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# **Feedback as Support for Employee Development in a Global Virtual Team**

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**TIIVISTELMÄ:**

Lisääntynyt tarve globaalille yhteistyölle sekä informaatio- ja viestintäteknologian kehitys ovat kasvattaneet globaalien virtuaalisten tiimien suosiota organisaatioissa. Virtuaaliset tiimit globaaleissa työympäristöissä mahdollistavat sen, että fyysisestä sijainnista riippumatta, työntekijät eri puolilta maailmaa voivat työskennellä yhdessä ja näin muodostaa kulttuurillisesti moninaisia työryhmiä. Virtuaalisille tiimeille ominainen piirre on, että viestintä tapahtuu pääsääntöisesti teknologian välittämänä, ja näin kommunikointi kasvotusten on rajoittunutta tai sitä ei tapahdu lainkaan. Tämän on todettu aiheuttavan haasteita muun muassa viestien ymmärtämiselle, ja näin ollen myös palautteen antaminen sekä vastaanottaminen voi hankaloitua virtuaalisessa työympäristössä. Globaalien virtuaalitiimien suosion kasvaminen on lisännyt tarvetta aiheen tutkimiselle etenkin palautteen näkökulmasta.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on selvittää, miten palaute voi tukea työntekijän kehittymistä työskennellessään globaalissa virtuaalitiimissä. Tavoitteena on saada lisää ymmärrystä siitä, millaisen palautteen koetaan olevan hyödyllistä työntekijän oppimisen ja suorituskyvyn parantamisen kannalta sekä miten palaute edistää työntekijän osaamista ja tietämystä työssään. Sen lisäksi pyritään saamaan näkemyksiä siitä, miten kulttuurinen moninaisuus vaikuttaa palautteeseen globaalissa virtuaalitiimi ympäristössä.

Tämä tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena ja tiedonkeruu menetelmänä hyödynnettiin puolistrukturoituja haastatteluita. Tutkimusta varten haastateltiin yhdeksää globaalissa virtuaalitiimissä työskentelevää työntekijää. Haastateltavat työskentelivät kansainvälisessä työympäristössä, eri aloilla ja tehtävissä, ja heillä oli tiimin jäseniä eri puolilla maailmaa. Tutkimuksen avulla saatiin selville, että erityisesti positiivinen ja rakentava palaute koettiin hyödylliseksi työntekijän oppimisen ja henkilökohtaisen kehittymisen kannalta. Positiivisen palautteen koettiin vahvistamaan työntekijöiden osaamista ja itsevarmuutta sekä lisäävän työmotivaatiota. Rakentava palaute ja palautteeseen perustuva reflektointi antoi mahdollisuuden muuttaa toimintatapoja ja oppia uutta. Palautteen avulla pystyttiin myös lisäämään tiimin sisäistä tietoisuutta eri tilanteista sekä yhtenäistämään prosesseja. Palautteen haasteena globaaleissa virtuaalitiimeissä nähtiin kuitenkin kasvokkain tapahtuvan viestinnän puute. Tämän koettiin vaikuttavan viestien ymmärtämiseen, suhteiden rakentamiseen sekä palautteen toimittamisen viivästyamiseen. Kulttuurilla puolestaan koettiin olevan vaikutusta palautteen ymmärtämiseen, kuinka usein ja millaisissa tilanteissa sitä odotettiin saavan ja kuinka suoraan tai epäsuoraan sitä annetaan. Tulosten perusteella voidaan todeta, että palaute tukee työntekijöiden oppimista ja kehittymistä. Tämän tutkimuksen tulokset vahvistavat aiempaa kirjallisuutta, mutta tuovat myös uusia näkemyksiä aiheeseen liittyen.

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**KEYWORDS:** feedback, global virtual teams, employee, competence development, culture

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# 1 Introduction

The following chapter will present the topic of this study. First, the background of the study will be introduced, leading to the research question and objectives of the study. After this, the delimitations of the study are presented, and lastly, the structure of the study is discussed.

## 1.1 Background of the study

In organizations, virtual teams have become increasingly common due to the growing global marketplace and the advantages of accessing workforce talent from a broader range of skill sets. The development of communication technology is one of the reasons that have enabled the use of virtual teams to become more popular. (Newman, Ford & Marshall, 2020, pp. 452-453). The way of working is significantly altered by the range of information communication technologies that teams extensively rely on their work and communication. (Maynard & Gilson, 2014, p. 4). Virtual teams serve numerous strategic advantages for the organizations and employees, including connecting employees regardless of their physical location, providing individuals more flexibility, and saving in expenses. (Geister, Konradt & Hertel, 2006, p. 460). According to a survey, virtual teams are utilized by approximately 66% of multinational organizations. From the companies that were surveyed, 80% believe that employing virtual team will continue to increase. (Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen & Hakonen, 2015, p. 1314).

It is widely recognized the relevance and growing interest in feedback within organizations, as it is considered that talented employees are a most valuable asset, and this way a key to organizational success. Feedback can influence organizational effectiveness, progression on salary and other work outcomes. As a result, feedback is important for organizations competitiveness. Often effects of feedback are not directly recognized in organizations outcomes, but rather indirectly in employees' behavioral aspects in those

organizations. For instance, enhancement in work performance can be seen as an actual behavioral effect. Additionally, job motivation, organizational commitment, and creativity are perceived as effects in motivational and affective aspects. (Mulder & Ellinger, 2013, p. 5).

It is suggested that the feedback providers and receiver's norms, assumptions and beliefs direct the feedback process besides the work context. Receiver's perceptions of feedback can be impacted by these factors and how it is reflected against performance as well as to how this information is intended to be used. Nevertheless, feedback processes may be different based on the cultural context. Feedback process can involve number of assumptions and values that are not equally shared across cultures. Indeed, it is argued that feedback and relating processes are linked to culture. (Wildman & Griffith, 2015, p. 170). As global virtual teams can consist of individuals from various nations and furthermore different cultural backgrounds, it is claimed that cultural differences can be a critical aspect to global virtual teams' effectiveness, thus it is stated that further research should be conducted on the topic. (Dekker, Rutte & Van den Berg, 2008, pp. 441-442). Due to this, it is relevant to involve this aspect in this study.

Globalization and the ever-changing business environment have created a need for companies to find new ways to facilitate global cooperation. Along with the development and growing popularity of virtual teams, it is important to continue the research on these. (Gilson, et al. 2015, p. 1314). There is significant number of empirical studies examining the effect of feedback in virtual teams. It is suggested in these studies that feedback can contribute to team process, improve team cognition, and performance of a team. (Handke, Klonek, O'Neill & Kerschreiter, 2022, p. 42). Preceding research indicate that the lack of face-to-face communication can affect negatively understanding messages when communicating through electronic mediums. Moreover, teams that utilize electronic mediums to communicate have found to face difficulties to from meaning of information and to manage feedback in their discussions. (Gibson & Cohen, 2003, p. 61). Hence, this thesis aims to gather more understanding about how feedback can foster

employees' competencies and knowledge in a global virtual team setting and further assist in employee development. In addition, it is strived to gain insights into the impact of cultural diversity on feedback.

## **1.2 Research question and objectives**

The cooperation between people around the world is not depending anymore on their location of them as the virtual platform allows people to work from their own space. New information and communication technology, and implementation of them has enabled the virtual teamwork. Virtual teams consist of two or more persons that work towards common goals. (Geister, et al., 2006, p. 459). Members of virtual teams are dispersed geographically, and the work is coordinated predominantly by information in electronic form and by utilizing communication technologies. (Hertel, Geister & Konradt, 2005, p. 69).

It is argued that virtual teams face the inherent lack of information, particularly team feedback. This information is provided to guide activity in teams, and overall to allow members to gain and maintain knowledge of current situations and states. (Handke, et al., 2022, p. 42). According to Geister, et al. (2006, p. 464), there is support that feedback has a beneficial effect on virtual teamwork. However, the empirical studies about this are lacking and it is still unclear which forms of feedback is perceived the most influential. Thus, it is needed to further investigate the role of feedback in employees' competencies and learning at work, and what type of feedback is experienced to be most useful. Moreover, this study is especially interested in how feedback can contribute to individuals' development in a virtual team. The research question is formed as follows:

1. How does feedback contribute to employee development when working in a global virtual team setting?



It has been developed two sub-questions to support the main research questions so that they could be answered as in-depth as possible. The sub-questions are the following:

2. What factors in feedback are experienced to be useful regarding employee's learning and improvement in performance?
3. How does cultural diversity affect feedback in global virtual teams?

The main objective of this study is to strive to obtain more understanding of how feedback receiving and providing occur in a global virtual team, what kind of impact feedback has on the development of employee's competencies, and to identify what kind of feedback is experienced to be the most valuable and useful for the employees. Additionally, it is aimed to obtain more understanding of how cultural diversity influences the interpretation and how feedback is provided and received. The objectives were developed to guide the direction of the research and to provide specificity, clarity, and cohesiveness for this study.

### **1.3 Delimitations of the study**

Today global virtual teams are a common arrangement as global cooperation has become essential in corporations' operations. Virtual teams can allow flexibility to their members regarding the physical place where they are working and provide a diverse and unique working environment. This study will focus on members that work in virtual teams and specifically in a global context to gain more understanding of the cultural aspects. This study is directed to the employee's perspective on the contribution of feedback in their development at work. It is aimed to investigate how feedback impact employees learning and performance while working in a global virtual team setting. In other words, this study will not involve employees that work in traditional teams or do not work in an international environment. In this study, feedback refers to work-related information that employee receives or provides from or to their colleagues, supervisor, external sources, or other stakeholders to describe the qualities and matters of work.

## **1.4 Structure of the study**

This study is divided into seven main chapters. The first chapter presents the background of this study, followed by the research question and the objectives. After this, the delimitations are discussed, and lastly, the structure of this study is presented. The second and third chapters consist of the literature review of the thesis which creates the theoretical background for the study. The virtual team's chapter defines what is a virtual team, discusses working in a global virtual team, and finally explained media richness theory. The third chapter is focused on the feedback topic, covering the definition of feedback, describing different aspects of feedback, and feedback in global virtual teams.

The fourth chapter presents the methodological approaches chosen for the research. This chapter introduces the research philosophy, approach, and design that are chosen for this research. After these, it is presented the data collection and analysis methods, and discussed the reliability, validity, and ethical conduct of this study. The fifth chapter presents the findings of the research, and sixth chapter discusses about the main findings. The seventh chapter is the final part of this thesis, and it provides the conclusion of the findings. This chapter presents the theoretical and managerial implications, and limitations of this study and gives suggestions for further research.

## 2 Virtual teams

This chapter focus on describing and examining virtual teams. The chapter has been divided into three main parts that view the topic from different perspectives. Firstly, it will be defined what are virtual teams, and after that, it is explored the advantages and disadvantages of virtual teams. Secondly, it is focused on working in virtual teams, and further, it is presented aspects of communication, trust, relationships, culture, learning, and technology relating. Lastly, it is discussed the media richness theory.

### 2.1 Defining Virtual Teams

A virtual team is a group of people that work interdependently across space, time, and organizational boundaries and are guided by a common purpose. (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997, pp. 6-7). In virtual teams it is primary or exclusively relied on electronic forms of communication when working together towards accomplishing shared goals. In these teams, it is at least partially replaced the traditional face-to-face communication methods with technology-mediated communication methods. Such methods can include e-mail, synchronous chat programs, phone, and videoconferencing. (DuFrene & Lehman, 2012, p. 1).

Due to increasing globalization and de-centralization in work processes, virtual teams have been introduced in many organizations to response their dynamic environments. Additionally, the communication technologies have developed rapidly, and it has influenced many business organizations to employ virtual teams to some degree. (Hertel, et al., 2005, p. 69-70). Hughes, Robert, Frady, & Arroyos (2019, p. 29) explains the popularity of virtual teams by saying that one individual does not necessarily possess multiple perspectives and diverse expertise that complex problems can require. However, the development of new communication technologies has facilitated teams to work together more conveniently. Thus, teams in organizations are no longer confined to the expertise and knowledge of members that are in the same geographical location, as organizations

can bring together physically dispersed individuals across the globe. (Hughes, et al., 2019, pp. 29-30).

Global virtual teams are defined by Jarvenpaa & Leidner (1999, p. 792) as following: “temporary, culturally diverse, geographically dispersed, electronically communicating work group”. Term global virtual team refer to its members to be geographically distributed and thus being culturally diverse, besides it being dependent on technology in communication and interaction. Additionally, it has been used terms such as “multinational and multicultural distributed teams” and “transnational teams” by researchers, but the global virtual team terms popularity is supported by the clear operationalizing to incorporate the global and virtual requirements. (Presbitero, 2021, p. 1).

Virtual teams have characteristics that differentiate them from the conventional teams, face-to-face teams. The main two characteristics that distinguish virtual teams and conventional teams are spatial distance and information, data, and personal communication. Hunsaker & Hunsaker (2008, p. 88) has illustrated the differences between virtual and conventional teams, shown in Table 1. However, missions that virtual teams are intended to accomplish, and their tasks and goals can be similar to conventional teams. (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008, p. 88).

**Table 1.** Differences between virtual and conventional teams. (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008, p. 88).

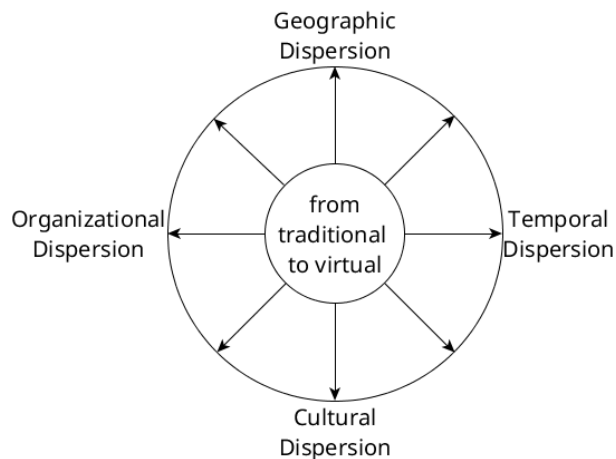
	<b>Virtual teams</b>	<b>Conventional teams</b>
<b>Spatial distance</b>	Distributed	Proximal
<b>Communication</b>	Technologically mediated	Face-to-face

While traditional teams’ members work in close proximity, virtual teams’ cross boundaries of space, meaning that virtual team members are apart from each other, which is their most important feature. Instead of interacting in face-to-face, virtual teams use

various mediating technologies to maintain internal links and perform their work, and rarely are in face-to-face contact. Yet traditional teams that are localized can also communicate through mediating technology, it is often to supplement the face-to-face communication. (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008, p. 88). Technological mediation is the second feature that distinguish virtual teams from conventional teams. These communication technologies are critical for virtual team members that are distributed across space as they provide the means to link members together. (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008, p. 89-90).

### 2.1.1 Dimensions of Virtual Teams

The “virtuality” of virtual teams can be considered through four main dimensions: geographic, temporal, cultural and organizational. The scope of dispersion describes how virtual the team is. Moreover, the more a team is dispersed on dimensions the more it is virtual. When examining the team’s virtuality, it makes sense to consider them existing on a continuum of virtuality, rather than thinking is a team either virtual or not. The different dimensions of virtuality are presented in the Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Dimensions of Virtual Teams. (Zigurs, 2003, p. 340).

*Geographical dispersion* can be defined as the team members physical separation. Geographic dispersion is viewed to be high among team members that are in different locations, such as different offices or cities. On the contrary, team members that are in same physical location are viewed as geographically collocated, and therefore the geographic dispersion is seen to be low. (Hughes, et al., 2019, pp. 31-32). Among scholars, the geographic dispersion is viewed as one of the distinguishing characteristics that constitutes virtuality. (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017, p. 572).

*Temporal dispersion* relates to the differences among team members normal working hours and the extent to which their hours overlap. Temporal dispersion exacerbates the challenges of coordination, as the spatial separation is amplified, thus makes the synchronous interaction difficult. (O'Leary & Cummings, 2007, p. 438). Team members that work at different times are seen to be temporally dispersed, and members that work at same time are temporally collocated. (Hughes, et al., 2019, p. 32).

*Cultural dispersion* is one of the dimensions, as virtual teams are likely to consists of team members that diverse in their cultural backgrounds. The cultural diversity is increased in virtual teams as they are not restricted by location. (Krumm, Terwiel & Hertel, 2013, p. 34). According to a survey conducted to 1372 business respondents from 80 different countries, 85% of them were working on virtual teams and 48% of them said that half of their virtual team members were from other cultures. This growth is seen to be contributed by factors such as globalization and distributed expertise. (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017, p. 569).

Virtuality is considered also from the *organizational dispersion* perspective as among others, virtual teams overcome the limitations of organizational affiliation. (Piccoli, Powell & Ives, 2004, p. 360). Virtual teams have the ability cross boundaries and this way these teams can be more flexible, adaptive, and responsive. Thus, by crossing organizational boundaries, virtual teams can access the most qualified individuals or needed expertise around world. (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002, p. 31).

### 2.1.2 Advantages of Virtual Teams

It has been recognized that virtual teams can provide many advantages, as these teams can overcome the limitations concerning time, space, and organizational affiliation. Consequently, it is seen that virtual teams enables the increasing demand for cross organizational cooperation, to encounter the growing shift to service environment, overcome the geographical, organizational, and temporal boundaries, and to gather dispersed talent. (Piccoli, et al., 2004, p. 360).

Virtual teams offer evident benefits in labor pool enhancement. Best talent can be employed in virtual teams as knowledge generation, work, innovation, and management are not bound geographically or locally. (DuFrene & Lehman, 2012, p. 5; Snellman, 2014, p. 1253). Employer efficiencies show when layers of management can be erased, thus valuable time will be saved from bureaucratic processes. Also, organizations can merge specific talents of employees from different locations. In virtual teams the exposure to workers differences in sense of their backgrounds and locations can encourage the appreciation of diversity. (DuFrene & Lehman, 2012, pp. 5-6). Moreover, virtual teams that are inclusive can develop a contributive environment in which it is accepted and respected members differences in nationality, gender, values, personality, religion, and physical appearance. (Hung, Cheng, Hou & Chen, 2021, p. 600). Virtual team provide also greater flexibility for the individuals, and this way can increase the worker satisfaction. (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008, p. 87; DuFrene & Lehman, 2012, p. 6).

One of the most noticeable benefits of virtual teams is the savings in costs. As virtual teams are capable to overcome geographical distance and offer flexibility in that sense, many organizational expenses can be reduced. These expenses can relate to physical meetings, costs of hotels and plane tickets, car rentals and food. The costs can be also associated in face-to-face meetings and the time involved on each expert. Also, the time that participants would use in travelling to meetings, can be focused on productive activities. (DuFrene & Lehman, 2012, p. 5). Benefits regarding facilities emerge in the less need for office space and for example parking space, as workers can work from remote

location to some degree. Additionally, the implementation of virtual teams can decrease the environmental strains and air pollution by reducing daily commuting traffic. (DuFrene & Lehman, 2012, p. 6; Hertel, et al., 2005, p. 72).

### **2.1.3 Disadvantages of Virtual Teams**

It is claimed that to some extent virtual teams face similar challenges as the traditional teams. However, there are again challenges caused by dispersion of team members and the information technology that is used to communicate. (Snellman, 2014, p. 1256). Particularly, virtual teams face challenges concerning communication, trust, and team cohesiveness. Additionally, it has been argued that virtual teams five main disadvantages would be:

1. lack of physical interaction
2. loss of face-to-face synergies
3. lack of trust
4. greater concern with predictability and reliability
5. lack of social interaction. (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008, p. 90).

Interpersonal communication can be challenging in the absence of physical contact, and the lack of non-verbal communication causes more weight on words. Because the relationships can be harder to form in virtual environment, virtual teams can lack cohesion. (DuFrene & Lehman, 2012, p. 7). There can be mentioned two main sources that causes challenges to virtual team members regarding communication. Firstly, team members lose much of the contextual information because technology is lower in social presence and in richness compared to face-to-face context. This can cause misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Secondly, most of the communication through technology is asynchronous, meaning that there is a lag between messaging. Thus, this can reduce efficacy and immediacy of feedback, but on the other hand provides the time to think about responses. (Maznevski, Davison & Jonsen, 2006, pp. 365-366).



The lack of non-verbal cues is one of the issues that cause challenges in communication. When conversing face-to-face, people rely on various modes of communication, for example, tone of voice, volume, facial expressions, eye movement, hand gestures and other body language. (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008, p. 91). Individuals are not able to use non-verbal cues, like body language when remote. Many modes of communication are limited when team is dispersed geographically. Moreover, virtual work context changes the quality of engagement, besides the quantity of interaction. (Dinh, Reyes, Kayga, Lindgren, Feitosa & Salas, 2021, p. 2).

Due to technical work environment, the isolation between people can increase in virtual teams, and therefore cause challenges. (Hertel, et al., 2005, p. 72). Others can experience disconnection and loneliness when working remotely, although some people enjoy it. Without proximity of support workers can feel “socially unemployed”. Also, without in-person social exchanges meaningful relationships can be harder to develop. (DuFrene & Lehman, 2012, pp. 6-7). Additionally, trust is a large issue in virtual teams, yet it is a major factor of team success. (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008, p. 90). In a virtual team setting building trust can be challenging task. Because of lack of the physically observed behaviors, virtual team members are dependent on different behaviors unique to virtual settings to assess trustworthiness. (Alsharo, Gregg, & Ramirez, 2017, p. 479).

In virtual teams the coordination of work can be challenging as team roles do not appear as easily as they would in face-to-face situations. Therefore, effective leadership is essential in efficient planning and communication. Exceptional leadership is required in virtual teams, and leaders have various tasks that they must carry out skillfully. These tasks involve leverage of team talent, provide team with necessary information and clear work goals, include all members, promote trust, encourage discussion and interaction, and manage conflict. (DuFrene & Lehman, 2012, p. 8). Hence, leaders in virtual teams must stay engaged in every step within the team’s life cycle. Leaders must actively build team’s strengths as they emerge by promoting timely feedback and reflection. (Maznevski, et al., 2006, p. 372).

## 2.2 Working in a Global Virtual Team

Global virtual teams have turned into daily part of business in the workplaces. These workgroups take place in a multinational setting in which team members are electronically connected and geographically dispersed, which makes these teams also culturally diverse. (Richter, Martin, Hansen, Taras & Alon, 2021, p. 351). These virtual teams enable bringing together knowledge workers over distance and time to unite effort and attain common goals. This work arrangement provides the ability to maximize functional expertise regardless of physical location, and this way allows to share knowledge across organizational units and geographic boundaries. (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017, p. 569).

Virtual work has become increasingly popular over the last 20 year, and due to the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic this trend has grown exponentially. (Newman & Ford, 2021, p. 1). The current Covid-19 pandemic has concise workers' physical mobility both domestically and internationally. Many firms have institutionalized the virtual working as a response and to manage the caused constraints by Covid-19. (Presbitero, 2021, p. 1). Due to the situation, new routines and technologies has been adapted to collaborate on tasks when team members work from home. (Grözinger, Irlenbusch, Laske & Schröder, 2020, p. 201). However, virtual working is not a new concept, as multinational companies have formed global virtual teams over the past decades and this way operated virtually earlier. (Presbitero, 2021, p. 1).

The emergence of Covid-19 transformed radically organizations underlying structures by forcing large parts of working population globally to shift into virtual working mode. Before that the organizing of virtual teams was essentially based on a choice that was driven by the organizations to access talent that was dispersed globally and to develop collaborations, as well to become more adaptive and flexible. Additionally, this form of organizing could result from preference of individuals for flexible working. Therefore, adaptation to virtual teams due to the current pandemic was not primarily a consequence of choice but rather must ensure organizational continuity and survival.

Increasing number of business signals suggest that these new types of virtual teams may stay and replace offices to some degree. (Chamakiotis, Panteli, & Davison, 2021, p. 2).

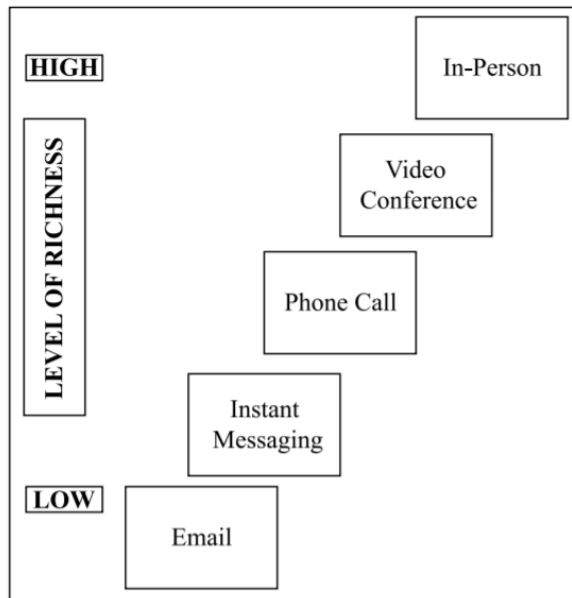
### **2.2.1 Communication**

Communication can be defined as a process of information, meaning, and understanding transferring between two or more parties. Communication reinforces collaboration between people, decision making and acts towards organizational objectives, and therefore is fundamental in organizations and in working. (Berry, 2011, p. 192). Global virtual teams are described to be temporary, geographically dispersed and culturally diverse that communicates electronically. (Presbitero, 2021, p. 1). Communication in virtual teams is typically based on asynchronous computer-mediated knowledge and information dispersion, thus the communication differs from face-to-face communication. This type of communication allows multiple conversations to occur simultaneously from various contributors. (Snellman, 2014, p. 1257).

Based on how it is wanted to employ a particular communication technology, sender and receiver can agree on the appropriation of communication technology. Such can be considered either as *synchronous* or *asynchronous* appropriation. These are appropriations are described based on the delay between sending and receiving a message. When there is little if any delay between sending and receiving message synchronous communication occurs. When there is a significant delay between sending and receiving message asynchronous communication occurs. (Hughes, et al., 2019, p. 33).

Synchronous communication tools can include face-to-face communication, videoconferencing, voice-only communication, conference calls, and chats that are synchronous electronic communication. Asynchronous communication involves tools such as, email, newsgroups, video, voice-only, and chats. (Hughes, et al., 2019, p. 35; Smith, 2014, pp. 3-4). Synchronous communication is viewed to be richer as the information that is detailed, comprehensive and effective is transferred immediately, compared to

asynchronously transferred information with few information cues. (Walsh, 2019, p. 101-102). In Figure 2 it is illustrated the richness of different communication technologies.



**Figure 2.** Richness of communication technology. (Walsh, 2019, p. 101).

Issues relating to synchronous communication can comprise the imbalance between the amount of sent and received messages. The discussion can consist of only few active speakers and ones that do not engage to conversation or that are not active. There can be also issues with not being heard or not being able to present ideas if the sizes of meetings are big. In these types of situations some can be reticent when other participants are more forthcoming. (Smith, 2014, p. 5). Again, it is associated considerable delays with asynchronous communication that affects to teams' engagement to convergence due to lack of real-time engagement or rapid negotiations. (Hughes, et al., 2019, p. 34). However, asynchronous communication has its advantages in allowing the time to consider both message and the response or enable to consult other resources. (Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005, p. 704). Synchronous communication allows rapid real-time negotiation, but it does not provide similar time to reflect or rehears as asynchronous communication. (Hughes, et al., 2019, p. 35).

Global virtual teams can face challenges in intercultural communication, due to possible language barriers that can cause misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and conflicts. It can be challenging to understand nuances in communication as communication technology can limit social presence and non-verbal cues. (Glikson & Erez, 2020, p. 2). Communication across cultures is claimed to cause challenges, as it requires sensitivity, ability to create and maintain good relationships, and trust-building capacity to be effective. (Snellman, 2014, p. 1258).

### **2.2.2 Trust and relationships**

Trust is largely recognized in virtual team literature as it is associated with team performance that explain the significant attention. (Jaakson, Reino & McClenaghan, 2019, p. 31). Trust is described to be willingness to depend or rely on some individual, process, event, group, or system in whom one has faith or confidence. Trust is identified to be an important element in virtual teams' success and teamwork. (Geister, et al., 2006, p. 461). To work collaboratively, it involves team members to overcome elements such as vulnerability, risk, and uncertainty. (Alsharo, et al., 2017, p. 480). Additionally, for promoting learning and innovation in collaborative relationships, trust is an essential factor. Trust encourages team members to accept and utilize information provided from their team members. (Hughes, et al., 2019, p. 42).

In all teams' high-quality relationships are important, as they can reduce destructive conflict in teams, increase comfort in brining diverse perspectives on tasks, manage and gain value from task-related conflicts, and enhance peoples will carry out team's decisions. High-quality relationships are characterized by respect and trust, cooperation, and commitment. Identity is a vital source of good relationships since it can these aspects in a team and improve commitment to the group. By getting to know each other and by creating a shared context for work, teams can develop shared identity. As virtual team members communication is based on technology, it can be more challenging to get to know

people as generally fewer contextual cues and things are interacted. (Maznevski, et al., 2006, p. 368).

Lack of face-to-face interaction can cause difficulties in developing trust between members. This can lead to challenges in task coordination, knowledge sharing and team performance. (Aissa, Gurău, Psychogios & Somsing, 2022, p. 1). Also, several studies have indicated that electronic communication can lead to less cooperative behavior and decreased trust in teams. (Geister, et al., 2006, p. 461). Because of the absence of direct supervision, trust may be even more crucial in virtual teams than in face-to-face teams. Furthermore, teams that possess good relationships can work apart more easily without concern for the process or outcome. Yet, trust can be more challenging to create if there are difficulties to develop shared identity. (Maznevski, et al., 2006, pp. 368-369). When team members can trust each other, they can better communicate and coordinate behaviors. Consequently, trust can improve engagement, morale, and willingness to cooperate. (Dinh, et al., 2021, p. 1).

### **2.2.3 Culture**

The growth and prevalence of global work has contributed to demand for collaborating in culturally heterogeneous teams. These teams consist of individuals that are from different cultural backgrounds, and they pursue on a common goal. Teams that consist of members from various cultures can provide broader range of abilities, skills, perspectives, and task related knowledge. (Gabelica & Popov, 2020, p. 254). Cultural difference as a term is formed to describe the dissimilarity or diversity in basic aspects of culture, such as core values, customs and rituals, beliefs, along with political, legal, and economic systems. (Klitmøller & Luring, 2013, p. 399). Cultural differences within virtual teams can pose barriers that teams and leaders must overcome, relating to cooperation, communication, time and distance, relationship building, language and cross-cultural barriers, trust, and cohesion that occur when team members have limited opportunities to

establish common values. (Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen, 2007, p. 68; Mockaitis, Rose & Zetting, 2012, p. 193).

Culturally diverse teams that collaborate and communicate through digital media can face challenges in developing norms that effectively guides their behavior. According to Krumm, et al. (2013, p. 34) group norms can be defined as *“rules that groups adopt to regulate and regularize group members behavior”*. Norms can assist individuals in recognizing behavior that is acceptable and normal in specific situations or context. In teams that are culturally diverse it is needed to cope with challenges concerning the formation and adherence of norms as these bring individuals together that have been socializing under heterogeneous setting. In one culture a certain team related behavior can be acceptable whereas in other it can be found to be completely unacceptable. As the communication and collaboration in virtual teams occur through digital media it can amplify the before mentioned challenges of culturally diverse teams. Since virtual team’s members cannot casually meet over coffee breaks to chat with each other for instance, it can make it difficult to develop trust and cohesion, as well as gaining implicit knowledge about norms and culture. (Krumm, et al., 2013, p. 34).

#### **2.2.4 Learning**

Learning at work can be seen vital for competitiveness and employability but there is strong evidence that it is important for enhanced performance and problem solving. Learning can be divided into formal and informal learning. First one refers to learning that can be attained through training or education institutes and is certified. Latter describes learning that does not lead to a certificate and is unstructured, instead the learning occurs outside of classroom and the learner has the most responsibility of their learning. (Mulder, 2013, pp. 50-51).

Informal learning can be examined from various aspects. As one dimension it can be considered the intention of learning activities that can be distinguished into three modes.

First one is *deliberative learning* that apply on planned and conscious learning, second one refers to almost spontaneous reaction to a specific event and is called *reactive learning*, and lastly *implicit learning* can be seen to be unconscious learning that the learner is not aware of. Learning is recognized to be combination of physical and cognitive learning activities. It should be also noted that these leaning activates can be also generate learning process that is observable. For example, researching internet is physical activity and can be observable learning process. Social and individual learning activities is an aspect that relates to the interaction point of view while executing learning activities. Individual learning activities does not involve social interaction, while social or collective learning activities involves other individuals either by asking help (one-way) or learning from each other by discussing about a matter (mutual). (Mulder, 2013, pp. 50-51).

Team learning is comprehended to be a process of reflection and action intended to find disparity in teams processes and to make changes accordingly. This process involves a set of team learning behavior by the members of team, such as reflecting on results, asking questions, experimenting, seeking feedback, and discussing about flaws. To be able to reflect on teams functioning, open discussion among team members is needed for the team learning. Thus, team learning can be considered as collective learning involving social interaction among team members. (Peñarroja, Orengo, Zornoza, Sánchez & Ripoll, 2015, p. 10).

Regarding newcomers in a team, it would be especially important to provide them the possibility to learn about norms, the level of formality, expectations regarding communication and use of technology, and customs in a team to develop guidelines to situate virtual teams. By clarifying these nuances among other things, it is possible to reduce uncertainty and anxiety. Additionally, through informal meetings it is possible to learn and mimic the socialization in an organization. It is recognized that various aspects of workplace can be learned much through in-person interaction and observation. (Dinh, et al., 2021, p. 4).



### 2.2.5 Technology

Global virtual teams rely on information and communication technology in their daily operations. Team members collaborate and coordinate on shared tasks that require constant back-and-forth workflows among members. It is important that team strive to communicate efficiently to prevent prolonged work delays and misunderstandings. (Jarvenpaa & Keating, 2021, p. 1). To assist working in virtual teams there are integrated collaborative technologies. These tools help virtual teams to collectively solve problems regardless of geographic distance. Collaboration technologies can be divided into two broad categories that are *communication-focused technology* and *coordination-focused technology*. Communication-focused technologies consist of various tools that support interaction in real-time. These are also considered essential contributors in building trust in virtual teams. Examples of such technologies are Zoom, Skype and FaceTime. (Walsh, 2019, pp. 102-103). Coordination-focused technology involves set of tools that can leverage coordination and enhance trust among team members. These tools can be for example scheduling tools, file sharing tools, co-creation tools and desktop virtualization. (Walsh, 2019, p. 104).

Communication is seen to be comprised of three components. The first one is the sender that transmit the message, second is the receiver who process the messages that are sent to them and third is the transmission medium that is used in the exchange. The effectiveness of communication can be defined based on the receiver's comprehension of sender's message. Moreover, communication technology can contribute to support or fail to support message comprehension. (Hughes, et al., 2019, p. 33). Through various communication technologies, it is possible to attain levels of communication richness. The quality and quantity of information that is provided by the technology determine the richness. In Figure 2. it is described the richness of different communication technologies by arranging them from lowest to highest. For effective collaboration a key factor is to find corresponding technologies concerning communication and coordination to match the needs. (Walsh, 2019, pp. 101, 105).

### 2.3 Media richness theory

Media richness theory presents that media can differ in information richness based on their capacity to promote shared meaning within a certain time interval. (Dennis & Kinney, 1998, p. 257). The theory asserts that the richness of media is influenced by the following four factors: ability of a medium to transmit multiple cues, such as verbal and non-verbal signals, ability to provide rapid feedback, language variety, and to personalize message. (Dennis & Kinney, 1998, pp. 257–258; Sedrine, Bouderbala & Nasraoui, 2021). Richness of a medium depends on its ability to provide those characteristics. (Zigurs, 2003, p. 346). For example, the richest medium is face-to-face interaction, because of its capacity to provide immediate feedback, multiple cues, and natural language. (Sheer & Chen, 2004, p. 77). Whereas rich media, such as videoconference, allows support from verbal and non-verbal signs, lean media, for example an e-mail, does not involve social presence cues, thus can lead to communication disruption. (Klitmøller & Luring, 2013, p. 399).

Media richness theory proposes that media can differ in abilities to handle information that involves conflicting interpretations. Moreover, it states that team members engage in communication to reduce complexity of a task. Media richness theory suggests using rich media for complex information or equivocal messages, and leaner media for providing explicit and simple information, canonical information. Previous studies on virtual teams have shown that misunderstanding and misinterpretations can be caused by media disrupting conversation patterns. Thus, this can affect the effectiveness of communication. Consequently, earlier studies have suggested that knowledge sharing and managing communication is more challenging in virtual teams than in face-to-face teams. (Klitmøller & Luring, 2013, p. 399).

Immediacy of feedback can be described as the extent of a medium to be able to provide rapid feedback on received communications. Most communication can be seen to consist of the sender presenting the message and receiver to accept it. Both sender and receiver should mutually agree that the message has been understood by the receiver

for the communication to be successful. Therefore, feedback plays an important role in communicating that message has been understood. The two fundamental types of feedback are considered as concurrent and sequential. Concurrent feedback is provided at the same time with the delivery of message, and it can take the form of non-verbal gestures such as head nods. Sequential feedback occurs when there is an interruption or pause and receiver confirms understanding or redirects the sender's presentation of message. (Dennis & Kinney, 1998, p. 259-260). Feedback is one of the critical behaviors in teamwork. It is argued that computer-mediated communication (CMC) teams exchange less feedback messages than face-to-face teams. CMC team members need to inquire or explicitly be told about current conditions and what needs to be completed, when non-verbal communication is decreased or eliminated. (Stone, 2014, p. 1382).

### **3 Feedback**

This chapter will examine the feedback and further explore how feedback affects global virtual teams. In this chapter, it is defined feedback and described different forms and aspects of it, including different types, levels, sources, and purposes of feedback. After this, it is focused on the feedback in global virtual teams, and it is discussed the role of feedback in this perspective.

#### **3.1 Definition of Feedback**

Feedback can be defined as providing information by an agent relating to aspects of one's understanding or performance. (Liang, 2019, p. 1642). Feedback is perceived to have a significant role in employees' development and learning, likewise in improving of performance. Feedback can have various beneficial outcomes, such as better self-awareness, greater competence, and skill proficiency. Moreover, it can foster aspects of self-development including engaging in career planning, goal setting for improving performance, acquiring new knowledge, and learning new skills. (Mulder, 2013, pp. 49-50; Mulder & Ellinger, 2013, p. 5).

It is highlighted in existing research that feedback is influential for cognitive, behavioral, affective, and motivational outcomes. For example, cognitive aspects can relate to acceptance and perception of feedback, behavioral can relate to outcomes such as participation, effort, and performance in development activities, affective outcomes can include satisfaction, and motivational outcomes can be feelings of autonomy and competence. However, research explain that "good" or positive feedback does not automatically lead to positive reactions. Thus, to foster learning, it is needed insights in the characteristics of feedback which lead to specific learning activities that are essential for development. This is vital, because the way for example feedback is delivered by the managers can be ineffective. Additionally, some other characteristics of the feedback

message, such as its function, content, the timing, and the form of feedback can impact on outcome. (Mulder, 2013, p. 50).

The various forms of feedback are described by different aspects. First aspect is the type of feedback, and it involves outcome feedback and process feedback. Second aspect relates to the feedback recipient or level of feedback. Third aspect concerns the source of feedback, and fourth aspect covers the purpose of feedback. Distinguishing between the different feedback forms is important due to the underlying assumptions relating the mechanisms of how feedback can impact on development of performance. (Geister, et al., 2006, p. 462).

### **3.1.1 Type of feedback**

The type of feedback consists of outcome feedback and process feedback. *Outcome feedback* provides information on outcomes of performance. Its elemental mechanism is the impact in increasing effort and this way to boost performance. Outcome feedback does not only increase performance of individuals but also teams, especially when it is combined with goals setting. *Process feedback* is information concerning how a job is performed. It is usually included task-related information in individual process feedback, but in team context the process feedback can include information about actions, behaviors, and strategies concerning a task (task related). Additionally, it can contain information about the motivation of team members (motivation feedback) and interpersonal behaviors as well as teamwork (relationship related). With team process feedback it can be directed attention of team members to process variables, like communication, cooperation, and motivation, to prompt development in these processes. Thus, team process feedback is perceived to improve task solving by enhancing interpersonal processes. (Geister, et al., 2006, pp. 462-464).

To make feedback effective it should include goal aspects, outcome feedback that individuals can get an understanding of their accomplishments and performance regarding

a task, and process feedback to provide information on how to improve performance and what strategies should be undertaken. Individuals often receive outcome feedback indicating their performance on tasks and how they met the set goals. However, the outcome feedback does not provide specific information on how individuals should adjust their actions if there is a need for that. If an individual received negative outcome feedback without any process feedback, there is a chance that individual adjust their actions and strategies inappropriately due to a lack of guidance in improvement suggestions. Process feedback can assist in reducing uncertainties by directing individuals' behaviors and strategies, and this way improves their performance. Thus, outcome feedback and process feedback provided together are more effective. (Liang, 2019, p. 1642-1643).

### **3.1.2 Feedback level**

Feedback can be given in different levels, which can have an impact on the effectiveness of feedback. Feedback can be targeted to individual team members, to the team as a whole or both. (Gabelica & Popov, 2020, p. 257). Individual-level feedback provides information that concerns individual team members, as team-level feedback provide information for the whole team. Team-plus individual-level feedback, target simultaneously both the team and its individuals. Consequently, team members can obtain information concerning themselves along with how they relate to others at the same time. (Handke, et al., 2022, p. 52). Feedback is seen to be an essential tool in guiding team learning and this way team's performance. According to London & Sessa (2006, pp. 305-306), the group is not able to learn without feedback, as it cannot determine the extent of the changes needed to achieve goals or move towards them. (London & Sessa, 2006, pp. 305-306).

### 3.1.3 Feedback source

Feedback source and how it is perceived is one of the aspects of feedback. (Gabelica & Popov, 2020, p. 257). Feedback source can be divided into two categories based on the extent to which feedback originates from subjective opinions, perceptions, or judgments, or conversely from measures that are more objective. *Subjective feedback* consists of information about opinions, perceptions or judgements of processes, features, and psychological states concerning teamwork and completion of tasks. *Objective feedback* describes information on teamwork or completion of task stemming directly from events or actions in team members behaviors or team environment. (Handke, et al., 2022, pp. 51-52). According to Gabelica & Popov (2020, p. 257), feedback-subjective source can be sorted to (a) source that is outside the team, such as manager, expert, and customers, and (b) sources that are inside the team, for example, team leader or team member giving each other feedback.

Feedback can be provided top-down by supervisors, bottom-up by subordinates, horizontally by colleagues and peers, or by combining these sources that can be called multisource feedback. (Geister, et al., 2006, p. 462). Top-down appraisal can be seen as a traditional approach to provide feedback, meaning that supervisor appraisal is the only rating source to view individual's performance. (McCarthy & Garavan, 2001, pp. 8-9). In upward or subordinate feedback/appraisal the feedback is provided by subordinates to their immediate supervisors rating their performance. The results are then formally returned to the focal individual. (McCarthy & Garavan, 2001, p. 17). Peer feedback/appraisal occur when members of a work group rate each other's performance by employing a specific scale of rating. (McCarthy & Garavan, 2001, pp. 20-21).

In the past years multisource feedback, also known as 360-degree assessment, has become increasingly popular in organizations. Multisource feedback can be defined as rating of a person based on evaluations given by two or more source. The sources consist of people that are "surrounding" the person being rated, such as self, peers, supervisors, internal and external customers, direct reports, suppliers, and vendors. (Smither, London,

Reilly, Flautt, Vargas & Kucine, 2004, p. 456; Taylor & Bright, 2011, pp. 432-433). Multi-source feedback's main purpose is to provide performance feedback consisting of variety of work-related competencies to the recipient. The results of feedback are returned to the person to support their development and self-exploration. (Taylor & Bright, 2011, p. 433).

According to Wu, Xu, Kang, Zhao & Liang (2019, p. 750), feedback-seeking is "*a conscious devotion of effort toward determining the correctness and adequacy of behaviors for attaining valued end states*". There is identified two tactics of feedback-seeking behavior that are inquiry and monitoring. Inquiry refers to individual's initiative to directly ask for feedback from others. Monitoring relates to individual's efforts to observe actions and situations of others to obtain feedback information. Feedback-seeking can be considered as central aspect of self-regulatory, and as an expression of effective learning interaction. It is recognized that feedback-seeking facilitate learners monitoring of their own progress and guide goal-directed activities towards the learning goals. Thus, it can promote learning, creativity, and adaptation, which makes feedback-seeking a valuable resource. (Wu, et al., 2019, p. 750, 752).

#### **3.1.4 Feedback purpose and valence**

The purpose of feedback can be for evaluative or developmental reasons. (Geister, et al., 2006, p. 463). Moreover, feedback can have several purposes, for instance, providing information about the situation of initially set goals, bring up outcomes of a process or activity, guiding activity, assist in fixing or adjusting new goals, and encourage critical reflection on situations and tasks to generate new insights and approaches. (Gabelica, Van den Bossche, Segers & Gijsselaers, 2012, p. 124).

Regarding the content of feedback, valence is an important aspect of it. Positive feedback incorporates messages that express the satisfactory or higher performance, or acceptance of behavior. Negative feedback involves messages that indicate to unsatisfying



behavior of the recipient. It is argued that feedback that contains a reasonable amount of positive feedback together with some negative feedback to be more effective. Additionally, it is proposed that employees that receive unpleasant feedback are more motivated to make improvements in their job performance when the source of feedback is perceived as credible, the feedback is high quality, and it is delivered in a thoughtful manner. (Mulder, 2013, p. 55).

### **3.1.5 Feedback culture**

Feedback culture can be identified as strong when individuals are able to continuously receive, solicit and use informal and formal feedback to make improvements in their job performance. Individuals' orientation towards feedback can be affected to some degree by the support and climate for learning. Individuals will likely develop positive attitude towards feedback when learning and development is supported, along with the availability for behaviorally oriented feedback. There are three categories of organizational interventions and practices that comprise the feedback culture. First one deal with enhancing the *quality of feedback*, which can involve actions like training supervisors and others about how to provide useful feedback or providing time to clarify and review feedback results with someone. Second one considers emphasizing the *importance of feedback*, for example, ensuring that everyone can receive feedback and use this information to guide their development. Third one relates to providing *support for using the feedback*, such as providing opportunities to learn, and help recipients to interpret formal feedback, set goals and track progress by providing skilled facilitators. (London & Smither, 2002, p. 84-85).

### 3.2 Feedback in Global Virtual Teams

Giving feedback in teams involves transferring information to either teams or individual team members relating to their performance, actions, events, behavior, or processes. Feedback has numerous functions that can be for example, motivating, guidance, reducing or stopping ineffective behaviors, and increasing effective behaviors. Feedback in teams is considered to contribute on their performance and further to coordinated process relating to completion of tasks, by merging their affective, cognitive, and behavioral resources. (Gabelica, et al., 2012, p. 125). It is acknowledged that feedback has beneficial influence on virtual teamwork and performance. It is argued that for developing and maintaining high performance and trust, comprehensive feedback is essential. (Geister, et al., 2006, p. 464). After providing team feedback a period of reflection allows virtual teams to develop mutual understanding of the tasks and on teamwork, which can guide and enhance group processes and performance. (Peñarroja, et al., 2015, p. 11). Indeed, it is claimed that feedback is important for reaching mutual agreement and common understanding among team members, which assist in developing a common ground. (Geister, et al., 2006, p. 464).

It is widely acknowledged that feedback serve a central role in motivation by fostering team efforts and learning due to its informational value. (Gabelica & Popov, 2020, p. 255). Feedback is an important tool in teams for promoting regulatory activities as it provides information about current situation for team members, which enables them to adjust future actions, and apply new strategies based on what was learned. Feedback allows virtual teams to obtain information that would otherwise not be available for them. This is due to virtual teams having fewer observational opportunities than teams that are physically co-located and work in a highly visible workspace, which makes feedback appear particularly relevant in virtual teams. Thus, to improve virtual team effectiveness, effective conveyance and use of feedback can be critical lever for managers, peers, and organizations. (Handke, et al., 2022, p. 42).

Regarding organization effectiveness, a critical question is whether feedback can be provided to teams that consists of members with different cultural backgrounds and expect that it will be perceived and processed in the same way regardless of their cultural background. In literature it is often expressed that feedback practices and contingences might not always be solely effective across other cultures. Major misunderstandings and even conflicts can occur among team members that have differing values, beliefs, norms, attitudes, and cognitive styles. Moreover, in multicultural teams it can appear major differences in receiving feedback. The differing attitudes relating decision-making, problem solving, hierarchy and high versus low context communication styles among other factors can cause misunderstandings and process losses. For instance, some individuals can perceive that providing critical feedback and being straightforward is an effective way to identify possible shortcomings and an opportunity to learn. However, some may take the critical feedback as inappropriate and would prefer to avoid interpersonal confrontations and conflicts. Culturally diverse teams constitute demand for competence in teamwork regulatory for both team members and managers and leaders concerning the culture-related challenges. (Gabelica & Popov, 2020, pp. 253-255).

Existing research on feedback in teams has recognized that feedback process is a constant dynamic system of performance management rather than an isolated event. Research has emphasized the importance of continuous reflection and feedback mechanisms for teams to success. (Gabelica & Popov, 2020, p. 255). Moreover, it is observed regarding feedback types that process feedback effects team learning, functioning and member's satisfaction, whereas performance feedback shows to improve performance. Additionally, when the objective of feedback giver is to influence member's attribution of performance to the team, attitudes towards the team and reduce disagreement among team members, research propose that team-level feedback can be more effective in case of team and task independence, with team members who are prone to affiliate with others. (Gabelica, et al., 2012, p. 127).

## **4 Methodology**

In this chapter, the methodological choices of this study are presented and justified. The research approach for this study will be introduced, and the research philosophy will be explained. It is also introduced the way data is collected and further analyzed. Lastly, it is discussed about validity, reliability, and ethical conduct of this study.

### **4.1 Research philosophy and approach**

Research philosophy relates to the knowledge development and to the nature of that knowledge. The research philosophy that is adopted by the researcher involves important assumptions about the researchers views about the world. The research strategy and methods that are chosen are supported by these assumptions. Moreover, the employed research philosophy will be influenced by practical considerations. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007, p. 101). Interpretivism was chosen as the research philosophy in this thesis. Interpretivism is described to be epistemology that highlights the differences between humans in the role of social actor. It is seen necessary that these differences are understood by the researcher while conducting research. It is argued that an interpretivist perspective aligns especially well with business and management research. As these business situations are unique and complex in nature the goal is to capture the rich essence of these situations and generalizability of the research is not crucial. (Saunders, et al., 2007, pp. 106-107). As this thesis aims to gather more understanding and insights about the feedback's impact on employee development in a global virtual team setting, interpretivism is considered an appropriate research philosophy.

Research approach refers to how theory is employed in research. Deductive and inductive approaches are the most common ones to use. In deductive approach it is established a theory and hypothesis that are later tested. In inductive approach, the theory is formed based on the results of data analysis that is developed from the collected data. (Saunders, et al., 2007, p. 118). This study applies a deductive approach. The literature

review was established in the beginning to gain more understanding of the topic and to facilitate the planning of executing the research. The theory was developed during completing the literature review.

## **4.2 Research design**

Research design is the plan of research that guides on how the research question will be answered by the researcher. The ways in which the research question is chosen to be answered are influenced by the approach and philosophy of the research. Research design consists of clear objectives, the sources that are utilized to collect data, the constraints that will be faced, and ethical aspects. More importantly, it reflects on how well the employed research design is considered and planned. The decisions of research design must have valid and justified reasons behind them. (Saunders, et al., 2007, pp. 130-131).

Research methods can be divided into qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative research utilizes non-quantitative data collection and analysis methods, and it aims to examine the social relations and describe how the respondents have experienced a phenomenon. Conversely, quantitative research uses statistical analysis and applies quantitative and numerical measurements. (Adams, Khan & Raeside, 2014, p. 6). A qualitative research method was chosen for this thesis due to the nature of the studied phenomenon, which cannot be assessed in-depth in quantitative terms but rather by examining the experiences and views of respondents.

## **4.3 Data collection and analysis**

For the primary data collection method, it was chosen semi-structured interview to be able to collect in-dept insights and experiences on the topic. Interviews happen between two or more people and can be described as purposeful discussions. Interviews can

assist to gather reliable and valid data that is significant for the research question and objectives. (Saunders, et al., 2007, p. 310). Semi-structured interviews are non-standardized and are often called as qualitative research interviews. Semi-structured interviews comprise of themes and questions that are planned beforehand, yet these questions can vary between interviews. Also, the order in which the questions are asked can vary depending on the flow of discussions. (Saunders, et al., 2007, p. 312).

A total of nine interviews were conducted and all of them were conducted anonymously. Participants of the interviews work in various industries, and positions and they have varying years of experience working in a global virtual team. Additionally, they have different geographical areas that they focus on in their work, thus their colleagues are located around the world. Only individuals working in global virtual teams were selected for the sample of interviews. For this study, this criterion was necessary because the research deals with global virtual teams. Another criterion was that all interviewees worked in an international setting, and they had colleagues from other countries or locations besides their respective locations to ensure a global perspective on the working.

Interview questions were sent beforehand for the participants to allow them to familiarize themselves and prepare for the interviews. Participants were also given information about the topic and purpose of the thesis, what is their part in the research and how the data will be handled and used. The interviews lasted from 30 to 40 minutes, and five of them were held in Finnish and four were in English. The interviews were conducted in two languages to allow the interviewees to use their preferred language so that they could share their experiences and opinions as freely and in-depth as possible. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the interviews had to be conducted remotely. Two of the interviews were held through phone calls, and five through internet-mediated tool Microsoft Teams. However, the rest two of the interviews were able to be kept in a face-to-face setting. All interviews were recorded with the participants' permission, and these recordings were deleted after this thesis was completed. Table 2 introduces the

interviewees and their respective areas of expertise, the industries they work in, and the years they have worked in a global virtual team.

**Table 2.** Introduction of the interviewees

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Area of expertise</b>	<b>Experience of a global virtual team (years)</b>
Interviewee 1	Technology	Purchasing	1
Interviewee 2	Technology	Purchasing	4
Interviewee 3	Electrical equipment	Logistics	2,5
Interviewee 4	Technology	Purchasing	4
Interviewee 5	Mining	Logistics	2
Interviewee 6	Technology	Purchasing	10
Interviewee 7	Technology	Purchasing	3
Interviewee 8	Technology	Purchasing	4
Interviewee 9	Technology	Procurement and supply chain management	1

All interviewees used the internet-mediated tool Microsoft Teams to communicate with their team members at work. Microsoft Teams was used both as a daily communication medium and to keep meetings. All interviewees used the chat feature to interact with colleagues and other contact persons. Additionally, voice and video calls in Microsoft Teams were utilized for communication. E-mails were also used by all interviewees as a part of their communication mediums at work. Some used phone calls to communicate with colleagues and suppliers. One interviewee had used previously WhatsApp to interact with team members at work. Table 3 presents information about the interviewee's

working environment, including geographical focus area, location of team members, and the technology that is used to communicate with colleagues.

**Table 3.** Information about interviewees work environment

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Geographical focus areas</b>	<b>Location of team members</b>	<b>Technology used to communicate</b>
Interviewee 1	Finland	Finland, Norway, Sweden	Microsoft Teams and e-mail
Interviewee 2	Focus on Finland, yet tasks globally in Central Europe, Africa, South and North America, Asia	Closest team members in Finland and Norway	Microsoft teams, e-mail, and phone calls sometimes
Interviewee 3	Tasks globally	Finland and Sweden	Microsoft teams, e-mail, and phone calls
Interviewee 4	United Kingdom	In Central Europe countries and some in Finland	Microsoft teams, and e-mail
Interviewee 5	Tasks globally	Finland and Sweden	Microsoft teams, and e-mail
Interviewee 6	Finland and Nordic countries	Finland and Norway	Microsoft teams, e-mail, and previously WhatsApp
Interviewee 7	Currently Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. Previously, UK, Switzerland, US, and Canada	Team members mainly in Norway, Sweden, and Finland	Microsoft teams, and e-mail
Interviewee 8	Central Europe	France, Germany, the UK, Switzerland, Netherland, and Poland	Microsoft teams, and e-mail
Interviewee 9	Central Europe and Finland	Team members mainly in Germany and Netherlands	Microsoft teams, and e-mail



Qualitative research interviews are often transcribed from the audio-recorded format, and this was also done in this research with the help of recordings of the conducted interviews. (Saunders, et al., 2007, p. 475). The transcribes were saved in separate files distinguished between participants. Later, the written results were moved to another file and classified into meaningful categories. After this it was identified and connected relevant data units and these were divided into corresponding themes, and further analyzed the relationship between data. To assist the categorizing process, it was utilized color coding to facilitate the data analysis. Qualitative analysis involves set of general procedures and activities that are categorization, unitizing data, recognizing relationships, and developing categories, and to develop and test theories to make conclusions. (Saunders, et al., 2007, p. 479).

#### **4.4 Reliability, Validity, and ethical conduct**

For evaluating and testing measurements of variables and ensuring the quality of data, research design methods and the overall accuracy of study results, there are three criteria that are generally used. These criteria are validity, reliability, and generalizability. Both in qualitative and quantitative research these are important criteria. In qualitative study the generalization can be more difficult than in quantitative research in which it is relatively easy to follow to understand the reality and generalize the findings. However, in qualitative research it is needed theoretical refinedness and methodological accuracy. (Adams, et al., 2014, p. 245).

According to Saunders, et al. (2007, p. 149), “reliability refers to the extent to which your data collection techniques or analysis procedures will yield consistent findings”. Reliability can be assessed by considering if the measures can yield consistent results on other occasions, can other observers reach similar observations or the level of transparency in making sense from the raw data collected. It is professed that the four main threats of reliability are subject or participant error and bias, and observer error and bias. (Saunders, et al., 2007, p. 149-150). As an attempt to minimize any threats to reliability, it is

aimed to be as transparent in the research process as possible by explaining clearly what and how it is done. All interviewees work in a global virtual team, thus, they were chosen specifically to participate for that reason. Along with the similar type of team, it was paid attention to interview people that had a similar working environment in the international aspect. In interviews, the researcher acted neutrally to avoid any guiding or meaningful reactions, that could affect the interviewees' way of answering. Also, all interviewees were kept completely anonymous, and they were asked the same interview questions.

Validity describes the extent to which method used in data collection or the accuracy of methods to measure what they were intended to measure. Moreover, validity expresses the extent to which research findings respond to what they are claimed to be. (Saunders, et al., 2007, p. 614). To enhance the validity of this study, the interview questions were developed to reflect the existing literature and theory relating to the topic of the thesis. In addition, efforts were made to ensure that the interview questions were in line with the research question. The interview structure was pilot-tested in advance to detect any hampering qualities, such as unclear or similar questions. After the pilot test, two questions were altered to improve the clarity and to fix overlapping questions.

By research ethics it is referred to the researcher's behavior and its appropriateness in relation to the people that are subject of research or affected by it and their rights. (Saunders, et al., 2007, p. 610). It is important to address aspects concerning the ethicality of this study. While conducting this study it was ensured that the privacy of interviewees was respected. Therefore, it was clearly informed the interviewees, what the study is about, what are its aims, what is their role in it, and how the data obtained from interviews will be utilized and handled. All interviewees participated in the study voluntarily. Additionally, interviewees were informed in advance that the interviews were recorded, and these recordings would be removed after the study is completed. All the participants gave their consent to do this.

## **5 Findings**

This chapter presents the conducted interviews. The findings are presented in two main themes that are working in a global virtual team and feedback in a global virtual team. Firstly, data relating to working in a global virtual team is presented. The data is divided into subparagraphs that focus on presenting the interviewees' views about the advantages and disadvantages of a global virtual team. Lastly, it is displayed the data concerning feedback in a global virtual team, and the data is further divided into topics that deal with receiving and providing feedback, the usefulness of feedback, cultural diversity, challenges of feedback in a global virtual team, effects on learning and development, and lastly, the importance of feedback in global virtual teams.

### **5.1 Working in a global virtual team**

This section shares the interviewee's views of working in a global virtual team and particularly examines the interviewee's experiences of the advantages and disadvantages of these teams.

#### **5.1.1 Advantages**

Five interviewees out of nine mentioned that one of the global virtual team's advantages is that you get to meet people from different countries and cultures. As an advantage was seen the chance to learn about different ways of working and it can be gained new perspectives on work tasks or how work is performed as there are differences between countries how these are performed. Four interviewees also mentioned that global virtual teams allow you to work with people from different cultures, which provides a possibility to learn and obtain knowledge of different cultures and people. The interviewees perceived this possibility as valuable and useful in sense of new ideas and insights and terms of work. Global virtual teams were described to be fun as they gave the possibility to

meet new people around the world and learn new things from them, and this was experienced to be personally fulfilling.

*“Global virtual team has its own challenges, but it’s also fun. Because you get to meet and to talk to a lot of different people from different parts of the world, so I think it’s good for you personally as well, not only work wise. Personally, as well it is good to understand about different cultures and different types of people. You learn a lot yourself when you work in these global virtual teams.” – Interviewee 2*

*“You can get different perspectives to what you do at work, as there are often variations on the way of working between countries.” – Interviewee 4*

*“You learn about different cultures and ways of working, which you can then utilize in the future, for example in your own or working life, when you meet new people from these cultures. It is important to gain diverse perspectives on different things that are strengthened by these cultural backgrounds, and then to gain new ideas and insights, even in relation to working methods.” – Interviewee 5*

*“I am able to work with people from different countries and cultures, and it is very nice to get to know people from different countries and get some other perspectives how they do things in other countries.” – Interviewee 7*

Eight interviewees out of nine mentioned that having colleagues in different countries and all over the world is an advantage. Working in a global virtual team was told to provide the possibility to work anywhere around the world, regardless of the physical location. This possibility was perceived as an advantage as it provided flexibility to the working location. Two interviewees also mentioned that different time zones can also be an advantage of a global virtual team from a service provider perspective, as the time when people work is greater when people work in different times and time zones.

*“I see advantage in being able to work with people regardless of physical location. I can work remotely, as physical location is not relevant.” – Interviewee 6*

Efficient and fast communication and contact with people were considered an advantage to some extent. Also, one interviewee mentioned that it is easier and faster to reach people through Microsoft Teams when you can see if people are available. This was compared to a phone call, as with that it cannot be sure if the person is working and when they are available.

### **5.1.2 Disadvantages**

All nine interviewees said the lack of face-to-face interaction to be a disadvantage of a global virtual team. It was described that when the face-to-face interaction is lacking it can cause misunderstanding or it is harder to understand each other on the same level. This was experienced to be caused by the lack of body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures, that can often guide or give hints about the meaning of discussion. When these elements are missing or lacking in interaction it was said that being very clear with words and communication is essential, to avoid any misinterpretations. Also, it was stated that through messages it can be difficult to deliver the intended information to each other. Also, when it is worked in different times and time zones, one interviewee said this to be a disadvantage as it was sometimes hard to schedule meetings or time to talk.

*“Face-to-face contact is not with all colleagues, so you do not become that close with all. Facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, these basic things in general are lacking, and can cause misunderstandings or you don’t understand each other on the same level. It’s easier to understand each other in face-to-face and get to know each other more easily.” - Interviewee 1*

*“You don't see facial expressions or body language, and you don't see how the other person speaks and what they mean. You can even get a different idea of discussion based on body language. Then in general, when you communicate a lot just by writing, you can understand messages in many ways, depending on the culture, as that can also affect how the text is understood by the recipient.”*

*– Interviewee 5*

*“Disadvantage is that the face-to-face element is completely removed ... I think that it is really important to meet face-to-face to make the relationship stronger and get to know each other a little bit different way.” – Interviewee 8*

*“The disadvantage would be that if you don't perhaps know them that well then, these small hints and tones in the language might be misunderstood or interpreted in a wrong way, and you really must use clear communication to get the message delivered in the meant way. As the communication lacks body language and facial expressions, you need to be very clear with your words.” – Interviewee 9*

Five interviewees mentioned that working in global virtual teams can have an impact on how the relationship is developed with team members. When there is no possibility to see own colleagues physically, it was experienced to hamper the development of deeper relationships with them. Therefore, this was seen as a disadvantage. One interviewee said that in the beginning when getting to know the team members was a learning curve, meaning it was needed to learn how people prefer to communicate and agree on the ways to interact together. Some interviewees had not even seen their closest colleagues face-to-face as they are in different countries. Communication was experienced to be difficult when it was not known all the colleagues that well and some felt it hard therefore to contact people. One interviewee mentioned that it can be even intimidating to send message to a bigger team chat if they do not know everyone that well.

*“You don’t get to see the persons that often and might not have that type of relationship with them then. I think you get a special relationship with people if you see them physically, its more different than just talking via teams. So, in my opinion that is a huge disadvantage. As that helps then also with teamwork, and communication and everything” – Interviewee 2*

*“They are kind of your cyber buddies, you only know them from internet, but you haven’t never seen them, it’s kind of weird. In the beginning, when you didn’t really know the people, you don’t yet know for example their humor or way of communicating.” – Interviewee 7*

Four interviewees said they experienced learning or being introduced to a new job to be especially difficult in a virtual environment. This was felt to be difficult as the chance to ask questions face-to-face was lacking or not even possible, and they felt that it would be easier if someone could physically show how to do a different task, instead of sharing a screen in Teams meeting.

*“In particular, it is virtually a little harder to try to teach or be taught about some new tasks, process, or such.” – Interviewee 3*

One interviewee had also experienced that teaching for example summer workers were more difficult through virtual means when it is not possible to physically show where to click and how to do things. Virtual setting in teaching situations was said to be problematic as it could not be sure that the message and information were understood comprehensively by the other party and that their learning would have been profound when the teaching could not be given in the same physical place.

## 5.2 Feedback in global virtual teams

This section discusses the geographical focus areas of interviewees and dispersion of their team members, the technology used to communicate with the team members, and lastly, it is shared the interviewees' views about the advantages and disadvantages of a global virtual team.

### 5.2.1 Receiving feedback

There were differences between the interviewees in receiving regular feedback. Through interviews, it was found that six interviewees out of nine received regular feedback at work. Yet, three of the interviewees that received regular feedback mentioned that there was no set specific time when they would receive feedback. Three interviewees on the other hand stated that they did not receive regular feedback, or it was seldom when they got feedback. Feedback was received both on an individual level privately and team level, meaning feedback was given to the whole team. Table 4 shows how the regularity of the feedback was distributed according to the number of interviewees.

**Table 4.** Regularity of feedback

Regularly	6
Not Regularly	3

There were many differences between interviewees and how often they received feedback. All interviewees received feedback once or more a year. Seven interviewees mentioned development discussions as an event when they received feedback from their supervisors. Development discussions were experienced important as on those occasions it was possible to receive concrete and personal feedback on results, performance, and how work was done. Four interviewees told that they received feedback quarterly,



meaning every four months. Five interviewees received feedback every month, and three received weekly feedback. One interviewee gave and received daily feedback from their team, or the aim was to give feedback relating to work done during the day. Table 5 presents how often interviewees received feedback and reported according to the number of interviewees.

*“We have these development discussions once a year or maybe twice, and these sessions are really good that you get on black and white your feedback from your manager. It is very important to get the feedback from your manager and that you know also what you have done” – Interviewee 7*

**Table 5.** How often feedback is received

Development discussions	7
Annually	9
Per quarter	4
Monthly	5
Weekly	3
Daily	1

Not all the interviewees received regular feedback, and some felt that they rarely received feedback. Indeed, many hoped that feedback would be provided much more frequently and at more regular intervals to assist in raising awareness of different situations and their work.

### **Feedback provider**

All nine interviewees have received feedback from their supervisors and colleagues. Five out of nine interviewees received feedback from customers of which four were internal

customers. Five interviewees received feedback from suppliers, however, two of the interviewees mentioned that they did not receive feedback on regular basis from suppliers. One interviewee received feedback from the forwarder agent. Feedback was received the most from colleagues and supervisors. Three interviewees told that they received feedback from supervisors, colleagues, and external sources, such as customers, suppliers, or forwarder agents. Two interviewees even mentioned that they have asked for feedback from their supervisor to be able to recognize things that they could improve in their performance. Table 6 presents from whom interviewees received feedback according to the number of interviewees.

*“I have also asked for feedback that I could improve my performance or if there is something that I could do better or do differently that I haven’t recognized.”*

*– Interviewee 7*

*“I have tried to ask for feedback and ask which areas I could improve, as it has not always been given, but this has been improving in recent times.” – Interviewee 8*

**Table 6.** From whom feedback has been received

Supervisor / Manager	9
Colleagues / Team members	9
Customers / Internal customers	5
Suppliers / Forwarder agent	5
Combination of all above-mentioned	3

From supervisors, it was mostly received feedback on what has gone well and what could be focused on more, and other information relating to outcomes and performance. Positive feedback and thanks were often received from colleagues. Feedback relating to

something that was on the negative side was often distributed within the team regarding some process and on an ad hoc basis, meaning if some issues needed to be fixed or matter that needed fast action. Feedback was mainly received from customers regarding the service and thanks. Feedback from suppliers or forwarder agents was often related to technical matters. The feedback provided by the supervisor was experienced to be very important for acknowledging how it is performed at work.

### **Type of feedback**

All interviewees have received both outcome feedback and process feedback. Through interviews, it was found that feedback on the outcome of performance was received mostly from a supervisor. Five interviewees stated that they receive feedback relating to outcomes from supervisors. This kind of feedback was mainly received in development discussions or one-on-one meetings with the supervisor. During these meetings, it was examined the performance, results, and progress. One interviewee receives outcome feedback on regular basis from the forwarder agent relating how it has been performed, key performance indicators (KPIs), what has been succeeded and what should be improved.

*“In development discussions with supervisor we have gone through how I have performed in my work, for example, if I have a lead on a project, so how well have I done, what are the results and how project has progressed.” – Interviewee 3*

*“I have received outcome-related feedback at least in meetings with my supervisor”  
– Interviewee 4*

*“My peers are very concentrated on how the work is conducted because we have shared tasks that we need to work together. Therefore, they are more interested on the how you perform the job or the process part. But my superior is more interested in the results and that the work is done.” – Interviewee 9*

Process feedback was received mostly from colleagues, and on some occasions from supervisors. Some received process feedback more than others. Feedback relating to the process perspective was given in situations when something had been done well. Also, it was provided when there was a process-related issue, however, this kind of feedback was often not directed to the person but rather focused on the process itself that is followed.

### **5.2.2 Providing feedback**

Seven interviewees out of nine had given feedback to their team. The feedback related mostly to letting colleagues know that they have done a great job and it was wanted to thank them for the good work. It was wanted to boost team members with positive feedback and aimed to motivate them. Additionally, the purpose of providing feedback was to improve the way of working and different processes. Five interviewees told that they had given feedback concerning some processes that could be done better and suggested alternative ways to do things. It was also taught and given tips for colleagues to try to do some tasks easier way or try to do things differently. One interviewee had given constructive feedback to team members. The main reason for giving the feedback was to encourage and motivate the team members, as well as to thank them for the good work, and to develop different ways of working and processes.

*“The purpose is of course to be better, maybe if we have a flaw in our process let’s say, then work on that, and if we don’t even give the feedback within the team then we don’t even know that it is a flaw. The purpose is to get better, to make not only us but also our process better.” – Interviewee 2*

*“The purpose has been to bring clarity to the guidance and thus aim to more efficient work and better results. Then I have also given positive feedback to colleagues about the well-done work and the purpose is to thank and acknowledge the good work.” – Interviewee 5*

*“My purpose is to motivate people, to be motivated at work and to do even better job.” – Interviewee 7*

Two interviewees that had not given feedback in their team experienced that they did not feel that comfortable giving feedback based on their knowledge or position. It was felt that it was not their responsibility to provide feedback relating to improving some processes or to give feedback on work done by the team.

### **5.2.3 Usefulness of the feedback**

From interviewees, it was found that constructive and positive feedback was perceived to be the most useful for the interviewees. Eight interviewees out of nine had experienced constructive feedback to be the most useful kind of feedback for them. It was said that constructive feedback assists in reflecting own ways of working and perhaps change own actions or aiming to have a better process. Constructive feedback was told to be useful when with it can be done something, meaning feedback that improves professional skills or ineffective processes can be reduced or eliminated. Two interviewees highlighted that it would be important that the feedback consists of concrete examples, and it is directly stated what should be changed and how these things can be changed and justify why it is better to make these changes. Four interviewees pointed out that constructive feedback should be given in a respectful way that comes from a positive place. It should not be given in any blaming or negative way but rather discussing about the topic. It was experienced as an almost personal attack or to feel unfair if it was not provided any arguments or grounds for the constructive feedback, as it was wanted to know the reasons behind the feedback. When constructive feedback was given in a good manner and the content of the feedback could be justified, this feedback was felt to be important and very welcome.

*“From constructive feedback, I can change or think about my own actions, and that it would contain some concrete examples.”– Interviewee 4*

*“In my opinion, the most useful feedback is to instruct you to correct some behaviors or ways of working that you are doing wrong or ineffectively. With this feedback it can be removed these inefficient and wrong ways of doing things. It is also important to get that positive feedback about your own work that you get to know what your own strengths are and where you have succeeded and what you do well.” – Interviewee 5*

Positive feedback was also considered to be important and useful for confidence and motivation. Positive feedback was experienced to give verification of own skills and confirm that the job is conducted correctly. Seven interviewees stated that positive feedback was useful for them, and it affected their confidence in their work. It was also experienced to boost their motivation and work, and receiving good feedback gave them a happy feeling. Additionally, one interviewee mentioned that it was also nice to receive positive feedback as a team. However, it was mentioned that positive feedback could be given more often, and many wished that they would receive positive feedback regularly.

*“Positive feedback makes you feel good and make you feel safer or makes me more confident in what you are doing, and you are doing the right thing in a right way.” – Interviewee 2*

*“Of course, it's always nice to get positive feedback, it gives you such confidence that you can do your job really well. It also gives you more motivation after receiving good feedback.” – Interviewee 3*

Four interviewees brought up that negative feedback that was deserved and presented positively was said to be useful. Moreover, if the negative feedback contained information that was developmental and relevant for completing work tasks or processes, it was seen to be useful. However, if negative feedback related to processes that were not dependent on employee actions, it was felt as unnecessary and personal.

*“Feedback that is negative can really annoy you I would say. Feedback that you do not think that you deserve it can be hard to process. It can feel that it is a personal attack, and if you do not find or get any grounds for the feedback, and you are personally satisfied with the process you can take it personally.” – Interviewee 9*

One interviewee told that in a virtual team it is very hard, or it is very likely that negative feedback is misunderstood or taken personally. This was said to be caused by the lack of body language when it is not possible to get hints from the expressions and, for example, from a smile. Thus, how the negative feedback was intended to be given was harder to be interpreted based on written or spoken words only, without seeing other persons.

#### **5.2.4 Cultural diversity**

All nine interviewees agreed that cultural background affects giving or receiving feedback. Everyone had experienced that cultural background that there were different ways or customs to give feedback or expect to receive it, based on a different cultural background. For example, it was experienced that in Finnish culture it is not given any feedback if things are going well, but when something unexpected happens or there is an issue then it is given feedback. Four interviewees mentioned that the directness or indirectness of feedback was experienced to be varying based on the cultural background. In some cultures, it was experienced that the feedback was given in a very direct way, and in others, it was given indirectly.

*“In Finland when things are going well no comment is made, you are not quiet, everything is going well. But then when something goes wrong, or things go wrong so sit down for a big discussion and give feedback.” – Interviewee 1*

*“It may influence the directness or indirectness of the feedback, and this may be due to that cultural background. For example, you in another culture it may be given feedback very directly and the other party may even take it as an attack. Or*

*that the other party gives feedback indirectly rather than directly, and that feedback may not be delivered or work in an intended way.” – Interviewee 5*

Three interviewees told that in many cultures or countries it is expected to receive feedback on things that would not maybe be even expected to be given. It was recognized that in Central European countries and the US that many did expect to receive feedback much more often than in Finland which was compared to these countries. It was noted that in Finland people do not even necessarily expect to receive feedback or it is not demanded.

*“In Finland for example, receiving feedback for many people, even if it’s positive feedback, they get like super uncomfortable. But then people in UK or somewhere else are almost like expecting to receive good feedback, and if you do not give any feedback, it’s very strange.” – Interviewee 2*

*“In Finland it is not maybe expect to get feedback like people in other countries maybe do.” – Interviewee 7*

*“In my culture it is given often positive feedback but in Finland they are not too positive when things do go well, it would be nice to get positive feedback when things do go well.” – Interviewee 8*

It was highlighted by an interviewee that it is essential that it is acknowledged different cultures in global virtual teams. Global virtual teams consist often of people from various countries and different cultural backgrounds, and therefore this aspect should be paid attention to as different cultures have different ways of working, perceiving practices, and communicating among other things. This is an essential aspect also that relates strongly to giving and receiving feedback and should be considered by the teams.



*“In global virtual teams it would be important to have a common or agreed way to give feedback, I think this could prevent some misunderstandings or people getting annoyed, because they would not maybe misinterpret the feedback. Also, if you do not know that well each other it can also impact on the misunderstandings.”*

*– Interviewee 9*

*“The fact that you have different cultures as well in the virtual global team is also something that you should pay always attention to.” – Interviewee 8*

It was suggested by an interviewee that it should be agreed on a way how feedback is given in global virtual teams. When there would be an agreed way of providing the feedback, it could prevent possible misunderstandings. When it is discussed about the feedback in advance and then later compiled an agreed practice of giving it there could be much fewer misinterpretations or conflicts caused because of the unfamiliar or differing way of providing feedback.

### **5.2.5 Challenges of feedback in a global virtual team**

Concerning the challenges of feedback in global virtual teams, the lack of face-to-face contact and communication was experienced to be the biggest factors that caused issues in the teams. Eight interviewees said that communication and lack of face-to-face interaction and missing body language were the biggest challenges. The interviewees told that it is easier to give feedback when physically seeing each other and talking. The feedback was felt to be delivered in a more correct way when it was possible to be in face-to-face contact with the other party and possible misunderstandings could be reduced when it was a chance to elaborate and use body language and facial expressions. When not seeing each other there was told to be more room for understanding the message in a different way than intended. Many were highlighting the fact that they need to be much more careful with their tone of voice, be clear with their communication and focus on the words they use. When feedback is given in written form there is a bigger chance

that it can be understood in various ways. One interviewee had experienced that in the global virtual team the feedback may not reach everyone that it should. In Microsoft Teams there can be several different chat groups and if the feedback is not told in the ones that it would concern, it can cause it is not reached by the individuals it should.

*“Certainly communication, but if you give feedback in written form, for example, then people may understand it in a really different way, especially if it’s not positive feedback, you may understand it much harder, or different in how it was meant to, compared if it was given in the face -to-face so that message could go a little better or clearer.” – Interviewee 6*

*“It is making it more difficult as you must be very careful with the tone of your voice, and you have to focus on little bit different way of communicating when you are not physically seeing them or even touch them. ... Also, I know that when I write, I express myself in a different way than when I actually talk, which is why I more often prefer to talk on the phone because I have more opportunities to explain myself or elaborate if something is not coming across in a correct way.”*

*– Interviewee 8*

The relationship was viewed to have an impact on the feedback given and received. It was told by two interviewees that how well they knew the other party affected how they would give feedback to them. It was experienced to be difficult to give feedback to someone that they did not know that well or did not have a deep relationship that they could provide feedback openly. Deeper relationships were harder to be developed in a virtual setting when it has not seen each other face-to-face.

*“In global virtual teams it can take time to create a deeper relationship with your colleagues as you do not see them in person. It is therefore important to keep the communication very clear and straight forward.” – Interviewee 9*

The culture was seen also as one of the feedback challenges in global virtual teams. Two interviewees said that differences in cultural background can have an impact on how people react to the feedback. As in a global virtual team, there can be people from many different nationalities and cultures that can cause challenges in interpreting the given feedback or how it is experienced.

*“One is the cultural background definitely, because some are more sensitive on hearing feedback if it is negative or positive” – Interviewee 2*

It was mentioned by one interviewee that time zone can cause some challenges as people are working at different hours or times which can lead to delays when providing or receiving feedback. The interviewee told that it can be an issue if some crucial feedback cannot be delivered to the other party fast enough or they receive it too late because of different time zones.

*“Time zones around the world can cause challenges, such as delays in giving or receiving feedback.” – Interviewee 5*

### **5.2.6 Effects on learning and development**

Through interviews, it was found that all interviewees had benefitted from the feedback that they had received. All interviewees told that they had learned from feedback and that based on the feedback they could improve or develop their way of working. Many had learned new ways of handling different tasks after getting new perspectives on these through the given feedback. It was experienced also useful to receive concrete action points or tips where it could be improved or changed own performance. Feedback was experienced to bring new perspectives to work as well as the opportunity to look at own ways of working and to change them if necessary, and thus guide the development at work. Moreover, feedback was perceived to assist reflection of own performance and action at work afterward. Based on reflection, interviewees were able to adapt to the

feedback, and this was seen as important as it provided an opportunity to develop the skills or knowledge, or even learn new techniques.

*“It has had a positive effect on my development, that I have learnt more efficient ways of working when I have received feedback about something, so that you will do it more efficiently and better in the future.” – Interviewee 5*

*“It has been very good to get the feedback because I feel like that, I have a concrete action point I can improve on or consider next time.” – Interviewee 8*

*“I have adapted to the feedback that I have received, and it is always a continuous learning curve.” – Interviewee 9*

In interviews, it arises that many experienced that positive feedback was beneficial for their confidence at work. Six interviewees told that positive feedback brought them confirmation concerning their performance and competencies in sense of working. It also was perceived as reassurance that they were doing their work in the right way and motivated to continue in the same way. The motivation was increased by the positive or constructive feedback that assisted in acknowledging the status of their way of working.

*“Positive feedback regarding my performance has been a reassurance that I am doing the right thing, and that I am on the right path. That has definitely benefitted me.” – Interviewee 2*

*“The feedback has increased my confidence because I know that I have received good feedback that I can do my job well, so then I have been able to share my own knowledge to others.” – Interviewee 3*

Two interviewees also felt that team-level feedback was important for development, in addition to personal feedback. Both feedbacks supported individual and team

development at work and the performance of different tasks. One of the interviewees also said that the feedback had strengthened their confidence at work, and this contributed to their confidence to share knowledge and skills with their team.

### **5.2.7 Importance of feedback in global virtual teams**

Interviewees' opinions concerning if feedback is especially important when they are geographically dispersed with their colleagues were divided. Five interviewees found that feedback is key in any situation regardless of the distance of the team. Four interviewees on the other hand felt that feedback was especially important when the team members were physically dispersed. The ones who did not think feedback to be especially important in a global virtual team setting justified this by saying that feedback is important in every team regardless of the location of team members or the setting that the team is working in. Interviewees that told that the feedback would be especially important said this being since in global virtual teams it cannot be seen the colleagues face-to-face, or these occasions are lacking, the importance of feedback was highlighted. For example, it was mentioned that the possibilities to discuss together were lesser in the virtual setting and even informal coffee breaks were not always possible, so, therefore, feedback was essential in global virtual teams.

*“It’s important to give feedback when we’re not sitting in the same country because I can’t go knock anyone’s shoulder from there and ask something face-to-face.” – Interviewee 3*

*“I don’t think that the geographical location affects the importance of the feedback, all feedback is important regardless of the geographical location.” – Interviewee 5*

Feedback was found important in terms of having aligned ways of working in the team. As in these teams many works in different countries and are being dispersed from the team it was considered essential to be aware of the situations in the team and if there

are any issues to be noticed about these to have a fluent and functioning workflow. One interviewee mentioned also that it should be agreed at the beginning of forming a virtual team how it is wished to be communicated in the team that later on it can be ensured that there are no misunderstandings regarding the interaction between team members.

*“I think that it is important you consider how you will communicate in the team, and I think that is the key element here ... It is important to keep up with frequent and regular communication with the team members that you are working with at that point. This way you can achieve mutual understanding what is expected and how you should deal with those people.”*

*– Interviewee 8*

Moreover, what was highlighted by the interviewees was to keep up continuous communication preferably every day in global virtual teams. When team members are often working distant from each other in these teams it was noticed how important it was to maintain regular communication with the team. Eight of the interviewees highlighted the importance of continuous interaction with team members in a global virtual team. In addition, the usual exchange of ideas and thoughts was seen as important. It was not felt that it would always be necessary to even share feedback, but specifically to discuss different situations in the team, how the team is progressing, and striving for good teamwork.

## 6 Discussion

Through the conducted interviews it was found answers to the research questions that were developed for this study. The findings of this study show that feedback was experienced to be beneficial for learning and that way supported personal development at work. This supports the previous literature, according to which feedback has a significant impact on employees' learning and development yet also in enhancing their performance. Feedback can promote self-development by assisting in acquiring new knowledge, learning new skills, and setting goals in sense of improving performance. Existing literature propose that feedback contribute to behavioral, affective, cognitive, and motivational outcomes. Behavioral aspect may involve effort and actions towards developing activities, affective outcome can relate to the satisfaction, the perception and acceptance of feedback relate to the cognitive aspect and motivational outcomes can relate to the feelings of competence and autonomy. (Mulder, 2013; Mulder & Ellinger, 2013).

In literature it is emphasized that positive feedback does not always lead automatically to positive outcomes. Feedback should include insights in its characteristics that it can foster learning and this way contribute to learning activities that are crucial for development. Moreover, different characteristics, such as, content, function, timing, and feedback form can have an impact on the delivery of feedback and if this generates effective outcomes. (Mulder, 2013). Indeed, the findings of this study show that positive feedback was perceived to confirm employees' skills as well as how well they have performed their work. That was found to strengthen confidence and improve knowledge sharing within the team as the employee had confidence in their competencies. In addition, it was found that positive feedback increased motivation and job satisfaction. Therefore, it can be stated that positive feedback is an important element of employee learning.

Indeed, feedback can serve several purposes, which can be for developmental or evaluative reasons. (Geister, et al., 2006). Feedback can provide information about outcomes of certain activities and outcomes, status of initially set goals, guide activity, and assist

in fixing or adjusting new targets. (Gabelica, et al., 2012). Constructive feedback was considered important in terms of the employee's performance. More specifically, constructive, and concrete feedback was seen as useful, as it enabled one to obtain concrete action points where it could be improved or change own way of working. Concrete feedback assisted in better understanding the content of the feedback and its necessity. With the help of the feedback, it was possible to obtain new perspectives of different ways of working, which in turn helped to adopt more efficient processes and learn new techniques and skills.

According to Gabelica, et al. (2012) feedback can also encourage for critical reflection to develop new insights and approaches by reflecting tasks and situations. In particular, the findings support that reflection based on received feedback was considered important when examining own ways of working. With help of reflection, could be made changes to processes or performance. The feedback that improved professional competencies and reduced or even eliminated ineffective processes was recognized to be vital for development in work. Hence previous research has highlighted the importance of continuous feedback and reflection to support team success. (Gabelica & Popov, 2020). There was a broad consensus that feedback was felt to be important, but above all it was hoped to be received more frequently and more regularly. Feedback received from supervisor was considered especially meaningful.

The advantages of virtual teams are that the limitations concerning time, space, and organizational affiliation can be overcome. (Piccoli, et al., 2004). Consequently, the study shows that as advantages of global virtual teams were considered the flexibility and working with people around the world, and this way learning about different cultures, perspectives, and ways of working, among other things. However, the main challenges of feedback in a global virtual team setting that were recognized in this study related to the lack of face-to-face interaction and limited chances to observe body language, difficulties to create a deep relationship with colleagues, and aspects relating to cultural differences and time zones.



Media richness theory suggest that the medium's ability to transmit verbal and non-verbal signals, ability of rapid feedback exchanging, variety in language, and messages personality can impact on how rich the media is. (Dennis & Kinney, 1998; Sedrine, et al., 2021). Moreover, this theory presents that there are differences between media in information richness based on the ability to promote shared meaning within a certain time. (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). Face-to-face interaction is considered the richest medium, as it has the capacity to provide multiple cues, natural language, and rapid feedback. (Sheer & Chen, 2004). This study support Media richness theory, as lack of face-to-face interaction, was seen to be the biggest challenge regarding feedback in global virtual teams, and it was experienced to affect communication and relationships. It was observed that a lack of body language, facial expressions, and other tones while communicating could generate more misunderstanding and difficulties in delivering the intended message to the other party. Additionally, time zones caused difficulties in delays in receiving feedback, especially when the feedback should reach the other party in a short time.

Global virtual teams can face also challenges in developing trust among team members due to the lack of face-to-face interaction, which can further lead to challenges in knowledge sharing, task coordination and team performance. (Aissa, et al., 2022). Additionally, when communication is mediated through technology it causes difficulties in developing relationship between team members, as there is limited number of contextual cues interacted. (Maznevski, et al., 2006). Indeed, it was experienced by the interviewees that fewer, or no chances to meet colleagues face-to-face basis had an impact on creating deep relationships with colleagues. It was highlighted by the interviewees that continuous interaction between team members is essential in maintaining relationships and being aware of situations in the team.

Another aspect that affected feedback in global virtual teams was cultural differences within the team, and more specifically this related to how individuals understand and react to different types of feedback. Culture may also influence when and to what extent feedback is expected to be received by individuals. The culture was also expressed to

influence how directly or indirectly feedback is given. Moreover, cultural diversity contributed to cooperation among dispersed team members and stakeholders internationally, and helped individuals learn about different cultures and practices globally. Differences in culture can pose barriers relating to communication, cooperation, relationship building, trust, language, time and distance, and cohesion, yet these must be overcome by teams and leaders. (Malhotra, et al., 2007; Mockaitis, et al., 2012).

One of the main findings of this study was that most of the interviewees experienced receiving too little feedback and would hope to receive it more often and regularly. Especially, it was hoped that supervisors would provide more feedback regarding how it is succeeded in work and other relevant information. Additionally, feedback received from colleagues was appreciated. Through this study, it could be found that interviewees aimed to also provide feedback themselves to colleagues and supervisors. The target for providing feedback was to acknowledge good work, assist and improve processes, and particularly motivate others. However, it was experienced that learning a new job was harder in a virtual environment due to a lack of face-to-face interaction. It was described to be challenging to ask questions and to follow the learning situation. These insights obtained through interviewees, contribute to increasing the value of this study.

The findings show that feedback contributes to employee development in several ways while working in a global virtual team. Feedback can support the employee's understanding of their skills and success in their work. Particularly, positive and constructive feedback was perceived as a significant form of feedback that supported the employee's learning and development. Positive feedback brought a sense of security and confidence in employees' skills, and increased motivation, as constructive feedback was found to be vital for employees' performance as it provided information on things that could be changed or improved. Feedback fostered the adoption of new ways of working, global cooperation, reflection, and further personal development. To conclude, the findings of this research are aligned with the previous literature yet provide new insights on the topic.

## **7 Conclusion**

This last chapter aims to conclude and discuss the findings of this study. Firstly, it is discussed the theoretical and managerial implications of this study. Finally, it is discussed the limitations of the study, and given suggestions for further research.

### **7.1 Theoretical implications**

This study contributes to expanding the understanding and knowledge about how feedback in a global virtual team supports employees' learning and enhances work performance. Moreover, it is provided information on how feedback assists employee development and what kind of feedback is experienced to be most useful. The findings of this study support already existing literature on feedback in a global virtual team setting, but also provide new and unique insights into the topic. Through this study, it was found that feedback was experienced to be useful in employees' development of knowledge and professional competencies. However, it was identified that feedback should be given on regular basis. The role of positive and constructive feedback was found to be essential when considering increasing motivation, self-awareness, learning, and improving performance. Feedback is a helpful tool in finding effective ways of working and supporting aligned and effective team processes. Additionally, this study increases the knowledge relating to cultural diversity in global virtual teams and how it impacts feedback in this kind of virtual environment.

### **7.2 Managerial implications**

It would be important to provide feedback, especially positive and constructive feedback, to the employee regularly to strengthen their experience of their competencies as well as increase their work motivation and development. Through feedback, it can be identified the strengths and in which employees are succeeding in their work, but also give

concrete suggestions where it could be improved. This information is valuable in the sense of having a functioning and smooth operations in a team. In global virtual teams, it is essential to have aligned ways of working as team members can be broadly dispersed from each other, which can cause differences in the way the processes and tasks are conducted. Through feedback it can be learned the situations in the team, raise awareness of issues and improve processes or performance, thus ensuring effortless workflow. Consequently, feedback should be utilized to guide employees' performance and to reinforce aligned operations within a team. Especially, it is the leaders' responsibility to actively promote timely feedback and reflection but also be engaged in every part of the team's life cycle. (Maznevski, et al., 2006). Leaders should also encourage team members to keep up continuous communication within the team to maintain good relationships in the team and to increase awareness of different situations in the team's activities.

In global virtual teams, communication is typically based on asynchronous computer-mediated communication and therefore differs much from face-to-face communication. (Snellman, 2014). Asynchronous communication lacks real-time engagement and rapid negotiation, and it is associated with considerable delays with this type of communication. Thus, this can impact teams' engagement in conversations. (Hughes, et al., 2019). Due to this, it would be vital to put effort into organizing possibilities to communicate with colleagues in a way that fosters similar interaction as in face-to-face situations, meaning that body language and other expressions could be interpreted in the context of interaction. That would also be particularly important for learning. That could also assist in trust and relationship building within a team, as it is considered an important factor in virtual teams' success and teamwork. (Geister, et al., 2006).

Global virtual teams often include people from different cultural backgrounds and thus bring different ways of working and operating. Based on the findings of this study, it would be extremely important for global virtual teams to acknowledge and take cultural diversity into account in team activities. By being aware of the differences within the team, for example, in providing feedback, cultural diversity and the personal qualities of

employees could be supported. It is suggested that these aspects should be acknowledged by the supervisors and teams to be able to decrease or avoid any further issues concerning cultural differences. Moreover, it should be aimed to enhance these aspects in a team that it could be developed better ways to work together and facilitate the communication and relationships within a team. It would be vital to agree in advance with the team on how the feedback is provided and presented, as this could prevent possible misunderstandings or complications. Consequently, agreed procedures could help to ensure that feedback is received and understood as consistently and properly as possible among team members.

### **7.3 Limitations and further research**

In this study, it can be identified several limitations. Firstly, the aspect of employee development that was studied in this thesis can be considered quite a broad definition. The term development can serve many meanings and therefore it can be seen as not so specific focus aspect. In this study, the development was aimed to examine the learning and improvement of employees' performance in their respective work. Secondly, this study interviewed individuals from different industries and professions, but the unifying factor was working in a global virtual team. It was not aimed to focus on any specific countries or professions that the interviewees would work in, but rather examine the topic from the aspect of a global virtual team setting. Since the interviewees cannot be considered to have any other unifying factors other than working in a global virtual team, the findings can differ based on the respective industry or workplace in which the individuals work in. Thirdly the findings of this study cannot be fully generalized because of the limited sample. Moreover, there were only nine interviewees, and the information obtained through interviews is strongly based on the interviewee's individual experiences and views, and it can be therefore concluded that the results are limited in generalization. With a bigger size of the sample, it could be obtained a broader understanding of the studied phenomenon.

Based on this study can be recognized number of further research suggestions. It could be further studied how feedback is impacting learning and work performance in a specific area of expertise, or even conduct a case study to detect any affecting factors in a particular scope. For instance, conducting similar research on a specific target group or team could be obtained important information that could be applied and utilized to improve operations and ways of working regarding feedback in a team. The topic of feedback-seeking could be studied from the perspective of how it contributes to self-regulatory and development at work. It could be also valuable to study the topic of feedback from leaders' perspectives to gain more understanding of what their input and responsibility are when giving feedback to a team.

Finally, the cultural aspect of feedback could be studied further. In this study, it came up that many interviewees saw that culture has a significant impact on receiving and providing feedback. Global virtual teams enable gathering people from various countries and locations to work together. That also generates the possibility of culturally diverse teams, meaning that teams can consist of individuals from various cultural backgrounds, which is common in today's work environment. Therefore, the cultural aspect would be relevant to study more closely. For example, it could be compared to two or more countries and find factors that differ or align with each other relating to feedback. Also, it could be examined how feedback should be adjusted according to cultural diversity in a team that the feedback could be received and perceived in a similar way among team members.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1. Interview questions in English**

#### **Background:**

1. Work industry and title?
2. How long have you worked in a global virtual team?

#### **Working in a global virtual team:**

3. What geographical areas do you focus on in your work?
4. Where are your team members located?
5. What type of technology do you use to communicate with your team members?
6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a global virtual team?

#### **Feedback in global virtual teams:**

7. Do you regularly receive feedback? How often?
8. From whom have you received feedback? (e.g. supervisors, peers/colleagues, external sources, combination of all)
9. What type of feedback do you mostly receive: Does the feedback relate to the outcomes of your performance (Outcome feedback) or/and how you have performed a job (Process feedback)?
10. Have you given feedback in your team? What was the purpose of the feedback?
11. What type of feedback do you experience to be the most useful to you?
12. Do you think that cultural background effect on giving or receiving feedback?
13. What are the challenges of feedback in a global virtual team?
14. Have you benefited from the feedback you received, and has it had an impact on your learning and development in your work?
15. Have you found feedback to be especially important when you are geographically dispersed with your colleagues?



## **Appendix 2. Interview questions in Finnish**

### **Taustatiedot:**

1. Ala ja työnimike?
2. Kuinka kauan olet työskennellyt globaalissa virtuaalisessa tiimissä?

### **Työskentely globaalissa virtuaalisessa tiimissä:**

3. Mihin maantieteellisiin alueisiin keskityt työssäsi?
4. Missä tiimisi jäsenet sijaitsevat?
5. Mitä työkaluja käytät kommunikointiin tiimisi jäsenten kanssa?
6. Mitkä ovat globaalin virtuaalisen tiimin edut ja haitat?

### **Palaute globaalissa virtuaalisessa tiimissä:**

7. Saatko säännöllisesti palautetta? Kuinka usein?
8. Keneltä olet saanut palautetta? (esim. esimiehet, kollegat, ulkoiset lähteet, kaikkien yhdistelmä)
9. Millaista palautetta saat useimmiten: Liittyykö palaute suoritukseksi tuloksiin (Outcome feedback) tai/ja siihen, miten olet suorittanut työsi (Process feedback)?
10. Oletko itse antanut palautetta tiimissäsi? Mikä oli palautteen tarkoitus?
11. Millaisen palautteen koet olevan hyödyllisintä sinulle?
12. Vaikuttaako kulttuurillinen tausta mielestäsi palautteen antamiseen tai vastaanottamiseen?
13. Mitkä ovat palautteen haasteet globaalissa virtuaalisissa tiimeissä?
14. Oletko hyötynyt saamastasi palautteesta, ja onko sillä ollut vaikutusta oppimiseesi ja kehittymiseesi työssäsi?
15. Oletko kokenut palautteen erityisen tärkeäksi, kun olet maantieteellisesti erillään kollegojesi kanssa?