



# Enabling trust through digital leadership practises

A qualitative study on employee's perception of leadership trust in a digital work environment

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## Abstract

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to further investigate how leaders can enable trust in a digital work environment, by looking at what digital leadership practice's employees perceive as trust building.

**Theory:** The actor network theory was used to conceptualize the social processes in which people build relationships, communicate, and collaborate when incorporating advanced information technologies. The theory of modernity was used to provide insight for how trust is created and dynamically affected by the influences of a digital work environment.

**Method:** A qualitative research design was applied to investigate the purpose of the study, contingent on 19 semi-structured interviews. Respondents were white-collar employees found in one single case company and had digital leaders that worked partly or fully remotely.

**Result:** The study findings suggest how trust is dependent and closely tied to social interactions, where several practices have shown to be beneficial in the creation of leadership trust. Along with the importance of creating beneficial environment for leader to enable trust creation. Being the importance of the informal context, to form and build professional relationships, and having time and space to communicate with one's leader.

## Foreword

We would like to take this opportunity to express our greatest gratitude to both the case company and all involved participants who took of their valuable time to take part and make this study possible. The conversations with interviewees were rewarding not only in the sense of our study, but as they opened up for new experiences, thoughts and knowledges to form. We would also like to give our sincerest thank you to our supervisor at the case company that has assisted in all possible aspects, providing us with everything needed for the study to be conducted. As well as giving support and demonstrating the importance of occasionally having a well-deserved fika to get on with the work. Finally, a special thank you to our supervisor Elena Bogdanova who has supported our work throughout the whole study process, providing us with great insight and new perspectives to guide our work in the right direction.

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## 1. Introduction

The world of work has during the last decades experienced rapid and irreversible changes connected to the use and development of technological advancements, leading to as some claim a new paradigm of work (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003; Cortellazzo, Bruni & Zampieri, 2019). The emergence of digital work environments are enabled by the implementation and use of technologies, that effectively shape and change organisations. This by facilitating shifts and innovative ways of working, and consequently creating a new digital work context for employees and leaders to operate within (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Hambley, O'Neill & Kline, 2007). Work can now be conducted at any time in any place, and workers are no longer bound to a physical workplace to fulfil their daily tasks (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). Leaders are described as key actors in managing these digital transformations (Avolio, Sosik, Kahai & Baker, 2014; Cortellazzo et al., 2019), as they effectively can shape, change, and adapt work environments in order to create employee motivation and performances (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). However, to lead in a digital environment and communicate through the help of digital tools are making the role of leading a more complex task (Avolio et al., 2014; Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). Moreover, as the use of technologies are described as a threat to the creation of leadership trust and employee commitment (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). To enable leadership trust in a digital work environment is described as both fundamental and critical, as it affects the motivation, function, performance, and success of employees, shaping organisational results (Lee, 2009). Different research positions are found regarding the possibilities of creating trust digitally. Where some argue it to be impossible as trust mediated through physical and social interactions, whereas others claim that needed requirements for trust creation can be fulfilled digitally (Taddeo, 2009).

The fast development, implementation, and greater use of technologies within companies has had the consequence of creating a growing research gap concerning the effects that technologies pose on leadership. The gap is said to be as an effect of that the technology use has outpaced the knowledge, where traces and impacts of already introduced technologies are being studied (Avolio et al., 2014). The social and contextual aspects are also becoming more important to investigate, to understand how the context in which leaders are operating in effects and influences leadership practices (Dinh et al., 2014; Hambley et al., 2007). Along with a need for further research of how to build digital trust and how leaders can enable trust in a digital

work environment (Lee, 2009; Taddeo, 2009). The new digital work context and lack of research regarding digital leadership and the creation of trust argues for the need for further research. It would therefore be of interest to further investigate how leaders can enable trust in a digital and social work context. Furthermore, to understand how technologies affect leadership practices and the possibilities of building leadership trust in the new more digital world of work. The need for further research on leadership trust is also supported by the fact that a lack of management trust poses many negative effects on the organisational performances, including employee turnover and declining employee morale (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Trust-building is described as an individual process (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001), therefore making it interesting for the paper to study the employee perspective and what employees perceive as important in the creation of digital leadership trust.

To investigate employees' perceptions of how leaders can enable trust in a digital work environment, a collaboration was signed with a global case company. The company marketed themselves to invest and use technologies to a high degree and thereby had leaders working digitally in collaborations with employees. During 2021 the company conducted a global internal survey, with a response rate of 15 000 employees. The results of the report presented several different areas that could be viewed as both enablers and barriers for the future development and success of the company, where leadership, trust, and technologies were all mentioned. The found interest for the research project was initiated through this report and supported by the identified lack of research.

## **1.2. Problem statement**

Digital innovations are changing the ways in which organisations manage, structure, and communicate around work. Making it crucial for companies to secure skills and competencies in regards to emerging and implemented technologies (Haddud & McAllen, 2018; Cortellazzo et al., 2019). The modern e-leader is defined to influence social processes, thereby affecting attitudes, behaviours, motivation, and performances among employees (Avolio, Kahai & Dodge, 2000). Making leaders key actors in the development of digital work environments (Cortellazzo et al., 2019), and further also in the creation of trust (Lee, 2009). However, previous research in the field of leadership and technologies have shown how the leadership role is becoming more complex in a digital environment (Cascio & Shurygalio, 2003). Along with challenges of creating trust among employees and leaders (Hoch & Koslowski, 2014; Lee, 2009). However, little is said to be known about what leadership practices, processes, tools,

and behaviours that effectively can contribute and support the creation of trust among employees when having a digital leader (Cortellazzo, et al., 2019; Dinh et al., 2014; Hambley et al., 2007). As well as for how the new social context of working digitally can affect the operations and practices of leaders (Dinh et al., 2014; Jawadi, Daassi, Favier & Kalika, 2013; Lee, 2009). Therefore, making it interesting to further investigate from an employee perspective how leaders can enable trust. By looking at what leadership practises employees perceive as trust building in a digital work environment.

### *1.3. Research questions*

- *What digital leadership practices do employees perceive as important to enable the creation of leadership trust?*
- *What possible challenges and improvements are expected by employees in connection to trust creation in the digital context?*

The two research questions will be investigated through interviews with employees at a global manufacturing company based in Sweden, that focuses on implementing digital tool into their work environment. Employees interviewed had to have leaders that work partially or fully through digital means.

## **2. Previous research**

*The focus of the chapter is to outline previous research on the concepts of digital workplaces and e-leaders, along with the effects that the digital work environment poses on leadership and the creation of leadership trust. The chapter consists of the following sections. First, prior research on the evolution of digital work and the emergence of digital tools are presented, and how it has resulted in changes in the work context. Second, leadership in a digital environment and the concept of e-leaders are introduced, along with new demands. Thirdly, research on the importance and impacts on leadership trust is discussed from a digital work environment perspective.*

### **2.1. Digital workplace**

Ever since the start of the industrial revolution, great technological achievements have been made, making a significant impact on the labour market, and shaping future developments of labour (Kagermann, Whalster & Helbig, 2013). Work can now be conducted in both the real



and virtual world through the use of technologies, leading to changes in organisational structures, systems, processes, routines, and skills needed (Hambley et al., 2007; Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). Companies around the globe are turning into digital workplaces, where new demands are placed on both organisations, leaders, and employees' abilities to use and exploit the advanced technologies and tools as a part of daily work (Haddud & McAllen, 2018; Cortellazzo et al., 2019).

### *2.1.1. Digital work*

Digital tools create possibilities for people to have collaborations from anywhere around the world and having increasingly greater access to both information and knowledge within organisations (Avolio et al., 2014; Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Darics, 2020). Digital work practices have come to be a part of everyday work life (Darcis, 2020), making workers that rely on digital tools to conduct work also dependent on having functioning tools (Avolio et al., 2000). The most commonly used tools for internal communications are described by Ng and Ngai (2015) to be everything from internal company intranets, emails, chat functions, as well as platforms for videoconferencing such as Microsoft Teams or Skype.

Research is highlighting digital work and the use of digital tools in regards to both negative and positive aspects. Researchers arguing for the negative effects, describe how work and to be in digital teams can be a challenge for people that lack technology acceptance, as they struggle to see the purpose of using technologies (Schepers, Wetzels & Ruyter, 2005). To struggle with digital tools as an employee, may lead to inefficient use as tools are not utilised to their full potential according Cardon, Huang and Power (2019). Another issue is described to be the overload of information that has sufficiently increased since digital tools have been implemented as one of the main ways of communicating. Along with the fact that digital tools are making people reachable at any given hour, limiting the space between work and private life (Haddud & McAllen, 2018). Organisations using digital tools for storing and sharing important company data, also must secure and develop digital security to use tools in a safe way (Haddud & McAllen, 2018). Researchers giving attention to positive effects of digital work highlights the effects digital tools have on the organisational and individual employee factors. The use of digital tools enables employees to be more flexible around their work, and where innovative work behaviours are encouraged (Schepers et al., 2005; Avolio et al., 2014). The flexibility is not only enabling employees to engage their work productivity, but also organisations to reduce labour costs and hire skilled employees independent of their

geographical location (Haddud & McAllen, 2018). Benefits that an employee might experience in connection to workplace technologies are creating effective ways of working and increasing individual productivity and engagement. This because it raises the employee's autonomy when choosing their work location and being able to structure their work environment (Attaran, Attaran & Kirkland, 2019). However, in order for technologies to be well integrated into workplaces there are numerous practical implications that are key for success such as clear strategies, user experience among employees and leadership support among many other things (Attaran, Attaran & Kirkland, 2020).

### *2.1.2. Digital communication*

Global companies having virtual teams are often characterised by unlimited geographical distance and being able to assist teams and leaders 24/7. Resulting in that a majority of the communication takes place through digital tools and platforms (Jawadi et al., 2013; Kahai & Cooper, 1999; Avolio et al., 2014). Digital tools enable communication to take place through text, chats, calls and video calls (Ng & Ngai, 2015). Even though there are positive effects of using digital tools as a way of working and communicating, limitations are found in an absence of physical interactions. These limitations can be connected to the absence of visual cues, direct feedback, and the sense of presence. Leading to further problems of working with innovation and sharing of ideas, taking decisions and in coordinating work processes (Avolio, 2014; Dennis, Fuller & Valacich, 2008; Powell, Piccoli & Ives, 2004). When digital communications are made through text-based interactions such as mail or chat forums, visible and auditory cues are gone or more difficult to interpret according to Darcis (2020). The composition and receiving of the message take place on two different occasions, making up space for misunderstandings to be as a result.

Limiting the observations of each other's behaviours, non-verbal cues, facial expressions, and other communications formats could lead to challenges in interpreting and understanding digital communication among people (Darcis, 2020). Later affecting the ability to build good relations due to inability to properly communicate feelings and emotions accurately (Jawadi et al., 2013; Kahai & Cooper, 1999; Avolio et al., 2014). Prior research suggests how face-to-face interactions and encounters are crucial when building trust in virtual teams that hold the ability to manage processes and decisions within organisations (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright, 2014). The visual cues have also been proven to be of importance for communication since digital collaboration can only be successful if the leaders have an ability to solve

miscommunication or misinterpretations (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002; Shollen & Brunner, 2016). Therefore, making it important to be able to communicate with visual and auditory abilities to solve any miscommunication that could result in misunderstandings (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002; Shollen & Brunner, 2016).

Accessible digital tools of today enable employees and leaders to communicate internally. The internal communication of organisations is described as valuable in order to engage employees in company processes (Ng & Ngai, 2015). Where Morgan et al., (2014) found that making routine communication and frequency in seeing each other's face was important for trust and making the team interactions work more efficient. One challenge that is acknowledged by Dulebohn and Hoch (2017) in digital communications and interactions are to express feelings and opinions, making decisions, managing conflicts and trust creation. Indicators show that the frequency of the communication is more important rather than the method of communication for it to be effective in the digital world (Morgan et al., 2014). It is also evident given by Darics (2020) that individual and contextual factors play a great role in what employees want in terms of digital leadership communication, but that this needs more research. Prior research shows challenges regarding how e-leaders can create an effective interaction due to digital communication being somewhat limited (Darics, 2020).

## **2.2. Leadership in the digital context**

### *2.2.1. E-leadership*

Human interactions within companies are today largely enabled and mediate through advanced information technologies. Causing changes to both the environment and systems surrounding leadership, and as an effect creating a need for new ways of working according to Avolio and Khai (2003). Leaders are now required to master advanced technologies to perform and conduct their normal work (Mustajab et al., 2020). To lead in a digital environment has been defined as being an e-leader and is when a leader can work and influence processes and practices using advanced technologies (Avolio et al., 2000; Avolio et al., 2014; Saccaro & Bader, 2003). The concept of e-leadership is a composition of “e” standing for electronic and “leadership” relating to one’s ability to influence employees to reach organisational goals (Mustajab et al., 2020). Although leadership work and practices are undergoing changes in regard to managing employees digitally, the same traditional expectation remains on the role of being an e-leader

(Antonakis & Atwater 2002; Avolio et al., 2014). This includes being responsible for managing the performance of employees, creating values, visions, goals, and trust (Darics, 2020).

The leadership role is still vital for the success of employees and teams working in the virtual context according to Liao (2017). However, researchers have agreed upon how the digital context is challenging for leaders, as their work is now done virtually instead of physically in the real world through the help of face-to-face and physical interactions (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Hoch & Kozlowski; Liao, 2017). While the creation of relationships between leaders and employees in a traditional work environment can form in an organic and natural way. E-leaders now need to take a bigger part in guiding and proactively creating processes where relationships can form, as social interactions are less evident using digital tools (Liao, 2017). Leaders are thereby expected to invest both more time and effort into these kinds of relationship-building processes, as well as to coordinate groups and work (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Liao, 2017).

To influence and lead digitally can cause challenges in managing employees, teams and organisational performance (Avolio et al., 2014). The shift to a more digital leadership may result in meeting employees less regularly and not in the physical world, creating a distance which can affect the ability of leaders to influence and sustain high performance among employees (Antonakis & Atwater 2002; Avolio et al., 2014). Moreover, being challenging as the work of leaders is now conducted mainly through digital tools and requires leaders to adapt their teams to working digitally (Mustajab et al., 2020). To enable effective e-leadership the importance of answering questions, communicating regularly, providing feedback, and giving support and direction are underlined (Darics, 2020). Humour and laughter also play an important part in leadership communication and can help in critical situations and to minimise the tension of tough conversations (Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009). Digitalisation is often mentioned as both an enabler and a barrier in connection to the leadership practices that could come to affect employees' trust in leaders (Gierlich-Joas, Hess & Neuburger, 2020). Despite a growing interest in leadership and technology studies, prior research is described as scattered and with gaps related to different patterns and changes in relation to digitalisation of leadership where more research is needed according to Cortellazzo et al., (2019).

### *2.2.2. New demands on e-leaders*

The leadership role has become more vital for the value creation in a digital environment, where it is of importance as an e-leaders to have set strategies for how to adopt and use technologies

to successfully enable digital work (Cortellazzo et al, 2019, Haddud & McAllen, 2018; Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2018). The greater implementation of digital tools into workplaces requires leaders to investigate and understand what has changed and to adjust their behaviours, as the digital context demands more of leaders (Snellman, 2014). Cascio & Shurygailo (2003) recognize a challenge in how each e-leader must analyse the work environment to gain a better understanding of the impacts of new contexts, and how this affects their leadership style. Further, putting the pressure on leaders to attain or build the right skills and competences to communicate and sustain high performing teams digitally (Antonakis & Atwater 2002; Avolio et al., 2014; Mustajab et al., 2020). Another aspect evident in previous research has shown how leaders not only then have to adapt their strategies, behaviours and styles but also work effectively with adapting team members and establish a digital culture (Mustajab et al., 2020). The first digital interaction as an e-leader with a team, is further described as fundamental and determining for both the performance, satisfaction, and later trust of employees (Avolio & Khai, 2003).

Studying e-leadership as a phenomenon is described as a complex task as leaders operate across different organisational levels, times-zones, and are dependent on interactions with different actors and factors that could come to influence the leadership practises (Dinh et al., 2014). Research in the field of leadership has during the last decade increased and evolved, further seeing a new focus on social context, and understanding leadership from the perspective of how it changes and evolves over time in different social contexts (Dinh et al., 2014; Kaiser, Hogan & Craige, 2008). Even though the topic of leadership has been greatly researched during the last decades the contextual perspective is still seen as essential and important to understand leadership practices (Hambley et al., 2007).

### **2.3. Effects of trust in the digital context**

#### *2.3.1. The importance of leadership trust*

Trust is described by social scientist Anthony Giddens (1990, p. 30) to be defined as “confidence or reliance on some quality or attribute of a person or thing, or the truth of a statement”. Furthermore, as the intention or desire to depend on another person or group. Researchers argue that trust initially starts low to later increase as groups of people interact, making the concept of trust dependent on interactions occurring over time (McKnight, Cummings & Chervany, 1998; Lewicki, Tomlinson & Gillespie, 2006). Communication is

therefore described as a fundamental aspect for the ability to create trust (Raisinghani et al., 2010). To understand the concept of trust, it is often described as a relationship between a human or object being the trustor, and the other actor being the trustee (Taddeo, 2009). Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt and Camerer (1998) establish trust to be a psychological state rather than a trait. Indicating how trust is dynamic and can quickly fluctuate if not being maintained. McKnight et al., (1998) further suggest that individuals base their perception about teammates by using their pre-existing allocations, institutional background and other social categorizations and illusions of control to make credits about the others initial trustworthiness.

An emerging area and focus have been found in research regarding trust from a digital perspective, where the concept of e-trust has been introduced (Taddeo, 2009). E-trust is defined by Taddeo (2009, p. 25-26) “E-trust occurs in environments where direct and physical contacts do not take place, where moral and social pressures can be differently perceived, and where interactions are mediated by digital devices”. However, the concept of e-trust has been discussed, where some argue for trust to be impossible to create digitally. The argument for why this is, lies within that to create trust one needs to meet in direct and physical interaction, where physical interactions as an effect of using digital tools cease to exist (Taddeo, 2009). Moreover, the lack of shared norms and ethical values that shape and form the social interactions, are also identified as missing digitally, creating problems for trust to form (Taddeo, 2009). The main issue is said to be that trust no longer can rest on the normally occurring physical interaction in the digital context, that then makes the ground for trust to exist (Taddeo, 2009). However, some argue that the requirements needed for trust to be created can be fulfilled digitally, as digital tools are evolving, creating new ways of communicating as seeing each other in the virtual world (Taddeo, 2009).

The geographical distance of virtual teams is a challenge for leaders as it may affect the ability to create a good team environment and to build trust (Gupta and Pathak, 2018). This is because many global leaders tend to manage a team that they might not even meet physically, only sustaining contact through digital platforms. More demands are being put on e-leaders operating with digital channels to both combine their leadership effort in creating a trusting environment as well as enable the management functions and offer help when work problems arise (Darics, 2020). Even though the basis for communication has shifted into becoming more digital the goals of leaders and leadership practices have remained the same. The leader's objectives are still related to motivation, vision, and trust-creation (Avolio, Walumbwa &

Weber, 2009). The trust creation and maintenance are argued to be a challenge for e-leaders due to less opportunities to be socially present and where the interaction is limited by digital tools (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003).

### *2.3.2. Digital leaders and the creation of trust*

Trust is described as essential to initiate, maintain and repair social relationships in organisations (Dirks & de Jong, 2022). Where trust is based on communication (Raisinghani et al., 2010), and relationships that are built over-time between different parties (Darics, 2020). To build relationships and to sustain trust in digital communication has been researched, where positive interactions such as leaders showing that they care, respect, and listen to employees featured positive outcomes in digital communications between leaders and employees (Shollen & Brunner, 2016). Leaders' use of hand gestures is further described as important to build an emotional connection in digital interactions and in a leader-follower relationship according to Talley and Temple (2015). Further found by Kayworth and Leidner (2002) is how effective e-leaders can build good relationships with employees if they provide feedback, are present, answer questions, as well as establishing a regularity in communication. Connecting to Morgan et al., (2014) research that asserts that there is a need for routines and consistency in communications in order to build effective digital teams. When teams interact digitally there is a greater chance of misunderstandings to occur, which Morgan et al., (2014) highlight as leaders' responsibilities clear out, this by setting standards and expectations for digital interactions and communication. Lee (2009) states that, other than maintaining the relationship, trust is particularly important since misunderstanding quickly can intensify when not being able to have face-to-face communication in a virtual work environment.

To enable trust digitally is of importance as it is described to be connected to higher levels of performance and positive attitudes. Dirks and de Jong (2022) lists a number of practical implications for leaders that show support in building trust digitally. Firstly, investing in practices that benefit different types of organisational justices, such as informational and distributive practices, being important for developing and maintaining trust in organisations. Secondly, to engage employees to participate in decision-making and help them feel empowered, and as a leader show that there is a present support-function. Lastly, face-to-face communication is described as vital to encourage trust creation processes (Dirks & de Jong, 2022). Baer et al., (2015) argues that an employee's ability to build trust to their leader is connected to behavioural manifestations of the leaders' actions. Such as delegating the

employee with difficult tasks or disclosing important information that the employee has confided in them with. Being provided with critical tasks can presume the employee to feel that the leader withholds them with trust in finishing the task. The appearance of being trusted by the leader could therefore be a reason for employees to trust the leader (Baer et al., 2015). Another aspect of gaining trust from an employee is for the leader to determine that they are competent, kind, and honest, which is challenged in a virtual team because of the social and physical distance (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998).

In a digital context the offline behaviour among leaders is visibly reduced for employees to be witness (Birnholtz, Dixon & Hancock, 2012). Therefore, trust may be more difficult to build given this distance and reduced visibility of digital leadership behaviours. To create relational transparency is described as something that could increase leaders' trustworthiness as the transparency reveals more accurate information about a person (Holtz, Cremer, Hu, Kim, Giacalone, 2020). Research has also found that employees tend to reciprocate the leader's trust in them - making them respond to whether or not they are being trusted by the leader (Campagna, Dirks, Knight, Crossley & Robinson, 2020). Along with being transparent as a leader it has been found by Lee (2009) to be of leader's interest to be ethical to create well-being in virtual teams, by following three valid foundations;” following *exemplary behaviour*, *helping employees to value the consequences of their actions in other persons*, and *not betraying employees' trust*” (Lee, 2009, p, 458).

Organisations are turning into digital workplaces where new demands are placed on leaders' abilities of using and exploiting advanced technologies as a part of their daily work. The new work context comes with challenges for leaders in regard to the creation of leadership trust, where trust is regarded as crucial for the success and performance of employees and teams. The understanding of the importance of trust is evident along with the challenges for leaders in operating in the digital context. However, less is known for how leaders can enable trust in a digital context and the possibilities of trust creation. Therefore, making the area of leadership trust interesting to further investigate.

### **3. Theoretical departure**

*This chapter presents two theories used to support the understanding and analysis of collected data. The actor network theory was used to conceptualise the processes in which actors build*



*relationships, communicate, and collaborate when incorporating advanced information technologies into networks. The theory of modernity was applied to provide insight into how trust is created dynamically in modern societies and in transformations.*

### **3.1 Actor-network theory**

The actor-network theory (ANT) was created in the 80's by social science theorists and builds upon how technologies play an important role in shaping social processes. Shifting focus towards the relationship between humans and other non-human technological actors (Latour, 2005). The theory argues for how social forces do not only exist within themselves as a phenomenon, but rather in a network where relationships between different parties of "humans" and "non-human" actors or technologies are constantly shifting (Latour, 2005). Making the theory relevant for the analysis, as the study aims to look at the network of leaders, employees and implemented technologies, and how these parties and actors affect the social process of trust creation. This by investigating how employees perceive interactions, collaborations, and relationships with leaders to be affected when adding the actor of technologies to the network and social processes.

The theory is challenging the traditional view of looking at networks as something humanism, but rather as heterogeneity between material things and concepts according to Latour (2005). Further, in not making a distinction between humans and non-human actors or actant e.g., technologies. The theory withholds two concepts: *Actors*, referring to an entity that can perform different things, and *actor-network* using the central concept of the theory aiming to describe patterns between material things and concepts when aligning them as one entity (Latour, 2005). The ANT-theory is preferred to use, as it enables the creation and analysis for understanding possible interactions, collaborations and shifts in relationships connected to the above-mentioned parties. Further, to explore how these interactions shape social practice connected to leadership. Latour (1996) states how it is impossible to understand societal connections without combining natural sciences and artefact designed by engineers. Therefore, making the theory helpful in reducing the distance between the two. The theory builds on sociology or as Latour (2005.p 160) states it "the science of living together", where individuals are explained to be bonded to a variety of social interactions and networks. Therefore, trying to sort all associations possible to enable an understanding for what routines works in the composition of one network (Latour, 2005). Latour states it to be important to study five different areas of

uncertainties: “1) the nature of groups (identity); 2) the nature of action (agents/goals); 3) the nature of objects (agencies/interaction); 4) the nature of the facts (natural science/ society); 5) the “science of the social.” (Latour, 2005, P. 23). Some challenges have been mentioned due to the use of the word network in the theory. This is because it emphasises the technical meaning and therefore could effectively part the human and in this case material technologies (Latour, 1996). Further the theory has been criticised for not paying attention to complexity, as it provides a rather black and white picture of networks, therefore being less adaptable when differencing the actor associations (Latour, 2005).

### **3.2 Theory of modernity**

Anthony Giddens (1990) theory of modernity is based on modern society where trust has been conceptualised to be a defining feature and mechanism. The theory highlights the attitudes of trust that feature social life and interaction of individuals, as well as social changes or the idea of the world as open to transformation. Making the theory applicable for the analysis of the study when looking at the digital transformation that has taken place, and in studying changes that occur within an organisational environment between individuals. Giddens (1991) breaks down three important aspects in the analysis of modernity: 1) the separation of time and space, 2) the dis-embarking of social systems and 3) the uncontrolled ordering and reordering of social relations (Giddens, 1990). Giddens (1991) argues that the dis-embarking of social systems and the application of the uncontrolled ordering and reordering of life produces insecurity. Therefore, making trust a crucial aspect of modern life and modernity. Giddens express certain disorientations with the systematic knowledge that organisations have today. These disorientations lie within that many individuals are today being held in a universe of information and events that they cannot fully understand and control. Giddens (1990) explains trust as something individuals believe in or as a form of faith, that later vests in probable outcomes and commitments rather than just a cognitive understanding of a phenomenon. One example of this is in how individuals view professionals. A builder on a construction site or a doctor might have more knowledge than the individual that seeks professional help. For an individual to trust their work does not mean that the person needs to understand the work, but rather have a trust in that this person knows how to build a house that does not collapse or carry out a medical procedure. Therefore, trust assumes an awareness of surrounding risks (Giddens, 1990).

Giddens (1990) explains different observational elements of trust, both to help describe the concept but also awaken observation: Trust is related to absence in time and space. This means that the need for trust would not have to be apparent if all activities were visible and transparent for others to see. The theory speaks of trust in expert systems. Giddens (1990) breaks down the subject of trust into 2 parts: experts and laymen. "Expert" identifies a person who withholds a technology or knowledge that the laymen do not. Therefore, making it applicable to modern society and the organisational context that is built up on specialists. Trust exists in the context of an environment of socially created transformative human activity. Meaning that enabling individuals to social interaction across time and space via social systems also allows for certain uncertainties which would need procedures and regulations to manage (Walsham, 1998).

According to Giddens the modern labour society contains divisions where many "experts" tend to be good at different skills and competencies. An expert or an expert system provides "guarantees" of expectations across time and space. This aspect provides an outlook of a relationship based on an expert and a layman. New technological developments expand our space significantly and creates new social possibilities of interaction (Meyer, Ward, Coveney & Rogers, 2008; Schlichter, 2010). By applying the theory of Modernity by Giddens (1991) the study can address the trusting relationship between an individual and the social system that one operates within. Criticism has been aimed to Giddens understanding of trust since it ignores the network of interactive relationships which may influence the individual trust. This indicates that Giddens argues for interpersonal trust and trusting the "expert" is more important before there is potential to build institutional trust (Meyer et al., 2008).

### **3.3 Combining our theories**

Combining the theories is useful because it draws upon the realisation that inviting technology into a network will affect the social processes and human actors or a network. As well as challenge the perception of who to trust or as being the expert in the system. Giddens states that the theory of modernity breaks down the geographical barriers and makes the interaction less personal since individuals do not have to be face-to-face to interact (Walsham, 1998). Latour (2005) invites the perception of the relationship between humans and technology to be constantly shifting and changing due to context and intervention. Combining these theories enables the analysis of the study to connect interaction between technology and humans as a network, as well as analysing the effects it has on trust-creation in expert-laymen relationships.

## 4. Method

*This chapter provides a detailed description of the study's research design and methodology, explaining the different steps, choices and considerations made following the research process. The chapter will have a descriptive form presenting the research design, case company, sample, interviews, data analysis, ethical considerations and ending in a discussion of limitations.*

### 4.1 Research design

A qualitative research design was applied for the purpose of the study, contingent on interviews for gathering data. The qualitative method was chosen as it conditions for the collection and exploration of the specific phenomenon chosen for the study, by collecting rich and in-depth data (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2014). This is made possible by using interviews to uncover respondents' answers, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings in connection to the studied questions. Further, as it also allows for the sample and selection of respondents to be both purposeful and criterion based. Meaning that participants are selected in relation to certain predetermined criteria to facilitate the exploration of the specific context needed for the study (Ritchie et al., 2014).

The study is a single case study and results are formulated using the answers of employees from one single case company. The company was chosen as it was in acquiesce with the context needed for the aim of the study. Providing the possibility to further investigate the research questions. Yin (2014) argues for the case study method to be suitable when investigating questions of how, why, and when in a specific context or case. With the research questions in mind of how leaders can enable trust as well as the specific context of a digital work environment, this method was seen as appropriate. Two theories were used to support our understanding and analysis of the collected data. The actor network theory, to bring a better understanding for what possible changes and effects technologies being the non-human actor poses on social interactions between employees and leaders as human actors in a network. The theory of modernity was applied to explain the different attitudes of trust evident in social life and in interactions in a transformational environment, and how it affects trust.

The research had an inductive approach, to collect material to bring a better understanding of the means that technologies pose leadership trust. In an inductive approach evidence is used

to draw conclusions, where one collects materials to build a better understanding and knowledge for the studied phenomenon (Ritchie et al., 2014). However, there is no such thing as a pure inductive approach, as people can't generate and interpret data with no predetermined thoughts about what is being investigated (Ritchie et al., 2014). Something that has been important throughout the entire process of collecting, analysing, and discussing findings, being aware of our own preconceptions.

To apply the measurements of validity and reliability to qualitative research has been largely debated in terms of its value (Ritchie et al., 2014). However, measures were made to ensure that biases and predetermined assumptions would affect the collection of materials, analysis, and presentations of findings as little as possible. This to ensure that the finding would be well-founded to accurately reflect the studied phenomenon (Ritchie et al., 2014). To reach a higher degree of measurement validity, relating to if the study measures and studies what it is intending to do (Ritchie, et al., 2014) several actions have been made. Some of the measures made were to conduct a pilot interview, revise questions, connect the interview questions to the research questions, transcribing the interviews word for word, coding separately in the beginning to not influence each other's opinions and biases. Along with that the research findings are presented by using the respondents' words and citations to ensure reflection of the phenomenon in an accurate way, which is described as important for validity (Ritchie et al., 2014).

## **4.2 Case company**

The case company used for the purpose of the study is a multinational company (MNC) within the manufacturing sector. The company operates across 40 industries in 130 countries, with approximately 40 000 employees globally. Their main business is built around development, construction, and the production of goods. One of the company's described strengths is the ability to develop and use new technologies to create value both internally and externally. However, when further investigating internal reports, digitalisation is often mentioned as both an enabler and a barrier. Along with indicators of how employee's perceived trust of leaders to be declining. Making the areas of digitalisation, leadership, and trust interesting to further investigate in the specific context of the company. Moreover, providing a context where the formulated research questions can be studied, as employees have leaders working remotely through different digital tools.

### **4.3 Sample selection and access**

The purpose of the study was essential for the selection and sampling of respondents, to enable the collection of rich data to answer the research questions (Ritchie et al., 2014). The appropriateness of the sample is moreover also essential for the results and trustworthiness of the study (Ritchie, et al., 2014). The sampling was therefore made on a criterion-based matter to ensure that the selection of a company and respondents was suitable for the aim (Ritchie et al., 2014). Determining factors for the targeted sample was for employees to have a leader that worked partially or fully remotely through digital tools. These criteria were found widely in the case company as they operate globally and have global teams and leaders. Limitations were consequently made to white collar workers, as digital tools were more extensively implemented into their daily work. However, respondents were allocated in six different departments and worked at different organisational levels both globally and in the Swedish organisation. More information about the respondents and their degree to physical interaction with their leader can be found through a respondent scheme ([Appendix 5](#)). By not limiting respondents to country or department helped enable the collection of rich data and conditions for the possibility to discover similarities, varieties, and differences in the respondents' answers regardless of department, leader, or country-region. Furthermore, to be able to argue for the findings of what employees perceive as trust-building in digital leadership practices, it was found to be beneficial to not let the respondents share the same leader or department. Access to the case company was granted through a previous contact to one of the authors. This contact person was arranged to be the gatekeeper who helped arrange the study and provided needed materials and tools to conduct the study. After the written agreement of the study had been signed, the gatekeeper permitted a long list of possible candidates working in different departments. The first contact with possible respondents was initiated by the authors. The participants were contacted from a company email with an interview invitation, information letter, and consent form.

### **4.4 Data collection**

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data to enable the exploration of employee's experiences and perceptions (Charmaz, 2006), in connection to trust building leadership practices in a digital work environment. The semi-structured interviews made it possible for respondents to give detailed descriptions and elaborate on their thoughts and feelings connected to the studied phenomenon (Ritchie et al., 2014). Moreover, providing

flexibility in collecting data and finding variations by adapting interview questions when interesting answers emerged during the interviews (Charmaz, 2006). An interview guide was constructed and applied during all interviews ([Appendix 3](#)). The guide was used to lead the conversations, and to ensure the same quality of the interviews by asking the same fundamental questions to ensure consistency (Flick, 2014). The interview guide was provided both in Swedish and English to enable it to be used despite the language of the respondent. The questions were constructed and based on previous research, and tested through an initial pilot interview, to later re-construct several questions after given feedback. After using the guide for eight interviews, a discussion took place regarding how the answer became too skewed to focus on digitalisation as a phenomenon rather than trust building practices. Several questions were thus reformulated, and questions were also added regarding trust. One disadvantage with interviews as a method is that it is easy to make incorrect interpretations, to ensure that interpretations were consistent with the respondents' thoughts follow-up question where used (Ritchie et al., 2014)).

Respondents were asked if they preferred meeting digitally or face-to-face. It was seen as an important aspect that respondents would be able to participate regardless of their location, as well as to make them feel comfortable as it described to contribute to better quality of interviews and answers given (Ritchie et al., 2014). The interviews were conducted 50/50 face-to-face and digitally through Microsoft Teams, which is a digital tool for virtual communication where video calls are enabled. All respondents except one had their camera on during the digital Microsoft Teams interviews. As mentioned in previous research, interaction and communication enabled through technologies are changing the ways for interpreting and understanding the interaction between leaders and employees. However, no substantial difference was noticeable through the answers, or the quality of the conversations made digitally versus face-to-face. The physical interviews were held at the case company in booked meeting rooms where no offices are located to protect the anonymity of respondents. Interview invitations ([Appendix 1](#)) were sent out through a created company email with our name. The invitation included information about the thesis project, researchers, purpose, how collected material would be handled, and what rights of the respondent if participating. When respondents had announced their wish to participate, a consent form was sent out to ensure their rights, and consent to participate. Many of the interviews were held cooperatively with both researchers attending, to further ensure that a similar structure was followed. The interviews were between 45 minutes to an hour and conducted mainly in Swedish with some

exceptions. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and conducted during the month of March in 2022.

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed word by word in Swedish or English and analysed through a thematic analysis. The analysis method was chosen as it allows for the opportunity to systematically review collected data and find patterns and prominent themes (Ritchie et al, 2014; Flick, 2014). The analysis process started with transcriptions being equally divided among the authors, where three different transcripts initially were coded. A meeting was after that conducted in order to see if common codes have emerged and apparent for both authors, and to make sure that the coding was done in the same way. After this meeting the rest of the transcriptions were coded. The frequency and occurrence of emerging codes was later merged into categories to build our main themes and create a rich understanding for the research questions (Ritchie, et al., 2014). To analyse data through this process creates the possibility to sort material to create an understanding for prominent themes and an understanding for what experiences participants had of the studied phenomenon (Flick, 2014). The method was preferred as it gives the opportunity to analyse the collected data with explanations given to find emerging and possible prominent codes and themes to build a better understanding for the research questions (Flick, 2014). The expressed perceptions, thoughts, feelings and experiences were interpreted in the coding phase to enable for a deeper understanding, and further see variations and similarities (Ritchie et al., 2014) to build our findings. Coding scheme can be found in [Appendix 4](#).

#### **4.6 Limitations**

Using a qualitative method comes with limitations as it is dependent on the researchers' interpretations and reporting of collected materials and findings. In addition to these below limitations has been realised. To use a gatekeeper can be considered as a limiting aspect, as gatekeepers can affect both the direction and results through granting access to certain people for the selection and sample (Lee & Renzetti, 1990). In an attempt to avoid connected issues and limiting the study, the gatekeeper was asked to provide a list of possible respondents from different levels and departments. When this list was collected, a first contact was initiated through an email that was sent out to inform the participants of the study, and their rights if



willing to participate. The gatekeeper was not informed of which contacted participant accepted or declined, ensuring the respondent anonymity.

Conducting interviews digitally can be seen as a limiting aspect of the study, as discussed in previous research digital tools can affect both the conversations and interpretations in the sense that one does not see body language and reactions in the same way. However, all respondents except one used the camera and no differences were recognized from the researcher's perspective regarding the quality of the conversations. As well as respondents provided similar answers regardless of the interview being digitally or physically conducted. One limitation is that the interviews were conducted both in English and Swedish. Transcripts were done in both languages, however going into the coding phase and the creation of themes everything was translated to English to enable us to write the results in English. This can affect the wording of sentences as the languages do not always have the same use of words. Another aspect that could be considered as limiting is that one person has had an internship at the company, to limit predetermined assumptions, interviews and coding were carried out by the other author when a possible connection could be seen.

Something that could affect the study results is for how the research did not investigate how the company works with leadership. The choice was made in accordance with the research question of finding practices and not leadership styles that would be beneficial for leadership trust. In addition to this, it can also be seen as somewhat limiting to study the phenomenon in one case company. Which was a choice made because of the company working globally and as the interviewees had different leaders and were allocated to different teams.

#### **4.7 Ethical considerations**

The thesis work adhered to the guidelines and ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council for research in humanities and social sciences (Vetenskapsrådet, n.d). All respondents were before attending the interviews asked to sign a consent form ([Appendix 2](#)) to ensure their rights and anonymity, as well as an information letter ([Appendix 1](#)) that informed them of the authors, the purpose of the study, what was expected from them and how materials collected would be stored and used. Respondents were further informed that only the authors, and supervisor from the university would have access to collected materials, and that collected materials will be deleted once the thesis is examined and approved. This information was communicated both through the initial email, information letter, consent form and at the time

of the interviews. The choice was made to ensure all respondents and the company to be anonymous as the studied phenomenon could be considered as sensitive. This as respondents were asked to talk about their digital relationship to leaders and trust which could possibly uncover negative answers and feelings in connection to management and leaders. To enable respondents to feel comfortable to share their thoughts and feelings they were informed about their anonymity both in written form and during interviews. No one other than the authors and the gatekeeper knows who was invited to participate, and the gatekeeper of who declined or accepted the invitation to participate. The collected material was stored inaccessible to unauthorised users on password protected computers. Transcripts, codes and recordings were handled confidential and anonymous by adding numbers, and not presenting any information that could uncover respondents' identity.

## 5. Results

*The following chapter presents and describes the main findings of the study. The results are presented in the sense of letting the respondents' words and citations lead the text. Citations are marked with italics and respondents with (R), along with the number they were given to be anonymised. The chapter will start off with a background describing how digital tools are used in the organisation by employees and in collaboration and communication with leaders. Moving on to presenting the main themes and subthemes found.*

*Since the aim was to investigate employees' perceptions of how leaders can enable the creation of trust in a digital work environment, it was seen as crucial to establish an understanding for the digital context in which employees and leaders were situated. To condition for this understanding respondents were asked how they use digital tools, and how they communicated and collaborated digitally with their leader ([Appendix 3](#)). A summary of the answers are presented below as the first part of the results. This section intends to provide the reader with an understanding of the digital context, background, tools, communication, and collaborations made possible by the use of digital means between employees and leaders in the case company.*

### 5.1 Background to how employees use digital tools

Respondents worked mainly using digital means, stating that they would be unable to perform their daily tasks without the possibilities of using technological tools and systems. Tools most widely used to enable work were described to be Microsoft Teams for conducting collaboration

channels, storing of company data and possibilities to have chat forums with either video calls or regular calls. Other applications used were Outlook, an email application used for scheduling work, and text-based communication. SharePoint an online application for storage of data, sharing of internal information and team collaborations. All applications in Microsoft 365, Word, Excel and PowerPoint were also mainly used. The digital tools were used for all kinds of work, as well as for sharing information, collaboration and communication between employees, teams, and leaders. One respondent explained:

*I would say that I use digital tools almost all the time, I cannot think of a time when I do not use them. -R9*

Even though several employees had returned partially to their offices after the Covid-19 restrictions had been released, work was still conducted digitally in collaborations and communications with leaders to a considerable degree. Employees and leaders were not always in the office at the same time, leading to a hybrid way of working. To enable the work to be conducted in a hybrid manner, digital tools were used throughout the workdays and always present according to the respondents. The employees interviewed had their teams and leaders located both physically at the same office, in other locations in Sweden, as well as globally. Respondents that had their leaders physically closer or at the same office had other possibilities of meeting their teams and leaders. Others working in global teams or having leaders in other countries explained how they seldom or never do this. Despite working in different areas, locations, or teams all respondents shared the image of how important the digital resources were for enabling work. Many of the respondents explained how they had seen a positive development regarding the focus on digitalisation and the use of digital tools. As one respondent express:

*I have experienced a positive change within the company with a greater focus on digitalisation. They do not only just talk, but they also actually do it, by finding smart solutions to make work easier... in using tools for communication... having tools to work faster and simplifying tasks.... -R19*

According to the employees, the company is actively working with finding smart solutions and tools, to digitalised work and offices to ensure the possibility of working digitally. Leading to flexibility, effectiveness, and simplifying work tasks of employees and leaders.

## **5.2 Background digital communication and collaboration with leaders**

The change of working more digitally in collaborations with leaders are described by the respondents to have worked remarkably well. However, the work context has changed and enabled work to become more effective and flexible. Some respondents argue for the negative effects of the change, where it is described as more difficult to get in contact with leaders when working remotely, as it requires a person to actively reach out. One respondent explained for their perception of the change:

*It is a big change, it really has been, from having the leader close by to scheduled meetings and calls to talk.... from the beginning it was a bit confusing, and you did not talk about how to make it work, to later find some order and structure to it. -R17*

Even though digital tools have enabled the work of leaders and employees to become more flexible, and effective as an effect of people always being connected. One respondent argued for how digital means slows down communication with leaders, were it takes longer to receive answers to questions:

*The communication has been easier... however in some way you get answers faster... if you meet your leader physically you can always ask and get an answer directly. -R8*

On the other hand, there were also those who believed that communication went better, where employees felt that it was easier to get in touch with leaders digitally. The primary means used for work, collaboration and communication between leaders and employees remained the same. Being Microsoft Teams, Outlook email, SharePoint, text messages and ordinary phone calls. Even though work and communications for the most part took place digitally, it is of employees' beliefs that it is almost always easier to take things face-to-face and in physical meetings. However, to communicate and work digitally is also explained to be the new normal, where employees and leaders need to learn and adjust to make it work in a better manner. One respondent explained for how digital tools were used in collaboration with their leader:

*We use SharePoint to store documents and we save our goals. We have Teams and a lot of the meetings are conducted there...chat more than email, and sometimes through the phone. -*

R8

Other tools used by employees and leaders are described to be different personnel systems to set goals and to follow the work, and performances of employees. The quality of work and collaborations are not believed to be affected using digital means to a great extent. However, some differences are mentioned in regards to how communication has changed, where meetings and conversations need to be booked and structured to a higher degree. Altogether, putting more pressure on leaders in handling work in the digital context according to the employees.

### **5.3 The importance of the informal context**

The increased use of digital tools in collaboration and communication between leaders and employees has led to changes in conversations where informal conversations are lost and challenging to enable. Employees and leaders are not sharing in the same ways when working digitally from different locations and where some express the feelings of being disconnected in the connected world due to hybrid team meetings.

#### *5.3.1 Informal conversations disappear*

Prominent during the interviews were respondents' descriptions of how natural and spontaneous conversations between leaders and employees disappear in the digital context. This is explained to be an effect of that digital conversations have a higher degree of structure, agenda, purpose, and goals. Along with that, conversations are described to not flow in the same sense as they do when meeting physically, where it is more difficult to find common ground with one's leader when interacting digitally. Another reason for informal conversations to disappear is described to be that meetings are often scheduled back-to-back with shorter time frames. The aspect of not having to move and being in the digital world allows for these new structures to be created. Digital meetings push attendants to work more effectively and focus on the purpose and goals of the meeting according to the respondents. Moreover, making conversations focused on work related matters, with no time for informal and private conversations to form before or after meetings, or when walking to the coffee machine. The

change that has taken place lies within that it is much easier to be social and put aside time for informal, private, and personal conversations with leaders in the physical world. Respondents describe how this is more challenging to enable when working digitally or hybridly, and how these conversations are important to get to know each other. As one respondent put it:

*I think that you in some way get to know the whole person when meeting face-to-face. I come back to this with body language and that, but also generally that conversations have a more informal tone pretty fast when meeting face-to-face. -R18*

Another respondent agrees to this statement and add how the short walks between meetings have an impact on the informal discussions:

*The social bits are disappearing, I mean you don't get this small talk, that is what goes missing. If you have a face-to-face meeting, it is often that you take a coffee before or after to talk for a while before moving on to the next thing... But if we meet on teams, it is often that people just leave. -R4*

Spontaneous conversations do not form as an effect and are thereby lost in the digital communication with leaders and teams. Informal conversations along with having fun and relaxed conversation are believed to be important for the creation of trust. This is what makes one notice that the leader is a person like yourself, where one can find similarities and differences for who you are as a person according to the employees. Respondents argue for conversations that enable space to share feelings, thoughts, issues, and private matters to set the foundation for relations to form. It is in these conversations that the employees really get to know their leaders and each other. Respondents describe how this enables one to create a picture of who the other person or leader is, and to share is an important aspect to enable this. One respondent argues that:

*It's in these kinds of informal conversations that makes the leader human in a way, or else it is just a picture on the screen. -R16*

Making jokes and having a light-hearted conversation is an important aspect of building a good connection to the leader and makes employees see their leader in a different light. One employee claim that:

*It is of course more fun to actually work in the same room so to say... you do not call digitally to share the joke of the day - R17*

The downside of using digital tools is that people cannot see different shades in conversations and recognise small cues to understand and follow the progress and social paths of the interaction. As well as conversations being more challenging to initiate, as it is easier to interrupt when taking turns to speak. The informal conversations are explained to bring important aspects valuable for trust creation between leaders and employees. This is because leaders can ask how employees feel, work status, read body language and reactions. As an employee it is also easier to observe if the leader listens to the message, which is further described as important for trust. Respondents argue for a different informal tone during small talks in the digital world and therefore state that it still is important to meet physically from time to time. In the physical world one can see how another person is feeling, their reactions, and how questions are received in different ways, which is more challenging digitally. The changed context of conversations has also led to not sharing in the same sense and regarding the same topics as in physical conversations.

### *5.3.2 Not sharing in the same ways as before*

The greater degree of structure and purpose in meetings and conversations, has led to new standards for what is shared digitally according to the respondents. This does not only affect the informal conversations already mentioned, but also for what is shared digitally. Conversations have taken on a new form, where for example private conversations, jokes, small talks about the weather, weekend plans and more are considered as something to not bring up to the same extent digitally. These topics and kinds of conversations are thereby described as sometimes missing in the digital communication between leaders and employees. Conversations tend to get more stiff and flat when talking and do not have the same dimensions as in the real world. Reflections are made from respondents to why this is and concludes that as a human one is not used to the digital context in the same way as having conversations physically, where one knows the cues and how to read people's body languages and reactions. Making it harder to interpret and understand the digital cues in communication, and a lack of dimension in conversations are said to go missing. To not be able to share thoughts, feelings, issues and questions to the leaders to the same extent as before is therefore seen by the respondents as something that could be harmful for the ability to build trust in one's leader. It

is perceived as a challenge for leaders to create a beneficial environment to share and also be comfortable with doing this by the use of digital means. One respondent support this by stating:

*I do believe that the conversation that you would normally have physically disappears as you are not used to the digital forms of communication. Just because we are on teams, does not mean that we can't talk to each other, I just don't think we are accustomed to it. -R3*

Conversations have taken new forms and directions regarding what is shared and considered as topics that should and can be discussed in digital interactions. Some respondents even shared how they experience that one will get different answers if asking something in person opposed to asking it digitally. As well as one respondent that described how one sometimes chooses to not bring up questions as it is not fitting for the current meeting or situation. Making it more challenging for leaders to notice when something is wrong and when employees need support and help. Factors that are described by respondents to be important for the ability to build trust is to feel that one can ask questions, to dare to talk about how they feel in a constructive way, and to be open and share. To not be able to share questions and feelings digitally could be harmful to the creation of trust according to the respondents:

*Trust is to feel that you can depend on your leader, to be open, to dare to share and bring constructive criticisms regarding what you think and be able to explain... to be open against each other, I like that. -R4*

To enable more topics to be shared and considered as something important to share digitally with leaders, is believed to be a challenge. Respondents have also argued for a change connected to getting hold of the leaders when working from home and that it now requires them to call the leaders in need of feedback. Respondents describe how leaders need to create environments that enable them to share and talk about important topics to not lose essential parts of the conversation. The ability of sharing and asking questions more spontaneously in any context is described as important as it is in these kinds of conversations where questions arise. One respondent argues for new strategies that leaders need to attend to receive the same ability to have casual digital conversations:

*What is lost is the small talk...one needs to find other ways of handling this. It is much easier when meeting physically. -R13*



Respondents have stated that not having the ability to build a relationship creates a distance which could result in becoming less loyal towards the leader. Some respondents talked about how they have implemented something called a digital fika and this was said to affect these conversations positively. To implement a meeting with no specific goal or purpose is therefore seen by respondents as something leaders need to work with to not get disconnected to the employees.

### *5.3.3 Disconnected in the connected world*

Respondents working in global teams or teams situated in different Swedish sites or offices, could describe a certain degree of disconnection in terms of not receiving the same information as other's located closer to their leader. Respondents described how employees could miss out on informal conversations, valuable information, and the ability to discuss with leaders as an effect of working remotely. This has resulted in some employees feeling that they gain less insight of future matters than others or that it occurs much later than if you would have met the leader physically. Hybrid work where teams are split between the office and at remote work, enables employees that are at the offices to usually gain greater insight in the organisation by receiving information and the ability to ask questions regarding different matters sooner. Respondents experienced how they could have different degrees of social connections and interactions with leaders as an effect of the physical distance in the digital work environment. As one respondent put it:

*We can get information that the others won't get, or at least not as quickly. It is not like we call each other on teams whenever you get some informal information that you caught by the coffee machine. So, if you would interview people that are sitting at home, I do believe what they would miss the most is this. -R12*

The ones close to leaders can physically go and ask questions to get updated on upcoming matters. To have the same spontaneous questions and conversations are not experienced to happen digitally by employees. Leaving the ones working remotely to not get the same natural and spontaneous stream of information. This is further also affecting the professional relationship with leaders, as employees can get to know their leader and their work better by having these conversations. Factors that were considered as important by the respondent for the creation of trust were to be equally treated and to get access to information at the same time.

To then as a leader share information at different times and to different people of the team dependent on the location of employees was considered harmful to the creation of leadership trust. The choice had been made in multiple teams to not have hybrid meetings where some sit together and some individually, now everyone sits alone so no one feels left out or forgotten, and so that everyone can always see each other. To sit individually even if some could have the ability to sit together is something that respondents explain that leaders need to think about. To not create this feeling of being disconnected and left out, which one respondent says affects their trust in their leader:

*I believe that one important aspect of leadership is if we do something, and we have some virtually connected teammates then everyone is sitting virtually. So, when I have a meeting, we never sit together in one room, the ones located at the same office, all call in digitally one by one on link. This is super important! -R19*

When topics came up during meetings that had only been discussed informally and with certain people, confusion became evident in teams. Sometimes these topics were described by respondents to be talked about in the sense of common knowledge, leading to confusion of when this was shared and informed. Being treated differently as an effect of the digitalisation and in the form of receiving information and social interactions to various forms and degrees was described as harming to the relationship with the leader and the creation of digital trust. Another dimension to why employees can feel disconnected had to do with that employees and leader sitting in the same room during meetings cannot all be the focus of the camera, so employees cannot see who is talking for example. This makes it hard to see the leader's reactions to questions or answers if the camera focuses on another person.

#### **5.4 The aspect of space and time**

To always be connected, reachable, and available to anyone at any given time has made digital leaders both more and less available in a sense according to the respondents. The connectivity effect that the tools provide has led leaders to schedule more meetings to work more effectively. Along with the fact that when anyone can reach them, they are described to become more occupied digitally, leaving less space for employees to meet and get in contact with their leaders. The described lack of space and time as an effect of the greater use of digital tools, creates less time for urgent or daily matters.

#### *5.4.1. Leaders needed to structure space and time*

To have spontaneous and informal meetings with one's leader has been expressed as important for employee's ability to connect and build a professional relationship with the leader to later enable trust. Adding to that aspect is the need for a plan and structure for how to create continuous space and time to meet digitally with one's leader according to the respondents. To meet digitally becomes important as leaders and employees no longer have naturally occurring and spontaneous encounters at the office. There is no longer a natural environment digitally to for example ask quick questions, receive, and give spontaneous reconciliations and feedback on work matters. To meet and talk digitally requires actions to be taken either by the leader or employee, through making a call, email, chat or booking a digital meeting. Respondents describe how this creates new demands on leaders to realise the need for these kinds of conversations and of employees, and to create a structure and environment for digital encounters to take place. Respondents describe it as important to create space for interactions and for when these occasions should occur. As one respondent described it:

*The most important thing to create trust as a leader is to have a dialogue with employees, reconciliations, to discuss workload, the usual things that are so easy to forget. -R4*

Respondents further explained it as important to realise the different needs among employees to have time and space with the leader. What one employee might need and appreciate from the leader could be totally different from another. It is therefore crucial as a leader to have a dialogue about how often and what the employees' needs are according to them. Some expressed how they would appreciate to see their leader more often and others more seldomly. Regardless of how often the respondents wanted to meet their leader, the fact remained for how they wanted more continuous meetings, so one always knew that there was time space for them to ask for help, get support and feedback for example. This was regarded as a challenge for leaders to enable but as something important that becomes more evident digitally. One respondent explained:

*If you can't meet physically then the leader needs to create a routine, and a plan for how to meet to share information and when they are available for questions, and then actually be available. Digitally leaders are connected and booked to meetings from dawn to dusk... it is needed to have weekly meetings. -R12*

To not be able to meet and see the leader to the same extent digitally is described to affect employee's ability to rely and count on leaders. When leaders are less available and do not have the same time to answer questions, provide support and help, it is harder to rely on them according to the respondents. Moreover, as the work is conducted digitally and remotely, leaders have less of an opportunity to observe and understand the work and performance of employees and issues that could possibly occur. Leading to that, employees have less trust in leaders' abilities to know and understand how to provide the right kind of support and help according to the respondents. One change or improvement that is suggested by the employees for leaders to make is to create channels or arenas to easier follow up the work of employees, having weekly meetings to provide opportunities to talk about diverse topics and questions, along with digital alone time with your leader to have dialogue. But also, to feel that the leader puts time and effort into booking some time to just sit and chat, which makes you feel seen and appreciated according to the respondents. This demands more from the leader than before as leaders must decide to check in on employees work and health status. One of the greatest challenges for leaders to make this happen is according to the respondents the lack of time that they have, that will be an obstacle when trying to create these continuous opportunities for communication.

#### *5.4.1 Continuity provides digital spontaneity*

Having meetings digitally has been stated by employees to not make up for the spontaneously occurring meetings in the physical sphere at the office. However, making these spontaneous meetings more planned in the digital work environment could make up for the lack of communication possibilities according to the respondents. Therefore, using continuous meetings to create arenas for spontaneity to emerge as a more natural part of digital communication. This is described to be a responsibility of digital leaders as it will not occur if no changes and processes are set in place. Creating continuous meetings for spontaneous conversations could be an occurring event, it could also become a practised routine where the leader and the employee share time to discuss work and well-being. As expressed by one employee:

*The informal communication doesn't come naturally digitally so you must put it on the agenda. This is the leader's responsibility to put on the agenda. It is also to make it recurring or regular every week that makes it better. Not just having a talk once and then it's fine. -R12*

A few respondents state how they lack a set routine and how to work digitally to communicate in a good way with their leader. Having continuous meetings with the leader is described as important for both the leader and employee to not lose valuable insight and information further to be able to have a clear communication bridge between the two parties. It is of further importance to make these meetings not a strategy to monitor employees as this can affect trust-building in a negative manner as employees can feel like the leader does not trust them. Trust needs to be equally shared between the employee and leader to work according to respondents. However, it is still important to have a purpose for these spontaneous meetings. Otherwise, it could result in no one showing up to them, or being down prioritised when not having an important agenda for the meeting. Some respondents want these kinds of meetings to still to be carried out in the physical context, and others that share that they already have a good relationship with their leader argues that it is enough for these talks to be digitally conducted:

*As I don't ever meet my leader face-to-face, I would really appreciate having a briefing meeting, where we can talk about how I am doing. I think it is important to find as a leader what your employee needs to get it to work digitally. -R6*

Showing availability and interest in the employees are important to build trust according to the respondents. Leaders need to invest time in communicating and checking in with the employees. Every employee has different needs and different relationships with their leader, which also affects their feeling towards how and how often they would need these digital check-ins. Having check-ins is important in all work relationships according to the respondents. Trust is not just built in needs to be cared for and by having communication and check-ins with employees' leaders can maintain the relationship with the employees and thereby trust.

#### *5.4.1 The impact of the camera*

Respondents have all agreed upon the importance of seeing each other during digital meetings. This is supported by the fact that turning on the camera carries very important factors for connecting with the other person that you are talking to. Having digital meetings without any cameras tends to feel a bit impersonal according to some employees, as conversations become flat when talking to a black screen with a picture of initials. Therefore, making it an important tool for the creation of trust and getting to know one's leader according to employees. If employees are unable to see their leaders, feelings, reactions, body language and how they

express and communicate their leadership style is a challenge without the camera. One respondent state that having a camera on changes the impression of the conversation:

*I believe you can see more than you can hear from the voice only. You get completely different impressions by having the camera on and being able to see facial expressions made by the other person. -R9*

Many also state that using a camera feels a bit strange sometimes even though they have started to get used to the camera. Respondents describe how one tends to see your own reflection when interacting with other people, which steals the focus off the meeting. This would not be the case in a physical meeting. As one respondent explained it:

*Using the camera could be beneficial in some cases. But I have also heard, and it applies to me as well, that when the camera is on you tend to focus on how you look, looking at your own reflection, losing focus on the actual meeting. -R10*

A few respondents stated that having a camera on should be listed as a company policy and should be expressed by leaders. The importance of using the camera was also connected to the argument that words stats facts, but expressions and body language reveals a lot more. Furthermore, being an important aspect when communicating and meeting digitally with one's leader, to not lose possible non-verbal communication cues.

The importance of the camera is also mentioned in connection to well-being and seeing early signs of being unwell. Without the camera leaders are unable to observe changes in behaviours, emotions, and feelings. The respondents believed it to be of importance for leaders to dare to make demands of always having the camera on to enable them to observe employees. This also shows that the leader cares for the employees, as one can hide behind their picture, and not be active during meetings, leaving the leader unknowing of the state of health of employees. In the office leaders could more easily see changes in behaviours, conversations and how people look, that is now lost. Making the camera an important tool for leaders to gain some insight into how their employees are doing when working remotely and digitally. Without the camera conversations become impersonal as one can't see how someone is doing according to the respondents. However, human feelings are not visible and present in the same way through

the camera even though it is described as a good tool by the employees. Therefore, respondents believed that it is of importance to still have a balance between the digital and real-life communication to enable the creation of trust.

## **5.5 What benefits trust-creation**

Trust is something that should be mutually created and shared in a work relationship according to the respondents. For the respondent to trust the leader, one must also feel that the leader trusts them. To create this mutual understanding and feeling for another person is more challenging in the digital context than in the physical world, some respondents even describe it as impossible. To establish a relationship with your leader has been described to be important to build professional trust between employees and leaders. Without having a functioning professional relationship, it is more challenging to build trust. Building a good relationship takes time, commitment, work, and communication according to the employees as trust needs to be cared for. Respondents have stated that it brings comfort to know that the leader is always close if ever needed, being something that has gone missing digitally.

### *5.5.1 Feedback and support*

Something that is described as important is to get feedback to feel both appreciated and seen by the leaders. To be able to support employees with continuous feedback relies on that leader being able to see what employees do, in terms of results and efforts put in. This becomes less evident for the leader digitally as they do not really see their employees and cannot observe the work digitally in the same way according to the respondents. Leading to that employee receive less feedback which is said to affect the trust for leaders. This has also been mentioned by respondents to be lacking from their perspective. They would like to be provided more insights into what the leaders are doing in their work, and if what they say is something that they later practically establish. It is therefore of importance that leaders make sure that employees do what is expected without feeling controlled as this is another aspect that could be challenging for trust-building. Employees also described it as important that leaders provide transparency into their work and not only require this from the employees. Employees describe how it is important to not feel controlled or monitored as this can create the feeling of not being trusted by one's leader to carry out their work. Respondents express how there is a fine line between following up the work and having reconciliations and trying to control the work of employees. One respondent stated:

*If the manager would come and check on me all the time, I would have thought that I made a mistake or that there would be a problem of some sort- R7*

If the leader is located elsewhere, respondents describe how the pressure of being supervised tends to decrease, but also the support which long term can affect the relationship and trust. Especially if the employee as a person needs appreciation, feedback and to be seen. To understand what is happening in the daily work is described as important to be able to give the support and help needed of employees and thereby creating trust. Leaders do not see what is right and wrong and cannot react to it, affecting the trust in the leader of being able to observe when something is wrong to correct it. Having a leader that is present when work gets difficult and being able to ask for help has been expressed by some respondents to be of importance for them to build a trust-bond. By involving the employees in how to make the digital collaborations better and using less of an “top down” leadership approach helps the employees feel more included and makes the leader appear more like “one of us”. Which helps to build trust as well as make the employees respect their leaders. Setting boundaries is also important not to create misunderstandings according to the respondents.

As the conversation changes and employees share less than in physical meetings employees believe that it is important to be more aware as a leader. This is to gain insights especially regarding if everyone can speak their mind, and regarding work issues and challenges. One respondent explains that you must be expressive in the digital communication:

*I think to dare to take these dialogues about well-being, how you want to structure work and also dare to make demands to use the camera is of importance -R14*

Showing awareness is believed to enable trust, making it important for leaders to show that they care and want to know how employees are doing according to the respondents.

### *5.5.2 Physical connectivity*

Respondents explain how the area of leadership trust has been negatively affected by the greater use of digital tools. This is described to be an effect of that a lot has changed and been lost in regard to how communication and collaboration with leaders are made possible. One respondent argues for when being physically closer to their leader, conversation just happen. It is described how individuals as human-beings are taught to have conversations in real life and how it is more challenging to create the natural flow of interacting digitally. Not being able to



meet changes the dynamics and feelings of the conversations as one loses the ability to observe body language, read reactions, emotions, and feelings. It is described for how it is something different to be able to sit down with your leader face-to-face than to meet digitally. As one respondent explained:

*I believe... you can build a greater trust if you are able to build contact in the physical world first, from time to time. To initially meet physically and then move over to meeting digitally makes it easier and not as different to communicate. -R14*

To have continuous real and live meetings with leaders is explained to be beneficial for the creation of trust, as the conversations cover different topics in the physical world. One example was to talk about the current work situation and how to move forward, and if there were any issues currently. One respondent argues that digital tools cannot replace human interaction:

*I think the greatest challenge for leaders digitally is that not any kind of digital tool can replace human conversations, I don't think so. -R1*

To change from physical meetings to digital ones has been the hardest part to get used to as it feels a bit weird to communicate through a camera. Digital meetings are described to go straight to the point of the conversation, missing the otherwise visible human compassion that is energetic and descriptive of visible cues. Leaders need to plan conversations in another way to enable this human compassion to be shown. Sometimes work is easier and more effective with the leader digitally, however sometimes employees describe how they need the human touch and that there is a person and actual human being behind the digital tool. Leading to those leaders are explained to maybe have to change their style when leading digitally than when working physically. One respondent argued for the personal connectivity one receives with your leader by working from home. This is because working from home mixes the private and personal life and the employee get to see their leader in their private habitat:

*I do not think physical availability is the only way to be available, with the pandemic we started to know each other also from a private point of view because we were connected from home with animals, children and everything around. I know more of my team members from a private pov than what I knew from the previous ones because we were just professional then when we were in the office. - R16*

The respondents argue that having connectivity is a matter of the approach one has towards having a digital leader and that although having a leader that is just down the hall is easier to contact. However, instead of having physical connectivity the respondent states that being digitally present from home with your leader provides employees with a picture into their private life and would make you connect even though you do not meet.

### *5.5.3 Establishing a relationship*

Some respondents state that they have known their leader for many years and therefore have built a fundamental trust between each other. Other respondents are said to never have met their leaders physically. Meeting each other physically is described to make it easier to get to know one another as one can see body language and parts of the communication that becomes less visible digitally, in text or verbally. To meet in the real world before entering a digital work environment with one's leader is described to help with openness and communication as employees know more of the other person. Leaders working digitally need to be both informal and transparent in their communications to enable relationships to form in a natural sense according to employees. To know certain elements of the other person's ways of communicating is important for the digital interactions as well as the physical. And after building that bridge it is easier to create trust as one respondent argues for:

*If you can read the language of the body, if you can see the face, if you can make a laugh or be ironic on something or say, it's a good way to create contact with the other person...probably is not trust but is a sort of a bridge and after the bridges being built you can start creating a trust. -R16*

To only meet leaders digitally can result in not putting the same trust into leaders' styles and ways of leading. This is described by the respondents to be because meeting someone physically also tells how they are as a person and how they treat other people around them. To create a feeling of belonging and connectivity to the leader was also believed to be a challenge to do without the real-life meetings and as one respondent said:

*We are sitting in an open office space... my colleagues are also sitting there... and you notice for example in different situations how the leader is treating others, depending on their titles and what they work with. This is something you can see while at the office and is important for trust. -R11*

Being able to know the leader and see all dimensions of the person, is something that has gone missing in the digital world, which makes it more difficult for employees to get to know their leader and build a perception for who they are. This feeling of knowing the leader is needed to further enable a professional relationship to form and enable the creation of trust. Respondents have argued for the importance for them to feel that the leaders keep what they promise and do not share valuable information that they have confided in them with. This is because it enables the employees to share with the leader if they have any struggles or worries. Not being able to share with the leader could result in certain issues not being brought up.

## **6. Discussion**

*This chapter will present, discuss, and analyse the findings of the study in relation to previous research and theory found to answer the two research questions. The first research question had the focus of investigating what digital leadership practices employees perceived as trust building in a digital context, and the second referring to possible challenges and improvement employees perceive in connection to digital leadership practices.*

### **6.1 The importance of the informal context**

Working digitally has presented positive experience from the respondents since they appreciate the flexibility and individualistic appreciation that digital work offers. The overall experience of working with digital tools to enable work is highly valued among the employees. Many of the respondent's state that they valued hybrid work because of the flexibility it enables. Supported by Attaran et al., (2019) in how the ability to work from home may raise employee engagement and productivity. Therefore, implementing digital tools into the world of work may be related to positive outcomes in the form of employee productivity (Schepers et al. 2005; Avolio et al., 2014). However, digital communication has also been resulting in barriers connected to the informal conversations that usually occur more easily and effortlessly when meeting in person. Employees argue that the small-talk and important check in one have with their leader is not as prominent during digital communication due to it not being spontaneous enough. Therefore, leaving employees feeling disconnected in a world that should enable digital connection. Described by Cortellazzo et al., (2019) as a paradigm shift in work due to increased use of digital tools being visible in the context of the case company, where the employees experience limitations connected to these conversations. The shift and transformation that has resulted in integrating digital tools into work can be described as what

Giddens (1990) calls an uncontrolled ordering and reordering of social relations. Where means for communication have been re-ordered and a new order been created, where informal interactions have been lost as an effect.

The informal discussions have been expressed by the respondents to carry a wide range of important topics, serving a great purpose in creating relationships. Everything from catching up after meetings to internal gossiping. Ng and Ngai (2015) argue for informal communication being valuable for employee engagement, which could be an indicator of digital employees feeling somewhat disconnected in the communication, therefore losing engagement for their work. Other purposes informal discussions carry is sharing of valuable information that typically would not be mentioned during a meeting agenda, therefore getting lost by not being brought up in the spontaneous interactions. One other challenge connected to the informal discussions are the fun parts of communication, like humour and making each other laugh. The respondents argue for these uplifting and fun conversations to be important to build a relationship with their leader. Relating to research by Kangasharju and Nikko (2009) describing how possibilities of sharing a fun joke with your leader can help reduce tension and be important in critical situations or discussing something that is tough. To build a steady relationship with your leader is further described as a fundamental part in the creation of trust. To be able to comfortably share with leaders could also create less tensions, as employees do not withhold information, feelings, and thoughts experienced. Not being able to ask questions or to be open and honest with the leader has been expressed to be limiting trust-creation (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002). It is the digital leader's responsibility to create a good digital work environment (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003), where employees can share their concerns. As respondents have expressed that during digital meetings, they might avoid bringing up questions surrounding work because it does not match the current meeting agenda. This highlights the leader's responsibility in engaging in practices that enable employees to share thoughts and feelings when interacting digitally even though it is not on the meeting agenda.

Respondents indicate that meeting a leader in the physical world tends to make them appear more human than when having digital interactions. Which would mean that having a digital leader might be de-humanizing the look of the leader from the employees' point of view. Respondents express that the conversations tend to get stiff when interacting digitally, where the human actor in this case almost becomes a part of being what Latour (1996) describes as a non-human actor. If the cameras are not on, the mediation of the human characteristics are lost,

and leaders are more closely connected to being less human in the network of actors. Latour (2005) describes the importance of viewing both the non-human and human actors as one entity in a network. Being important in this case as leaders and employees would not be able to have social interaction without the technological actor. Emphasising the technology's importance as an actor in the network and for shifts to occur in relationships and communications. However, only communicating through digital tools with the leader has shown effect in the relationship between the human actors. Where leaders almost become a part of the technologies and are dehumanised as an effect of using the non-human actors of technologies as a mediator for communication and work.

The digital meetings are argued by the respondents to carry a high degree of structure and a clear agenda, making it more challenging for employees to share informal and private matters with one's leader. These discussions are by the employees argued for being important to connect with the leader and are easier to do when meeting someone physically. New technologies are stated by Kagermann et al., (2013) to be reshaping organisational processes, routines and calls for different demands on both employees and leaders (Haddud & McAllen, 2018; Cortellazzo et al., 2019). This is also evident in how digital conversations tend to take new forms and directions regarding what is considered to be topics to share. Respondents argue that asking leaders questions digitally versus in person will provide different answer, since it is usually formed in a different and direct manner when asking digitally. Respondents have also argued that due to a reduced informal talk with their leader, the chances of discussing something that is tough or learning about the other person is limited. The limitations found in connections to digital conversations, tend to result in conversations get lost as important topics are not shared to the same extent. Where visible cues and other important artefacts of showing presence tend to go missing also go missing (Avolio et al., 2014). This can be an effect that leader is less present when working in the digital environment that is described by Antonakis & Atwater (2002), as an effect of using digital tools. Conversations are described to get stiff and flat as employees and leaders are not used to communicating in the digital world in a similar way as in the physical world. Connecting to research done by Cardon et al, (2019) describing how digital tools can lead to inefficient use if not used to their full potential. Which have been evident through respondents sharing that talking to someone without a camera, may affect the communication negatively and make it appear flat.

Prominent during several interviews were the need to set out digital meetings without a clear agenda to enable time for spontaneously asking questions. Some respondents argued that this is something that their leaders actively work with. However, having a team that is divided at different sites and countries still left some employees feeling disconnected. This is since the employees that are digitally connected will not get the same sense of presence in the meeting as the other employees that might be present physically in the meeting. Which according to Darics (2020) can be an effect as digital communication does not provide the same auditory and visible cues as meeting in person. Therefore, the message that some employees receive digitally might be different from what the physically present employees receive. Which have been stated is the case by respondents working in virtual teams. If any misinterpretations occur the leader will have issues catching up on these since the visible cues in digital communication are limited (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002; Shollen & Brunner, 2016). The respondents working in virtual teams have also experienced an inequality in being provided different degrees of information dependent on one where able to meet their leader at the office or not. Not being offered the same information-sharing as an effect of working remotely, results in respondents feeling not equally treated and limits their feeling of trust towards the leader. Gupta and Pathak (2018) acknowledge in their research stating that having a virtual team with unlimited distance that rely on digital interaction may affect the ability for the leader to create an equal environment that builds trust. Being also evident in the findings of this study.

## **6.2 The aspect of space and time**

The need for continuous time and space to communicate with leaders was expressed as something valued for the ability to form relationships and enable the creation of trust. Along with the possibilities of leaders to gain better insights into the work and life of employees. Proposed solutions were for leader to create more frequently occurring meeting, having follow-up sessions, and creating space and time to raise a variety of questions and topics. The described areas are all connected to social interaction to enable the creation of trust. Trust is described to be built through communication and social interactions according to Raisinghani et al., (2010), being in accordance with the answers of the respondents. The need for continuity in these kinds of meetings, and for them to be a practiced routine was further shared as important, as employees lacked a sense of routine in meeting leaders. Connecting to research by Kayworth and Leidner (2002), who concludes that effective e-leaders are those who communicate on a regular basis, are present to answer questions and provides feedback and directions. It can

therefore be discussed if leaders need to become more efficient in their communication, as the aspects of being effective also seems to create benefits for the creation of leadership trust. The need for leadership support and having clearer strategies are also evident in research found by Attaran et al., (2020) who state that these elements are practical for employees to feel and trust that the digital work is well integrated and organisationally supported.

The aspect of being present is further also described as an issue for leaders when using digital tools, as they become less available in the digital world of work. Previous research is describing how digital tools enables anyone to be reachable at any given point as a positive effect creating flexibility (Haddud & McAllen, 2018). However, respondent describes this aspect of being reachable in a negative sense, as leaders become less available and present. In this case it seems like what employees are missing is leadership strategies and processes for how to communicate and work digitally to be more present. Something that is described as important by Mustajab et al., (2020) along with the creation of a digital culture. By lacking a routine for conscious conversation regarding well-being, feedback, and workload, leader have less of an ability to become conscious of the possible issues employees might experience. To have more continuous digital meetings becomes of importance for leaders' abilities to act, help support and understand employees' feelings and emotions. Which is further important for the trust creation process.

The non-human actors of technological tools are shaping social processes according to (Latour, 2005), which is evident in the network of employees, leaders, and digital tools as non-human actors in this case. The non-human actors of tools are changing interactions and communications, effecting leaders and employees' abilities of trust creation. Where employees also recognise changes in the availability of leaders and where space and time for communication is limited. This is not a force and social change created only by the tools. However, leaders make themselves more available by booking back-to-back meetings, and employees try to reach leaders in between. The technologies are playing an important role in shaping social processes (Latour, 2005), where leaders and employees have created this limiting space for communication upon themselves because of how they have chosen to use the tools in the network. Morgan et al., (2014) is also describing how routines in communication between leaders and employees plays an important role in promoting the creation of trust, and further also encouragement and effectiveness. Respondents call for routines as an effect of limited interactions to create space for communication, in a response to re-shape the initial processes that have been created in the network of the human and nonhuman

actors (Latour, 2005). Employees that do not receive continuous possibilities to ask, share and communicate with their leader digitally, express how this is affecting leadership trust, being similar to the findings of Morgan et al., (2014). To not be able to obtain answers to questions and discuss issues with leaders has been mentioned to affect the ability to trust and rely on leaders (Morgan et al., 2014). If one does not know how to move forward and does not rely on the leader to get the time and support needed, it can be assumed that it will be a more difficult task for employees to feel encouragement and work effectively. To be able to rely on someone is described by Giddens (1990) as a ground definition of what trust is, to then lose the ability to rely on one's leader due to the inability to communicate will effectively challenge trust creation.

The paradigm shift that enables one to conduct work in both the real and virtual world at any time at any place has changed structures, systems, processes, and routines. (Kagermann et al., 2013; Hambley et al., 2007; Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). Where leaders need to create new routines according to the employees to enable the creation of leadership trust, by communicating in a similar way as in the physical world. The connection to Kagermann et al., (2013) Hambley et al., and Cascio & Montealegre (2016) can further be found in how it is expressed as important to align these new routines or structures for digital communication in accordance with the different needs of employees. To know that the leader makes time for employees is also showing as the respondents explained that leaders care and put efforts into one's work and health. The office and being in the same physical space were explained to have the effect of bringing people together, creating more time and space for interactions to take place in a natural sense. The spontaneous encounters of the physical world do not take place digitally and actions must be made to interact. Putting higher demand on leaders in creating a digital environment that promotes the possibilities of interactions between employees and leaders. One limiting aspects of working digitally is described to be the lack of physical interactions, feedback and sharing of ideas (Avolio et al., 2014; Dennis et al., 2008; Powell et al., 2004). Being evident in the digital environment of the respondents in the case company, and by limiting the above-mentioned aspects also affecting the trust creation processes. Prior research shows indications of how the frequency of communication is more important than the method used for communication (Darics, 2020). Which is clearly shown in the respondents' answers as well, regardless of the method it remained clear that respondents wanted more continuous meetings with their leaders.



The importance of using the camera during digital communication and video calls was agreed upon by all respondents to be important. This is supported by the fact that turning on the camera carries important dimensions of social interactions, for example, facial expressions, reactions, body language, non-verbal cues and to be able to see how information is received. If one is unable to observe leaders' feelings, reactions, body language and how they express their message, employees believed it as more challenging to get to know the leader and build trust. The respondents' answers can be supported by what previous research says, where digital tools are described to limit interactions (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003), making it more difficult to deliver rich non-verbal cues. Indicating the importance of using the camera in digital interactions, this as one learns a lot about one's leader by being able to see them according to respondents. It is described in previous research how leaders need to understand what has changed going into a more digital work environment, to adjust their leadership styles and behaviours in accordance with the changes (Snellman, 2014). Respondents have recognised the change that has been and the actual importance of the camera and what disappears without it. Having cameras turned off tended to create feelings of conversation to be impersonal and flat, as one only sees a picture on a black screen. The need for the camera was expressed to the extent that some had the suggestion of making it a company policy to always use it during meetings. The leadership role has become more vital in introducing digital tools in a way that is beneficial to successfully enable digital work (Cortellazzo et al, 2019, Haddud & McAllen, 2018; Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2018). To use the camera could therefore be one way of adopting the tools in a beneficial way to gain a higher quality of conversations.

Face-to-face interaction and encounters are crucial when building trust according to Morgan et al., (2014). Some respondents state that they do not have the possibilities of making physical face-to-face interactions a reality. Therefore, making the camera the closest thing to meeting the leader in the real world. The importance of the camera is also mentioned in relation to seeing if someone is unwell, as one can hide behind a black screen. In the physical world leaders can observe changes in behaviours, conversations, energy, and for how people seem to feel and look. The digital tools are said to affect the ability to build good relationships due to the inability to properly communicate feelings and emotions (Jawadi et al., 2013; Kahai & Copper, 1990; Avolio et al., 2014). Making the camera an important tool for gaining insights into employees' feelings and emotions to possibly detect signs of being un-well.

### **6.3 What benefits trust-creation**

Trust is described by employees as something that needs to be created and shared mutually in work relationships with leaders, if to give trust one needs to feel trusted by one's leader. Some respondents state that it is more challenging to create this mutual understanding of trust digitally, and some even state how they think it is impossible. Taddeo (2009) discuss trust to be impossible to mediate through digital communication as trust relies on physical interactions. The digital context in which employees are situated, further aligns with the environment of e-trust described by Taddeo (2009) being where physical contact does not take place and interactions are mediated through digital means. The new technological developments expand the possibilities for social interactions despite time or space (Meyer et al., 2008; Schlichter, 2010). However, the new social possibilities created by the use digital tools, might not always create a beneficial environment for trust.

The employees argue for the importance of physical interactions and meetings for the creation of trust, and how digital communication does not make up for the physical and real interactions. The perceptions of the employees relate to Taddeo (2009) research of how to create trust one needs to meet in direct and physical interactions. However, one aspect of digital communication that could create connectivity to one's leader and still bring personal interactions was to see leaders home environment by using the camera. This is aligned with Meyer et al., (2008) and Schlichter (2010) stating that new technological developments allow for new possibilities of interaction in an organisational setting.

To be acknowledged and appreciated was described as something that benefits trust creation. According to Dirks and de Jong (2022) providing employees with a present support-function makes the employees feel empowered and encourages them to trust that the leader is there if they need them. Other factors that according to some of the respondents would benefit their trust-building is being able to have transparency into the leaders work and more specifically if they stand by their word as well as how they are towards other people. Described by Giddens (1990) how one needs to trust the expert that they rely on to be able to conduct the work, in this case employees trusting their leaders to know how to use the digital tools to enable digital work. According to Giddens (1990) individuals can speak of trust in expert systems, where leaders being the expert and employees being the laymen. The expert withholding knowledge that the laymen might not have, creates a need for trust between the two. When not being able to observe and know the work of leaders it might then be challenging to enable trust in the

sense that Giddens (1990) describes as important to have insights. Further, supported by Holtz et al., (2020) that states that transparency will provide more accurate information about the other person and therefore increase trustworthiness. Which could become less evident when not meeting your leader in person. According to Dirks and de Jong (2022) face-to-face communication is vital for building trust. Making it important to have digital communication with the camera on. Overall respondents agreed that mutual understanding and feeling of the other person as well as receiving feedback and support was important to build a relationship. According to McKnight et al., (1998) trust is something built up over time and that research had found that employees tend to reciprocate the leaders trust in them. Making it important to have a mutual trust for each other (Campagna et al., 2020). Following exemplary behaviour and not betraying the employees trust is also a valid foundation for remaining an ethical leader (Lee, 2009).

Digital leaders might struggle with understanding of what works better for everyone in terms of feedback and support. Respondents have argued for both wanting more feedback and supervision while others state that it would make them feel like they were monitored. Making the support offered by leaders a fine line dependent on what the individual employee appreciates in their leadership. Respondents argued for the importance of having mutual trust between themselves and the leader, where being trusted by the leader would make them feel like having the support in performing work-tasks. The possibilities to self-organize the individual work-environment would also encourage self-autonomy. This is supported by Attaran et al., (2019) to be valid as employees that can control their work environment effecting their productivity.

According to Gupta and Pathak (2018) the distance in virtual teams might make it difficult for the leader to create a good environment that enables trust. Knowing what the respondent wants from their leader in terms of feedback might take time to understand. Having digital communication between leader and employee might even make that process of understanding what works individually more difficult. This is because the leader is not present to be able to see if anything goes wrong and to be able to correct it. If misunderstandings occur in situations where face-to-face interactions are limited and the relationship between the parties are not trusting each other, the misunderstanding can quickly intensify (Lee, 2009). Argued by Snellman et al., (2014) is the new demands being put on leaders working in the digital context. Respondents have stated that they would appreciate having a leader to ask for help

when needed, which emphasises the importance of being digitally close to the employees. Being physically close to the leader results in communications to naturally occur, providing important aspects such as body language and reactions that might not take place digitally. Bell & Kozlowski (2002) describes how relationships in a traditional work environment can form in a natural sense as social interaction occurs. This is something that the employees have perceived to create challenges in the digital context. Employees describe how social interactions do not flow in the same way and dimensions of conversations are missing affecting relationships and later trust. Where they want leaders to take a higher responsibility in creating an environment that benefits communication and relationships to form. Connecting to the statements of Bell and Kozlowski (2002) for how the leader needs to invest more time and effort into relationship-building processes and in coordinating work. The aspects of coordination, time, and processes are all mentioned by employees as suggestions on how leaders can work to create a better environment to enable trust creation.

One respondent state that digital tools cannot replace human conversations fully, because physical conversations provide so much more to the conversation and receiving the message. This is supported by Kayworth and Leidner (2002) as well as Shollen and Brunner (2016) that auditory and visible abilities are important for sending out the right message when communicating. The respondent claims that having cameras turned off during meetings limits visual cues, energy and human compassion that is found in physical meetings. As Talley and Temple (2015) argue, visible cues that strengthen the message are important to build an emotional connection. This is shaping new demands of leaders to change their leadership style depending on which communicative tools or not that they share with their employees. Build effective team communication is the leader's responsibility to set standards for the employees. (Morgan et al., 2014).

Building a relationship with the leader is according to the respondents vital in order to form a trust-bond. Respondents who claimed that they have known their leader for a long time and therefore built up a professional relationship also stated that they experience a trust connected to their leader. Respondents that have had less time with their leader state that building the relationship is more challenging. According to McKnight et al., (1998) trust takes time to build and can shift the more people interact with each other. Which emphasises the importance in maintaining the relationship (Rousseau et al., 1998) as well as invest in the interaction to form a trust-building in the relationship (Lewicki et al., 2006). Many respondents stated that moving

towards mainly having digital contact with the leader was easy since they have established a relationship before moving into having digital communication. By adding a non-human actor, in this case a digital communication system could therefore make the social relationship building between the human actors more challenging (Latour, 2005). Meeting someone physically makes it easier to get to know the other person as personal meetings provide the chance of being more open and transparent from the beginning. It also provides information about how the leader treats people around them besides what is said during meetings. This is important to build a characteristic understanding for your leader and how they act with the information provided to them. Other respondents that had experiences of both physical and digital leaders argue for the leader and the employee's ability to be very informal and transparent in their work. Moving on to mainly digital communication requires employees and leaders to form a trusting relationship and a bridge where space is provided to have informal conversations and provide each other with follow-ups. Both to help the employees remain engaged in their organisational involvement (Ng & Ngai, 2015), but also to help limit misunderstandings that could potentially harm trust-building. Employees also share how it is important to be able to observe leaders' behaviours outside of the digital context. For example, in how they treat people around them. Being connected to research by Birnholtz et al., (2012) stating that offline behaviours become less visible to witness in a digital context. Even though the interview questions asked for specific practices, another perspective was found of importance for the creation of leadership trust. Being for leaders to create beneficial environments and conditions to condition for the ability of forming leadership trust digitally. The results of the study are therefore also focusing on the importance of how leaders can create environmental conditions needed for the ability to build leadership trust among employees.

## **7. Conclusion**

*In this concluding chapter, the main findings of the study will be presented. The aim of the study was to further investigate what digital leadership practices employees perceived as important for the creation of trust, and for what possible challenges and improvements were expected in connection of leadership trust in a digital context. The findings of the two research questions will be merged into one part as the results of the first question build a foundation for expected challenges and improvements.*

Our findings suggest several leadership practices that employees perceive as trust building in a digital context. Along with how leaders could work with the creation of beneficial digital environment to condition for the abilities of creating leadership trust. All the main themes found can be linked to that the employees want their leaders to create space and time to share, communicate, and connect to get to know their leader. To enable this in a digital environment is described as more difficult as interactions decrease, conversations are lost, and physical contact and meetings disappear. The technologies have in a sense removed many of the essential parts of physical and social interactions that respondents describe as important to get acquainted with the leader. This to later build a professional relationship, rely on and trust their leader. Leaders as human beings become less human as actors of digital network, connecting to Latour's (2005) statements of non-human actors in networks. Affecting employees' abilities to form relationships with leaders. What is now required of leaders and what becomes a challenge is to take back the fundamental parts of physical interactions into the digital world and to make it into naturally occurring events in the new context. To bring back the physical and human parts of interactions such as seeing non-verbal cues, spontaneous conversations and time and space to meet will be of importance for the future work of digital leaders. Through the findings one can recognize that trust creation is affected by the fact that social interactions and meetings are less evident and differently structured digitally. Something that becomes clear from the interviews is how trust is dependent and tied to social interactions, where it is still seen as crucial to have the opportunity of meeting your leader physically from time to time to enable trust. Clearly connected to the research made by Taddeo (2009) that states that physical and social interactions build the foundation for trust creation.

Future challenges of leaders lie within creating beneficial digital environments for communication, and to bring back the naturally occurring events of the physical sphere, along with creating space and time in their very busy schedules. Leaders also need to create a better understanding of the individual needs of employees when working digitally. In connection improvements have been identified as employees feeling less monitored by having a digital leader. The lack of leader's ability to fully control and transparently overlook the employees daily work would be an indicator that the employee feels trusted to and that this encourages their self-autonomy. Further improvement was expected when working hybrid from home, proving employees with an image of the leader that is a less top-down approach and connectivity. The main issue of creating trust digitally lies within that employees and leaders no longer meet in normally occurring physical interaction where dimensions of social

interactions are lost. Connecting to the research of Taddeo (2009) describing the lack of social and normally occurring physical interactions as the main issue for trust to be created digitally. To conclude, the expectations of leaders have not changed working in the digital context. However, leaders need to become more aware of how to create a beneficial environment for relationships and communication to take place, to enable the more increasingly important leadership trust.

### **7.1 Future research**

Our findings suggest that trust creation processes are both dependent on individual needs, and of physical social interactions. Therefore, we propose further research on the differences in experiences among employees meeting leaders on a regular basis and employees who have never met their leader physically. To further see the perceptions of leadership trust and if it is as closely connected to having physical interactions from time to time. As well as for what tools that enables leaders to create beneficial environments for leadership trust to form.

## **8. Contributions**

The aim of the study was to contribute to the field of research on leadership and trust in a digital context from an employee perspective. By adding knowledge concerning the means that technology use poses on the creation of leadership trust. The findings of the study highlight the importance of different communication aspects that get lost in translation when working through digital tools. Along with the importance of leader to create beneficial digital environment to enable the creation leadership trust. The findings of the study can be found applicable to many different actors, occupations, and sectors, as the findings are connected to the importance of social interaction for the ability to create trust. As well as how this was perceived as challenging in the digital context. Many organisations and occupation are largely dependent on technologies to communicate and collaborate, where trust can be an important aspect for the success and development. Therefore, making it interesting to see the changes that technologies pose on interaction but also leadership trust. Where the results might be of different use depending on context and use of digital tools and for what purpose.

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## **Appendix 1- Information to participants**

### **Enabling trust through digital leadership practices – A qualitative study on digitalisation and trust in management**

#### **Information to participants about the master thesis project**

*Previous research in the field of leadership and technologies have shown how the role of leading is becoming a more complex task in a virtual environment, where challenges are evident in connection to the creation of trust. Despite this, little is known about what leadership practices that effectively can contribute to the creation of trust in a digital work environment.*

#### **Study aim**

The aim of the study is to further investigate and explore what means digitalisation pose on leadership practices from an employee and trust perspective. To bring a better understanding of this phenomenon, we aim to look specifically at what leaders can do in a more digital work environment to enable the creation of trust. To try and answer this question we want to hear more about what you as an employee experience or perceive leaders to do or can do to enable trust.

#### **Who we are?**

The study is a student project and will result in a thesis within the Master Program in Strategic Human Resource Management and Labour Relations, at the University of Gothenburg. The study is conducted independently by the student Ida Fogelström and Malin Johansson, under the supervision of Senior lecturer Elena Bogdanova in the Department of Sociology and Work Science. Please see further contact info below. The project adheres to the key ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council for research in social science. Information about research ethical information for participants please read below.

#### **Data Collection**

The data collection will consist of qualitative interviews that will be recorded with the permission of the participants.

#### **Voluntary participation and non-disclosure**

Participation is voluntary and confidential, and participation will be anonymous. Participants can choose to cancel their participation at any time and have the right to withdraw from the study if they should wish. Unauthorised individuals will not have access to the material.

Personal names are not registered, and participants will be given a pseudonym or number when interviews are transcribed and analysed. This also applies to the organisation. Participants can

decide when it is suitable to meet and if they like to meet in person or through digital video call.

### **Handling of collected material**

Material such as notes, recordings and interview data are kept locked away on password protected computers and are only available to authorised researchers. In the final thesis, extracts from interviews may be cited and given a pseudonym [e.g., a fake name]. The collected material and interview transcriptions will not be used for any purpose other than the study's scientific research purpose. Recordings will be erased after the conclusion of the project.

### **Results and publication**

The results of the study will be published in the form of a Master thesis completed in June 2022. Link to GUPEA and the essay can be provided to participants if requested.

### **Contribution**

The study will contribute to the field of research on technologies and leadership, by adding knowledge concerning the means that technology poses on leadership trust from an employee perspective.

### **For questions and further information**

#### **Please contact:**

Ida Fogelström, Tel: - , Mail: - Malin Johansson, Tel: - , Mail: - Elena Bogdanova, Tel:- , Mail: -

## Appendix 2 - Consent form

### Consent Form

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**Master thesis project title:** Enabling trust through digital leadership practices – A qualitative study on digitalisation and trust in management

**Research students:** Ida Fogelström & Malin Johansson

**Programme:** Master's in Strategic Human Resource Management and Labour Relations, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

This thesis work adheres to the ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council for research within the areas of humanities and social sciences.

- The interview will be recorded, with the respondent's approval
- Collected data will be analysed by Ida Fogelström and Malin Johansson
- Materials such as notes, recordings and interview data are kept locked away on password protected computers and are only available to authorised
- Access to the data will be limited to Ida Fogelström, Malin Johansson. Our supervisor and examination could need access to parts of transcripts.
- Any recordings, transcripts and notes will be deleted once the thesis is examined and approved.

**By signing this form, I agree on:**

Voluntarily participate in the thesis project with the title *“Enabling trust through digital leadership practices – A qualitative study on digitalisation and trust in management”*

I understand that I at any time can withdraw from participating in the study

The collected material from the interviews will be used only for the purpose described above

The study follows the ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council

I have read and understood the information and consent form

### **Appendix 3 - Interview guide**

***Introduction:*** Hi my / our names are X and I am a master's student from the University of Gothenburg where I study a program in Strategic Human Resource Management and Labour Relations. As a part of our master's thesis, we conduct interviews to be able to investigate and understand what a leader can do in a more digital work environment to build trust. Where you are a part of hopefully finding more knowledge about this phenomenon.

***Purpose of the study and interview structure:*** The purpose of the study is to try and find more knowledge regarding what leaders can do in a digital leadership to build trust as earlier mentioned. To find an answer to these research questions we aim to ask you how to have a leader who works partly or mainly digitally of your experiences and perceptions.

The interview will consist of a number of different questions divided into different themes, starting off with some introductory questions. If there is any question that you do not want to answer regardless of the reason, just say so and we will move on to the next. You can at any time during the interview or after choose to cancel your participation in the study, once again without announcing the reason for that decision.

***Handling of collected material:*** You are as previously described in both the consent form and information letter anonymous through the entire study process and report and no names will be presented. All materials collected from today's interview and before will be anonymous and stored on password-protected computers. No one except me, my essay partner, research supervisor and examiner will have access to the materials if needed. I wish to also ask you if it is possible for me to record the interview with your permission? So that we can transcribe the collected material in a later phase and analyse the data?

Any questions before we start?

#### ***Introductory Questions:***

- *For how long have you worked for the case company?*
- *What is your current role at the case company?*



- *Have you previously had other roles?*
- *What are your main responsibilities in this role?*

***Theme 1: Digitalisation: (Generic Questions)***

First, we want to clarify what we mean by digital tools. Digital tools are the technical tools used for work, for example for communication, structuring, calculation or collaboration. This can include components ranging from computers to mobile devices, and various business systems that can simplify work tasks and delivering of work. It can also include various systems such as chat functions, email, video calls etc.

- *How would you describe that the case company works with digitization and digital tools?*
  - *From your perspective*
- *How would you describe that you use digital tool in your daily work?*
  - *And for what means? How much?*
- *In what ways is your work affected by digital tools?*
  - *What is simplified or made more difficult?*
- *How have you experienced the change from working physically on site to working more digitally in collaboration with your leader?*

***Theme 2: Digital Tools and Communication of Leaders***

- *Through what digital means or tools does your leader work in collaboration with you?*
  - *What means/tools are used mainly or most?*
  - *Which conversations and questions should be taken digitally VS face-to-face?*
  - *How does this affect your trust in your leader?*
- *How would you describe that the digital communication between you and your leader works?*
  - *What is it that enables it to work good or not well?*

- *How do these challenges / difficulties / opportunities / positive experiences affect your relationship with your leader?*
- *Is there something you miss in the digital communication between you and your leader?*
  - *Why?*
  - *How does this affect your trust in your leader?*
- *How do you perceive leadership to be affected by the use of digital means?*

### ***Theme 3: Trustworthiness Connected to Digital Leadership Practices***

- *What is trust according to you?*
  - *in connection to leadership*
- *How do you think that the trust between you and your leader has been affected by communication through digital tools?*
- *What would you say are actions or practices that contribute to building trust for your leader digitally?*
  - *Why? Why not?*
- *What do you think that leader needs in order to work in a way that will create trust digitally?*
- *Do you think there are any areas of improvement that leaders can work with in order to create trust digitally?*

### ***Theme 4: Development and Challenge questions***

- *What do you believe or experience to be the biggest challenge that leaders could face when it comes to building trust digitally?*
  - *What skills do the leaders require in order to work in this way?*

- *What do you think is important for leaders to consider in the future when working more digitally?*

### ***Concluding questions***

- *Is there something else that you would like to add now that we have approached the end of the interview that you might believe is of importance?*
- *Do you have any following questions connected to this interview? Or something else you want to ask before we end?*

#### Appendix 4 - Coding scheme

Table 1. exemplifies how some of our main themes and subthemes have been found through the thematic analysis and coding process.

Table I. Overview of the process from unit of meaning to themes

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Unit of meaning</b>	<b>Simplified unit of meaning</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>Main theme</b>
<b>R4</b>	No but you do not get the small talk, that is lost. If you have a meeting and then finish up digitally you just shut down that meeting. If you meet like we do now face-to-face, you might take a coffee after and talk for a while about other things than work.	The social context of having small talks around different matters than work disappears digitally	Informal conversations	Informal conversations disappear	<i>The importance of the informal context</i>
<b>R6</b>	If I call and he responds, we can take 5 minutes later when I have time. Do you really think I can share all my thoughts and feelings in these few minutes, no it's really hard. And I might not even feel comfortable to share at that specific time. We have tried this for several months it is not working.	Harder to share thoughts and feelings as an effect of lost time and space for conversations in the digital work context	Less Informal/Private conversations	Not sharing in the same way as before	<i>The importance of the informal context</i>

<b>R12</b>	We can experience that... Or we sit one by one in digital meetings, so that the ones not located in Sweden won't feel left out. We can meet and talk in these informal meetings, which makes the flow of information higher and faster to us than to them	Digital interactions cause for the feeling of being left out and differences in informal information flows	Lack of informal information	Disconnected in the connected world	<i>The importance of the informal context</i>
<b>R 8</b>	Normally at the office you could get answers faster as you approach them when seeing them. It can be hard to reach your leaders digitally. He can be busy in digital meetings and not answering the chat directly. Then you have to book a meeting just to ask a question, because then I can make sure he has time for my question.	Lack the physical arena for meeting the leader and need to create space and time to ask questions and meet leaders digitally.	Time with leader	Space and time needed from leaders	<i>The aspect of space and time</i>
<b>R17</b>	I believe when we are at the office you make time for conversations and to meet and talk. You sit down when its fitting and talk for a while. You do not do that digitally and work remotely from home. And I do believe it is very important. As	Don't make time for conversations and meetings digitally, the natural and spontaneous conversations are lost and needs to be put on agenda.	Planed conversations and meetings with leader	Continuity makes for Spontaneity digitally	<i>The aspect of space and time</i>

	<p>this does not come naturally it needs to be put on the agenda. And it's the leader's responsibility to make it happen.</p>				
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## Appendix 5 - Respondent scheme

<b>Respondent number</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years working for case company</b>	<b>Degree of physical interaction with leader</b>
1	Female	1-5	Weekly
2	Female	30-35	Monthly
3	Male	35-40	Weekly
4	Male	35-40	Weekly
5	Male	10-15	Weekly
6	Female	15-20	Never met leader physically
7	Female	20-25	Less than monthly
8	Female	25-30	Monthly
9	Male	1-5	Never met leader physically
10	Female	15-20	Never met leader physically
11	Male	1-5	Monthly
12	Female	20-25	Weekly
13	Female	25-30	Never meet leader physically
14	Female	20-25	Monthly
15	Female	5-10	Monthly
16	Female	25-30	Never met leader physically
17	Female	20-25	Less than monthly
18	Female	10-15	Less than 3 times a year
19	Female	30-35	Monthly