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Emmi Kiiskilä

# **Self-leadership in Born Remote Organizations**

Evidence from the Finnish Startup Sector

School of Management

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Strategic Business  
Development

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**Author:** Emmi Kiiskilä  
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**ABSTRACT:**

Nykyajan haastava ja nopeatempoinen liiketoimintaympäristö on johtanut kasvavaan joustavuuden ja uudistumiskyvyn kysyntään organisaatioilta. Samalla työntekijöillä on runsaasti odotuksia työnantajaansa kohtaan. Työntekijät odottavat autonomiaa, työn ja vapaa-ajan välistä tasapainoa sekä merkityksellisyyden tunnetta, mutta samalla selkeitä tavoitteita, kilpailukykyistä palkitsemista sekä mahdollisuutta käyttää uusia teknologioita ja innovaatioita. Kilpailukyvyn varmistamiseksi organisaatioiden tulee tunnistaa työntekijöidensä taitojen tärkeys ja keskittyä johtajuuden kehittämiseen. Itsensä johtamisen taidon tunnistaminen sekä itseohjautuvuuden johtaminen organisaatiossa ovat olennaisessa roolissa sekä yksilön, että yrityksen menestymisen näkökulmasta.

Tutkimuksessa käytetty kirjallisuus pohjautuu aiempiin tutkimuksiin ja teorioihin johtajan ja johdettavan välisestä vuorovaikutussuhteesta (LMX) sekä itseohjautuvuusteoriasta (SDT). Tutkimus on toteutettu laadullisena tutkimuksena, jonka tiedonkeruumenetelmä oli puolistrukturoidut teemahaastattelut. Tutkielmaan haastateltiin viiden Startup-yrityksen toimitusjohtajaa teknologia-alalla. Tämä tutkimus selvitti parhaat käytänteet itseohjautuvuuden johtamiseen etätyössä, sellaisissa Startup-yrityksissä, joissa etätyöskentely on ollut työskentelyn ja yrityskulttuurin kulmakiviä yrityksen perustamisesta asti.

Analyysi tuloksista on toteutettu abduktiivisella menetelmällä, joka yhdistää deduktiivisen lähestymistavan aikaisempiin tutkimuksiin ja teorioihin, sekä induktiivisen päättelyn aineistosta. Tutkimuksen tavoite on selvittää, kuinka yritykset, jotka ovat perustamisesta asti olleet joko toimistottomia tai palkanneet työntekijöitä eri puolelta Suomea ja maailmaa työskentelemään etänä, johtavat itseohjautuvuutta.

Tutkimuksen löydökset vahvistavat, että oikein johdettuna itseohjautuvuus sekä etätyöskentely tuottavat monia etuja sekä yrityksen että yksilön näkökulmasta. Empiiriset löydökset paljastavat, että itseohjautuvuus on tärkeä taito, jota organisaatioiden täytyy systemaattisesti johtaa ja tukea etätyössä. Jotta yksilöt pystyvät johtamaan itseään työskennellessään etänä, tulee yritysten kiinnittää huomiota johtajan ja johdettavan väliseen vuorovaikutukseen sekä johtamiskäytänteisiin niin strategian kuin käytännön tasolla. Tämä vaikuttaa merkittävästi työntekijöiden motivaatioon, hyvinvointiin sekä sitoutumiseen.

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**KEYWORDS:** Leadership, Self-leadership, Self-Determination Theory, LMX Theory, Leader-Member Exchange, Remote work, Practices



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## Abbreviations

LMX	Leader-Member Exchange
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
CEO	Chief Operating Officer
Tech	Technology Industry
HR	Human Recourses
OKR	Objective key results
1-on-1	A regular check-in between a manager and an employee

## 1 Introduction

Self-leadership (the ability of individuals to take charge of their behavior and direction without the need for external supervision or control), remote work, and born remote organizations (companies that were intentionally created as fully remote or distributed organizations from their inception) are all concepts that have gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that has dramatically altered the way we work. These three concepts represent a significant shift in how we think about work and leadership. As more and more companies embrace remote work and born remote structures, the traditional hierarchical structures of organizations are being challenged, and new forms of leadership and collaboration are emerging. At the same time, self-leadership is becoming increasingly important for remote workers, who must rely on their motivation and initiative to succeed in a more independent work environment. As we continue to navigate the changing work landscape, understanding the principles of self-leadership, remote work, and born remote organizations will be essential for individuals and companies. Whether you are a remote worker looking to improve your performance, a leader looking to build a successful remote team, or a company considering a shift to a born remote structure, these concepts offer valuable insights and strategies for success.

There are several studies conducted on the management of remote work. Silva et al. (2022) explore that remote work can increase work overload, leading to emotional exhaustion and decreased task performance. However, the study also found that self-leadership can mitigate these effects by reducing the negative impact of work overload on emotional exhaustion and task performance. The results suggest that self-leadership is essential for employees to cope with the challenges of remote work and achieve success. Similarly, "The Role of Self Leadership for Employees in Implementing Work from Home (WFH) During the COVID-19 Pandemic" (Bandi 2022) highlights the importance of self-leadership in implementing remote work during the pandemic. The article suggests that self-leadership is crucial for employees to maintain productivity and stay motivated while working remotely. The study also found that self-leadership can

help employees overcome the challenges of remote work, such as distractions and lack of social interaction. The results suggest that self-leadership is a valuable skill that employees should cultivate to thrive in a remote work environment. Castellano et al. (2021) found that self-leadership positively impacts team performance. Self-leadership enhanced team members' motivation, self-efficacy, and proactive behavior, while shared leadership improved team coordination and communication. The results suggest that self-leadership is essential for remote teams to achieve their goals. Sjöblom et al. (2021) highlight the importance of self-leadership and psychological safety for employee well-being in enforced remote work. The article suggests that self-leadership strategies, such as setting goals, self-reflection, and self-motivation, can help employees cope with the challenges of remote work and maintain their well-being. In conclusion, all studies indicate that self-leadership is crucial for employees to thrive in remote work. Therefore, organizations should prioritize self-leadership skills and manage self-leadership to ensure the success and well-being of their remote work. Previous studies focus on self-leadership when shifting rapidly to remote work during the pandemic.

However, there are many reasons for the growing importance of self-leadership. As born remote organizations continue to grow, there is a need to understand how to manage self-leadership in such organizations. Self-leadership has become increasingly important in remote organizations, where employees must take more responsibility for their performance and well-being. Born remote organizations rely on this self-leadership to maintain productivity and efficiency. However, managing self-leadership in born remote organizations presents unique challenges that require specific solutions. Despite the increasing interest in self-leadership, a research gap exists in this area, particularly in remote organizations. On the other hand, in the existing teams, self-leadership wanted to be emphasized and encouraged—both the company and the individual benefit from self-leadership skills. As mentioned in the first paragraph, several studies have been conducted on remote work management. Since this study focuses on born remote companies where these elements are deep in the company's structures, it opens a new relevant research gap on self-leadership from the perspective of the company's

management practices. There is a lack of studies when reviewing self-leadership from the born remote point of view. The topic was chosen based on topicality, personal interest, and experience. Several studies have been done from the perspective of Covid19's influences on management and remote work, but this study applies self-leadership in "born remote" organizations. Overall, further research is needed to understand better how self-leadership can be effectively practiced in remote organizations, considering remote work's unique challenges and opportunities. This study can be used to develop a guideline or a handbook for establishing and managing remote teams or organizations based on the study's findings. The study will also contribute to remote work and self-leadership knowledge and will be useful for researchers and practitioners.

The research question for this study is: *How to manage self-leadership in born remote organizations?* The study aims to identify the best practices for managing self-leadership in born remote organizations with this research question. In addition, the study aims to analyze the benefits and challenges faced in managing self-leadership in born remote organizations. This study utilizes an empirical approach, specifically employing interviews as a qualitative methodology, to investigate the best practices for managing self-leadership in born remote organizations. The research combines relevant theoretical frameworks, including Deci and Ryan's Self-determination Theory (SDT) and the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, to comprehensively understand the relationship between superiors and subordinates in remote work settings. This study uses a qualitative method to collect data, specifically, semi-structured interviews conducted with company executives from the Startup sector that has operated in a remote or hybrid work model since their establishment. These companies are similar in size, operate in the same industry, and have been founded in the past decade. The selection of companies with these specific characteristics is intended to provide a more focused and comprehensive understanding of managing self-leadership in born remote organizations. Overall, this research approach offers a rigorous and in-depth examination of managing self-leadership in born remote organizations, integrating theoretical and practical

perspectives to develop a comprehensive understanding of this topic. Using interviews and theoretical frameworks enhances the validity and reliability of the findings, contributing to the body of knowledge on remote work and self-leadership. This study's management practices and outcomes can be a guideline when building remote teams.

## 2 Remote work

### 2.1 Defining remote work

In the literature, various definitions of remote work have been proposed. Sydänmaanlakka (2016) defines remote work as work outside the employer's premises, typically at the employee's home, utilizing technology to connect to the workplace. Similarly, Martela and Jarenko (2012) define remote work as working apart from the workplace and work community with the assistance of information technology. Haapakoski, Niemelä, and Yrjölä (2019) describe remote work as location-independent, facilitating work from any place in the world, flexible working hours, and communication through technological tools. Most definitions highlight that remote work enables work regardless of location and involves the use of technology while also providing flexibility and better time management.

Messenger and Ghosheh (2010) define remote work as a work arrangement where employees work outside of traditional office settings, often from home or remote locations, using technology such as computers, the internet, and mobile devices to communicate and collaborate with colleagues and clients worldwide. The authors emphasize the potential benefits of remote work, including increased productivity, reduced commuting time and expenses, and better work-life balance for employees. However, they also note the challenges of remote work, such as self-discipline, isolation, and clear communication and expectations.

According to Lojeski and Reilly (2016), remote work is not tied to a physical location and relies on technology to enable communication and collaboration among employees and teams worldwide. The authors highlight that remote work has become more common due to technological advancements and can provide flexibility, reduced commute times, and access to a broader talent pool. However, they also caution that remote work can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection and requires careful attention to communication and relationship-building to succeed.

Salli (2012) defines remote work as organizing or performing work utilizing information technology, where work can be done at the employer's premises or outside of it. Koehne et al. (2012) state that remote work is a flexible, voluntary, and paid position based on agreed rules that can be done outside the workplace. In Finland, remote work is not recognized as a separate term by working life legislation. Still, it falls under existing legal frameworks such as the Employment Contracts Act, Working Time Act, and Occupational Safety Act (Salli 2012: 103-131).

### **2.1.1 Benefits of remote work**

In recent years, remote work has gained popularity among employees and employers. Remote work, or telecommuting, refers to working outside the traditional office, such as from home or a co-working space. Remote work offers numerous benefits for both employees and employers. Employees benefit from the flexibility and autonomy that remote work provides, which leads to increased job satisfaction, better work-life balance, and improved productivity. For employers, remote work can lead to cost savings, access to a broader talent pool, and a positive environmental impact. Given the numerous benefits, it is no surprise that remote work has gained popularity in recent years and is likely to continue to do so in the future.

One of the key benefits of remote work for employees is its flexibility. Remote work allows employees to manage their schedules and work from a location that suits them best. This, in turn, leads to increased job satisfaction and morale. According to a study by Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés (2020), remote employees reported higher job satisfaction levels compared to their in-office counterparts. Remote work also offers employees temporal flexibility, which allows them to balance work and family obligations better (Carreras & Valax 2010).

Remote work can also lead to increased productivity and better work performance. Studies have shown that remote workers are more productive and experience fewer interruptions than those working in a traditional office setting (Carreras & Valax 2010;

Gibson et al. 2002; Lewis, 1998; Weisberg & Porell 2011). In addition, remote workers are less likely to be absent from work due to sickness, resulting in fewer sick days and increased productivity (Gibson et al. 2002).

By allowing employees to work from home, companies can reduce the need for office space, saving on real estate expenses (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Gibson et al. 2002; Weisberg & Porell 2011). According to a study by Weisberg and Porell (2011), the possibility of remote work can decrease real estate expenses by approximately \$3000 per remote worker each year. Remote work also enables companies to hire employees from a broader geographic area, allowing them to tap into new talent pools and fill skill gaps (Gibson et al. 2002; Lewis 1998). Another significant benefit of remote work is its positive impact on the environment. Remote work can decrease air pollution and traffic congestion reducing the number of employees who commute to the office (Rajendran & Harrison, 2007; Gibson et al. 2002).

### **2.1.2 Challenges of remote work**

While remote work offers many benefits, several challenges need to be addressed. One of the biggest challenges of remote work is maintaining effective communication between team members. Carreras and Valax (2010) noted that communication could be a significant issue when working remotely. It is harder to build relationships and trust when team members are not physically present in the exact location. Additionally, remote work can lead to the misinterpretation of messages and lack of clarity due to the absence of nonverbal cues. Evangelakos (2020) argued that communication challenges could arise due to time zones and availability differences.

Another challenge of remote work is the difficulty in managing work-life balance. While remote work can offer greater flexibility, it can also lead to employees feeling like they are always "on call" and unable to disconnect from work fully. Weisberg and Porell (2011) suggested that remote workers may have difficulty establishing boundaries between work and personal life, leading to feelings of burnout and stress. In addition, the lack of

supervision and accountability is another challenge of remote work. Gibson et al. (2002) pointed out that remote workers may feel isolated and disconnected from their team, negatively impacting their motivation and productivity. In addition, remote work can make it harder for employers to monitor and assess employee performance, leading to concerns about accountability.

Remote work can also lead to data security and confidentiality challenges. For example, Evangelakos (2020) noted that remote work requires access to sensitive company information. Therefore, there is a need for increased security measures to protect against data breaches and cyber-attacks. Furthermore, remote work can make it more challenging to ensure compliance with regulatory requirements, such as data protection laws.

Finally, there is a risk of social isolation and a lack of professional development opportunities associated with remote work. Gibson et al. (2002) argued that remote workers might miss essential networking opportunities and face challenges in building their professional reputations. In addition, remote work can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, especially for employees not used to working alone.

## **2.2 Defining born-remote organization**

A born remote organization is a company or organization intentionally created as a fully remote or distributed organization from its inception. Born remote organizations have been gaining popularity due to advancements in communication technology and the changing nature of work. These organizations operate without a central physical office, with employees working from different locations, often from their homes or co-working spaces.

Researchers in management and organizational behavior have studied the concept of born remote organizations. According to a study by Tushman and O'Reilly (2017), born remote organizations are characterized by a high degree of autonomy, flexibility, and employee collaboration. Born remote organizations also tend to have flatter

organizational structures, with less hierarchy and more emphasis on self-management and individual responsibility. Another study by Pantea and Pînzaru (2020) identified several key factors contributing to the success of born remote organizations. These include using digital tools and platforms to facilitate communication and collaboration, strongly emphasizing trust and transparency, and a continuous learning and improvement culture.

A born-remote organization is a company that was intentionally created with a fully remote or distributed workforce from the outset. This means employees work remotely from home, co-working spaces, or other locations. Born-remote organizations are often founded startups or small businesses to leverage remote work to access a larger talent pool, reduce costs, and increase flexibility. In addition, they often prioritize digital and virtual collaboration tools to facilitate communication and teamwork among their distributed workforces.

Compared to traditional organizations that have transitioned to remote work, born-remote organizations have a unique culture and set of practices designed specifically for remote work. For example, they prioritize transparency, trust, and communication and often use innovative strategies to build and maintain strong team dynamics and company culture. As a result, born remote organizations represent a new and innovative way of organizing work. Although, in comparison, there are challenges associated with this model, such as managing communication and maintaining team cohesion, born remote organizations can offer significant benefits to both employees and employers, including increased flexibility, autonomy, and productivity.

### **2.3 Leadership in remote work**

Since the popularity of remote work has grown significantly in past years and is expected to grow in the future, superiors should show more responsibility to employees who do not work at the office premises. (Neufeld et al. 2010). According to Kuscu & Arslan (2016), the differences between traditional "old school" leadership and "modern"

leadership in remote work are significant in many ways. In remote work, the physical distance between supervisor and employee is greater, but the role of supervisor work and management is even more critical. The employee must be able to work independently, emphasizing the importance of orientation and onboarding at the beginning of employment. The manager's task is also to build and enable a sense of community among scattered employees so that no one feels left alone or isolated from their work. One of the critical challenges of remote work is maintaining effective communication and collaboration between team members. This is where leadership can play a crucial role. Kuscü and Arslan (2016) emphasize the importance of leaders who can create a culture of trust and openness where team members feel comfortable communicating and sharing ideas even in a remote setting. In a distributed team, trust is a critical component of effective collaboration. It is up to the leader to foster that trust by setting clear expectations, providing regular feedback, and creating a supportive environment where team members feel valued and heard.

Another critical aspect of leadership in remote work is the ability to manage and motivate a team spread out across different locations and time zones. Neufeld et al. (2010) suggest that leaders must be able to adapt their management style to suit the needs of remote workers. This may involve using different communication tools or platforms, setting up regular check-ins, and providing resources and support tailored to remote team members' needs. Leaders must also be able to recognize and address potential issues or conflicts that may arise in a distributed team, such as miscommunication or feelings of isolation, before they escalate.

According to Sutherland, Land & Böhm (2014: 774), even if an organization does not have a leader, it does not mean that it does not have leadership and management practices. However, leadership without a direct line superior is possible but requires different thinking (Salovaara 2019: 120). Although the employees are self-directed, they need support from their superiors. Employees should know exactly what is expected, i.e., the area of responsibility and the goals of the work. Agreed procedures make everyday

life easier and reduce potential conflicts. Successful remote leaders must be able to balance autonomy and accountability. In a remote setting, team members may have more freedom to work on their schedule and in their way, but this can also lead to a lack of oversight and accountability. Leaders must provide guidance and support while allowing team members the flexibility to work effectively. This requires a keen understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each team member, as well as a clear understanding of project goals and expectations. (Sutherland et al. 2014.)

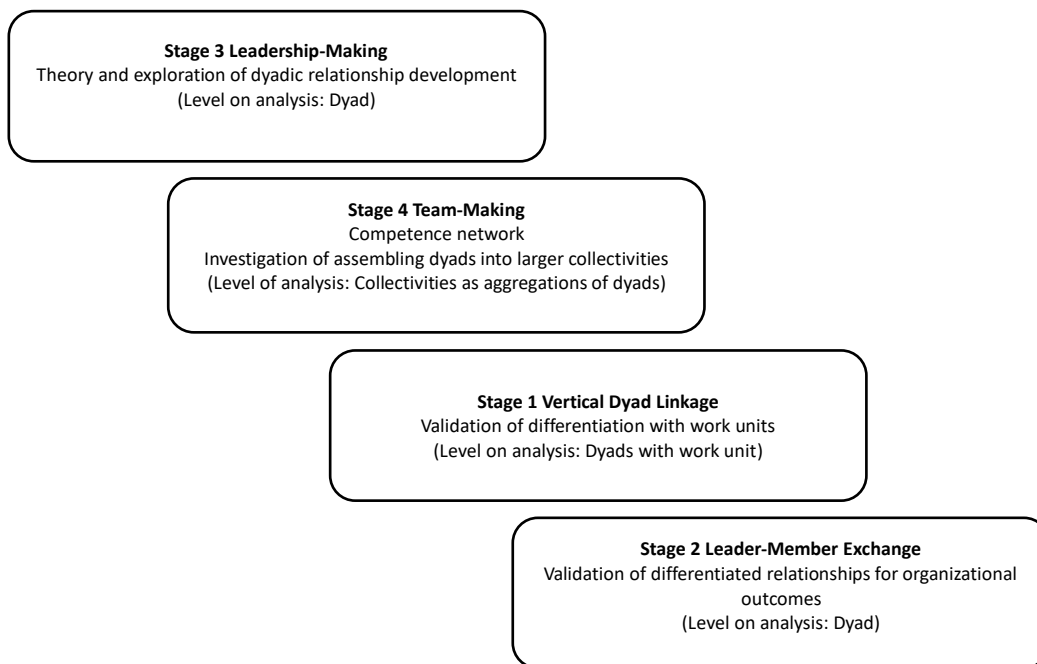
Workplace well-being experts are almost universally of the opinion that the best way to prevent self-directed organizations from descending into chaos and employees becoming overburdened is to set clear goals for both the organization and each employee. Everyone must know what direction they are headed in and what needs to be done to get there. What is their responsibility, what is someone else's responsibility, what are they doing, and why? Where are the boundaries of their work, and what does not belong there? One must clearly understand one's role, actions, and reasons. This is a crucial factor for motivation. Self-leadership requires trust among employees, but it mainly requires a sense that management trusts its employees, that mistakes do not result in being delisted, that problems can be openly discussed, and that management can receive critical feedback. The attitude towards mistakes is crucial because the fear of failure makes people passive, and they cannot achieve enough Savaspuro (2019: 48.)

Leadership in remote work requires a unique set of skills and strategies, as highlighted by Kuscu and Arslan (2016), Neufeld et al. (2010), and Sutherland, Land, and Böhm (2014). Leaders must foster trust and effective communication, adapt to the needs of remote team members, and balance autonomy and accountability. By doing so, they can create a productive and successful distributed team that achieves its goals and fulfills its potential.

## 2.4 The Relationship between Superior and Subordinate

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, or the Vertical Dyad Linkage theory, is a popular approach to understanding leadership and its impact on employee behavior and attitudes. This theory suggests that leaders form different relationships with followers, leading to varying trust, respect, and support levels. (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden, Sparrowe & Wayne 1997). The LMX theory was first proposed by Dansereau, Graen, and Haga (1975), who argued that leaders develop different levels of trust and respect with their subordinates. Over time, this theory has evolved into a more nuanced approach to understanding leadership, with Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) suggesting that leaders form different "dyads" or pairs of relationships with their subordinates. According to this theory, some employees will be in the "in-group" and have a high-quality exchange relationship with their leader, while others will be in the "out-group" and have a low-quality exchange relationship. Liden et al. (1997) further developed the LMX theory by identifying three critical components of leader-member exchange relationships: affect, loyalty, and contribution. Affect refers to the emotional bond between the leader and follower, which can lead to increased job satisfaction and commitment. Adherence refers to the willingness of the follower to defend and support the leader, which can lead to increased job performance and organizational citizenship behavior. Finally, contribution refers to the extent to which the follower contributes to the goals and objectives of the organization, which can lead to increased job security and career advancement opportunities. Liden et al. (1997) expand on this definition, stating that the quality of the leader-member exchange depends on the degree of mutual trust, respect, and obligation. This relationship influences follower job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance. They also note that LMX theory emphasizes the importance of communication, negotiation, and social influence in developing leader-member exchanges. Overall, LMX theory suggests that leaders can enhance follower outcomes by producing high-quality, differentiated relationships with their followers.

The LMX theory suggests building mature leadership relationships or partnerships between leaders and followers leads to optimal leadership processes. These relationships bring several benefits that can be accessed. First, the theory has shifted from the traditional view of superiors and subordinates to a partnership approach, emphasizing that leaders should build LMX relationships with all subordinates. Leadership domains include the follower, leader, and leader-follower relationship. The leader domain focuses on the leader's traits and behavior that result in positive outcomes. The follower-based specialization concentrates on follower-related characteristics and behavior that promote positive outcomes. Both domains focus on attitudes, expectations, and perceptions that affect the effectiveness of leadership styles and techniques. These aspects provide a foundation for followership and the relationship to leadership outcomes. The third domain is a relationship-based approach focusing on the bilateral relationship between the leader and the follower. This domain emphasizes trust and respect in the relationship and the development and maintenance of effective leadership relationships. All three parts should be used in combination with each other. (Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995).



**Figure 1** Leader-Member Exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995)

From a distant work point of view, leaders must make an extra effort to build strong relationships with their team members because they lack the benefit of face-to-face interactions. Influential remote leaders use LMX theory to build trust and mutual respect with their team members by communicating regularly and effectively with their team members through various remote communication channels, such as video calls, emails, or instant messaging, also by providing individualized support to each team member based on their unique strengths, goals, and needs. This can include personalized feedback, mentoring, and career development opportunities. They also encourage and facilitate teamwork and collaboration among team members, especially when working on remote projects. In addition, they create a sense of belonging and inclusivity by recognizing and celebrating their team members' diversity, skills, and contributions to the team. By following LMX theory in remote work, leaders can develop strong relationships with their team members, leading to higher job satisfaction, motivation, and performance. (Liao, Wang & Liu 2020.)

### 3 Self-leadership

Self-leadership is influencing oneself to achieve goals (Houghton & Neck 2006). Self-leadership involves taking charge of one's thoughts, behaviors, and emotions to achieve desired outcomes. In remote work, self-leadership is essential because employees must rely on themselves to stay motivated and focused. Houghton et al. (2012) developed the Abbreviated Self-Leadership Questionnaire (ASLQ) to measure self-leadership behaviors, which include self-goal setting, self-reinforcement, and self-cueing. Ross (2014) proposes a conceptual model for understanding the process of self-leadership development. The model consists of three phases: self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-development. In the self-awareness phase, individuals must become aware of their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions to identify areas for improvement. The self-regulation phase involves developing strategies to regulate thoughts, behaviors, and feelings. Finally, self-development involves implementing new behaviors and strategies to achieve personal goals. Steiner (2020) argues that promoting self-leadership can significantly impact employee productivity and engagement in remote work settings. By promoting self-leadership, organizations can empower employees to take charge of their work and maintain motivation and focus despite the virtual distance. Neck et al. (2020) also highlight the importance of self-leadership in promoting personal excellence, which ultimately translates to organizational success.

Self-leadership is a demanding skill. To navigate unclear decision-making and tasks, employees require good self-awareness, self-confidence, initiative, goal orientation, and the ability to take responsibility, make independent decisions, prioritize, and delegate. Many companies built on the ideology of self-leadership, typically technology startups, are currently paying the price for not achieving their expected outcomes. This has resulted in exhaustion, tense atmospheres, inefficiency, excessive haste, stress, prioritization issues, and uncertainty. Another problem is a free-rider syndrome: it has been noticed that there are always those who do not work towards the common goal but enjoy the benefits of reaching it since bonuses and other rewards for hard work are often distributed equally in companies based on the ideology of equality. Therefore,

reducing formal and official control may not liberate the individual from control; it may produce the opposite effect. The absence of supervisors and clear responsibilities can lead to a power vacuum, which employees fill with an informal hierarchy. This casual elite usually consists of people with the most so-called social capital, meaning the most vital views, courage to voice them, natural leadership, and the capacity to use it. When the informal elite starts making decisions and telling others how things should be done without a spoken mandate, other employees begin to feel dissatisfied, which is conducive to a tense atmosphere. (Savaspuro 2019: 41-43.)

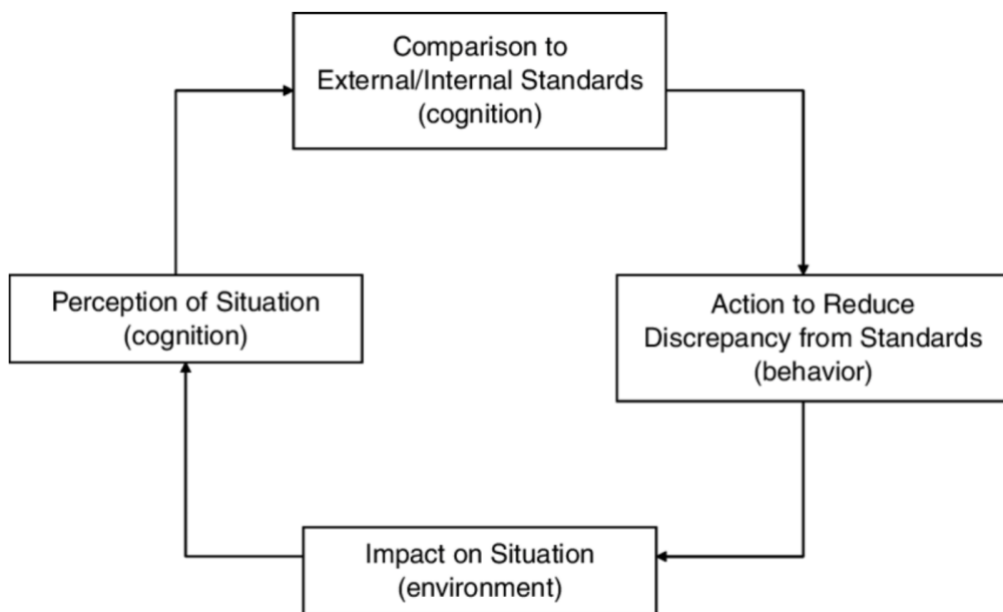
### **3.1 Defining Self-leadership**

Manz (1986: 589) initially defined self-leadership as a "*process through which individuals control their behavior, influencing themselves to achieve self-set goals and to behave in ways consistent with their personal and professional standards.*" That involves directing oneself towards inherently motivating tasks and managing oneself to perform necessary but less inspiring work. In a more recent definition, Neck and Manz (2010: 4) describe self-leadership as "*the process of influencing oneself.*" Self-leadership emphasizes the importance of individuals taking responsibility for their motivation and behavior. According to Manz, self-leadership involves three main behavior-focused strategies: natural reward and constructive thought pattern strategies. Behavior-focused systems involve actively managing behavior, such as setting goals, monitoring progress, and rewarding oneself for achievements. Natural reward strategies involve finding intrinsic motivation in activities, such as finding joy in learning, rather than just focusing on the result. Constructive thought pattern strategies involve cultivating positive thoughts and beliefs, such as developing a growth mindset and reframing negative thoughts into positive ones. (Manz: 1986.)

One of the critical benefits of self-leadership is increased self-efficacy or the belief in one's ability to achieve goals. By taking control of their behavior, thoughts, and emotions, individuals can develop a sense of agency and empowerment that can lead to tremendous success and satisfaction. In addition, self-leadership can also lead to

improved decision-making, as individuals can better assess their strengths and weaknesses and make choices that align with their goals and values. (Manz: 1986.)

However, self-leadership is not without its challenges. The authors note that self-leadership requires discipline, persistence, self-awareness, and a willingness to take risks and learn from failure. Additionally, self-leadership can be problematic due to external factors, such as societal pressures or organizational culture. Overall, Neck, Manz, and Houghton's book provide a valuable resource for individuals and organizations seeking to develop self-leadership skills. By providing a comprehensive overview of the concept and its components, as well as practical tips and tools for implementation, the book offers a roadmap for achieving personal excellence through self-leadership.



**Figure 2** Theoretical framework for Self-leadership (adapted from Manz 1986)

### 3.2 Self-Determination Theory

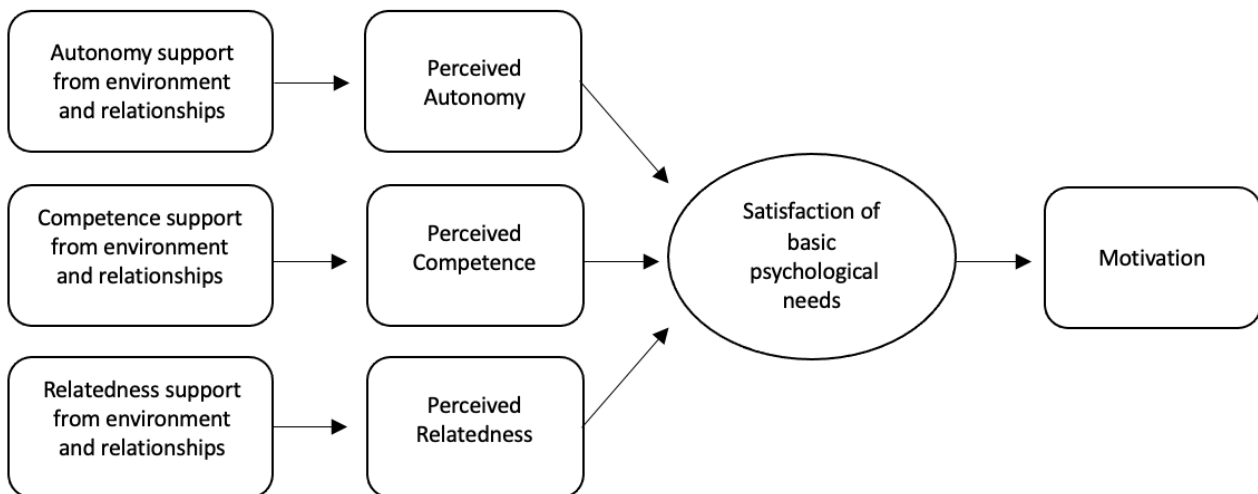
The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) theoretical framework developed by Ryan and Deci offers a valuable lens for understanding self-leadership in remote work. Within this context, self-leadership fosters autonomy, builds competence, and develops positive relationships with others in remote work environments. SDT is a well-established framework widely utilized to explore human motivation, personality development, and well-being. The theory posits that individuals possess three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are satisfied, individuals are likelier to experience greater self-motivation and a heightened sense of well-being. The combination of SDT with the study of self-leadership in remote work provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the importance of satisfying these psychological needs within remote work environments. Specifically, remote workers may thrive and achieve high levels of self-leadership by promoting autonomy, building competence, and fostering positive relationships, even without direct supervision. As such, the application of SDT provides a critical framework for understanding the unique challenges and opportunities associated with self-leadership in remote work contexts. (Deci & Ryan 2000.)

Autonomy is the need to feel in control of one's life and decisions (Deci & Ryan 2000: 233). When individuals have a sense of autonomy, they feel that their actions are self-determined and reflect their values and beliefs. This can lead to increased motivation and engagement in personally meaningful activities. Autonomy is significant because it allows individuals to act in ways congruent with their sense of self and feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for their actions. In the context of motivation, autonomy is linked to greater intrinsic motivation, engagement, and persistence in activities that are meaningful to the individual (Deci & Ryan 2002: 6).

Competence refers to the need to feel capable and effective in one's actions (Deci & Ryan 2000: 233). Individuals with a sense of competence feel confident in their abilities and are likelier to engage in challenging tasks. This can lead to mastery and accomplishment,

motivating individuals to continue engaging in complex and meaningful activities and experience a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. In motivation, competence is linked to greater intrinsic motivation, engagement, and persistence in activities perceived as challenging but achievable. In addition, when individuals experience competence, they are more likely to seek opportunities to develop their skills and pursue goals aligned with their interests and values (Deci & Ryan 2002: 7).

Relatedness is the need to feel connected to others and to experience a sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan 2000: 233). When individuals have a sense of relatedness, they feel supported and valued by others, leading to increased motivation and well-being. Social relationships provide a sense of meaning and purpose, and individuals who feel connected to others are more likely to experience positive emotions and a greater understanding of fulfillment. Deci and Ryan (2002: 7) argued that relatedness is crucial because it satisfies individuals' need for social support, validation, and intimacy. In the context of motivation, relatedness is linked to greater intrinsic motivation, engagement, and persistence in activities that involve social interaction and collaboration. When individuals experience relatedness, they are more likely to feel motivated to participate in activities that involve social interaction, seek out opportunities to connect with others and establish and maintain supportive relationships.



**Figure 3** Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan 2000)

SDT proposes that fulfilling these three basic psychological needs is essential for optimal motivation, personality development, and well-being. When individuals feel that their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are not being met, they may experience a sense of alienation and disengagement from their activities and relationships. One way to apply SDT in practice is to create environments that support individuals' basic psychological needs. For example, in the workplace, managers can provide employees with opportunities for autonomy by allowing them to make decisions about their work and give feedback on their performance. They can also support employees' sense of competence by providing training and resources to help them develop their skills. Finally, managers can create a sense of relatedness by fostering positive employee relationships and encouraging teamwork. By focusing on individuals' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, SDT can help us create environments that support optimal functioning and well-being. (Deci & Ryan 2000.)

### 3.3 Internal and external motivation

Individuals can be motivated either internally or externally. External motivation is driven by the desire to obtain specific rewards such as money, while internal motivation is driven by intrinsic excitement and willingness to perform. External motivation often arises in situations where psychological needs are not being fulfilled, while intrinsic motivation is defined by Deci and Ryan (2000: 70) as "the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn." Gagne and Deci (2005) and Deci and Ryan (2000) discuss internal and external motivation concepts. Internal motivation refers to engaging in an activity because it is inherently interesting, enjoyable, or satisfying. This type of motivation arises from within the individual and is not dependent on external rewards or pressures. Deci and Ryan (2000: 63) described internal motivation as "the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn." Intrinsic motivation is associated with greater autonomy, competence, and relatedness and is linked to better performance, persistence, and well-being.

According to Gagne and Deci (2005) and Deci and Ryan (2000), internal motivation refers to engaging in an activity because it is inherently interesting, enjoyable, or satisfying. This type of motivation arises from within the individual and is not dependent on external rewards or pressures. Deci and Ryan (2000: 63) described internal motivation as "the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn." Internal motivation is associated with greater autonomy, competence, and relatedness and is linked to better performance, persistence, and well-being. Gagne and Deci (2005: 276) argued that internal motivation is driven by individuals' inherent psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When individuals feel that their actions are self-determined, can achieve their goals, and are connected to others, they are more likely to engage in activities for the inherent enjoyment and satisfaction they provide rather than for external rewards or pressures. Gagne and Deci (2005) further elaborated on the concept of internal motivation, proposing that it can take different forms, including intrinsic motivation,

integrated regulation, and identified code. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity because it is inherently enjoyable or exciting. At the same time, integrated regulation involves engaging in an activity because it is aligned with one's values and sense of identity. Finally, identified regulation involves engaging in an activity because it is personally meaningful, even if it is not enjoyable. Regardless of the specific form, internal motivation is characterized by autonomy, competence, and relatedness and is associated with greater well-being and optimal functioning.

Gagne & Deci (2005: 62-63) highlight that external motivation refers to behaviors driven by external factors, such as rewards or punishments, rather than an individual's interests or internal goals. They state that external motivation can be effective in the short term but may not lead to sustained behavior change or a sense of personal fulfillment. Deci & Ryan (2000: 55-56) also define external motivation as being driven by external rewards or pressures rather than internal interests or values. They argue that external motivation can undermine intrinsic motivation, driven by personal satisfaction and enjoyment in an activity. Both sources emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivation in fostering lasting behavior change and personal fulfillment.

### **3.4 Leader's role in Self-leadership**

Leaders play a critical role in promoting self-leadership among their followers, as they must lead by example and inspire their subordinates to adopt self-leadership practices. Self-leadership refers to the ability to manage oneself effectively, set goals, and take responsibility for one's actions and outcomes. Haapakoski, Niemelä, and Yrjölä (2020: 168-169) posit that leaders are instrumental in facilitating self-leadership among their employees. To achieve this, leaders can support self-leadership by providing opportunities for employee development and autonomy and creating a culture that values and encourages self-leadership. Furthermore, leaders can model self-leadership behaviors, serving as a potent example for their employees. Similarly, Savaspuro (2019: 40-41) emphasizes the importance of leaders in promoting self-leadership by providing feedback, setting clear goals and expectations, and fostering a culture of trust and

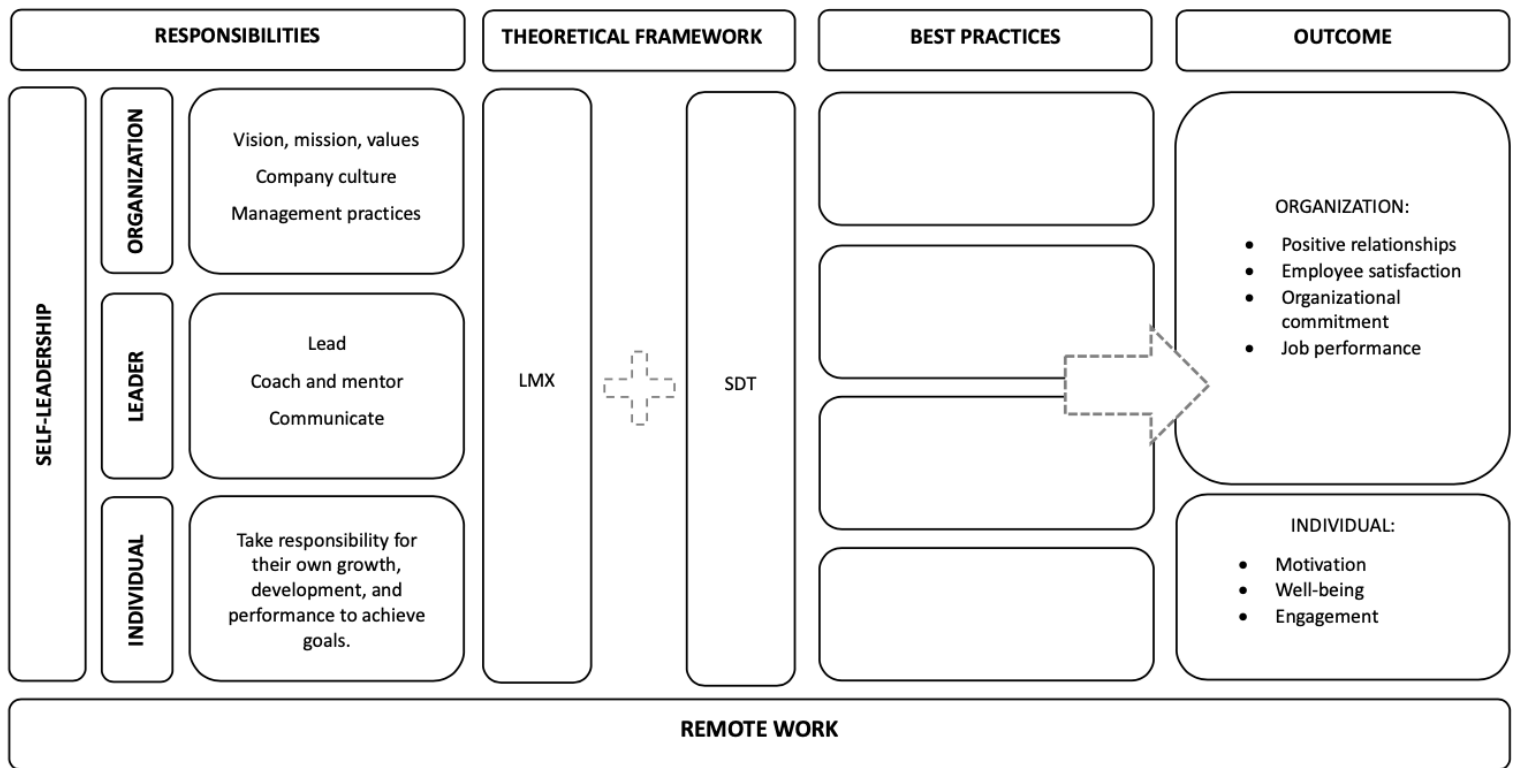
empowerment. Leaders encouraging self-leadership can foster a more motivated and engaged workforce, leading to better organizational outcomes.

Martela (2017: 46-48) argues that leaders can play a crucial role in fostering self-leadership among employees by establishing a supportive organizational culture. This can be accomplished by providing employee skills and knowledge development opportunities, creating a positive work environment, and promoting a growth mindset. In addition, Martela emphasizes the importance of leaders modeling self-leadership behaviors themselves. Järvinen (2014: 41-42) also underscores the importance of leaders in promoting self-leadership among employees. Leaders can achieve this by providing autonomy, offering meaningful work, and opportunities for learning and development. Järvinen further highlights the importance of leaders modeling self-leadership behaviors, as this can serve as a powerful example for their followers. Alloy (2008: 92-94) suggests that leaders can support self-leadership by creating a work environment that encourages employee self-reflection and self-awareness. Leaders can achieve this by providing feedback and coaching, setting clear goals and expectations, and fostering a culture of trust and collaboration. Alloy also stresses the significance of leaders modeling self-leadership behaviors themselves.

Haapakoski et al. (2020: 266-267) state that a leader's role in self-leadership is to provide an environment that supports and encourages self-leadership practices. The leader should create a culture that values and rewards self-leadership, provide resources and support for employees to develop self-leadership skills, and serve as a role model for self-leadership behaviors. Additionally, the leader should give employees autonomy and trust while providing feedback and coaching to help them improve their self-leadership skills. By taking these actions, the leader can create a self-leadership-supporting environment that enables employees to take charge of their work and become more effective and satisfied.

### 3.5 Theoretical framework

Theoretical frameworks of self-leadership in remote work draw on LMX and SDT. LMX theory focuses on the significance of leader-member exchange relationships for team effectiveness, whereas SDT emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for individual motivation and well-being. In remote work, self-leadership practices can be used by both individual employees and leaders to ensure that these basic psychological needs are met and that high-quality relationships are maintained.

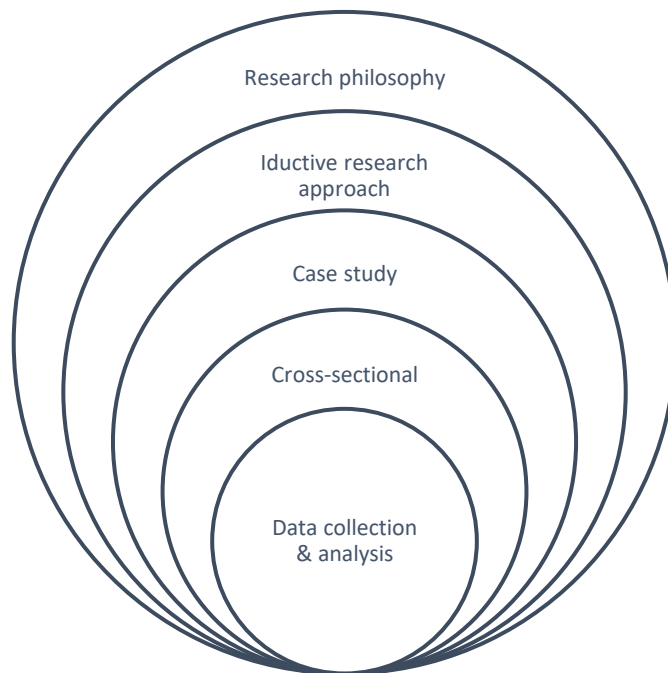


**Figure 4** The theoretical framework of Self-leadership in remote work

To achieve the best possible outcomes for organizations, the study identifies several managerial implications, and best practices, for supporting self-leadership in remote work. By combining the insights from SDT and LMX theory with empirical research, this study offers practical guidelines for leaders and organizations to enhance self-leadership in remote work.

## 4 Methods

This chapter offers a comprehensive exposition of the research methodology employed in this empirical investigation. It begins by elucidating the research approach, succeeded by an overview of the interviewed case companies. A detailed description of the data collection technique and data analysis process is then presented, followed by a discussion on data quality evaluation. Finally, the "research onion" model developed by Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2007) examines the methodology. This model is symbolized by a multi-layered onion structure (Figure 6), where each layer serves a distinct purpose in guiding the selection of data collection techniques and analysis procedures. Research Onion is a valuable tool for understanding the various stages of the research process. By understanding the layers of the onion, researchers can make informed decisions about the design, implementation, and analysis of their research. (Saunders et al. 2007: 76.)



**Figure 5** Research onion (adapted from Saunders et al. 2007)

## 4.1 Research approach

The first layer of the research onion (figure 6) represents the research philosophy and is the first and most fundamental layer. It deals with the researcher's worldview, beliefs, assumptions, and theoretical perspective that informs their research. The second layer represents the research approach, which includes the choice of research strategy, research design, and data collection methods. In line with the research objectives, a qualitative approach is considered suitable. In an inductive course, data is first collected, followed by developing a theory resulting from data analysis. (Saunders et al. 2007: 76.) Hirsjärvi (2009) states that qualitative research's fundamental principle is understanding real-life situations comprehensively. This type of research recognizes that reality is intricate, multifaceted, and unpredictable and aims to comprehend it (Hirsjärvi 2009: 161). The current study seeks to delve deeper into self-leadership in remote work, so a qualitative research approach is deemed appropriate.

This study is qualitative research. Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (text and audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. Qualitative research is a research approach that aims to understand the subjective meaning of human experiences, behaviors, and phenomena. Saunders et al. (2007) explain that qualitative research involves understanding social phenomena' context, process, and meaning and is conducted in natural settings using an interpretive approach. Qualitative research is often used to explore new and complex areas of research where little is known and where there is a need to gain an in-depth understanding of the research topic.

Similarly, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2009: 136) define qualitative research as an approach emphasizing the importance of understanding human experiences and perspectives in their natural settings. Qualitative research is concerned with the meaning and interpretation of social phenomena, and it involves collecting data through various methods such as interviews, observations, and focus groups. According to Hirsjärvi (2009: 136), qualitative research is characterized by its flexibility, allowing the researcher to

modify the research design and data collection methods throughout the research process. Qualitative research also focuses on understanding the complexity and diversity of human experiences rather than reducing them to simple numerical data. Hirsjärvi emphasizes the importance of reflexivity and the researcher's role in the research process, as the researcher's own experiences, values, and assumptions can influence the research findings.

The fourth layer of the onion (figure 6) represents the time horizon of the research, which includes cross-sectional studies. A cross-sectional study examines a particular phenomenon at a specific point in time. This type of study can provide a snapshot of a given situation but doesn't explain how the phenomenon might change over time. Again, this layer is influenced by the nature of the research question. (Saunders et al. 2007.)

## **4.2 Case companies**

The present study is a practical investigation examining five born remote Startup companies, all of which have adopted a remote/hybrid work model from their inception. Self-leadership is a core element of their organizational culture and management practices. These companies operate in the technology industry in Finland and share several commonalities, including their relative youth, having been established within the past decade. Furthermore, they all prioritize innovation and the utilization of technology to address contemporary business and societal challenges. This research approach facilitates a focused exploration of self-leadership in born remote organizations, particularly emphasizing the unique characteristics and practices of technology-based Startups in Finland. By examining a select group of companies that have embraced remote work as a central tenet of their organizational culture and management practices, the study aims to provide practical insights into self-leadership management in such contexts.

COMPANY	EMPLOYEES	ESTABLISHED	INTERVIEWEE	INDUSTRY
A	30	2016	CEO	Tech
B	22	2017	CEO	Tech
C	36	2018	CEO	Tech
D	41	2016	CEO	Tech
E	19	2016	CEO	Tech

**Table 1** Interviewed Startup Companies

The term “Startup” was first popularized in the late 1990s during the dot-com boom and has since become a buzzword in entrepreneurship. According to Livingston (2001), a startup is a young company founded to create a new product or service that solves a problem in a new or innovative way. The book describes startups as being characterized by their rapid pace of development, their focus on experimentation and iteration, and their willingness to take risks in pursuit of growth and innovation. Startups are often founded by a small team of passionate individuals willing to work long hours and take on multiple roles to bring their idea to fruition. Additionally, startups typically seek to disrupt existing markets or create new ones and are often characterized by their commitment to innovation and willingness to challenge the status quo. Blank & Dorf (2020: 15) define a startup as a *“temporary organization searching for a repeatable and scalable business model.”* This definition emphasizes that a startup focuses on finding a business model that can be scaled up sustainably rather than simply creating a new product or service. The authors explain that startups are typically characterized by their high uncertainty and risk and their need to rapidly test and iterate on their business model until they find one that works. Startups are often founded by entrepreneurs seeking to disrupt existing markets or create entirely new ones and willing to take on significant risks to pursue their goals. The book also emphasizes the importance of customer development in the early stages of a startup to ensure that the product or service being developed meets the target market's needs. (Blank & Dorf 2020.)

### 4.3 Data collection

The fifth and last layer of the research onion (figure 6) represents the data collection methods, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, observation, or experiments. The choice of data collection methods is influenced by the research approach and the nature of the research question (Saunders et al. 2007: 76). In this study, data collection is conducted as semi-structured interviews in which the interviewer and the interviewee are in linguistic interaction with each other. Saunders et al. (2007: 343) define a semi-structured interview as "an interview guide that lists the topics or issues to be covered but permits the interviewer flexibility to pursue other topics if they arise during the interview." As an interviewer, I try to create a semi-structured and natural atmosphere. As the name implies, the semi-structured interview is open, conversational, and not tied to a strict format. A semi-structured interview requires time and the interviewer's familiarity and interest in the topic. A semi-structured interview is reminiscent of an ordinary conversation, in which the progress of the discussion is not locked in but progresses within the chosen topic and on the terms of the interviewee. Semi-structured interviews discuss issues the researcher selected in advance, but the interviewer does not overly lead the discussion (Saunders 2007: 332). If necessary, as the interviewer, I will try to steer the conversation back to the actual topic if the conversation goes off track or gets stuck in detail. However, I, the interviewer, ask the additional interviewee questions so that the interview produces the desired result. Interviews were conducted in March and April 2023 face-to-face or on the phone. One interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. At the onset of each interview, the research topic was introduced, and it clarified that the participating organizations and individuals would remain anonymous. Additionally, consent was sought from every participant for audio recording purposes. The interviews were recorded to facilitate meticulous and precise data analysis.

The interview questions aim to gather information about the remote work environment and culture, management of remote work, and self-leadership in remote work. The interviewee's relevant work history in management and educational background will be

explored first, followed by their perspective on the company's working environment and culture concerning remote work. The structures and practices that support self-leadership, communication, tools, and interaction when working remotely will also be discussed. The benefits and challenges of remote work and the differences between different cultures, languages, and nationalities will be explored. The interview will then discuss the benefits and challenges of leading in remote work and the challenges employees face in achieving their goals. The critical factors of successful remote work will also be explored. Finally, the interview will focus on self-leadership in remote work, how it is supported and managed in the organization, and the current knowledge regarding self-leadership and containing it. The benefits and challenges of managing self-leadership will be discussed as best practices. The interview will also explore the benefits of individuals' self-leadership skills to the organization and the critical factors of managing successful self-leadership. This study's detailed themes and questions are in the document's appendices.

#### **4.4 Data analysis**

The fifth layer of the research onion (figure 6) also represents the data analysis methods, including qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches. The research approach and the nature of the research question influence the choice of data analysis methods. (Saunders 2007: 76.) In this study, qualitative methods were used. The data obtained from the interviews was meticulously transcribed from the recordings into written form. To preserve the anonymity of the companies and interviewees, letters (such as Company A, Company B, etc.) were used to identify the interviewees. The data analysis process involved filtering the relevant content following the research question and objectives of the study. Subsequently, the interview data were grouped into different themes, with specific themes and words emerging repeatedly.

A summary of the findings was produced as the analysis aimed to provide a clear written description of the research data. The objective of the content analysis was to structure the research data without losing any critical information and present it more organized

way to provide more insight into the research subject. Additionally, the result of the content analysis should offer a valuable basis for further conclusions. Chapter Five presents the findings of the data.

#### **4.5 The assessment of the quality of the data**

In qualitative research, case studies are often utilized to gather in-depth insights into a specific phenomenon or topic of interest. However, to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, the case study must meet particular standards for rigor. Gibbert et al. (2008) provide a framework for evaluating the critical results of a case study based on the severity of its qualitative research methods. To assess the key findings of a case study, Gibbert et al. (2008) suggest four dimensions: reliability, validity, generalizability, and neutrality.

For reliability, it was ensured that the interviews were conducted consistently and systematically. This included using standardized interview questions and themes, providing clear instructions to participants, and conducting interviews in a similar setting for each participant. Additionally, recording and transcribing the interviews accurately was crucial to ensure that the data was reliable. To ensure validity, it was necessary as the researcher to consider the appropriateness of the interview questions for the research question and ensure that the questions were open-ended to allow participants to express their thoughts and experiences. Additionally, the as the researcher, it was essential to establish rapport with participants to create a comfortable and non-threatening environment that encouraged truthful and honest responses. Generalizability can be addressed by selecting a diverse group of participants representing the population of interest. This can include participants from different geographic locations, industries, and job roles to ensure the findings apply to a broader range of individuals. This study's scope was narrow and limited to a particular sector to investigate phenomena in a specific field. Finally, neutrality was addressed by ensuring the survey was approached openly and avoiding preconceived notions or biases. The data was interpreted objectively. (Gibbert et al. 2008.)

## 5 Findings

### 5.1 Experiences from the born remote organizations

The study explored the experiences of company executives in born remote organizations. Findings suggest that while born remote organizations offer many benefits. However, they also come with unique challenges that require careful management and attention. By leveraging the benefits of remote work while addressing the challenges, born remote organizations can create a competitive advantage and thrive in their industry.

#### 5.1.1 Benefits of remote work

The interview findings indicate that remote work has numerous advantages for companies. One of the most significant benefits is the ability to recruit talent from anywhere in the world.

*"One of the biggest advantages of remote work is the ability to recruit talent from anywhere in the world. This is particularly beneficial for companies based in countries with smaller populations or areas where finding qualified candidates for certain positions may be difficult. By opening job opportunities to a global talent pool, companies can significantly increase their chances of finding the perfect candidate for the job." (Company A)*

*"One of the biggest benefits is that the talent pool is wider than when recruiting onsite. The ease of recruitment is emphasized when we can recruit experts from anywhere. For this, we also use a partner for employment matters (considering the employment laws of different countries, etc.)." (Company D)*

*"Remote work allows companies to tap into the expertise of freelance employees worldwide. This is particularly useful for businesses that require specialized skills or knowledge that may not be readily available in their local area. By working with*

*freelance employees worldwide, businesses can gain access to a wider range of expertise and experience, which can help them to innovate and stay competitive."*

(Company E)

Companies C and D mentioned how remote work can save money, such as rent and utilities, which can be particularly beneficial for startups that may not have the resources to invest in a physical office space.

*"Remote work can also help us to save money. This can benefit startups that may not have the resources to invest in a physical office space. Instead, it's smart to reinvest those savings into other business areas, such as marketing or product development."* (Company C)

*"It's easy to maintain a flexible working environment, for example, in a business hub or co-working space. Many flexible office solutions support a company's changing situation. It's unnecessary to invest in a large and expensive office with a longer rental period."* (Company D)

In addition, the role of a work-life balance was emphasized. For example, companies B and E highlighted how remote work can promote a better work-life balance, allowing employees to focus on work and personal responsibilities, leading to better well-being and productivity.

*"Remote work can help to promote a better work-life balance for employees. Without the daily commute and the distractions of a traditional office environment, employees may find it easier to focus on their work and achieve better results. Additionally, remote work can allow employees to manage their responsibilities better. When employees are well-being, they are productive."*

(Company B)

*"Employees can take breaks and manage their work hours according to their needs when working remotely. Also, remote work can provide a more balanced lifestyle, allowing employees to have more time for things that are important to them (family, hobbies, and personal interests, etc.)."* (Company E)

### **5.1.2 Challenges of remote work**

The interviews highlight several challenges of remote work. Companies A and D note that dealing with time differences and different communication styles can make collaboration more difficult.

*"One of the most significant challenges is dealing with time differences, especially when working with team members in different parts of the world. Communication can be more difficult when team members are not working in the same time zone, and scheduling meetings or collaborating on projects in real-time can be difficult. In addition, different cultures may have different communication styles, leading to misunderstandings."* (Company A)

*"One of the biggest challenges we face with remote work is the time difference, especially since many of our employees are based in the USA when no one is working in Finland at the same time. It can be tough to find common working hours when there are only a few hours of overlap in a day. On top of that, cultural differences can sometimes make it hard to foster a sense of commitment among the team."* (Company D)

The interviewees highlighted common challenges and themes related to managing remote employees. For example, companies B and C emphasize the importance of systematic management for employees to perform at their best. Overall, the answers highlight the importance of effective management practices and employee characteristics in the remote work environment.

*"In the worst case, the employee simply does what they are told. The result of the work may be poor, which does not solve the problems. This kind of situation eats away management resources." (Company B)*

*"If employees are not motivated and do not know what to do, they can easily be left alone. However, this is not solely the employee's responsibility; remote work should be systematically managed, for example, with clear goals and expectations." (Company C)*

*"There is always a possibility for recruiting the "wrong" employees when the growth rate is high. Although seniority does not mean age or years of work, people must be able and willing to work independently. Some employees may struggle with too much freedom and independence if used to hierarchical and controlled management." (Company D)*

*"In a growth company, goals may change quickly. It can be difficult for employees when new needs constantly arise, and priorities change. However, this is part of self-leadership and requires resilient employees. This is not for everyone." (Company E)*

## 5.2 Best Practices for managing Self-leadership in born remote organizations

### 5.2.1 Communication and Tools

The interviews highlighted the importance of clear communication and relevant communication tools and channels for remote teams to function effectively. Technology tools such as Whereby, Zoom, Google Meet, and Slack were identified as effective means for staying connected, collaborating, and communicating in real-time.

*"Establishing clear communication channels and expectations from the outset is important. This can involve meeting regularly online and ensuring all team members know their roles and responsibilities. Whereby, for example, is a great tool for video meetings. You can also integrate Whereby with tools like Google Calendar, Slack, and Trello."* (Company A)

*"Communication is the key, so remote teams should establish clear communication channels and protocols and use technology to stay connected and collaborate effectively. Regular team meetings, virtual social events, and opportunities for team members to connect and share their experiences can help to foster a sense of community and belonging. For example, Slack is a great communication tool for startups due to its real-time communication, integrations, and user-friendly interface."* (Company B)

*"When working remotely, it's important for employees to communicate with their managers and team members regularly to ensure that they are aligned with the organization's goals. This can involve setting regular check-ins or using project management tools to track progress and provide updates."* (Company C)

*"Regarding remote work, the key to success is good communication. At our company, we place a lot of emphasis on using Slack to keep in touch. We find that*

*it's much better than relying on emails for internal communication. We use the Huddle feature in Slack, which is straightforward to use. We also try to keep things as flexible as possible, and we're always willing to jump on a call or have a remote meeting when necessary. Even though we're all working in different locations, we try to make our communication as natural and effective as possible."* (Company D)

*"We encourage employees to effective communication. It helps to build trust and a sense of community among remote team members. When everyone works remotely, communication plays a critical role."* (Company E)

### **5.2.2 Goals and Expectations**

All five interviews emphasize the importance of setting clear goals and objectives for remote workers to enhance self-leadership. Clear goals help remote workers to prioritize their workload and manage their time effectively. In addition, a clear understanding of the company's mission and objectives was crucial for remote workers to ensure that everyone was working towards the same goals and contributing to the overall success of the team and the company.

*"When a company's strategy is clear for everyone, it's easier to achieve goals as an individual. It's important to remote workers because it helps provide direction and alignment with the organization's overall goals. When working remotely, it's essential to clearly understand the company's vision, mission, and objectives to ensure that everyone is working towards the same goals."* (Company A)

*"Setting clear goals can help remote workers to prioritize their workload and manage their time effectively. By thinking for themselves, remote workers can demonstrate initiative, problem-solving skills, and a commitment to achieving results."* (Company B)

*"Having clear goals is essential for employees working remotely, as it helps to keep them focused and motivated. Setting clear, specific, and achievable goals can help remote workers stay on track and ensure that they contribute to the overall success of the team and the company." (Company C)*

*"Although everyone can decide their working hours and location, there must be clear frameworks and expectations. The game's rules are clear, fair, and equal for everyone. We recruit people who fit in this kind of company culture." (Company D)*

*"Our management practices and supervisory work strongly support self-leadership. We have clear goals and OKRs, and everyone knows what is expected from them. In addition, 1-on-1 discussion and development discussions are part of the company's management practices, everyday life, and culture. We offer a safe environment for remote work and self-leadership." (Company E)*

### **5.2.3 Feedback**

Feedback is crucial in self-leadership when working remotely since it helps remote workers identify their strengths and areas for improvement. Companies A, C, and D highlighted the importance of feedback culture. Since remote workers do not have the opportunity to receive immediate feedback from their colleagues or managers, they need to actively seek it out to gauge their performance and progress toward their goals. Interviewees agreed that feedback could also help employees feel more connected to their team and the organization, giving them a sense of direction and purpose.

*"It is very individual what kind of feedback employees wants and how often. Coaching and mentoring are good ways to discuss back and forth and provide feedback constantly. Leadership should be flexible and provide team members with options." (Company A)*

*"Without the constant face-to-face interaction with colleagues and supervisors, remote workers must be able to provide and receive feedback effectively. This requires a high level of self-awareness and self-leadership skills." (Company C)*

*"The feedback culture must be strong to support self-leadership in remote work. Our employees are independent and are encouraged to give direct feedback to their colleagues. We have Teamspective as a tool and plenty of internal training for this. Giving feedback is constantly practiced and encouraged throughout the organization." (Company D)*

#### **5.2.4 Company culture**

Company culture was seen as crucial when working remotely. All interviewees mentioned the importance of company culture when working remotely. Company culture also helps to establish a framework for decision-making and guided behaviors, ensuring that all team members work towards the same values and goals. Additionally, a strong company culture emphasizing trust, support, and coaching helped remote team members feel connected to their colleagues and the organization, increasing job satisfaction and employee engagement.

*"By taking a proactive approach to addressing challenges with time different and different backgrounds and cultures, companies can help to ensure that their remote teams can work effectively regardless of time differences. This can help to foster a strong company culture and to enable businesses to take full advantage of the many benefits of remote work." (Company A)*

*"Company culture that emphasizes trust, support, and coaching is crucial to the success of a remote team. By prioritizing these, remote teams can work together effectively, achieve their goals, and build a strong team culture. We offer all new employees a share in the company, which commits them to work towards its long-term success." (Company B)*

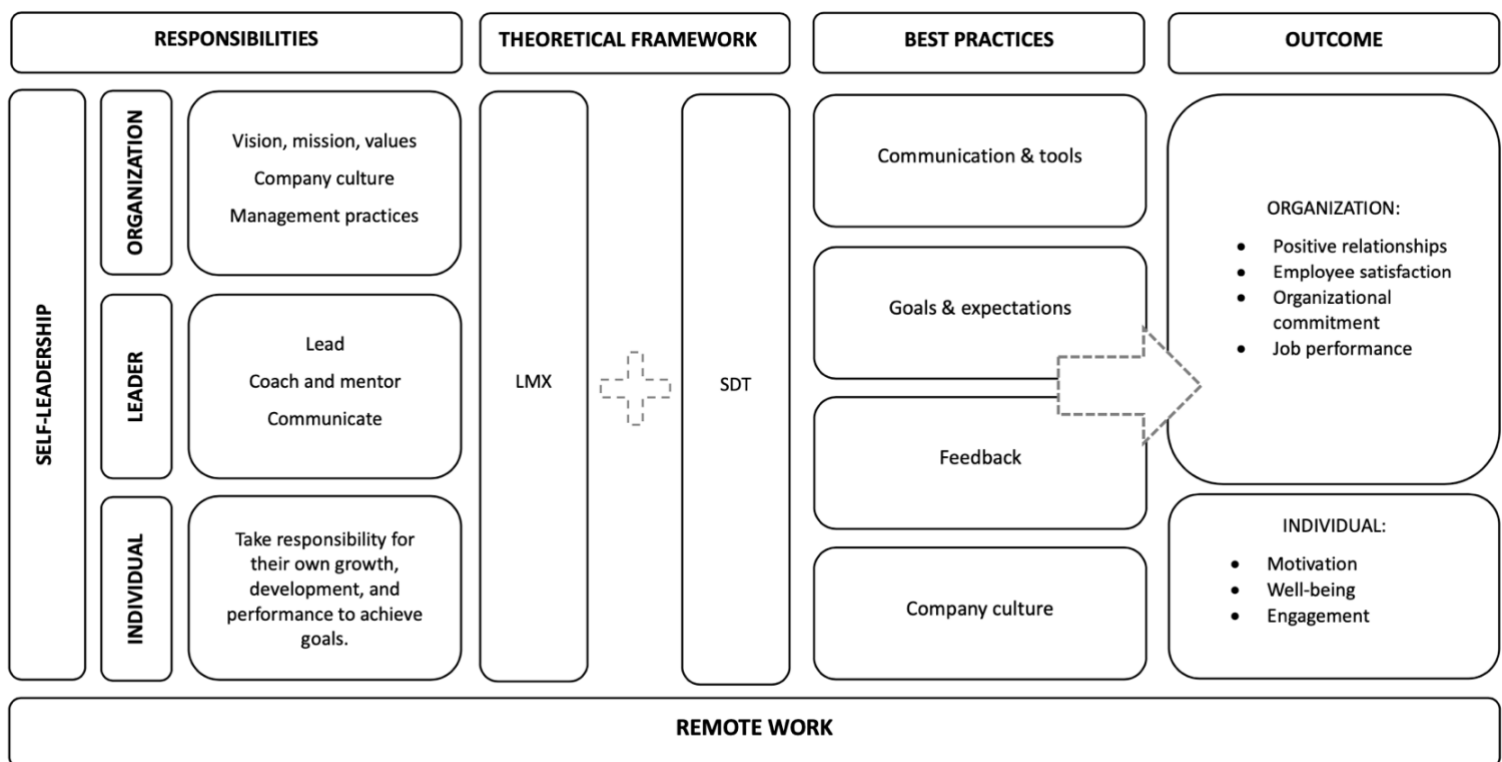
*"Emphasizing shared values and a clear sense of purpose can help to align remote team members towards a common goal and build a strong and cohesive company culture." (Company C)*

*"Our support network and company culture are very strong. We encourage everyone to ask for help and make it easy with different tools. Although employees are independent, at the same time, no one is left alone." (Company D)*

*"When employees feel like they fit in with the company culture, they are more likely to feel connected to the company and its values. This hopefully leads to increased satisfaction and commitment." (Company E)*

### 5.3 Summary of the key findings and the revised framework

Figure 7 presents the synthesis of the theories and empirical findings on the best practices for managing self-leadership in remote work. Four critical practices emerged based on the analysis of the interviews conducted with five born remote companies. Successful management of self-leadership requires communication and tools, clear goals and expectations, constant feedback, and a thriving company culture supporting remote work.



**Figure 6** Synthesis of the theoretical framework and empirical findings

These four management practices can achieve positive employee relationships, satisfaction, commitment, and performance outcomes. Drawing from the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), these factors enhance employee motivation, well-being, and engagement in the remote work setting.

## 6 Discussion

### 6.1 Theoretical contribution

Several studies have been conducted on self-leadership in remote work. Since this study focuses on born remote companies, companies intentionally created as a fully remote or distributed organization from their inception; it opened a new relevant research gap on self-leadership from the perspective of the company's management practices. There is a lack of studies when reviewing self-leadership from the born remote point of view. Previous articles (Bandi 2022; Castellano et al. 2022; Silva et al. 2022; Sjöblom et al. 2021) suggest that self-leadership, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a critical factor for success in remote work and that organizations and individuals should prioritize developing self-leadership skills and strategies to improve performance, well-being, and overall outcomes.

All five interviewees highlighted the importance of communication and relevant tools in communication. Although the articles focus on remote work and self-leadership, they do not explicitly discuss communication or communication tools. However, Silva et al. (2022) examine the effect of remote work on emotional exhaustion and task performance, which may be influenced by the communication tools and strategies remote workers use to manage their workload and maintain social connections. Similarly, Sjöblom et al. (2021) highlight the importance of self-leadership strategies and psychological safety for well-being in remote work, which may also involve effective communication and collaboration tools. In addition, LMX and SDT emphasize the importance of communication between leaders and followers. According to LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995), leaders develop unique exchange relationships with their followers. The quality of these relationships depends on the quality of communication between the leader and follower. Therefore, leaders who communicate effectively with their followers can build high-quality exchange relationships, which lead to higher job satisfaction, performance, and commitment. Self-determination theory (SDT) also highlights the importance of communication in fostering autonomy and relatedness,

two of the basic psychological needs that drive motivation and well-being. According to SDT (Deci & Ryan 2000), individuals need to feel they have choices and control over their work and are connected to others in meaningful ways. Effective communication between managers and employees can help foster these feelings of autonomy and relatedness, increasing employee engagement, job satisfaction, and performance.

In addition, all interviewees agreed that setting clear goals and expectations supports self-leadership when working remotely. Bandi (2022) mentions that self-leadership helps employees set goals, prioritize tasks, and manage their time effectively. Castellano et al. (2021) found that self-leadership positively impacts the performance of virtual teams by enabling individuals to set specific goals and identify action steps to achieve those goals. Also, Sjöblom et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of self-leadership strategies, such as goal setting and time management, in promoting well-being in remote work. They also discuss how psychological safety, a shared expectation among team members that they can speak up without fear of negative consequences, can facilitate goal setting and achieve better outcomes in remote work. Ryan & Deci's (2000) self-determination theory posits that individuals have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Goal setting can enhance these needs by allowing individuals to exert autonomy over their work by setting their own goals, providing opportunities to develop and demonstrate competence through achieving goals and fostering a sense of relatedness by providing a common purpose and direction for individuals and their teams. In addition, leaders are more likely to engage in goal-setting activities with their in-group members, which can lead to better performance outcomes. (Deci & Ryan 2000.)

When working remotely, company culture was crucial from the self-leadership context. Castellano et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of creating a shared vision and culture for virtual teams to enhance performance. Sjöblom et al. (2021) discuss how company culture can impact the success of remote work and emphasize the need for organizations to create a supportive work culture that promotes employee well-being.

While Bandi (2022) and Silva et al. (2022) do not explicitly discuss company culture, they explore factors that can impact employee well-being and productivity in remote work, which are important considerations for maintaining a healthy work culture. Also, LMX theory supports the study's results that leaders should develop high-quality relationships with their subordinates, which leads to increased trust, communication, and collaboration. In turn, this positive relationship enhances the sense of belongingness and identification with the organization, a critical aspect of company culture (Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995). When SDT proposes that employees have three basic psychological needs, company culture plays a vital role in supporting these needs. It provides a context for employees to develop a sense of belongingness and relatedness, enhancing their motivation and engagement in their work (Deci & Ryan 2000).

## **6.2 Managerial implications**

### Communication is the key

Managers should prioritize building a culture of open communication where employees feel comfortable sharing their ideas and concerns. This can be achieved through regular team meetings, 1-on-1 check-ins, and communication tools like instant messaging, email, or project management software to keep everyone on the same page. Effective communication is critical to building trust, collaboration, and employee engagement. Using practical communication tools and platforms, such as Slack, Zoom, Google Meet, and Whereby, are popular communication tools used in Startup and remote work environments since they offer a variety of benefits. For example, Slack and Whereby provide real-time communication, crucial for remote teams to stay connected and collaborate effectively. With Slack and Trello, a real-time project management tool, all communication and updates are centralized, making it easy for team members to find important information, track progress, and stay on top of tasks. Furthermore, all three tools are cloud-based and can be accessed from anywhere with an internet connection, making it easy for remote teams to stay connected and work from anywhere. In addition, Slack and Trello offer integration with other tools, such as Google Drive,

Dropbox, and GitHub, which can further streamline collaboration and make remote work in the Tech field more efficient.

#### Set clear goals and give feedback

Setting clear and measurable goals for employees is essential for enhancing self-leadership and success. Managers should work with their teams to set specific and achievable goals, regularly check progress, and provide feedback. This helps to keep everyone focused on the most critical tasks and motivates employees to stay committed to achieving their goals. Employees with clear goals and expertise can lead themselves toward the goals. In addition, managers should prioritize providing constructive feedback regularly through formal performance reviews, such as weekly 1-on-1's, and more informal feedback, such as through development discussions throughout the year. This helps employees understand how they are performing, what they need to improve, and how they can continue to grow within the company.

#### Build a strong company culture

Finally, a company's culture is a critical factor in its success. A positive company culture creates an environment where employees feel valued, motivated, and engaged. A positive company culture is essential for attracting and retaining top talent. In today's competitive job market, talented employees seek more than just a paycheck. They want to work for a company that aligns with their values and offers opportunities for growth and development. A positive culture helps create a sense of belonging and fosters a supportive environment. In addition, a strong company culture can also improve teamwork. Employees who feel part of a cohesive team are likelier to work together effectively and achieve common goals. A positive culture emphasizing teamwork and collaboration can create a sense of shared purpose and accountability, leading to better results. As a result, companies prioritizing company culture are more likely to attract and retain top talent, achieve better business results, and create a legacy of success.

### **6.3 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research**

This study only examined born remote companies within the technology sector, which may have restricted the insights gained. A broader range of companies could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, as the interviewees were all CEOs, the study's perspective was limited. Including HR professionals may have offered a more well-rounded view of the topic. The study focused on self-leadership in remote work, specifically in Finland. While the literature review suggests an international perspective could have offered an interesting comparison, the study remained local. Furthermore, the permanent changes brought on by COVID-19 have significantly impacted work life, which could have resulted in differences in self-leadership in born remote organizations before and after the pandemic.

Future research could include the perspectives of different organizational members, such as HR professionals, middle managers, and employees, to gain a more holistic understanding of self-leadership in born remote organizations. Including diverse perspectives in research can provide a complete picture of the phenomenon being studied. For example, HR professionals can provide insights into how self-leadership practices are integrated into HR policies and procedures. Middle managers can provide insights into how they support their teams' self-leadership in remote work, while employees can provide insights into their experiences with self-leadership practices. Additionally, including different perspectives can provide insights into developing effective strategies for promoting self-leadership in remote work.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview themes

#### BACKGROUND

- Relevant work history (in management)
- Educational background

#### WORKING ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE

- Company's working environment and working culture concerning remote work
- Communication, tools, and interaction when working remotely
- Benefits of remote work
- Challenges of remote work
- Differences between different cultures, languages, and nationalities

#### MANAGEMENT OF REMOTE WORK

- Benefits when leading in remote work
- Challenges when leading remote work
- Challenges for the employees in achieving the goals in remote work
- Key factors of successful remote work

#### SELF-LEADERSHIP IN REMOTE WORK

- How is self-leadership supported and managed in your organization
- Current knowledge regarding self-leadership and managing self-leadership
- Benefits of managing self-leadership
- Challenges of managing self-leadership
- Best practices for managing self-leadership
- Benefits of individuals' self-leadership skills to the organization
- Best practices for managing successful self-leadership