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**Shaping future communication practises using the CCO  
perspective: A study of pandemic remote work at the  
United Nations Development Programme**

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# Abstract

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## **Shaping future communication practises using the CCO perspective: A study of pandemic remote work at the United Nations Development Programme.**

Covid-19 has forced organisations globally to shift from a physical office to a remote workspace overnight. One year into the pandemic, research suggests remote work could be the ‘new normal’, highlighting the need for organisations to enhance their knowledge of this practise. By investigating remote workers at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), this study aims to explore the implications of telework and how organisations can support their staff, wherever they are. Using content email analysis, qualitative interviews and diary studies, this study reveals that we cannot seamlessly transfer the office to our homes. With the physical office gone, organisations need find new ways to tie their members to the organisation. Drawing on communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) theory, the four flows model holds that organisations are dependent upon specific flows of communication for their existence. Exploring communication at UNDP from this perspective, it is suggested that remote work has reduced opportunities for the different flows, which has impacted the existence of the organisation in the collective consciousness of its members. To understand the constitute power of communication in the making of the organisation, a bottom-up approach which acknowledges the various agents that partake in the communicative flows is proposed.

*Keyword:* Remote work, CCO, organisational communication, four flows, strategic communication, bottom-up approach

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# 1. Introduction

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Covid-19 has drastically changed how we work and how the future of work will look like. Confronted with unforeseen circumstances, organisations have had to move quickly to adapt to the novel situation. For many this has involved shifting from a physical office to a remote workspace. One year into the pandemic many organisations are still working from home and some research suggests that remote work could be the ‘new normal’ (Mulcahy, 2020; Verbeemen & D’Amico, 2020) or at least part of a new hybrid model. The spike in working remotely and the large investments companies have made into working from home equipment may have dramatic effects on the future of work. Many businesses have embraced the situation, Facebook has announced that they allow 50% off its staff to work from home forever (Duffy, 2021), Twitter have made teleworking their company norm (Kelly, 2020) and Dropbox is becoming a “virtual-first” company which involves letting employees decide when and where they will work (Page, 2021).

While remote work is likely to remain post-covid, the new reality has presented organisations with novel challenges concerning how to engage, manage and communicate with employees in a fully digital environment. Being out of the office has drastically changed the premise of many jobs, employees now spend more time in front of a screen, they have to process an increased amount of written information and their opportunities to develop relationship with colleagues and managers have changed. It has also transformed the very notion of organisations, which are no longer materialised by the physical office. This indicates that we cannot seamlessly transfer the office to our homes, but organisations must rethink how work is done and provide different kind of support which responds to emerging needs and desires.

The pandemic has put a spotlight on the role of internal communication in keeping a workforce informed and engaged, and upholding company culture – remotely. This is especially important when the commonality of the physical office is gone. Organisations which have previously

transmitted information, corporate values and culture in physical spaces, now need new channels and methods for this.

This is where strategic communication comes in, understood as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” (Hallahan et al., 2007: 3). To accommodate the needs of employees, organisations should rethink their communicative practises in the future virtual workplace. Without the physical office, employers need to find other ways to tie employees to the organisation. In order to do so they need to enhance their understanding of the complex quirks of the human mind. How can we better appreciate employees’ experience and produce a reality that matches their needs? How are interests of employees and the organisation aligned? How can current communication practises be improved to keep employees motivated and engaged?

To generate knowledge about the experience of working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic, this thesis has studied a group of remote workers of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) from January until April 2021. As internal communication is a concern for most organisations with large budgets being allocated to these efforts yearly, it is crucial to enhance our understanding of its effects. Therefore, the thesis will firstly investigate UNDP’s organisational communication to explore how the organisation have engaged with its employees during the pandemic. Thereafter, a close study of employees’ experiences of remote work and of organisational communication will be carried out. This will highlight potential limitations of the situation and shed light on any tensions between organisational communication and employee interpretation.

As the pandemic has caused organisations to transform and adapt to new restrictions continuously, the situation can be looked at from a change communication perspective. Much change communication theory stresses the need for organisations to stay present and disseminate great amounts of information during any change process (Lewis, 2011). Frequent communication is often seen to prevent resistance (Elving, 2005; Kotter, 1995), increase job satisfaction and reduce uncertainty (Bordia et al., 2004). Challenging this idea, this thesis seeks to explore whether less communication might be the answer. While this idea is rarely discussed, it could be that the remote workplace does not necessitate more communication per se, but rather fundamentally restructured communication practises.

## **1.1 Aim, relevance and research question**

As strategic communication specialists we have an opportunity to support organisations in this novel situation, but in order to do so we need to enhance our knowledge of the challenges remote work. By exploring the intricate experiences of teleworkers, this study seeks to generate knowledge which can inform organisational communication practises and influence the future office modality. It rejects the idea of much change communication theory that a successful change can be achieved by following a specific set of steps. Rather, the study will adopt a communication constitutes organisation (CCO) perspective acknowledging the integral role of communication in organisations. In doing so it aims to discover insights which can isolate study areas for future research rather than producing simple instructions for organisations.

Covid or not, people may never go back to using the office as before (Barerro et al, 2021). It is safe to say that the past year has changed our view of what work is, and what it can be. The new work reality has given rise to new challenges for employees, urging organisations to rethink current practises. With employees worldwide changing their expectations on work, employers wanting to create a thriving work environment and attract talent in the future will need to deepen their understanding of this new reality. To find out how organisations can rethink their practises for the future, we need to find out what the main challenges with remote work has been. Therefore, this thesis asks the following research question:

## **1.2 Research Question**

*How is working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic affecting employees and how can organisations tailor their communication to support?*

## **1.3 Delimitations**

It should be noted that this research takes an employee perspective, as the perception of senior managers have not been covered in this study. While the participants of the interviews and diary studies are from all over the world, they all work in Denmark and the study is limited to exploring internal communication in one specific organisation. With that being said, the aim of the study is to generate findings which can be applied more broadly. In the endeavour, the study follows the reasoning of Flyvbjerg (2011) that a carefully chosen case study can produce concrete, context-dependent knowledge from which generalisations can be made.

## **1.4 Disposition**

The thesis is structured in the following way: Firstly, the literature review will present previous research relevant to the study including change management theory and leadership in change processes, information overload and recent research on remote work. This will be followed by a presentation of the CCO perspective which will form the theoretical framework, followed by an introduction of the research approach phronetic social science which will guide the thesis. The methodology section includes the methodological approach, an introduction to the case organisation, the research design and validity and reflexivity considerations. The findings and analysis section will present a discussion of the research results and a theorisation about the future of work. Lastly, the study concludes with actionable insights and suggestions for future research.



## 2. Literature Review

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This chapter will provide an overview of the common theories within change management theory and leadership during organisational change. This will be followed by a brief exploration of the concept of information overload and a review of current research on remote work, with the purpose of presenting a broad review of what research and empirical studies have touched upon until today.

### 2.1 Crisis or change

When looking at the pandemic from an organisational communication perspective, the question arises of whether the situation should be treated as a crisis or a change. Coombs and Holladay (2010, p. 2-3) define crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes". All crisis events share the general attributes of being largely unanticipated, threaten high priority goals and require relatively rapid response to contain or mitigate the harm (Hermann, 1963; Seeger et al., 2013). While these statements seem to capture Covid-19 well, one year into the pandemic we have started talking about "the new normal" and of how business will need to continue changing as the crisis ebbs (Buchanan, 2020). Supporting this notion, Seeger et al. (2013) argue that crises may be significant change-inducing events, as the discourse of renewal after a crisis creates an opportunity to fundamentally re-order the organisation. As this research is not looking at the initial period of Covid-19 but rather on how the crisis is becoming normalised and how it will have a continuous effect on organisational structures, this thesis will look at the pandemic from a change communication perspective.

## **2.2 Change management theory**

There is an array of literature presenting simple recipes for successfully managing organisational change (Johansson, Heide, 2008). Examples of these are Lewin (1947) three step change model of unfreezing, changing and refreezing, and Kotter's (1998) eight step model on how to manage change successfully. These models have often been criticised for portraying change as a process developing through certain stages, with little influence from its surroundings (Lewis, 2011). In contrast to this, Orlikowski (1996) describes organisational change as ongoing and Weick and Quinn (1999, p. 1217) ask scholars to focus on "changing" instead of "change" in order to appreciate the continuous nature of change. Another critique of change management literature posed by Lewis (2011) and Heide and Johansson (2008), is that it rarely questions the need for change (e.g., Sturdy & Grey, 2003; Zorn et al., 1999), but affirms that change is always good.

Much organisational change research emphasises the important role of communication in successfully managing a change (Daly et al., 2003; Elving, 2005; Ford & Ford, 1995; Kotter, 1995). However, some researchers argue that this literature often presents a simplified view of communication, without acknowledging the complexity of a communication process (Lewis 2011; Johansson & Heide, 2008). In an analysis of the major American books on change management, Lewis et al. (2006) concluded that communication was perceived as having a key function in change processes. The literature underlined the importance of (1) wide participation in the change process to make organisational members feel more included, committed and in control of the situation, (2) wide dissemination of information together with openness, early notification and discussion possibilities; and (3) communication about vision and purpose of the change process in order to provide justification. Lewis et al. (2006) critique these guidelines for being unspecific, acontextual and not founded on underlying theoretical literature. In this view communication is used as a tool to inform, create understanding and change people's attitudes and behaviour.

### ***2.2.1 Leadership in change processes***

Research focusing on the key role of leadership in the context of planned organisational change is also well established (e.g., Kanter et al., 1992; Kotter, 1998; Luecke, 2003). Much of this research focuses on the role of leadership in implementing and managing change. Kotter's

eight-step change model emphasises the need of management to create a strong sense of urgency and forming a solid change coalition, while early theories such as Lewin's (1947) three-step change model underlines the significant function of the leader in involving and instructing employees about the change process (Hussain, et al., 2018). Whelan-Berry et al. (2003) point to the leader's critical function in emphasising and explaining the necessity and reasons for change and developing a shared vision for change and Cummings and Worley (2003) present five activities of key leadership in change process, which involve motivating change, creating a vision, developing political support, managing the transition and sustaining momentum.

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2015) argue that most research on organisational change is management-centric, focusing on the management or the change agent's point of view and actions. They point to the criticality of carefully considering the experiences, meanings and actions of all involved in a change process, and not just those communicating objectives, messages and instructions. Greenberg (1995: 204) states that "during any type or size of change, organisational leaders need to pay attention to organisational members' understanding and reactions to the change."

Lewis (2011) similarly critiques the common approaches to change implementation for overly focusing on the implementers and overlooking other stakeholders. In this view, non-implementer stakeholders such as employees are merely an audience for implementers' messages about change, and they thus come to understand change only in relation to what they are being told by the implementers. This rejects the idea that these stakeholders are actors who have stakes, insight, and valuable perspective. Further, the resistance behaviours or attitudes ascribed to the stakeholders is often understood as an emotional response rooted in irrational anxieties, personal interests or personality flaws. In this way stakeholders are portrayed as reactionary rather than strategic, individualistic and not collective, and focused on self-interest and not on shared interests (Lewis, 2011).

Simonsson and Heide (2011) reaffirm this critique by underlining the remarkably little attention employees have received in research and practice within the field of strategic communication. This is a consequence of the heroic view of leadership which produces a notion of employees as passive recipients rather than active and influential communicators. Instead, they argue that

employees should be viewed as active communicators who formulate messages, make critical interpretations, and influence colleagues, managers and customers.

Johansson and Heide (2008) have carried out a literature review investigating different understandings of communication during organisational change and defined three common approaches: (1) seeing communication as a tool; (2) as a socially constructed process; or (3) as social transformation. These approaches do not have clearly defined boundaries but overlap one another.

### ***2.2.2 Communication as a tool***

In the communication-as-a-tool approach, the communication process is viewed as a simple step where the organisational members are offered information and thereby assumed to understand the change and their role in the process. Communication is reduced to a tool for declaration and explanation of the change, often with a focus on the “what, when, who, and how” (Johansson & Heide, 2008).

An issue that has received a lot of attention in this approach is resistance to change. It is often argued that “effective communication” will reduce resistance and generate a willingness to change. According to Elving (2005), one key goal of communication during an organisational change process is to prevent or reduce resistance to change. In line with this, DiFonzo and Bordia (1998) emphasise the relation between communication and uncertainty and argue that insufficient information will initiate rumours and gossip. Similarly, Bordia et al. (2004) suggest that a systematic communication programme reduces employee uncertainty and increases job satisfaction. Kotter (1998) presents communication as the key item which can reduce resistance and spur engagement, and argues that “without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured “(Kotter, 1995, p. 100). In his eight-step model, the executives are seen as the primary communicators, with little attention given to the employees. It is argued that if a change is to be successful, management should incorporate the organisational vision and the bigger picture of the change in all their communication, which should be disseminated through multiple channels.

In this perspective, any change can succeed if it is engineered in the right way. The general recipe that is offered for a successful change program is to keep employees well informed

(Johansson & Heide, 2008). The outcome of a change is largely dependent on the way in which management communicates with the employees, while the interpretation of the employees is disregarded. Lewis (2011) argues that an overemphasis on the people in organisations who take on a formal role in bringing about the change effort suggests that other stakeholders are passive and peripheral. Another common criticism of this approach is the failure to acknowledge the mutual relationship between organisation and communication, and the notion that organisations are produced maintained and reproduced through communication. As a result, communication is perceived as a phenomenon existing in isolation from the organisational context (Johansson & Heide, 2008). This idea will be further questioned in the theory section, but first we will explore more sophisticated approaches to change communication.

### ***2.2.3 Communication as a socially constructed process***

As a response to the critique of previous approach, an increasing number of researchers have begun to view communication as the very medium within which change occurs. This more complex approach to change communication, views communication as a socially constructed process. Emphasis is put on understanding and sensemaking and change is viewed as something that takes place within human interactions which produces and reproduces people's social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). It is thus through the act of communication that change takes place and social reality is reproduced (Ford & Ford, 1995). For instance, a communication act such as a speech, an order or the naming of something forms an action or event, which produces a new reality different from the reality prior to the communication act. This notion stands in opposition to the common understanding that communication only reports or represents something already existing (Austin, 1962).

On a similar note, Balogun (2006) rejects the understanding of change as something done to and placed on individuals and draws attention to the active role that change recipients play in creating and shaping change outcomes. Latour (2005) illustrates the spread of an idea or a movement, such as a change, with a translation model. In this model, an object, order, or change will move according to how people actively make sense of it. The object, or change, is seen as residing in the hands of individuals, or actors, and their sensemaking. People are regarded as mediators that "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (Latour 2005: 39). The outcome of the object, order or change is thus dependent upon how people appropriate and invoke it, modify and adjust it, and generally make

sense of it. This model thus emphasises recipients' active role in the transformation of the idea, rather than as the passive receivers of it (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015).

Organisational change processes are always dependent on people's understanding and sensemaking processes (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). These sensemaking processes takes place within communication. In this perspective, organisational change is often understood from a narrative approach, since humans create order and understanding of our experiences through stories (Weick, 1993; Heide et al., 2018). In the context of organisational change, several scholars underline the importance of managers' sensegiving role in supporting employees' sensemaking processes (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). It is argued that managers have the possibility to create and transmit dominant narratives which can frame the interpretation for organisational members. They can help influence and guide employees by reducing and prioritising, explaining and translating organisational messages. Starbuck and Milliken (1988, p. 60) state that "if events are noticed, people make sense of them; and if events are not noticed, they are not available for sensemaking". Heide et al. (2018a) further argue that middle managers have a pivotal organisational role as communicators, as they translate, inform, make sense, support, and give feedback to employees. In doing so managers can lessen the gap between the top and bottom of an organisation.

Smircich and Morgan (1982) similarly emphasise the power of leaders in managing meaning by shaping and interpreting situations to guide organisational members into a common interpretation of reality. Leadership in this view is understood as a social process where meaning is induced to events and situations. Leaders can through actions and communicative acts influence stakeholders involved in a change situation. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2015) focus on leadership in relation to meaning and symbolism, and argue that leaders through their actions can be seen as symbols of the change process and the ones responsible for it. In order to become role models for change, their actions should reflect the desired behaviour.

### ***2.2.3 Communication as social transformation***

In this more recent approach to organisational change as defined by Johansson and Heide (2008), communication is viewed as a social transformation. In line with the previous approach, change is seen as the very medium within which change occurs. However, this perspective goes one step further by examining the relationship between communication and action and the

different dimensions of power and dominance at play. It views communication acts as multi-layered and containing conflicting levels of understanding, highlighting the struggle and negotiation of meanings in the communication processes where change is socially constructed, and (Johansson, Heide, 2008). The outcome of the change process is thus dependent on the negotiations of meaning. In this view, organisations are treated as political sites, where different organisational groups struggle for their meaning (Mumby, 2004).

For instance, Leonardi and Jackson (2004) demonstrate how leaders in an organisational change process would use narratives strategically to suppress conflict and justify managerial decisions to the public. This strategic activity provides leaders with a powerful mechanism to present organisational changes as inevitable, privilege certain ideologies and prevent the telling of competing stories. However, in doing so it reduces the possibilities for open and reflective communication about organisational processes, which in turn may constrain organisational change. Heracleous and Barrett (2001) shed light on the multiple perspectives of stakeholder groups and their interaction during change. Hidden assumptions, understandings and values amongst stakeholders can create discursive clashes at both the deep structure levels and communicative action levels, making it difficult to find a common ground on which to base a dialogue. This creates a divide between a surface level of communication and a deeper level of change, suggesting that while a change may occur at the communicative level, there might be little real change to the deep structures of either group of actors.

Having investigated three levels of approaches to change communication, this study proposes going one step further to view communication as constitutive of organisation. It is believed that this perspective adds another level of sophistication in approaching communication, as it allows us to understand the fundamental and formative role of interactions, language, sensemaking, and other symbolic processes in the emergence of the organisation. This perspective will be further developed in the theory section.

## **2.3 Information overload**

There is no universal definition of information overload but it broadly refers to the difficulty of understanding an issue, determining options, and making decisions in the presence of too much information (Edmund, 2000; Bowden & Robertson, 2020). The phenomenon has been known

by many different names, including information overabundance, infobesity, infoglut, data smog, information pollution, information fatigue, infostress, communication overload, cognitive overload, information violence, and information assault. Toffler (1970) describes it as a bombardment to the senses causing confusion, distraction, disorientation and lack of responsiveness and suggests that individuals exposed to exponential information from several sources cannot make the correct assessments which informs rational behaviour. Feather (1998) similarly describes information overload as the point where there is so much information that it is no longer possible effectively to use it.

The term was coined by Bertram Gross (1964) who used it to refer to the state when the information inputs to any system exceed its information processing capabilities, although the phenomenon had been mentioned in the literature before this. Social scientist Georg Simmel (1950) wrote of the overload of sensations in the urban world which caused inhabitants to become numbed and develop an incapacity to react to new situations with the appropriate energy. Karl Deutsch (1961) argued that communication overload was a disease of cities and Richard Meier (1962) predicted a crisis of communication overload within the next half century.

It appears the overload can come from various sources; information, data, documents, ideas, but in essence it is about people drowning in information while lacking knowledge. Bowden and Robertson (2020) illustrate it by quoting T.S Elliot (1934) “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”. Rosenberg (2003) mentions that the information explosion in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Europe was regarded as an outcome of an increase in the number of books, the amount of descriptive facts, and the number of authoritative voices.

The idea of overload in a modern sense began with the advent of the digital information environment, as this has increased the supply of information available and our exposure to it. Since the 1990s the publication of a series of reports showing the waste of time, decrease in efficiency and ill-health allegedly caused by information overload has increased the term’s prominence (Merendino et al., 2018; Bowden & Robertson, 2020; Gupta & Rani, 2018). It has since been claimed to be a major issue of our time, cited in literature disciplines as varied as medicine, education, politics, governance, business and marketing, planning for smart cities,



access to news, personal data tracking, home life, use of social media, and online shopping (Stephens, 2015; Groes, 2017).

Information overload in the 21st century is generally attributed to email, social media, big data, a publication explosion, and other manifestations of digital technology. The phrase data smog (Shenk, 1997) aptly illustrates the phenomenon, presenting an image of a lack of clarity and perception. Much research on digital information overload points to the issue being that diverse and complex information coming from different sources is homogenised by the web (Bawden and Robinson, 2020; Cooke, 2017; Schmitt, Debeit & Schneider, 2018). The homogenising effect makes it difficult to distinguish between which information is useful or useless, accurate or inaccurate, reliable or unreliable. Wesch (2008) has introduced the term context collapse which is often used in relation to social media. It refers to the infinite possible audiences online, as opposed to the limited groups a person normally interacts with face-to-face. In regular interactions people adjust their tone and presentation to fit the social context, but in a situation of context collapse this is impossible. In these situations, information grows but its meaning and connection is lost (Borkovich, 2018). Postman (1993: 70) describes it as “information appear[ing] indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume and at high speeds, disconnected from theory, meaning, or purpose.”

According to Bawden and Robinson (2020), two pragmatic strategies for coping with information overload have been identified: filtering information and avoiding information. First mentioned by Miller (1962), filtering is a systematic attempt to focus on relevant information by immediately leaving out certain types of information. It is one of the most frequently observed ways of reducing overload. Information avoidance relies on simply ignoring potentially useful information and sources of information, either due to overload or because it is difficult to fit with the user's existing knowledge (Sweeny et al. 2010, Neben 2015).

A contemporary example of a condition caused partly by information overload, is the response to Covid-19 referred to by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) as pandemic fatigue. In a recently published report WHO outlined this emerging global public reaction to the Covid-19 crisis, defined as a demotivation to follow recommendations, emerging gradually over time and affected by a number of emotions, experiences and perceptions. This is argued to be a natural and expected human coping mechanism to the longevity of the crisis. Underlying factors

of this are the reduced perceived threat of the virus as we get used to its existence, the near normalcy we have reached as the situation has dragged on and the Covid-19 information overload which is the result of the overwhelming amount of available information. This has caused people to become more complacent to the situation, and less likely to read and follow restrictions (WHO, 2020).

### ***2.3.1 Email overload***

E-mail overload has been defined as individuals' perception of their email inbox being out of control as they receive and send more email than they can read or process effectively. Email overload at work has been associated with an increased risk of burnout, sleep disorders and emotional distress (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Brown et al., 2014; Jackson & Farzaneh, 2012; Mano & Mesch, 2010). A Radicati (2019) report found that the average business user receives and sends 122 emails per day. Research further shows that 30 percent of employees admit to not reading email from their employers (APPrise, 2019). A survey by PoliteMail (2019) of 56 million internal email messages found that although 77 percent of employees opened internal emails, only 37 percent read those messages and just 24 percent clicked through to see links or images. 43 percent of communicators cited that employees being exposed to information overload as one of the key challenges of internal communication. This appeared to be a bigger challenge at companies with more employees.

Stich (2019) has found that the number of received emails positively relates to workload stress and argues that email load affects perceived workload. Cybernetic theory applied to human behaviour is concerned with human beings self-regulating their behaviours. The cybernetic theory of stress suggests that individuals try to influence their environments and distance themselves from stressful stimuli (Carver & Scheier, 1982). Applying this theory to email behaviour, Stich (2019) suggests that individuals cope with higher workload stress by desiring less emails in order to distance themselves from the stressful source. Quirke (2008) argues that due to individuals' limited capacity, they develop various coping strategies to deal with overload, such as deleting emails unread or waiting until messages are sent several times to test their urgency.

Studies on email also focus on the interruption of workflow each time a new email is received. A study by Hewlett-Packard (2005) found that it takes between 23-30 minutes to restore

cognitive awareness and concentration on the original task after being subjected to emails or other digital distractions and Gupta and Sharda (2008) estimated that knowledge workers lose 4 to 5 percent or 28 min of their workday because of such interruptions. A majority of research on traditional interruption shows that it increases completion time on tasks and the amounts of errors (Eyrolle & Cellier, 2000; Hodgetts & Jones, 2006). When studying individuals performing a creative writing task, Foroughi et al. (2014) found that interruptions also have a negative impact on the quality of work.

## **2.4 Remote work**

While remote work has seen a rapid increase in the last year, the phenomenon has received a lot of attention in research even before the pandemic. In an MIT study carried out over ten years, Claudel et al. (2017) investigate the relation between creativity and proximity in research institutions and concludes that even in the age of easy virtual communication, being near colleagues helps cross-disciplinary research. Battison et al. (2017) have similarly found that while the technological means for communicating online are there, productivity is higher when teammates are in the same room, especially when dealing with non-routine issues.

Exploring the challenges of working together in geographically distributed teams, research by Hinds and Mark (2016) shows that working virtually results in more and longer-lasting conflicts thus negatively impacts collaboration. However, it suggests that a stronger sense of shared identity within teams could moderate the effect of interpersonal conflict and that spontaneous communication play a pivotal role in this, as people with a notion of shared identity are more likely to engage in spontaneous communication.

There is also a recent wave of literature looking specifically on the teleworking which has emerged as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. Canonico and Lup (2020) suggest that individuals with autism spectrum disorder might benefit from teleworking, as communication is more specific and explicit in virtual meetings and virtual communication relies less on visual cues (e.g., body language). Further, remote workers are more likely to be valued for output (e.g., results) rather than effort (e.g., number of working hours), which could be beneficial for people who need to structure their days differently. Further, a performance appraisal based on output also reduces the importance of soft or social skills (Canonico & Lup, 2020).

A report by the International Labour Organisation (2020) highlights that teams that work remotely face more communications challenges than face-to-face teams. These challenges multiply with time as the degree of separation and professional isolation increases when team members spend more time working apart. The report further states that employees tend to share less information with their colleagues when communicating electronically and in some cases have difficulty interpreting the information they receive which negatively affects teamwork. Given the real risk of social isolation that is associated with full-time remote work, focus should be put on facilitating contact between employees and their supervisors and colleagues. Especially in the context of an abrupt shift to remote work, it is important for managers to offer wider support, to be empathetic, acknowledge stress and listen to employees' anxieties and concerns (Larson, 2020).

In a study of remote software developers at Microsoft, Ford et al. (2020) argue that close proximity, in-person work provides opportunities for unplanned interactions in the office, which build trust. In a remote setting more efforts should be put into intentional interactions, or collaboration and relationships will suffer. Their research proposes a need for organisations to devote more time, resources, communication channels and events to foster relationships. Ford et al. further found that there is a dichotomy of experiences which are influenced by different factors. Aspects such as schedule flexibility, proximity to family members and more time for work are for some a benefit, while others see it as a challenge. Results of the study suggest that organisations need to provide employees with additional support when working remote and that they can best do this by enhancing their understanding of employees' dichotomous experiences and the different challenges they may face. Organisational support does not only concern improving tools and processes for remote work, but organisation can also guide employees on more private or complex issues such as maintaining a healthy work life balance (Ford et al., 2020).

There is a growing amount of research exploring 'Zoom Fatigue', which is describing the tiredness, worry, and burnout associated with overusing virtual platforms of communication. In a recent study of the psychological consequences of spending hours per day in front of these mediums, Bailenson (2021) suggested that videoconferencing tools can be socially exhausting as they force us to engage in long stretches of direct eye contact and seeing faces closely in a

way we would never do if we were physically together. Additionally, in a regular meeting we would not look at everyone the entire time, but we would direct our gaze towards the person speaking. In virtual meetings however, meeting participants' eyes are focused on everyone the entire time, making the amount of direct eye gaze much higher than it would be in a regular meeting.

Brescia (2000) argues that leaders tasked with managing a distributed team will find that the profile of a leader changes. A recent study found that the skills and traits of successful managers in an office-based environment differ from those needed to lead remote teams (Purvanova et al., 2020). Instead of valuing confidence and charisma, remote teams value leaders who are organised, productive and facilitate connections between colleagues. The magnetic, smart-seeming extroverted traits typical for organisational leaders were dismissed in favour of leaders who were doers and focused on planning. Sorensen (2016) suggests that the best method for managing telecommuting personnel is through a process called Management by Results, whereby both manager and employee agree on a common productivity measurement mechanism. Purvanova et al. (2020) further argue that the new era of remote work will require much wider use of a new kind of management which is more trusting and more results-based, and a new way of working which is autonomous, flexible, and better adapted to the individual circumstances and preferences of employees.

Larson (2020) points to the importance for managers to keep an available and accessible approach and create opportunities for their staff to approach them with concerns and questions during remote working. Nawas (2020) suggest that managers can hold daily office hours where personnel are invited to join for a brief video call. When one person joins, the meeting is closed for further participants, presenting an online version of a closed office door. Research further predicts that employers will need to shift from managing the employee experience to managing the life experience of their employees, as the pandemic has given organisations more visibility into the personal lives of their employees, who have faced increased personal and professional struggles (Kropp, 2020). Emmet et al. (2020) argue that leaders can help support employees' social connection and affiliation by linking them to one another and allowing informal and organic conversations to emerge.

In a survey of remote workers in the United Kingdom Chung et al. (2020) found that the nationwide move towards working from home during the Covid-19 lockdown has shifted managers and employees' attitudes and preferences around flexible working, making it a more acceptable alternative. A survey by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2021) of remote work in the United States found that over 80 percent of employers believe that remote work has been a success. 70 percent of executives are planning to increase investment in virtual-collaboration tools and 65 percent wants to invest in training managers to deal with a virtual workforce. While the last century have seen a shift from more hierarchical organisational structures, to organisations built on loosely structured networks, management by values and visions, self-directed teamwork, and horizontal communication (Fairtlough, 2008), a report from McKinsey (D'Auria et al., 2020) shows that the abrupt shift to remote work has greatly increased the speed of this development. This suggests that organisations need to rethink management structures and practises to fit new circumstances.

## 3. Theory

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The research on change communication presented in the literature review demonstrates that the area is becoming increasingly sophisticated. While many scholars view communication in change processes as an instrument to disseminate messages, a more contemporary understanding views communication as an ongoing socially constructed process. In line with this approach, which acknowledges the complexity of communication, this thesis will adopt a CCO perspective. In the following chapter this theoretical framework will be introduced followed by a presentation of the research approach phronetic social science which guides this study.

### 3.1 Communication constitutes organisations

Founded on the belief that communication is not something that happens within organisations or between organisational members, the CCO perspective understands communication as the process whereby organisations are constituted (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). While the term CCO was first introduced by McPhee and Zaug (2000) the understanding can be traced back to John Dewey (1916/2004) in the early 1900s who understood communication to be the essence of society and organisation and not just a function. In this view communication is not reduced to one variable amongst many other but seen as the means through which organising and disorganising occur (Cooren & Martine, 2016). Another predecessor of CCO, Barnard (1938) pointed out that the organisation should not be taken for granted, but highlighted its fragile existence, since its form was dependent on the cooperation of its members. Since then, the concept has been developed by scholars such as Weick (1969), who rejects the idea that organisations are psychical objects or systems but rather views organisations as processes of organising and Taylor who argues that instead of studying how communication takes place in organisations, we should explore how organisations emerge from communication (Cooren, 2000).

This perspective has changed the perception of communication as a tool for transmission of information and instead views organisations as emanating from communication. Communication is therefore not a variable but should rather be understood as a perspective that can help researchers understand organisational processes and actions. In this perspective, organisations emerge from the bottom-up rather than from the top-down, suggesting that organisations are a product of continuous sensemaking and communication processes (Taylor, 2009). Organisations can for instance take form in employees' conversations and other communicative acts (Heide et al., 2018a). According to a bottom-up approach everything in the world evolve from small to great (Tarde, 1899), meaning that in order to understand how an organisation functions, we have to study how organising (the small) takes place. The bottom-up approach of the CCO perspective is grounded in the notion that organisations are multivocal involving competing rationalities and tensions (Heide et al., 2018a). Much research rejects the idea of tensions and contradictions as something necessarily problematic, but instead present them as normal and inevitable parts of organisational life (Tracy, 2004). Heide et al. (2018a) argue that researchers carry out case studies with interviews and observation to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena and manage these contradictions. This reasoning will be expanded in the methodology section.

The understanding of communication as constitutive of organisation has been discussed by several scholars. Taylor (1993) argues that communication processes produce a pattern that constitute the structure of the organisation and the organisation itself simultaneously. He claims that the communication involves two aspects, conversation and text, where text serves to stabilise and ground the organisation and that it has potential to be transformed by conversation. Boden (1994) discusses the notion that communication constitutes organisation by examining how single communication events such as telephone calls, gossip or planning meetings structure organisation. She focuses on how interactive mechanisms can implicate organisational properties. Deetz and Mumby (1990) emphasise the continuous nature of the CCO perspective and underline that organisations are not simply given in their current form and persist over time, but they are produced and reproduced continually.

While there are different variations, the CCO research movement can today be divided up in three general schools of thought (Schoeneborn et al., 2014), namely the *Montreal School of organizational communication*, (Taylor et al., 1996) the *four-flows model* (McPhee & Zaugg,



2000) and *Luhmann's theory of social systems*, represented by scholars such as David Seidl and Dennis Schoeneborn (Cooren & Martine, 2016). This thesis will concentrate on the four-flows framework which is founded on the belief that in order to exist, organisational forms have to be constituted through four types of distinct yet independent message flows. The model is strongly influenced by Giddens (1984) structuration theory, which argues that structures are both “the medium and the outcome of the practises they recursively organize” (1984: 25). McPhee and Zaug (2000) argue that as organisations are complex and have varied defining facets, one communication form can never be sufficient to constitute them. Each flow is interactive, multiform, and multicurrent, carried out in multiple places and contexts simultaneously (McPhee & Zaug, 2000).

The first flow is *membership negotiation* and refers to the communication relationships between individual members and the organisation. Here the “membership” in any one organisation is not a natural property but is constituted by or in the flow of communication. One example of membership negotiation is employee recruitment, where the member and the organisation decide to form a relationship. This interaction process is characterised by a dialectic courtship where the organisation and the member typically present the most positive line possible, often tacitly offering to redefine themselves to fit the other’s expectations. This flow does not only apply to new members, but an ongoing negotiation occurs for all members, new and old (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). McPhee states that structuration rests on the activity of organizational members, which suggests that membership negotiation is privileged as *the* critical flow (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 297).

The second flow, *self-structuring* corresponds to communication that brings the organisation into being by structuring it. Emphasis is put on how organisations’ draw members and coordinate work through reflexive control and design. Communication elements such as organisational charts, policies, procedures, budgets, units, control systems have the effect of setting up the structure of the organisation and determine how people work and coordinate themselves (Cooren & Martine, 2016).

*Activity coordination*, the third flow, refers to the necessary adjustment and negotiation that need to take place when people work with each other. For instance, results from self-structuring (the policies, procedures, charts, etc.) can never anticipate all the problems and

disruptions that individuals will come across in their work, which means that some adaptation and cooperation will need to take place. An example of this is how employees informally coordinate work arounds when they encounter issues in their work.

Lastly, *Institutional positioning* links the organisation to its external environment such as its suppliers, customers, and competitors. The flow underlines how the communication processes can help the organisation become appropriately defined and set in an institutional environment. This can for instance concern establishing and maintain a presence, an image, and a two-way communication channel with partners. In line with Giddens' structuration theory, these four flows make up organisations to the extent that they mobilise and produce the structures that organise them (McPhee & Zaug, 2000).

The four flows model has been empirically applied, for instance in a study by Bean and Buikema (2015) who adopted it as a theoretical framework to examine the communicative constitution and dissolution of the terrorist organisation al-Qaeda. By examining the publicly available communication of al-Qaeda, the study concluded that attempts to suppress al-Qaeda's activities and organisational existence would require interventions seeking to hinder one or more of the 'four flows'. The CCO movement demonstrates a maturing of the field of communication, where communication is put at the centre for studying social and organisational forms (Cooreen & Martine, 2016). As the four flows model identifies communicative phenomena that are central to organisational existence, we argue that it will be a suitable framework for studying UNDP from a communicative perspective.

### **3.2 Phronetic social science**

This thesis has been carried out within the research approach of phronetic social science. Founded on a contemporary interpretation of the classical Greek concept phronesis, this approach to the study of social science has been variously translated as practical judgment, practical wisdom or common sense. Introduced by Bent Flyvbjerg (2001), phronetic social science critiques the social sciences for mimicking the natural sciences in their attempts to build generalisable, predictive models or test hypotheses to demonstrate law-like relationships. Flyvbjerg (2011) argues that since social sciences are the study of human interactions involving human consciousness, power and reflexivity, any attempt to build generalisable models based

on natural science will be futile. Instead, he presents phronetic social science as an alternative approach to mainstream social science which calls for more problem-driven, mixed-methods research. Flyvbjerg argues that central to social, political and economic development in any society is a complex set of values and interests, which can best be explored through the social sciences. While natural sciences excel at conducting decontextualised experiments to understand abstract and generalisable relationships, the social sciences are better at producing situated knowledge about how to understand and act in contextualised settings.

Frank (2012) understands phronetic social science as people's practical wisdom in dealing with both routine decisions and unexpected contingencies. In this view it has three aspects: it is content – an accumulation of experiential knowledge, a quality of persons – something which enables acquisition and appropriate use of that knowledge, and lastly it is a form of action – it must be “practised”. Frank believes that this approach presents social science as more than a topic, because when studying the world, real social science should have the effect of changing it.

Phronetic social science does not favour a specific research method or type of data but its focus is to produce research that can help develop context-specific knowledge and effect change. The approach suggests that we keep an open mind towards acceptable research methodologies, and include context-sensitive research, such as case studies, narratives, and datasets that help social actors learn to appreciate the complexities of social relations. In this way social sciences can produce the kind of knowledge that grows out of intimate familiarity with practice in local settings (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012). Donald Campbell and Charles Lindblom have noted that the development of social research is limited by the fact that researchers tend to work with issues in which the answer to the question “If you are wrong about this, who will notice?” is “Nobody”. The importance of phronetic social science is instead to come up with a result which can effectively influence decisions and praxis (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Phronetic research is about asking little question hoping to get “thick descriptions”. While this procedure might seem tedious, it pays attention to the smallest things rather than disregarding them as detail, illustration or background. As Nietzsche advocates “patience and seriousness in the smallest things” (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 113). This understanding will guide the research design.

## 4. Methodology

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This chapter will present the methodological approach, introduce the case organisation and provide a justification for the use of case studies for this research. This will be followed by a description of the research design and a brief discussion on the thesis' reflexivity and validity.

### 4.1 Methodological approach

This study has been conducted with a multimethod approach including data from qualitative interviews, diary studies and email content analysis. Bryman argues that while multimethods may be fruitful (Bryman, 2011), there is a tendency for researchers to use a multimethod research approach without thinking it through sufficiently (Bryman, 2006). He points to the fact that much research does not specify how the quantitative and the qualitative research were each used to answering distinct research questions. If there is no particular rationale for the use of multimethod research, the project risks collecting redundant data which is highly unlikely to shed light on the topic of interest. The rationale for the multi-methods approach of this thesis was thus reviewed carefully.

A combination of different methods is sometimes applied in the same study in order to secure the quality. If the same results are reached with different methods, it is claimed that a study demonstrates good validity. This presupposes the existence of an objective reality "out there" (Heide et al., 2018). On the contrary, this research is founded on the belief that theories and knowledge are constructs. Thus, the main advantage is the possibility to capture tensions and contradictions rather than to ensure one finds a universal "truth" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Another interesting aspect of multimethod research is that it often brings more to researchers' understanding than they anticipate at the outset (Bryman, 2006). This suggestion holds truth for the thesis at hand, which has uncovered surprising and contrasting insights which would not have been possibly using a singular method.

For this research project diary studies and interviews were carried out with ten employees working in the UNDP Information and Technology department (ITM) over a period of ten weeks. These findings were supplemented with a systematic email content analysis, which added an objective dimension to people's subjective experience. For instance, if a participant expressed receiving a large quantity of emails with a strong headquarters focus, this method helped demonstrate whether this was objectively the case too. By doing so it disclosed potential differences between talk and actions.

## **4.2 Case organisation**

This thesis explored a particular case, with the intention of creating knowledge that is interesting for both research and practice. A case study was appropriate, as the aim of the research was to gain a more detailed understanding and knowledge of the perceptions of organisational members within a particular context (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). While the focus was on a singular case, the aim was to gather general insights which can be applied to a broad context. The case organisation was the UNDP, where the researcher had been employed since July 2020. As the United Nation's (UN) development agency, UNDP strives to support long-term sustainable development, employing around 17 thousand people in nearly 170 countries and territories. This particular case study investigated UNDP ITM, which is the organisation's primary IT office with approximately 180 employees globally.

The Director of The United Nations System Staff College Jafar Javan (2017) argues that UN agencies have traditionally favoured a top-down change approach, treating organisational change as a process that starts at the top and filters down. This is generally done through top-down communication from senior leadership to staff, and can presents challenges when the senior management make decisions that affect the entire system, but which are not communicated directly. In his remarks to the General Assembly after taking the oath of office in 2016, the UN's chief Secretary-General António Guterres indicated that he wanted a new direction for the organisation. He stated his intention to undertake a management reform across the organisation that is built on "consensus around simplification, decentralisation and flexibility", focusing more on people and less on bureaucracy (UN Web TV, 2016). This suggests that the claim that the UN agencies are overly bureaucratic holds true, but that an

ambition to reinvigorate the UN organisations and adopt a bottom-up change approach exists (Javan, 2017).

As one of the largest UN organs (UNDP Transparency Portal), this makes UNDP an interesting case to study. Other factors that made the organisation suitable for the case study was its large size and the fact that everyone at ITM was working remotely. Further, as an employee of UNDP ITM, the researcher had immediate access to its employees and organisational information, which eased the research project.

Case study research has been criticised for a number of reasons such as its focus on practise rather than theory, its bias towards verification and its unsuitability for testing hypotheses and producing generalising theories (Flyvbjerg, 2004). Campbell and Stanley (1966: 6–7) strongly reject using single-case studies as a method:

[S]uch studies have such a total absence of control as to be of almost no scientific value... It seems well-nigh unethical at the present time to allow, as theses or dissertations in education, case studies of this nature (i.e., involving a single group observed at one time only).

Flyvbjerg (2004) addresses the critique by proposing that it is by collecting intimate information of concrete cases that one really becomes an expert. As a strong advocate for case studies, he does not discount rule-based knowledge but underlines the need for both approaches as the context-dependent knowledge associated with case studies can lead to a higher level of learning. Further, the closeness of the case study to a real-life scenario and the wealth of details included in a case offers a nuanced and complex view of reality.

With the selection of phronetic social science as the research approach of this thesis, the aim of producing general, context-independent theory was disregarded. In fact, this approach renders social science unable to produce such theory (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Rather, social science, and this particular thesis, can produce concrete, context-dependent knowledge, which case studies are especially well suited for (Campbell, 1975). This might raise concerns of the usability of such research, and whether one can generalise on the basis of a singular case. However, it has been proven that a carefully chosen case may greatly add to the generalisability of the case. Much significant research (Goldthorpe et al., 1968; Wiewiorka, 1992) demonstrates that an individual case study can be used as a black swan, i.e., discovering something believed to be impossible

or non-existent (Taleb, 2007). This was for example the case when Galileo rejected Aristotle's law of gravity based on a singular experiment (Flyvbjerg, 2004).

### **4.3 Data collection methods**

The data supporting the thesis has been collected through qualitative interviews and diary studies with employees at the UNDP ITM as well as by analysing pandemic-related internal email communication from UNDP to its personnel.

#### ***4.3.1 Interviews***

A series of repeated in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with eight employees working at UNDP ITM. The interviews took place on the organisational videoconferencing tool Microsoft Teams during a period of ten weeks. Within this timeframe each participant were interviewed two to three times and each conversation lasted approximately 25 minutes. The extended data collection period allowed for an exploration of people's experiences over time.

The aim was to investigate the participants' working from home experience and their response to communication initiatives during this period, as these insights would help to answer the research question. Much of this information was believed to be found in conversations, as it is by talking to people that we learn about people's experiences, feelings and attitudes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). While it is acknowledged that individuals' accounts of their actions are not always the same as their actual actions, the focus of the study was to understand how people had experienced a certain phenomenon. Therefore, interviews provided a good opportunity to see the world through the eyes of the participants.

While the interviews were semi-structured, the participants were free to digress from the initially asked questions. The already existing relationship with the participants made it easy to establish a connection and create a relaxed environment. The researcher engaged in active listening to ensure that relevant follow up questions were asked and avoided interruption and other behaviours that would put an end to free expression from the interviewee (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). An initial interview guide (see appendix 3) had been prepared to get insightful answers from the interviewees, however very quickly into the interview process themes crystallised, presenting a basis for formulating future interviews questions. Inspired by phronetic

social science' preference of 'thick descriptions' the interviews aimed to encourage long answers that described context and details. Leading questions such as: "does working from home make you feel isolated?" or "what if" questions, were avoided, instead participants were asked about concrete experiences, such as "describe your last social interaction at work".

The interviews have been transcribed and can be made available upon request.

#### ***4.3.2 Diary Studies***

Diary studies refer to a research method used to collect qualitative data about user behaviours, activities and experiences over time. In this type of study, data is self-reported by participants who are asked to keep a diary and log specific information about activities being studied (Bolger et al., 2003). The method provides a wide range of advantages. Individuals' everyday experience suggests that our mood changes and is directly impacted by various factors in our surroundings. The extended timescale of diary studies makes them suitable for measuring fluctuation in human experience over a period of time (Ohly et al., 2010). Further, the method allows for an exploration of events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context, which provides a good complement to other data collection methods. Lastly, diary studies reduce the likelihood of retrospection, since the amount of time between an experience and the account of this experience is minimised (Bolger, et al., 2003).

Because of these inherent characteristics, diary studies are suitable for studying thoughts, feelings and behaviours within a natural work context, and are therefore often used to carry out organisational research particularly in the areas of health and stress, work-related emotions, social interactions and work-life balance (Bolger et al., 2003). For instance, in their studies of software engineers working at Microsoft during the pandemic, diary studies enabled Butler and Jaffe (2020) to explore employees' physical and mental health over an extended time and allowed for a type of participant reflection which would not have been as easy in interviews.

Apart from above mentioned advantages, the method also allowed the study to include participants that were less extrovert than those participating in the interview studies. Employees participating in the study research were given the option to participate in either interview or diary studies. One of participants expressed a preference for the introspective and controlled format of diary studies in contrast to face-to-face interviews.



The diary studies were conducted with two employees of UNDP ITM over ten weeks. Each Friday the two participants would receive a questionnaire (see appendix 4), consisting of four short, required questions (always the same) and an optional free text section. The participants would revert with their answers weekly. Each week a different optional question was added to gather time-sensitive information, for instance to explore the experience of a specific communication initiative. This also helped to keep the questionnaire engaging and fresh. The questions were designed to get insight on key challenges and areas of gratitude and the answers helped inform the future interview questions and refocus the literature review area.

Find one of the diary journals in appendix 5, all journals can be made available upon request.

#### ***4.3.3 Selection***

The participants of the diary and interview studies were selected using purposeful sampling. They shared several features: they were in similar ages (25-35) employed by UNDP ITM Copenhagen and worked from home. They had been employed at UNDP between one month and five years in various roles within business and IT. The selection was based on a belief that the participants' relative similarity would better highlight shared or contrasting experiences. There is a possibility that the participants' relatively young age meant that they expected or desired a different and more extensive kind of organisational support than their more senior colleagues would. For many this was their first job, they were often new to Copenhagen and only one in ten had a family. Further, most participants lived in shared apartments where their working from home space was confined to their bedrooms, which could make it harder for them to work remotely. These factors should be considered when applying the findings to other organisations.

#### ***4.3.4 Email analysis***

This study has looked particularly at emails as this is the primary communication channel used at UNDP. Video townhall meetings occurred occasionally, it might have been that the global nature of the company where employees worked in many different time zones made these difficult to organise. Last year Microsoft Teams was adopted as a company tool in response to the mass shift to remote work, but this is merely used as an inter-colleague messaging tool. The

organisational intranet is awaiting a renovation and is currently inefficient and not frequently visited by staff. According to data traffic analytics the intranet has received 2390 average monthly visits since the start of the pandemic. With a global workforce of 17 thousand people, this equals to 14 percent of personnel visiting the intranet once a month.

The first step of the email analysis involved a quantification of all official emails sent from UNDP official email channels (definition follows) to all personnel at UNDP ITM Copenhagen from 1 January – 1 April 2021. This was done in order to show the accumulated number of organisational emails received by staff. The period was chosen as this was when the majority of interviews and diary studies took place and when most UNDP personnel and all Copenhagen employees worked remotely.

The term UNDP official has been used to refer to the following email channels: Senior Management, UNDP headquarters official email channels, UNDP Copenhagen official email channels, ITM Management and UN City Copenhagen. UN City Copenhagen is the official communication channel for employees of all UN agencies working at the UN centre in Copenhagen, thus all employees of this study. There is no designated internal communication email account, but all organisational emails to UNDP all staff or UNDP ITM personnel are sent from these channels.

In the second step of the email analysis, Covid-related emails were systematically classified according to following criteria:

- Informative reports
- UNDP's work with Covid-19
- Copenhagen-specific information
- Virtual social activities
- Wellbeing and health

Emails from all criteria were then analysed to find general tendencies and patterns such as typical sender, frequency, mentioning of Covid and regional focus. While the first part of the email analysis was quantitative, the content analysis included both qualitative and quantitative elements as the classification step involved a subjective interpretation. However, the criteria

and general tendencies were often clear and self-evident thus left little room for personal readings.

#### **4.4 Research stages**

The study strived to keep a practical approach throughout all research steps, focussing on producing insights which would be helpful to research and practise. Using an iterative research process allowed the researcher to go back and forth between different stages, in this way the problem formulation and theory was revisited after some of the data collection. As the study moved forward, the working process was adjusted.

**Phase 1:** In the first stage the organisational email analysis was initiated and literature on remote work, change communication and leadership was explored. These findings formed the basis for the interview and diary themes.

**Phase 2:** In the next stage the first round of interviews and diary studies was conducted. These aimed to be curious, open-ended and free from assumptions. See key findings from the first round of interviews and diaries in appendix 6.

**Phase 3:** In this stage the research question was revisited and the key themes for the literature review were defined based on the findings of the email analysis, the literature search and the first interviews and diaries.

**Phase 4:** The findings from the first round of interviews and diaries allowed for plausible guesses to be made, which were tested in the second round of interviews. This process was fully transparent, the participants would be told that interesting information had emerged in previous interviews and that the researcher would test if this applied to them too. The answers were thus prompted. This method allowed for the making of conclusions such as, we have strong reasons to believe that X impacts Y, and encourage future research to test if this is correct.

**Phase 5:** Lastly, all interviews and diaries were coded and the email analysis was finalised to prepare all data for analysis.

## **4.5 Reflections and ethical considerations**

Validity and reliability are key concepts for all research but are less straightforward when it comes to qualitative studies. Some research seeks to tailor qualitative work in order to meet the criteria laid down by quantitative research, which is somewhat counterproductive as it does not contribute to enhancing the craftsmanship of the actual research process (Prasad, 2018). This echoes some of Flyvbjerg's (2011) critique of social science mimicking natural science. He instead argues that they are two distinguished fields each with its own different possibilities and limitations, and should thus be treated differently. The same applies to quantitative and qualitative research.

The interviews and diary studies were carried out in a transparent and professional manner, to create a comfortable environment encouraging participants to provide honest and truthful answers. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, its potential contributions and who would be able to access to enhance transparency and engagement. They were made aware that their participation would be fully anonymous and that their names or specific titles would not be revealed in the thesis or to their colleagues. All interviewees were further asked to consent before the conversation was recorded (audio only) and offered to read the final transcript of their interview.

It is important to acknowledge the dual position of the researcher as a colleague and an observer of the participants. A previous relation with the participants meant that predetermined values and assumptions could influence the interviews and the interpretation of the data. To avoid unconsciously "filling in" any gaps in the interview with own assumptions (Berg, 2001: 36), efforts were made to ask for examples and follow-up questions to clarify possible gaps in the answers. While the closeness to the participants puts extra attention on the researcher's objectivity, it also comes with benefits. Shared values and norms between interviewer and interviewee can lead to a more relaxed and easy-going conversation and thereby to more valuable data (Berg, 2001).

## 5. Findings and Analysis

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This section will begin by revealing the findings of the email analysis to demonstrate the number and types of emails received by employees of UNDP ITM from UNDP official. This will be followed by a discussion of the findings from the qualitative interviews and diary studies to explore how employees have made sense of communication when working remotely.

### 5.1 Email analysis

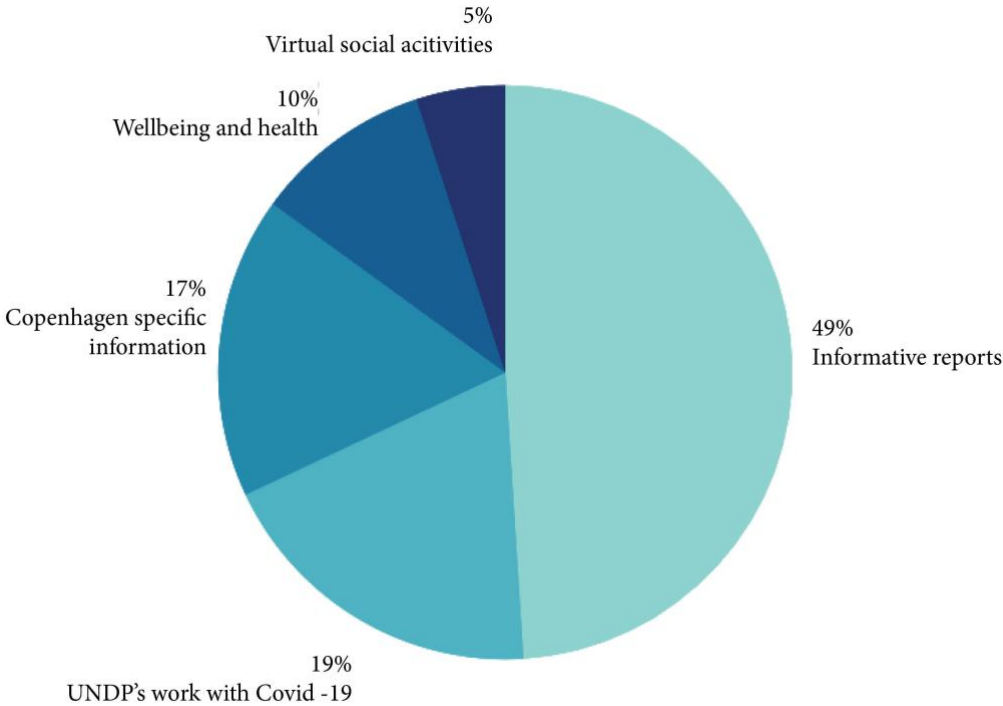
Email is the primary communication channel of UNDP through which the majority of organisational information to all staff is being communicated. The reasons for this could be a lack of other suitable communication channels, with the organisational intranet being outdated and the digital infrastructure limited with many offices suffering from bad internet connectivity.

Findings from the quantitative email analysis demonstrates that from 1 January to 1 April the UNDP ITM personnel received 144 emails from UNDP official. Out of these, 123 emails were relating to Covid-19. This means that in a work week, employees would receive 12 organisational emails on top of regular emails from colleagues and stakeholders. Out of these ten emails concerned the pandemic.

#### 5.1.1 Covid-related emails

Below an overview of the various types of emails UNDP sends out to their personnel regarding Covid is presented. Out of the 123 emails sent from UNDP official to personnel at UNDP ITM Copenhagen, informative pandemic reports made up 49 percent, 19 percent concerned UNDP's work with Covid-19, 17 percent concerned Copenhagen-specific information while wellbeing and health made up 10 percent and 5 percent concerned virtual social activities.

**Email overview**

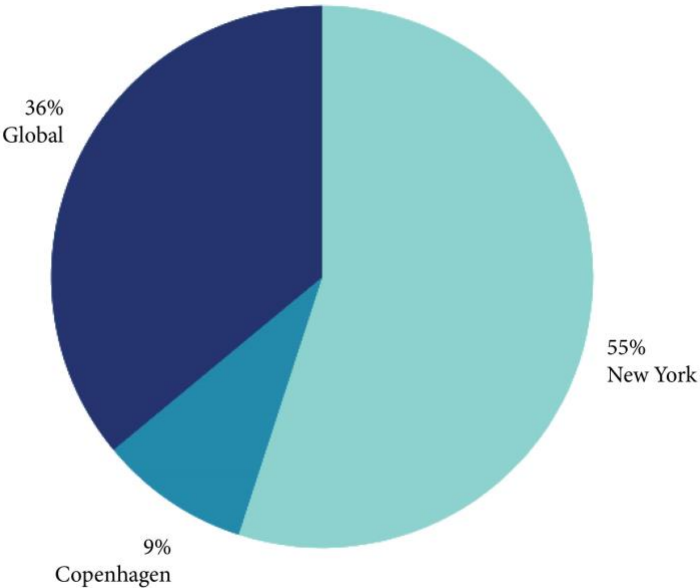


The analysis exploring general tendencies and patterns revealed the following:

The most frequent email was the Covid Situational Report, which was sent to UNDP all personnel two to three times every week. Each Covid Situational Report included several long attachments with detailed information concerning New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Washington, and a list of online resources with a strong New York focus. The email was generally half a page long, highlighting two to three items. It was formally written with no images or graphics. Not all items were related to Covid-19, but the email typically involved far-reaching topics, which could give a confused expression. The second most common email was the weekly newsletter Covid Bulletin, which featured stories of how UNDP is working to fight Covid-19 globally and the future vision for UNDP's programmatic work. Each newsletter included images and ten longer articles from UNDP offices around the world.

The findings revealed that while the majority of UNDP ITM personnel are based in Copenhagen, the majority of Covid-related emails they received had a strong New York focus, which is where the UNDP headquarters are located. Out of the Covid-related emails, 50 percent concerned New York and only 17 percent were about Copenhagen.

**Regional focus**



The UNDP ITM management has sent no official emails to its staff regarding Covid or remote work during the period 1 January – 1 April 2021. This means that UNDP ITM staff has received no official information about the practical implications of the pandemic (such as when they can come back into the office) nor about any other work-related or social aspects from their employer. On two occasions an ITM manager has forwarded emails to ITM Copenhagen personnel which have been sent from the UN City email channel regarding remote work practicalities.

The findings of this study demonstrate that most information regarding Covid-19 and remote work was communicated via emails from senior management and the headquarters, with no emails being sent on a department-level. As the intranet was underutilised, the secondary communication channel was organisational webinars, which were often for all staff globally or all Copenhagen personnel. These communication channels did not encourage dialogue or upward communication, it would probably be fruitless to reply to an email sent to 17 thousand others. Thus, the type of communication favoured by UNDP rejected the possibility for much feedback. The lack of two-way communication and active listening meant that UNDP was unable to understand how their personnel was making sense of messages. Without the

recognition of upward communication, the organisation would not be able to make modifications to its communication or identify areas of improvement.

This type of communication exemplifies the first approach to change communication defined by Johansson and Heide (2008) which sees communication as a tool to disseminate information. In this approach, the organisational members are offered information about the change which they are automatically assumed to understand and accept. A common critique of this approach is its tendency to view communication as an isolated variable, rejecting the fundamental relationship between communication and organisation, and the notion presented by the CCO perspective that organisations are produced, maintained and reproduced through communication. A further critique of the approach is its reliance on information distribution. The simple recipe offered for a successful change programme is keeping employees well informed. The result of a change is therefore generally attributed to how well management communicates with the employees, with little attention given to the employees' interpretation of the communication (Lewis, 2011). In the findings from the interview and diary studies, we will explore the complexity involved in the organisational members' interpretation and acceptance corporate messages and behaviours.

## **5.2 Interview and diary findings**

As explored in the literature review, information overload can occur when there are more messages competing for our attention than we can handle. In these instances, information can act like noise, impacting our ability to process it. The number of organisational emails received appeared as a key concern for nearly all participants of the study. One of the interviewees expressed that,

I have, I think 500 emails I haven't read. I swear. It's like you pass a certain threshold, if you don't read 50 emails then no matter if it's 50 or 200 you're just like, I'm late. I got to catch up. But it's hard to find the time to actually go through the emails.

Several findings support the argument by Stich (2019) that there is a clear link between higher workload stress and desiring less emails. There was a tendency of the interviewees to be more concerned with the email load if they experienced their workload to be heavy. For instance, one of the interviewees who had recently started in the department and had a very junior role, did not seem distressed over the number of emails received. On the other hand, two employees with



larger areas of responsibilities were experiencing the growing email load as a stress factor. It seems that the pressure of time and workload puts demand on employees to set their own priorities and focus only on the information they need to complete their assignments. This is exemplified in one of the statements,

I opened one [organisational email] at the beginning and I was like, it was kind of nice to have this little newsletter with museums that you can visit online and some different things that you can do, it was a nice initiative. But, yeah, my inbox has spamed so so much since then, if I'm very busy I just delete them to get them out of my inbox so I can focus.

### ***5.2.1 Coping with information overload***

Several findings demonstrate how employees are using a coping strategy to deal with the overload where emails deemed irrelevant are systematically filtered away to allow them to focus on immediate tasks. This is in line with the cybernetic theory of stress (Carver & Scheier, 1982) introduced previously, in which individuals try to influence their environments by distancing themselves from stressful stimuli. In these instances, employees may delete organisational emails unread based on an individual estimate that these are irrelevant.

As discovered in the literature review, employees globally are receiving an increasing amount of emails (Radicati Group, 2019). In the context of Covid-19, findings from the email analysis demonstrate that staff receive even more organisational emails now as a large part of emails concern the pandemic. On top of this, findings from the interviews suggest that employees also receive and send an increased number of emails as remote work has changed the way we interact with our colleagues. One employee mentions how remote work has escalated his email use,

I feel like I receive much more emails now. Of course, I send more emails when I am not in the office, you know, about things that you used to turn around and ask your colleague who's sitting next to you. Now maybe you have to write an email. So, I think, more emails are being sent and received.

This testifies to how the new work modality has altered everyday work behaviours, where you cannot longer turn around and ask your colleague if you have an issue. Apart from resulting in an increased number of emails, working remotely has also spiked the use of digital communication tools. Several study participants reported being in conversations with their

colleagues throughout the day over Microsoft Teams. The reactions to using this digital tool was generally very positive as it gives employees instant access to teammates and allows for spontaneous conversations. However, some complained of interruptions and felt obliged to reply to messages immediately, suggesting organisations need to acknowledge that remote workers are likely to be exposed to an increased amount of written information and communication daily.

The notion of information overload (Feather, 1998) as a situation where individuals are exposed to such great amount of information that it is impossible to effectively use it, appeared in many of the interviews. Several interviewees mentioned that they would delete or disregard emails not related to their direct tasks,

I skip many of the emails to be honest. To be fair like the quantity you receive sometimes make you miss very interesting events. Often when I look back at my inbox I'm like: Oh, I'm actually very interested to participate in this but that was a week ago.

This further suggests that the quantity of information caused employees to accidentally overlook valuable information. With a constant communication abundancy, it can be difficult to distinguish the valuable information from the rest. The situation described by the interviewee demonstrates that somewhere along the communication process, messages that could have been appreciated were being lost.

It is understandable that employees did not take the time to read all the emails they received, however, this can be problematic for the company. While some internal communication emails present nice-to-know rather than need-to-know information, other emails may concern critical information on policies or regulations which employees must be aware of in order to carry out their jobs. Not recognising how or if communication is being understood may put organisations in a position where they are not able to evaluate and adapt its practises.

### ***5.2.2 The dream of a tidy inbox***

The idea of having a tidy email inbox was something most participants strived towards. This seemed to concern more than the email inbox, but appeared to symbolise an overall control of one's work. In the below statement the interviewee uses the terms 'spam' and clutter' to

describe organisational emails, which can be seen as standing in clear contrast to order and structure. This type of language came up in several of the interviews when referring email overload,

If I get caught up in the morning and I already have 10 emails that I need to work on, then I'm going to delete the five additional, like spam ones straight away. So they don't clutter my inbox.

A certain resignation could often become apparent in the interviewees' expression, as if they had given up on things which did not concern them directly or their immediate work.

The pandemic has been a test for humanity. The economic and social disruption caused by COVID-19 has been devastating, presenting unprecedented challenges to public health, the global economy, and the world of work. Life as we knew has changed, possibly forever, leaving no one unaffected by the crisis. Much of the past year has been marked by a global uncertainty of both our personal and work life. Border closures and confinement measures have reduced our freedom while the uncertain future of jobs and societies have limited our self-determination and ability to organise our lives. In our professional lives, well-established routines have been shaken up and replaced by constant improvisation. What we used to know as the office might have been replaced by a makeshift desk in our bedroom, while our weekly department meetings have turned into a Zoom cacophony of voices and starry eyes. Several reports further report that remote work is blurring the boundaries between family and work life and causes people to work longer days (International Labour Organization, 2020). Trying to bring some order to this chaos, it is no surprise that people are clinging on to the abstract dream of tidy email inbox free of 'spam' and 'clutter'. In this situation, the structured email inbox is an indicator of being on top of things. This is a fundamental human mechanism of controlling what you can control in a situation of disruption. Organisations can help their employees achieve a sense of order and overview by providing them with a framework to structure their working day.

Several study participants further reported feeling a resistance or disinterest in all communication concerning Covid-19, suggesting that as the situation continues people have become more complacent about it. A parallel can be drawn to the condition pandemic fatigue introduced by WHO (WHO, 2021). Considering the inherent resistance people might feel towards the situation, maybe this type of communication cannot be treated like any other

organisational message but organisations must rethink how to reach their employees with critical information.

### **5.2.3 Lacking relevance**

While the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that employees received an abundance of information, several participants expressed that they were not receiving communication that was relevant to them,

I think I receive a lot of communication that is not relevant to me. For example the automatic emails that you receive from UNDP, I don't even know what those things are. I don't read them to be honest.

What comes across as particularly problematic with above statement is how the employee refers to the emails from UNDP as ‘the *automatic* emails’, as if they were sent mechanically without human involvement. The dictionary description of ‘automatic’ explains it as something “done or occurring spontaneously, without conscious thought or attention”. The employee’s disinterest in this type of communication is not surprising, in our everyday we are constantly bombarded with generic messages and it is part of an information overload coping strategy to filter many of these out. This further exemplifies the common critique of much change communication theory, where communication in change processes is viewed as a tool to inform, but little attention is given to how organisational members understand or react to change messages (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). The CCO perspective understands the organisation as a product of continuous sensemaking and communication processes emerging from the bottom-up rather than from the top-down (Taylor, 2009). In its focus on linear, top-down communication, UNDP thus fails to acknowledge the critical role of its organisational members in constituting and making sense of the organisation through their communicative behaviours.

Further, with a feedback mechanism in place, communication practices could have been adopted to their audience’s response. One of the interviewees pointed out that he would have been more interested in organisational communication if it seemed less generic and more tailored, however, this critique would never reach the people producing the communication,

I think making it more personalised and maybe making it look nicer would help. Many of these emails are just like a normal text with lots of PDF attachments, you really have to look hard to find anything interesting or relevant in there. And I also think it would help if the sender was a real person, rather than just like United Nations Development Programme or Registry Staff Counsel.

Quirke (2008) argues that effective communication is dependent on people's inclination, time and willingness to engage with the communicator. In the statement above, it seems that the interviewee is less inclined to read an email from a generic corporate source, than a concrete person. Another interviewee further expressed that knowing that the UNDP All Staff emails were sent to 17 thousand people globally made them seem generic and less relevant. Several participants expressed that the organisational communication was generic, too frequent and appeared out of context. In Wesch's (2008) theory of context collapse, online information appears indiscriminately in great quantities, directed at no specific audience, disconnected from meaning or context, making it difficult for the reader to process the information. This phenomenon finds support in some of the findings which reflect the unsystematic and haphazard nature of much of the internal communication.

Nearly all interviewees brought up the New York focus of the organisational emails as a key issue. These emails concerned issues such as local vaccination, guidelines on re-entering the headquarters or news on the post lockdown opening phase in New York. As this communication often did not concern the participants of this study, most of them would have preferred if the organisation had filtered this away. While some employees immediately disregarded such emails assuming they had been sent to them by mistake, others felt resentful as these emails pointed to a lack of recognition of their contribution,

I mean, these UNDP emails are often New York-focused, I'm not really sure they [UNDP] even know we exist in Copenhagen or what we do in Copenhagen. They should know that ITM is not only situated in New York, we're in Panama, in Copenhagen, in Kuala Lumpur – we are everywhere. It's up to the people responsible to make it relevant for a wider audience.

An issue which emerges when exploring the tendency to focus on the New York headquarters, revealed in the interviews and later corroborated in the email analysis, is how it undermines the very nature of the United Nations (UN). Driven by the core value of 'Respect for Diversity' the

UN is known all over the world as a fundamentally international force striving to build friendly global relations. However, this insight demonstrates that UNDP does not reflect this in its communication, but instead appears to favour some regions or communities over others. Apart from overloading its employees' inboxes with information they cannot use, it signals that the organisation is out of touch with its identity and vocation. With much research pointing to the importance of brands having personality traits and human characteristics (Aaker, 1997), one could even argue that UNDP is presenting a perplexed and conflicting personality where it says one thing but does another.

The qualitative findings demonstrate that employees' experiences of remote work are dichotomous. This is expected as extensive research on people's experiences of teleworking during the pandemic has been divergent. This reaffirms the research presented by Ford et al. (2020) that the experience of remote work is influenced by factors such as varying personalities, job characteristics, family life, and living conditions. While nearly all study participants reported that their email load was too high, some employees enjoyed receiving organisational support in the form of wellbeing guides or information about social activities. Some might have been able to use the information better had it been communicated through a different channel. However, others only wanted to receive information directly relating to their direct tasks or job situation, as indicated by one of the participants,

I read the emails regarding the Copenhagen office, to see if we can come in or not. To be honest, I throw everything else away. The wellbeing guides and the other updates, that doesn't help me, it's useless for me. I do not care so much about the communication, I just want to have time to do my job.

The findings revealed that the experience and need of remote workers were not uniform, suggesting that communication efforts should be tailored to different needs. We have previously discussed the limitations of UNDP's reliance on a one-way transmission model of communication. Maybe a better option would be to focus on communication which the receiver could discover individually. Limiting emails and presenting options for employees to process information in their own time, would reduce workflow interruptions, which as demonstrated in the literature review can reduce concentration and increases the time it takes to complete a task (Eyrolle & Cellier, 2000; Hodgetts & Jones, 2006).

### ***5.2.5 Managing remote workers***

The majority of the participants pointed to the lack of in-person manager contact as being one of the top negative outcomes of working from home. While participants' experiences of their manager relationship were very varied, all participants expressed that this relationship was significant, even more so when working remote. The pandemic has forced the adoption of new ways of working which has presented a novel set of challenges for employees. Not being in the office can complicate work processes, make it difficult to get hold of information (Men & Bowen, 2016) and isolate employees from their colleagues and organisations (International Labour Organization, 2020).

In this unparalleled situation, managers play a key communicative role as the primary link between employees and the organisation. But as the conditions of the office has fundamentally changed, managers will have to rethink how they best manage and support their teams. The new challenges were reiterated in the qualitative findings, which suggested that the remote work setting had added an additional barrier between managers and employees, which made it more difficult to reach out and ask for support.

The employees expressed that not being able to walk over to the supervisor's desk with a simple question stalled work processes and added unnecessary time to complete tasks. One participant mentioned that issues which would previously be solved through informal chats and ad-hoc meetings now necessitated formal meetings,

Our contracts are running out soon, and we haven't really heard anything about renewal or what's coming. In the office, this would have been so simple. I would just say to my manager, I need 15 minutes of your time at some point today, and we would walk into one of the meeting rooms and talk about it. Like you could do it a lot more informally, whereas now I have to invite him to a meeting, and it feels that it has to be reasonable.

Several findings suggested that remote online work contributed to a perceived inaccessibility of managers with interviewees reiterating that they would not reach out unless entirely necessary. Microsoft Teams gives users the option to change their work mode to "busy" when they want to avoid interruptions. Interviewees mentioned that managers would often be in this mode, which could stop them from reaching out. One interviewee mentioned that while she

would not mind reaching out to her manager if she had been in the office, she would be less likely to contact her manager if she was at home,

If I'm at home and I have a small doubt. I'll be like, I'm not going to bother my boss sending a message about it, I'll try to figure it out on my own. Before, I could just ask her in the office, I would get an answer right away and that would be it.

Some employees expressed how working from home has contributed to a more results-oriented approach. The fact that employees would not contact their manager unless having a solid product or deliverable could potentially lead to the generation of a new work practise which favour quick results over complex processes. The qualitative findings suggested that employees working from home preferred slightly different tasks than they would do in the office, which were more deliverable-oriented. The focus on results reiterates Sorensen's (2016) argument that the best way to manage remote workers is by the process Management by Results, which concentrates on output. One employee mentioned that it is easier to discuss one's work with a manager if there is something 'solid' to present,

When you're at home you usually wait to contact your manager until you have something solid to show, which I think relates to being more results-oriented now. This is inefficient because it's so important to communicate at an early stage in the process. I presented my manager with something that I had done, and he was like: Oh, you went too far like you did too much, and I was like, okay this could have been avoided.

When sitting at home it seems to be more important to make visible progress, to be able to "tick things off a list". When the participants were asked about the reason for this, it seemed to come from a desire to achieve solid results to present to one's manager but also almost to convince oneself that one is actually doing work. There was a sense of guilt reoccurring in the interviews and diary studies of not doing enough or not doing the right kind of work. At the same time many admitted working longer hours than they used to in the office. This insecurity of one's work standard could potentially stem from the idea that work has become less "professional" it could for instance be carried out from the participants' bedrooms, sometimes during different hours, often wearing leisure wear. This supports Puranova's (2020) argument that the skills and characteristics of successful managers in an office-based environment differ from those needed to lead remote teams, as it is now more important for management to be trusting and results-



based, allowing employees to keep an autonomous and flexible working style adapted to the individual circumstances and preferences.

While remote work might necessitate a more trusting and autonomous management style, it is important to create a mechanism for employees to get support when they need it. One employee proposed having daily check-ins, underlining that these should come from the employees rather than the managers to avoid a feeling of top-down control,

It's hard to have this balance between managers not being too controlling of your work, and at the same time having some daily guidelines or daily reorientation. I think it has to come from the employee side more than the manager, or it can be perceived as control of the employees.

Perhaps managers need to reevaluate how they can best support their employees working remotely. Whether that is through daily orientations (Nawas, 2020), maintaining an accessible approach (Larson, 2020) or facilitating connections between colleagues (Brescia, 2020), the findings and much research on the topic indicate that the role of leadership in a remote setting needs to be rethought.

### ***5.2.6 Building online relations***

The online environment demonstrated that the lack of in-person interaction often put a strain on the employee manager relation. One of the interview statements captured how the online format gave rise to new challenges in the employee manager communication,

It's never pleasant to call someone and say I that didn't understand. The process is not easy. It's much easier for me to go to my supervisor's desk and say okay I didn't understand anything. Human behaviour can be so misinterpreted online, if you text or even if you're in front of the camera.

While many participants were positive about some aspects of remote work, such as an increased amount of freedom and better opportunities to focus, there was a consensus that remote work negatively affected social relations. Spending time socialising was nearly always presented as the key aspect participants were missing from being in the office, expressed in one of the diary journals,

I am most looking forward to the small interactions and socializing. Going for a coffee and exchanging some gossip or small talk. Also just bouncing ideas off each other in the open space rather than having to schedule a proper call. I think all of us may be more productive at home at times, but in terms of enjoying the work and looking forwards to improving, this only really happens when we are regularly in the office.

Another interviewee pointed out that the lack of socialising and informal chats with her manager in the office affected their relationship and made it more difficult to approach her,

When you work in the office you build relationships faster, because you don't talk only about work, you also talk about trivial stuff. And that makes people approachable and easier to connect with.

The interview and diary studies revealed that working remotely provided less opportunities to be social and made it more difficult to build relations, supporting much the research that remote work can have a negative impact on trust and relationship building (Ford, 2020; Hinds & Mark, (2016). While some noted that they were comfortable talking about non-work-related things in online video meetings, others expressed that if the meeting exceeded three to four people they would be hesitant to speak about other things than the task at hand. This resistance seemed to be founded on a fear of wasting someone's time or a social anxiety of speaking in front of an "audience". This could be related to the 'Zoom Fatigue' put forward by Bailenson (2020) where the amount of direct eye contact throughout a meeting make these socially exhausting, and that the number of eyes seemingly following all meetings participants every move can cause anxiety or stress. This does not mean that video meetings should be avoided altogether, but rather that meeting practices in remote setting should be consciously thought through. Instead of turning all regular in-office meetings into online meetings, perhaps a better idea is to facilitate a mix of one-on-ones, audio meetings, larger meetings or social team activities.

One of the key challenges of remote work appeared to be the lack of social interaction with the team and manager. The social aspect seemed to be even more important as the participants expressed that their social life was constrained by the Covid-19 restrictions. This reiterates the claim that during these challenging circumstances, organisational communication should not be limited to content but should also include the social aspects of work, providing opportunities for socialising with team and manager (International Labour Organisation, 2020). It further supports some of the research on remote work presented in the literature review, which suggests

that employers will need to put a greater focus on managing not only the employee experience but the life experience of their employees (Kropp, 2020). As teleworking has taken away many of the social opportunities employees would have in a physical office, managers can help connect enhance social connection by allowing organic conversations to emerge.

It is predictable that human relations do not flow as naturally online. We have seen that with social media for over a decade, and we might have experienced it with distant teaching the past year. This reiterates the findings by the International Labour Organisation (2020) that teams that work remotely face more communications challenges than face-to-face teams. Further, it is argued that these communicative challenges increase over time as people continue to work from home, underlining the necessity of organisations to learn a new set of skills and adapt different practises to accommodate these emerging challenges and needs. One of the diary journals supports the idea that remote work is something we need “learn”,

Our team has at last managed to learn how to communicate more effectively it seems. It took a couple of months of working from home but it seems that everyone has started to understand that the way some of them have communicated for years inside a normal office environment does not always work when doing it via Teams or emails.

This optimistic insight suggests that while research proposes that relations will suffer the longer we work remote, we might be able to counter this with the right set of tools and behaviours in place.

### ***5.2.7 Organisation versus team***

In response to an interview question of what type of Covid-related communication employees were missing, nearly all participants mentioned that they would like to receive more communication from their direct manager or department (ITM). The qualitative study found that ITM had send no Covid related information to its personnel, but all information came from the headquarters and was often sent to 17 thousand people. The lack of communication concerning Covid-19 or remote work from the department was critiqued in several interviews. However, since the start of the pandemic, UNDP headquarters has hosted a range of global digital webinars and presentations concerning Covid-19, but none of the participants of the study had ever joined. When asked why, an interviewee responded,

It's so big. So I think if you're on a webinar with like 800 people, it's not going to be the same social dynamics as connecting with your teammates and I think that's where it's lacking. I don't think there's anything missing on an organisational level, it's more on the department or manager level.

Even before the pandemic struck, Buckingham and Goodall (2019) argued that the esteemed importance of the organisation was often overrated, but that employees tend to care less about the organisation they work for and more about which team or department they were on. As organisations are becoming increasingly global and complex, contemporary work is more and more team-based. Contemporary organisations have understood this and Lovegrove (2020) reports that the consulting firm McKinsey focus efforts on creating and fostering a micro-culture for their disparate project-based teams to enhance trust and collaboration. Google emphasises that establishing psychological safety within a group is critical to making a team work. This involves encouraging emotional conversations and facilitating an environment where employees can talk freely without fear of recriminations (Duhigg, C., 2016). A research study published in Harvard Business Review (Cross et al., 2016) found that the time spent by managers and employees in collaborative activities has increased by 50 percent or more over the last two decades and that, at many companies, more than three-quarters of an employee's day is spent communicating with colleagues. An interviewee pointed out that when we are not in the physical office, what we immediately associate with work is likely to be our team who we see on a regular basis, suggesting that the importance of the team is even more true now. If we are less concerned with the larger organisation and more concerned with the team, organisational communication efforts might benefit from occurring more on a department or team level, rather than an organisational level.

The study findings indicate that while UNDP had provided employees with a substantial amount of information relating to Covid, employees would have liked the department and the managers to have taken a more visible role in the communication of this information. Several interviewees reported that the constant flow of communication without any guidance, narrative or direction made it difficult to grasp. Some stated that they would be more interested in hearing about organisational changes caused by the pandemic from their direct managers, rather than senior management. Another interviewee pointed out that she only read organisational emails when her supervisor had forwarded them to her directly as she then assumed they were relevant to her. Weick et al. (2005) identify two issues in relation to information dispersal; lack of

information and lack of meaning. While a lack of information creates uncertainty and allows for the creation of alternative stories, a steady stream of information void of meaning does not constitute good communication, but key information needs to be selected and prioritised. Several interviewees pointed out that had the organisational emails been sent from a familiar person such as a departmental manager, they would have been more inclined to read it.

I think from our department there's nothing basically, in terms of them trying to help us or give information. This webinar, for example, I saw that because I read one of those mass emails that went out to everyone. I wish one of the managers would have said like, this might be a good idea for the team to join. They could really push it downwards and try to recommend it.

This points to a need of employees to be guided through organisational communication. In the context of organisational change, it is the manager's role to reduce and prioritise, explain and translate. It could be that a constant feeling of information overload made employees miss messages they would have otherwise found valuable, underlining the key communicative role of the manager. It is also important to understand that the communication has to be "acted", it should for instance be included in manager's talk. The Economist (2020) argues that in the context of teleworking, the role of the leader is not so much "management by walking around" as management by phoning, or Zooming, around.

Much change communication research underlines the key role of the leader in creating opportunities for dialogue during change processes (Lewis, 2011; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Managers can support employees make sense of situations by creating opportunities for people to talk them into existence. As people interpret things differently varying interpretations of messages will always exist, if these are not brought up and discussed leaders cannot address them. However, the perceived inaccessibility of managers mentioned by some of the interviewees meant that many employees would refrain from reaching out to their supervisors until they had something solid to show. This in turn, reduced the opportunities for feedback and dialogue.

It is unsurprising that UNDP sent a wide range of change communication messages to its employees, as much change management theory emphasises the important role of communication in successfully managing a change (Daly et al., 2003; Elving, 2005; Ford & Ford, 1995; Kotter, 1995). It is argued that if a change should be successful, the organisation

should incorporate the vision of the change in all its communication, which should be disseminated across multiple platforms (Kotter, 1995). In this view, the success of a change depends primarily on whether it is engineered in the right way, suggesting that if UNDP send repeated communication on multiple channels the message will ultimately be understood and approved. The findings indicated that UNDP had adopted this perspective, an abundance of messages were sent, concerning themes such as social wellbeing, organisational updates, global Covid-19 news or recreational activities. The organisation was thus following much of the general advice presented by common change management theory, seeking to guide their employees through these ever-changing times with frequent communication of various types. However, most qualitative findings demonstrate that sending multiple messages does not increase the receiver's ability to accept them, rather the opposite. Many study participants reported being in a constant state of information overload or feeling complacent about much of the organisational communication.

#### ***5.2.8 The CCO perspective***

Another interesting aspect revealed in the interviews, was that several individuals expressed having little relation to the sender of most organisational emails. As seen in one of the interview statements mentioned previously, the United Nations Development Programme as the sender of communication carried no real strength. A feeling of anonymity towards UNDP was revealed in both the diary studies and the interviews. This seemed to increase over time, the longer the participants of the study had worked from home, the more distance seem to have appeared between them and the organisation. Although the participants continuously received emails about UNDP's achievements at the headquarters and around the world, they expressed no real interest in reading about this. When asked about the latest changes at the headquarters or who the key people in UNDP senior management were, many participants were unsure or unconcerned. Speaking about their workplace, the participants rarely referred to UNDP but instead talked about their department ITM. In discussions about UNDP's weekly newsletter Covid Bulletin which highlighted the pandemic support work of UNDP around the world, the participants rarely appeared to feel a connection to or pride of this work. It was as if the contribution was done by a different company, which had nothing to do with them. This was surprising to see, as you would think that members would want to identify and associate themselves with an organisation with such an established reputation and noble mission.

Could it be that as the physical office had been removed, employees' relationship to the organisation suffered? Perhaps the very notion of the organisation had faded? The CCO perspective understands communication as constitutive of the organisation. In this view, organisations are in fact talked into existence. According to the four flows model (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) organisational forms have to be constituted through four types of message flows in order to exist. Exploring the various types of communication appearing within UNDP, we can see examples of the self-structuring flow which refers to communication that brings the organisation into being by structuring it (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). This could for instance be communication from UNDP to its employees, such as top-down emails and directives, which determine how people work and coordinate themselves. While this communication flow was recognised, the study participants' general complacency toward much of UNDP's organisational communication raise doubts over the management's ability to sufficiently control the organisation's structure.

Activity coordination coincides with self-structuring and refers to the necessary adjustment and negotiation that takes place when people work with each other. This can for example involve how organisational members generate order in problematic situations, where no pre-established structures exist (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). In the case of UNDP, this flow was recognised in employees' planning, execution and negotiation of work. While these communication flows were identified, the other flows were less apparent. Membership negotiation, refers to the communication which establishes and maintains the organisation's relationships to its members. This communication controls the extent to which an individual understands herself as an organisational member. It urges questions such as what is communication doing with agents' membership? The idea is that through communication flow such as interview processes, socialisation, informal and formal talk, members produce a collective consciousness of "our organisation" (Zaug, 2014). However, much of the informal talk and socialisation normally associated with work had disappeared as a result of remote work, meaning that the opportunities for this flow were reduced. As discussed, many interview and diary findings point to the lack of social interaction, informal conversations and department initiatives. There is thus no indication that the organisational arrangements adequately stabilised the employees organisational membership negotiation.

The last flow, institutional positioning, which is processes of individual communication that generate relations between any specified organisation and its external audience, might also have been affected by the remote work situation. It is likely that creating and maintaining an image that will position the organisation in a larger environment or with the public, might be hindered when some of the elements that typically symbolise an organisations, such as the physical office, is gone. As employees are now carrying out their work from their bedrooms rather than from the UN City Copenhagen, some of the very representative attributes of the organisation may be gone.

McPhee and Zaug (2000) argue that in order for an organisation to exist, it has to be constituted through four types of message flows. However, the remote work situation may have resulted in a limitation of communication interactions and transactions, which in turn could affect the communicative constitution of the organisation. Meaning that if we understand organisations as being communicated into existence through interactions, language, sensemaking, and other symbolic processes, reducing opportunities for these moments will have an effect on the constitution of the organisation. Thus, remote work may have affected the collective consciousness of the organisation, causing it to exist a bit less now than before.

### ***5.2.9 The future office***

With the emergence of a Covid-19 vaccine, lockdowns and restrictions are easing up in most parts of the world and employees are slowly returning to the office. However, findings from the diary studies and interviews demonstrated that despite the hardship experienced during working from home, none of the study participants were ready to come back into the office fully. While some believe that working from home once a week was ideal, others wanted to keep their remote work set-up for most of the time.

While businesses have modernised to different extents, the very nature of remote work involves greater levels of autonomy and freedom than in-office work. Many participants of this study expressed appreciating the independence and trust that came with working remotely, which might be a reason for wanting to continue the practise in the future. If organisations would suddenly ask their employees to come back into the office full-time, this sense of freedom and trust would be radically limited. As pointed out by one of the interviewees, this could prove problematic,



I would love to have a mix between going to work and being able to work at home. I think the worst would be if they just force us to go back to normal. I've got so used to this now, it will be a very big change going back.

This revealed the levels of complexity involved in our post-pandemic future. If some companies imagined returning to the office simply means putting their workers back behind the desk, it is becoming increasingly clear that this will be a long process and that businesses might never go back to the way they were.

With that being said, the future remote office will be different to that of today. Once our lives have gone back to normal, employees might not require the same support as they do today. In a post-pandemic reality, we might go out and see our friends at the end of the day, thus, working remotely should prove less tiring when the rest of life moves offline.

## 6. Conclusion

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As remote working is here to stay, the strategic communication community can support by studying this phenomenon to help organisations build better practices for their employees, wherever they are. The varied insights presented in this study can help enhance our understanding of the current situation and present actionable insights for the future. This means that we are not guessing, but we have a scientific skillset which allows us to know our audience, understand what triggers them, how they will behave, and which buttons we need to push.

Our findings indicate that UNDP has approached communication during the Covid-19 pandemic from a common change management perspective which emphasises media, content, and the dissemination of information. Rejecting this, we claim that a focus on top-down one-way communication fails to acknowledge the fragile nature of organisations and how their existence is depending on members' conversations, actions and sensemaking processes. Instead, this study suggests adopting a CCO perspective which understands organisations as emerging from communication, meaning that an organisation is not only the messages it sends, but all its members' communicative acts. The bottom-up approach of the CCO perspective understands organisations as evolving from small to great, thus requiring us to start from these interactions to understand how organisations emerge from them. This suggests that organisations need to fundamentally change their perspective from top-down to bottom-up, to acknowledge the key role of organisational members in shaping the way the organisation is produced and reproduced.

The reaction to the pandemic of many organisations has been superficial, assuming we can seamlessly transfer the office to our homes. Opposing this notion, this study proposes that organisations need to rethink how they operate in order to exist in the collective consciousness of its remote workers. Communication processes may need to be reworked or enhanced to strengthen the organisation's ability to adequately coordinate and control its members. The CCO perspective holds that organisations are dependent upon flows of communication for their

existence. In our investigation of UNDP from the four flows approach it appears that working remotely has had limiting effects on its four flows of communication. It has reduced opportunities for social interactions, sensemaking, and other symbolic processes which affects the communicative constitution of the organisation. As this jeopardizes the very existence of the organisation, businesses need to ensure all flows of communication occur even in a remote work reality. With the physical office gone, employers may need to find new ways to tie their members to the organisation.

The findings further reveal some interesting aspects of remote work: employees having had their well-established routines turned upside-down are likely to seek structure and order in their everyday. Organisations can support by providing a framework which they can organise their work in. Further, many remote workers have experienced less opportunities to interact with others, which may have increased their appreciation of managers that maintain an accessible approach and facilitate time for the team to foster social relations. Lastly, the findings suggest that tasks and evaluation systems of remote work might differ from those in the office, proposing a need to restructure how work is done and performance is measured. Future research could validate these hypotheses and explore how organisations can best support staff based on the findings.

Unsurprisingly the overnight shift to a fully digital environment has had implications for how we carry out and make sense of our work. This does not mean we cannot continuously improve. As we are operating in an unfamiliar environment, making remote work more satisfying in the future probably comes down to practise. Drawing upon CCO theory, this study has indicated how organisations can strengthen themselves in a remote work reality. Businesses should strive to make use of these insights to improve future practises. In this way, strategic communication can be used as a workable weapon to advance practises, enhance performance and thereby support organisations fulfil their mission.

## **6.1 Contributions and future research**

The study has demonstrated how the four flows model can be empirically applied to explain the communicative constitution, or dissolution, of an organisation. In doing so, it presents a practical example of the integral role of communication to the existence of an organisation.

Drawing upon CCO theory, this study has revealed the risks involved in relying on a transmission model of communication and instead presents organisations with an alternative perspective which acknowledges the constitutive power of communication.

By closely examining human interactions in a specific context, this study has generated situated knowledge about how to understand and act in a contextualised setting. In this endeavour, it has followed the prescriptions laid down by Flyvbjerg (2001) that social sciences should avoid the work of the natural sciences of building generalisable, predictive models or test hypotheses.

The study has revealed that without the physical office, an organisation's existence in the collective consciousness of its members might be altered, future research may want to explore ways in which the organisation can find new ways to tie its members to the organisation. Further, communication scholar may want to investigate if the four flows model is adequate to describe the communication flows essential to an organisation's existence, as the last year has radically changed the conditions of the organisation. In this way, the field of strategic communication can make valuable contributions to the academic and professional community.

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# Appendix

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## 1. Email to UNDP ITM management

**From:** Hanna Eliasson <[hanna.eliasson@undp.org](mailto:hanna.eliasson@undp.org)>  
**Date:** Saturday, 13 February 2021 at 00.30  
**To:** Maria Ieroianni <[maria.ieroianni@undp.org](mailto:maria.ieroianni@undp.org)>  
**Subject:** Master thesis introduction

Dear Maria,

Below you will find a summary of my master thesis, for you to share with the ITM management.

### Master thesis summary

This Spring 2021 I will undertake a master thesis project, which seeks to explore UNDP's Covid-related communication to find out how UNDP can best support employees working from home in this unparalleled situation.

### Method

By carrying out content analysis of UNDP's pandemic-related emails and qualitative interviews with ITM personnel, I hope to get insights on what is being communicated, and how colleagues make sense of this. I would also like to explore more broadly how ITM employees experience the new conditions we are working in – remotely, on Teams, in our homes – to collect insights that can inform future recommendations. I would like to ask a wide selection of colleagues from all teams in ITM to participate in short, voluntary interviews. The interviews will take place over a period of two months and will be completely anonymously.

### Report

In addition to the research paper which will be for Lund University only, I would like to produce a brief report for ITM – including tailor-made recommendations as well as industry best practise.

### Usefulness

Covid or not, people may never go back to using the office in the same way. I believe producing knowledge about how organisations can use communication to engage with remote workers will be beneficial to the future workplace.

Best,  
Hanna



**Hanna Eliasson**

Communication Consultant  
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*ITM is ISO 9001:2015; ISO 20000:2011, ISO 27001:2013 Certified*

## 2. Emails to study participants

**From:** Hanna Eliasson <hanna.eliasson@undp.org>  
**Sent:** Thursday, January 21, 2021 4:53 PM  
**To:** [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Master thesis support

Hi,

This term I am writing my master thesis, focussing on working at UNDP during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I would like to understand how colleagues have experiences the new conditions we are working in – remotely, on Teams, in our homes – and explore their thoughts on the COVID-related information we have received from UNDP.

To support my research, I would like to follow some colleagues in our department over a period to hear their thoughts. I am reaching out to a wide selection, so that I include people of various teams, gender and age.

I think you have some valuable input, and I would like to ask if you would be available for a couple of brief chats – I am thinking 20 minutes 3 times this Spring – about your working from home experience?

Best,  
Hanna



**Hanna Eliasson**

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### 3. Initial interview guide

- Introduction of thesis topic and mention what you are interested in:
  - The effects of UNDP's COVID-19 related communication
  - Positive, negative, surprising impact of WFH (working from home)
- Make participants aware that the information collected during these conversations will only be used for the purpose of this study. All participants will be completely anonymous.
- Ask for informed consent – and if they consent to being recorded.
- Ask about family, living and work situation and if they have worked from home before.
- Questions start

*The aim is to start a talking and see where the conversations go. I will rely on the loose questions to focus the conversation and ask the interviewees to give examples and specify situations.*

#### **Interview themes:**

##### **UNDP communication**

- What communication from UNDP do you recall reading/receiving (e.g., Covid-19 Bulletin or the Covid Situational Report)
- How often do you receive these
- Do you read these
- What are you missing
- How do you get information relating to COVID or WFH

##### **Wellbeing / engagement / creativity**

- Coping with WFH
- What is important for a successful workday
- Negative / positive thoughts regarding autonomy / independence
- Memories from the beginning of the COVID breakdown
- Feelings about WFH now, and in the beginning of the pandemic
- How likely are you to want to work from home after this
- Satisfaction with work
- Has the experience of working from home changed these last two months, when it is full-time, and no longer optional?

##### **Communication**

- Who do you speak with and how often (manager, co-worker, organisation)
- Would you like to communicate more / less
- Has the conversation changed now when you are at home
- How has the team collaboration and communication developed over time?

##### **Organisational identity**

- What is their relation to the immediate team, the department, the organisations (have they remained the same, what has changed?)
- Do you feel connected to the larger UNDP
- How have you experienced the organisation's shift to online
- The UN excels in crises. Do you feel that the COVID pandemic has showed UNDP's core function?

## 4. Diary studies questionnaire

### Permanent questions

- *How satisfied are you with WFH this week?*
- *What was the hardest part about WFH this week?*
- *What are you grateful in your WFH this week?*
- *Anything else you want to mention?*

### Time-sensitive questions

- *Does the new working setup impact your feelings concerning work?*
- *Have you experienced any difference in remote work after being in the office?*
- *What are you looking forward to going back to the office?*
- *How are you experience remote work now, compared to three months ago?*

## 5. Diary journal

*Week - 19/04/2021 – 23/04/2021*

*How satisfied are you with WFH this week?*

Overall, pretty satisfied in this last week. It seems like everything is within focus and manageable in terms of workload and communication within the team and I was able to be fairly productive while working from home this week (and actually was not in the office once either). Perhaps it's a combination of having the end in sight and there being some opportunity to return to the office as well as seeing Denmark take actual steps towards opening up again. This creates a feeling of progress and improvement that relieves some of the mental pressure that otherwise starts to slowly build in the back of all of our minds.

*What was the hardest part about WFH this week?*

Hardest part at this stage are still certain types of work I think. As I was not working from my usual home where I had the good WFH setup, it really became clear again that we need support and structure at home in order to be overall comfortable WFH as otherwise certain type of very computer driven work (data cleaning and data analysis) really becomes a big drag that drains your energy and leaves me unmotivated.

*What are you grateful in your WFH this week?*

Our team has at last managed to learn how to communicate more effectively it seems. It took a couple of months of WFH and different work pressures as well but it seems that everyone has started to understand that the way some of them have communicated for years inside a normal office environment does not always work when doing it via Teams or emails. And as much as I and some other younger team members also tried to push this, it took a while for people to adjust their behaviours and ways of working. Almost a shame that it soon might not be necessary anymore 😊

*What are you looking forward to going back to the office?*

I am most looking forward to the small interactions and socializing. Going for a coffee and exchanging some gossip/small talk. Also just bouncing ideas off each other in the open space rather than having to schedule a proper call. I think in part all of us may be more productive at home at times, but in terms of enjoying the work and looking forwards to improving it this only really happens when we are all regularly in the office.

## 6. Initial interview and diary findings

Below are some things I have found in the interviews and diaries from February. Based on this I would like to define what to focus on / what angle to take in the literature review.

- **Working from home = gradual disengagement / low motivation**  
Employee engagement is declining due to colleagues working from home (interview 1,2,3,4,5, diary 1) While the majority of interviewees were happy the first few weeks of working fully from home, engagement and motivation amongst all interviewees have quickly dropped (since full lockdown in December 2020) and is on a downward spiral. 2 out of 10 have resigned in the last month to start other jobs, partly due to disengagement.
- **Employers will need to give employees wider support in the future**  
Working from home during the pandemic is not the same as working from home during normal circumstances. The pandemic impacts all aspects of people's lives and employees require greater support from workplaces than previously (interview 1, 3, diary 1).
- **Internal communication has not reached the desired effect**  
Internal communication meant to engage employees has not got the desired effect on people. No one seem to read or care for organisational COVID emails (interview 1, 2, 4). Many interviewees complain about a New York (HQ) focus in internal communication (1, 2). It is easy to feel far away from the organisation overall mission when sitting at home. It seems that the immediate team is much more important than the overall organisation.
- **Working from home demands different tasks**  
Employees working from home fully (every day of the week) prefer slightly different tasks than they would do in the office, with a more results-oriented focus. When sitting at home it seems to be more important to make visible progress, to be able to "tick things off a list", to make people feel like they are actually working (interview 1, 5). In line with that, it seems, unsurprisingly, that a feeling of ownership, of being able to steer projects and feeling individually involved/responsible, increases employee engagement.
- **The future workplace**  
All interviewees (7) enjoyed working from home 2-3 times a week and think that 2-3 days in the office post Covid would be ideal. Even though no one was happy with the full working home situation, no one seems to be ready to go back to working as they did again.
- **Organisational identity created by external factors (?)**  
The abstract feeling of being part of the UN organisation / brand seems to have a positive impact on people and gives them (at least some) motivation. This seems to be unaffected by internal organisational email communication (e.g. people do not seem to care about internal emails being sent out, what drives them might be something else, e.g. the external UN + UNDP "brand").