frequent and informal interactions that occur when the team is working together in the same physical space. This comment can be seen to support the previous ones, however, the impact on knowledge sharing that has resulted from reluctant leadership will be discussed more in the next theme. Nevertheless, Brian gives a different perspective on this issue. He states that the process of sharing information when working from home is more complicated than it is in the office, as it often requires more formal communication or waiting until the next meeting. Despite this, Brian does not view this as a problem, and he has not received any hard feedback from employees. This may suggest that, from Brian's perspective, the current communication and collaboration practices are sufficient, and there is no need to change anything.

"When working from home the issue is that you can't just say things immediately. You have to do it formally or gather things until the next time you see them. It's not as uncomplicated as in the office. However, I don't feel like it's a problem. There are occasional comments from colleagues expressing a wish for more in-person interaction, but without any hard feedback it seems more of a passing thought than a true wish from the employees. "- Brian, the manager

Furthermore, when asked the employees if they have struggled with balancing between freedom and structure, they replied the following:

> *"Balancing freedom and structure is often a challenge for me. Having so much flexibility means that you have the responsibility to structure your own work and motivate yourself. However, having too much freedom can lead to mistakes in planning, and sometimes I may need to work harder to make up for lost time."* - Chris

> *"Having so much freedom means that it's sometimes difficult to understand the rules and boundaries. Generally I would like to have more clearly defined guidelines when working on a project. This is not only a leadership issue, but also relates to the workflows and the lack of a common approach to tasks and projects. "*- Samuel

> *"You have to figure stuff out for yourself even if you sometimes prefer more guidance. While I would appreciate more standardization, support, and networking within the department, it's challenging to implement such measures given the current level of freedom. However, the freedom is not affecting the quality of my work."* - James

Chris expresses in his excerpt that he sees Brian's leadership style as being too flexible, leading to issues with structuring work and self-motivation. This suggests that Brian may not provide enough guidance or support to his team and that some employees may struggle to manage their workload effectively as a result. Samuel's excerpt further elaborates on the same issue as it highlights the lack of structure and defined boundaries in the case department. However, he also points out that it is not solely an issue with Brian's leadership, but also relates to the workflows and work processes in place. James also comments on the issue of balancing freedom and structure as he suggests that he would prefer more standardization, support, and networking in the case department. However, he acknowledges that this may be difficult to achieve given the amount of flexibility. Despite this, he further mentions that the flexibility has had no impact on

the quality of his work. These excerpts suggest that Brian's leadership approach may be contributing to earlier discussed issues within the department.

The GloTech Consultancy's People Strategy from the recent year addresses the balance between working from home and the office, stating the following:

> *"To develop guidelines for the future workplace at GloTech Consultancy, we conducted a global survey to gather input from employees. This feedback was used to create global guidelines and local policies in major locations to help employees find a balance between working from home and returning to the office." (recent year, People Strategy)*

The above excerpt from GloTech Consultancy's People Strategy indicates that the company is proactively seeking to address the balance between working from home and working in the office. By conducting a global survey and then using employee perspectives to inform the development of guidelines and policies, GloTech Consultancy is demonstrating a commitment to considering the needs and preferences of its employees. In contrast to this, the excerpts from the employees in the case department suggest that there may be too much flexibility as well as a lack of structure, support, and guidance when working remotely from home. These comments may indicate a gap between the current situation for the employees in the case department and the desired state expressed by GloTech Consultancy's People Strategy. Furthermore, this further supports the respondents' need for this described balance between working remotely from home and working at the office as well as that their perspectives would be heard.

This concludes our discussion of the second theme, namely the benefit of working from home paradox, which can be viewed as one of the impacts caused by reluctant leadership in the case department. The paradox has been created by allowing a great amount of flexibility to the employees but ignoring the need for having more structure at the same time, which has been resulted from reluctant leadership. Furthermore, as we briefly mentioned earlier, the need for knowledge sharing among employees will be discussed further in our next theme which explores the barrier to effective leadership in promoting knowledge sharing.

4.4 Barrier to effective leadership in promoting knowledge sharing

Our analysis now turns to the impact of reluctant leadership on knowledge sharing, which was briefly discussed earlier but will be examined more in the following section. Despite the given flexibility that allowed the employees to work remotely from home, Brian does not perceive it as negatively affecting knowledge sharing when asked how knowledge sharing has been impacted by working from home. In the following excerpt he states that he does not believe that working from home has limited knowledge sharing within the case team:

> *"I could imagine that working from home would be an obstacle for working together, but I haven't noticed any negative effects on knowledge sharing. It's fine." - Brian, the manager*

However, several respondents shared their concerns regarding knowledge sharing within the team. Samuel and Chris describe their concerns in the following excerpts as follows:

> *"While working remotely, team meetings have been helpful in sharing knowledge, although some issues can go unnoticed when you're not seeing each other face-to-face." - Samuel*

> *"I believe that the communication and knowledge sharing within the team is lacking due to the leadership." - Chris*

As earlier discussed during the previous theme, when employees work at the office, they are more likely to notice potential issues with projects and help each other easier. Samuel's excerpt further explains the situation, particularly regarding knowledge sharing. He implies that working remotely may limit knowledge sharing to some extent, as some issues may not be detected when team members are not meeting face-to-face. On the other hand, Chris's excerpt suggests that the lack of effective communication and knowledge sharing is a result of leadership. The excerpts from Samuel and Chris indicate that there may be some negative impacts of Brian's leadership approach on knowledge sharing within the case team. Therefore, the excerpts can be seen as

consistent with the concept of reluctant leadership, as a reluctance to lead and facilitate communication and collaboration among team members may limit knowledge sharing and communication, especially in a remote work environment.

Furthermore, the case department consists of a mix of new and senior employees, especially more new employees as noted by Chris "*We are a lot of new guys at our department*". Therefore, the other interesting insight is considering the knowledge sharing between the new and senior engineers within the case team. When asked about how the relationship between new and senior employees is being encouraged both socially and professionally in the case department, Brian describes the situation as follows:

> *"New employees are usually guided by senior employees, who provide task-oriented instructions focusing on materials, processes, and so on. However, this guidance is not in the form of a formal mentorship. Due to high workloads, this guidance is not always successful or prioritized. Despite this, the current guidance system is deemed appropriate. This relationship is how it should be." - Brian, the manager*

In the excerpt, Brian explains that when a new colleague starts at the case team, they are instructed and informed by senior employees on mainly task-oriented issues such as materials and processes. However, this is not a mentor-mentee relationship, and it is not always successful or prioritized due to the employees' workload. Brian concludes that *"This relationship is how it should be"*. This may suggest a lack of willingness to improve the situation. In addition, Brian may be content with the current approach to knowledge sharing between new and senior employees, even if it is not always successful or prioritized due to workload. This reluctance to prioritize and improve the relationship between new and senior employees may limit the department's overall success. Furthermore, the employees illustrate the current situation regarding the relationship between the new and senior employees as follows:

"The department has a lot of young people directly from universities who are accustomed to working in an unstructured environment. However, the consequences of the lack of structure is obvious - information is not being shared." - Robert

"In the department, there are a couple of consultants who have been working there for a long time and they mostly work from home, with more than 90% of their time spent remotely. You can call them and ask for help if you need it. They are willing to share their knowledge and provide help, but they only do so when asked." - Chris

"Regarding the senior employees, it's not that I don't understand them, but they work in "silos". Additionally, they live far away and don't have much incentive to communicate with new employees as they already possess all of the technical knowledge. Thus, they are not socially involved in the department." - Samuel

Robert's excerpt describes that the lack of structure in the case department is affecting knowledge sharing, indicating that the unstructured setup might not be supporting effective knowledge sharing practices. Whereas, Chris explains that some senior employees who work mainly remotely from home, are willing to help and share their knowledge but only if asked. This suggests that they might not be actively engaged in knowledge sharing, and their reluctance to share their knowledge might affect the overall knowledge sharing culture in the department. Samuel further illustrated the situation as he refers to the senior employees as working in silos and not being socially invested in the department. This suggests that there may be a lack of collaboration and cooperation between the senior and new employees, particularly due to the flexibility to work remotely from home. These excerpts support that there may be underlying issues with knowledge sharing in the case department.

Besides this, the respondents describe knowledge sharing to be limited primarily to regular team meetings and small check-ins:

"To share knowledge, we mainly rely on Monday meetings and access to documents of previous projects. If I need more specific information, I schedule a team meeting with a senior engineer. However, since we are working from home, there is a decrease in knowledge sharing. In the office, we can easily approach each other for quick questions, but when working from home, you don't want to disturb people with a simple question." - Chris

"Sharing of knowledge mainly occurs during the Monday meetings. As time goes by, we develop an understanding of who has expertise in different areas of the department and other departments, making it easier to know who to contact for specific knowledge needs." - James

"Knowledge is mainly shared in the supplier meetings, but we also share knowledge in Monday meetings where we can follow up with people about their projects. While I don't hesitate to call someone on Microsoft Teams to ask questions, I would prefer to be able to ask in person." - Samuel

These excerpts support the earlier insight from Chris, who mentioned that the employees share knowledge whenever they are in the office. The above excerpts suggest that regular team meetings and small check-ins are the primary modes of knowledge sharing in the department. Chris further explains that working from home reduces the opportunities for knowledge sharing, as employees are less likely to approach others for help due to the fear of disturbing them. This also brings out the potential power structure of the team dynamics as Chris describes that he does not want to disturb a senior colleague because of a *simple* question. Whereas, James highlights the importance of Monday meetings in sharing knowledge and developing an understanding of who possesses specific knowledge within the department. Samuel expresses a preference for asking questions in person rather than online, indicating that face-to-face interactions are better when considering effective knowledge sharing. All in all, these excerpts support the earlier discussions of the impacts of reluctant leadership. The flexibility to work remotely from home

impacts the knowledge sharing between the senior and new employees as well as the employees' needs and preferences for face-to-face interactions.

However, when considering learning and development in the case department, Brian acknowledges the importance of sharing and developing knowledge within the case team.

> *"Sharing and developing knowledge are crucial to me. To achieve that, I make an effort to invite suppliers to our department and learn about their solutions and equipment. Currently, we are also exploring ways to improve file sharing." - Brian, the manager*

The above excerpts show that Brian is interested in sharing knowledge and developing it within the case department. This is a positive sign that he actively seeks to invite suppliers to share their expertise. He also recognizes the importance of improving file sharing within the team. While this shows a willingness to collaborate and learn, it is important to note that some respondents have highlighted the impact of reluctant leadership on knowledge sharing in the department. Furthermore, Samuel illustrates the current situation as follows:

> *"I try to clean up our internal sharing platform as there has been encouragement from my colleagues. In addition, suppliers occasionally come out to present their solutions and how to incorporate them into the consultancy. Another senior colleague arranges this. I find this very enjoyable and informative." - Samuel*

Samuel's excerpt suggests that he is taking a proactive approach to improving their internal sharing platform. However, the fact that he mentions being encouraged by his colleagues indicates that there may be a lack of leadership in this area. However, Chris and James further illustrate the positive aspects of Brian's learning and development perspective in the following excerpts.

> *"Brian encourages knowledge and development to some extent. He invites external companies to discuss their products and new technology. This was nice." - Chris*

"We are currently trying to develop better knowledge sharing practices with Brian. We have our regular Monday meetings where we discuss ongoing projects, as well as smaller check-ins within project groups. Additionally, we have started a new type of meeting with our colleagues abroad to encourage knowledge sharing across projects." - James

The above excerpts support Brian's efforts, indicating that it is appreciated when suppliers come to the case department. James further adds that the department has a new type of meeting with colleagues abroad to encourage knowledge sharing across projects. However, there is no mention of any structured learning initiatives or training programmes for the employees themselves. Brian elaborates on this when asked how he promotes a culture of learning and development in his team.

"I often remind my colleagues that if they have missed any information, they can just take courses by themselves from GloTech Consultancy or seek knowledge outside of the company from external sources. GloTech Consultancy has an academy with a lot of videos on how to act and use their systems. You can also join GloTech Consultancy's online courses, "Learn the GloTech Consultancy way of doing things"." - Brian, the manager

In the excerpt, Brian suggests that employees should take courses by themselves from GloTech Consultancy or seek knowledge outside of the company if they have missed any information. This can potentially indicate that there is no structured approach to learning or development within the department. However, James and Samuel state the following in their excerpts:

"It is important to speak up if you need to change direction and Brian listens to that. Opportunities for development are available. However, Brian will not hold your hand, but if you have wishes he works to grant them. You have to work for it. There are no scheduled learning initiatives. As long as you plan it yourself there is no problem." - James

"Brian is really motivated to develop people. However, consultant hours are the most important. This is a requirement from "above". Brian is more motivated to develop people than others might be." - Samuel

James explains that there are possibilities for development, and Brian listens to feedback and works to grant their wishes. However, he will not hold employees' hands, but if the employees plan their learning initiatives themselves, there is no problem. This suggests that there is some support for individual learning and development, but it is not necessarily a priority for the department as a whole. Furthermore, Samuel's excerpt highlights Brian's motivation to develop people, but consultant hours are more important, as it is a requirement from higher management. This indicates that while Brian values employee development, it is not necessarily the top priority in the case department. Samuel further notes that Brian is more motivated to develop people than others might be, which suggests that employee development is not completely overlooked. Additionally, the previous excerpts suggest that the case department is taking some steps towards knowledge sharing and development, but it is not a primary focus and there is no structured approach to learning and development. GloTech Consultancy's leadership strategy of Employee and management relations states the following when considering the learning and development of employees:

"A leader's responsibility includes creating a supportive environment for employees to develop and learn, where everyone has equal opportunities, feels fulfilled and safe, and is motivated to do their best." (recent year, Employee and management relations)

It can be seen that GloTech Consultancy's leadership strategy may not fully align with the case department's practices. The strategy mentions that leaders are responsible for helping employees learn and grow and fostering an environment of equal opportunities where people and teams feel safe, fulfilled, engaged, and thrive. However, the case department seems to have a more individualized approach to learning and development, with employees planning their own learning initiatives rather than the department having a structured approach led by a leader. Furthermore, the case department's approach to knowledge sharing and development seems to be

less of a priority than what is outlined in the annual report. While there are some efforts towards knowledge sharing and development within the case team, it appears to be more reliant on individual initiative rather than being a core part of the department's culture. It appears that there may be a gap between GloTech Consultancy's leadership strategy and the practices of the case department when it comes to learning and development. It may be worth considering ways to align the two, such as implementing more structured approaches to learning and development or making knowledge sharing and development more of a priority for the department. Therefore, it can be seen that the case department's approach to leadership and development is potentially consistent with reluctant leadership. The department's focus on individual learning and development rather than a structured approach led by a leader suggests a lack of initiative or reluctance on the part of the leader to take a proactive role in fostering a culture of learning and development within the team. In the following excerpt, Brian claims that he is fulfilling the requirements of GloTech Consultancy's leadership strategies:

> *"I feel like I don't need someone to tell him how to be a leader as long as I fulfill the requirements. I feel like I already act within the statements of GloTech Consultancy's leadership strategies." - Brian, the manager*

This suggests that he may have a lack of awareness of the company's leadership strategies. This further supports the fact that there may be a disconnection between the company's leadership strategies and the actual practices being implemented in the case department. Furthermore, Samuel mentions that the HR initiatives are not prioritized enough as they are not known to anyone.

> *"HR initiatives are not being prioritized and their existence is not known to anyone." - Samuel*

Samuel's comment about HR initiatives not being prioritized and being unknown to everyone also highlights potential issues with the case department's leadership practices. It suggests that there may be a lack of communication within the department regarding HR initiatives and priorities. This could potentially indicate a lack of leadership initiative or reluctance to take an

active role within the department, which can be seen as consistent with the concept of reluctant leadership.

This concludes our discussion of the third theme, as well as the whole analysis section. The reluctant leadership can be seen to have an impact on followership within a knowledge-intensive firm by isolating employees from the social aspects of work life, creating a paradox from the given flexibility, and finally, impacting the knowledge sharing within the case team.

5. Discussion

To gain a deeper understanding of our empirical material, we will now discuss our findings in the context of our research questions in relation to the existing literature on the topic. The analysis will be based on Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership (Hollander, 1978) in order to provide a common lens to view leadership, its components and their interactions. Compared to other prominent leadership frameworks such as leader-member exchange (LMX), situational- and reflexive leadership, we found Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership to best describe the minimalistic and almost purely transactional form of leadership present in our studied department.

Likewise, while the low level of leader-follower engagement might signify that Brian is purely performing management, we would argue that he, although very simplistically, does perform leadership. It is clear in our empirical data that he does engage in behaviors that aim to motivate, develop, and build a relationship with his employees as well as set a direction for the department. While a lot of it, as will be evident in the following discussion, is done in a reactive manner as an answer to his followers' or the organization's demands, it still follows Maccoby's (2000) definition of leadership.

Overall, the purpose of this discussion is to explore the impact of reluctant leadership on followership in knowledge-intensive firms and to discuss strategies for addressing this issue. Specifically, we will examine the followers and their impact on leadership, reluctant leadership and its impact on followership, the role of followership in addressing reluctant leadership, and strategies for addressing reluctant leadership in knowledge-intensive firms.

5.1 Knowledge workers and their impact on leadership

From the perspective of Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership (Hollander, 1978), followers are an integral part of creating and shaping the leadership. This is especially true in knowledge-intensive firms, where knowledge workers possess a certain amount of power due to their specialized knowledge, which makes them of great value to their employer (Newell,

Scarbrough and Swan, 2009; von Nordenflycht, 2010). Therefore, a leader has to take their wants and needs into consideration when leading, in order to ensure their continued following (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017).

5.1.1 Needs and expectations of knowledge workers from their leaders

Our data indicates that the employees in our studied department have a clear image of what they need from their leader in order to succeed in their work. Aligning with the theory on the topic of knowledge workers, the employees expressed a desire for autonomy, flexibility, recognition, social engagement, as well as learning and knowledge sharing (Oldham and Cummings, 1996; Coff, 1997; von Nordenflycht, 2010). While some of these requests seem to have been granted, the employees are still longing for more recognition, social engagement and knowledge sharing.

Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership emphasizes the importance of communication and feedback between the leader and the follower in order to create meaningful leadership (Hollander, 1978). By the followers expressing their needs and expectations from their leader in a clear and concise manner, it reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings and misdirected leadership efforts which then overall benefits both the leader and follower. However, it is evident that this is not the case in our studied department, since there is a lack of communication and expectation alignment between Brian and his employees regarding their needs and wants and how he can live up to these.

Our data indicates that the level of communication differs immensely when in the office compared to when working from home. In the office, the interaction is described as so-called "check ins" and small talks when passing each other during the work day. However, the amount of autonomy and working individually on projects seem to have an impact on the general interaction and communication between Brian and his employees, as it becomes more official and less spontaneous when communicating through emails and online meetings. Furthermore, when asked, none of the employees expressed that they were giving Brian feedback as to what

kind of leadership they would want from him. According to both Samuel and Chris, this is an active choice due to it being uncomfortable to express their expectations to a superior.

However, this lack of direct communication is not only caused by the employees not voicing their needs. According to Hollander (1978), the leader is likewise responsible for reaching out to inquire about their followers, and our data indicates that Brian is not sufficiently doing this. This is apparent by multiple of the employees noting that there is a general lack of interaction between them and Brian when working online compared to when they meet physically at the office. Additionally, Brian only does more formal check-ins every three to six months. This is especially problematic as Brian has implied that he does not take informal requests and feedback as seriously.

Overall, the vague way the employees communicate their wants and needs combined with Brian not taking a particularly proactive approach to it might make it difficult for him to take on the role as leader in a way that feels satisfactory for his followers.

5.1.2 The paradox of wanting both flexibility and structure

One of the things that stood out in our empirical analysis was the amount of praise the employees had for the amount of autonomy and flexibility in their work which allowed them to work on projects in the way that they themselves felt was the most suitable. Im praxis, this meant that the employees, and especially the ones with the most seniority, would choose to work from home rather than regularly working in the office. According to Brian, this results in the department very rarely meeting together as the full team, and routine meetings are therefore always conducted online.

However, the employees not wanting to regularly come into the office contradicts our data, which highlights that they are motivated by sharing their expertise and ideas, feeling like their presence makes a difference, and having a well-functioning social life both within the department and the organization. Both Brian and most of the employees describe how, when they

meet, there is a visible change in working climate, idea generation, collaboration and general interaction.

Likewise, in their people strategy, GloTech Consultancy's policies on the area state that a key part of optimizing the workplace is ensuring that their employees find a balance between working physically at the office and from home. According to them, this is to improve employee engagement and well-being. This aligns with the views of Schaefer (in press) who emphasize that social interaction in-person is essential in sharing knowledge and creating innovative ideas as well as creating a common culture.

Despite the pressure from the organization for all workers to return to work now that the pandemic has ended, it does not seem to have had an impact on the amount of freedom allowed in Brian's department. Multiple employees have voiced their needs for more collegial interaction through mandated and scheduled time at the office to Brian, but without him actually taking action and implementing it. This is elaborated on by Robert, who describes it as a conscious choice by Brian to use "soft benefits" like working from home as a benefit or reward to ensure that the employees are content in their work. Likewise, it could be a sign of avoiding conflicts, which Doyle (2016) highlights as one of the central characteristics of a reluctant leader. Generally, our empirical data show that the employees see the benefits of physically working together, but they feel that the flexibility has a positive effect on factors like work-life balance and efficiency in their work which outweighs the possible benefits of changing the current way of doing things.

However, when taking a critical look at how the level of flexibility and working from home impacts the leadership being exercised, it becomes evident that by changing the context of the leader-follower interaction from in the office to online, it negatively affects the efficiency of Brian's leadership efforts (Hollander, 1978; Schaefer, in press). His natural way of interacting with his employees is described as small check-ins and talks by the coffee machine. Instead, when leading his employees online, he does it through the more formal forms of communication such as emails and online meetings, or, as he describes it himself, by gathering things until he meets with them the next time. Therefore, by allowing this amount of flexibility for the workers,

regardless of their perception of whether it positively or negatively affects their work, Brian is decreasing the amount of interaction he and his employees have.

5.2 Reluctant leadership and its impact on followership

As noted in the above section, knowledge workers are usually fairly self-directed and require a level of autonomy and flexibility in their work to perform at their best and stay motivated. However, this has to be supported by a leader in order to provide direction, facilitate communication, provide resources, manage change, and foster a positive work culture (Hislop, 2005; Mládková, 2012).

In our empirical material, we explored how Brian, the manager of the department, shows signs of reluctantly leading the department. This was noted by both himself and his employees, who saw him as more of a peer rather than a true leader figure. By being hesitant to exercise leadership he inevitably affects the desire to engage as a follower in the department which in turn has consequences for the work environment.

5.2.1 Causes of reluctant leadership in knowledge-intensive firms

When investigating the causes of reluctant leadership, two main factors emerge: Being promoted despite not having the desire to be in a leadership role, or lacking the skills or confidence to efficiently be leading other people (Doyle, 2016). In the Brian's case it seems as if it is primarily the leadership role itself causing his reluctance rather than missing abilities. When first joining GloTech Consultancy, he made it evident that he was not interested in any leadership duties, and instead wanted to exclusively function as an engineer to focus on doing technical projects. However, not long after, the company pushed him into a leadership position regardless of his initial wishes.

This follows the ideas of The Peter principle, where people who excel at their job almost always find themselves being promoted into a leading role despite their desire or skills to perform well

in the job (Peter and Hull, 1969). Peter and Hull (1969) emphasize that the responsibility of avoiding reluctant leaders due to undesired promotions mainly lies with the organization, as they argue that it is seen as socially unacceptable to refuse a promotion being offered, and that refusing might end up causing an unspoken conflict. This narrative aligns with our data, which highlights that Brian hates conflicts.

Organizations might be aware of the issue but, when looking at the bigger picture, see reluctant leaders as the better option. In a knowledge-intensive firm, such as GloTech Consultancy, it can be critical to have workers who are experts in the field they operate within (Drucker, 1993). Therefore, there might be a limited number of people, if any, who are both capable and willing to become a leader in these organizations, which in turn may force some employees into reluctantly accepting a superior role.

In our empirical data we found several indications that Brian is fully capable of practicing leadership, but that his personal motivation in the job is linked to technical projects and consulting rather than his leadership duties. Therefore, he lacks the intrinsic motivation to lead, and instead leans on either his employees and the organization to take the initiative instead (Deci, 2017). This is also pointed out by several of his employees who note that Brian is usually not a source of inspiration or motivation, but that this changes whenever he shows his "nerdiness" and technical skills to the team. Furthermore, he will happily help connect people, secure learning opportunities, and provide resources, but solely if they bring it up themselves.

5.2.2 Impact of reluctant leadership on followership

Brian being a leader who only reluctantly assumes a leadership role to his employees while simultaneously, to some extent, not regularly interacting with them significantly impacts the leader-follower interaction and thereby also the leadership being created (Hollander, 1978). Furthermore, followers who feel well led are more likely to commit themselves to the organization and thereby actively engage positively in ensuring the organization's success (Uhl-Bien, Marion and Mckelvey, 2007).

Reluctant leadership can also have an impact on the followership in terms of changing follower types. According to Kelley's model of followership, there are five types of followers: Sheep, yes-people, alienated, stars and pragmatics (Kelley, 1992). Our data indicates that the employees are mainly pragmatics, as they generally follow the direction of the organization, although not necessarily with great enthusiasm, while also preferring to maintain the status quo. A few of them, however, lean more into being yes-people, as they are more actively and willingly participating in the tasks given to them, but are not actively challenging the way things are done.

Yes-people followers tend to be fairly compliant and do not have strong opinions or ideas of their own. They are likely to follow the leader, which can be problematic when the leader is reluctant to take charge or make decisions. If the leader is not providing clear direction, the followers may become frustrated and feel lost. This could lead to a shift towards becoming an alienated follower. Pragmatic followers tend to be focused on achieving results rather than engaging heavily in the leader-follower relationship. However, they may also be hesitant to challenge the leader or take risks. When the leader is reluctant, pragmatic followers could feel that they are not being given enough support or direction to achieve their goals. Therefore, this can likewise lead to a shift towards becoming an alienated follower instead.

If looking to define the followers according to Chaleff's follower typology, there are four types of followers: Partners, implementers, individualists, and resources. Since this model does not allow followers to be defined in-between categories, the followers in this department would be best described as being individualists with a few of them being implementers instead. In the context of reluctant leadership, individualists could want to resist the leader's authority and seek to go their own way which could result in a lack of uniformity and direction within the department. On the other hand, implementers may simply follow the leader's direction, even if they disagree with it, in order to maintain stability and order. This could instead result in lack of innovation and development as new ideas and practices may not be adopted.

Ultimately, reluctant leadership can impact both the level of critical thinking and challenge, but may also negatively affect how supportive and contributing the followers are to both the leader and the organization.

5.3 The role of followership in addressing reluctant leadership

As noted in the above sections, followership plays a significant role in shaping leadership since it is the follower who perceives the situation and defines the needs that the leader has to fulfill. Furthermore, it is the follower who either rejects or accepts acts of leadership. (Hollander, 1978; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). When leaders are hesitant to lead, it creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and indecisiveness, which can affect the morale and motivation of followers. In such situations, followership can serve as a valuable tool in addressing the challenges posed by reluctant leadership by engaging in behaviors that support their reluctant leader in creating meaningful leadership rather than placing the main responsibility for this upon the leader themselves.

5.3.1 Supportive followership to a reluctant leader

As we have previously discussed, reluctant leadership can have a negative impact on followership in a knowledge-intensive firm. While there are several strategies that leaders can use to address their own reluctance, followers can also play an important part in supporting their leaders and helping them become more effective and comfortable in their role. One approach to do this is by developing follower skills such as communication, teamwork and problem solving (Uhl-Bien, Marion and Mckelvey, 2007; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017).

First and foremost, followers can work to improve their communication skills. Effective communication is key to any successful working relationship, and this is especially true when dealing with a reluctant leader (Hollander, 1978; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). Followers can make an effort to communicate clearly, be proactive in asking questions, and provide regular feedback to their leader. However, from an organizational point of view, the followers might be reluctant to provide feedback, as the leader is in a position of authority and holds the power and decision-making responsibilities.

This is further enhanced in our studied department as Brian possesses additional power due to his seniority and technical knowledge. This dynamic is evident by both Chris and Samuel expressing

that it feels uncomfortable to provide feedback on Brian's way of leading the department, as they do not consider themselves experienced enough to address his actions. Moreover, communication and feedback is further challenged as Brian's laid-back way of interacting with his employees contrasts with more formal ways of communication leading them to primarily discuss their wants and concerns at social events outside of work. However, this power dynamic has resulted in an overall lack of communication and feedback concerning the leadership in the department as Brian states that even though his employees do occasionally provide feedback, he is not inclined to take it to heart as he personally does not view informal feedback as a true expression of their opinions. Therefore, for the employees to improve their communication to and with Brian, it could be beneficial to be considerate of choosing the right time and place, be specific about their wants and needs, and focusing on the behavior rather than Brian himself.

Secondly, followers can provide support to their leader who might feel overwhelmed or uncertain about their role (Doyle, 2016; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). Leaders are generally influenced by their followers, and by exhibiting positive attitudes and behaviors, followers can influence their leader's behavior in a positive way (Hollander, 1978, 1993). One way to do this is by providing encouragement to their leaders by recognizing and celebrating the leader's successes and achievements in order to support the reluctant leader's confidence and motivation for leading (Doyle, 2016). There is no indication in our collected data that any of the employees in the department are currently supporting Brian in his attempt to lead the department. This might also be due to mirroring Brian's behavior since Samuel notes that no one is celebrated for what they do and their results. Likewise, James expresses that there is a lack of attention being paid to addressing more personal matters.

Lastly, followers can take initiative to help alleviate some of the burden put on their reluctant leader. From the perspective of Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership (Hollander, 1978), the followers can strengthen the leadership by working in unison with the leader to help them to more effectively lead their team. One way to do this is by being proactive in their work. This means taking the initiative to identify problems and develop solutions, rather than waiting for the leader to provide direction. By taking a proactive approach, they can somewhat relieve the leader, ensuring more time spent on carrying out leadership tasks. However, our data shows

that instead of working with Brian to support his leadership efforts, the employees are increasingly distancing themselves from him resulting in more horizontal ways of organizing.

5.3.2 Alternative forms of organizing for reluctant leadership

The presence of a leader who is reluctant to take on the tasks and responsibilities associated with the role inevitably has an effect on how the employees engage as followers. However, while Hollander (1978) emphasizes that leadership is created in the interplay between the leader, followers and the situation, he does not specify that the leader necessarily has to be the followers' superior. As a result of Brian only reluctantly leading the department, our data shows that his employees have increasingly chosen to not socially acknowledge Brian as a leader and therefore not assuming a follower role, but instead taking on some of the leadership tasks themselves. However, in the context of a knowledge-intensive firm where a reluctant leader is present, alternative forms of organizing can be an effective way to address the leadership gap and ensure that the organization functions effectively (Manz and Sims, 1987; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017).

This is evident by the employees taking responsibility for some of the leadership tasks, as they do not feel like Brian is performing the necessary leadership tasks in a way that they deem satisfactory to fulfill their needs. While this may not be perceived as a mutually agreed upon act of shared leadership, their actions do follow the same principles of taking ownership and responsibility for their contribution to the organization as well as carry out their work without the need for oversight from a superior (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). This can be observed within our empirical data by Samuel taking initiative to organize their internal sharing platform and Robert inviting suppliers to come out to explain their solution and how to incorporate them in the departments consultancy tasks.

However, due to the isolated way work is being conducted at the department with only little regular interaction between the employees in our studied department, it would take significant changes to instead adopt a more organized distributed leadership approach (Alvesson, Blom and

Sveningsson, 2017). Yet, striving to embrace this way of organizing, when the traditional top-down leadership does not prove sufficient, could prove to address and help the challenges concerning collaboration and knowledge sharing that the department is currently experiencing. This has even been acknowledged by Samuel, who notes that a more democratic leadership approach would benefit them.

Some of the employees have gone further than just taking on some leadership tasks and have become almost completely autonomous or self-leading in their work (Manz and Sims, 1987; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). This becomes evident by Robert noting *"I work independently, I am not being managed"* and *"I don't consider Brian my superior".* Although the employees do not feel like this way of organizing the department negatively affects the quality of their work, our data shows that them being encouraged by Brian to work on different projects without interacting with each other has a negative impact on both knowledge sharing, motivation and their social life.

Although this might be an active choice for some of the employees, others have voiced that Brian's reluctant way of leading is pushing them into becoming autonomous regardless of their personal wants and needs for leadership. It becomes evident when James notes that they are left to navigate things out for themselves, even though they would prefer more guidance, support, and opportunities for networking. This is further elaborated on, when he expresses that *"you have to be your own boss and plan and structure your own work".* According to Brian, this is a conscious choice, and he describes his approach to leading as *"I let people lead themselves and see how it goes".* Since some of the employees are being pushed into a self-leading role, even though they would rather persist as followers, it could be argued that now they themselves have become reluctant leaders. However, this is a rather unexplored topic in leader-follower literature and would need further research in order to be fully understood.

5.4 Strategies for addressing reluctant leadership in knowledge-intensive firms

Reluctant leadership can be a challenge for especially knowledge-intensive firms as it can hinder growth, productivity, and innovation as well as negatively impact retention rates for skilled and essential employees (Mládková, 2012; Doyle, 2016). From the perspective of Hollander's Transactional Approach to Leadership (Hollander, 1978), GloTech Consultancy and its culture, policies and actions has an undeniable impact on the leadership practiced within the department as it sets the overall setting for the situation that the leader and followers interact within. Therefore, to truly address and help mitigate the negative effects of reluctant leadership, GloTech Consultancy has to play an active role in addressing the issue from both a strategic and personal perspective.

5.4.1 The role of organizational structure in addressing reluctant leadership

In many knowledge-intensive firms, as well as in GloTech Consultancy, both leaders are expected to balance their time between client work and internal leadership responsibilities. This can create a culture where leadership is undervalued and underdeveloped, which, in combination with having reluctant leaders, might lead to a lack of direction, motivation, and accountability (Schweiger and DeNisi, 1991; Latham and Pinder, 2005). Therefore, organizations wanting to help or prevent reluctant leaders have to allow prioritizing and investing time into actually practicing leadership.

GloTech Consultancy's two leadership strategies, the "Employee and management relations" and the "People strategy", are in place to ensure the quality and uniformity of leadership throughout the organization, and from the way these new leadership strategies have been presented as one of four central parts of their general business strategy of 2022-2025 it can be deduced that it is an area that GloTech Consultancy is heavily prioritizing. However, when taking a closer look at the reasoning for this initiative, it becomes clear that the general focus is to be able to attract and retain talents while also maximizing the creation of shareholder value.

Overall, this aligns with the general goal of GloTech Consultancy whose business model revolves around providing consultancy services to its customers. However, this focus on making leadership a means to achieve a monetary goal rather than having leadership and engaged followers a goal in itself has clearly made an impact on how Brian runs his department. This is emphasized by Samuel, who notes that Brian is very motivated to develop people, but that it is a requirement *"from above"* to instead spend his time on encouraging consultancy tasks. He further points out that Brian's way of leading lacks a relationship-oriented aspect due to the immense focus on solving tasks for clients.

In order for an organization to shift their focus to prioritizing leadership as a means to ensure motivated and thriving employees rather than to secure profits, they must implement fundamental structures throughout the organization to address these challenges. One way to do this would be through formal mentoring programs that pair experienced leaders with newer leaders or followers who aspire to leadership roles. This can help to develop leadership skills and reduce the reluctance of leaders to take on more responsibility. By providing support and guidance, mentors can help new leaders navigate the challenges of leadership and build confidence in their abilities. This would be effective in addressing the reluctance that is due to not wanting a leadership position, as it would funnel the resources into those who are actually interested in becoming leaders, but also the reluctance caused by lack of confidence or leadership skills. According to our data, this system, to some extent, already exists on an employee-to-employee basis, where new hires are paired with a senior employee to instruct, inform and inspire.

Another initiative to organizationally prioritize leadership efforts could be by implementing performance metrics that prioritize leadership development and skills. Tying performance metrics to leadership development would signal the importance of leadership skills and encourage leaders to prioritize their development. Ideally, this should be supported by allocating resources to support leadership development and skills. This can include budgeting for leadership training, providing time for leadership activities, and creating incentives for leadership development. By prioritizing leadership development, organizations can encourage and motivate leaders to take on more responsibility and reduce the reluctance of leaders to lead.

However, these suggestions would need to be further looked into by organizational scholars to fully understand their impact on preventing and supporting reluctant leadership.

5.4.2 The importance of promoting a learning culture and a desire to improve for reluctant leaders

Organizational policies and cultures can not stand alone in preventing and supporting reluctant leaders. To truly have an impact, it is essential that the intended practices are voluntarily adopted by potential and current leaders throughout the organization. According to Doyle (2016), the negative implications of a reluctant leader can be diminished, or even completely avoided, by the leader themselves working to improve in the leader role. However, this requires both the organization and the leaders themselves to work together to ensure continuous positive development. This is in line with (Hollander, 1978), who emphasizes that in order to successfully create meaningful leadership, it requires a mutual and willing interaction between the leader, follower and situation.

By fostering a culture that emphasizes and rewards learning and improvement, organizations can create an environment that supports the development of both personal and leadership skills, which can benefit the reluctant leader as well as the organization as a whole. It is evident in GloTech Consultancy's leadership strategies that this is an area that they are heavily prioritizing which is supported by Brian noting that the organization is investing in teaching its employees the *"GloTech Consultancy way of doing things"*. However, our data indicates that Brian does not perceive these initiatives as important to look into or follow. He is further affirming this by stating that he does not need someone to tell him how to be a leader as long as he fulfills the requirements. This is supported by Samuel, who notes that HR initiatives are not prioritized. Likewise, James adds that Brian's department is not as good as other departments to implement *"GloTech Consultancy work practices"*.

Our data from our studied department shows that there exists a paradox of reluctant leaders also being reluctant to participate in leadership learning. On one hand, a reluctant leader may

recognize the need for improvement but may be hesitant to participate in leadership development activities due to various reasons such as lack of time or interest, fear of failure, or even a fixed mindset that they cannot improve (Doyle, 2016). However, on the other hand, it is important for organizations to promote a learning culture and provide leadership development opportunities for all employees, including reluctant leaders. By refusing to participate in leadership development opportunities, a reluctant leader may be hindering their own growth and limiting their ability to effectively lead their team (Hollander, 1978; Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017).

In addition, a reluctance to learn and improve can also have negative consequences for the organization as a whole. In a knowledge-intensive firm, where innovation and adaptability are critical to success, leaders who are not continuously learning and improving may not be able to keep up with changing market conditions and may miss out on important opportunities for growth (Miles *et al.*, 1995; Muller and Doloreux, 2009). Moreover, when a leader is unwilling to participate in leadership development activities, it can send a message to their followers that learning and growth are not valued or important in the organization. As a result, employees may experience a decline in motivation, decreased morale, and a lack of trust in leadership, all of which even further negatively impact the leader-follower aspect of creating leadership (Hollander, 1978; Schaefer, in press).

Therefore, it is crucial for organizations to promote a desire to learn and improve among all employees, including reluctant leaders. However, it can be difficult to implement such a culture and the task is even further complicated when a reluctant leader does not want to participate. One approach could be to start with those followers and employees who are more receptive to learning and improvement. By empowering them and creating opportunities for them to learn and develop, they can serve as role models for others and inspire a positive culture of learning (Hollander, 1993; Schaefer, in press). Our data shows that this is already somehow implemented, as those employees who are proactive and taking initiative in seeking learning opportunities will often have them granted. However, nothing in our data indicates that this has thus far had an effect on encouraging Brian to pursue leadership development opportunities.

Another approach could be to provide incentives and rewards for leaders who participate in the organization's learning opportunities. This could help to create a sense of accountability for their

own growth and development. However, as noted in the above section, it is an integrated part of GloTech Consultancy's current culture that the time and resources available to spend on learning and development is heavily dependent on the amount of projects being tended to at a given time. Therefore, they would have to adopt an increasingly people-oriented approach to organization development rather than mainly focusing on being task-oriented.

Lastly, for this cultural change to fully make an impact, it would require an environment where leaders feel comfortable admitting their shortcomings and areas for improvement. This is especially essential in a knowledge-intensive firm, where being the expert on their individual tasks is often a part of the identity of a knowledge worker (Drucker, 1993). From our data it is evident that the general lack of social interaction in combination with the immense focus on tasks rather than building relationships, and the power imbalance between new and senior engineers is not contributing to a culture where neither the employees nor Brian would feel comfortable sharing their weaknesses.

Ultimately, creating a culture of learning and growth within an organization requires a long-term commitment and a willingness to adapt and evolve. When dealing with particularly reluctant leaders, it is important to find ways to encourage them to actively participate. By leading by example, focusing on the benefits, providing flexible learning options, offering incentives, and fostering a supportive environment, organizations can create a culture of learning and growth that benefits all of its members, including reluctant leaders.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Empirical Findings and Research Contribution

In our study, we aimed to develop a deeper understanding of how reluctant leadership impacts followership in a knowledge-intensive firm. As defined in our literature review, there is a lack of research on the topic of reluctant leaders and especially on what the implications of them are for both followers and organizations. From our empirical data we identified four themes: reluctant leadership - the initial desire to not be a leader, "island" - missing social aspects of work-life, the benefit of working from home paradox, as well as the barrier to effective leadership in promoting knowledge sharing.

Firstly, it can be concluded that Brian has been hesitant to lead his department throughout his whole employment at GloTech Consultancy. It is clear that his motivation lies with being able to exercise his technical knowledge by working on projects rather than doing leadership, and this attitude is rubbing off on the employees who, as a result of this, have started seeing Brian as a peer rather than a leader and are therefore becoming more autonomous in their work.

Likewise, it is evident that this autonomy and freedom has caused the entire department to neither communicate nor collaborate effectively, as they are all working on separate projects without any significant leadership efforts providing direction or unity. While knowledge sharing and collaboration is usually a key factor in ensuring competitiveness in a knowledge-intensive firm (Alvesson, 2004), the employees all stated that they enjoy the freedom and find it motivating. This stands as a contrast to them voicing how the level of flexibility is negatively impacting their personal development, time management, and the level of interaction within the department.

Lastly, our findings suggest that so-called "billable tasks" are prioritized more than personal development and knowledge sharing. While some of it is due to GloTech Consultancy being dependent on its workers providing consultancy tasks to their customers, a lot of it can be attributed to the lack of direction and initiative coming from Brian, who instead lets his employees take charge on how and where they choose to work. As a result, this has negatively

impacted especially the knowledge sharing from the senior engineers to the younger, newer engineers.

6.2 Practical Implications

From our data we can conclude that reluctant leadership has several implications for followers in knowledge-intensive firms. However, since leadership is co-created between the leader, follower and the situation, it is not only the reluctant leader themself who has an impact on how the leadership is carried out.

We can deduce that there is a higher risk of reluctant leadership in knowledge-intensive firms as there is a need in such organizations for superiors both leading and being technical experts. However, it is evident that when a leader is only reluctantly leading, it can cause otherwise engaged and motivated followers to become apathetic or even directly cynical due to the lack of direction and initiative from the leader. On the other hand, reluctant leadership might help the followers achieve a greater level of autonomy and feeling of ownership in their work, which is shown to be of great importance to especially knowledge workers.

Overall, followers also have a significant role to play in impacting their reluctant leader. As highlighted in this study, knowledge workers have specific needs and expectations from their leaders, and they need to communicate those needs to their leaders in a constructive and respectful manner. By doing so, followers can help build trust and support between the leader and the followers as well as guide the leader into co-creating the optimal leadership for their followers. However, if there is a lack of communication it may be even more difficult for a reluctant leader to lead.

Furthermore, followers can provide emotional and social support to their reluctant leader, as well as help facilitate their growth and development by encouraging them to participate in leadership development programs or providing them with feedback and opportunities for improvement. This can not only benefit the leader but also the entire organization, as a more effective and competent leader can help drive innovation, productivity, and employee satisfaction.

Additionally, followers may choose to support their reluctant leader by relieving them of some of their leadership responsibilities. This can be done by performing shared or distributed leadership within a group, where the specific leadership tasks are assigned to those either most competent or willing to perform them. However, a reluctant leader in a knowledge-intensive firm may find that their reluctance drives the followers to have such a great level of freedom in their work, that they become completely self-leading or autonomous.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of the organization in addressing reluctant leadership. Organizations should work towards creating a culture of learning and growth, where leaders are encouraged to take ownership of their work and develop their skills. This involves providing adequate training and development opportunities, recognition and rewards for high performance, and promoting a positive and supportive work environment. However, our research also indicates that despite being a part of a well-supporting organization, the leader themself need to take responsibility for their own learning and development as well.

6.3 Research Limitations

Like other studies, we are aware that our study is not without limitations. Given that we have conducted a single-case study, our results can neither be considered fully representative of other departments within GloTech Consultancy nor of other companies in general. This is only further enhanced due to the use of qualitative data which makes it challenging to create statistical generalizations. Likewise, with the small sample size of six participants, including the manager of the department, we might not have had a chance to look at the full picture regarding the reluctance within GloTech Consultancy which then only even further reduces the general applicability for other cases of reluctant leadership.

Another limitation refers to how we have collected our data. Due to the extent that our respondents were working from home, it was difficult to schedule interviews in-person. Therefore, we conducted the interviews as online meetings instead. However, due to this we might have missed non-verbal cues such as body language, especially during our observation in

which not everyone had their webcam turned on. Only doing data collection online also meant that we were unable to observe how the participants interacted with each other.

Due to the language barrier between us, the researchers, and the employees, we chose to conduct the interviews in English with the option for them to express some things in their mother tongue if they were unable to in English. However, as none of us are native English speakers, some things might have been lost in translation or simply have been unsaid due to this.

Lastly, we cannot be certain that our data reflects the true reality within the department. As a requirement for participating, the respondents were told the general topic of our interview questions beforehand. Due to our thesis potentially having negative implications for the relationship between subordinates and superiors in GloTech Consultancy, the participants in our study might have been holding back opinions, experiences and details that would have contributed to our study.

6.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Apart from the contributions of this study, there are several avenues for future research that could further advance our understanding of the impact of reluctant leadership on followership in knowledge-intensive firms. First, while this study focused on the perspectives of followers, future research could explore the views of reluctant leaders themselves to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their attitudes and behaviors towards leadership. This could involve interviews or surveys of reluctant leaders in knowledge-intensive firms to identify the factors that contribute to their reluctance, and how they perceive the impact of their leadership style on their followers.

Secondly, we identified several needs and expectations of followers from their leaders, however, future research could investigate how these needs and expectations vary across different types of followers. For example, followers in technical roles may have different needs and expectations than those in managerial or administrative roles. Exploring these differences could provide

valuable insights into how leaders can effectively lead diverse groups of knowledge workers despite being reluctant to.

Finally, while this study explored the impact of reluctant leadership on followership in knowledge-intensive firms, future research could explore this phenomenon in other types of organizations, such as service-based or manufacturing firms. This could help identify similarities and differences in the impact of reluctant leadership across different types of organizations and industries.

Overall, the suggestions for future research highlight the need to continue exploring the impact and implications of reluctant leadership on followership in knowledge-intensive firms, as well as the need to examine this phenomenon from multiple perspectives and across different types of organizations.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Overview of the Interviews

Name of the employee (pseudonyms)	Total length of the interviews (round 1&2)	Date of the interview round 1	Date of the interview round 2
Brian (the manager)	59 min	2023-03-06	2023-04-14
Chris	52 min	2023-04-27	2023-04-27
David	49 min	2023-04-05	2023-04-18
James	56 min	2023-03-30	2023-04-20
Robert	40 min	2023-03-06	-
Samuel	58 min	2023-03-06	2023-04-17

Appendix B: Interview Guides for the Manager

Introduction:

Introducing ourselves and introducing our research topic briefly: "Leadership from the employees point of view". Mentioning that the interviews are anonymous and asking for their permission to record the interview. Mentioning that they are always welcome to say if they are uncomfortable with a question and therefore do not want to answer the interview question.

Introductory questions for the respondent:

1. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself? Who are you and what is your job at GloTech Consultancy?
2. How long have you been working at GloTech Consultancy?

First round of Interviews

1. How do you get feedback from your team members about their needs and preferences?
2. Can you describe a time when you had to adjust your leadership approach to better meet the needs of a team member? How did you make this happen, and what was the outcome?
3. Do you feel like the needs of your employees have changed throughout your management career? How have you adapted to this? Do you have any examples?
4. How would you describe your leadership style? Any examples? Pros/cons?
5. How does this differ from the leadership being practiced by your own boss? Are you influenced by him/her in your own way of leading?
6. Do you see yourself more as a leader or a manager? Why and any examples?
7. How do you think your employees view you as a leader? How does this influence your leadership approach?
8. In which way do your employees evaluate your leadership?
9. Does leading a knowledge-intensive department have an impact on the way you lead?

10. Recently GloTech Consultancy introduced their people strategy and leadership principles. How, if at all, has this affected the way you lead your department? Does this have an impact on your own decisions about how to lead your team?

11. Can you describe a time when you had to adapt your leadership style to achieve a specific goal? How did you do this?

12. Can you name an episode where you feel like you really practiced impactful leadership?

13. Can you name an episode where you wished you had acted differently as a leader?

14. How do you keep your team members motivated and engaged in their work? What techniques have you found effective?

15. How do you check-in with your employees (e.g. goals, frustrations, well-being, motivation)? Does them being out of the office so often complicate this? How do you deal with that?

Second round of Interviews

Introduction:

Explaining the interview process and the formal aspects of it once more before starting with the second round of interview questions.

LEADER:

1. We have gotten an impression that you seem like a very experienced and knowledgeable engineer. Is it important for your department's success to be led by someone with the same background as you opposed to someone with a management or business background? If yes/no, why?

2. How do you measure the success of your leadership approach, and how do you know if something needs to be adjusted?

3. What steps do you take to improve your skills and effectiveness as a leader?

4. In your opinion, do you think your leadership approach is more task- or relationship-oriented, or both? Could you give us some examples?

5. In what ways do you agree with the phrase "Brian leads with carrots rather than a whip"? Do you have any examples of what carrots or whips you use?

6. Do you have a vision and general strategy for the future of your department?

7. Could you describe your process for sharing your vision with your team members? How do you ensure that your vision is effectively communicated and understood by everyone? Have you ever had to adjust your vision based on feedback from your team, and if so, how did you approach this process?

FOLLOWERS:

8. Since this is a fairly young department, how is the relationship between new and senior employees being encouraged both socially and professionally?

9. How has the culture of working as a team been promoted, even when members of the team are working from home?

SITUATION:

10. How do you facilitate and encourage knowledge sharing in your department? Do you have any examples?

11. How do you think this knowledge sharing has been impacted by working from home?

12. How do you promote a culture of learning and development in your team?

LEADER-FOLLOWERS:

13. To what extent do you agree that your values and goals at work align with those of your employees?

14. In your opinion, how important is it for the leader and employees to work efficiently together? Could you give any examples of situations where you have had effective collaboration with your employees?

15. Do you think a peer relationship between a manager and employees is important, or would you prefer it to be more hierarchical? Why?

16. How do you build and maintain trust with your employees?

17. How would you describe the differences in leader-employee interaction when working at the office compared to working from home?

18. You mentioned that you "check in" on your employees in an informal way in the office. How do you make sure that each team member is getting the support and guidance that they need even when working from home?

19. Could you describe how you approach leading a team remotely compared to leading a team in person at the office?

LEADER-SITUATION:

20. In the previous interview you mentioned that you felt like you should have been seeking conflicts more and been more firm in order to avoid issues, even though this is not your style. However, how do you handle conflicts when they emerge within your team? Any examples?

21. How much control does GloTech Consultancy have over the way you choose to lead? Could you give some examples.

22. Your department is still a fairly new addition to GloTech Consultancy. How do you think the culture of the department differs from the general culture of GloTech Consultancy? Examples.

FOLLOWERS-SITUATION:

23. In the last interview you expressed that you allow a lot of flexibility for when your employees have to be at the office. In what ways do you feel like this flexibility has a positive or negative impact on the quality of the department's work? Any examples?

24. Have you heard a team member express a need for more flexibility/structure?

Thank you! Would you like to add something more to this?

Appendix C: Interview Guides for the Employees

Introduction:

Introducing ourselves and introducing our research topic briefly: "Leadership from the employees point of view". Mentioning that the interviews are anonymous and asking for their permission to record the interview. Mentioning that they are always welcome to say if they are uncomfortable with a question and therefore do not want to answer the interview question.

Introductory questions for the respondent:

1. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself? Who are you and what is your job at GloTech Consultancy?
2. How long have you been working at GloTech Consultancy?

First round of Interviews

1. How does your manager, Brian, get to know your needs and preferences?
2. Do you voice your needs or give feedback to your manager concerning his way of leading the department? (Why not?)
3. Can you describe a situation where you felt your manager was not meeting the needs of the team, and what do you think he could have done differently?
4. How do you view your manager as a leader and how do you view his leadership approach? How would you describe the type of leadership being practiced in your department?
5. Is it more leadership or management? Why and do you have any examples?
6. How do you feel about the amount of leadership/management? Too much/too little? Why?
7. What type of leadership do you prefer?
8. How is your manager balancing between allowing flexibility and encouraging openness but also having to be more firm as needed? Any examples?
9. Do you feel like you are a priority to your manager? Any examples?

10. Could you describe a time when you had to provide feedback to your manager about their leadership approach? What was the outcome?

11. Could you describe a time when there was great leadership/management?

12. Could you describe a less good time of leadership/management?

13. Recently GloTech Consultancy introduced their people strategy and leadership principles. How has this affected the way you are being led?

14. What motivates you at work?

15. How does Brian check-in on you (e.g. goals, frustrations, well-being, motivation)?

16. How does your manager help you to stay motivated and engaged with your work?

17. Can you describe a situation where you felt motivated or inspired by your manager?

Second round of Interviews

Introduction:

Explaining the interview process and the formal aspects of it once more before starting with the second round of interview questions.

LEADER:

1. Brian seems like a very experienced and knowledgeable engineer. Is it important for you and your department's success to be led by someone with the same background as him opposed to someone with a management or business background? If yes/no, why?

2. In what ways do you agree with the phrase "Brian leads with carrots rather than a whip"? Do you have any examples?

3. In your opinion, do you think your manager's leadership approach is more task- or relationship-oriented, or both? Could you give some examples?

FOLLOWERS:

4. How is the relationship between you and your colleagues both socially and professionally?

5. Since this is a fairly young department, how is the relationship between new and senior employees being encouraged both socially and professionally?

6. What is done to encourage a good inter-collegial relationship?

7. How has the culture of working as a team been promoted, even when members of the team are working from home?

8. Is this usual for people to leave the team and then new people joining the team?

SITUATION:

9. How is knowledge being shared between you and your colleagues? Could you give some examples?

10. How is knowledge sharing impacted by working from home?

11. Does your manager foster a culture of learning and development within the team? Do you have any examples?

12. You have mentioned previously that you are generally allowed a lot of freedom in your job. Can you describe a situation where you have struggled with the balance between freedom and structure? How did you address this to your manager and how were you supported?

LEADER-FOLLOWERS:

13. To what extent do you agree that your values and goals at work align with those of your manager?

14. In your opinion, how important is it for the leader and employees to work efficiently together? Could you give any examples of situations where you have had effective collaboration with your manager?

15. Do you think a peer relationship between a manager and employees is important, or would you prefer it to be more hierarchical? Why?

16. How would you describe the differences in leader-employee interaction when working at the office compared to working from home?

17. You mentioned that Brian does small check-ins whenever you see each other. When working from home, how do you perceive your leader's approach to leading the team compared to when working in person at the office?

18. So we just joined your Monday meeting, is this something that is scheduled every Monday and what other meetings etc do you have scheduled?

LEADER-SITUATION:

19. How does your manager handle possible conflicts within your team?

20. Your department is still a fairly new addition to GloTech Consultancy. How does the culture of the department differ from the general culture of GloTech Consultancy? Examples.

FOLLOWERS-SITUATION:

21. In the last interview you expressed your appreciation for the flexibility of when you have to be at the office. In what ways do you feel like this flexibility has a positive or negative impact on the quality of your work? Any examples?

Thank you! Would you like to add something more to this?