

Johanna Jansson

Balancing Employee Preferences and Organizational Expectations for Mutual Gains

A Multilevel Approach to Implementing
HR Practices in Remote Work Arrangements

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Tiivistelmä

Covid-19-pandemia synnytti työelämään jännitteen, jossa työntekijöiden ja organisaatioiden tarpeet ja odotukset ovat vastakkain. Työntekijät haluavat jatkaa etätöjärjestelyjä pandemian jälkeen, kun taas organisaatioiden johto odottaa paluuta toimistoille suojellakseen innovaatiokykyä, organisaatiokulttuuria ja tiedonkulkua sekä lieventääkseen huolta työvoiman valvonnan menettämisestä.

Tämä väitöskirja tutkii henkilöstöjohtamisen käytäntöjen (HR-käytäntöjen) toteuttamista etätöjärjestelyissä ja esittää ratkaisuja molemminpuolisten hyötyjen — työntekijän hyvinvoinnin ja organisaation tuloksellisuuden — saavuttamiseksi. Väitöskirjan kolme artikkelia muodostavat monitasotutkimuksen, joka tarkastelee ilmiötä organisaatio-, suhde- ja työntekijätasoilla. Tutkimus yhdistää teoreettisia ja kvalitatiivisia menetelmiä, ja sen empiirinen aineisto koostuu haastatteluista (n=81) ja henkilöstökyselyn avoimista vastauksista (n=1278).

Organisaatiotasolla tutkimus tarkastelee organisaatiosuunnittelua HR-käytäntöjen perustana ja ehdottaa taitojen standardointia ja klaanikontrollia paikkariippumattoman työn kontrolli- ja koordinaatiomekanismeiksi, päivittäen organisaatiosuunnittelun kirjallisuutta. Suhdetasolla tutkimus analysoi esihenkilö-alaisuuden (LMX) dynamiikkaa etätöissä palautekäytäntöjen kautta, korostaen vuorovaikutuksen tasapainottamisen tärkeyttä, jotta vastuu ei kasaudu esihenkilölle. Näin tutkimus rikastaa LMX- ja palautekirjallisuutta. Työntekijätasolla keskiössä ovat työntekijöiden käsitykset hybridityön HR-käytännöistä. Tutkimus tunnistaa yhdeksän psykologiseen sopimukseen kytkeytyvää HR-käytäntöä, joiden arviointi vaihtelee, täydentäen samalla tutkimusta psykologisista sopimuksista, hybridityöstä ja työntekijöiden HR-käsityksistä.

Kokonaisuudessaan tämä väitöskirja edistää monitasoista, työntekijäkeskeistä henkilöstöjohtamisen tutkimusta kuvaamalla HR-käytäntöjen toteuttamista etätöjärjestelyissä monimutkaisena prosessina, jossa organisaatiosuunnittelu, esihenkilö-alaisuudet ja työntekijöiden näkemykset vaikuttavat toisiinsa. Se argumentoi, että minkä tahansa näistä tasoista sivuuttaminen HR-käytäntöjen toteuttamisessa vaarantaa molemminpuolisten hyötyjen saavuttamisen. Käsittelemällä todellista työelämän haastetta tutkimus kuroo umpeen teorian ja käytännön välistä kuilua tarjoten ohjeita organisaatioille, esihenkilö-alaispareille ja työntekijöille jännitteen purkamiseksi molempia osapuolia tyydyttävällä tavalla.

Asiasanat: HR-käytännöt, etätö, hybridityö, paikkariippumaton työ, organisaatiosuunnittelu, esihenkilön ja alaisen vaihtosuhte, LMX, psykologinen sopimus, työntekijöiden näkemykset HR-käytännöistä, molemminpuoliset hyödyt, monitasotutkimus

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created a tension in working life, pitting the needs and expectations of employees against those of organizations. While employees adapted to remote work arrangements during the pandemic and now wish to maintain them, organizational management seeks a return to office settings, in order to safeguard innovation, organizational culture, knowledge transfer, and to alleviate concerns about losing control of the workforce.

This dissertation investigates the implementation of human resource (HR) practices in remote work arrangements and proposes solutions for achieving mutual gains in the form of employee well-being and organizational performance. The three articles of this dissertation form a multilevel study, examining the phenomenon at organizational, relational, and employee levels. The study employs theoretical and qualitative methods, using empirical data from interviews (n=81) and open-ended responses from an employee survey (n=1,278).

The organizational level examines organization design as the foundation for HR practices, proposing skill standardization and clan control as key mechanisms for structuring work in work-from-anywhere environments, contributing to the organization design literature. The relational level examines leader-subordinate dynamics through feedback practices, emphasizing the need to balance interaction efforts in remote work settings to avoid overburdening the leader, thus adding to the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory and feedback literature. At the employee level, the focus is on employees' perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work. The study identifies nine HR practices linked to psychological contract elements, with varying degrees of evaluation, enriching research on psychological contracts, hybrid work, and employee HR perceptions.

Overall, this dissertation advances multilevel, employee-centered human resource management (HRM) research by portraying HR practice implementation in remote work arrangements as a complex process where organization design, leader-subordinate dynamics, and employee perceptions interact. It argues that neglecting any of these interconnected levels in HR practice implementation poses risks to achieving mutual gains. By addressing a real-world workplace issue, the study bridges the theory-practice gap and offers guidelines for organizations, leader-subordinate dyads, and employees to resolve tensions between employee preferences and organizational needs, ensuring outcomes that satisfy both parties.

Keywords: HR practices, remote work, hybrid work, work-from-anywhere, organization design, leader-member exchange, LMX, psychological contract, employee perceptions of HR practices, mutual gains, multilevel research

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New decade, new beginnings! In January 2020, I decided to embark on my long-held plan of applying for a doctoral program in human resource management. This decision marked a shift from a master's in accounting to a field where I had found my professional calling over the years. Initially, my research interest centered on remote work arrangements in small and medium-sized enterprises – or more specifically, the lack of them. While finalizing my research plan during the pandemic lockdown, I added the term 'COVID-19', realizing that my topic had gained profound relevance for organizations worldwide, literally overnight.

I have been fortunate to be surrounded by incredible people who made this process possible. Above all, I am grateful to my supervisors, Professors Liisa Mäkelä and Tomi Kallio. I have heard of a doctoral dissertation being compared to a driver's license – one that qualifies you for independent research. I could not have asked for better driving instructors: Liisa and Tomi, you taught me the rules of the road, guided me through crossroads, and hit the brakes when I was at risk of steering off course. Most importantly, you let me take the wheel, with the reassurance that help was always just a seat away. Now, as the final driving test, the defense, approaches, I feel assured and immensely thankful for the driving lessons along the way.

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"I had come to believe that the ability to evaluate many ideas, many histories, many points of view, was at the heart of what it means to self-create"

PhD Tara Westover

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Abbreviations

HR	Human resources
HRM	Human resource management
LMX	Leader-member exchange (theory)
PC	Psychological contract
RDI	Research, development and innovation
WLB	Work-life balance

Publications

- [1] Kallio, T. J. & Jansson, L. J. (2023). Näkökulmia organisaatio-suunnitteluun covid-19-pandemian jälkeisellä paikkariippumattoman työn aikakaudella. [Perspectives on organization design for the era of work-from-anywhere following COVID-19.] *Focus Localis*, 51(1), 5–22.
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- [2] Jansson, L. J. & Kangas, H. (2025). The art of staying in touch – exploring daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate in remote work. *Personnel Review*, 54(2), 660–679. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-04-2023-0301>. Reprinted under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license, as published by Emerald Publishing Limited. Copyright Linda Johanna Jansson and Hilpi Kangas.
- [3] Jansson, L. J. & Mäkelä, L. (in progress). Evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work: A psychological contract perspective. [A revised version of the article manuscript has been submitted to an international academic journal. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 27th Nordic Academy of Management in Reykjavik, Iceland, August 2024.]

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Apple's AI chief, Ian Goodfellow, quits over three-day week office order

(Byers, The Times, 10.5.2022)

Amazon tells staff to get back to office five days a week

(Sherman, BBC News, 17.9.2024)

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 triggered a paradigm shift in working life by introducing large-scale remote work (Howe et al., 2021; Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). Consequently, signs of tensions over workplace arrangements have become increasingly evident, with corporate giants like Apple and Amazon exemplifying the clash between employees' and organizations' views on balancing remote and office work.

A European survey (Eurofound, 2024) shows that 83 % of respondents prefer to work remotely at least part-time, while an American study reports that 44 % have some form of remote work arrangement (Barrero et al., 2023). In contrast, a global survey of over 1,300 CEOs reveals that 83 % anticipate a full return to office-based work within three years – up from 64 % the previous year (KPMG, 2024). This growing gap between employee preferences and management expectations has prompted drastic actions, such as Apple's director of machine learning resigning over rigid work arrangements (Byers, 2022), and Amazon mandating full-time office attendance (Sherman, 2024), and even encouraging dissatisfied employees to leave (Bensinger, 2024).

Further fueling these tensions, the disconnect between employees and organizations has led to "flex-washing" – a practice where organizations advertise flexible work arrangements to attract job seekers, yet fail to deliver on those promises (Reisinger, 2022; Saarinen, 2024).

In light of these developments, it becomes apparent that organizations need to reconsider their approaches to people management in knowledge-intensive work, responding to the evolving work landscape and actively engaging employees in the process. This article-based dissertation addresses this issue through three publications and their integrated analysis.

1.2 Implementing HR practices for mutual gains

Human resource practices (HR practices) refer to processes that organizations use to manage their most valuable assets – their employees (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023; Huselid, 1995; Wright & McMahan, 1992). HR practices are acknowledged for enhancing organizational performance by developing human capital as a critical source of competitive advantage, and shaping employee attitudes and behavior to meet organizational goals (Jiang & Li, 2019; Wright & McMahan, 1992). Moreover, HR practices support employee well-being, which not only contributes to organizational performance, but is also valued as an outcome in its own right, rather than merely as a means to achieve performance (Guest, 2017; Paauwe, 2024). When both organizational performance and employee well-being are achieved simultaneously, it reflects the mutual gains perspective, where HR practices benefit both organizations and employees (Van De Voorde et al., 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a sudden and unprecedented event of complexity and scale, prompting fundamental questions such as “What’s the story?” and “Now what?” – typical inquiries which emerge when making sense of disruptive or confusing events (Christianson & Barton, 2021; Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking, which involves interpreting past events and determining future actions to address changed circumstances, is essential for organizational responses to crises and change (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). In HR practice implementation, sensemaking is particularly relevant, calling for various actors to collaborate in adjusting practices to suit the evolving organizational environment (Mirfakhar et al., 2018; Trullen et al., 2020). To successfully navigate the changing work environment, organizations must recognize that HR practices cannot be formed in isolation, and instead, they must reflect the organizational context (see Beer et al., 1984; Burke & Morley, 2023).

The pandemic demonstrated that many knowledge-based tasks can be performed remotely, allowing organizations to sustain productivity regardless of employees’ physical locations. This insight should have implications for how organizations manage their workforce in the post-pandemic work environment (Malhotra, 2021). In particular, HR practices play a pivotal role in fostering employee commitment (Guest, 2025; Hiltrop, 1999), which is essential for coping with the prevailing shortage of skilled labor (Madgavkar et al., 2024). Organizations aiming to attract and retain skilled talent must prioritize implementing HR practices to align with the characteristics of the evolving work landscape (Trevor & Holweg, 2022).

At the same time, several challenges have been cited as reasons for limiting the continuation of remote work, post-pandemic. While pre-pandemic literature

primarily emphasized concerns about loss of control (i.e., lack of trust) over employees in remote work environments (e.g., Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012; Silva-C et al., 2019), post-pandemic discourse has increasingly highlighted recurring concerns such as the erosion of organizational culture, a decline in innovation capacity (Barrero et al., 2023; Kane et al., 2021; Sherman, 2024; Šmite et al., 2023a; Trevor & Holweg, 2022), and difficulties in knowledge transfer (Kane et al., 2021; Šmite et al., 2023a). Addressing these concerns requires fostering a shared understanding between employees and management, and such alignment can guide organizational actions and balance employee preferences with management expectations, thereby achieving mutual gains (see Guest, 2017; Vartiainen, 2024).

The Harvard model of human resource management (HRM) (Beer et al., 1984) highlights two primary outcomes of HR practices—performance and well-being—central to mutual gains, and further central to the soft HRM approach, which seeks to consider the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. The Harvard model also identifies societal well-being as a third key outcome of HRM (Beer et al., 1984). While remote work arrangements are known to influence societal well-being (Kulik, 2021; McPhail et al., 2024), this third aspect lies outside the scope of the present study.

1.3 The multifaceted concept of remote work

Before delving into the knowledge gaps in implementing HR practices in the remote work environment, it is essential to clarify the contextual concepts that frame this phenomenon, including remote work, hybrid work, and work-from-anywhere. The research literature recognizes a variety of overlapping terms associated with remote work, highlighting its complexity and evolving nature (Allen et al., 2015; Nakrošienė et al., 2019; Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024).

Remote work, also referred to as telework and telecommuting, involves employees performing their responsibilities from locations outside the employer's premises, using information and communication technology for collaboration and communication (Allen et al., 2015; Gohoungodji et al., 2023). Beyond this spatial flexibility, remote work also offers temporal flexibility, allowing employees to adjust their working time to align with their personal schedules and optimize productivity (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Nakrošienė et al., 2019; Raghuram et al., 2019). However, the degree of spatial and temporal flexibility may vary depending on organizational policies and task requirements (Allen et al., 2015). Although remote work can occur in various locations, the home environment has become the most common setting (Allen et al., 2015; Raghuram et al., 2019), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which required employees in knowledge-intensive, office-based

roles to work remotely in order to reduce virus transmission (McPhail et al., 2024; Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024).

The unprecedented period of enforced remote work during the pandemic catalyzed the adoption of **hybrid work** (Vartiainen, 2024). Hybrid work blends modern and traditional work practices, giving equal consideration to both individual tasks and collaborative efforts (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024; Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). By combining in-person and technology-mediated communication, along with synchronous and asynchronous interactions, hybrid work enables employees to work from various locations while facilitating the transition between personal responsibilities and collaborative tasks (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024; Vartiainen et al., 2025).

In essence, hybrid work integrates remote and in-office work, with employees alternating between these settings (McPhail et al., 2024). Temporal flexibility involves switching between synchronous (constrained) and asynchronous (non-constrained) working hours (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024), with flexibility determined by factors such as duration, timing, and frequency of different work modes (Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). Similarly, spatial flexibility requires balancing between remote and in-office work locations to support diverse work demands (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024; Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024).

As Vartiainen and Vanharanta (2024) suggest, hybrid work should be seen as the overarching framework within which remote work is one form. Hybrid work is a broader concept that inherently offers flexibility, adapting to diverse contexts and providing a broader framework for customized work arrangements that accommodate varying job requirements, organizational needs, and employee preferences. Many organizations have adopted the so-called 3/2 hybrid work model, typically involving three days in the office and two days of remote work each week (Bloom, 2021; Trevor & Holweg, 2022; see Vartiainen et al., 2025, for a review of different hybrid work models).

Work-from-anywhere is an emerging form of remote work that has also gained prominence in the aftermath of the pandemic (Gupta et al., 2022). It allows employees to choose where they live independently of their employer, even across national borders, aligning work location with personal preferences and lifestyles (Choudhury et al., 2021; Šmite et al., 2023b). Temporal flexibility is inherent in the work-from-anywhere model (Choudhury et al., 2021). However, the broad spatial flexibility associated with this model can lead to temporal dispersion within organizations. This necessitates attention to time zone differences to ensure overlapping work hours that facilitate collaboration (see Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020; Raghuram et al., 2019), which may, in turn, limit the overall temporal flexibility.

While companies like Apple (Byers, 2022) and Amazon (Bensinger, 2024; Sherman, 2024) have imposed limitations on remote work to encourage a return to office environments, numerous organizations have adopted the work-from-anywhere approach, offering their employees complete or partial geographical (spatial) flexibility (Šmite et al., 2023a; We Work Remotely, n.d.).

Although remote work, hybrid work, and work-from-anywhere share common dimensions in terms of location, time, and technology-mediated communication, they differ in scope and focus. Remote work emphasizes employees' individual control over location and time, with technology enabling independent and effective work (see Gohoungodji et al., 2023; Lauring & Jonasson, 2024; Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). In contrast, hybrid work adopts a more structured approach to location and time, focusing on social and collaborative aspects (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024; Vartiainen, 2024). Thus, hybrid work requires careful consideration of spatial, temporal and technological dimensions, balancing in-office and remote work locations, synchronous and asynchronous interactions, and combining analog tools for face-to-face collaboration with digital tools for virtual work (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024). Work-from-anywhere, on the other hand, prioritizes spatial flexibility, allowing employees to choose their residence independently of the workplace (Choudhury et al., 2021; Šmite et al., 2023b), with less emphasis on the social and collaborative aspects. As a result, this model implies a more intensive reliance on technology-mediated communication compared to remote and hybrid work (see Gohoungodji et al., 2023; Raghuram et al., 2019).

This dissertation covers all three concepts: work-from-anywhere in Paper 1, remote work in Paper 2, and hybrid work in Paper 3.

1.4 Knowledge gaps

This section outlines the knowledge gaps of the dissertation. The focus is on examining the implementation of HR practices in remote work arrangements from diverse perspectives across three levels: the organizational level, examining outdated organization design as the foundation for HR practices (1.4.1); the relational level, addressing the overlooked reciprocal leader-subordinate dynamics in HR practices (1.4.2); and the employee level, investigating the alignment of employee needs and expectations with HR practices (1.4.3). Together, these gaps reflect the varied challenges of implementing HR practices in the evolving work environment, highlighting the need for a multilevel, employee-centered approach to HRM research (1.4.4).

1.4.1 Organizational level: Modernizing organization design as the foundation for HR practices

Organization design refers to structuring tasks and responsibilities to achieve organizational objectives (Joseph & Sengul, 2025; Mintzberg, 1979). It forms the foundation for HR practices, providing the structure within which these practices are implemented (Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009; Eriksson & Ortega, 2024; Kim et al., 2014). In turn, HR practices operationalize the organizational structure, translating its design into action (Beer et al., 1984).

The field of organization design is in need of fresh insights and reorientation. Much of its seminal literature, mainly developed in the 1970s, has become outdated in the context of digitalized work environments (Kallio, 2015; Kallio et al., 2020; Kivistö, 2019). This gap is especially evident in the Finnish research literature, where Eloranta's (1977) classic work remains the most recent contribution specific to the field of organization design. Internationally, however, the outlook is more optimistic. For example, Worren (2018) has argued that the field is undergoing a renaissance, evolving to address the contemporary challenges of complex environments, technological advancements, and the rise of knowledge-intensive industries.

Furthermore, although traditionally a practically oriented discipline, organization design has drawn on knowledge from various fields to support management decision-making (Galbraith, 2008; Joseph & Sengul, 2025). However, the research has increasingly shifted toward narrower, more theoretically coherent studies, reducing its practical problem-solving capabilities (Alvesson et al., 2017; Kallio, 2015; Timming & Macneil, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for updated insights in organization design, as organizations struggled with the complexities of remote work (Alasoini, 2024; Kallio & Jansson, 2023; see Tourish, 2020). While classic organization design concepts, such as the division of labor, coordination, and control (e.g., Mintzberg, 1979; Ouchi, 1979), remain valuable as a basis for research (see Kivistö, 2019), they require reinterpretation to align with the characteristics of knowledge-intensive, decentralized work arrangements in the post-pandemic era of work-from-anywhere (Foss, 2021; Malhotra, 2021; Muzio & Doh, 2021).

By examining organization design at the organizational level in Paper 1, this dissertation highlights its crucial role in implementing HR practices in remote work arrangements. Addressing gaps in the literature requires theoretical-conceptual research that integrates classic organizational design literature with insights from literature on remote work arrangements. Such research can generate innovative ideas by connecting concepts, theories and literature across disciplines, proposing

novel relationships that guide future empirical studies (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Jaakkola, 2020; Klein & Potosky, 2019).

1.4.2 Relational level: Recognizing reciprocity in leader-subordinate dynamics

The leader-subordinate relationship is the primary context where HR practices are implemented (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Kilroy et al., 2023; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Therefore, recognizing the significance of this relationship is essential when implementing HR practices in the remote work environment (see Leroy et al., 2018).

This study investigates the leader-subordinate relationship through a single HR practice: feedback. In addition to being a crucial management tool (Li et al., 2022; London, 2015), feedback is identified as one of the most challenging HR practices (Pulakos, 2009). It conveys information about employees' performance and behavior (Eva et al., 2019), with the intent of facilitating learning and improvement for future performance (Anseel & Sherf, 2025). Moreover, feedback fosters social relationships, supports personal growth, and shapes individuals' organizational roles (London, 2015).

Feedback interactions, typically occurring between a leader and a subordinate (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Fletcher, 2001), have evolved from formal annual processes to essential components of informal, daily interactions within organizations (Kuvaas et al., 2017; Mertens et al., 2021). This evolution makes feedback particularly sensitive to changes in the organizational environment (Anseel & Brutus, 2019), such as the rapid shift to remote work which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although feedback is recognized as crucial in remote work settings, existing research primarily focuses on team-level feedback (e.g., Handke et al., 2022; Hertel et al., 2005; Kirkman et al., 2002). This leaves a gap in understanding dyadic feedback interactions that a qualitative approach could help address with deeper insights (Brown et al., 2019).

Furthermore, feedback research integrating perspectives from both leaders and subordinates remains sparse (Anseel & Sherf, 2025; Katz et al., 2021), which is a notable gap given that feedback interactions inherently involve both parties (Anseel & Brutus, 2019). Most existing research utilizes primarily quantitative data from subordinates (e.g., Kim et al., 2024; Li & Xia, 2024; Mertens et al., 2021; Mertens & Schollaert, 2025). Even those drawing on data from both leaders and subordinates (e.g., Gallo & Steelman, 2019; Jiang & Qu, 2023; Peng & Lin, 2016) fail to address both viewpoints in feedback exchanges.

Since feedback is a form of dyadic interaction and communication in leader-subordinate relationships (Anseel & Brutus, 2019), leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, grounded in the principles of reciprocity and social exchange (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), provides a suitable framework for studying it. LMX theory views leader-subordinate relationships (LMX relationships) as reciprocal efforts by both parties to actively build their working relationship through social exchanges involving trust and support (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Terpstra-Tong et al., 2020).

However, despite its relevance, current literature lacks empirical evidence on the actual reciprocal dynamics of LMX relationships (Martin et al., 2023; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2017; Sheer, 2015), leading to increasing critiques of reciprocity and social exchange within LMX (Liden et al., 2025). This gap becomes particularly relevant in remote work settings, where prior research acknowledges the challenges in interaction (Allen et al., 2015; Gohoungodji et al., 2023; McPhail et al., 2024; Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024) that impact reciprocity in these relationships. Nevertheless, LMX relationships in remote settings remain underexplored (Mat- Artun & Kuskü, 2024; Varma et al., 2022).

To summarize, these limitations underscore the need for qualitative research to gain an in-depth understanding of how remote work influences the dyadic feedback environment, focusing on reciprocity in LMX relationships and its impact on feedback dynamics. Paper 2 addresses these literature gaps, and represents the relational level of HR practice implementation in remote work arrangements.

1.4.3 Employee level: Aligning HR practices with employee preferences

It is widely acknowledged in the research literature that HR practices are connected to organizational performance (e.g., Arthur, 1994; Boon et al., 2019; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Guest, 2025; Huselid, 1995; Jiang & Li, 2019; Wright & Boswell, 2002; Wright & McMahan, 1992), and more recently, to employee well-being (e.g., Guest, 2017; Huetterman & Bruch, 2019; Paauwe, 2024; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019a). These aspects represent elements of mutual gain. However, the mechanisms through which HR practices influence these outcomes remain a topic of ongoing scholarly debate, often referred to as the challenge of opening the “black box” of HRM (Guest, 2011; Renkema et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2020).

In recent decades, employee perceptions have gained increasing attention in unlocking this “black box” (e.g., Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019; Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Nishii et al., 2008; Meijerink et al., 2021; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Van

Beurden et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). Research suggests that employees' subjective views on HR practices are more influential in driving organizational and individual outcomes than managerial actions (Nishii et al., 2008; Van Beurden et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). This insight highlights the importance of employee perceptions in driving mutual gains, which can only be achieved if HR practices create value for employees (Beijer et al., 2021; Lepak et al., 2012; Nishii et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2020).

Employees assess HR practices based on how well they align with their individual needs and expectations (Beijer et al., 2021; Meijerink et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2024), meaning that the mere presence of HR practices does not automatically indicate their value to employees (Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019). This distinction highlights the difference between employees' observations of the availability of HR practices in the organization, and their evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and satisfaction with these practices (Wang et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2024). While current research often shows that these two types of perceptions are intertwined, scholars emphasize the need for studies that separate descriptive and evaluative perceptions to better understand the outcomes of HR practices (Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021; Van Beurden et al., 2021).

As the work environment evolves due to technological advancements and shifting employee preferences, HR practices must adapt accordingly (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Haque, 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022, Vartiainen, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this shift, highlighting the necessity for research addressing the current needs and expectations of employees in managing hybrid work (Salin & Koponen, 2024; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023; Verma et al., 2023).

Research on employee HR perceptions often lacks an explanation of the theoretical framework used, which is essential for better understanding these perceptions (Edgar & Geare, 2014; Van Beurden et al., 2021). Psychological contract (PC) theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the alignment of employee needs with HR practices, yet it remains underutilized in this context (Lepak et al., 2012; Van Beurden et al., 2021). Building upon the principles of reciprocity and social exchange (Blau, 1964; Conway & Briner, 2009), PC theory captures the subjective and reciprocal expectations that employees hold concerning their relationship with the organization (Rousseau, 1989). Employee needs and beliefs underpin these expectations, and their fulfillment influences employee behavior at work (Conway & Briner, 2009; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Rousseau, 1995). Therefore, understanding how HR practices align with employee needs and expectations is crucial, as these factors shape the PC content and contribute to positive outcomes for both employees and the organization (Kutaula et al., 2020; Rousseau & Greller, 1994).

PC also provides insights into how employment relationships evolve, particularly during times of change (Conway & Briner, 2009). As the pandemic has reshaped employee expectations and altered the psychological contract (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Karani Mehta et al., 2024), applying PC theory in post-pandemic hybrid work settings is especially relevant (see Tietze & Nadin, 2011).

Research on psychological contracts generally focuses on content (what is exchanged and the factors influencing it) or process (the causes and effects of fulfillment, breach, and violation) (Conway & Briner, 2009; Kutaula et al., 2020). However, studies on PC content in remote work settings remain limited (Dhanpat, 2021; Guest & Rodrigues 2024). Indeed, most existing research focuses on the process perspective exploring PC fulfillment and breach (Gong & Sims, 2023; Gutworth et al., 2024; Hornung & Glaser, 2010; Karani et al., 2022; Yu, 2024), or examines how the digitalized work environment shapes psychological contracts (Coetzee, 2021; Dhanpat, 2021; Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010; Raeder, 2021; Tietze & Nadin, 2011; Veldsman & Van Aarde, 2021). Only a few studies examine the PC content in remote settings (Adekoya et al., 2022; Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Karani Mehta et al., 2024), of which only two rely on a qualitative approach (Adekoya et al., 2022; Karani Mehta et al., 2024).

Notably, the predominant use of quantitative approaches in PC research fails to fully capture the subjective nature of PCs (Ali, 2020, 2021; Conway & Briner, 2009). The few qualitative studies on PC in remote settings—covering all perspectives, not just PC content—are limited by small sample sizes (Adekoya et al., 2022; Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010; Karani Mehta et al., 2024; Tietze & Nadin, 2011; Veldsman & Van Aarde, 2021), narrow demographics (Tietze & Nadin, 2011), restricted geographic focus (Adekoya et al., 2022; Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010), or outdated pre-pandemic data (Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010; Tietze & Nadin, 2011).

These limitations highlight the need for further qualitative research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices in a hybrid work environment, using the psychological contract as a theoretical framework. Consequently, Paper 3 examines employee perceptions of HR practices, focusing on how HR practices have been implemented in hybrid work settings from the perspective of employees.

1.4.4 Towards a multilevel, employee-centered approach to HR practice implementation

Implementing HR practices can be defined as a dynamic process, starting with the introduction or modification of a practice, and involving key organizational actors (such as HR professionals, top management, leaders and employees) until it becomes routine (Trullen et al., 2020). It is recognized as a multilevel process in which actors at different organizational levels interact, influencing its progression (Mirfakhar et al., 2018; Roodbari et al., 2025).

However, the HR implementation literature lacks a multilevel perspective that considers the implementation as a multilevel phenomenon in remote work settings, comprising the level-specific mechanisms and contextual factors at different levels of analysis (see Roodbari et al., 2025, for a literature review). Lazarus and Nalepka (2024) present similar observations in their study of a large organization transitioning to hybrid work, underscoring the need for a comprehensive approach that integrates employee needs, leadership challenges, and organizational structures to foster mutual gains in remote work environments.

Indeed, organizations are complex systems shaped by the interplay between organizational structures, interpersonal dynamics, and individual behaviors (Leroy et al., 2018; Molina-Azorín et al., 2020; Renkema et al., 2017). A multilevel approach is essential in HRM research to capture these complexities, understand the interconnectedness across different levels, and develop more effective HR practices and theories (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019b; Renkema et al., 2017). This approach connects micro-level individual insights, meso-level interpersonal dynamics, and macro-level organizational structures, integrating theories from various disciplines (Molina-Azorín et al., 2020; Wright & Boswell, 2002) to provide a comprehensive understanding of phenomena spanning multiple organizational levels (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Furthermore, by addressing the complexities of real-world organizational practices, multilevel research helps bridge the research-practice gap, enhancing the relevance and applicability of findings for practitioners (Molina-Azorín et al., 2020; Renkema et al., 2017).

Despite its potential to provide a holistic understanding, the multilevel approach has not yet been fully established in the HRM field, indicating a gap and room for further development (Hitt et al., 2007; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019b; Renkema et al., 2017; Wright & Boswell, 2002). In addition, a multilevel approach offers significant value in employee-centered HRM research, providing insights into the relationships among various factors that benefit both employees and organizations (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019b). As employee well-being gains prominence as a key outcome of HRM alongside organizational performance, there is a growing demand for research

exploring how HRM can foster mutually beneficial outcomes for both parties (e.g., Guest, 2017; Guest, 2025; Huettermann & Bruch, 2019; Kulik, 2021).

To address the gaps discussed above, this dissertation examines HR practice implementation across organizational, relational, and employee levels, each shaped by distinct mechanisms and contextual factors. At the organizational level, the focus is on the core processes of organization design, including the division of labor, coordination, and control. The relational level examines leader-subordinate dynamics through LMX theory, while the employee level investigates employee HR perceptions through psychological contract theory. Grounded in social exchange, the two latter theoretical perspectives are crucial for understanding and improving HR practice implementation efforts (see Trullen et al., 2020).

Moreover, the study examines both top-down and bottom-up influences, the latter of which is largely overlooked in multilevel research (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Renkema et al., 2017). Top-down processes influence lower levels from above, while bottom-up processes arise from individual actions shaping higher-level outcomes (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Specifically, by exploring the reciprocal influence between the organizational and relational levels, this study bridges HRM and leadership, which have often been criticized for being disconnected, with HRM typically analyzed at the organizational level and leadership at the individual level (Leroy et al., 2018). These interactions are crucial for understanding both organizational and individual outcomes (Leroy et al., 2018; Molina-Azorín et al., 2020).

The multilevel approach is predominantly applied in statistical, quantitative research (Köhler, 2024; see also Eckardt et al., 2021 and Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019b for reviews of quantitative multilevel studies, and Van De Voorde et al., 2012 for a review specifically focused on employee-centered multilevel HRM research). However, multilevel research also encompasses qualitative methods (e.g., Abid & Loufrani, 2024; Köhler, 2024; Nordbäck et al., 2024) and theoretical approaches (e.g., Burke & Morley, 2023; Shabana & Ravlin, 2016; Sitzmann & Weinhardt, 2019), demonstrating its versatility (Molina-Azorín et al., 2020). In this study, the multilevel approach is theoretical, synthesizing distinct studies, introducing novel constructs and relationships, thereby laying a foundation for future empirical research (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Jaakkola, 2020; Klein & Potosky, 2019).

In sum, integrating literature and findings from three studies into a multilevel framework enhances our understanding of the implementation of HR practices in remote work as a complex organizational phenomenon (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Roodbari et al., 2025). In addition, by moving beyond traditional approaches centered on physical office settings, this study embraces perspectives that reflect the flexibility and technological integration of modern work arrangements. In doing so, this study

helps HRM research to remain relevant and impactful in the evolving work environment (see, e.g., Collings et al., 2021; Lauring & Jonasson, 2024; McPhail et al., 2024).

1.5 Research aim and questions

This dissertation aims to enhance the understanding of the multiple perspectives essential for implementing HR practices in remote work arrangements, focusing on mutually beneficial outcomes for employees and organizations. In doing so, it contributes to the fields of HRM and organization theory. Furthermore, by addressing real-world organizational challenges, the study contributes to industry-engaged academic research and bridges the theory-practice gap (Timming & Macneil, 2023).

Notably, this study focuses on understanding the implementation process rather than the specific content of HR practices in remote work arrangements (see Roodbari et al., 2025). To achieve the overarching aim, the research integrates study findings from organizational, relational and employee levels. These studies from three distinct levels each have specific research questions (RQs).

Paper 1, focusing on the organization level, theoretically and conceptually examines the implications of work-from-anywhere arrangements for organizational design as the foundation for HR practices:

RQ1: What implications does work-from-anywhere impose on the division of labor, coordination, and control?

Paper 2 shifts the focus to the relational level, qualitatively exploring the leader-subordinate relationship and the implementation of a single HR practice—feedback—in remote work:

RQ2: How does remote work shape daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate?

Paper 3 narrows the focus to the employee level, qualitatively examining employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work. It addresses the following research questions:

RQ3: What are the HR practices highlighted by employees in a hybrid work setting, reflecting elements of the psychological contract?

RQ4: How do employees evaluate these HR practices?

Table 1 provides an overview of the three papers, including the specific research questions, perspectives on HR practices, and research approaches.

Table 1. Summary of the dissertation

	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
Title	Perspectives on organization design for the era of work-from-anywhere following COVID-19	The art of staying in touch – exploring daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate in remote work	Evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work: A psychological contract perspective
Research questions	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3, RQ4
Perspective on HR practices	Organizational level	Relational level	Employee level
Research approach	Theoretical-conceptual	Empirical (qualitative)	Empirical (qualitative)

1.6 Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is divided into two parts. The first part consists of five chapters. The introductory chapter provides background information, a definition of remote work arrangements as a research context, highlights the need for this study, and presents its aim. Chapter two establishes the theoretical background of this study, focusing on key considerations for implementing HR practices in remote work arrangements. Chapter three discusses the philosophical and methodological foundations of the research, along with reflections of research quality. Chapter four summarizes the findings from the three papers. Finally, Chapter five discusses the theoretical contributions and practical implications of the work, offering an integrated perspective that extends beyond the individual papers. This chapter also addresses the limitations of the study and provides suggestions for future research.

The second part of the dissertation includes the papers, as published or submitted for review. All of the included papers are co-authored. In Paper 1, Johanna Jansson was the second author, responsible for integrating perspectives from the literature on remote work arrangements and managing the review process. Together with the corresponding author, Professor Tomi J. Kallio, she collaborated on shaping the

content and structure of the paper, contributing to multiple revisions and enhancements. The article has been published in the Finnish academic journal *Focus Localis* (Finnish Publication Forum ranking 1).

In Paper 2, Johanna Jansson was the lead author, co-authoring with Postdoctoral Researcher Hilpi Kangas. Jansson had the main responsibility for the research process. She authored the abstract, literature review on feedback, method section, and limitations and future research subsection, while also contributing to the conceptualization of the study. Kangas concentrated on LMX literature and managed the data collection phase, which had been completed prior to Jansson's involvement in the study. The authors collaborated on data analysis and multiple revisions of the paper. The article has been published in *Personnel Review* (Chartered Association of Business Schools, CABS, AJG 2024 ranking 2; Finnish Publication Forum ranking 1). It was published online in advance in January 2024, and by July 2024, it ranked among the three most downloaded articles published in *Personnel Review* within the past 12 months.

In Paper 3, Johanna Jansson was the lead author, responsible for planning, data analysis, writing, and managing the review process. She also contributed to the development of the survey questionnaire. Professor Liisa Mäkelä, as the second author, provided the research data and supervisory feedback, and contributed to the refinement of the analysis and the structure of the paper. The revised version has been submitted to an international academic journal (Chartered Association of Business Schools, CABS, AJG 2024 ranking 2; Finnish Publication Forum ranking 1).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation adopts a multilevel perspective built on three distinct theoretical foundations, each aligned with a specific level of analysis and connected to the respective research papers. To establish the theoretical groundwork necessary for addressing the knowledge gaps outlined in the previous chapter, this chapter reviews relevant literature. Section 2.1 provides an overview of HR practices relevant in remote work arrangements, setting the stage for an examination of their implementation process across three levels. The organizational level examines updated organizational design as the foundation for HR practices (2.2); the relational level addresses the leader-subordinate relationship, using feedback as an example of an HR practice to uncover reciprocal dynamics (2.3); and the employee level investigates employee HR perceptions through the lens of psychological contract theory, highlighting the alignment of employee needs and expectations with HR practices (2.4). Finally, Section 2.5 synthesizes these theoretical perspectives into a multilevel framework, providing a holistic view of the implementation process and informing the comprehensive contributions of this dissertation.

2.1 HR practices as drivers of mutual gains

As discussed earlier, HR practices are organizational processes involving multiple roles and interactions among various actors—such as HR professionals, top management, leaders and employees—for managing the workforce to enhance organizational performance and employee well-being (Trullen et al., 2020). However, there is no universally accepted set of best HR practices (Guest, 2025; Lepak et al., 2006; Wright & Essman, 2021). The choice of suitable practices often depends on various factors, including organizational goals, industry context, organization size, and employee demographics (Boon et al., 2019; Guest, 2025). Consequently, various frameworks have been proposed, often with overlapping categorizations (Posthuma et al., 2013; Wright & Essman, 2021)¹. Moreover, even within specific HR practices, there is no consensus on their content; for example, ‘job design’ may refer to developing clear job descriptions or creating roles that foster engaging work environments (Boon et al., 2019).

Importantly, the selected HR practices should form a coherent system that aligns practices with each other to collectively support the organization in achieving its goals (Delery & Gupta, 2016). This internal coherence ensures that HR practices reinforce one another, thereby avoiding so-called “deadly combinations” that could

¹ See, e.g., Couto et al. (2024), Guest (2017), Lepak et al. (2006), and Posthuma et al. (2013), for different categorizations of HR practices

create conflicting expectations and lead to negative outcomes for both the organization and its employees (Delery & Gupta, 2016; Lepak et al., 2006). For example, if teamwork skills are emphasized during the selection process, this focus should extend to other HR practices, such as performance evaluation and incentive compensation. Consequently, performance appraisals should recognize and reward group achievements rather than individual performance, ensuring consistency throughout the system (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

Guest (2025) emphasizes that the selection of HR practices should be grounded in theory to ensure alignment with broader organizational goals, such as high performance (Huselid, 1995; Posthuma et al., 2013) and employee well-being (Guest, 2017). This alignment should also encompass intermediate goals, such as employee commitment (Arthur, 1994; Latorre et al., 2016), employee involvement (Guthrie, 2001; Oppenauer & Van De Voorde, 2018), and control (Su & Wright, 2012; Wright & Essman, 2021), which contribute to the achievement of broader organizational goals (see Guest, 2025).

As employee well-being has become a key focus alongside performance in HRM (Guest, 2025; Huettermann & Bruch, 2019; Kulik, 2021), this dissertation examines the implementation of HR practices in remote work arrangements from the perspective of mutual gains, incorporating both elements. This is discussed further in the following sections.

2.1.1 Achieving mutually beneficial outcomes

Employee well-being is fundamental to achieving mutual gains (Aubouin-Bonnaventure et al., 2024; Salas-Vallina et al., 2021), and encompasses the mental, social, and physical dimensions of workplace experience and performance (Grant et al., 2007; Warr, 1987). Well-being plays a pivotal role in shaping job satisfaction, motivation, and organizational commitment, which in turn, contribute to both individual and organizational performance (Guest, 2025; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019a). This relationship is underpinned by the concept of social exchange (Blau, 1964), which suggests that employees who perceive organizational initiatives to support their well-being are likely to reciprocate with positive behaviors that benefit the organization (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019a; Salas-Vallina et al., 2021).

The concept of mutual gains emphasizes the importance of fostering a work environment that benefits both employees and organizations (Van De Voorde et al., 2012). Organizations can achieve mutually beneficial outcomes through HR practices that involve employees in decision-making, promote work-life balance and personal development, recognize and reward contributions, and prioritize health and safety

(Aubouin-Bonnaventure et al., 2024). Such healthy workplaces nurture positive employment relationships based on trust, fairness, and mutual respect (Guest, 2017).

As noted earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic and technological advancements have accelerated the adoption of remote work arrangements, and reshaped employee preferences (Couto et al., 2024; Rupcic, 2024). This transformation requires rethinking traditional HR practices, in order to better support mutually beneficial outcomes. However, research on HR practices in remote work settings is still emerging, and due to the necessity of tailoring interventions to organizational specifics, a comprehensive framework for remote environments remains elusive (see Couto et al., 2024). Nevertheless, recent literature provides valuable guidance on HR practices and their unique features in remote settings. These are outlined below.

2.1.2 Insights into HR practices relevant to remote work environments

This section explores different aspects of HR practices that contribute to mutual gains, especially within remote work arrangements. Although inclusion, fairness, and work-life balance are not defined as HR practices in the literature per se, they are embedded within other HR practices as crucial antecedents for mutual gains in remote work settings. Moreover, HR practices such as autonomy, communication, performance management, physical workspaces, fringe benefits, employee voice, recruitment, selection and onboarding, and training and development are also discussed.

Inclusion and fairness

As integral characteristics of HR practices, inclusion and fairness contribute to employee well-being and performance by fostering a sense of belonging and equity among employees (Baumann & Marcum, 2023; Guest, 2025). In remote settings, inclusion is crucial for creating an environment where employees feel valued and empowered to contribute, regardless of their physical location (Haque, 2023; Luring & Jonasson, 2024; Salin & Koponen, 2024).

Equally important is fairness, which involves implementing and communicating consistent policies and transparent criteria to ensure that all employees are treated equitably (Baumann & Marcum, 2023; Gratton, 2021). For example, if remote work requests are not accepted from all employees, organizations should provide clear justifications to avoid perceptions of favoritism or discrimination, thereby reinforcing both inclusion and fairness (Baumann & Marcum, 2023; Gratton, 2021).

Work-life balance

Support for work-life balance is a key aspect of HR practices (Couto et al, 2024; Guest, 2017; Lepak et al., 2006). As remote work arrangements blur the boundaries between personal and professional domains, organizations must support employees in maintaining a healthy balance (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Couto et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023; Vartiainen et al., 2025). Ignoring these issues can result in stress, ultimately harming employee well-being and performance (Haque, 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022).

Autonomy

A key element of job design practices is autonomy (Guest, 2017; Lepak et al., 2006; Posthuma et al., 2013), which refers to employees' decision-making power over their own tasks and work management (Sardesmukh et al., 2012). Autonomy is fundamental in remote work arrangements, where physical distance makes direct supervision more challenging (Baumann & Marcum, 2023; Haque, 2023). As a result, managerial control should shift toward support, encouraging employees to take ownership of their tasks and responsibilities rather than being micromanaged (Couto et al., 2024; Straus et al., 2023; Vartiainen et al., 2025). Overall, granting employees autonomy over their tasks and schedules benefits both well-being and performance in remote settings (Haque, 2023; Höcker et al., 2024).

Communication

Communication is central to HR practices (Guest, 2017; Lepak et al., 2006), encompassing both formal knowledge-sharing mechanisms (Posthuma et al., 2013) and informal activities (Couto et al., 2024). In remote settings, where face-to-face interactions and shared office spaces are limited, establishing clear communication practices becomes particularly essential (Haque, 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023). These practices promote interaction and collaboration among team members, sustaining organizational culture and ensuring that employees remain engaged and informed despite physical distance (Fayard et al., 2021; Luring & Jonasson, 2024; Salin & Koponen, 2024; Straus et al., 2023). Moreover, communication helps mitigate negative emotions of loneliness and isolation, which are common threats to well-being in remote work settings (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Fayard et al., 2021; Straus et al., 2023).

By prioritizing open communication, organizations can address the challenges posed by physical distance (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023), ultimately enhancing both employee well-being and performance (Couto et al., 2024; Haque, 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022). However, communication and interaction in

remote work arrangements are not without challenges, which are discussed in more detail in Section 2.3.2.

Performance management

Performance management refers to practices aimed at measuring and improving individual and team performance (Posthuma et al., 2013), and is considered a core HR practice (Guest, 2017; Lepak et al., 2006; Posthuma et al., 2013). In remote settings, organizations should prioritize result-oriented performance evaluations (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Haque, 2023; Vartiainen, 2024) over control measures tied to physical presence, as such practices can negatively affect both well-being and performance (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Maddox-Daines, 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023). Importantly, performance evaluation should remain unbiased by an employee's work location (Baumann & Marcum, 2023).

Physical workspaces

Providing employees with an adequate work environment is considered as an HR practice (Guest, 2017). In remote settings, workspaces extend beyond traditional office premises to include home offices. Consequently, organizations are encouraged to provide necessary supplies to home offices, including computer equipment and office furnishings (Couto et al., 2024; Maddox-Daines, 2023; Straus et al., 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023).

At the same time, organizational office spaces should accommodate both collaborative work and individual tasks to support performance (Fayard et al., 2021; Gratton, 2021; Skountridaki et al., 2024; Trevor & Holweg, 2022). Ergonomic workspaces that facilitate social interaction and focused work also contribute to employee well-being (Alasoini et al., 2025; Couto et al., 2024; Maddox-Daines, 2023; Straus et al., 2023).

Fringe benefits

As part of compensation and benefit practices, fringe benefits include non-wage perks that contribute to employee satisfaction and well-being, which translate into enhanced organizational performance (Posthuma et al., 2013). In remote settings, these benefits—such as the home office supplies discussed above—should be tailored to meet the diverse needs of remote employees (Couto et al., 2024).

Employee voice

HR practices that empower employees in work-related decision-making are referred to as employee voice (Guest, 2017; Lepak et al., 2006). To support performance in remote work arrangements, it is essential to involve employees in the planning process (Gratton, 2021; Vartiainen et al., 2025). Particularly in hybrid work settings, this includes incorporating employee preferences into office space design to ensure alignment with employee needs (Skountridaki et al., 2024). Ultimately, this also contributes to employee well-being (Guest, 2017).

Recruitment, selection, and onboarding

This category of HR practices is focused on attracting, selecting, and integrating new employees into the organization (Couto et al., 2024; Posthuma et al., 2013). Remote work settings offer access to a broader talent pool from diverse locations (Haque, 2023). However, success depends on ensuring that new hires are equipped with the skills required for remote work (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023), and that expectations about work flexibility are mutually understood between employers and employees (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024). Ensuring that new employees feel welcomed and integrated into the organization enhances their well-being – a factor particularly critical in remote settings where the onboarding process can be more challenging (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Couto et al., 2024). Ultimately, identifying the right talent and effectively integrating them into the organization reduces turnover, maintains productivity, and boosts overall organizational performance (Posthuma et al., 2013).

Training and development

Recognized as core HR practices (Couto et al., 2024; Guest, 2017; Lepak et al., 2006), training and development refer to initiatives that provide employees with the skills and knowledge essential for their current and future tasks (Posthuma et al., 2013). The literature frequently highlights these practices as essential in adapting to evolving work environments. Upskilling is required in several areas, such as communication and interaction skills (Maddox-Daines, 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022; Suravi, 2024), self-leadership (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024; Straus et al., 2023), digital competencies (Couto et al., 2024; Shahriar et al., 2022; Suravi, 2024; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023), and well-being (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023). Leadership skills, in particular, must adapt to remote work arrangements to foster trust, support, and the dynamics of remote interactions (Baumann & Marcum, 2023; Salin & Koponen, 2023; Straus et al., 2023; Suravi, 2024).

As the workplace continues to evolve, training opportunities should be continuous (Haque, 2023) and available in virtual formats to ensure flexible access to skill development (Rupcic, 2024). Besides supporting performance, training and development practices enhance employee well-being by enhancing skills and confidence, while also fostering a sense of organizational support (Rupcic, 2024; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023).

In sum, the HR practices identified as relevant to remote work arrangements are closely interconnected, demonstrating the coherence expected of a system of HR practices (see Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Delery & Gupta, 2016). For example, autonomy supports work-life balance (Höcker et al., 2024), while result-oriented performance management, in turn, can be seen to enhance autonomy by focusing on outcomes rather than the processes used to achieve them (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Haque, 2023). Without tailoring fringe benefits such as support for home office equipment, organizations may struggle to create optimal physical workspaces (Couto et al., 2024). Moreover, two-way communication is essential for supporting inclusion (Gratton, 2021; Haque, 2023; Luring & Jonasson, 2024), fairness, performance management (Baumann & Marcum, 2023), onboarding (see Couto et al., 2024), and enabling employee voice that further contributes to the suitability of workspaces (see Gratton, 2021). Finally, training and development can be utilized to strengthen many of these HR practices. Table 2 summarizes the key HR practices discussed above and their relevance to remote work environments, including embedded antecedents such as inclusion, fairness, and work-life balance.

Table 2. Summary of HR practices and embedded antecedents relevant to remote work

HR Practice / antecedent	Description	Remote Work Relevance
Inclusion and fairness (antecedents)	All employees feel valued and equally treated; policies are transparent.	Creates a sense of belonging and equity, regardless of location.
Work-life balance (antecedent)	Healthy boundaries between work and personal life.	Helps prevent stress due to blurred boundaries in remote settings.
Autonomy	Employees' decision-making power over their own tasks and work schedules.	Encourages self-leadership and performance in the absence of direct supervision.
Communication	Formal knowledge sharing and informal interactions.	Sustains collaboration, reduces isolation, and supports culture at a distance.

HR Practice / antecedent	Description	Remote Work Relevance
Performance management	Setting goals, providing feedback, and evaluating outcomes.	Encourages focus on results rather than visibility; prevents bias based on physical presence.
Physical workspaces	Access to suitable work environments.	Ensures ergonomics and performance both at home and in the office.
Fringe benefits	Non-monetary benefits that support well-being and job satisfaction.	Adapts compensation to remote needs.
Employee voice	Involving employees in decision-making.	Increases engagement and ensures remote work environments reflect employee needs.
Recruitment, selection and onboarding	Attracting, hiring, and integrating new employees.	Broadens the talent pool; requires careful onboarding to ensure connection.
Training and development	Continuous skill development for current and future tasks.	Strengthens digital, interpersonal, and (self-) leadership skills critical in remote work environments.

Moving forward, the research literature provides valuable insights into HR practices for remote work arrangements. However, as outlined in the following sections, a closer examination at the organizational, relational, and employee levels is necessary to address the specific requirements for implementing these practices.

2.2 Organizational level

Paper 1 explores organization design as the foundation for HR practices, which in turn foster organizational performance and employee well-being – key factors for achieving mutual gains (see Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009; Eriksson & Ortega, 2024; Kim et al., 2014).

2.2.1 Organization design foundations: (de)centralization, division of labor, coordination, and control

Organization design, described as the practical application of organization theory (Worren, 2018), is the strategic process of shaping an organization's structure to

align with its goals and operational environment (Joseph & Sengul, 2025; Mintzberg, 1979). A central topic in organization theory is the discussion of *centralized* versus *decentralized* organizational structures (Mintzberg, 1979), which examines the extent to which decision-making power is distributed among members and its relationship to geographical spatiality (Hatch, 1997; Mintzberg, 1980).

In centralized organizations, decision-making is concentrated at the top of organizational hierarchy, typically located at the headquarters (Mintzberg, 1979). Conversely, decentralization refers to decision-making power and spatiality through three primary forms discussed in classical organization theory, as illustrated in Figure 1: (i) vertical delegation of authority, where decision-making power is transferred downward from managers to subordinates; (ii) horizontal decentralization, where responsibility shifts outside the hierarchy of managers to analysts who contribute to data-driven decision-making (Mintzberg, 1979; Mintzberg, 1980); and (iii) spatial decentralization, where organizational activities are distributed across various locations (Hatch, 1997; Mintzberg, 1979).

Technological advancements have introduced a fourth dimension to decentralization, that was not addressed in the seminal literature from the 1970s due to the lack of such technological capabilities at the time (see Magalhães, 2020). However, economist and Nobel laureate Herbert Simon (1973) foresaw the impact of technology on organization design. This fourth dimension refers to work-from-anywhere and forms the point of departure for Paper 1.

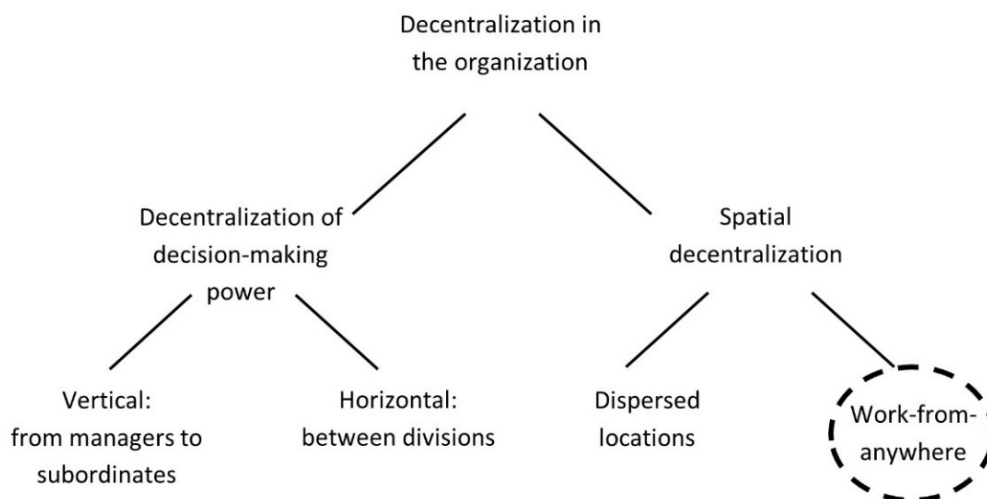


Figure 1. Forms of decentralization and the focus of the study (Kallio & Jansson, 2023)

The degree of (de)centralization significantly influences core processes of organization design identified in the seminal literature: division of labor, coordination, and control (e.g., Mintzberg, 1979; Mintzberg, 1980; Ouchi, 1979; Ouchi & Maguire, 1975). These processes collectively enable organizations to enhance efficiency, promote collaboration, and ensure alignment with their goals (see Kivistö, 2019). Although these core processes are conceptually differentiated, they are inherently interconnected and overlapping in practice, rather than being sequentially executed in managerial work (Mintzberg, 1973; Kallio, 2015). Division of labor and control are integral components coordination, ensuring that all tasks are completed and aligned with organizational goals (Joseph & Sengul, 2025; Kallio & Jansson, 2023). A more detailed examination of these processes is provided below.

Division of labor is a fundamental concept in understanding organizational structure, and refers to the process of breaking work into specific tasks and assigning them to individuals, teams, or divisions (Mintzberg, 1979). At its core is job specialization, which involves defining roles and responsibilities to ensure that each task is performed by someone with the appropriate skills and expertise (Mintzberg, 1980). When organizations become larger and tasks thereby more specialized, the need for effective coordination and control mechanisms increases, ensuring that the various parts of the organization align and work together toward shared goals (Mintzberg, 1979).

Coordination is described by Mintzberg (1979, p. 3) as “the glue that holds organizations together”, and involves integrating tasks to facilitate a smooth workflow while inherently addressing aspects of control and communication. Classic organization design literature identifies five primary coordination mechanisms: mutual adjustment, direct control, standardization of work processes, standardization of outputs, and standardization of skills (Mintzberg, 1979, 1980). Table 3 provides an overview of these mechanisms and the conditions under which they are most effective.

Table 3. Five key coordination mechanisms, with modifications from Mintzberg (1979, 1980) (Kallio & Jansson, 2023)

	Logic	Prerequisite
Mutual adjustment	Employees independently adjust their actions, either proactively or through negotiation, to align with the activities of their colleagues.	Suitable when there are few employees who interact continuously with one another.
Direct control	The manager assigns tasks and monitors employees' performance, providing instructions as needed.	Requires constant interaction between the manager and employees, and the possibility for the manager to observe subordinates at all times.
Standardization of work processes	Employees are fully briefed on their duties. When the manager considers that the employee is competent enough, they remain in their post independently.	Suitable when all work steps can be clearly identified, and the work involves repetitive tasks performed in a predefined order.
Standardization of outputs	The desired outcome, including quantity, quality, and timeline, is precisely defined in advance, or the work is carried out as a contracted task.	Suitable when the desired outcomes and timelines or total costs can be clearly defined in advance.
Standardization of skills	The employees understand their responsibilities and use their education and experience to determine how to handle the work situations they encounter.	Extensive education and training are required to help employees internalize the ethos and standards of the profession and consistently adhere to them in their work.

Control in organizations refers to the mechanisms used to manage employees' behavior and performance, ensuring alignment with shared organizational goals and facilitating cooperation among individuals, teams, or divisions with differing objectives (Joseph & Sengul, 2025; Ouchi, 1979; Ouchi & Maguire, 1975). Among control mechanisms, no categorization has become as widely recognized as Mintzberg's five coordination mechanisms presented above (see Brivot, 2011). Therefore, this study builds on Ouchi's (1979) three controls—bureaucratic control, market control, and clan control—while incorporating additional mechanisms, such as supervision of work (Ouchi & Maguire, 1975) and social control (Brivot, 2011). In addition, market control is expanded to include performance measurement. While Ouchi (1979) also identified this control mechanism, it was not as central in the 1970s

and 1980s as it is today. These five mechanisms and the prerequisites for their use are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Five key control mechanisms, with modifications from Brivot (2011), Ouchi (1979) and Ouchi & Maguire (1975) (Kallio & Jansson, 2023)

	Logic	Prerequisite
Social control	Team members monitor and guide each other's activities instead of relying on a formal manager. Requires team members to understand the correct actions to take.	Requires constant interaction between subordinates and the possibility to observe and provide mutual supervision.
Supervision of work	The manager observes and evaluates employees' performance, serving as "an extension" of the direct control coordination mechanism.	Requires constant interaction between the manager and employees, as well as the possibility to observe them. The number of subordinates must be limited to ensure effective oversight.
Bureaucratic control	The organization establishes precise written rules and guidelines that define employees' work roles, responsibilities, and reporting processes.	Requires sufficient knowledge of the work, a work description that is not too broad or constantly changing, and reliable reporting on work performance.
Market control / performance measurement	The value of work is assessed directly in economic terms. If direct valuation is not feasible, standardized performance measures tailored to the task are used.	Requires that the value of the employee's work can be quantified in market terms, or that the organization can develop performance measures capturing the core aspects of the work.
Clan control	Employees monitor their own performance against professional standards (clan values); "an extension" of the coordination mechanism of skill standardization.	Requires reliable, highly trained employees who are indoctrinated in the profession's values. Employees must independently assess their performance and recognize when to consult colleagues for guidance or feedback.

As can be seen in the descriptions of the mechanism logics in the above Tables 3 and 4, coordination and control share many similarities. Unsurprisingly, certain mechanisms have sometimes been conceptually conflated and used interchangeably in the literature (Kallio, 2015). Moreover, organizations that rely solely on a single control and coordination mechanism are exceptions (Brivot, 2011; Ouchi 1979).

Specifically, in knowledge-intensive work, the boundaries between the core processes—division of labor, coordination, and control—become blurred (Kallio, 2015; Mintzberg, 1979). Managing these complex, often parallel, and interconnected tasks effectively requires decentralized decision-making, both vertically to employees and horizontally to organizational analysts (Hatch, 1997; Kallio, 2015; Mintzberg, 1979; Ouchi, 1979). However, this necessary decentralization introduces potential risks, including tasks being left undone, duplicated efforts by employees unaware of each other's work, or tasks being carried out in an inefficient order, thus compromising optimal outcomes (Kallio & Jansson, 2023). Indeed, large organizations often experience situations where “the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing” (see Kivistö, 2019). These issues, whether in straightforward manufacturing tasks or complex knowledge-intensive work, often stem from inadequate organizational design; however, they are rarely unpredictable and can be anticipated and prevented through thoughtful design (Kallio & Jansson, 2023).

Nevertheless, when complex knowledge-intensive work involving decentralized decision-making is further transferred to a spatially decentralized environment—where employees lack face-to-face interactions with colleagues and managers—organizing work becomes even more challenging (Kallio & Jansson, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored these challenges by forcing organizations and employees to rapidly adapt to remote work, and thereby spatial decentralization. It is noteworthy that organizations adopting remote work arrangements are often knowledge-intensive and engaged in complex tasks (see Allen et al., 2015; Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Leonardi et al., 2024). The organization design implications of this large-scale shift are discussed in the next section.

2.2.2 Insights from work-from-anywhere shaping organization design

As noted, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work became a necessity to ensure health safety for numerous organizations and employees (Wang et al., 2021), accelerating the decentralization of work. In its aftermath, a work-from-anywhere paradigm is emerging, allowing employees to separate their living locations from their workplaces (Choudhury et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2022).

Such location-independent work offers organizations several benefits, such as cost savings on office space (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Choudhury et al., 2021), and the previously mentioned enhanced attraction and retention of talent in an increasingly competitive global labor market (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; KPMG, 2024; Madgavkar et al., 2024). Moreover, the pandemic highlighted the value of location independence for organizational resilience, as remote work enabled business continuity during extraordinary circumstances (Allen et al., 2015; Leonardi et al., 2024; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). Remote work arrangements have also been shown to enhance the productivity of knowledge-intensive work (Choudhury et al., 2021; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012; Verma et al., 2023), while improving work motivation and job satisfaction (Choudhury et al., 2021; Kretschmer & Khashabi, 2020; Verma et al., 2023). Together, these benefits contribute to mutual gains for organizations and employees (Guest, 2025; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019a).

However, work-from-anywhere also presents challenges. One major issue is the difficulty of monitoring employees, which is often linked to a lack of managerial trust (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). This factor has often been cited as a key barrier to the broader adoption of remote work arrangements (Kaplan et al., 2018; Kniffin et al., 2021; Silva-C et al., 2019). Additionally, spatial decentralization can hamper interaction (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Kniffin et al., 2021), complicating knowledge transfer (Šmite et al., 2023a; Taskin & Bridoux, 2010) and increasing role ambiguity (Liu et al., 2022; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012), as further discussed in Section 2.3.2. Finally, especially in the post-pandemic context, reduced innovation capacity—often associated with serendipitous face-to-face encounters (Fayard & Weeks, 2007; Kallio, 2015)—forms a major concern for organizations (Sherman, 2024; Šmite et al., 2023a).

As the pandemic hit, organization design literature, traditionally valued for its focus on practical problem-solving (Joseph & Sengul, 2025; Wegener, 2023; Worren, 2018), proved outdated in addressing the challenges of organizing work in a rapidly digitalizing work landscape. This environment, marked by both the pros and cons of location-independent work, required new approaches to organization design (Kallio & Jansson, 2023; see Kivistö, 2019 and Tourish, 2020). This shortcoming in literature can be argued to attribute to the theoretical orientation of existing research (see Alvesson et al., 2017; Kallio, 2015; Timming & Macneil, 2023).

Therefore, further research is needed to explore how the rise of work-from-anywhere arrangements influences the decentralization of organizational activities, and how organizations can effectively manage their activities in such decentralized contexts. In particular, the foundations of organization design should be updated to reflect modern work environments (Foss, 2021; Kivistö, 2019; Malhotra, 2021; Muzio & Doh,

2021), with a renewed emphasis on practical problem-solving (Alvesson et al., 2017; Kallio, 2015; Timming & Macneil, 2023).

2.3 Relational level

The leader-subordinate relationship is considered to be one of the most important work relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), and its significance is particularly emphasized in remote work due to the absence of office premises that facilitate interaction and communication, both of which are essential for organizational functioning and cohesion (Mat-Artun & Kuskü, 2024; Varma et al., 2022). The dynamics of this leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship which form the primary context for HR practices (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Kilroy et al., 2023; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) are addressed in Paper 2.

2.3.1 The dynamics of leader-subordinate relationship

LMX relationships are unique and vary in quality, developing through continuous interactions and exchanges (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by frequent interactions and socio-emotional elements such as trust and support, which are often absent in low-quality relationships (Gerstner & Day, 1997).

The quality of LMX relationships is largely shaped by the effort invested by both parties—the leader and the subordinate—through mutual exchanges, rather than the effort of either party alone (Sheer, 2015; Terpstra-Tong et al., 2020). This dyadic and reciprocal nature is central to LMX theory, with both the leader and subordinate contributing to the relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2017). This dynamic aligns with the concept of social exchange (Blau, 1964), where exchanges involving trust and support foster interdependence and strengthen the relationship over time (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Martin et al., 2023).

2.3.2 Feedback as an HR practice: Exploring reciprocal leader-subordinate dynamics in remote work

Although the literature has identified several challenges related to remote leader-subordinate relationships (see, e.g., Contreras et al., 2020; Höddinghaus et al., 2024), feedback stands out as one of the most essential HR practices (Eva et al., 2019; Tseng & Levy, 2019) and plays a significant role in developing and maintaining high-quality LMX relationships (Lam et al., 2007). Traditionally defined as information on past performance and behavior, a recent review of feedback research by Anseel and Sherf

(2025) emphasizes its future-oriented role in facilitating continuous learning, enhanced performance, and engagement in work relationships. Moreover, Anseel and Sherf (2025) underscore the ambiguity in defining feedback, noting that it encompasses various forms, including performance conversations, emotional exchanges, task-related information, and brainstorming sessions.

LMX relationships can be viewed as the social context of feedback (Levy & Williams, 2004), often referred to as the *feedback environment* (Katz et al., 2021; Steelman et al., 2004). In a supportive feedback environment, individuals feel comfortable giving, seeking, and receiving relevant and timely feedback (Anseel & Brutus, 2019; London, 2015), with high-quality feedback being integral to daily communication (Levy et al., 2017). The quality of the LMX relationship influences how feedback is perceived. In high-quality relationships, feedback is viewed as supportive (Audenaert et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2021) and performance-enhancing (Wu et al., 2024). Conversely, in low-quality relationships, feedback can be perceived as a control mechanism (Audenaert et al., 2021), leading to defensiveness and impaired performance (Wu et al., 2024).

Feedback processes can be evaluated and developed using a specific scale, where subordinates assess the feedback environment based on seven facets: feedback source credibility, feedback quality, feedback delivery, frequency of favorable feedback, frequency of unfavorable feedback, source availability, and the promotion of feedback seeking (Steelman et al., 2004). Earlier research on feedback process evaluation and development primarily focuses on how the feedback source (typically the leader) shapes the feedback environment (Anseel & Brutus, 2019; Steelman et al., 2004).

However, like LMX relationships, which are inherently reciprocal (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), feedback should be understood as a two-way interaction (Anseel & Sherf, 2025; Katz et al., 2023). While leaders invest effort into providing feedback, subordinates are expected to actively seek feedback by asking directly or observing others' responses to their actions (Ashford et al., 2016; London, 2015). Prior studies indicate a strong connection between high-quality LMX relationships and subordinates' feedback-seeking behaviors (Anseel et al., 2015; Chun et al., 2014). Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of a supportive feedback environment in fostering such behaviors (Steelman et al., 2004), and the leader's example in soliciting feedback from their subordinates (Mertens & Schollaert, 2025).

Recent developments have transformed feedback from a formal, annual procedure into an integral component of spontaneous, daily interactions (Levy et al., 2017; Mertens et al., 2021). However, remote work presents challenges to interaction by reducing face-to-face encounters and increasing reliance on technology-mediated communication (Allen et al., 2015; Gohoungodji et al., 2023; Salin et al., 2022; Wang

et al., 2021). The large-scale shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted LMX relationships (Schreier et al., 2022) and feedback exchange (Mertens & Schollaert, 2023), as opportunities for frequent, spontaneous communication diminished. Moreover, in remote settings, the absence of physical presence hinders the interpretation of nonverbal cues (Alasoini, 2024; London, 2015; Salin et al., 2022), potentially leading to role ambiguity (Liu et al., 2022; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012) and uncertainty (Varma et al., 2022).

As discussed in Section 1.3., remote work allows temporal flexibility, which in turn, creates temporal distance in interaction as well. Synchronous tools such as videoconferencing enable real-time interaction, while asynchronous tools such as email and chat delay feedback exchange (see Lauring & Jonasson, 2024; Raghuram et al., 2019; Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). This shift presents challenges for leaders, who must carefully formulate messages and select appropriate communication tools (Kirkman et al., 2002). Simultaneously, subordinates must exert more effort to seek feedback in the absence of continuous interaction (London, 2015). Additionally, the high autonomy characteristic of remote work (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012) may reduce feedback-seeking behaviors (Krasman, 2013). However, leaders' trust in subordinates can mitigate this effect, encouraging feedback requests (Huang, 2012).

To summarize, feedback is an essential HR practice and a form of dyadic interaction in LMX relationships. The significance of leader-subordinate relationships becomes particularly apparent in remote work settings, where organizations rely heavily on interpersonal connections due to the absence of shared physical spaces. The reciprocal dynamics in leader-subordinate interactions are fundamental for both the relationship itself and the feedback environment. However, remote work settings present challenges for these interactions, making it difficult to establish and sustain high-quality LMX relationships and a supportive feedback environment, which are more important than ever, due to the continued preference for remote work arrangements post-pandemic.

Therefore, there is a rationale for addressing the gap in the literature on LMX relationships in remote work contexts (Mat-Artun & Küskü, 2024; Varma et al., 2022) and expanding feedback research beyond the team level (Handke et al., 2022; Hertel et al., 2005; Kirkman et al., 2002) to the dyadic level (Brown et al., 2019). This expansion should include integrated perspectives of leaders and subordinates, currently absent from the literature (Anseel & Sherf, 2025; Katz et al., 2021), with a qualitative approach providing valuable insights into the feedback process (Brown et al., 2019). Additionally, investigating actual reciprocity within these relationships is a vital, but overlooked aspect (Martin et al., 2023; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2017; Sheer, 2015).

2.4 Employee level

As detailed above, this dissertation examined the importance of the LMX relationship, based on the principles of reciprocity and social exchange, in implementing HR practices in remote settings. These principles are also recognized in the relationship between the employee and the organization, which can be viewed through psychological contract (PC) theory (Rousseau, 1989). The PC offers insights into the employment relationship dynamics and employee behavior (Dhanpat, 2021; Rousseau, 1995). Building on this framework, Paper 3 explores implementation of HR practices in remote work settings from an employee-level perspective.

2.4.1 The psychological contract and its connection to HR practices

The psychological contract is an informal and unwritten agreement that reflects employees' subjective beliefs about mutual obligations with their organization (Rousseau, 1989, 1995). Rooted in social exchange theory and the principle of reciprocity (Blau, 1964), the PC outlines employees' expectations of their responsibilities toward the organization and the commitments they expect in return (Rousseau, 1990). Employees' expectations stem from both individual needs (Conway & Briner, 2009; Rousseau, 1995) and their beliefs. These beliefs are shaped by explicit promises such as policies and agreements, as well as by implicit cues such as organizational culture and interactions (Conway & Briner, 2009; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Rousseau, 1995).

The content of PCs can be divided into transactional elements, which encompass tangible exchanges such as salary and benefits based on explicit agreements (Conway & Briner, 2009; Rousseau, 1990), and intangible relational elements, which involve implicit socio-emotional aspects like support and mutual trust (Raeder, 2021; Rousseau, 1990). Together, these elements reflect the range of employee expectations (Conway & Briner, 2009; Rousseau, 1995), coexisting within balanced PCs and evolving over time in response to changing employee preferences or organizational settings (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Rousseau, 1995).

Existing research highlights the dynamic nature of the PC, showing that remote work can cause changes in its components (see Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010; Veldsman & Van Aarde, 2021). While remote work has the potential to strengthen relational elements such as trust and emotional commitment (Hornung & Glaser, 2010), it can also hinder the maintenance of these relational aspects due to reduced social interactions (Raeder, 2021). On the other hand, remote environments may prompt employees to adopt a more transactional perspective, focusing on task completion rather than emotional engagement (Raeder, 2021; Tietze & Nadin, 2011). This shift may, in turn,

reduce employees' loyalty to the organization, which is considered as a relational PC element (Coetzee, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the PC by triggering a reassessment of employee expectations, driven by the widespread shift to remote working arrangements (Karani Mehta et al., 2024; Šmite et al., 2023a; Veldsman & Van Aarde, 2021). Employees' expectations have risen, particularly regarding job autonomy (Adekoya et al., 2022; Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020), organizational support for well-being (Yu, 2024), and work-life balance (Adekoya et al., 2022; Gong & Sims, 2023), necessitating a corresponding adaptation in the psychological contract. Employees also increasingly value relational PC elements related to communication and interaction (see Adekoya et al., 2022; Gong & Sims, 2023; Gutworth et al., 2024; Karani et al., 2022). Additionally, current work values highlight a growing expectation for organizations to support employees' personal and professional growth through learning opportunities and career development (Coetzee, 2021).

These evolving employee expectations should be reflected in a revised psychological contract content for remote settings, where the agreement between the employee and the organization is founded on mutual trust and respect. Organizations are expected to show care for their employees and provide the necessary support for them to meet both personal and organizational goals (Karani et al., 2022; Yu, 2024), while employees are expected to demonstrate accountability and self-discipline in their work in return (Adekoya et al., 2022).

HR practices play a crucial role in meeting employee expectations, thereby shaping psychological contracts (Guest & Rodrigues, 2024; Kutaula et al., 2020; Raeder, 2021). These practices signal management's expectations and commitments to employees (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Rousseau & Greller, 1994). As discussed in Section 2.3, leaders are pivotal in implementing HR practices (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Kilroy et al., 2023; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007), thus also influencing the PC (Conway & Briner, 2009). Aligned with the principles of social exchange and reciprocity (Blau, 1964), psychological contract theory explains why positive perceptions of HR practices encourage beneficial employee behavior, while unmet expectations can harm attitudes and performance (Lepak et al., 2012; Nishii et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2020), ultimately affecting mutual gains (see Van Beurden et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2024).

To conclude, recognizing and adapting to evolving employee expectations is essential for organizations. This shift, reflected in transactional and relational PC elements, has been driven by changes in the work environment, such as the rise of hybrid work in the post-pandemic era. Understanding how these expectations impact HR practices

is central to fulfilling the psychological contract. The next section further explores employees' perceptions of HR practices within a hybrid work setting.

2.4.2 Evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices shaping the psychological contract in hybrid work

As noted earlier, aligning HR practices with employee preferences is crucial for achieving positive outcomes for both employees and organizations (Van Beurden et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2024). Merely providing HR practices does not guarantee their value to employees, and thus may not promote the desired attitudes and behaviors (Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019). In fact, individual-level processes, such as the (un)fulfillment of needs and expectations, tend to be more influential in determining individual and organizational outcomes than managerial actions (Lepak et al., 2012; Nishii et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2020). Consequently, there is a growing interest in examining how employees perceive HR practices (e.g., Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021; Van Beurden et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2024).

Research literature distinguishes between descriptive and evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices (Wang et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2024), each linked to different outcomes (Beijer et al., 2021). Descriptive perceptions focus on employees' observations of available HR practices (Beijer et al., 2021; Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Van Beurden et al., 2021), and are associated with personal and job resources, such as skills and organizational support (Meijerink et al., 2021). Evaluative perceptions which assess how employees emotionally respond to HR practices (Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019) are more connected to job attitudes and motivation-related outcomes, like job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Meijerink et al., 2021).

Existing literature identifies three commonly used evaluative measures. First, *effectiveness* refers to how HR practices support (Edgar & Geare, 2014; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Van Beurden et al., 2021) or hinder (Conway et al., 2016; Van Beurden et al., 2021) employees in achieving their personal and job-related goals. Second, the *quality* measure evaluates how accurately and reliably employees perceive HR practices are delivered by HR professionals and leaders (Gilbert et al., 2011; Meijerink et al., 2016). Third, *satisfaction* reflects how well HR practices generally meet employees' diverse personal needs (Marescaux et al., 2012; Meijerink et al., 2021). Positive employee evaluations of HR practices across these measures positively influence employees' attitudes and behaviors, ultimately enhancing both individual and organizational-level performance (Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007).

In sum, evaluative employee perceptions are essential for understanding how employees assess HR practices in terms of meeting their needs and expectations (Van Beurden et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2024). Given that employee needs and expectations lie at the core of the psychological contract (Conway & Briner, 2009), this framework is particularly well-suited for studying the alignment of HR practices with employee preferences, and interpreting the consequences of (mis)alignment (Lepak et al., 2012; Van Beurden et al., 2021).

However, the PC theory remains underutilized in employee perception research (Lepak et al., 2012; Van Beurden et al., 2021), and existing literature often neglects a justification of the choice of theoretical framework (Edgar & Geare, 2014; Van Beurden et al., 2021). Moreover, the HR assessment literature has been criticized for conflating descriptive and evaluative measures, which undermines the clarity and accuracy of HR practice assessment. This highlights a gap in the research that would focus exclusively on evaluative measures within a single study (Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021; Van Beurden et al., 2021).

Qualitative research is valuable for capturing the subjective nature of the psychological contract (Ali, 2020, 2021; Conway & Briner, 2009) and for providing unexpected insights into HR practice assessment that go beyond standardized employee surveys (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994). In this context, a qualitative approach helps address the underexplored PC content in remote settings (Dhanpat, 2021; Guest & Rodrigues 2024; Karani Mehta et al., 2024). Furthermore, qualitative research contributes to the emerging literature on hybrid work, which calls for a deeper understanding of employee needs and expectations to manage these evolving work environments more effectively (Salin & Koponen, 2024; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023; Verma et al., 2023).

2.5 Synthesizing literature: a multilevel approach to implementing HR practices

As discussed earlier, organizations are multifaceted systems influenced by overall structural design, interpersonal dynamics, and individual behaviors (Leroy et al., 2018; Molina-Azorín et al., 2020; Renkema et al., 2017). Recognizing this complexity, this dissertation examines the implementation of HR practices in remote work arrangements as a multilevel phenomenon aimed at achieving beneficial outcomes for both employees and organizations.

Sections 2.2–2.4 explored the perspectives of organizational structures, dyadic relationships, and employees, each adopting distinct theoretical approaches: the foundations of organization design at the organizational level, LMX theory at the

relational level, and psychological contract theory at the employee level. These perspectives have been explored in the individual studies of this dissertation (Papers 1–3), offering valuable insights into specific aspects of HR practice implementation, as presented in Chapter 4.

However, understanding a complex phenomenon requires a research design that integrates perspectives from different fields and synthesizes insights from them (see Langley, 2021). A theoretical multilevel approach to the study findings from distinct papers at the dissertation level provides a framework for uncovering the interconnections among these perspectives (Molina-Azorín et al., 2020), demonstrating how actions or decisions at one level may influence outcomes at another (Paruchuri et al., 2018). The existing literature offers insights into connections between three distinct levels. These interconnections are illustrated in Figure 2 and elaborated next.



Figure 2. The interconnections between the different levels of analysis

Organizational level influencing relational level

The core processes of organization design—described in Section 2.2.1: division of labor, coordination, and control—each affect LMX relationships by structuring opportunities for interpersonal exchanges and shaping leadership behaviors. These pathways explain why variations in division of labor and coordination and control mechanisms affect relational dynamics at the dyadic level.

The impact of *division of labor* on these dyadic relationships is particularly evident through the span of control, a key feature of organization design referring to the number of subordinates a leader directly oversees (Jacobsen et al., 2023; Mintzberg, 1979). A narrow span of control where a leader supervises a small number of subordinates fosters more personal relationships through frequent interactions, but also allows for greater direct control (Mintzberg, 1979, 1980). Conversely, a broader span of control where a leader oversees a larger number of subordinates tends to weaken LMX relationships due to reduced opportunities for personal interaction, while simultaneously increasing employee autonomy (Mintzberg, 1979, 1980). Supporting this, the quality of LMX relationships (Schyns et al., 2010) and employee job satisfaction (Jacobsen et al., 2023) may decline as the number of subordinates directly reporting to the leader increases. Accordingly, Huettermann et al. (2024) show that decentralization requires empowering leadership that helps employees effectively utilize their increased autonomy. In sum, the span of control shapes the nature of LMX relationships by influencing the interaction frequency and the level of direct control or support leaders provide (Jacobsen et al., 2023).

Coordination and *control* mechanisms also play a significant role in shaping LMX dynamics. The five key coordination and control mechanisms presented in Section 2.2.1 (see Tables 3 and 4) influence leader-subordinate relationships in distinct ways. For example, mutual adjustment and social control, counterparts in the coordination and control mechanisms, foster a collaborative, egalitarian relationship that promotes shared responsibility (see Brivot, 2011; Mintzberg, 1979, 1980). In contrast, direct control including its extension through the supervision of work, establishes a hierarchical relationship based on oversight (see Mintzberg, 1979, 1980; Ouchi & Maguire, 1975). Standardizing work processes and outputs, with bureaucratic and market controls/performance measurement, structures LMX relationships, but risks creating a formal, compliance-driven atmosphere that limits interpersonal engagement (see Mintzberg, 1979, 1980; Ouchi, 1979; Terpstra-Tong et al., 2020). On the contrary, the standardization of skills and clan control enhance trust, autonomy, and communication while reducing the need for direct supervision (see Mintzberg, 1979; Ouchi, 1979), indicating enhanced LMX relationship quality (Terpstra-Tong et al., 2020).

In conclusion, organization design determines the conditions under which LMX relationships develop by structuring interaction opportunities and the style of leadership, thereby influencing levels of formality, trust, support and autonomy (see Mintzberg, 1979, 1980; Ouchi, 1979). Specifically, these factors are influenced by whether the span of control is narrow or broad (Jacobsen et al., 2023) and whether an organization prioritizes control or coordination (Eriksson & Ortega, 2024). Jacobsen et al. (2023) reinforce the notion that narrow spans of control often result

in LMX dynamics characterized by close oversight, whereas medium spans of control facilitate more empowering LMX dynamics, encouraging autonomy and initiative in decision-making. Similarly, organizations emphasizing control foster leadership styles centered on oversight, while those prioritizing coordination encourage empowerment (Eriksson & Ortega, 2024). Notably, from the LMX perspective, high-quality LMX relationships are based on trust, support, and mutual respect (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Organizational level influencing employee level

Existing literature recognizes that organizational structure, shaped by organization design, plays an important role in shaping employee perceptions of HR practices (Wang et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2024) and the psychological contract (Lepak et al., 2012). Notably, prior research (Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009; Eriksson & Ortega, 2024; Kim et al., 2014) indicates that employees in less hierarchical organizations tend to view HR practices more positively due to greater autonomy and involvement, fostering trust and respect. In contrast, employees in more hierarchical structures may perceive HR practices as restrictive tools of control, reflecting an authoritative environment.

The connection between organizational design and employee perceptions of HR practices can also be explained through alignment. Particularly, coherence between organizational design and HR practices fosters an environment where employees are more likely to view these practices positively, enhancing their commitment and motivation, and ultimately contributing to improved organizational performance (Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009; Kim et al., 2014). Essentially, this alignment ensures consistency in the messages conveyed by HR practices, clarifying organizational expectations and enhancing employee motivation, commitment, and overall organizational performance (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Eriksson & Ortega, 2024). Such positive reciprocity in employee attitudes and behaviors reflects the fulfillment of the psychological contract – the theoretical framework applied at the employee level in this study (see Rousseau, 1995; Conway & Briner, 2009).

In contrast, a misalignment between organization design and HR practices may lead to negative perceptions of HR practices, making employees feel unsupported in their roles (Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009), resulting further in decreased job satisfaction and increased intention to leave (Kim et al., 2014). Furthermore, when HR practices are implemented inconsistently and communicated unclearly across organizational levels and functions, employees may experience confusion and misinterpretation, increasing the risk of psychological contract breaches (Rousseau & Greller, 1994; Uen et al., 2023). Veldsman and Van Aarde (2021) further argue that organization design should be utilized to shape the psychological contract, as organizing work roles and

interactions influences employees' perceptions of their relationship with the organization.

Relational level influencing employee level

As discussed earlier, leader-subordinate relationships are central to examining the implementation of HR practices in remote work arrangements. High-quality LMX relationships characterized by mutual trust, support and frequent interaction, foster positive employee perceptions of HR practices (Kilroy et al., 2023; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Specifically, these positive perceptions arise because employees feel valued and supported, which enhances their motivation and commitment. Conversely, low-quality LMX relationships, characterized by mistrust and poor communication, can lead to negative perceptions, as employees may feel unsupported and undervalued (Kilroy et al., 2023; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). This distinction highlights the essential role of mutual trust and communication in shaping how HR practices are perceived.

This dynamic also applies to feedback, a key HR practice discussed in Section 2.3.2. In high-quality LMX relationships, employees perceive feedback as supportive, while in low-quality relationships, it may be seen as a controlling tool undermining trust (Audenaert et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2021). These differences in employee perceptions are explained by the principles of reciprocity and social exchange inherent in LMX relationships (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Kilroy et al., 2023). In conclusion, high-quality LMX relationships enhance job satisfaction, commitment and performance by shaping employee perceptions, with low-quality LMX relationships indicating opposite effects (Kilroy et al., 2023; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Roodbari et al., 2025).

Existing research also recognizes that alignment between leaders' and subordinates' perceptions of HR practices enhances employee and organizational performance, while inconsistencies can undermine these outcomes (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Wang et al., 2022).

LMX relationships also influence the psychological contract through their impact on employee HR perceptions. As discussed above, previous research has established a connection between the quality of LMX relationships and employees' perceptions on HR practices (e.g., Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Kilroy et al., 2023; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Additionally, the relationship between HR practices and the psychological contract has been highlighted earlier in Sections 1.4.3 and 2.4 (e.g., Conway & Briner, 2009; Guest & Rodrigues, 2024; Kutaula et al., 2020; Raeder, 2021). Thus, it can be concluded that high-quality LMX relationships generally lead to positive perceptions of HR practices, suggesting that employees' needs and

expectations are being met and their psychological contract fulfilled. In contrast, low-quality LMX relationships tend to have the opposite effect. Supporting these arguments, empirical evidence indicates that poor LMX relationships are associated with a higher likelihood of psychological contract breaches (e.g., Dulac et al., 2008; Kasekende, 2017; Restubog et al., 2011).

Relational level influencing organizational level

Despite its acknowledged significance, existing literature on the influence of LMX relationships on organization design remains limited (see Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden et al., 2025; Zoller & Muldoon, 2020). As Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) noted as early as 30 years ago, expanding LMX theory beyond its conventional, narrow dyadic focus could provide valuable insights into how organizations function. Broadening the scope of LMX allows us to understand how interactions within individual LMX relationships impact broader organizational structures and processes.

However, the link between the relational level and organizational level remains underexplored due to the lack of sufficient literature in this area. Liden et al. (2025) similarly emphasize the need to examine leadership not just as a dyadic phenomenon, but also as a multilevel construct that shapes higher organizational levels. They argue that LMX relationships influence employees' collective attitudes and behaviors, which in turn affect team performance, and ultimately, overall organizational outcomes.

Employee level influencing organizational level

As noted earlier, there is growing interest in understanding how employees perceive HR practices (e.g. Beijer et al., 2021; Lepak et al., 2012; Van Beurden et al., 2021). In line with this, the literature review on HR practice implementation by Roodbari et al. (2025) emphasizes that employees are central actors in the process, collectively shaping the success or failure of implementation based on their perceptions of these practices.

Psychological contract theory, as a micro-level framework, helps uncover the mechanisms driving organizational performance, illustrating how aligning organization design and structures with employee preferences can enhance overall performance (Lepak et al., 2012; Wright & Boswell, 2002). This alignment fosters a sense of reciprocity, motivating employees to contribute positively to organizational goals. Supporting these notions, prior research indicates that employee dissatisfaction with HR practices—such as perceived misalignment with personal needs or unmet expectations—can lead to decreased motivation and commitment (Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009; Eriksson & Ortega, 2024; Kim et al., 2014). This, in turn,

can hinder organization design from functioning as intended and achieving desired performance outcomes. Therefore, ensuring that HR practices reflect employee expectations is not just a matter of job satisfaction, but a key factor in effective organization design.

Employee level influencing relational level

Finally, empirical findings reinforce the impact of the employee level on the relational level. Employees' perceptions of HR practices are closely connected to their relationship with leader, who is typically responsible for delivering these practices (Roodbari et al., 2025). When employees perceive HR practices positively, they are more likely to trust and respect their leader, strengthening the LMX relationship (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) and increasing their willingness to reciprocate in these relationships (Kilroy et al., 2023). Specifically, positive perceptions can enhance trust, communication and mutual respect between subordinates and leaders, which in turn fosters a more supportive environment, enhancing overall productivity (Kilroy et al., 2023; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007).

Furthermore, Terpstra-Tong et al. (2020) conducted a multilevel, cross-cultural study demonstrating that individual values significantly shape LMX relationship quality, as subordinates' behaviors and priorities directly influence dyadic dynamics. Notably, poor LMX quality can both precede and result from psychological contract breaches. In the latter case, a perceived breach negatively affects the LMX relationship, reducing the quality of interactions and impeding trust and effective collaboration (see Dulac et al., 2008; Kasekende, 2017; Restubog et al., 2011). Thus, employees' perceptions of HR practices not only shape their work experiences, but also influence relational leader-subordinate dynamics over time.

The overall multilevel approach illustrating these interconnections is discussed in Section 3.4, while the framework derived from this analysis—comprising seven propositions and representing the dissertation's comprehensive contribution—is elaborated in Chapter 5.

To conclude, this dissertation addresses the need to explore the HR practice implementation in remote work arrangements as a complex phenomenon (Lazarus & Nalepka, 2024; Roodbari et al., 2025), while also advancing the application of a multilevel approach in HRM research (Hitt et al., 2007; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019b; Renkema et al., 2017; Wright & Boswell, 2002). Particularly, by bridging HRM and leadership—fields which are often studied separately (Leroy et al., 2018)—the study enhances the understanding of outcomes at different levels (Leroy et al., 2018; Molina-Azorín et al., 2020). Additionally, it contributes to ongoing efforts to explore

how HRM can promote mutually beneficial outcomes (e.g., Guest, 2017; Guest, 2025; Huettermann & Bruch, 2019; Kulik, 2021).

Finally, this study acknowledges that transforming ingrained ways of thinking and operating is a slow and challenging, yet necessary process amid drastic changes in the nature of work. By addressing these contemporary challenges, it provides solutions to ensure that HRM research remains relevant and continues to make a meaningful impact in the rapidly evolving work landscape (see Collings et al., 2021; Luring & Jonasson, 2024; McPhail et al., 2024). Such an approach also narrows the research-practice gap (see Timming & Macneil, 2023).

3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the philosophical choices that underpin the methodological decisions and research approach of this dissertation. It is followed by a description of the data collection and analysis processes, concluding with reflections on the research quality.

3.1 Research philosophy

Philosophical approaches refer to the underlying beliefs and assumptions that form the foundation for research, guiding how it should be conducted (Saunders et al., 2016). At its core, research philosophy involves understanding the nature of reality and knowledge, and how the knowledge should be gathered and analyzed. This encompasses the ontological, epistemological, and methodological dimensions essential for conducting rigorous research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

These dimensions of research philosophy collectively form paradigms, which represent a researcher's worldview or foundational framework for conducting research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, there is no universal consensus on the definition of paradigms in organization and management research, and they are often classified into various taxonomies (Primecz, 2020; Shepherd & Challenger, 2013). This section provides a general overview of philosophical foundations, followed by an examination of the pragmatist paradigm relevant to this dissertation and its underlying philosophical assumptions.

3.1.1 Philosophical foundations

Ontology concerns the nature of reality and encompasses beliefs about the extent to which an objective reality exists independently of an individual's subjective perceptions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Researchers need to consider whether they assume a singular, context-free reality that can be uncovered or acknowledge the presence of multiple subjective, context-bound realities (Killam, 2013). These ontological perspectives span a continuum from objectivism which corresponds to a realist view, to subjectivism which corresponds to a nominalist view (Saunders et al., 2016). Relativism lies between these two extremes and is closer to nominalism; it is commonly referred to as a constructionist view, suggesting that the socially constructed nature of reality is shaped through interactions among individuals (Kovalainen & Eriksson, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016). Importantly, ontological assumptions form the philosophical core of research,

guiding the subsequent epistemological and methodological assumptions discussed below (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

Epistemology relates to the assumptions about the nature of knowledge, specifically regarding the extent to which objective data can be obtained to measure or quantify phenomena (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It engages with questions such as “How is knowledge acquired?” and “How do we know what we know?”, while also examining the relationship between the researcher and the knowledge produces during the research process (Killam, 2013, p. 8). Similar to ontology, epistemological perspectives exist along a continuum from objectivism to subjectivism. At the objectivist (positivist) end, the researcher remains independent of the knowledge, allowing for unbiased examination and replicable findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Conversely, at the subjectivist (constructivist) end, the researcher and the knowledge are interconnected, leading to findings that are created during the research process rather than being simply discovered (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Positioned between these ends, critical realism recognizes that reality has an objective component, but is also shaped by social structures and context (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

Methodology is closely related to epistemology, but focuses more on practical assumptions regarding how a phenomenon can be studied (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Killam, 2013). The two most common broad methodological approaches are quantitative and qualitative, each guided by distinct ontological and epistemological assumptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The quantitative approach aims to uncover a single objective truth by collecting and analyzing data without bias, detached from any specific context (Saunders et al., 2016). In contrast, the qualitative approach seeks to understand complex phenomena within their natural contexts by interpreting the subjective and socially constructed data derived from the experiences of those involved in the study (Saunders et al., 2016). Beyond these empirical approaches, theoretical-conceptual research—free from reliance on empirical data—serves to inspire new ideas and guide empirical studies, thereby supporting the development of a discipline (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Jaakkola, 2020; Kesting, 2023).

Finally, it is important to distinguish methodology—a philosophically oriented concept—from methods, which are the specific techniques used for data collection and analysis within different methodologies (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Killam, 2013).

3.1.2 Philosophical positioning of the research

Pragmatism is a central paradigm in organization and management research, emphasizing the practical application of knowledge to address real-world problems (Morgan, 2014; Saunders et al., 2016). This dissertation arises from the challenge of bridging the gap between employee and managerial expectations in balancing remote work arrangements with in-office presence, aiming to provide practical solutions to this issue. Pragmatists advocate for integrating theory and practice, exploring how individuals can collaboratively develop effective, democratic approaches to organizing amidst complexity and uncertainty –preserving valued traditions while embracing necessary adaptations (Farjoun et al., 2015). By moving beyond all forms of dualism, including the theory-practice divide, pragmatism promotes the interdependence of concepts and fosters a holistic understanding of organizing in complex environments (Farjoun et al., 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unforeseen and challenging event that created significant uncertainty (Christianson & Barton, 2021), highlighting the critical role of sensemaking in adapting to change. Sensemaking enables individuals and organizations to gain understanding of what has happened, and to determine future actions that address the altered circumstances (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). Pragmatism is integral in the process, as it fosters a future-oriented and collaboratively constructed understanding of meaning. This perspective reflects past events, while also creating alternative future directions (Elkjaer & Simpson, 2011; Farjoun et al., 2015).

Consistent with the pragmatic approach, this dissertation seeks practical, mutually beneficial solutions for employees and organizations navigating the complexities of remote work arrangements. Achieving this requires questioning established structures, as leaving them unchallenged could hinder progress. Therefore, a balanced approach that respects organizational and employee perspectives while challenging them when necessary is essential for successful HR practice implementation. This study encourages confronting complexity by integrating seemingly opposing strategies to uncover new opportunities (see Farjoun et al., 2015). Specifically, it explores how to implement remote work arrangements without placing the conflicting interests of organizations and employees on a collision course.

Furthermore, by highlighting the interplay between organizational structures and individual actions across multiple levels of analysis, pragmatism is particularly suited for studying organizational complexity in a constantly evolving environment (Farjoun et al., 2015). This dissertation exemplifies this approach through a multilevel analysis that considers the interconnected organizational, relational and employee dimensions that shape human experiences and guide future actions.

Finally, this study touches on organization design, a field with a strong practical focus (Joseph & Sengul, 2025; Wegener, 2023), which further supports the adoption of a pragmatist approach.

Pragmatism challenges traditional philosophical debates about the nature of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) by focusing instead on the human experience and the practical outcomes of knowledge (Morgan, 2014). Its approach to ontology rejects the rigid separation between objectivism and subjectivism, emphasizing their interconnectedness and promoting a holistic view of reality as a dynamic, evolving process (Farjoun et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2016). This perspective suggests that both the external world and the subjective interpretations of it are essential to understanding human experience (Morgan, 2014).

Accordingly, this dissertation study treats the pandemic-induced evolution of working life as an accepted external reality driving organizational changes (see, e.g., Collings et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2022; Howe et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021; Kulik, 2021; McPhail et al., 2024; Šmite et al., 2023a). Furthermore, it requires a nuanced understanding of remote work arrangements, organization design, leader-subordinate relationships, and HR practices, all of which are shaped by subjective perspectives and social interactions within organizations, as demonstrated below.

First, remote work arrangements are recognized as contextual phenomena influenced by both culture (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Ollo-López et al., 2021) and personal preferences (Allen et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021). Second, organization design is acknowledged as a complex and context-bound process shaped by social factors, rather than a fixed system that can be objectively studied and designed (Kallio, 2015; Mintzberg, 1979, Wegener, 2023). Third, the relationships between leaders and subordinates are inherently interactive (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), suggesting that these relationships are social constructs. Finally, existing research indicates that employees perceive the same HR practices differently, depending on their subjective preferences and background (Beijer et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020) and managerial actions (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007), further underscoring the role of social interactions in shaping individual views.

In sum, the pragmatist *ontological* view of the study acknowledges the external reality of the evolving work environment, emphasizing that this evolution is an objective truth, particularly in light of the significant changes brought about by the pandemic and technological advancements. It also recognizes the role of social interactions in shaping this reality, as individuals actively construct and refine their experiences of remote work arrangements, organizational design, leader-subordinate relationships, and HR practices.

Similar to its ontological approach, pragmatism rejects the conventional dualistic perspective of epistemology (Farjoun et al., 2015; Morgan, 2014). Instead, it prioritizes the role of experience and emphasizes the research process as an iterative interaction between beliefs and action, where knowledge is constructed through taking action and reflecting on outcomes (Morgan, 2014). In this view, researchers are seen as active, reflexive participants in knowledge production, shaping the research through their beliefs and actions as they address practical problems (Farjoun et al., 2015; Morgan, 2014).

Consistent with the pragmatist emphasis on experience, this dissertation engages with insights from hybrid and remote employees and their leaders – participants who are directly involved in the phenomenon under investigation. In addition, the study integrates theoretical perspectives from various disciplines (Saunders et al., 2016), including human resource management, organizational behavior, and organization theory. This multifaceted approach supports the exploration of complex, real-world issues by using various frameworks to understand the study phenomenon. The researcher's beliefs and actions shape the research design and analysis, reflecting this study's pragmatist *epistemological* view that knowledge emerges as a product of beliefs, actions, and reflection.

As discussed, pragmatism does not rigidly adhere to traditional philosophical foundations of ontology and epistemology. Instead, it applies these concepts flexibly, selecting approaches that best align with the research aims and questions. This adaptability is fundamental to pragmatic methodology, often leading to the use of multiple methods (Morgan, 2014; Farjoun et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2016). A detailed discussion of the methodological choices underpinning this dissertation follows.

3.1.3 Chosen research methods

This study combines theoretical and qualitative methods. At the organizational level, this research adopts a theoretical-conceptual approach to propose novel insights to a field where they are critically needed. Especially in times of uncertainty and disruption, this type of research is essential in organization and management science (Langley, 2021), as it refines existing theories and drives the evolution of these fields (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Kesting, 2023).

At the relational and employee levels, a qualitative methodology is particularly suitable for capturing participants' lived experiences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016), providing insights into relational dynamics and employee HR perceptions influenced by remote work arrangements. Within organizational and management research

(King & Brooks, 2017), and particularly during events like the COVID-19 pandemic that disrupt social order, a qualitative methodology becomes valuable in fostering a deeper understanding of how people create and share meaning in complex environments (Teti et al., 2020).

To capture the complex phenomenon of implementing HR practices in remote work arrangements and achieving mutual gains, a multilevel approach is adopted to synthesize organizational, relational and employee perspectives (see Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Langley, 2021; Lazarus & Nalepka, 2024; Roodbari et al., 2025). By integrating literature and findings from Papers 1–3, the theoretical approach offers a comprehensive perspective across these three levels.

In sum, the *methodological* choices of this dissertation are grounded in the pragmatist paradigm, addressing the complexities of implementing HR practices in remote work arrangements. As previously discussed, pragmatism and sensemaking, both of which have been underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasize practicality, iteration, and interconnected interpretative processes in navigating complex issues. Like pragmatism, sensemaking is essential for understanding past events and for identifying new directions in response to change (Elkjaer & Simpson, 2011; Farjoun et al., 2015). The theoretical approach in this study integrates concepts and literature across disciplines, proposing relationships that guide future research (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Jaakkola, 2020), while qualitative methods enable an in-depth exploration of social phenomena (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016), emphasizing human experiences central to pragmatism. Both the theoretical perspectives (Weick, 1989; Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017) and the empirical qualitative approach (Patnaik, 2013) highlight the researcher's interpretive lens as central to analysis.

Table 5 outlines the research methods: Paper 1 adopts a theoretical-conceptual approach, synthesizing literature on organization design and remote work arrangements to develop hypotheses at the organizational level. Papers 2 and 3 are empirical and qualitative, focusing on the relational and employee levels through interviews and open-ended responses, respectively.

Finally, findings from studies at these three distinct levels are integrated into a multilevel framework, constituting the overall contribution of this dissertation.

Table 5. Research methods of the dissertation

	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
Research method	Theoretical-conceptual	Empirical (qualitative)	Empirical (qualitative)
Level of analysis	Organizational level	Relational level	Employee level
Data	Journal articles and book chapters	Semi-structured interviews (n=81) with leaders (n=29) and subordinates (n=52)	Open-ended responses from an online survey (n=1,278)
Research question(s)	RQ1: What implications does work-from-anywhere impose on the division of labor, coordination, and control?	RQ2: How does remote work shape daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate?	RQ3: What are the HR practices highlighted by employees in a hybrid work setting, reflecting elements of the psychological contract? RQ4: How do employees evaluate these HR practices?
Analysis method	Theoretical-conceptual analysis	Template analysis	Template analysis
Research approach	Deductive	Inductive	Inductive and deductive

3.2 Theoretical-conceptual research

As noted earlier, organization design forms the foundation for implementing HR practices. Paper 1 is theoretical-conceptual, aiming to understand the prerequisites that work-from-anywhere arrangements impose on organization design, addressing the first research question (RQ1). This type of deductive research is essential for generating new ideas and theories as it connects existing concepts, literature streams, and theories across various disciplines. It integrates these ideas and proposes novel relationships among constructs, thereby guiding future empirical studies without relying on empirical data (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Jaakkola, 2020; Klein & Potosky, 2019).

No standardized model exists to guide the structure and logic of theoretical-conceptual research (Cornelissen, 2017; Jaakkola, 2020), unlike research design in empirical studies, which provides a framework linking research aims, literature, research questions, data, and analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Nevertheless, to ensure analytical rigor and clearly demonstrate the development of the argument, theoretical-conceptual papers are expected to address key methodological elements of research design. This involves, first, explaining and justifying the selection of literature and concepts; second, clarifying their roles in the analysis; and third, presenting a transparent, coherent chain of evidence (Jaakkola, 2020). How these elements are addressed in Paper 1 is discussed next.

First, the rationale for this study arises from the recognition that existing organization design literature is outdated and lacks insights from literature on remote work arrangements, as outlined in Section 1.4.1. In other words, the *focal* research domain of organization design is incomplete and requires *supplementary* value from current work environment studies (see Jaakkola, 2020, p. 19). To address this, Paper 1 focuses on three classic core processes of organization design—division of labor, coordination, and control—within the context of work-from-anywhere that has gained prominence post-pandemic. Notably, since work-from-anywhere is an emerging concept with limited literature at the time of writing, Paper 1 primarily relies on remote work research. This approach is justified, as remote work and work-from-anywhere work share similar dimensions, as outlined in Section 1.3. The paper first reviews the three key concepts of organization design, explaining their characteristics in both basic routine work and complex knowledge-intensive work, highlighting how organizational decentralization affects these concepts. Following this, the concept of work-from-anywhere is defined, with a concise overview of its implications for organization design. Overall, the focused literature review summarizes the current understanding in both fields of study (see Gilson & Goldberg, 2015).

Second, the organization design and remote work arrangement literatures are both recognized as having distinct roles in this study (see Jaakkola, 2020), with organization design serving as the *domain* literature and remote work arrangements informing the analysis as the *method* literature (see Lukka & Vinnari, 2014).² The study relies on theory adaptation (Jaakkola, 2020) and theory refinement (Klein &

² In their study, Lukka and Vinnari (2014) differentiate between ‘domain theory’ and ‘method theory’. In Paper 3, organization design is treated as a research field rather than a specific theory (see Joseph & Sengul, 2025), whereas remote work arrangements are viewed as a contextual factor rather than a theoretical construct. Consequently, the term ‘literature’ is used here to emphasize the integration of two literature fields to inspire new thinking, which is characteristic of theoretical-conceptual research, in addition to integrating theories. Similarly, Jaakkola (2020) employs the term ‘theory’ to include both theories and literature streams for simplicity.

Potosky, 2019), with the primary aim of contributing to the organization design literature. Insights from literature on remote work arrangements help to better align organization design with contemporary working life. By examining organization design through the lens of work-from-anywhere characteristics, the study introduces new boundary conditions for determining which coordination and control mechanisms are suitable for spatially decentralized work environments (see McNamara & Schleicher, 2024).

Third, making the chain of evidence visible in the development of arguments is particularly crucial in theoretical-conceptual research, where argumentation is not empirically tested (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Jaakkola, 2020). Notably, hypotheses are often used in theoretical-conceptual argumentation to capture the essence of the argument into clear statements that guide future empirical research (Cornelissen, 2017; Weick, 1989).

Paper 1 introduces six hypotheses defining work-from-anywhere from the perspective of organization design in the post-pandemic era. The logical steps leading to these hypotheses are clearly outlined by first explaining the key concepts from both literature streams. Furthermore, the paper explicitly articulates the underlying assumptions associated with organization design in decentralized work settings, as well as the characteristics and application of work-from-anywhere. Each hypothesis is preceded by a synthesis of literature on organization design and remote work arrangements, enhanced by real-life examples from diverse organizations and work tasks. Thoroughly articulating the premises of the hypotheses supports readers in verifying the analytical conclusions presented in the study. Finally, the structure of Paper 3, progressing from the research aim to the literature review and key concept definitions, followed by the development of hypotheses and concluding with suggestions for future research, strengthens the overall chain of argumentation (see Jaakkola, 2020).

3.3 Qualitative empirical research

The objective of the qualitative empirical studies was to gain an in-depth understanding of HR practices within remote work arrangements at the relational and employee levels. At the heart of the research was finding meaning of employees' experiences.

The data for the qualitative studies (Papers 2 and 3) was collected using two different approaches. Paper 2 utilized interview data, while Paper 3 relied on responses to an open-ended question extracted from a survey. Both data sets were analyzed using

template analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; King & Brooks, 2017). Further details on the data, its collection and analysis are provided in the following sections.

3.3.1 Data samples and collection

For Paper 2, qualitative data were collected from six large organizations across various industries in Finland, including information technology, insurance, engineering and metalwork, telecommunications, accounting and management consultancy, and energy equipment manufacture. The organizations were selected based on their remote work policies to ensure access to respondents engaged in remote work. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the majority of respondents (94 %) were working remotely, and only 6 % were working partially remotely during the study. Before the pandemic, 6 % had primarily worked remotely, and 38 % had engaged in part-time remote work. The majority (56 %) had little or no remote work experience before the pandemic.

The data sample covered 81 semi-structured interviews, including 29 with leaders and 52 with remote employees working in product development, sales, marketing, customer service, production and service management. The interviews were individual and conducted in Finnish (n=79) and Swedish (n=2). Teams were selected based on either a leader's nomination or a recommendation from an HR professional within the organization. Interviewees were randomly selected in alphabetical order from these teams. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. The study included a total of 47 leader-subordinate pairs. Additionally, the study featured six subordinates who participated without their leader, and five leaders without any of their subordinates.

Data collection took place from October to December 2020, that is, seven to nine months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent shift to remote work. Interviews, ranging from 45 to 75 minutes, were carried out via Microsoft Teams or Zoom, either as audio or video calls. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized.

The data forms part of a research project focused on the experiences of remote work and remote leadership. An interview guide (Myers, 2013) was designed to address topics including the remote work environment and culture, leadership in remote settings, work-life balance, and self-leadership. Although feedback was not a primary research focus, it was identified as a repeated and prominent theme when interviewees reflected on their communication and interaction in leader-subordinate relationships, managerial support and recognition, and their own processes of goal tracking and handling setbacks. Consequently, Paper 2 focuses on this key

HR practice (Eva et al., 2019; Tseng & Levy, 2019) to deepen understanding of its role in remote work environments. The dataset captures perspectives from both leaders and subordinates, enabling an exploration of the dyadic and reciprocal nature of feedback (see Anseel & Sherf, 2025; Katz et al., 2021).

For Paper 3, the research data was derived from a study within a multinational corporation operating in technology manufacturing industry in Finland, which follows the widely adopted 3/2 hybrid work model. An online questionnaire was used to explore employees' experiences of hybrid work, including an open-ended question: "What are your thoughts on the current HR practices in hybrid work in your organization?". The study involved 11 autonomous units within the corporation. The survey was distributed to 3,329 employees in December 2022, providing an opportunity for all employees in roles suitable for remote work arrangements to participate, regardless of their involvement in hybrid work. Conducted via the Webropol platform, the survey required participants to consent before completing the questionnaire. It achieved a 49 % response rate (n=1,641), with 1,278 respondents answering the open-ended question. Among these, 75 % were men and 25 % women, with a mean age of 44.9 years. The majority of respondents (53.6 %) spent most of their working hours (51–99 %) working remotely. Around 16.4 % reported dividing their time equally between remote and in-office work. Furthermore, 24 % of participants reported working remotely for less than half (1–49 %) of their working time. Smaller proportions worked entirely in the office (3.8 %) or completely remotely (2.1 %). On average, respondents spent 56.8 % of their time working remotely, with a median rate of 60 %, suggesting a slight tendency for higher remote working hours.

Unlike standardized surveys commonly used to explore HR practices, an open-ended question allowed respondents to freely express their views. This approach provides insights into evolving HR practices in hybrid work, and can be used to highlight areas for improvement (see Guzzo & Noonan, 1994). The responses revealed which HR practices employees consider significant in hybrid work, and how they assess these practices. The practices highlighted by employees can be interpreted as integral to shaping employees' psychological contracts, as they reflect employees' personal needs and expectations. Responses, ranging from brief comments to detailed descriptions, also provided insights into employee perceptions of the effectiveness, quality, and overall satisfaction with HR practices in hybrid work.

3.3.2 Analyses

Qualitative researchers often use thematic methods to examine textual data, aiming to identify themes that reveal significant aspects of human experience and meaning-

making (King & Brooks, 2017). However, when working with large and complex datasets, the challenge in the analysis lies in preserving their depth and richness, while avoiding being overwhelmed by the volume of information (Braun & Clarke, 2022; King & Brooks, 2017). Template analysis provides structure for large datasets, while allowing flexibility in philosophical and theoretical orientations during the organization and interpretation of qualitative data (King & Brooks, 2017). This method has been applied in organizational research exploring employee views and experiences (e.g., Kele & Cassell, 2023; Tomczak, 2022).

The study uses two datasets: 81 interview transcripts (Paper 2) and 1,278 open-ended responses of varying lengths (Paper 3), both representing extensive qualitative textual data. Paper 2 utilized a coding template developed through an inductive approach to address RQ2, with themes derived from the data. In Paper 3, the analysis combined inductive and deductive approaches to address the research questions (RQ3 & RQ4). The inductive approach focused on developing new patterns and themes through subjective interpretation, generating themes to address RQ3. The deductive approach applied predefined themes of effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction with HR practices to address RQ4. As noted earlier, template analysis allows flexible data handling informed by different theoretical and philosophical foundations (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Both of analysis processes, supported by NVivo software, are discussed in detail below.

In Paper 2, template analysis (King, 2004; King & Brooks, 2017) facilitated an examination of leaders' and subordinates' perspectives on remote dyadic, daily feedback interactions, aiming to understand how a particular HR practice manifests in remote settings.

Initial engagement with the data began prior to this research during work on other topics, when feedback was identified as a notable theme. The analysis process for this study started with a review of all interviews, accompanied by reflective note-taking on feedback interactions. As template analysis allows for the development of a coding template based on a sub-set of data (King & Brooks, 2017), an initial data-driven template was created from a random selection of 50 interviews, including both leaders and subordinates, to ensure balanced coding (King et al., 2018). This inductive approach uncovered six themes essential to understanding feedback interactions in remote contexts: characteristics of feedback, feedback forms, quality of LMX relationships, information flow, feedback-seeking, and team feedback.

In the second phase, the initial coding template was refined into an intermediate model, guided by the research questions. This model encompassed three higher-level themes: feedback procedures, the dyadic nature of LMX relationships, and

organizational feedback culture in remote work. The intermediate template was then applied to the remaining 31 interviews.

The third phase proved to be the most crucial for analysis. Comparing leaders' and subordinates' perspectives on the three themes identified from the previous step revealed tensions in remote feedback interactions. Notably, aspects initially perceived as strengths also presented challenges. The data indicated that (a) leaders' constant online availability increased their workload, (b) a strong LMX relationship did not resolve quality issues associated with remote feedback, and (c) feedback-seeking, while encouraged, remained difficult in a remote work environment. In the final phase, hierarchical coding developed 13 sub-level codes representing these contradictory aspects of the feedback environment.

The final template was reviewed and applied to the entire dataset to ensure comprehensive representation. Throughout the analysis process, the review of themes and the interpretation of findings were based on extensive discussions between the authors.

In Paper 3, template analysis (King, 2004; King & Brooks, 2017) was employed to investigate evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work, with the aim of providing information on how employee needs and expectations align with HR practices.

The analysis process began by reading all open-ended responses and taking notes on the data. Initially, the research sought to identify indications of evaluative employee perceptions and related positive/negative sentiments in the data. Template analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; King & Brooks, 2017) served well for giving structure for a large data set. Accordingly, a preliminary deductive a priori coding template was developed, drawing on theoretical concepts related to employee perceptions of effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction (Beijer et al., 2021; Van Beurden et al., 2021) with HR practices in hybrid work.

Insights from the preliminary coding template and subsequent reflective discussions between the authors highlighted the need to expand the original research question. In addition to focusing on evaluations, it became essential to understand what employees specifically evaluate. An inductive clustering of data from the preliminary coding template (King & Brooks, 2017) uncovered nine themes of HR practices denoting elements of the psychological contract in hybrid work. These practices included working time monitoring, office facilities, fringe benefits, employee voice, job autonomy, fairness, interaction and teamwork, work-life balance, and well-being at work.

The template construction was an iterative process, with identified HR practices categorized further into transactional and relational elements of the psychological contract (Raeder, 2021; Rousseau, 1995) reflecting employee needs and expectations and their fulfillment in hybrid work settings. The categorization into transactional and relational elements was based on whether the identified HR practices were considered to exhibit explicit, tangible characteristics or socio-emotional qualities (see Conway & Briner, 2009; Raeder, 2021; Rousseau, 1990). The development involved collaborative author discussions, independent coding by both authors, and template revisions. When applied to the entire dataset, the final hierarchical coding template organized theory-based transactional and relational PC elements as higher-order themes, and data-based HR practices as second-order themes. Third-order themes, derived from the data, captured the fulfillment of employee needs and expectations related to HR practices. The final template guided the interpretation of how identified HR practices convey employees' perceptions of effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction. Since the psychological contract is an individual-level concept, the analysis was conducted on the employee level, without focusing on unit-level comparisons, despite data collection occurring at the organizational unit level.

3.4 Synthesizing findings from distinct levels: a multilevel approach

According to Kozlowski and Klein (2000), multilevel analysis is particularly useful when the phenomenon under investigation has been explored in depth at various levels, providing a solid foundation for integration. This study combines a theoretical-conceptual approach from organization theory with two qualitative studies in HRM and organizational behavior to explore cross-level interactions at the organizational, relational, and employee levels. Capturing these reciprocal influences is essential for understanding HR practice implementation in remote work arrangements (see Molina-Azorín et al., 2020).

The findings from the three papers and their literature are analyzed in pairs to clarify relationships between levels. Such multilevel theorizing explores how factors from different levels influence outcomes at other levels (Paruchuri et al., 2018). A deductive method links the cross-level analysis to existing literature, drawing new implications and relationships. To avoid complexity—a common challenge in multilevel designs (Klein et al., 1999; Paruchuri et al., 2018)—the analysis does not compare one level to two others simultaneously. A multilevel framework, illustrated in Figure 3, is developed to provide valuable insights for implementing HR practices in remote work arrangements to achieve mutual gains.

A critical initial step in multilevel research is defining the level of constructs, as this influences the assumptions about relationships and the interpretation of findings (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Paruchuri et al., 2018). As mutual gains span both organizations and individuals, this study aims to guide both parties in HR practice implementation by incorporating the perspectives of three entities: the organization, leader-subordinate relationships, and individuals. Since leader-subordinate relationships represent the primary context for HR practices, they are crucial to the analysis.

Moreover, clearly explaining how different levels relate to one another, as detailed in Section 2.5, is essential for meaningful multilevel research, as it ensures that interactions across levels are adequately captured (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Multilevel research distinguishes between two key types of relationships. First, individual elements may maintain their original qualities when aggregated to another level, suggesting a linear relationship (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Molina-Azorín et al., 2020). Second, combining individual elements creates new patterns through interaction at another level, producing non-linear outcomes (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Molina-Azorín et al., 2020).

Aggregation is a key concept in multilevel research, and refers to combining data from one level to form a measure at another (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). While acknowledging the diversity in relationship types, this study adopts a linear aggregation approach for all relationships. This approach enhances clarity and logical flow in the multilevel framework, while minimizing complexity to keep the focus on the research aim (see Kozlowski & Klein, 2000).

The framework incorporates both bottom-up influences, where individual characteristics shape higher-level constructs, and top-down influences, where higher-level factors shape lower-level units (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). These interconnections capture relationships across three levels, with processes 1–3 representing top-down dynamics, and processes 4–6 representing bottom-up dynamics (see Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Renkema et al., 2017), as illustrated in Figure 3.

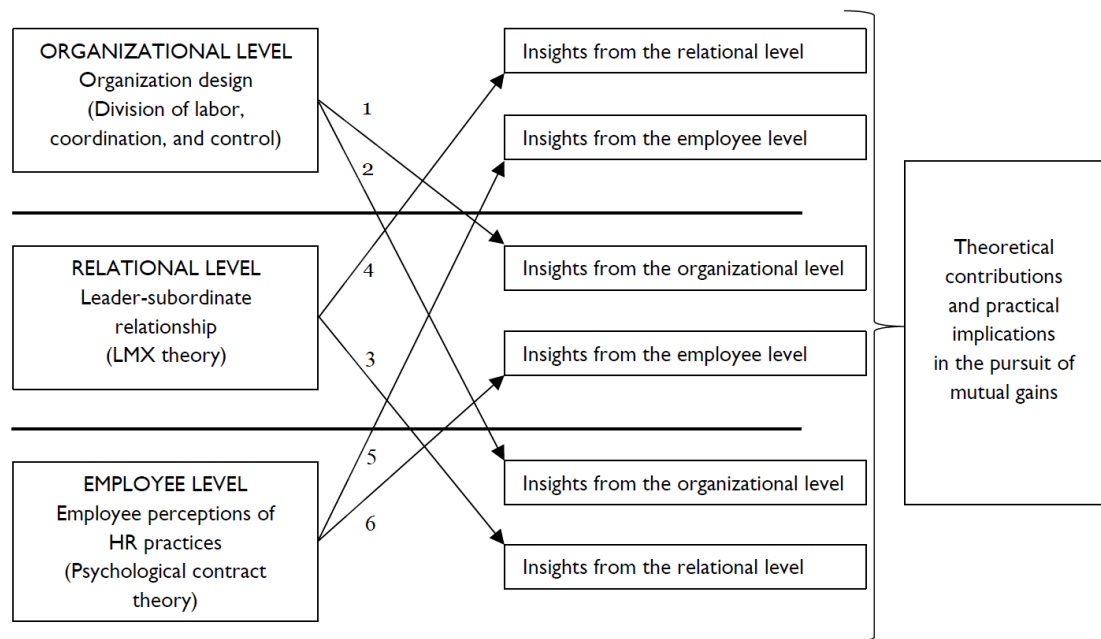


Figure 3. A multilevel approach to HR practice implementation

Top-down processes

Figure 3 illustrates three downward-pointing arrows, representing top-down processes within the multilevel framework. The first arrow depicts the integration of **(1) insights from the organizational level to the relational level**, highlighting how organizational design—through its core elements of division of labor, coordination, and control—influences LMX relationships. The impact of organization design elements is examined at the dyadic leader-subordinate level through the lens of LMX theory.

The second top-down process integrates **(2) insights from the organizational level to the employee level**, illustrating how organizational design and structure impact employee perceptions of HR practices and the psychological contract. Here, the study findings regarding organization design are explored in terms of employee-level constructs.

Finally, the third top-down process refers to integrating **(3) insights from the relational level to the employee level**, highlighting the influence of the LMX relationship on employee perceptions of HR practices and the psychological contract. As with the second process above, findings from a higher level are analyzed through the lens of literature on employee HR perceptions and the psychological contract.

To summarize, organizational design shapes both leader-subordinate relationships and employee-level constructs, while leader-subordinate relationships also influence these lower, employee-level constructs. Such top-down processes are widely recognized and commonly applied in multilevel studies (Klein et al., 1999). However, multilevel research often overlooks how lower-level processes contribute to shaping higher-level constructs, unintentionally assuming that higher levels function independently of lower-level dynamics (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Renkema et al., 2017). This study adopts a multilevel approach that considers influence as a two-way process across three levels. Accordingly, the following section explores the three bottom-up processes.

Bottom-up processes

Figure 3 illustrates three upward-pointing arrows representing bottom-up processes within the multilevel framework. The first arrow depicts the integration of **(4) insights from the relational level to the organizational level**, highlighting the influence of LMX relationships on organization design. This process, forming a two-way relationship with Process 1, analyzes the relational-level findings within the context of core organization design elements.

The second bottom-up arrow represents **(5) insights from the employee level to the organizational level**, highlighting the influence of employees' perceptions of HR practices and the (un)fulfillment of psychological contract on organization design. Among bottom-up processes, this one has attracted significant interest in managing organizational outcomes (see Beijer et al., 2021; Lepak et al., 2012; Wright & Boswell, 2002). This process, forming a two-way relationship with Process 2, interprets the implications of employee-level findings for organization design.

Finally, the third bottom-up process integrates **(6) insights from the employee level to the relational level**, highlighting how employees' perceptions of HR practices and the (un)fulfillment of psychological contract influence LMX relationships. This process, bidirectional with Process 3, examines employee-level findings through the lens of LMX theory.

In summary, the three bottom-up processes illustrate how employee-level constructs shape both organization design and leader-subordinate relationships, and how these relationships also influence organization design. A closer examination of these three processes reveals that while these relationships have been acknowledged, one process (process 4) requires further exploration, while another (process 5) has recently gained growing scholarly interest. This reinforces the notion that bottom-up processes remain understudied in multilevel research (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Renkema et al., 2017).

Overall, framing HR practice implementation as a multilevel phenomenon highlights the interplay and reciprocal influences across levels, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dimensions involved.

3.5 Reflections on research quality

It is essential that the selected quality criteria align with the philosophical foundations of the research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). The following section outlines the role of triangulation in strengthening the research quality in this dissertation. In addition, the quality of theoretical-conceptual and empirical qualitative research, as well as the multilevel approach are evaluated separately. Finally, the author's reflexivity—a further key indicator of research quality—is discussed.

3.5.1 Enhancing research quality through triangulation

Triangulation enhances research quality by integrating multiple methodologies, data sources, theories, and investigators to explore a phenomenon (Denzin, 1978; Stamenkov, 2023). This dissertation employs each of these elements.

Methodological triangulation involves using multiple methods to address the research aim (Denzin, 1978). This dissertation combines theoretical-conceptual and empirical qualitative approaches to develop a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of HR practices in remote work arrangements. Furthermore, the research applies a theoretical multilevel approach as a form of triangulation, integrating findings from a theoretical-conceptual study at the organizational level with qualitative empirical studies at the relational and employee levels (see Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

In addition, *data triangulation*, which involves using multiple types of data, is employed (Denzin, 1978). The research integrates open-ended responses, interviews, journal articles, and book chapters to explore the phenomenon.

Theory triangulation applies multiple theoretical approaches to interpret and understand the phenomenon (Denzin, 1978). This study draws on distinct theoretical approaches at different levels: organization design at the organizational level, LMX theory at the relational level, and psychological contract theory and HR perception literature at the employee level. Each approach provides relevant insights into the implementation of HR practices at distinct levels. Overall, a multilevel theory

triangulation enables cross-level analysis of findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomenon.

Finally, *investigator triangulation*, referring to collaboration among multiple researchers to confirm findings and incorporate diverse perspectives while minimizing bias (Denzin, 1978), is applied in this dissertation. For each paper, two researchers participated in the data analysis process, ensuring that interpretations are critically examined from multiple perspectives.

Overall, triangulation not only enhances research quality, but also serves as a critical interpretive approach to understanding complex social phenomena. In this dissertation, triangulation is inherently multilevel in structure, allowing for a more holistic exploration of the HR practice implementation. It aligns with the pragmatic goal of addressing real-world issues, positioning research as a catalyst for organizational change (Denzin, 2012).

3.5.2 Theoretical-conceptual research

The quality of theoretical-conceptual research can be assessed through various criteria. First, *logical coherence* is achieved by clearly defining key concepts and constructs, followed by a well-structured argumentation that allows readers to easily follow the reasoning in a logically organized paper (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Jaakkola, 2020; Klein & Potosky, 2019; McNamara & Schleicher, 2024; Suddaby, 2010; Whetten, 1989). Second, *engagement with existing literature* demonstrates a robust connection to previous work, critically examining and building upon it (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Jaakkola, 2020; Klein & Potosky, 2019; McNamara & Schleicher, 2024; Suddaby, 2010; Whetten, 1989). Third, *theoretical contribution* is assessed by how the research advances the existing body of knowledge, offering new insights, frameworks, or perspectives that refine, challenge, or extend current understanding in the field (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Jaakkola, 2020; Klein & Potosky, 2019; McNamara & Schleicher, 2024; Suddaby, 2010; Whetten, 1989). Finally, *practical relevance* is expected, and assessed by its potential to address real-world issues and inform management practices (Klein & Potosky, 2019; McNamara & Schleicher, 2024; Whetten, 1989).

Paper 1 begins by defining the three core processes of organization design and the concept of work-from-anywhere, emphasizing the need to revisit the element of organization design in the current work environment. In a logically structured paper, hypotheses are based on a thorough discussion of literature on organization design and remote work arrangements, enriched with real-world examples, which allows readers to follow the deductive reasoning process. The lens of remote work

arrangements introduces new considerations for organization design in structuring and managing organizations with employees working from various locations. The paper concludes by highlighting the practical relevance of the study and discussing how the presented insights can influence managerial practices.

3.5.3 Empirical qualitative research

Traditional positivist quality measures for quantitative research—validity, reliability, and generalizability—are often criticized as inappropriate for evaluating qualitative research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Consequently, these measures are typically replaced with naturalistic criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which collectively demonstrate the trustworthiness of qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The criteria of trustworthiness as applied in empirical qualitative Papers 2 and 3 are elaborated below.

Credibility, analogous to internal validity in quantitative research, refers to the extent to which the findings accurately reflect participants' original viewpoints, and whether other researchers would concur with the data interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In Paper 2, multiple interviewers collecting the data reduced the potential for bias from any single interviewer, while in Paper 3, data collection was conducted through an open-ended, neutral-toned question without researcher intervention. Credibility was further enhanced through investigator triangulation as described in Section 3.5.1. The co-authors independently coded sections of the data in both empirical studies, and direct quotes in Papers 2 and 3 provide further evidence of capturing participants' meanings and interpretations accurately. Additionally, both empirical studies were presented at seminars and conferences, allowing for external validation through peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Moreover, specific quality risks are associated with template analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which can undermine research credibility. These risks include treating the codebook template as the primary aim of the analysis, failing to develop themes during data engagement, prioritizing hierarchical structures over deeper meanings, and relying solely on descriptive summaries without interpretation. In both empirical Papers 2 and 3, a priori and initial themes were further developed throughout the analysis process. Additionally, the final coding template served to uncover meanings beyond the identified themes, highlighting imbalances in leader-subordinate feedback exchanges (Paper 2) and assisting in the evaluation of HR practices in hybrid work (Paper 3). Lastly, both coding templates contain only three levels of hierarchy, ensuring that the structure does not overshadow the depth of meaning.

Transferability, comparable to external validity and generalizability in quantitative research, refers to providing a detailed description of the study's context, enabling readers to assess whether the findings may apply to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, transferability was enhanced by the detailed description of the data sample and collection methods in Papers 2 and 3. However, caution is needed when considering the transferability of findings, while the study is culturally bound in several ways, as detailed in Section 3.5.5.

Dependability, equivalent to reliability in quantitative research, is achieved when the research process is logical, traceable, and thoroughly documented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Demonstrating credibility and transferability—i.e. internal and external validity as discussed above—also implies the presence of dependability. Furthermore, particularly in template analysis, a clear and thorough presentation of theme development is essential (King & Brooks, 2017), as demonstrated in Papers 2 and 3. Finally, to ensure dependability, researchers should engage in self-reflection to acknowledge their influence in research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is addressed in the Section 3.5.5 of the dissertation.

Confirmability, aligned with objectivity, refers to ensuring that the data are genuine and not fabricated, with clear connections between the data, findings, and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It emphasizes transparency in the interpretation process embedded in the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In Papers 2 and 3, an audit trail was maintained, including note-taking and the retention of previous versions of the coding template to track changes throughout the analysis.

3.5.4 Multilevel approach to synthesizing findings

To ensure multilevel research quality, researchers must carefully navigate its pitfalls, such as the absence of clear definitions, misalignment between theory and measurement, and assumptions of uniform data aggregation across levels (Paruchuri et al., 2018). A crucial first step is to clearly define and justify the levels included in the analysis (Hitt et al., 2007; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Paruchuri et al., 2018). This study examines organizational, relational, and employee levels with distinct constructs: core processes of organization design, leader-subordinate relationships, and employee perceptions of HR practices. These constructs are defined in detail in the literature review (Sections 2.2–2.4), while the rationale for selecting these levels is provided in Section 1.4 and summarized in Section 3.4.

Furthermore, establishing logically consistent theoretical explanations for how and why the selected levels interact is essential (Hitt et al., 2007; Paruchuri et al., 2018).

This involves distinguishing between the levels of measurement and analysis, demonstrating how data from one level can be meaningfully interpreted at another (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Section 2.5 synthesizes literature across the three levels, providing a theoretical foundation that illustrates the interconnections and underlying mechanisms between key concepts: organizational design at the organizational level, LMX theory at the relational level, and psychological contract and employee HR perceptions at the employee level. Building on these relationships, Section 3.4 outlines how data from different levels aggregate to higher or lower levels, strengthening the conclusions presented in Chapter 5 (see Hitt et al., 2007).

Finally, as this multilevel study is theoretical, the quality measures for theoretical research outlined in Section 3.5.2 also apply. Logical coherence is ensured through clear definitions of constructs and their interconnections, which are firmly grounded in existing literature, as outlined above. The theoretical contributions discussed in Chapter 5 introduce a novel framework that enhances understanding of the interconnected factors essential for implementing HR practices in remote work settings. This framework is also highly relevant for organizations, leader-subordinate dyads, and employees navigating the complexities of remote work arrangements.

3.5.5 Positioning of the researcher

Beyond the quality criteria discussed above, the pragmatist paradigm views researchers as active, reflexive participants in knowledge creation, shaping the process through their beliefs and actions to address practical issues (Farjoun et al., 2015; Morgan, 2014). In addition, qualitative research places a strong emphasis on reflexivity, encouraging researchers to critically examine their own roles, biases, and the broader context in which knowledge is generated (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This reflexive stance is equally essential in theoretical-conceptual research, where researchers must actively question their assumptions, scrutinize their framing of topics, and consider alternative interpretations that could enrich their insights (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Kornberger & Mantere, 2020).

In this dissertation, my perspective and background inevitably influence how I present and analyze data. Consequently, an awareness of my attitudes, assumptions and values is essential for maintaining a research participant-centered approach, deepening the insights drawn from the study, and remaining open to revisiting previous beliefs (Patnaik, 2013). By positioning myself within the research process, I aim to help readers understand how my perspectives have influenced the analysis and the conclusions (Patnaik, 2013).

In addition to my role as a doctoral researcher, I work in regional development at a university of applied sciences, where research, development and innovation (RDI) activities are a statutory responsibility aimed at fostering regional growth alongside higher education. During my studies, I led a team of RDI specialists in a hybrid setting, with no fixed in-office days. Through this research, I have come to recognize that our organizational structure relies on clan control and skill standardization, with staff—including teachers, RDI specialists, and administrative personnel—enjoying a high degree of autonomy and managerial trust. I have also observed the mutual gains within our organization: we rank among the leading Finnish universities of applied sciences, excelling in RDI activities and national student satisfaction rankings. Additionally, annual staff surveys indicate high job satisfaction and well-being, further reinforced by our top 10 ranking in Finland's *Great Place to Work*TM survey for large organizations in 2023.

Both this research and my professional experience are rooted in Finland, a country already recognized among global leaders in remote work before the COVID-19 pandemic (Gschwind & Vargas, 2019). The cultural and societal context plays a significant role in shaping remote work arrangements (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Ollo-López et al., 2021; Vartiainen, 2024), HR practices (Beer et al., 1984; Papalexandris & Panayotopoulou, 2004), and the theoretical frameworks applied in this study, including organization design (Hofstede, 2011; Worren, 2018), LMX (Dulebohn et al., 2012), the psychological contract (Kutaula et al., 2020), and employee perceptions of HR practices (Wang et al., 2020). Finnish culture is characterized, for example, by low power distance, high individualism, high uncertainty avoidance, and relatively high indulgence (see Culture Factor Group, 2023 and Hofstede, 2011, for a detailed analysis of these cultural dimensions).

The pandemic elevated the relevance of my research topic, providing additional perspectives. I have been exposed to media discussions on remote and hybrid work throughout the research process. Additionally, numerous people with whom I have discussed my dissertation have shared their personal opinions and experiences of remote work arrangements. The awareness of my own position, the cultural context, the public discourse, and the influence of personal exchanges has underscored the importance of considering diverse perspectives in the data analysis. Particularly, my personal experiences with remote work arrangements—both as an employee, as a team leader, and as a regional developer—offer a valuable kaleidoscope through which to interpret the varied perspectives in the research data.

4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM THE DISSERTATION RESEARCH PAPERS

This dissertation comprises three research papers: two published articles (Papers 1 and 2) and one currently under journal review (Paper 3). This chapter briefly summarizes their purpose and key findings, each addressing a distinct perspective on implementing HR practices in remote work arrangements. Theoretical and methodological foundations for the papers have been detailed in Chapters 2 and 3, while their contributions are discussed in Chapter 5. Full versions of the papers are included in the second part of the dissertation. Paper 1 explores organization design in the era of work-from-anywhere, Paper 2 focuses on the leader-subordinate relationship as a context for HR practices in remote work, and Paper 3 examines employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work.

4.1 Organizational level: Updating organization design as the foundation for HR practices

Paper 1, "*Perspectives on organization design for the era of work-from-anywhere following COVID-19*" explores the structural arrangements suitable for work-from-anywhere, focusing on key aspects of organization design: (de)centralization, division of labor, coordination, and control. The paper extends the implementation of HR practices to the organizational level, where organization design forms the foundation for HR practices.

This theoretical-conceptual study integrates classic organization design literature (e.g., Mintzberg, 1979, 1980; Ouchi, 1979; Ouchi & Maquire, 1975) with research on remote work arrangements (e.g. Allen et al., 2015; Choudhury et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2022; Handke et al., 2024; Kanse et al., 2024; Lazarus & Nalepka, 2024; Šmite et al., 2023a; Wang et al., 2021), generating six hypotheses that define work-from-anywhere from the perspective of organization design in the post-pandemic era.

The study frames work-from-anywhere as a novel form of spatial decentralization, requiring decentralized decision-making due to physical distance between leaders and subordinates. Such decentralization aligns with the contemporary emphasis on organizational flexibility, employee empowerment, and reduced bureaucracy to drive performance (Huettermann et al., 2024).

Regarding division of labor, the study suggests that tasks best suited for work-from-anywhere are either decomposable into smaller parts or inherently autonomous, requiring minimal collaboration. Prior research supports this perspective, highlighting task interdependence as a critical boundary condition for work

effectiveness (Handke et al., 2024). High task interdependence has been linked with lower job satisfaction (Golden & Veiga, 2005), reduced productivity (Turetken et al., 2011), and managers' reluctance to allow remote work (Lembrechts et al., 2018). Moreover, as noted in Section 1.3, work-from-anywhere relies on communication technology. Accordingly, this study further suggests that tasks suitable for work-from-anywhere produce electronically transferable results, but do not require specialized equipment or facilities. These characteristics align with the knowledge-intensive nature of work-from-anywhere (see Allen et al., 2015; Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Leonardi et al., 2024).

However, technological advancements are expanding the range of tasks feasible for remote settings, including those requiring extensive collaboration or specialized equipment. Indeed, Kanse et al. (2024) show that high task interdependence—marked by collaborative workflows and mutual reliance—can enhance both performance and creativity in virtual teams when supported by collaboration platforms. These developments broaden the scope of work-from-anywhere, particularly concerning the division of labor and technological requirements.

To leverage these opportunities in the evolving work environment, organizational management must enhance its ability to adopt work-from-anywhere. This can be achieved by implementing appropriate coordination and control mechanisms for organizing work (**Hypothesis 1**). Table 6 highlights, with a blue background, the mechanisms that the authors interpret as principally well-suited for organizing work-from-anywhere. In contrast, mechanisms without emphasis are those considered as poorly functioning, mediocre, or unsustainable.

Table 6. Coordination and control mechanisms and their principal applicability from the perspective of work-from-anywhere (Kallio & Jansson, 2023)

Coordination mechanisms and their applicability to work-from-anywhere		Control mechanisms and their applicability to work-from-anywhere	
<i>Standardization of outputs</i>	Very good	Very good	<i>Market control / performance measurement</i>
<i>Standardization of skills</i>	Good	Good	<i>Clan control</i>
<i>Mutual adjustment</i>	Mediocre	Mediocre	<i>Social control</i>
<i>Standardization of work processes</i>	Very poor	Mediocre	<i>Bureaucratic control</i>
<i>Direct control</i>	Poor	Ethically unsustainable	<i>Supervision of work</i>

For apparent reasons, coordinating work-from-anywhere presents significant challenges for *direct control* and the *standardization of work processes*. *Mutual adjustment* is similarly limited, as it depends on immediate and informal interaction, as does *social control* as a control mechanism. In contrast, *supervision of work* could function highly effectively with modern technology (see Kretschmer & Khashabi, 2020; McPhail et al., 2024), enabling forms of control reminiscent of Bentham's panopticism or Orwell's "Big Brother is watching" scenario (Muzio & Doh, 2021). However, these forms of control are ethically questionable and may undermine employee well-being by increasing stress through intrusive surveillance (Jaser & Tourish, 2024; Pesole, 2023). The discussion of *bureaucratic control* as a mediocre mechanism is continued on the next page.

As indicated in Table 6, the *standardization of outputs* and *skills* are primarily the most appropriate coordination mechanisms for work-from-anywhere environments (**Hypothesis 2a**), while *market control/performance measurement* and *clan control* are the most appropriate control mechanisms (**Hypothesis 2b**). These hypotheses are based on the notions that standardization of outputs and market control/performance measurement minimize the need for constant interaction among organizational members (see Kallio & Kallio, 2025), and that result-based performance measurement is recognized as critical for remote work success (e.g., Kim et al., 2021; Kowalski & Swanson, 2005; Muzio & Doh, 2021). In particular, the standardization of skills and clan control are considered as good mechanisms for work-from-anywhere as they are pivotal in coordinating and controlling knowledge-intensive work (Kallio, 2015; Mintzberg, 1979; Ouchi, 1979). In such tasks, the responsibility for organizing work largely falls on the employees themselves (Brivot, 2011; Kallio, 2015; Mintzberg, 1979; Ouchi, 1979; Simon, 1973).

Building on this understanding and considering that work-from-anywhere is inherently knowledge-intensive (see Allen et al., 2015; Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Leonardi et al., 2024), the standardization of outputs and market control/performance measurement appear, only principally, to be the most suitable coordination and control mechanisms. Thus, the study argues that the selected mechanisms must be suitable *both* for work-from-anywhere *and* knowledge-intensive work. While these two mechanisms may suit work-from-anywhere, they face challenges in knowledge-intensive work, which is typically abstract, unique, and difficult to measure (see Brivot, 2011; Kallio, 2015; Kallio & Kallio, 2025).

In conclusion, standardization of outputs is an appropriate coordination mechanism for knowledge-intensive work-from-anywhere *only* when outputs can be clearly predefined (**Hypothesis 3a**). Similarly, market control/performance measurement is an appropriate control mechanism *only* if it avoids undesirable consequences

(Hypothesis 3b). These include bureaucratic inefficiencies, where excessive time is spent on reporting instead of actual work (Hatch, 1997; Kallio, 2015; Kallio & Kallio, 2025). This understanding also suggests that *bureaucratic control* is only moderately suitable, although it is widely applied in knowledge-intensive organizations. Moreover, work distortion is another undesirable consequence, where an overemphasis on measurable outcomes shifts attention disproportionately to results, while neglecting other crucial aspects of work quality and value (see, e.g., Aboubichr & Conway, 2023; Alvesson et al., 2017; Kallio et al., 2016). Therefore, the study finally suggests that standardizing skills and implementing clan control as primary coordination and control mechanisms are generally more appropriate for organizing knowledge-intensive work-from-anywhere than other combinations of mechanisms **(Hypothesis 3c).**

The crucial role of clan control in remote settings has also been highlighted in other recent studies (Alasoini, 2024; Pianese et al., 2023). However, changes in interaction within remote environments challenge this mechanism which relies on shared norms and values (Alasoini, 2024). These challenges can be mitigated by fostering mutual trust, interaction, collaboration, and knowledge sharing (Alasoini, 2024; Pianese et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021), underscoring the importance of prioritizing and developing coordination mechanisms over control mechanisms (Drucker, 1999; Eriksson & Ortega, 2024; Mat-Artun & Kuskü, 2024). Consequently, organizations adopting knowledge-intensive work-from-anywhere arrangements should strive to balance employee autonomy with organizational oversight (Burke & Morley, 2023; Lauring & Johansson, 2024; McPhail et al., 2024; Pianese et al., 2023; Vartiainen et al., 2025).




4.2 Relational level: Feedback interactions reflecting leader-subordinate dynamics

Paper 2, *“The art of staying in touch – exploring daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate in remote work”* examines the relational aspects of implementing HR practices. By integrating the leaders' and subordinates' perceptions on daily feedback interactions, it explores how remote work shapes the dyadic feedback environment (Katz et al., 2021; Steelman et al., 2004). The study specifically investigates how reciprocity within LMX relationships (e.g., Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Martin et al., 2023; Sheer, 2015) manifests and influences the dynamics of feedback exchange in remote work.

The qualitative analysis of 81 interview transcripts with leaders (n=29) and subordinates (n=52) reveals three tensions in their daily feedback interactions,

highlighting drawbacks in aspects that initially appear as positive (see Table 7). The findings are discussed in relation to these tensions and presented in the paper in a dialogical format, capturing the perspectives of both leaders and subordinates.

Table 7. Tensions in remote feedback interactions between leaders and subordinates

TENSION 1 – THE AVAILABILITY OF FEEDBACK		
Leader’s online accessibility		Leader’s intensified workload
Subordinates appreciating systemized communication frequency		Burden on leaders to create and maintain communication routines
Subordinates satisfied with remote interaction		Leaders desiring face-to-face encounters to provide feedback
TENSION 2 – LEADER’S TRUSTWORTHINESS IN DELIVERING FEEDBACK AND FEEDBACK QUALITY		
A close leader-member relationship		Ongoing quality challenges with remote feedback
Improved relationship quality of established relationships despite physical distance, due to frequent interactions		Lack of informal and spontaneous interactions hindering feedback delivery (delayed timing, reduced informational value, risk of misinterpretation)
TENSION 3 – FEEDBACK-SEEKING		
Promoted		Still complicated in remote work
Leaders and technology facilitating feedback-seeking		Subordinates passive in seeking feedback (threshold for contacting, risk of loneliness)
Remote work fostering trust and autonomy		Leaders balancing subordinates’ perceptions of interaction as support vs. control

The first tension concerns the availability of feedback (Steelman et al., 2004), reflecting the frequency of interactions between leaders and subordinates. Interviews revealed that remote work fostered more structured communication, with leaders maintaining regular contact through daily, weekly, and monthly routines. While subordinates appreciated the increased one-to-one communication and leaders’ immediate online availability, the structured setup also added to leaders’ workload. In addition, there were differing views on the need for face-to-face

interactions: Leaders emphasized them as essential for demonstrating care for their subordinates, while only a few subordinates expressed a desire for in-person meetings.

The second tension involves a leader's trustworthiness in delivering feedback and feedback quality (Steelman et al., 2004), highlighting both opportunities and challenges in remote work. Findings indicate that frequent leader-subordinate interactions have fostered emotional closeness, with video-mediated discussions from home allowing for deeper, more personal connections beyond work roles, showing how technology can facilitate psychological closeness (see Marstand et al., 2025). However, while established LMX relationships maintain or improve closeness at a distance, newer relationships may still require in-person interaction to build trust (see Mat-Artun & Küskü, 2024). Notably, despite frequent and intimate exchanges, the lack of informal, spontaneous interactions has hindered the delivery of high-quality, timely feedback, limiting leaders' abilities to fully leverage the strengthened trust within these relationships.

The third tension relates to feedback-seeking (Steelman et al., 2004). Although LMX relationships were perceived as trustworthy, and leaders made efforts to encourage subordinates to seek feedback facilitated by technology, subordinates did not actively engage in feedback-seeking in remote work. Significantly, how leaders manage interactions in remote work can influence whether subordinates perceive their behavior as supportive or controlling.

In sum, integrating leaders' and subordinates' perspectives highlights the challenge of balancing feedback availability with workload demands while navigating the absence of spontaneous exchanges that can hinder feedback quality despite perceived emotional closeness, and also the complexities of fostering feedback-seeking in remote settings.

4.3 Employee level: Understanding employee perceptions of HR practices

Paper 3, "*Evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work: A psychological contract perspective*" offers an employee-level perspective on implementing HR practices. Drawing on psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989, 1995), it examines the alignment of employee needs and expectations with HR practices, explaining how their (un)fulfillment shapes employee behavior and attitudes within the employment relationship.

The qualitative analysis of 1,278 open-ended survey responses from employees across 11 company units identifies the HR practices employees highlight, and evaluates the extent to which these practices meet their needs and expectations. Additionally, the responses uncover the PC content in the context of hybrid work.

The data reveals nine HR practices or related aspects in hybrid work that can be categorized into four transactional (explicit, tangible, and/or monetizable) and five relational (intangible and socio-emotionally based) PC elements (see Raeder, 2021; Rousseau, 1995). The transactional elements and related HR practices—working time monitoring, office premises, fringe benefits, and employee voice—gain exclusively negative views from employees. These elements are perceived as failing to add value to work, not fulfilling the expected reciprocity for employees' commitment, or not addressing employees' needs.

In contrast, the five relational elements and their associated HR practices—job autonomy, fairness, interaction and collaboration, work-life balance, and well-being at work—receive more varied evaluations. Employees who felt supported and whose needs and expectations were met expressed positive views. Conversely, those with negative perceptions highlighted a lack of trust or insufficient support from the organization or management. Figure 4 summarizes these HR practices, their connection to PC elements, and their evaluations.

Figure 4 further guided the interpretation of evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices. Respondents' opinions differ across three evaluative criteria: effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction. Some employees view HR practices positively, expressing appreciation and indicating that their needs and expectations are being met regarding task facilitation, accurate and reliable delivery of HR practices, and overall contribution to satisfaction. Others hold opposing views, raising criticisms or concerns regarding these same aspects, underscoring the differences in individual perceptions and underlying needs and expectations.

Overall, employees' evaluations of HR practices offer valuable insights into how these practices support or hinder work in hybrid environments. These insights are crucial for organizations aiming to align HR initiatives with employee needs and expectations, fulfill the psychological contract, and influence employee attitudes and behavior.

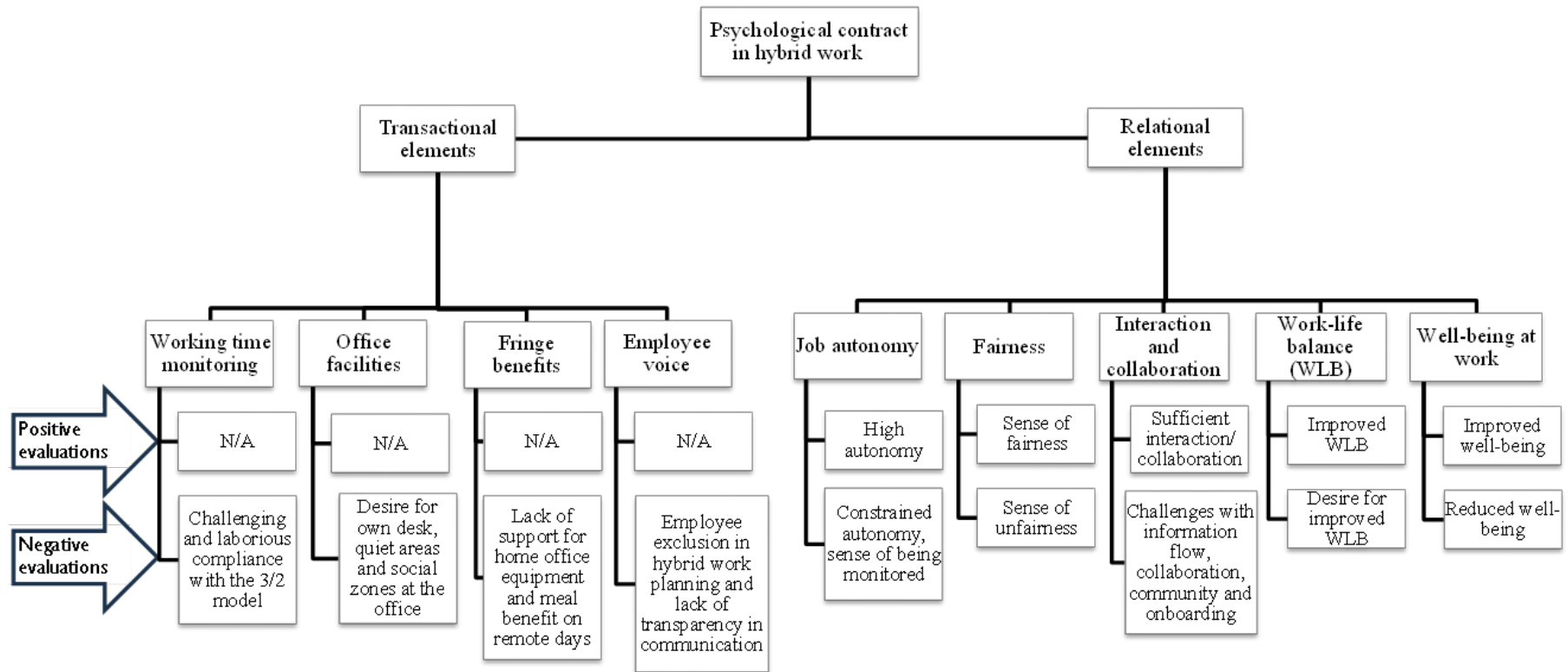


Figure 4. HR practices in hybrid work raised by employees, their connection to the psychological contract elements and their evaluation

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter summarizes the contribution of this dissertation. It begins by outlining the theoretical contributions of the three studies, each addressing specific research question(s). Next, the overarching research aim is discussed by integrating the findings into a multilevel framework, offering comprehensive theoretical contributions and practical implications. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

5.1 Theoretical contributions of the research papers

Paper 1 addresses the first research question (RQ1) of this dissertation: *“What implications does work-from-anywhere impose on the division of labor, coordination, and control?”*

By integrating the characteristics of knowledge-intensive work and work-from-anywhere, the study identifies key aspects of organization design that should be prioritized in remote work arrangements. It frames work-from-anywhere as a novel form of spatial decentralization, and argues that skill standardization and clan control are generally more appropriate coordination and control mechanisms for organizing knowledge-intensive work-from-anywhere than alternative combinations of mechanisms. The six proposed hypotheses provide a foundation for further refinement, development, and empirical testing (see Cornelissen, 2017; Weick, 1989). Paper 1 contributes to organization design literature by responding to calls for better alignment with modern work environments (Foss, 2021; Kivistö, 2019) and by re-emphasizing practical problem-solving, countering the recent trends of theoretical abstraction in the field (Alvesson et al., 2017; Kallio, 2015; Timming & Macneil, 2023).

Paper 2 addresses the second research question (RQ2) of this dissertation: *“How does remote work shape daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate?”* The focus is on understanding the reciprocity in LMX relationships and its impact on feedback dynamics.

The study contributes to the literature on LMX and feedback by offering insights into both domains. First, Paper 2 fills the gap in LMX literature regarding the actual reciprocity of relationships (Martin et al., 2023; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2017; Sheer, 2015), while also enhancing the understanding of LMX dynamics in remote settings (Mat-Artun & Küskü, 2024; Varma et al., 2022). The findings reveal an

imbalance in reciprocity within remote LMX relationships, where leaders are primarily responsible for maintaining interactions, while also balancing a fine line between providing support and being perceived as intrusive. This aligns with criticism of LMX theory, particularly regarding the idea of reciprocity as a foundational element in these relationships (Liden et al., 2025). Additionally, the study challenges previous assumptions that close LMX relationships (Anseel et al., 2015; Chun et al., 2014) and a leader's trust in subordinates (Huang, 2012) foster feedback-seeking, suggesting that technology may create barriers in remote settings.

Second, by integrating the perspectives of both leaders and subordinates (Anseel & Sherf, 2025; Katz et al., 2021) on dyadic feedback interactions in remote settings (Brown et al., 2019), the study highlights the imbalance in their efforts to build and maintain a favorable feedback environment.

The findings further indicate that remote feedback is predominantly positive, while constructive feedback is often delayed due to the challenges of remote communication. Given that feedback is intended to foster learning and performance improvement (Anseel & Sherf, 2025), the focus on positive feedback in remote settings is particularly noteworthy: wherein the relationship between positive feedback and learning remains unclear (Anseel & Sherf, 2025), while constructive feedback has been recognized as a driver of performance improvement (Li et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2024). Moreover, developmental feedback has the potential to enhance innovative behavior (Li & Xia, 2024), which organizations are concerned may erode in remote settings (Barrero et al., 2023; Kane et al., 2021; Sherman, 2024; Šmite et al., 2023a; Trevor & Holweg, 2022).

In sum, Paper 2 underscores the dyadic nature of the LMX relationship and feedback interactions, advocating for subordinates to take a more proactive role in nurturing both aspects.

Paper 3 addresses the third and fourth research questions of this dissertation. RQ3 explored, "*What are the HR practices highlighted by employees in a hybrid work setting, reflecting elements of the psychological contract?*"

The study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it advances research on psychological contracts by exploring their content in the post-pandemic work environment. In addition to identifying key transactional and relational elements valued by employees in hybrid work, the study reveals that expectations for transactional elements often remain unmet due to absent or burdensome HR practices, despite their dominance in today's work life (see Raeder, 2021; Tietze & Nadin, 2011). Notable is also the absence of training practices in employee responses, which contrasts with their recognized significance in the literature. This highlights

the need for organizations to ensure that employees recognize and understand the value of HR practices, and perceive them as supportive.

The findings also underscore the critical role of organizational and managerial support in fulfilling relational PC elements. This is complicated in remote settings, where managers must strike a balance between organizational expectations for in-office presence and employee desires for flexibility (see Pak et al., 2024). The fulfillment of relational PC elements is further complicated by the challenges that increased remote work poses to interaction and the socio-emotional aspects such as trust and support, necessary for maintaining relational PC elements. Overall, compared to the pre-pandemic literature, this study reveals differences that confirm that PCs are dynamic in nature (Rousseau, 1995) and continue to evolve in response to pandemic-induced changes in working life (Karani Mehta et al., 2024).

Second, the study enhances the emerging literature on hybrid work by comparing employee-identified HR practices with existing literature. This comparison reveals differences resulting from the rapid shift to remote work during the pandemic and evolving employee expectations in hybrid settings. Notably in the study, respondents do not associate training practices with hybrid work, and the study expands the concept of fringe benefits to include meal allowances on remote workdays.

The final research question of the dissertation (RQ4), "*How do employees evaluate these HR practices?*", was also addressed in Paper 3, making its third contribution to the literature.

The study advances the understanding of employee perceptions of HR practices, highlighting the importance of using specific metrics to better address employee needs and expectations (see Meijerink et al., 2021). Additionally, it suggests reconsidering satisfaction as an overarching evaluative measure, as it may encompass aspects of both effectiveness and quality in the delivery of HR practices.

5.2 Theoretical contributions of the multilevel approach

This dissertation aimed to explore the multiple perspectives essential for implementing HR practices in remote work arrangements, with a focus on fostering mutually beneficial outcomes for employees and organizations. It adopted a multilevel approach to examine this overarching research aim, starting with a theoretical discussion at the organizational level, moving to qualitative empirical analyses at the relational level, and further at the employee level.

Each of the three studies highlights key aspects of HR practice implementation in remote work arrangements: organizational design, as the foundation for HR practices, must be updated; maintaining LMX relationships requires a balance of efforts from both leaders and subordinates; and HR practices should be informed by a comprehensive understanding of employee needs and expectations. Through a multilevel approach, these studies offer novel theoretical and practical insights into the implementation of HR practices within remote work settings.

By integrating different levels of study and bridging HRM and leadership, this dissertation addresses the need for multilevel HRM research (Hitt et al., 2007; Leroy et al., 2018; Molina-Azorín et al., 2020; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019b; Renkema et al., 2017; Wright & Boswell, 2002), particularly concerning HR practice implementation in remote work arrangements (Lazarus & Nalepka, 2024; Roodbari et al., 2025). Moreover, it aligns with recent calls for employee-centered HRM research (e.g., Kulik, 2021; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019a), focusing on how HR practices can create mutually beneficial outcomes for both organizations and employees (Guest, 2017; Huettermann & Bruch, 2019; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019a). Finally, this dissertation responds to the call for the evolution of HRM research by challenging the continued dominance of traditional approaches to work organization (see Collings et al., 2021; Luring & Jonasson, 2024; McPhail et al., 2024), and contributes to industry-engaged academic research by searching for practical solutions to contemporary tensions between employee and organization interests (Timming & Macneil, 2023). The following sections present seven propositions based on a cross-level analysis, aimed at supporting the achievement of mutual gains.

5.2.1 Bottom-up influences on organization design

The organizational level is influenced by two bottom-up processes, originating from leader-subordinate dynamics at the relational level and employee perceptions of HR practices at the employee level. Recognizing the influence of lower levels to this higher-level construct reinforces the view that organization design should be the result of a thoughtful analysis rather than a predetermined starting point (see Kivistö, 2019). It also aligns with employee-centered HRM research, investigating how employees' perceptions and interactions impact higher-level outcomes (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019b).

Insights from the relational level

Cross-level insights indicate that leader-subordinate dynamics should influence organization design, yet this bottom-up relationship remains underexplored (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden et al., 2025; Zoller & Muldoon, 2020).

Paper 2 (the relational level) reveals that although frequent, planned interactions helped maintain high LMX relationship quality during pandemic-era remote work, delivering and seeking timely feedback remained challenging. Moreover, remote feedback is predominantly positive, whereas constructive feedback is often delayed due to communication technology barriers. Such delays can hinder performance improvement and innovation, both of which rely on timely developmental feedback.

Examining these findings through the lens of organization design offers valuable insights. Maintaining LMX relationships in remote work arrangements appears time-consuming and requires greater effort compared to office environments, where interaction occurs more naturally due to physical proximity. Consequently, from a division of labor perspective, particularly regarding the span of control, it can be argued that remote work arrangements necessitate a narrower span of control to facilitate frequent interactions and personal relationships. However, a narrower span of control can also imply greater direct control (Mintzberg, 1979, 1980), which is inappropriate for remote settings (Kallio & Jansson, 2023). Instead, organizations should combine a narrower span with increased employee autonomy, which is a trait typically associated with a broader span of control (see Mintzberg, 1979, 1980). This hybrid approach combining elements of both spans, which Jacobsen et al. (2023) refer to as a medium span of control, can foster psychological closeness in LMX relationships and help alleviate the challenges of physical distance (see Marstand et al., 2025).

Consequently, a manageable span of control in remote work arrangements implies fewer subordinates per leader, requiring additional resources for managerial work. This challenges the assumption that remote work reduces costs on office premises (Bailey & Kurland 2002; Choudhury et al., 2021). Rather than reducing costs, remote work reshapes the nature of the office, necessitating a shift in resources from the physical space to supporting interactions through both managerial and technological investments. Indeed, technological advancements are likely to reduce barriers to feedback interactions seen in Paper 2, as virtual presence increasingly mirrors physical presence, and can even facilitate richer social interactions than face-to-face encounters (see McVeigh-Schultz & Isbister, 2022).

Furthermore, maintaining LMX relationships and dyadic feedback interactions in remote settings has implications for coordination and control mechanisms. High-quality LMX relationships, which are essential for high-quality feedback, rely on mutual trust, support, and frequent interactions – fortunately, the same elements that underpin the most suitable coordination and control mechanisms in remote work (see Kallio & Jansson, 2023). Skill standardization and clan control require trust in the absence of direct supervision, structured training for support, and interaction to uphold professional standards and shared norms and values. In other words, the factors that enable strong LMX relationships and dyadic feedback interactions also facilitate the most suitable mechanisms of organizing remote work arrangements.

Overall, sustaining high-quality LMX relationships and dyadic feedback interactions remotely requires organization design choices that foster trust, support, and frequent interaction; that is, a medium span of control, skill standardization, and clan control. Notably, high-quality LMX relationships (Modliba et al., 2024; Sanders et al., 2010) and feedback (Eva et al., 2019; Li & Xia, 2024) also drive innovation, yet remote work can hinder these processes by limiting spontaneous interactions (e.g., Šmite et al., 2023a; Trevor & Holweg, 2022). Given these concerns, organization design also is the key to fostering innovation in decentralized work environments (see Lazarević & Ružičić, 2023).

In conclusion, the first proposition is as follows:

Proposition 1: *Maintaining high-quality LMX relationships and dyadic feedback interactions in remote work arrangements requires appropriate organization design and sufficient managerial and technological resources.*

Notably, incorporating trust, support, and interaction into organization design enhances social and mental well-being at work (see, e.g., Guest, 2017), which is essential for achieving mutual gains (Aubouin-Bonnaventure et al., 2024; Salas-Vallina et al., 2021).

Insights from the employee level

This study's suggestion that HR practices valued by employees should guide organizational design aligns with the growing focus on bottom-up perspectives of employee perceptions (e.g., Beijer et al., 2021; Lepak et al., 2012; Van Beurden et al., 2021). Additionally, the recognized role of employees in shaping HR practice implementation (Roodbari et al., 2025) warrants further attention.

Paper 3 (the employee level) identifies nine elements of the psychological contract in hybrid work, encompassing both transactional and relational aspects, each linked to

specific HR practices. The study highlights that HR practices must align with employee needs and expectations to fulfill the psychological contract. Employees develop positive perceptions of HR practices when these practices support rather than hinder their work, are applied consistently and reliably across the organization, and address diverse needs and expectations. Furthermore, the findings reinforce that psychological contracts are dynamic, evolving with changes in the work environment.

At the organizational level, these findings reveal that employees' needs and expectations in hybrid work, as manifested through identified HR practices and related PC elements, may not be met if they conflict with organization design. This contradiction is evident in the organization's practice of working time monitoring to enforce a fixed number of office days in hybrid work (see Figure 4 in Section 4.3). Strong employee dissatisfaction with this HR practice in hybrid work supports the argument that prioritizing coordination over control—through mechanisms such as skill standardization and clan control—is better suited to remote settings (see Kallio & Jansson, 2023). These mechanisms, which rely on mutual trust, support and interaction, also reinforce key PC elements such as flexibility, inclusion, autonomy, fairness, collaboration, and care for employee well-being, all without burdening oversight (see Figure 4 in Section 4.3). In contrast, requiring employees to adhere to the 3/2 model and report a fixed number of office days per week reflects characteristics of work process standardization and bureaucratic control – mechanisms that are ill-suited for complex, knowledge-intensive remote work (see Table 6 in Section 4.1).

Aligning organization design with employee-valued HR practices creates a reinforcing cycle in which organization design and employee perceptions of HR practices strengthen one another. Addressing employee needs in remote work arrangements, particularly regarding relational PC elements, facilitates the adoption of mechanisms like skill standardization and clan control. These mechanisms, in turn, foster less hierarchical and more empowering organizations (see Mintzberg, 1979; Ouchi, 1979). Employees in such organizations are more likely to perceive HR practices as supportive and empowering, further reinforcing alignment between organization design and employee preferences (Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009; Eriksson & Ortega, 2024; Kim et al., 2014). Thus:

Proposition 2a: *Creating positive employee perceptions of HR practices requires an organization design that remains responsive to employee needs and expectations within their psychological contract.*

However, increased autonomy in remote work arrangements also increases employees' responsibility in implementing HR practices (Kilroy et al., 2023), which in turn shapes their own perceptions of these practices (Lepak & Boswell, 2012;

Meijerink et al., 2016). While employees have traditionally been viewed as passive recipients of HR practices implemented by leaders (e.g., Beijer et al., 2021), the shift to remote work underscores the need for clearer role definitions for both leaders and subordinates in enacting these practices (see Trullen et al., 2020).

Building on this, when organizations implement skill standardization and clan control to structure work in remote settings, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on employees' active engagement. If employees disengage from HR practices related to interaction and training—both of which are essential for maintaining professional standards under these mechanisms (see Tables 3 and 4 in Section 2.2.1)—it may undermine both organization design and employee perceptions of HR practices. This is a potential concern, as the respondents in Paper 3 did not highlight training practices, indicating that they may not perceive them as valuable in hybrid work. This aligns with Camps and Luna-Arocas (2009), who emphasize the importance of employees' active involvement in HR practice implementation to support an organization design that fosters a strong company culture based on shared values and enhances collaboration, ultimately improving performance. Given that HR practices translate organization design into action (Beer et al., 1984), these insights lead to the formulation of the following proposition:

Proposition 2b: *To foster positive employee perceptions of HR practices, organizations must ensure employees understand their role in implementing these practices, as their active engagement is essential to effective organizational design.*

In conclusion, as employee preferences evolve, so does their psychological contract (Guest & Rodrigues, 2024; Rousseau, 1995), requiring a dynamic approach to organization design (see Eloranta, 1977; Wegener, 2023). Aligning organization design with employee preferences and encouraging active participation in HR practices can foster positive perceptions which not only enhance satisfaction, but also drive innovation (Sanders et al., 2010). These positive perceptions of HR practices, in turn, increase employees' willingness to reciprocate in ways that benefit the organization, ultimately fostering mutual gains (Lepak et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2020).

5.2.2 Top-down and bottom-up influences on the leader-subordinate relationship

As a relational-level construct, the LMX relationship is shaped by top-down organization design, which establishes organizational structure and culture and bottom-up individual employee values (Terpstra-Tong et al., 2020). Recognizing this

dual influence highlights the complexity inherent in understanding organizational phenomena (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Molina-Azorín et al., 2020).

Insights from the organizational level

The previous section examined how relational-level factors influence the organizational level. This section expands the discussion in the opposite direction, illustrating how organization design shapes LMX relationships at the dyadic level.

Findings from Paper 1 (the organizational level) suggest that technological advances are expanding the feasibility of work-from-anywhere, increasing spatial decentralization and the demand for decentralized decision-making. To organize work in such evolving environments, organizations must adopt appropriate coordination and control mechanisms. The study identifies standardization of skills and clan control as essential mechanisms for work-from-anywhere, both of which depend on highly trained employees who follow professional standards through provided guidelines, self-assessment, and peer support.

At the dyadic leader-subordinate level, these findings enhance the understanding of LMX dynamics in remote settings. A shift toward more decentralized organization designs could, in the firsthand, imply a broader span of control and greater employee autonomy (see Mintzberg, 1979, 1980). However, prior research suggests that a broad span of control can undermine LMX relationship quality (Schyns et al., 2010) and reduce employee job satisfaction (Jacobsen et al., 2023). As discussed in Section 5.2.1, this study suggests that organizations should aim for a manageable, medium span of control in remote settings, balancing employee autonomy with close leadership involvement (see Huettermann et al., 2024; Jacobsen et al., 2023).

The literature synthesis in Section 2.5 demonstrated how various coordination and control mechanisms influence LMX relationships by structuring interpersonal exchanges and shaping leadership behaviors. Standardization of skills and clan control—identified as the most suitable mechanisms for remote work—foster mutual trust, support, and interaction, encouraging leadership behaviors that empower employees (Kallio & Jansson, 2023). These mechanisms align with the reciprocal nature of LMX relationships, and are essential in cultivating effective leader-subordinate dynamics (see Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

An illustrative example highlights the importance of updating organization design when transitioning to remote work arrangements. In organizations that emphasize control, the shift to remote work—a situation faced by many during the COVID-19 pandemic—can significantly impact LMX relationships. In hierarchical structures focused on control, increased leader-subordinate communication, although

necessary in the absence of physical proximity, can easily be perceived as surveillance rather than support, thereby weakening LMX relationships. During the pandemic, leaders struggled to recognize when their interactions shifted from being supportive to controlling (Jansson & Kangas, 2025). Moreover, even when leaders adopt a more empowering approach that allows for autonomy, hierarchical organizational structures may still discourage employees from fully exercising their decision-making power (Eriksson & Ortega, 2024).

Given that organization design guides whether leaders act in a supportive or controlling manner within LMX relationships and also shapes how subordinates interpret these actions, it is critical for organizations to adjust their designs to promote autonomy and minimize perceptions of control in remote work arrangements. Over time, such adjustments to organization design can foster a supportive culture, strengthening trust-based LMX relationships (Terpstra-Tong et al., 2020). These insights lead to the following proposition:

Proposition 3: *A medium span of control, skill standardization, and clan control are not only suitable organizational design choices for remote work arrangements, but also essential for supporting the LMX dynamics.*

In conclusion, strong leader-subordinate dynamics are integral to mutual gains. Prior research demonstrates that a high-quality LMX relationship, combined with effective communication and a supportive environment offering recognition and development opportunities, enhances employee well-being. This, in turn, may foster increased individual performance and create win-win situations for both employees and the organization (Salas-Vallina et al., 2021).

Insights from the employee level

This section examines the bottom-up process through which employee-level constructs shape LMX relationships (see Terpstra-Tong et al., 2020).

Findings from Paper 3 (the employee level) highlight that managerial support is particularly essential for fulfilling the relational psychological contract elements which underpin positive employee perceptions of HR practices. However, leaders face challenges in providing this support, as they must balance conflicting organizational and employee needs and expectations regarding office presence while addressing the interaction, trust, and socio-emotional challenges associated with hybrid work.

Viewed through the lens of LMX theory which frames the leader-subordinate relationship as reciprocal, the findings reinforce that employees who perceive

HR practices positively (e.g., Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Roodbari et al., 2025) and experience the fulfillment of their psychological contract (see, e.g., Dulac et al., 2008; Kasekende, 2017; Restubog et al., 2011) are more likely to strengthen their LMX relationships – the responses from the employees perceiving HR practices positively in Paper 3 reflect mutual trust, respect, and a motivation to perform. Conversely, negative employee perceptions and an unfulfilled psychological contract—evident in the responses indicating a lack of these positive elements—seem to reduce employees' willingness to reciprocate, potentially weakening the LMX relationship.

However, reciprocity in LMX relationships extends beyond a mere sense of obligation to respond to a leader's actions. It also involves subordinates' voluntary efforts to engage with their leaders, offering support and demonstrating a commitment to organizational goals (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sheer, 2015). Notably, LMX literature has been criticized for disproportionately emphasizing the leader's efforts in maintaining relationships (see, e.g., Liden et al., 2025; Sheer, 2015). Particularly in remote work environments, a more balanced approach to reciprocity can be achieved, for example, when subordinates actively contribute to innovation capacity, organizational culture, and knowledge transfer – key organizational goals (see Barrero et al., 2023; Kane et al., 2021; Šmite et al., 2023a; Trevor & Holweg, 2022). Consequently, leaders and subordinates can cultivate reciprocity by negotiating remote work arrangements that balance individual needs with organizational expectations.

This collaborative approach not only enhances their relationship quality (see Sheer, 2015), but also helps address a primary organizational concern in remote work – a lack of trust (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Pianese et al., 2023; Silva-C et al., 2019). When subordinates take the initiative in solving challenges, they demonstrate reliability, thereby reinforcing organizational trust in remote work settings. Thus:

Proposition 4: *Subordinates must actively clarify mutual expectations with their leader, balancing personal needs and remote work preferences with organizational expectations to strengthen reciprocity, trust and the quality of the LMX relationship.*

In summary, positive perceptions of HR practices and the fulfillment of PC strengthen LMX relationships (Kasekende, 2017; Kilroy et al., 2023), which in turn foster mutual gains (Salas-Vallina et al., 2021). Just as leaders play a key role in nurturing these relationships, subordinates should also actively engage with the challenges arising from conflicting or unmet expectations, thereby enhancing the quality of their LMX relationship.

5.2.3 Top-down influences on employee perceptions of HR practices

The employee level is shaped by two top-down processes: organization design at the organizational level, and leader-subordinate dynamics at the relational level. These processes illustrate how higher-level factors affect outcomes at lower levels, such as employee attitudes and behaviors (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000).

Insights from the organizational level

Section 5.2.1 examined how employee-level factors (should) influence the organizational level. This section shifts focus to the reverse relationship, exploring how organizational design shapes employee perceptions of HR practices and the psychological contract. These cross-level influences are recognized in literature (Lepak et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2024). In this study, the interconnections underscore the importance of considering how organization design either facilitates or hinders the fulfillment of employees' psychological contracts when implementing HR practices.

To organize knowledge-intensive work in increasingly decentralized remote environments, Paper 1 (the organizational level) suggests that standardization of skills and clan control are the most suitable coordination and control mechanisms. From an employee perspective, these organization-level findings suggest that the increasing decentralization of organizations, driven by technological advancements, offers a valuable opportunity to enhance employee perceptions of HR practices. Employees in less hierarchical structures are more likely to view HR practices as supportive and empowering (Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009; Eriksson and Ortega, 2024; Kim et al., 2014). However, achieving this benefit requires alignment between organization design and HR practices (Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009; Kim et al., 2014) to ensure consistent messaging conveyed by these practices (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Eriksson & Ortega, 2024). Despite this, many organizations seem to struggle with such alignment in remote work arrangements, where they send mixed signals, as demonstrated below.

The decision to maintain remote work arrangements post-pandemic inherently suggests a trust-based rather than a control-based approach to organizational design. Moreover, organizations are increasingly concerned with innovation capacity, organizational culture, and knowledge sharing in remote settings (Barrero et al., 2023; Kane et al., 2021; Šmite et al., 2023a; Trevor & Holweg, 2022). Addressing these concerns relies on fostering interaction, and not exerting control over employees. Given these priorities, one would expect organization design and HR practices to focus on fostering trust and interaction – principles that are echoed in mechanisms such as skill standardization and clan control.

Implementing the HR practice of monitoring office attendance within the widely adopted 3/2 hybrid work model (Bloom, 2021; Trevor & Holweg, 2022) reflects the primary organizational concern of losing control in remote work environments (see Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Pianese et al., 2023; Silva-C et al., 2019). This focus on control conflicts with the autonomy typically afforded by remote work arrangements, leading to a misalignment between organizational design and HR practices. Furthermore, this contradiction between control and autonomy also creates conflicting expectations, indicating 'deadly combinations' of HR practices that potentially hinder mutual gains (see Delery & Gupta, 2016; Lepak et al., 2006). Similarly, when employees are not involved in the planning of remote work arrangements—despite having the option to work remotely—it sends conflicting messages regarding the HR practice of employee voice.

Notably, the HR practices, as referenced here and perceived negatively by employees in Paper 3, highlight not only a misalignment between organization design and HR practices, but also suggest decreased job satisfaction (see Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009; Kim et al., 2014) and a failure to fulfill the psychological contract, reinforcing previous research findings (see Rousseau & Greller, 1994; Uen et al., 2023). Thus:

Proposition 5: *Aligning organization design with HR practices in remote work arrangements is essential for fostering positive employee perceptions of HR practices and fulfilling the psychological contract.*

Such alignment is likely to result in enhanced employee motivation and commitment (Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009; Kim et al., 2014), ultimately fostering organizational performance by facilitating mutual gains (Eriksson & Ortega, 2024).

Insights from the relational level

While Section 5.2.2 explored how employee-level constructs aggregate on a relational level influencing the LMX relationship, this section takes the opposite perspective, examining how dyadic dynamics influence employee perceptions of HR practices and the psychological contract.

Findings from Paper 2 (the relational level) indicate that leaders and subordinates share the view of emotional closeness and trustworthiness in their relationships, reflecting high LMX quality in remote work. However, the findings show that reciprocity in these relationships is imbalanced, with leaders primarily responsible for maintaining dyadic feedback interactions. Despite the intensified workload, leaders view feedback as vital in remote work settings. In contrast, subordinates are satisfied with increased online communication and trustworthy relationships due to

leader's structured communication, yet they do not fully seem to appreciate feedback's significance or its reciprocal nature.

From an employee-level perspective, a perceived high LMX relationship quality presents a valuable opportunity to enhance employees' perceptions of HR practices. As discussed in Section 2.5, high-quality LMX relationships, characterized by mutual trust, support, and frequent interaction, promote positive perceptions of HR practices by making employees feel valued. However, while alignment between the perceptions of leaders and subordinates is crucial, the findings from Paper 2 reveal that leaders and subordinates perceive remote feedback interactions differently, indicating that employees' understanding of this HR practice may not align with leaders' intentions to strengthen the interaction and demonstrate support. Such misalignment can potentially hamper both employee and organizational performance (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Wang et al., 2022).

Moreover, the imbalanced reciprocity has implications for the fulfillment of the psychological contract. Reciprocity, inherent in the concept of PC (Conway & Briner, 2009), is particularly crucial in remote settings where interaction, trust, and mutual respect are more challenging to maintain (Kilroy et al., 2023). Furthermore, extending the notion that perceptions of HR practices are a result of a co-creation process where both leaders and subordinates influence the perceived value of practices (Lepak & Boswell, 2012; Meijerink et al., 2016) suggests that the fulfillment of psychological contract is similarly a product of collaboration. Particularly in regard to relational PC elements, fostering positive employee perceptions of HR practices and thereby fulfilling PCs should be a shared responsibility, rather than solely the leader's burden. Instead of viewing subordinates as passive recipients who simply evaluate HR practices, this study emphasizes their active role:

Proposition 6: *Leaders and subordinates must engage reciprocally, aligning their perceptions of HR practices and collaborating to fulfill the psychological contract to foster positive employee perceptions.*

In conclusion, high-quality LMX relationships enhance job satisfaction, commitment, and performance by shaping employee perceptions of HR practices (Kilroy et al., 2023; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). These relationships ultimately benefit both employees and the organization, provided that both parties in the leader-subordinate dyad share similar perceptions.

5.3 Conclusions

This dissertation presents HR practice implementation in remote work arrangements as the outcome of interconnected, two-way processes across organizational, relational, and employee levels, highlighting its complexity (see Figure 3 in Section 3.4). The multilevel approach enhances the contributions of the individual research papers by articulating seven propositions that offer deeper insight and understanding beyond what single-level analyses could provide.

Paper 1 updated organization design—the foundation for HR practices—for decentralized, knowledge-intensive, work-from-anywhere environments. The multilevel approach highlighted that for this updated design to function effectively, it requires sufficient resources to support leader-subordinate dynamics, and a careful consideration of employee perceptions of HR practices. In addition, employees must actively participate in translating organization design into action through HR practice implementation.

Paper 2 enhanced our understanding of LMX relationships—the primary context of HR practices—within remote work settings by incorporating both leaders' and subordinates' perspectives on dyadic feedback interactions. The multilevel approach provided insights at the organizational level, suggesting that leader-subordinate dynamics in remote work require a manageable, medium span of control, and compatible coordination and control mechanisms. From the employee-level perspective, maintaining high-quality, reciprocal LMX relationships in remote work requires employees to balance their own needs and expectations with those of the organization. In doing so, employees help their leaders manage conflicting interests.

Paper 3 advanced the research on psychological contracts and HR practices in hybrid work by identifying key PC elements and the HR practices that employees value most, which are critical constructs for understanding HR practice implementation at the employee level. The multilevel approach suggests that aligning organizational design with HR practices fosters positive employee perceptions and supports the fulfillment of the psychological contract. Furthermore, leaders and subordinates must align their perceptions of HR practices and collaborate to fulfill the psychological contract, fostering positive employee perceptions. Subordinates, in particular, should take an active role in shaping their own HR perceptions and enhancing the reciprocity of the LMX relationship.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that HR practice implementation in remote work arrangements is influenced by both top-down and bottom-up dynamics, necessitating actions at all levels. A multilevel approach offers a holistic framework for balancing organizational goals with employee interests to achieve mutual gains.

From an organizational perspective, realizing mutual gains in remote work requires recognizing and addressing employees' needs and expectations. By incorporating employee preferences, organizations can create work environments that benefit both parties. From an employee perspective, achieving mutual gains involves embracing the responsibility that comes with the autonomy and trust inherent in remote work arrangements. Employees who actively engage with HR practices and their leaders not only enhance organizational performance, but also build trust, increasing their likelihood of securing the flexibility in work arrangements that they seek. Conceptually, the leader-subordinate relationship acts as a bridge, shaping how HR practices are implemented and perceived, creating the context for mutual gains.

Notably, the interconnectedness of these levels makes them equally important. If the *organizational* level is neglected, outdated organizational structures may fail to accommodate remote work arrangements, potentially hindering HR practice implementation by lacking necessary resources and structures. Outdated organizational structures may conflict with employee preferences, leading to negative perceptions of HR practices. Additionally, ineffective organizational design may emerge if employees disengage from HR practices or fail to appreciate their value.

Similarly, neglecting the *relational* level can undermine LMX relationships—the most critical workplace relationship in remote work arrangements—while also increasing tensions between employees and management due to misaligned expectations. Ignoring the *employee* level may lead to unmet needs and expectations, resulting in negative perceptions of HR practices and an unfulfilled psychological contract. Specifically, subordinates (employees) may fail to take the active role necessary to enhance reciprocity in their LMX relationship and shape their HR perceptions. These insights lead to the main argument of this dissertation:

Neglecting any of the organizational, relational, or employee levels when implementing HR practices in remote work arrangements undermines the achievement of mutual gains.

Table 8 summarizes the cross-level influences in the form of seven propositions that constitute the dissertation's comprehensive theoretical contribution.

Table 8. Multilevel framework for implementing HR practices in remote work arrangements

Level	Main findings	Cross-level aggregation	Proposition to promote mutual gains
ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL	Technological advances are expanding remote work feasibility, increasing spatial decentralization and the demand for decentralized decision-making.	From the relational level	Proposition 1: Maintaining high-quality LMX relationships and dyadic feedback interactions in remote work arrangements requires appropriate organization design and sufficient managerial and technological resources.
	Standardization of skills and clan control as primary coordination and control mechanisms are generally more appropriate for organizing knowledge-intensive work-from-anywhere than other combinations of mechanisms.	From the employee level	Proposition 2a: Creating positive employee perceptions of HR practices requires an organization design that remains responsive to employee needs and expectations within their psychological contract. Proposition 2b: To foster positive employee perceptions of HR practices, organizations must ensure employees understand their role in implementing these practices, as their active engagement is essential to effective organizational design.
RELATIONAL LEVEL	There is an imbalance in reciprocal efforts of leaders and subordinates in maintaining LMX relationships in remote settings.	From the organizational level	Proposition 3: A medium span of control, skill standardization, and clan control are not only suitable organizational design choices for remote work arrangements, but also essential for supporting the LMX dynamics.
	Despite the experienced high quality in LMX relationships, delivering and seeking timely, constructive feedback in remote settings is challenging, which may harm performance and innovative behavior.	From the employee level	Proposition 4: Subordinates must actively clarify mutual expectations with their leader, balancing personal needs and remote work preferences with organizational expectations to strengthen reciprocity, trust and the quality of the LMX relationship.

Level	Main findings	Cross-level aggregation	Proposition to promote mutual gains
EMPLOYEE LEVEL	The PC content in hybrid work includes four transactional and five relational elements, each linked to specific HR practices. While all transactional elements remained unfulfilled, the relational ones received varied employee evaluations, largely depending on organizational and managerial support.	From the organizational level	Proposition 5: Aligning organization design with HR practices in remote work arrangements is essential for fostering positive employee perceptions of HR practices and fulfilling the psychological contract.
	To uphold the PC, organizations must align HR practices with employee needs and expectations in terms of effectiveness, quality and overall satisfaction, while remaining attentive to their evolution in changing work environments.	From the relational level	Proposition 6: Leaders and subordinates must engage reciprocally, aligning their perceptions of HR practices and collaborating to fulfill the psychological contract to foster positive employee perceptions.

5.4 Practical implications

Aligned with a pragmatic approach, knowledge gains value when it informs solutions and guides future action (Saunders et al., 2016). Given that this dissertation is based on pragmatism, a separate discussion of practical contributions is somewhat tautological. However, this section summarizes key insights for organizations, leader-subordinate dyads, and employees.

Organizations

This study highlights several implications for organizations. First, it is crucial to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the shift toward remote work arrangements, which has been described as one of the most fundamental changes in working life since the Industrial Revolution (Gratton, 2023). The longer organizations delay adapting, the more they risk falling behind in the competition for skilled, knowledge-intensive labor.

To achieve mutual gains in remote work arrangements, organizations should implement skill standardization and clan control to structure work, while aligning these mechanisms with HR practices that address employees' needs and expectations. This involves clearly defining roles and responsibilities, providing continuous training, and supporting employees in collaboration and self-assessment. Additionally, organizations must not only understand employees' needs and expectations, but also clearly communicate their own. For example, employees should be informed about what is expected in return for fully flexible remote work arrangements, such as fostering innovations and a sense of community while fulfilling individual work duties. These expectations should be integrated into organizational norms and values (see Gratton, 2023), which serve as the foundation for skill standardization and clan control.

Since these actions primarily take place within leader-subordinate relationships, organizations must invest additional resources into managerial work and evolving communication technologies, in order to support dyadic interactions. Furthermore, continuous online training opportunities on topics such as self-leadership (e.g., Straus et al., 2023), interpersonal skills (e.g., Maddox-Daines, 2023), digital competencies (e.g., Couto et al, 2024), and remote leadership (e.g., Baumann & Marcum, 2023), are essential. Notably, skill standardization and clan control make organizations less hierarchical, prompting employees to perceive training positively and view it as supportive, thereby helping to ensure that the organization derives maximum benefit from its training practices (Eriksson & Ortega, 2024). Overall,

rather than viewing reduced office space needs as a cost-saving opportunity, organizations should redirect these resources toward fostering interaction and professional development.

Furthermore, updating organization design to rely on shared norms and values—as seen in skill standardization and clan control—will likely help to address challenges such as a lack of trust, knowledge transfer, cultural erosion, and diminished innovation capacity in remote settings. Notably, the impact of office presence on innovation is not as clear-cut as commonly suggested. On one hand, face-to-face interactions (Brucks & Levav, 2022) and serendipitous 'watercooler encounters' (Fayard & Weeks, 2007) are recognized as beneficial for innovation. On the other hand, noisy open-plan offices and unplanned meetings can hinder focus and creativity, reducing the perceived benefits of in-person interactions (Skountridaki et al., 2024). Research on innovation in remote work environments highlights the importance of communication, knowledge sharing, employees' technological capabilities, and empowering leadership (Barrero et al., 2023; Konrad-Maerk, 2023). All of these elements can be fostered through skill standardization and clan control mechanisms, and aligning HR practices accordingly.

A motoring analogy aptly illustrates the importance of aligning organization design with its operating environment and HR practices. Just as car tires are essential for a vehicle's movement and comfort, HR practices are critical for an organization's strategic direction, ensuring smooth work processes and job satisfaction. Winter tires are commonly used to adapt to changing road conditions; similarly, organizations must recognize shifts in their environment such as the rise of remote work arrangements, and adapt their HR practices accordingly.

However, if the organizational structure is not designed for remote work arrangements, implementing HR practices meant for remote settings may be ineffective, much like using winter tires on a convertible. While winter tires provide grip on icy roads, a convertible not *designed* for freezing conditions will likely show compromised performance and driving comfort.

Finally, this study encourages organizations to reconsider the practice of measuring office presence, often justified as a solution to challenges related to innovation, organizational culture, and knowledge transfer. However, it primarily reflects another underlying concern: control, driven by the need to mitigate the lack of trust in remote work environments. If fostering innovation, strengthening culture, and promoting knowledge sharing are true objectives, these overarching goals should guide HR practice selection and ensure mutual consistency within practices (see Delery & Gupta, 2016). Instead of focusing on mandatory office days—an approach that does not even effectively measure these desired outcomes—organizations

should set explicit goals related to innovation, culture, and collaboration, integrating them into performance metrics. This would clarify organizational norms and values while motivating employees to return to the office, as people are often drawn to workplaces for social interaction and a sense of community (see Šmite et al., 2024; Urrila et al., 2025). Supporting this, Šmite and Moe (2022) found that the organization with the most flexible remote work policy was also the most successful in encouraging employees to return to the office. This suggests that flexibility fosters trust and job satisfaction, enhancing employees' voluntary, reciprocal engagement. Overall, careful planning of performance metrics for knowledge-intensive work in remote settings is essential to avoid undesirable outcomes such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and work distortion, which may arise, for example, if the focus is on the number of office days rather than the quality and effectiveness of work.

In sum, choosing the right HR practices and ensuring their consistency enables organizations to address key remote work concerns—trust, innovation, culture, and knowledge transfer—simultaneously.

Leader-subordinate dyads

This research has implications for leader-subordinate relationships. In remote work environments where office interactions are limited, leaders and subordinates must recognize the growing significance of their trust-based relationship that requires ongoing effort from both parties.

Notably, Terpstra-Tong et al. (2020) suggest that subordinates with individualistic values, who prioritize autonomy and independence, form weaker leader relationships than those with collectivist values, who see themselves as part of an interdependent group. Since remote work is more prevalent in individualistic cultures (Ollo-López et al., 2021), leaders and subordinates in these settings must actively work to strengthen their relationships (Terpstra-Tong et al., 2020).

Building strong leader-subordinate relationships also requires open discussions about mutual needs and expectations. One key challenge in addressing the preferences of both parties is balancing structural consistency with individual flexibility – where leaders must navigate the competing expectations of employees and the organization regarding remote work and office presence. Overemphasizing consistency may overlook employees' needs, while too much flexibility can create perceptions of inconsistency or favoritism (Pak et al., 2024). Open discussions in dyadic relationships should also address how often and through which channels to interact, as well as when face-to-face meetings are necessary. Importantly, handling challenges and sensitive issues should not be avoided or postponed simply because of physical distance.

At best, leader-subordinate dyads in remote work settings can achieve psychological closeness, which is a perceived emotional connection despite being physically apart (Marstand et al., 2025). Particularly, achieving this requires leaders to genuinely reassess their leadership approach, focusing on a trust-based leadership style instead of control-based management. What is required from subordinates in this dynamic is discussed next.

Employees

This study highlights two major implications for employees. First, especially for those unaccustomed to remote work, the sudden shift away from the office during the COVID-19 pandemic was akin to being thrown into deep water, requiring employees to develop self-taught skills to stay afloat. Now, post-pandemic, it is time to reflect on what skills could be improved. Importantly, are essential remote work competencies such as technological skills, digital communication and self-management at a level that genuinely supports efficient, collaborative work? Since effective coordination and control in remote work environments rely on skilled employees, professional collaboration, and self-assessment, identifying areas for further development remains crucial.

Beyond skill development, employees should also consider their role in workplace relationships (Urrila et al., 2025). This dissertation is grounded in the reciprocal relationships employees maintain with both their organization and their leader. Ideally, this study serves as an eye-opener, encouraging employees to recognize their role in managing remote work arrangements – a responsibility that comes with a high degree of job autonomy and trust. While organizations thrive on interpersonal dynamics, success in remote work environments requires more than simply 'doing my job'. Remote employees are responsible not only for their tasks, but also for supporting their colleagues and the broader work community. Hence, staying connected and fostering collaboration is an active role that employees must share with leaders (Alasoini et al., 2025). This requires an understanding that workdays cannot revolve solely around personal needs and expectations, but must also accommodate those of others. Ultimately, remote work arrangements are about balancing individual needs with the collective responsibility of maintaining and strengthening the work community. In doing so, employees also enhance their social well-being, which can be threatened by remote work arrangements (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Straus et al., 2023), but is fundamental to achieving mutual gains.

5.5 Limitations and future research recommendations

The specific limitations and suggestions for future research of each study are addressed in their respective papers, while this section outlines the broader limitations and potential avenues for further research identified through the multilevel approach.

First, this study is culturally bound in several ways. The study data was collected from organizations operating in Finland, and the analyses were conducted by Finnish researchers. It is important to note that remote work arrangements (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Ollo-López et al., 2021; Vartiainen, 2024), HR practices (Beer et al., 1984; Papalexandris & Panayotopoulou, 2004) and the theoretical approaches used in this study—organization design (Hofstede, 2011; Worren, 2018), LMX (Dulebohn et al., 2012), psychological contract (Kutaula et al., 2020) and employee HR perceptions (Wang et al., 2020)—are all influenced by cultural and societal context. Therefore, further research is needed on the implementation of HR practices in remote work arrangements across different cultural and societal settings. For instance, this study, conducted in an individualistic societal culture, emphasizes fostering community and interaction as key to achieving mutual gains. In contrast, within a collectivist culture characterized by strong interdependence and hierarchical organizational structures favoring centralized decision-making, supporting individual autonomy may be crucial to achieving mutual gains in remote settings (see Ollo-López et al., 2021). The implications of these cultural differences for HR practice implementation in remote work arrangements warrant further investigation collectively at the organizational, relational, and employee levels.

Second, while this theoretical multilevel study is firmly grounded in existing theories and empirical research, its main limitation lies in the absence of data needed to empirically validate the propositions. Therefore, empirical quantitative studies could develop more explicit hypotheses based on the multilevel framework, and test them to examine the suggested influences on mutual gains.

Third, balancing research design trade-offs to avoid excessive complexity is a common challenge in multilevel studies (Klein et al., 1999; Paruchuri et al., 2018). Similarly, distinguishing between levels of measurement and analysis in this study required careful consideration to ensure that the propositions are presented at the appropriate level. While aggregating findings from multiple levels would have added complexity—such as examining how insights from the employee and relational levels collectively influence the organizational level—it would also have provided a deeper understanding of HR practice implementation in remote work arrangements as

a multilevel phenomenon. This presents a compelling avenue for ambitious future research.

Fourth, this multilevel study encompasses organizational, relational, and employee levels, all situated within an organizational context. Grounded in the soft HRM approach of the Harvard model of HRM (Beer et al., 1984), this study could have also considered societal well-being when exploring mutual gains. Since the effects of remote work arrangements extend beyond individual and organizational outcomes to the societal level (Kulik, 2021; McPhail et al., 2024), future research would benefit from a broader perspective on mutual gains, incorporating aspects such as environmental sustainability and overall societal cohesion.

Finally, while this dissertation advocates for a reconsideration of the nature of work and how organizations operate from both organizational and employee perspectives, the long-term effects of such shifts remain uncertain. Changing established mindsets is a slow and challenging process, with outcomes that may only become evident after years have passed (Gratton, 2023). Since this study provides a snapshot of this ongoing evolution, future research comparing organizations and employees who adhere to traditional work arrangements with those embracing new models could offer valuable insights into the long-term implications of these approaches for mutual gains.

EPILOGUE

I work in regional development in Central Ostrobothnia – a region that, due to its somewhat remote geographic location, is not exactly a hot spot on the world map. However, the area is experiencing strong economic momentum driven by its industries, and workforce availability is a critical development focus, as it is globally. In my work with local businesses, I often saw untapped potential in work-from-anywhere arrangements as a means to attract skilled knowledge workers to the region. As a mother of three, I was also personally a strong advocate for remote work, which brought much-needed flexibility during hectic years and helped me to balance work with family life. Post-pandemic, I would now describe myself as an advocate for hybrid work.

When I first set out on this dissertation, I planned for it to promote remote work arrangements, viewing the topic through the lens of a regional developer and remote worker. However, the pandemic proved far more effective at advancing remote work arrangements than my research ever could. Now, I find myself incorporating the organizational perspective as well, offering a more balanced view on remote work arrangements.

In her award-winning memoir *Educated*, Tara Westover (2018) describes education as a transformative power, capable of moving people beyond their own realities. She emphasizes that education is not merely about accumulating knowledge; it is about fostering empathy – an openness and genuine curiosity toward others and their views. Similarly, these studies, combined with my roles as a remote worker, remote leader, and regional developer, encouraged me to consider multiple perspectives, engage in critical reflection, and let go of my own premises. As a result, I gained a more nuanced understanding of both employees and organizations that are navigating the evolving work landscape. In particular, I now view remote employees in a new light, emphasizing their responsibility in alleviating organizational concerns about adopting remote work arrangements.

I hope this dissertation inspires employees and organizations to move beyond their own viewpoints and engage in empathetic dialogue to bridge divides and create a shared vision for the modern workplace. Especially, in this pivotal moment of working life, I believe that the success of organizations and individual employees will depend on their ability to navigate disagreements to find common ground together. Just as in good relationships, the focus should be on understanding others, even when opinions differ. Ultimately, this is what working life and organizations are about – relationships between people.

In conclusion, completing this dissertation feels like saying goodbye to a close and loyal colleague, whom I have come to call Dr. Thesis in my thoughts. There is a bit of wistfulness in the air. No matter the time or place, Dr. Thesis was always there, ready to engage with my thoughts and collaborate. We have spent countless hours together discussing, debating, and experiencing a range of emotions, from excitement to frustration. Most importantly, we have learned from each other. All this, I think, captures the essence of writing at its best. Though our collaboration ends here, the memories and lessons I carry forward will last a lifetime.

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Näkökulmia organisaatiosuunnitteluun covid-19-pandemian jälkeisellä paikkariippumattoman työn aikakaudella



Tomi J. Kallio & Johanna Jansson

Tiivistelmä

Organisaatiosuunnittelun klassista, pääosin 1970-luvulta peräisin olevaa kirjallisuutta sovelletaan edelleen laajalti sekä johtamiskoulutuksessa että -tutkimuksessa. Aihepiirin kirjallisuus on kuitenkin vanhentunutta, etenkin uusien organisaation hajauttamismuotojen – kuten informaatioteknologian kehittymisen myötä yleistyneen paikkariippumattoman työn – osalta. Covid-19 on vauhdittanut merkittävästi asiantuntijaorganisaatioiden kehitystä, kun organisaatiot ovat ottaneet käyttöön paikkariippumattoman työn käytäntöjä pandemian vuoksi. Tässä tutkimuksessa pyrimme ymmärtämään organisaatiosuunnittelun näkökulmasta, millaisia edellytyksiä paikkariippumaton työ asettaa työnjaolle, koordinaatiolle ja kontrollille. Esitämme kuusi hypoteesia, jotka määrittelevät paikkariippumatonta työtä organisaatiosuunnittelun ja koronakriisin jälkeisen paikkariippumattoman työn aikakauden näkökulmasta. Osallistumme tutkimuksellamme sekä keskusteluun pandemian vaikutuksista organisaatioiden toiminnalle että organisaatiosuunnittelun ajantasaistamiseen digiaikakaudelle.

Avainsanat:

organisaatiosuunnittelu; covid-19; paikkariippumaton työ; etätyö; digitalisaatio

Abstract

The classic literature of organization design, mostly dating back to the 1970s, is still widely applied in both management education and research. Nevertheless, the literature is outdated, especially when it comes to the new and emerging forms of organizational decentralization – most notably work-from-anywhere – enabled by information technology and digitalization. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly boosted the development of knowledge-intensive organizations adopting work-from-anywhere practices. In this study we take the perspective of organizational design as we pursue to understand what kind of structural arrangements the work-from-anywhere practices entail in terms of division of labor, coordination and control. We suggest six hypotheses that define work-from-anywhere from the perspectives of organizational design and the

post-COVID-19 era. While doing this, we pursue to contribute to both the theoretical framing of the implications of the pandemic as well as to update the organization design literature to meet the realms of information era.

Keywords:

organization design; COVID-19; work-from-anywhere; telework; remote work; digitalization

Johdanto

Galbraith (2008, 325) on määritellyt organisaatiosuunnittelun (*organization design*) tutkimussuuntaukseksi, joka yhdistelee yhtäältä sosiologian, organisaatioteorian ja soveltavan psykologian sekä toisaalta liikkeenjohdon konsultoinnin ja ylipäätään kaikkien sellaisten käytännöllisten alojen osaamista, joita voidaan hyödyntää tuotettaessa soveltamiskelpoista tietoa organisaatioiden johdon työn ja päätöksenteon tueksi. Organisaatiosuunnittelu on luonteeltaan eklektistä ja preskriptiivistä; organisaatiosuunnittelu ei tavoittele niinkään empiirisesti testattavaa ja teoreettisesti ristiriidatonta tietoa, kuin käytännöllistä ja hyödyllistä tietoa. Tästä syystä organisaatiosuunnittelun tuottaman tiedon soveltamisaste organisaatioiden käytännön ongelmien ratkomisessa on poikkeuksellisen korkea. (Galbraith 2008.) Esimerkiksi Worren (2018) onkin luonnehtinut organisaatiosuunnittelua organisaatioteorian käytännön versioksi. Kuitenkin siinä missä organisaatiojohtamistutkimuksen korkeimmalle arvostetut lehdet julkaisivat vielä 1970- ja 80-lukujen taitteessa organisaatiosuunnittelun kaltaisia käytännön kanssa keskustelevia ja jopa soveltavia artikkeleita, julkaisevat ne nyt yhä suuremmalla todennäköisyydellä käsikirjoituksia, jotka ovat luonteeltaan teoreettisesti koherentteja ja paremminkin tiukasti rajattuja kuin keskustelevia. Organisaatiosuunnittelun voi nähdä samalla ajautuneen organisaatiotutkimuksen ytimestä kohti periferiaa, mikä on johtanut edelleen siihen, ettei organisaatiosuunnittelun perustaa ole päivitetty vastaamaan 2020-luvun realiteetteja (Kallio 2015; Kallio ym. 2020). Tähän seikkaan on kiinnittänyt huomiota esimerkiksi Kivistö (2019), joka ilmaisee huolensa organisaatiosuunnittelun jäämisestä muiden organisaatioita tarkastelevien tutkimussuuntausten jalkoihin. Hän peräänkuuluttaa organisaatiosuunnittelun ja -rakenteiden päivittämistä digitalisaation aikakaudelle niin tutkimuksellisesti kuin käytännön tasolla.

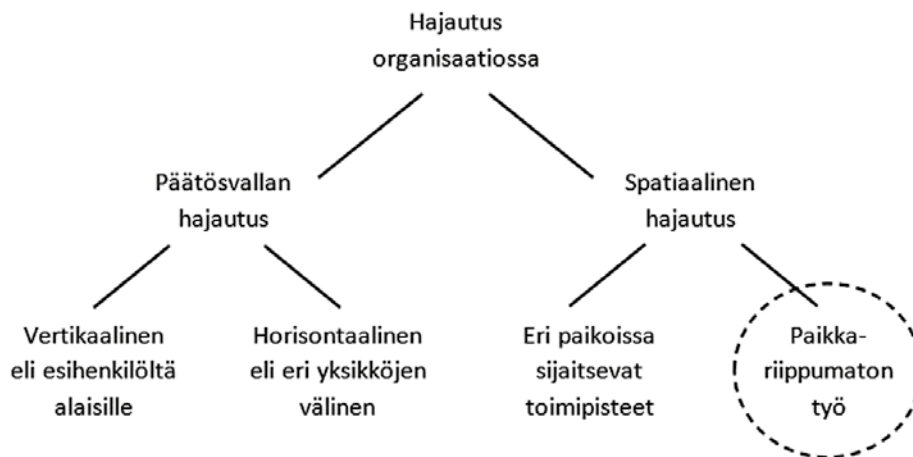
Suomenkielisen tutkimuskirjallisuuden tilannetta kuvaa hyvin se, että jo 1970-luvulla julkaistu Elorannan (1977) klassikko on samalla aihepiirin tuorein kotimaisen tutkijan kirjoittama teos, joka käsittelee erityisesti organisaatiosuunnittelua. Kansainvälisen tutkimuskirjallisuuden osalta tilanne ei ole kuitenkaan aivan yhtä lohduton – esimerkiksi Worren (2018) on väittänyt organisaatiosuunnittelun kokevan parhaillaan renessanssia. 1990-luvulla alkanut organisaatiosuunnittelun ajautuminen pois organisaatio- ja johtamistutkimuksen ytimestä on kuitenkin ongelmallista, sillä maailma organisaatioiden ympärillä muuttuu, ja sekä yksityis- että julkisorganisaatioiden tehokas päätöksenteko edellyttää jatkuvasti uutta sovellettavaa tietoa tuekseen. Kun covid-19-pandemian seurauksena satojen miljoonien työntekijöiden ympäri maailmaa oli yllättäen jättäytyttävä pois työpaikoiltaan ja ryhdyttävä lyhyellä varoitusajalla tekemään työtä etäältä käsin, organisaatio- ja johtamistutkimus oli melko aseeton vastaamaan sellaisiin kysymyksiin kuin mitä ammattiryhmiä etäältä tehtävä työ koskettaa, mitä etäältä tehtävä työ käytännössä edellyttää organisaatioiden ja niiden tehokkaan johtamisen näkökulmasta sekä miten etäältä tehtävä työ vaikuttaa organisaatioiden toimintaan. Kuitenkin juuri tällaisia kysymyksiä niin työelämän edustajat kuin media ovat toistuvasti esittäneet organisaatio- ja johtamistutkijoille koronakriisin aikana (vrt. Tourish 2020).

Kuten todettua, organisaatiosuunnittelu on kautta historiansa lainannut eri alojen osaamista ja välineistöä omaan käyttöönsä (Galbraith 2008). Koronakriisin myötä on ilmeistä, että organi-

saatiosuunnittelijoiden on mentävä erityisesti etätöiden tutkijoiden kentälle. Tässä artikkelissa pyritäänkin ajantasaistamaan organisaatiosuunnittelua digiaikakaudelle nimenomaan Kivistön (2019) peräänkuuluttamalla tavalla eli soveltamalla organisaatiosuunnittelun klassikkokirjallisuutta tutkimuksen perustana. Artikkelin tutkimustehtävänä on pohtia, miten paikkariippumattoman työn yleistyminen vaikuttaa organisaatioiden toiminnan hajauttamiseen ja miten organisaatioiden toimintaa on tästä näkökulmasta jatkossa mahdollista koordinoita tehokkaasti. Tätä tutkimustehtävää lähestytään artikkelissa yhdistämällä organisatoriseen hajautukseen liittyvä klassinen teoreettinen käsitteistö etätöiden tutkimukseen ja käsitteistöön, unohtamatta organisaatiosuunnittelun tuorempaakaan kirjallisuutta.

Hajautus yksinkertaisessa ja monimutkaisessa työssä

Kysymys keskitetystä (*centralized*) ja hajautetusta (*decentralized*) organisaatorakenteesta on ollut läpi organisaatioteorian historian sen keskeisimpiä teemoja. Kuten Mintzberg (1979) huomautti jo yli 40 vuotta sitten, keskityksen ja hajautuksen käsitteitä on organisaatioteoreettisessa kirjallisuudessa käytetty kuitenkin niin monessa eri merkityksessä, että niiden merkityksellisyys on vaarassa hävitä. Puhuttaessa hajauttamisesta organisaatiossa on keskeistä täsmentää, viitataaneko hajautuksella sen klassiseen ulottuvuuteen eli päätöksentekovallan hajauttamiseen (horisontaalinen ja vertikaalinen), vai spatiaaliseen hajauttamiseen (Hatch 1997; Mintzberg 1979). Kuviossa 1 on hahmoteltu mainittuja organisatorisen hajautuksen muotoja.

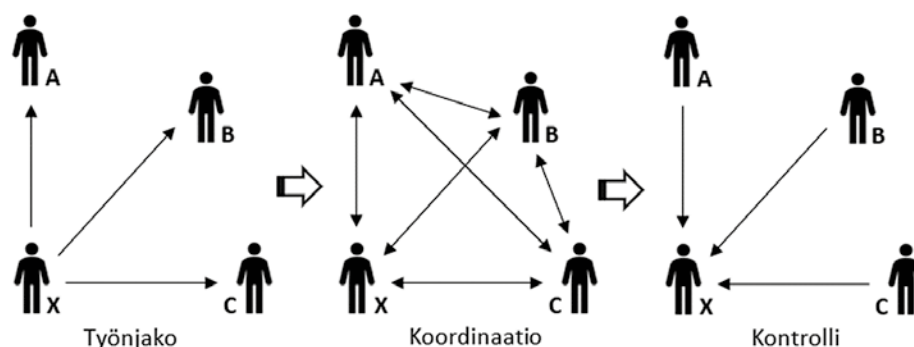


Kuvio 1. Hajautuksen muodot ja tutkimuksen fokus

Tässä tutkimuksessa fokusoidutaan organisatorisen hajautuksen muodoista erityisesti paikkariippumattomaan työhön. Artikkelissa käsitellään myös muita organisatorisen hajautuksen muotoja, koska paikkariippumaton työ edellyttää toimiakseen myös päätösvallan hajauttamista. Klassisessa organisaatioteoreettisessa kirjallisuudessa on Mintzbergin (1979) mukaan tarkasteltu ennen kaikkea kolmea kuviossa 1 esitettyä hajautuksen muotoa: i) vallan delegaatiota eli päätösvallan hajautusta esihenkilöltä alaiselle, ii) horisontaalista hajautusta eli päätöksentekovallan siirtymistä formaalissa esihenkilöasemassa olevan linjaorganisaation toimijoilta esikuntaelinten

suunnittelijoiden käsiin sekä iii) organisaatioiden toimintojen alueellista hajauttamista eri toimipisteisiin. Klassisessa organisaatioteoriassa sen paremmin kuin organisaatiosuunnittelussakaan ei ole käsitelty hajautusta paikkariippumattoman työn näkökulmasta. Tämä on toki ymmärrettävää jo siitä yksinkertaisesta syystä, että paikkariippumattoman työn edellyttämää informaatioteknologiaa (Ojala 2009) ei organisaatiosuunnittelun klassisella kaudella oikeastaan ollut edes olemassa. Organisaatioteoreetikoksi luonnehdittava taloustieteen nobelisti Simon (1973) kuitenkin pohti jo tätä tulevaisuuden skenaariota.

Erityisesti henkilöstömäärältään suurissa organisaatioissa ilmenee tapauksia, joissa kansanomaaisesti ilmaistuna organisaation oikea käsi ei tiedä, mitä sen vasen käsi tekee (vrt. Kivistö 2019). Tällaiset puutteelliseen organisaatiosuunnitteluun liittyvät ongelmat eivät ole luonteeltaan ennustamattomia ja yllättäviä – päinvastoin, huolellisella suunnittelulla paremminkin ennustettavia, ennakoitavia ja estettäviä. Kuitenkin myös vaativassa asiantuntijatyössä voidaan tehdä jälkikäteen tarkasteltuna yksinkertaiselta tuntuvia virheitä, sillä monimutkaisia asiantuntijatehtäviä koskettavat samat lainalaisuudet työnjakoon, koordinaatioon ja kontrolliin liittyen kuin yksinkertaisia, esimerkiksi tehdasorganisaatioissa tehtäviä työtehtäviä. Kuviossa 2 on havainnollistettu näitä kolmea perustekijää.

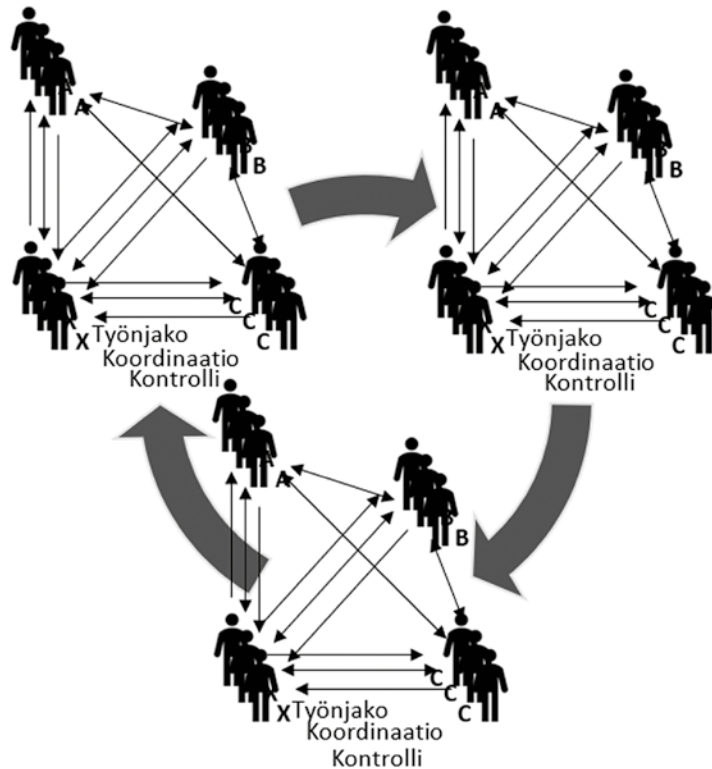


Kuvio 2. Työnjako, koordinaatio ja kontrolli yksinkertaisessa työssä

Kuviossa 2 esitetystä yksinkertaistetusta kuvauksesta esihenkilö X jakaa ensin työtehtävät alaisilleen A, B ja C, minkä jälkeen hän harjoittaa jatkuvaa koordinaatiota suorittaessaan työtehtäviä yhdessä alaisensa kanssa. Lopuksi esihenkilö varmistaa, että alaiset raportoivat hänelle työtulokset totuudenmukaisesti (kontrolli)¹. Tämä prosessikuvaus työnjaosta, koordinaatiosta ja kontrollista kuvaa varhaisia johtamismalleja, joissa ajateltiin olevan mahdollista jakaa esihenkilötyö toisiaan seuraaviin, loogisiin vaiheisiin mutta joiden on sittemmin todettu vastaavan huonosti todellisuutta (Mintzberg 1973). Käytännössä voidaankin ajatella, että työnjako, koordinaatio ja kontrolli ovat ennemminkin toisiinsa limittyviä kuin toisiaan seuraavia vaiheita (Kallio 2015). Tämä on loogista myös siksi, että työnjakoa ja kontrollia voidaan oikeastaan pitää koordinaation osatekijöinä. Toisin sanoen: työnjako ja kontrolli ovat osa organisaation tehokkaan toiminnan edellyttämää jatkuvaa koordinaatioprosessia, jossa – tavalla tai toisella – on huolehdittava siitä, että kaikki työtehtävät tulevat tehdyiksi toivotun lopputuloksen kannalta tehokkaalla tavalla.

Työnjako ja kontrolli ovat kuitenkin hyödyllisiä käsitteitä niin käytännön organisaatiosuunnittelun kuin ilmiön käsitteellistämisen näkökulmasta, sillä niiden avulla tätä monimutkaista koordinaationa tunnettua ilmiötä voidaan pilkkoa helpommin ymmärrettäviin ja käsiteltäviin osiin. Kyse on siis paremminkin käsitteellistämisestä kuin siitä, että kontrolli ja työnjako olisivat koordinaatiosta erillisiä ilmiöitä. Erityisesti vaativassa asiantuntijatyössä nämä kolme tekijää tapahtuvat

kin pääosin samanaikaisesti, ja niitä on usein myös osin vaikea erottaa toisistaan (Kallio 2015). Tällaista työtä on pyritty havainnollistamaan kuviossa 3.



Kuvio 3. Työnjako, koordinaatio ja kontrolli monimutkaisessa työssä

Tällaisten monimutkaisten, useita rinnakkaisia ja toisiinsa sitoutuneita ja limittyneitä työtehtäviä sisältävien ammattien kohdalla työnjaon, koordinaation ja kontrollin yhdistelmien permutaatio nousee niin suureksi, ettei niitä kerta kaikkiaan ole mahdollista hallita tehokkaasti muuten kuin *hajauttamalla* tehtäviin liittyvää päätöksentekovaltaa merkittävässä määrin ennen kaikkea työtekijöille itselleen (vertikaalinen hajautus), mutta edelleen myös linjaorganisaation ulkopuolella työskenteleville henkilöille, kuten esikuntaelinten suunnittelijoille (horisontaalinen hajautus). (Mintzberg 1979; Ouchi 1979; Hatch 1997; Kallio 2015.)

Kuten todettua, spatiaalinen hajauttaminen edellyttää toimiakseen ainakin jossakin määrin myös päätöksentekovalan hajauttamista, sillä keskitetyn työn edellyttämä suora ohjaus² ei ole mahdollista tehokkaasti, mikäli työntekijät ja esihenkilö työskentelevät valtaosan ajasta näkemättä toisiaan. Päätösvallan hajauttamisen seurauksena erityisesti asiantuntijaorganisaatioissa työntekijät itse ovat pitkälti vastuussa paitsi työnjaosta ja koordinaatiosta (Mintzberg 1979; Simon 1973; Kallio 2015), myös oman työnsä kontrollista (Ouchi 1979; Brivot 2011; Kallio 2015). Tämän sinällään välttämättömän hajauttamisen seurauksena syntyy kuitenkin erilaisia potentiaalisia riskejä, kuten esimerkiksi se, ettei kukaan tee organisaatioissa tiettyä tehtävää, useampi kuin yksi henkilö tekee tiettyä työtehtävää toisistaan tietämättä tai että osatehtävät tehdään väärässä järjestyksessä optimaalisen lopputuloksen kannalta.

Kun organisaatiosuunnittelun näkökulmasta yllättävä tapahtuma, jollaista ei ole osattu ottaa suunnitteluvaiheessa huomioon, yhdistetään hajautettuun organisaatorakenteeseen, riskien todennäköisyys kasvaa entisestään. Käypä tosielämän esimerkki hajautetun organisaation haasteista liittyy Yhdysvaltain ilmailu- ja avaruushallinto NASAan. Mars Climate Orbiter -luotain tuhoutui, kun sen ohjaaminen Marsin kiertoradalle epäonnistui vuonna 1998. NASA:n asiantuntijat työskentelivät hajautetussa organisaatiossa, jossa Kaliforniassa ja Coloradossa sijaitsevat yksiköt sovelsivat eri mittajärjestelmiä (toinen metrijärjestelmää ja toinen tuumajärjestelmää). Voidaan kysyä, olisiko Mars-luotaimen ohjauksessa käytettyjen mittayksiköiden erot havaittu ajoissa, mikäli NASA:n toimintaa ei olisi spatiaalisesti hajautettu eri osavaltioihin.

On ilmeistä, että riskien todennäköisyys kasvaa samalla, kun siirrytään yksinkertaisista monimutkaisiin työtehtäviin. Asiantuntijaorganisaatioissa, joita useimmat paikkariippumattomasta työstä soveltavista organisaatioista ovat (vrt. Allen ym. 2015; Bailey & Kurland 2002), kyse on luonnollisesti lähes poikkeuksetta monimutkaisesta työstä. Covid-19-pandemia sysäsi asiantuntijaorganisaatiot soveltamaan hajautettua rakennetta yhä aktiivisemmin, kun Maailman terveysjärjestö WHO (2020) suositteli maaliskuussa 2020 etätöiden käyttöönottoa tartuntojen vähentämiseksi. Täten onkin perusteltua tarkastella työn organisointia organisaatiosuunnittelun näkökulmasta pandemian muuttamassa maailmassa.

Hajautus paikkariippumattoman työn näkökulmasta

Paikkariippumattomaan työhön liittyvien käsitteiden kirjo on laaja: paikkariippumattomuuteen viitataan tutkimuskirjallisuudessa esimerkiksi termeillä etätö (telework, telecommuting, remote work), hajautettu työ (distributed work) ja virtuaalinen työ (virtual work). Paikkariippumattomuutta tarjoaa myös joustava työ (flexible work arrangements).³ Hajautetun ja virtuaalisen työn käsitteiden määrittelyssä ja näiden tutkimuksessa korostuu tiimien työskentely maantieteellisesti toisistaan erillään olevissa paikoissa, kun taas etätöiden määrittelyssä huomio kiinnittyy työntekijän työskentelyyn toimistotilojen ulkopuolella, tyypillisimmin kotona (Raghuram ym. 2019). Etätö voi olla osa-aikaista, jolloin työskentely tapahtuu osittain toimistolla. Joustava työ kattaa paikkariippumattoman etätöiden lisäksi työaikaan liittyvät järjestelyt, kuten liukuvan tai lyhennetyn työajan. (Allen ym. 2015).

Moniselitteinen ja osin päällekkäinen käsitteistö hankaloittaa ilmiön tutkimusta (Allen ym. 2015; Ojala 2009). Yhteistä käsitteille on kuitenkin se, että informaatioteknologian kehittyminen on mahdollistanut ajasta ja paikasta riippumattoman työntekijöiden välisen vuorovaikutuksen (Raghuram ym. 2019; Wang ym. 2021). Covid-19-pandemian siivittämänä useat aiemmin etätöitä soveltamattomat organisaatiot ja työntekijät ovat ottaneet etätöiden käyttöön (Wang ym. 2021), mikä on lisännyt paikkariippumattomuutta ja täten myös työn hajautusta. Choudhury ja kumppanit (2020) argumentoivatkin alkavasta paikkariippumattoman työn (work-from-anywhere) aikakaudesta, jossa työpaikka ei enää määrittele työntekijöiden asumispaikkaa.

Asiantuntija-arvioiden perusteella vaikuttaa siltä, että alun perin terveysturvallisuuden suojelemiseksi käyttöönotettu etätö tulee jatkumaan organisaatioissa myös covid-19-pandemian jälkeen (Contreras ym. 2020; Eurofound 2020). Paikkariippumattomuuden yleistymistä kuvaa hyvin myös se, että maailman laajin työelämäalähtöinen verkkoyhteisöpalvelu LinkedIn, jolla oli yhteensä 740 miljoonaa käyttäjää vuonna 2021, on uudistanut ominaisuuksiaan: työnhakija voi ilmaista #OpenToWork-tilassaan etsivänsä paikkariippumattomaa työtä, hybridityötä tai paikkasidonnaista työtä. Verkkoyhteisöpalvelun omaksuma paradigmanmuutos on merkittävä: pelkästään työnantajat eivät enää viesti tarjolla olevista työmuodoista, vaan nyt myös työntekijät viestivät, millaisia työmuotoja he suosivat.

Paikkariippumattoman työ tarjoaa organisaatioille monia etuja, kuten tilakustannuksiin liittyviä säästöjä (Choudhury ym. 2020) sekä veto- ja pitovoimaa kasvavassa globaalissa kilpailussa osaavasta työvoimasta (Bailey & Kurland 2002; Gajendran & Harrison 2007). Covid-19-pandemian

demia korosti lisäksi paikkariippumattomuuden merkitystä organisatoriselle resilienssille, kun liiketoiminnan jatkuvuus pystyttiin turvaamaan etätöiden avulla poikkeusolosuhteissa (vrt. Allen ym. 2015; Martin & MacDonnell 2012). Paikkariippumattomuus vaikuttaa kasvattavan myös asiantuntijatyön tuottavuutta (Choudhury ym. 2020; Martin & MacDonnell 2012) sekä parantavan työmotivaatiota ja työtyytyväisyyttä (ks. Kretschmer & Khashabi 2020; Choudhury ym. 2020).

Toisaalta paikkariippumattomaan työhön liittyy organisaation näkökulmasta myös ongelmia ja riskejä. Keskeisiin ongelmiin lukeutuu työntekijöiden valvonnan haaste, josta juontuvia organisaatiojohdon ja esihenkilöiden kielteisiä asenteita on pidetty esteenä paikkariippumattomuuden yleistymiselle. Lisäksi työn spatiaalinen hajautuminen muuttaa työyhteisön vuorovaikutusta kasvokkaisten kohtaamisten vähentyessä ja kommunikoinnin muuttuessa teknologiavälitteiseksi. (Bailey & Kurland 2002; Gajendran & Harrison 2007; Kniffin ym. 2021.) Kasvokkaisten kohtaamisten väheneminen ja informaatioteknologioiden käyttö kommunikaatiossa voivat heikentää tiedonjakoa (Maruyama & Tietze 2012; Taskin & Bridoux 2010) ja lisätä työtehtäviin liittyviä epäselvyyksiä (Sardeshmukh ym. 2012). Lisäksi työn hajautuminen vähentää käytäväkeskusteluissa tapahtuvaa epämuodollista oppimista ja henkilöstön verkostoitumista, mikä on olennaista henkilöstön kehittymisen (Cooper & Kurland 2002) ja täten myös organisaation osaamispääoman näkökulmasta. Aiemmat tutkimukset osoittavat, että monien innovaatioiden synty voidaan jäljittää spontaanisti syntyneihin keskusteluihin esimerkiksi kopiokoneiden tai kahviautomaattien ääressä (Fayard & Weeks 2007; Kallio ym. 2015). Kun henkilöt työskentelevät paikkariippumattomasti, tällaisten organisaation innovaatiokykyä ylläpitävien yhteentörmäysten mahdollisuus kutistuu.

Kuten yllä todettiin, monimutkaiseen työhön (ks. kuvio 3) liittyvät työn organisoinnin riskit kasvavat, kun työhön yhdistetään paikkariippumattomuus. Toisin sanoen, kun monimutkaista työtä – jossa toisiinsa limittyneet työnjako, koordinaatio ja kontrolli aiheuttavat jo itsessään suuria haasteita – yhdistetään se, etteivät työntekijät enää välttämättä kasvokkain kohtaa sen paremmin toisiaan kuin esihenkilöään, työn organisointi on entistä haasteellisempaa. Seuraavissa luvuissa tarkastellaan paikkariippumattoman työn organisointiin liittyviä tekijöitä dysfunktionaalisten riskien pienentämiseksi sekä esitetään hypoteeseja paikkariippumattoman työn omaksumiseen ja vakiintumiseen liittyen.

Paikkariippumattoman työn organisointi

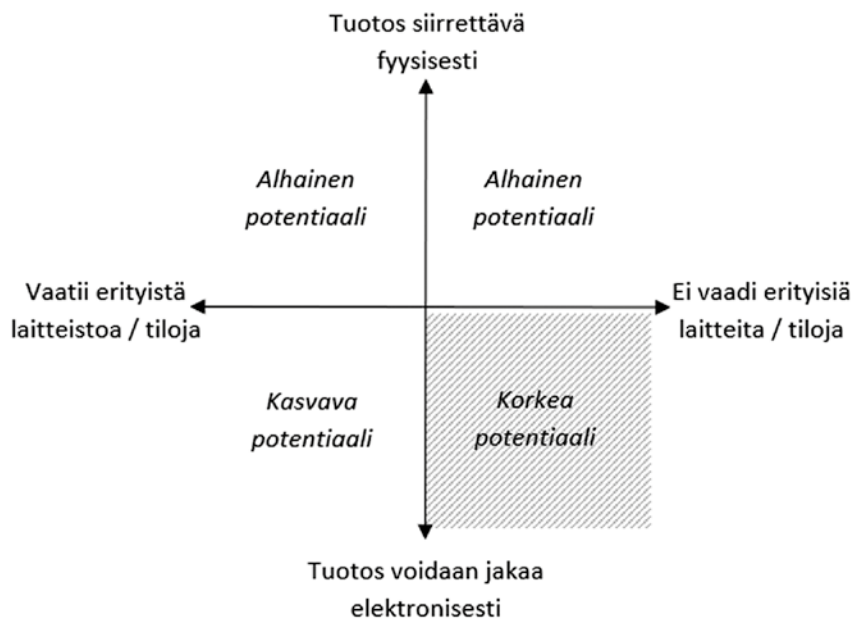
Paikkariippumattoman työn soveltamiskenttä organisaatiosuunnittelun näkökulmasta

Useimmissa asiantuntijaorganisaatioissa, kuten sairaaloissa ja yliopistoissa, vaativaa asiantuntijatyötä ei voitaisi harjoittaa tehokkaasti ilman päätöksentekovallan hajauttamista (Mintzberg 1979; Hatch 1997; Kallio 2015). Toisaalta myös spatiaalinen hajauttaminen on tietyille organisaatioille – esimerkiksi puolustusvoimille, poliisille, rajavartiostolle ja tullille – välttämätöntä niiden tehokkaan toiminnan mahdollistamiseksi. Täten onkin ymmärrettävää, että edellä kuviossa 1 esitetyt hajautuksen muut kuin paikkariippumattomuuteen liittyvät muodot ovat saaneet osakseen laajaa tieteellistä mielenkiintoa jo klassisen organisaatiosuunnittelun kulta-aikana 1970- ja 80-luvuilla.

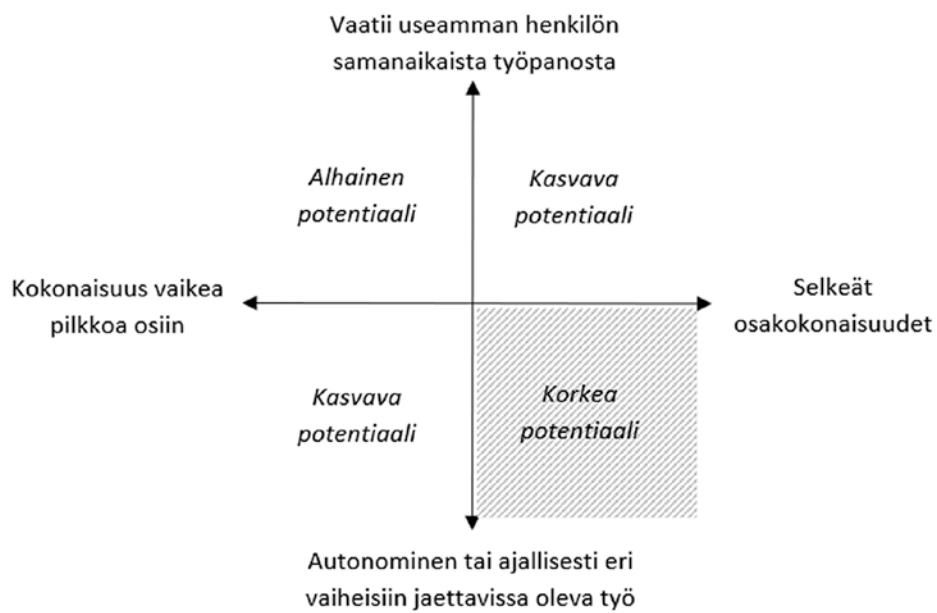
On myös ilmeistä, ettei paikkariippumatonta työtä voida soveltaa sellaisissa työtehtävissä, jotka vaativat työntekijän fyysistä läsnäoloa, kuten esimerkiksi siistijän ja yökerhon portieerin tapauksessa. Kun tiettyyn paikkaan sidotut ja fyysistä työpanosta edellyttävät työtehtävät rajataan tarkastelun ulkopuolelle, jäljelle jäävät työtehtävät, joissa on ainakin periaatteessa mahdollisuus soveltaa paikkariippumattomuutta. Kuitenkin myös nämä työtehtävät muodostavat laajan kentän, jonka sisällä potentiaali paikkariippumattomuuden hyödyntämiseen vaihtelee. Kuvioissa 4A ja 4B on haarukoitu tätä potentiaalia työssä sovellettavan teknologian ja työtehtäviin kytkeytyvän työnjaon näkökulmista.

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Kuvio 4A. Potentiaali paikkariippumattomuuteen työssä vaadittavan teknologian näkökulmasta



Kuvio 4B. Potentiaali paikkariippumattomuuteen työnjaon näkökulmasta

On loogista olettaa, että paikkariippumatonta työtä sovelletaan erityisesti sellaisissa työtehtävissä, joissa työ osuu luonteeltaan samanaikaisesti sekä kuvion 4A että 4B rasteroiduille, korkean potentiaalin kentille. Kuten aiemmin todettiin, informaatioteknologian kehitys on mahdollistanut paikkariippumattoman työn yleistymisen. Lisäksi tutkimuskirjallisuudessa (paikkariippumatonta) etätöitä leimaavat työntekijän autonomia ja asiantuntijuus sekä työn tietointensiivisyys (Allen ym. 2015; Bailey & Kurland 2002; Gajendran & Harrison 2007). Ennen pandemiaa etätö olikin yleistä muun muassa informaatio-, viestintä- ja rahoitusaloilla (Leskinen 2021), joissa työ kulkee mukana kannettavalla tietokoneella ja työn tulokset ovat siirrettävissä elektronisesti. Etätöön tutkimuksessa työtehtävien keskinäisen riippuvuuden on havaittu heikentävän etätötyytyväisyyttä (Golden & Veiga 2005), tuottavuutta (Turetken ym. 2011) ja esihenkilön halua sallia etätöskentely tiimissään (Lembrechts ym. 2018). Nämä löydökset tukevat kuviossa 4B esitettyä: kun työtehtävää on vaikea pilkkoa osiin tai tehtävä vaatii useamman henkilön samanaikaista työpanosta, työtehtävän potentiaali paikkariippumattomuuteen on alhainen.

Myös asiantuntijatyön piirissä on edelleen paljon sellaisia tehtäviä, jotka ovat tiettyyn paikkaan sidottuja. Lisäksi saman ammattikunnan, esimerkiksi lääkärikunnan, sisällä on selkeää hajontaa sen suhteen, missä määrin paikkariippumattomuutta on mahdollista soveltaa: radiologilla ja psykiatrilla on työnsä puolesta jo nykyisellään selkeästi paremmat edellytykset työskennellä paikkariippumattomasti kuin kirurgilla ja patologilla.

Tietoteknisten sovellusten jatkuvan kehityksen ansiosta yhä useammin myös sellaisia työtehtäviä, jotka aiemmin vaativat erityislaitteita tai -tiloja (ks. kuvio 4A kenttä kasvava potentiaali) ja/tai useamman kuin yhden henkilön samanaikaisen työpanoksen, voidaan tehdä paikkariippumattomasti (ks. kuvio 4B kentät kasvava potentiaali). Koronakriisi on luonnollisesti entisestään kiihdyttänyt tätä suuntausta niin (informaatio)teknologian kehityksen kuin kyseisen teknologian omaksumisen osalta. Käypä esimerkki on yliopistojen opetustyö, jota koronakriisin seurauksena toteutetaan pääosin paikkariippumattomasti. Informaatioteknologisen kehityksen myötä paikkariippumattoman työn potentiaalinen soveltamisalue onkin jatkuvasti laajenemassa, ja yhä uusia työtehtäviä on mahdollista muuttaa luonteeltaan paikkariippumattomiksi – mikäli tähän on riittävä tahtotila (vrt. Silva-C ym. 2019). Kuten yllä todettiin, esteenä paikkariippumattoman työn yleistymiselle ovatkin juuri olleet luottamuksen puutteesta kumpuavat negatiiviset asenteet tätä työmuotoa kohtaan (Kaplan ym. 2018; Kniffin ym. 2021). Koronakriisi on kuitenkin pakottanut organisaatioita paikkariippumattomaan hajautukseen (vrt. Eurofound 2020; Kniffin ym. 2021), vaikka niiden koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismit eivät tätä erityisesti tukisikaan (ks. Foss 2020; Muzio & Doh 2021). Edellä esitetyn pohjalta voidaan johtaa seuraava hypoteesi liittyen paikkariippumattoman työn organisointiin:

H1: Tehokkaiden ja tarkoituksensa hyvin soveltuvien kontrolli- ja koordinaatiomekanismien tunnistaminen edesauttaa erityisesti organisaation johdon valmiutta paikkariippumattoman työn hyödyntämiseen.

Klassisten koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismien soveltuvuus suhteessa paikkariippumattomaan työhön

Muzio ja Doh (2021) ovat esittäneet varsin loogiselta vaikuttavan näkemyksen, jonka mukaan organisaatioiden koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismit tulevat herättämään koronakriisin myötä paljon uutta kiinnostusta ja keskustelua – mutta myös huolta. Organisaatiosuunnittelun piirissä on tunnetusti esitetty varsin laaja joukko erilaisia typologioita ja luokitteluja liittyen koordinaatioon ja kontrolliin (ks. esim. Brivot 2011; Worren 2018). Tässä suhteessa koordinaatiomekanismit kuitenkin eroavat kontrollimekanismeista siinä, että ensin mainittujen osalta Mintzbergin (1979) esittämä viiden mekanismin typologia on paitsi kattavin, myös selkeästi laajimmin sovel-

lettu malli aihepiirin kirjallisuudessa. Kontrollimekanismien osalta mikään yksittäinen typologia ei ole saavuttanut vastaa asemaa (vrt. Brivot 2011), joskin Ouchin (1979) esittämä kolmen kontrollimekanismin jaottelu lienee lähinnä tätä. Hyödyllisyydestään huolimatta Ouchin (1979) typologia on kuitenkin ilmiökentän tarkastelun kannalta kokonaisuutena karkeistetumpi eritoten suhteessa Mintzbergin (1979) typologiaan koordinaatiomekanismeista. Ouchin (1979) typologiaa onkin siksi tässä tutkimuksessa jaoteltu hienojakoisemmaksi liittämällä siihen kaksi muuta kontrollimekanismia: työn valvonta (Ouchi & Maguire 1975) ja sosiaalinen kontrolli (Brivot 2011).⁴ Edelleen Ouchin (1979) määrittelemään markkinakontrolliin on lisätty käsitteenä näkyväksi myös suoritusmittaus, joka ei 1970 ja -80-luvuilla ollut samassa määrin keskeinen kontrollimekanismi kuin nykyään, vaikka myös Ouchi (1979) itse sen sinällään tunnisti. Tältä pohjalta taulukkoon 1 on koottu viisi organisaation keskeistä koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismia, joita on kuvattu tarkemmin liitteessä 1.

Taulukko 1. Koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismit ja niiden periaatteellinen soveltuvuus paikkariippumattoman työn organisoinnin näkökulmasta

Koordinaatiomekanismit ja niiden soveltuvuus paikkariippumattomaan työhön		Kontrollimekanismit ja niiden soveltuvuus paikkariippumattomaan työhön	
<i>Tuotosten standardointi</i>	Erittäin hyvä	Erittäin hyvä	<i>Markkinakontrolli / suoritusmittaus</i>
<i>Taitojen standardointi</i>	Hyvä	Hyvä	<i>Klaanikontrolli</i>
<i>Keskinäinen sopeutuminen</i>	Keskinkertainen	Keskinkertainen	<i>Sosiaalinen kontrolli</i>
<i>Työprosessien standardointi</i>	Erittäin huono	Keskinkertainen	<i>Byrokraattinen kontrolli</i>
<i>Suora ohjaus</i>	Huono	Eettisesti kestävä	<i>Työn valvonta</i>

Kuten liitteen 1 tarkastelusta käy ilmi, kontrolli- ja koordinaatiomekanismien välillä on runsaasti yhtymäpintoja erityisesti siinä suhteessa, kuin ne on taulukon 1 rinnakkaiskuvauksessa esitetty. Ei olekaan yllättävää, että eräät koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismit ovat myös alan kirjallisuudessa ajoittain menneet käsitteellisesti sekaisin ja niitä on käytetty myös toistensa synonyymeinä (Kallio 2015). Tämä on toisaalta loogista, sillä kontrolli- ja koordinaatiomekanismeilla on taipumuksena esiintyä käytännön työelämässä toisiinsa limittyneinä. Kaikki koordinaatiomekanismit eivät myöskään muodosta mielekkäitä yhdistelmiä kaikkien kontrollimekanismien kanssa, minkä vuoksi vain tietyt yhdistelmät ovat yleisesti käytössä. Lisäksi organisaatiot, jotka soveltaisivat vain yhtä ainoaa kontrolli- ja koordinaatiomekanismia, ovat poikkeuksia (Brivot 2011; Ouchi 1979). Onkin nähtävissä, että esimerkiksi byrokraattista kontrollia sovelletaan käytännössä useimmissa asiantuntijaorganisaatioissa, vaikka se ei olisikaan niiden primaarinen kontrollimuoto.

Taulukossa 1 on korostettu tummennuksella ne koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismit, jotka tämän tutkimuksen kirjoittajien teoreettisen tulkinnan mukaan toimivat hyvin paikkariippumattoman työn organisoinnin näkökulmasta, kun taas vailla korostusta ovat ne mekanismit, joiden toimivuuden kirjoittajat ovat tulkinneet huonoksi, keskinkertaiseksi tai kestävämmäksi. Asiantuntijatyön – jollaista valtaosa kaikesta paikkariippumattomasta työstä on – keskeisiksi koordinaatiomuodoiksi

on alan kirjallisuudessa perinteisesti mielletty taitojen standardointi ja keskinäinen sopeutuminen yleensä edelleen niin, että jälkimmäistä käytetään tehtävästä riippuen täydentämään ensimmäistä (Mintzberg 1979; Kallio 2015). Asiantuntijatyön kannalta toimivimpina kontrollimekanismeina on puolestaan pidetty eritoten klaanikontrollia (Ouchi 1979) ja sosiaalista kontrollia (Brivot 2011). Tästä huolimatta ainakin periaatteessa koordinaatiomekanismien osalta tuotosten standardoinnin ja kontrollimekanismien osalta markkinakontrollin/suoritusmittauksen voidaan nähdä toimivan paikkariippumattoman työn tapauksessa kaikkein parhaiten, sillä ne eivät edellytä toimiakseen jatkuvaa vuorovaikutusta organisaation muiden toimijoiden kanssa (vrt. Kallio & Kallio 2023). Etätyön tutkimuskirjallisuudessa juuri tuloksiin keskittyvä suorituksen johtaminen onkin todettu avainasiaksi etätyön menestykselle soveltamiselle organisaatioissa (Kim ym. 2021; Kowalski & Swanson 2005). Muzio ja Doh (2021) ovatkin esittäneet, että siirryttäessä yhä laajemmin paikkariippumattomaan työhön myös koordinaation ja kontrollimekanismien suhteen tullaan näkemään siirtymä työntekijöiden käyttäytymisen koordinoinnista ja kontrollista työn tuotosten koordinointiin ja kontrolliin.

Siinä missä suoraa ohjausta ja työprosessien standardointia on ilmiselvistä syistä erittäin vaikea soveltaa tehokkaasti paikkariippumattoman työn organisointiin, keskinäinen sopeutuminen toimii tässä suhteessa korkeintaan keskinkertaisesti. Toimiakseen hyvin kyseinen koordinaatiomekanismi edellyttää kykyä toimijoiden välittömään ja usein epämuodolliseen vuorovaikutukseen, eikä informaatioteknologia ainakaan toistaiseksi ole kehittynyt tällä saralla riittävästi. Sama pätee myös sosiaaliseen kontrolliin mekanismina. Kontrollimekanismeista työn valvonta taas toimisi informaatioteknologian ansiosta teknisesti erittäin hyvin paikkariippumattoman työn kontrollointiin (ks. Kretschmer & Khashabi 2020). Tällainen benthamilainen panoptisismi ja orwellilainen ”isoveli valvoo” -kontrolli olisi hyvinkin helppo toteuttaa nykyaikaisen informaatioteknologian keinoin (Muzio & Doh 2021). Vaikka esimerkiksi Kretschmer ja Khashabi (2020) näkevät informaatioteknologiaan perustuvassa työn valvonnassa myös positiivisia ulottuvuuksia, tällaiset sovellukset ovat paitsi eettisesti kyseenalaisia, myös hankalasti yhteensovittavissa EU:n tietosuojalainsäädännön kanssa (GDPR) kanssa (Bhave ym. 2020).

Yllä esitetyn pohjalta voidaan johtaa seuraavat hypoteesit liittyen paikkariippumattoman työn organisointiin:

H2a: Primaareina koordinaatiomekanismeina paikkariippumattoman työn organisointiin soveltuvat erityisesti tuotosten standardointi ja taitojen standardointi.

H2b: Primaareina kontrollimekanismeina paikkariippumattoman työn organisointiin soveltuvat erityisesti markkinakontrolli/suoritusmittaus ja klaanikontrolli.

Digitalisaatio ja paikkariippumattoman työn suunnittelu

Edellä taulukossa 1 käsiteltiin organisaatiosuunnittelun klassisella kulta-ajalla identifioituja kontrolli- ja koordinaatiomekanismeja. Nämä mekanismit kuvaavat ideaalityyppeinä varsin kattavasti sitä keinovalikoimaa, jota organisaatiot edelleen 2020-luvulla soveltavat toiminnassaan, eikä varsinaisia uusia mekanismeja ole kehitetty. (Kallio 2015; Kallio ym. 2020; Brivot 2011.) Näiden klassisten kontrolli- ja koordinaatiomekanismien soveltamismahdollisuudet ovat informaatioteknologian ansiosta kuitenkin olennaisesti kehittyneet, ja koronakriisin siivittämänä niitä ollaan myös aktiivisesti edelleen kehittämässä erityisesti paikkariippumattoman asiantuntijatyön osalta (ks. Muzio & Doh 2021).

Yllä esitetty näkyy eittämättä positiivisella tavalla siinä, kuinka esimerkiksi yritysjohtajat voivat säästää työaikaa ja voimia, kun työnantaja ei enää odota heidän matkustavan kaikkiin kokouksiin. Myöskään työnantajat eivät enää automaattisesti odota, että niiden uudet asiantuntijatyötä tekevät työntekijät muuttaisivat työnsä perässä toiselle paikkakunnalle. (ks. Leonardi

2020; Kretschmer & Khashabi 2020.) Tämä on positiivista esimerkiksi kahden uran perheiden, uusperheiden ja ylipäättään työntekijöiden yksityiselämän näkökulmasta. Lisäksi ilmeinen – joskin positiiviselta vaikutukseltaan yllä mainittuja tekijöitä kyseenalaisempi – muutos on nähtävissä siinä, kuinka kehittyneen informaatioteknologian ansiosta asiantuntijoilla on aiempaa parempi mahdollisuus tehdä samanaikaisesti ja paikkariippumattomasti useita tehtäviä (*multitasking*), kuten vastata sähköposteihin ja osallistua tiimipalaveriin. Multitasking edellyttää asiantuntijoilta kykyä itsekontrolliin ja kasvattaa väistämättä vaaraa, että olennainen tieto jää jakamatta tai huomioimatta. Ilmeisen negatiivinen vaikutus informaatioteknologian kehityksellä on siinä, että se mahdollistaa, ellei suorastaan houkuttele (ks. Kretschmer & Khashabi 2020) organisaatioita kontrolloimaan paikkariippumatonta asiantuntijatyötä tekeviä työntekijöitä *surveillance*-periaatteita soveltaen – tai vähintäänkin kasvattaa työntekijöiden huolta tällaisen valvonnan olemassaolosta (Muzio & Doh 2021).

Sen ohella, että kontrolli- ja koordinaatiomekanismien soveltamismahdollisuudet ovat informaatioteknologian ansiosta yllä kuvatulla tavalla kehittyneet, eritoten suoritusmittauksen ja byrokraattisen kontrollin soveltamista on useissa asiantuntijatyötehtävissä myös selvästi *laajennettu* sitten 1970- ja 80-lukujen (Brivot 2011; Kallio 2015; Kallio ym. 2020). Tämä on luonteeltaan kyseenalaista organisaatiosuunnittelun näkökulmasta: vaikka tietyt koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismit (erityisesti tuotosten standardointi sekä markkinakontrolli/ suoritusmittaus) toimivatkin edeltävässä luvussa kuvatulla tavalla paikkariippumattoman työn organisoinnin näkökulmasta, on kuitenkin eri asia, miten hyvin kyseiset mekanismit käytännössä toimivat *asiantuntijatyön* tehokkaan organisoinnin näkökulmasta. Erityisesti tuotosten standardointia ja markkinakontrollia onkin vaikea soveltaa useimpiin asiantuntijatehtäviin, sillä asiantuntijatyön tuotokset ovat luonteeltaan tyypillisesti ei-euromääräisiä, uniikkeja ja epämääräisiä (Brivot 2011; Kallio 2015). Sama pätee markkinakontrollin sovellettuun muotoon eli suoritusmittaukseen, josta asiantuntijaorganisaatioiden ja asiantuntijatyön tutkijat ovat viime vuosina ilmaisseet kasvavan huolensa (Kallio & Kallio 2023): suoritusmittauksen on monissa asiantuntijaorganisaatioissa havaittu käytännössä johtavan erinäisiin dysfunktionaalisiin seurauksiin. Näin on käynyt esimerkiksi yliopistoissa, joissa suoritusmittaus on muun muassa vinouttanut tutkijoiden ja opettajien työtä, johtanut stereotyyppiseen, riskejä välttelevään tutkimukseen sekä erilaisiin muihin ei-toivottuihin seurauksiin, kuten niin sanottujen julkaisupelien pelaamiseen (esim. Kallio ym. 2016; 2020; 2021; Alvesson ym. 2017; Kalfa ym. 2018; Spence 2019; Aboubichr & Conway 2021).

Jotta koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismit toimisivat tehokkaasti organisaatiosuunnittelun näkökulmasta, niiden tulisi luonnollisesti toimia *samanaikaisesti sekä paikkariippumattoman työn että asiantuntijatyön näkökulmista*. Tämän havainnon pohjalta voidaan johtaa tutkimuksen kolme viimeistä hypoteesia:

H3a: Tuotosten standardointi soveltuu primaarina koordinaatiomekanismina paikkariippumattoman asiantuntijatyön organisointiin vain niissä erityistapauksissa, joissa työn lopputulos on tarkkaan ennalta määriteltävissä.

H3b: Markkinakontrolli/suoritusmittaus soveltuu primaarina kontrollimekanismina paikkariippumattoman asiantuntijatyön organisointiin vain niissä erityistapauksissa, joissa se ei aiheuta dysfunktionaalisia seurauksia.

H3c: Taitojen standardointi ja klaanikontrolli soveltuvat primaareina koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismina paikkariippumattoman asiantuntijatyön organisointiin useimmissa tapauksissa paremmin kuin mitkään muut koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismien yhdistelmät.

Erityisesti julkissektorin asiantuntijaorganisaatiot ovat viime aikoina ottaneet käyttöön sekundaarisia koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismeja, joilla on pyritty täydentämään primaarien mekanismien – todellisia tai kuviteltuja – puutteita (Kallio 2015; Kallio & Kallio 2023). Keskeinen

syy sekundaaristen kontrollimekanismien käyttöönotolle on epäluottamus työntekijöitä kohtaan niin julkisorganisaatioissa (Kivistö 2009; Kallio 2015) kuin yksityisellä sektorilla (Mintzberg 1979; Kretschmer & Khashabi 2020). Tämän luottamuspuolan vuoksi taitojen standardointia ja klaanikontrollia ei voida pitää paikkariippumattoman työn organisoinnin kannalta ”erittäin hyvinä” vaan ainoastaan ”hyvinä” mekanismeina (ks. taulukko 1).

Toinen keskeinen syy sekundaaristen mekanismien omaksumiseen on tulosjohtamisen ulottaminen julkisorganisaatioihin, mikä on luonut tarpeen suoritusten mittaamiselle. Digitalisaatio mahdollistaakin helposti – joskin kenties vain näennäisesti toimivat – suoritustaukukset, kun tietoa on saatavilla nopeasti. (Kallio 2015; Kallio ym. 2020; Kallio & Kallio 2023.)

On myös huomionarvoista, että uusien koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismien käyttöönotto kasvattaa riskiä byrokratian noidankehästä: jos uusien mekanismien käyttöönoton yhteydessä muuta hallintoa ei osata keventää (vrt. Kallio 2015), raskas hallinto alkaa ruokkia itseään. Digitalisaatio voi vauhdittaa tällaista byrokratiakriisiä, sillä uusia tietojärjestelmiä suoritustaukukseen on helppo toteuttaa teknisesti. Lopulta raportointiin saattaa kuluu suhteettoman paljon aikaa varsinaisiin työtehtäviin verrattuna. (Hatch 1997; Kallio 2015; Kallio & Kallio 2023.)

Asiantuntijatyön tutkijoiden mukaan organisaatiosuunnittelun painopisteen tulisi olla asiantuntijaorganisaatioissa mieluummin koordinaatio- kuin kontrollimekanismeissa (esim. Drucker 1999; Kallio 2015; Kallio ym. 2020). Tätä näkökantaa tukevat myös etätöiden tutkimuksen tulokset: pandemia-aikaisen etätöiden tarkastelussa havaittiin, ettei työn kontrollimekanismien luominen tehosta työntekoa, vaan kontrollijärjestelmien kehittämisen sijaan pitäisi keskittyä tiedonjaon, keskinäisen luottamuksen ja vuorovaikutuksen kehittämiseen (Wang ym. 2021). Koordinaatiomekanismien kehittämistä tulisikin siis priorisoida suhteessa kontrollimekanismeihin, mikä haastaa organisaation johtoa päivittämään johtamiskäytänteitään luottamus pohjaisiksi ja pohtimaan, soveltuvatko tulosjohtamisten käytänteet ylipäätään omaan organisaatioon.

Johtopäätökset ja ehdotuksia jatkotutkimukseen liittyen

Aloitimme tämän artikkelin toteamalla, että siinä missä aiemmilla vuosikymmenillä organisaatiotutkimuksen arvostetuimmat lehdet julkaisivat organisaatiosuunnittelun kaltaisia, tosielämän organisaatioiden esimerkkejä soveltavia ja käytännön kanssa keskustelevia artikkeleita, julkaisevat ne nyt tarkkarajaisia, tyypillisesti kapeaan ja pitkälle jalostettuun empiiriseen evidenssiin pohjautuvia artikkeleita. Tämän ilmiön taustalla vaikuttaa paitsi organisaatiotutkimuksen ”tieteellistäminen” sovelletun psykologian suuntaan, mutta myös tutkijoiden yhä välineellisempi suhtautuminen tieteelliseen julkaisemiseen. (vrt. Alvesson ym. 2017; Kallio 2015.) Tieteellisen julkaisemisen rooli onkin kiistatta muuttunut perinteisestä tiedonvälittämisestä kohti kilpailua, jossa menestyminen määrittää tutkijoiden urakehityksen ja heidän edustamiensa organisaatioiden arvostuksen ja sitä heijastelevan sijoituksen erinäisissä kansainvälisissä rankingeissa. Siksi ei olekaan sattumaa, että tieteellinen julkaiseminen on toistuvasti rinnastettu pelin pelaamiseen. (esim. Alvesson ym. 2017; Kalfa ym. 2018; Aboubichr & Conway 2021; Kallio ym. 2021.)

Yllä kuvatun ilmiön eittämättä vakavin implikaatio on, kuten Alvesson ym. (2017) ovat asian muotoilleet, yhteiskuntatieteellisen tutkimustiedon muuttuminen yhä mitäänsanomattomammaksi ja triviaalimmaksi. Menemättä tässä kiistatta tärkeässä ja mielenkiintoisessa asiassa sen syvemmälle voidaan todeta, että organisaatiosuunnitteluun liittyvä uusi tieteellinen tutkimus on 2000-luvulla paremminkin loistanut poissaolollaan kaikkein korkeimmalle arvostetuista tieteellisistä aikakauskirjoista – eli juuri niistä lehdistä, joissa useimmat tutkijat mielisivät tutkimuksensa julkaista. Voidaan edelleen esittää, että tämä kehitys, jossa organisaatiosuunnittelun sinällään suhteellisen lavea ja eklektinen, mutta käytännön ongelmien ratkaisussa korkean potentiaalinen omaava tutkimus on tullut korvatuksi tieteellisesti eksaktimmalla, mutta käytännön näkökulmasta triviaalimmalla tutkimuksella on johtanut tilanteeseen, jossa organisaatiotutkijat ovat olleet aseettomia vastaamaan koronakriisin mukanaan tuomiin käytännön kysymyksiin.

On tunnettua, että koronakriisi on herättänyt eri alojen tutkijat pohtimaan kiivaasti oman tieteenalansa tulevaisuuden haasteita, kuten myös uudelleensuuntaamaan tutkimusta esimerkiksi tieteellisten aikakauskirjojen koronakriisiä suoraan tai välillisesti käsittelevien teemanumeroiden kautta. Näin on käynyt myös organisaatio- ja johtamistutkimuksessa. Esimerkiksi arvostetussa *Journal of Management Studies* -lehdessä on nopeutetulla aikataululla julkaistu artikkeleita, jotka käsittelevät niin organisaatio- ja johtamistutkimuksen alan tulevaisuutta koronakriisin näkökulmasta ylipäätään (ks. Muzio & Doh 2021) kuin organisaatiosuunnittelua koronakriisin aikakaudella erityisesti (ks. Foss 2020). Koronakriisin esiin nostamat huolet tieteellisen tutkimuksen sovellettavuudesta yhteiskunnallisten ongelmien ratkaisuun voivatkin samalla merkitä myös organisaatiosuunnittelun pysyvämpää paluuta organisaatio- ja johtamistutkimuksen johtavien kansainvälisten lehtien sivuille.

Tarve organisaatiosuunnittelun päivittämiselle on ajankohtainen covid-19-pandemiasta seuraneiden työn muutosten lisäksi myös osaavan työvoiman saatavuuden näkökulmasta. EU-maissa työikäisen väestön osuus tulee pienenevän noin viidenneksen vuoteen 2050 mennessä (Erickson 2009). Työvoimapula on rajoittanut Suomen talouskasvua jo pitkään, mikä käy ilmi Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriön (2022) puolivuositain julkaisemasta katsauksesta. Huomionarvoista on, että juuri paikkariippumaton työ on osaltaan helpottanut työvoiman saatavuusongelmaa. Täten onkin perusteltua väittää, että organisaatiot, jotka eivät päivitä työn organisoinnin käytäntöjään, jäävät häviäjiksi kilpailussa parhaista osaajista. Siinä missä yksityissektori on uudistunut voimakkaasti, julkishallinnon organisaatiot ovat konservatiivisempia ja nojaavat usein edelleen perinteisiin toimintamalleihin (Kallio 2014). Organisaatiosuunnittelun ja -rakenteiden päivittäminen paikkariippumattomaan työhön soveltuviksi olisikin täten merkittävää erityisesti julkishallinnon organisaatioille, joiden normaaliin toimintaan kuuluvat säännöllisin väliajoin toteutettavat rakenereformit (Kallio 2015).

Vaikka organisaatiosuunnittelun ajantasaistamista informaatioyhteiskunnan aikakaudelle voidaan perustella erinäisistä näkökulmista käsin, on erityisesti covid-19-pandemia motivoinut tätä tutkimusta. Toisaalta tutkimuksen kirjoittajat ovat jo ennen koronakriisiä tutkineet organisaatiosuunnittelun ja etätöiden teemoja, eikä tässä tutkimuksessa ole myöskään päädytty laatimaan *ad hoc*-luonteista analyysiä pandemian vaikutuksista organisaatiosuunnitteluun esimerkiksi Fossin (2020) tapaan. Päinvastoin, artikkelissa on pyritty ylipäätään päivittämään organisaatiosuunnittelua digiaikaudelle (vrt. Kivistö 2019). Tästä syystä artikkelissa on lähestytty organisaatiosuunnittelua sen kaikkein klassisimpien teemojen – työnjaon, koordinaation ja kontrollin – näkökulmista pohdittaessa, miten paikkariippumattoman työn yleistymisen vaikutus organisaatioiden toiminnan hajauttamiseen ja miten organisaatioiden toimintaa on jatkossa mahdollista tästä näkökulmasta koordinoita tehokkaasti.

Paikkariippumattoman työn soveltamisen lähtökohtana on loogista pitää olettamuksia siitä, ettei työtehtävä vaadi erityislaitteita tai -tiloja ja että työn tulokset ovat elektronisesti siirrettävissä. Lisäksi paikkariippumattomasti hoidettaviksi soveltuvat lähtökohtaisesti parhaiten sellaiset työtehtävät, jotka muodostavat selkeitä, ajallisesti eri vaiheisiin pilkkottavia osakokonaisuuksia tai jotka ovat luonteeltaan autonomisia. Teknologian kehittyminen mahdollistaa kuitenkin paikkariippumattoman työn yleistymisen myös sellaisissa tehtävissä, jotka vaativat erityistiloja tai -laitteita ja useamman kuin yhden henkilön samanaikaisen työpanoksen. Jotta organisaatiot pystyvät hyödyntämään muuttuvan toimintaympäristönsä tarjoamia mahdollisuuksia, niiden on samanaikaisesti tunnistettava tarkoituksenmukaisia kontrolli- ja koordinaatiomekanismeja työn organisoinniseksi. Olennaista on, että valittujen kontrolli- ja koordinaatiomekanismien tulisi toimia sekä paikkariippumattoman työn että asiantuntijatyön näkökulmasta, koska paikkariippumaton työ on useimmiten luonteeltaan asiantuntijatyötä. Jotta asiantuntijaorganisaatiot välttyisivät kasvattamasta kontrollioinnista aiheutuvaa byrokraatiaa (Kallio 2015), paikkariippumattoman työn organisoinnissa olisi perusteltua keskittyä kontrollimekanismien sijaan koordinaatiomekanismeihin panostaen samalla keskinäisen tiedonjaon, luottamuksen ja vuorovaikutuksen kehittämiseen.

Artikkelissa on päädytty hahmottelemaan yhteensä kuusi hypoteesia paikkariippumattoman työn organisointiin liittyen. Näitä hypoteeseja on mahdollista jatkojalostaa preskriptiivisiksi ohjeiksi paikkariippumattoman työn organisoinnista kiinnostuneille yksityis- ja julkissektorin johtajille. Toisaalta olisi kuitenkin liiallista väittää, että hypoteesit loisivat itsessään riittävän, saati kestävä pohjan paikkariippumattoman työn organisointiin. Hypoteeseja onkin siksi perusteltua jatkotutkimuksissa kehittää, laajentaa ja tarkastella myös empiirisesti.

Työsarkaa niin paikkariippumattoman työn organisaatiosuunnittelussa kuin organisaatiosuunnittelun päivittämisessä digiaikaan riittää yllin kyllin. Esimerkiksi innovoiva ja ennakkoluulottoman laaja-alaisesti eri tieteitä kartoittava tutkimus siitä, mitä eri tieteenaloilla voisi olla annettavaa covid-19-pandemian jälkeiseen organisaatiosuunnitteluun, olisi varsin merkittävä kontribuutio. Toisaalta juuri koronakriisin ansiosta paikkariippumattoman työn tutkimus etenee parhaillaan niin nopeasti, että kaikki kartoitukset antavat väistämättä osin vanhentuneen käsityksen aihepiirin tutkimuksen tilasta. Pelkästään tämän artikkelin kirjoitusprosessin aikana eri alojen tutkijat ovat julkaisseet lukuisia uusia artikkeleita, joista voisi ammentaa ajatuksia ja välineitä paikkariippumattoman työn organisaatiosuunnitteluun. Siinä missä viime vuosikymmenet eivät ole olleet erityisen otollisia tällaiselle eklektiselle otteelle, koronakriisi saattaa hyvinkin muuttaa tilannetta ja todella saada aikaan organisaatiosuunnittelun renessanssin 2020-luvulla. Artikkelin voikin siksi perustellusti päättää Elorannan (1977, 210) jo yli neljä vuosikymmentä sitten esittämään teesiin:

”organisaatiosuunnittelun tulisi olla jatkuva prosessi, jossa ajateltaisiin toistuvasti läpi kulloistenkin organisaatiorakenteiden ja organisaatiokäytäntöjen tarkoituksenmukaisuus suhteessa muuttuviin olosuhteisiin ja tarjolla oleviin vaihtoehtoihin.”

Viiitteet

- ¹ Kuten monia muitakin tieteellisiä käsitteitä, myös kontrollin käsitettä sovelletaan usein eri tavoin. Tässä artikkelissa kontrollin käsite on painottunut valvontaan (monitoring).
- ² Ks. paikkariippumattoman työn organisointia käsittelevä luku.
- ³ Ks. tarkemmin etätöiden käsiteanalyysi Allen ym. (2015).
- ⁴ Mainitut kontrollimuodot on huomioitu Ouchin (1979) kolmen kontrollimekanismin typologiassa, mutta ne ovat typologian karkean luokittelun vuoksi eräässä mielessä hukkuneet laajempien kontrollimekanismikonaisuuksien sisään tavalla, joka on epäkäytännöllinen tämän artikkelin analyysin kannalta.

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Liite 1. Koordinaatio- ja kontrollimekanismeja

Taulukko L1. Viisi keskeistä koordinaatiomekanismia Mintzbergiä (1979; 1980) mukaillen

	<i>Logiikka</i>	<i>Edellytys</i>
<i>Keskinäinen sopeutuminen</i>	Työntekijät sovittavat itse oma-aloitteisesti tai neuvotellen toimintansa muiden työntekijöiden toimintaan	Toimii, kun työntekijöitä on vain vähän ja he ovat jatkuvassa keskinäisessä vuorovaikutuksessa
<i>Suora ohjaus</i>	Esihenkilö määrää työtehtävän ja tarkkailee, kun alaiset suorittavat sitä antaen edelleen tarvittaessa ohjeita	Edellyttää esihenkilön ja alaisten jatkuvaa vuorovaikutusta ja esihenkilön mahdollisuutta tarkkailla alaisia jatkuvasti
<i>Työprosessien standardointi</i>	Työntekijälle osoitetaan seikkaperäisesti hänen tehtävänsä; kun esihenkilö katsoo työntekijän olevan riittävän osaava, hän jää suorittamaan itsenäisesti tehtävänsä	Toimii, kun kaikki työvaiheet on tunnistettavissa yksityiskohtaisesti ja työ koostuu vain näiden vaiheiden toistamisesta tietyssä ennalta määrättyssä järjestyksessä
<i>Tuotosten standardointi</i>	Työn haluttu lopputulos, sen määrä, laatu ja siihen käytettävissä olevan aika määritellään etukäteen yksityiskohtaisesti tai työ toteutetaan urakkana	Toimii, kun työn haluttu lopputulos ja siihen käytettävissä olevan aika tai kokonaiskustannus on mahdollista määritellä tarkasti etukäteen
<i>Taitojen standardointi</i>	Työntekijä tiedostaa oman tehtäväkenttensä ja päättää koulutuksensa ja kokemuksensa pohjalta, miten hänen on toimittava vastaantulevissa työtilanteissa	Edellyttää työntekijän pitkää koulutusta ja harjoittelua ja näiden aikana tuotettua indoktrinaatiota, jolla työntekijä saadaan noudattamaan ammattikunnan eetosta ja normeja työssään

Taulukko L2. Viisi keskeistä kontrollimekanismia Ouchia (1979), Ouchia ja Maguirea (1975) sekä Brivotia (2011) mukaillen

	<i>Logiikka</i>	<i>Edellytys</i>
<i>Työn valvonta</i>	Esihenkilö tarkkailee alaisten toimintaa ja kirjaa suorituksen; suoran ohjauksen koordinaatiomekanismin ”jatke”	Edellyttää esihenkilön ja alaisten jatkuvaa vuorovaikutusta ja esihenkilön kykyä havainnoida alaisia; alaisia voi olla vain rajallisesti
<i>Sosiaalinen kontrolli</i>	Ryhmän jäsenet valvovat toistensa toimintaa esihenkilön sijaan; edellyttää ryhmän jäsenten ymmärrystä oikeasta toiminnasta	Edellyttää, että alaiset ovat jatkuvassa keskinäisessä vuorovaikutuksessa ja kykenevät havainnoimaan ja valvomaan toisiaan
<i>Byrokraattinen kontrolli</i>	Organisaatio luo tarkat kirjalliset säännöt ja ohjeet, joilla määritellään työntekijän tehtävänk kuva, ja se, kuinka henkilön tulee raportoida työstä ja sen tuloksista	Edellyttää, että työtehtävät tunnetaan riittävästi, että työnkuva ei ole liian laaja tai muutu jatkuvasti ja että työsuorituksesta on mahdollista raportoida luotettavasti
<i>Markkina-kontrolli / suoritusmittaus</i>	Työpanoksen arvo määritellään suoraan taloudellisesti; mikäli tämä ei ole mahdollista, sovelletaan tiettyyn tehtävään varta vasten luotuja standardoituja mittareita	Edellyttää, että työntekijän työpanoksen arvo kyetään määrittelemään markkinalähtöisesti tai että organisaatio kykenee määrittelemään työn keskeisen sisällön kattavat suoritusmittarit
<i>Klaanikontrolli</i>	Työntekijä valvoo itse omaa toimintaansa suhteessa ammattikuntansa (klaaninsa) normeihin; taitojen standardoinnin koordinaatiomekanismin ”jatke”	Edellyttää työntekijän luotettavuutta, pitkää koulutusta ja indoktrinaatiota ammattikunnan arvomaailmaan; työntekijän on itsenäisesti kyettävä tarkkailemaan omaa toimintaansa ja tunnistettava myös, milloin hänen on konsultoitava kollegoitaan

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The art of staying in touch – exploring daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate in remote work

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to widen the understanding of how remote work shapes the feedback environment by examining the perceptions of leaders and subordinates of daily, dyadic feedback interactions. The emphasis is on understanding how reciprocity within leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships manifests and how it influences the feedback dynamics.

Design/methodology/approach – Template analysis of a qualitative data set consisting of 81 semi-structured interviews with leaders ($n = 29$) and remote working subordinates ($n = 52$) was performed.

Findings – Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of the feedback environment and the leader-member exchange, the findings demonstrate the imbalance between the efforts of leaders and subordinates in building and maintaining a favourable feedback environment in the remote work context. The results of this study highlight the importance of the dyadic nature of feedback interactions, calling for a more proactive role from subordinates.

Practical implications – Given the estimation that the COVID-19 pandemic has permanently changed the way organizations work, leaders, subordinates and HR practitioners will benefit from advancing their understanding of the characteristics of dyadic, daily feedback interaction in remote work.

Originality/value – Qualitative research on feedback and leader-member exchange interactions in remote work that combines the perceptions of leaders and subordinates is sparse.

Keywords Feedback, Remote work, Feedback environment, Leader-member exchange (LMX), Reciprocity, Leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Feedback is a dyadic interaction process (Anseel and Brutus, 2019) and a crucial performance management tool in organizations (Li *et al.*, 2022; London, 2015) containing information on a

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person's performance and behaviour at work (Eva *et al.*, 2019). Most feedback interactions occur within the daily interactions and communication that takes place between a leader and a subordinate, since the leader is considered as one of the most important sources of feedback (DeNisi and Murphy, 2017; Fletcher, 2001). Over past decades, feedback was considered as a formal annual performance management procedure, and an event separate from daily work (Fletcher, 2001; Levy *et al.*, 2017). However, feedback is currently perceived more often as taking place within informal day-to-day interactions (Kuvaas *et al.*, 2017; Mertens *et al.*, 2021), making it an inseparable part of everyday life in organizations.

As the feedback process has developed from isolated annual events to a part of day-to-day organizational life, feedback cannot be explored in a vacuum: the organizational environment where feedback emerges is dynamic and changes over time (Anseel and Brutus, 2019). The context of feedback changed substantially in the spring of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic plunged workplaces into turmoil by irrevocably changing the way we work through the rapid growth of remote working (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Remote work (also called telework or telecommuting) refers to work performed outside of office premises, regardless of time and place, and communicating through telecommunications or computer-based technology (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Gohoungodji *et al.*, 2022). Feedback has been recognized as vital within a remote context for team management (Hertel *et al.*, 2005; Kirkman *et al.*, 2002) and team effectiveness (Handke *et al.*, 2022). However, the field lacks research examining remote feedback interactions between leaders and subordinates. Thus, there is a need for studies investigating feedback in remote settings, particularly with a qualitative approach, to facilitate an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon (Brown *et al.*, 2019).

Additionally, although feedback is a phenomenon involving two parties, previous feedback studies have typically adopted a one-sided perspective on feedback, using mainly survey-based research data collected from subordinates (e.g. Anseel and Lievens, 2007; Gabriel *et al.*, 2014; Mertens *et al.*, 2021). Even studies that incorporate multisource data from leaders and subordinates (e.g. Gallo and Steelman, 2019; Jiang and Qu, 2023; Peng and Lin, 2016) fail to capture the perspectives of both parties on feedback interaction. Consequently, the significance of the dyadic nature in understanding feedback interaction has recently been acknowledged (Anseel *et al.*, 2018; Katz *et al.*, 2023), prompting a call for studies that enable the exploration of the dyadic aspects of feedback processes (Anseel and Brutus, 2019; Katz *et al.*, 2021).

These dyadic interactions can be examined through the theory of leader-member exchange (hereon LMX), which is a theory of social exchange (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Exchanges that enable both providing and seeking feedback have been suggested as vital elements in building the parties' work roles and their work relationship (Lam *et al.*, 2007), and also as creating the social context of the workplace. This dyadic-level construct can be referred to as a feedback environment (Katz *et al.*, 2021; Steelman *et al.*, 2004). The LMX theory strongly emphasises the reciprocal nature of leader-subordinate relationships, where both leaders and subordinates actively engage in resource exchanges, thus contributing to the overall quality of their interactions (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Martin *et al.*, 2023). However, the existing body of literature lacks empirical evidence of such actual exchanges underpinning reciprocity (Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017; Sheer, 2015). Moreover, recent research underscores that the remote work environment challenges interaction (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Gohoungodji *et al.*, 2022), which forms the foundation for exchange and reciprocity within LMX relationships. However, examining LMX in the remote work context remains an area of limited study (Varma *et al.*, 2022).

In sum, this study examines how remote work shapes the feedback environment by examining the perceptions of leaders and subordinates of daily, dyadic feedback interactions. The emphasis is on understanding how reciprocity within LMX relationships manifests, and how it influences the feedback dynamics. Using a qualitative approach, we explore the

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research question (RQ): *How does remote work shape daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate?*

The contribution of the study is twofold. First, it provides a missing qualitative examination of dyadic, daily feedback interactions in remote work. Second, the study widens the understanding of the dynamics of remote LMX relationships by investigating the actual reciprocal exchanges which shape the social context of feedback. Overall, the study offers practical implications for leaders, subordinates and HR professionals to develop remote work (leadership) practices. Next, we offer a review of the pertinent literature and propose three subsequent research questions (SRQs) to bridge the research gaps that are identified.

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Literature review

Feedback – from annual appraisal to daily interaction

Feedback belongs among organizations' vital HR and leadership practices (Eva *et al.*, 2019; Tseng and Levy, 2019) and is said to be the most challenging activity (Pulakos, 2009). Besides including relevant performance-related information, feedback is a way to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships, handle expectations and develop one's organizational role (London, 2015). During the past decades, organizations have been replacing the formal annual evaluation processes with daily informal feedback exchange procedures (Dahling *et al.*, 2017; Mertens *et al.*, 2021), as formal performance reviews are regarded as costly, ineffective and unpleasant (Levy *et al.*, 2017). Systematically scheduled in nature, formal feedback can be, for example, provided in performance appraisal discussions (DeNisi and Murphy, 2017) or through digital performance appraisal systems (Payne *et al.*, 2009). In contrast, informal feedback is spontaneous, and frequently occurring in day-to-day interactions outside formal organizational procedures (Levy *et al.*, 2017; London, 2015).

Steelman *et al.* (2004) conceptualize informal feedback interactions as a feedback environment, representing the social context of feedback (Levy and Williams, 2004). Indeed, giving and seeking feedback can be considered as part of the interpersonal exchanges that take place in daily interactions in leader-subordinate relationships and also between coworkers. For leaders in particular, delivering feedback should be a crucial, strategic task (Baker *et al.*, 2013) accompanied by empathy, tactfulness (Gallo and Steelman, 2019), care and support (Peng and Lin, 2016). Following the feedback environment scale, subordinates evaluate their perception of feedback source credibility, feedback quality, feedback delivery, frequency of favourable and unfavourable feedback, source availability and the promotion of feedback seeking (Steelman *et al.*, 2004). High levels of these seven facets indicate a favourable feedback environment where people feel comfortable providing, seeking and receiving timely and relevant feedback (Anseel and Brutus, 2019; London, 2015). In such an environment, interpersonal exchanges contain high-quality feedback as a part of the daily dialogue (Levy *et al.*, 2017).

But notably, extant research predominantly offers a one-sided perspective by focusing on the viewpoints of subordinates on the feedback process (Anseel and Brutus, 2019). This approach leaves a gap in understanding the dyadic nature of feedback interactions, necessitating an integration of the perspectives of both leaders and subordinates. Consequently, we propose the following subsequent research question:

SRQ1. How do combining viewpoints from leaders and subordinates contribute to understanding feedback interactions that shape the feedback environment?

Leader-member exchange relationship as a social context for feedback

As noted earlier, the dyadic relationship between leaders and subordinates constitutes a context in which giving, seeking, and the perception of the received feedback materializes

(Anseel *et al.*, 2018; Lonsdale, 2016). These LMX relationships (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden and Graen, 1980) are perceived to develop between the leader and each of their subordinates within their day-to-day interactions and communicative exchanges at work (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017; Kangas, 2021). These exchanges include essential information on work tasks, roles, performance, expectations and informal social exchanges between individuals (Liao *et al.*, 2016; Varma *et al.*, 2022). Through these exchanges, the leader is able to provide, e.g. frequent praise and constructive criticism when needed, as well as guide the subordinate in the right direction, creating a constructive feedback environment (Lonsdale, 2016; Steelman *et al.*, 2004).

Each of the LMX relationships within a work team is unique and varies in quality; high-quality LMX relationships often constitute extensive interactions, support and trust, whereas low-quality LMX relationships often lack these elements (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012; Gerstner and Day, 1997). The quality of the LMX relationship also has a role in how the feedback is perceived; high-quality LMX relationships and opinions of the favourability of the feedback environment are often positively correlated (Katz *et al.*, 2021; Jiang and Qu, 2023; Steelman *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, the quality of the LMX relationship moderates the perceptions of perceived feedback: in high-quality LMX relationships, frequent feedback interactions are seen as supporting, whereas in lower-quality LMX relationships, they are often considered as a controlling tool (Audenaert *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the notion of the effort exerted by the parties to a relationship is crucial to understanding the quality of LMX relationships. The theory emphasizes the dyadic and reciprocal nature of LMX relationships; it is not the leader's or subordinate's effort alone that drives the relationship, but rather the effort of both partners in the dyad (Terpstra-Tong *et al.*, 2020). Such behaviour represents the reciprocation effort as seen by the dyad partner, consistent with social exchange theory, in which interdependence and reciprocity develop through a series of exchanges over time (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Maslyn and Uhl-Bien, 2001).

Although the premise of LMX is the reciprocal nature of leader-member relationships (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), the field lacks empirical evidence on actual exchanges between the parties, which are the basis of reciprocity (Martin *et al.*, 2023; Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017; Sheer, 2015). Moreover, the feedback environment literature often emphasises the role and actions of the feedback source as constructing a favourable or unfavourable feedback environment (Anseel and Brutus, 2019; Steelman *et al.*, 2004). However, feedback should also be seen as a mutual interaction (Anseel *et al.*, 2018; Katz *et al.*, 2023). In the same way that the leader, as a source of feedback, puts effort into giving feedback, the subordinate should proactively seek feedback, which can be done by directly asking (inquiry) or indirectly observing others' reactions to their performance (monitoring) (Ashford *et al.*, 2016; London, 2015). Prior studies have also shown that high-quality LMX relationships and subordinates' willingness to solicit feedback are interrelated (Anseel *et al.*, 2015; Chun *et al.*, 2014), and that a supportive feedback environment promotes feedback-seeking (Stelman *et al.*, 2004).

While the significance of reciprocity is recognized in the theory of LMX and the feedback literature, there is a research gap related to empirical evidence on the reciprocity of LMX relationships and its specific role in feedback interactions. Thus, we propose the following subsequent research question:

SRQ2. How does the presence of reciprocity manifest within LMX relationships, specifically in feedback interactions?

Dyadic feedback interactions in remote work

The importance of the LMX relationship (Varma *et al.*, 2022) and high-quality feedback (Liu *et al.*, 2022) is emphasized in a remote work context, where the organization, in the absence of

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office premises, is founded merely on interpersonal relationships. However, remote work reduces face-to-face encounters, requiring the increased use of information communication technologies (ICT) (Gohoungodji *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, remote work is a contextual factor impacting the development and quality of LMX relationships as well as the feedback environment, by changing ways of interaction. For example, developing newly established leader-member relationships might be complicated remotely since frequent and spontaneous communication with the subordinates is reduced (Schreier *et al.*, 2022), including feedback exchange (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012; Schreier *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the social context created in physical presence is missing in ICT-mediated communication, since nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and body language are not there to assist in interpreting expectations and reactions and creating mutual understanding (London, 2015). As a result, hampered feedback interaction may lead to role ambiguity (Liu *et al.*, 2022; Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012) and a sense of uncertainty (Varma *et al.*, 2022).

Besides spatial distance, remote work may also add temporal distance to feedback interactions. Communication tools used in dyadic interaction can be categorized as synchronous or asynchronous, depending on their capability to enable simultaneous communication. For example, phone and videoconferencing are regarded as synchronous tools, allowing real-time interaction (Dennis *et al.*, 2008; Raghuram *et al.*, 2019.) Text-based communication tools like email, chat and instant messaging are regarded as asynchronous, since the interaction is sequential (Raghuram *et al.*, 2019). Importantly, the richer the communication tool is (such as a face-to-face meeting), the better it transmits social cues and shared meaning, leaving less room for misinterpretation (Daft and Lengel, 1986).

These aspects arising from a remote work context influence feedback exchanges. From the leader's perspective, giving feedback is challenging at a distance, requiring a careful formulation of the message, a choice of the appropriate communication tool, and the collection of more extensive background information to ensure that all the relevant facts are included (Kirkman *et al.*, 2002). From the subordinate's perspective, seeking feedback requires extra effort in remote work, where people cannot sense each other's perceptions of their behaviour in continuous interaction (London, 2015). Also notable is that remote workers often enjoy a high level of discretion in how and when to carry out their tasks (Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012). Such a high level of autonomy may reduce the subordinate's willingness to seek feedback in fear of losing face, as autonomy implies an expectation to operate independently (Krasman, 2013). However, Huang (2012) found that subordinates who felt empowered to make decisions related to their tasks were more likely to seek feedback if they simultaneously experienced trust from their leader. Thus, the trust subordinates have in their leaders increases the motivation for feedback-seeking.

To conclude, feedback is a critical leadership tool, and also a dyadic process between the leader and their subordinates, which, to a great extent, takes place through daily interaction. The reciprocal interaction creates a foundation for a feedback environment. At the same time, while the remote work context emphasizes the importance of high-quality leader-member relationships, it complicates building and maintaining a favourable feedback environment, engendering tensions in interaction. As indicated above, the existing literature extensively outlines the challenges of remote interaction, which are progressively becoming a permanent part of the work environment because of employees' desire to continue working remotely (see Eurofound-ETF, 2022). Consequently, there is a need to extend remote feedback research from the team level (Handke *et al.*, 2022; Hertel *et al.*, 2005; Kirkman *et al.*, 2002) to the dyadic level, while also exploring LMX relationships within remote contexts (Varma *et al.*, 2022). Hence, our final subsequent research question is:

SRQ3. How do the challenges identified in remote interactions affect the dyadic feedback environment?

Method

Data sample and collection

The research data was collected from six corporations operating in Finland, which is considered as one of the world's leading remote working countries (Gschwind and Vargas, 2019). The participating corporations operated in the industries of information technology, engineering and metalwork, insurance, accounting and management consultancy, telecommunications, and energy equipment manufacture. The corporations were large-sized when measured by the number of employees, and they were selected based on their remote working guidelines to ensure remote working respondents' availability. At the time of the study, the interviewees were working remotely mainly (94%) or partly (6%), due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Before the pandemic, only a small proportion of the interviewees (6%) had primarily been in remote work, while over a third (38%) had worked remotely part-time. Most respondents (56%) had little or no remote work experience before the pandemic.

The overall data set consists of 81 semi-structured interviews with leaders ($n = 29$) and remote working subordinates ($n = 52$) working in sales, marketing, product development, customer service, production and service management. The interviews were conducted individually in Finnish ($n = 79$) or Swedish ($n = 2$). The sampling method was as follows: a leader announced their team's participation, or our contact person in the organization (HR professional) proposed a team. Employees were selected by random sampling in alphabetical order from the teams. Participation was voluntary. Altogether, the study comprised of 47 leader-subordinate dyads. Additionally, six subordinates without their leader and five leaders without any of their subordinates participated in the study.

The research data is part of a larger study where the experiences of remote working and leadership were explored. An interview guide was used to prompt discussion (Myers, 2013), including the following themes: remote work environment and culture, leadership in remote work, work-life balance, and self-leadership. Although feedback was not in the original research focus, related questions were included. Eventually, feedback interactions emerged as a significant theme in the interviews. The data collection was carried out in October–December 2020, seven to nine months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to remote work. Qualitative interviews, ranging from 45 to 75 min, were conducted through Microsoft Teams or Zoom as audio or video. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymized with the permission of the interviewees.

Data analysis

To answer the research questions, we used template analysis (King, 2004), which is a form of thematic analysis used in organizational and management studies (see, e.g. Cassell and Bishop, 2019; Lecours *et al.*, 2021; Krehl and Büttgen, 2022). Template analysis provides a structured but flexible approach, allowing researchers to adapt their qualitative analysis to meet the needs of a particular study. The focus is on identifying, organizing, and interpreting qualitative data, in order to highlight the key findings. Researchers create an initial coding template based on a subset of data, iteratively develop the template further, and finally use it broadly for the complete data set (King, 2004; King *et al.*, 2018).

In the first step, the second author read through all of the interviews to become familiar with the data. The initial *a posteriori* coding template emerging from the data (see Lecours *et al.*, 2021) was created on a subset of data comprising of 50 interviews. The coding was supported by Nvivo software. To ensure a diverse as possible initial coding (King *et al.*, 2018), the second author chose leaders and subordinates from every organization by way of a random sample. The initial coding template resulted in six themes: characteristics of feedback interaction, forms of feedback, a high-quality relationship, information flow, feedback-seeking and team feedback.

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In the second step, the first author read through the initial coding, after which the authors discussed the themes. As a result, the initial themes were revised and merged into groups, forming three themes on the intermediate template relevant to the research questions: procedures for remote feedback interactions, a dyadic leader-subordinate relationship and organizational feedback culture in remote work. The first author applied the intermediate coding template to the remaining subset of 31 interviews, followed by a discussion between the authors and a revision of the codes.

In the third step, the authors compared perceptions of leaders and subordinates within the three themes formed in the prior step. This comparison revealed aspects that the authors saw caused tensions in feedback interaction in remote work. Interestingly, what initially appeared as positive aspects of remote feedback interactions (including the availability of feedback, close leader-member relationships and ease of feedback-seeking) were discovered to have their downsides or related challenges. These three tensions emerging from the data were incorporated as higher-order codes in the final coding template. The tensions were examined through four facets of the feedback environment created by [Steelman et al. \(2004\)](#). The first tension (availability of feedback) is related to source availability, the second tension (a close LMX-relationship) pertains to source credibility and feedback quality and the third tension (ease of feedback-seeking) concerns the promotion of feedback-seeking ([Steelman et al., 2004](#)). A final version of the coding template is depicted in [Table 1](#) below:

A hierarchical coding was applied in the final phase. The authors collaborated to create 13 sub-level codes, which, when explored collectively under a higher-order code, constitute contradictory aspects (tensions) related to a particular facet of the feedback environment (see [Steelman et al., 2004](#)). After the final coding template was confirmed, the first author re-coded the whole data set with the final codes to ensure that it was representative of the whole data ([King et al., 2018](#)).

Tension 1: Leader's online accessibility resulting in an intensified workload

- 1.1. Systemized communication frequency
- 1.2. Availability of the leader online
- 1.3. Leaders' experiences of being available online
- 1.4. Need for face-to-face encounters

Tension 2: A close leader-member relationship does not eliminate quality challenges related to remote feedback

- 2.1. Source credibility
 - 2.1.1. Confidentiality and intimacy in LMX relationship
 - 2.1.2. Old vs new LMX relationships
- 2.2. Feedback quality challenges
 - 2.2.1. Lack of informality and spontaneity
 - 2.2.2. Information value of feedback
 - 2.2.3. (Mis)interpretation

Tension 3: Feedback-seeking – promoted but still complicated in remote work

- 3.1. Leaders promoting feedback-seeking
 - 3.2. Technology facilitating feedback-seeking
 - 3.3. Risk of loneliness, threshold for contacting
 - 3.4. Trust and autonomy
-

Table 1.
Final coding template depicting tensions in feedback exchanges in remote work

Findings

As described above, the remote work context undeniably influences the organizational social context, one part of which is daily feedback in dyadic leader-member relationships. The interview data shows that the remote work context shaped the interviewees' interaction and communication routines, influencing the availability and credibility of the feedback source, feedback quality and the promotion of feedback-seeking. Although the overall perception of the remote work context was positive, some challenges might influence the feedback environment's favourability. We discuss the findings in more detail below.

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staying in
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Tension 1: Leader's online accessibility resulting in an intensified workload

Within the first theme, we found a tension related to feedback source availability (Steelman *et al.*, 2004), describing the contact frequency between the leader and the subordinate. Although the interviews revealed a positive shift to more organized interaction structures, this also created a more intensified workload for leaders. In many teams, remote working had resulted in more organized daily, weekly, and monthly communication. Interviewees experienced that one-to-one communication between a leader and a subordinate was more regular than in the office, since people had created communication routines to maintain the connection. Although the physical distance had increased, the communication frequency had surprisingly improved in many leader-subordinate relationships.

Now we are [in contact] every week. Once a week, about half an hour. We regularly review what's going on at work and whether there are any worries. Before, they [the conversations] were handled sporadically at the office alongside the work and were just shouted out in passing. The conversations were handled then, too, but now there are more of these one-to-ones. I know I have an appointment. It's important. (Subordinate_2)

In addition, many subordinates felt that it was easy to contact the leader when support and feedback were needed, and they felt that the leaders were more accessible online than in the office:

Well, maybe at the office, they [leaders] ran into a lot of meetings and stuff like that. You didn't see them that often. Now, when you send messages through Teams, in my opinion, you get a quick response. I feel like they're more present somehow. (Subordinate_38)

The leaders felt that creating an environment where the communication frequency and perception of accessibility were high was their most important task in the remote work context. Further, they emphasized that frequent communication should signal empathy and caring, instead of being considered as a monitoring tool. More structured interaction patterns were considered to increase team-level equality, as leaders had systematized communication with their subordinates, and many kept track of the number of interactions. It seems that the leaders also felt that keeping in regular contact conveyed accessibility. The leaders wanted to signal that they were accessible whenever the subordinates needed them:

I want them [subordinates] to feel that they kind of have support present when they need support. I then interrupt my own work rather than leave them wondering about what needs to be done. (Leader_2)

However, being accessible intensified the leaders' workload. Many leaders felt that the need to be present and accessible was burdensome, although they identified it as an essential element of their work and their role as a leader. Several interviewed leaders made an extra effort to be accessible and actively interact with their team members alongside their other work tasks. Two leaders commented:

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You must make yourself somehow visible, that you are available and present and accessible every day, you ask how people are doing, and you are actively interested in those people, [...] You must remind yourself of that. (Leader_18)

Now when we're all at home, I've had to get used to how can I be accessible. But on the other hand, I'm not exhausting myself with being reachable in every direction all the time. I have meetings and my own work too; a bit of balance in when I respond to the team members' messages. (Leader_11)

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A crucial element of frequent contact and feedback interactions in remote work was the leaders' keeping up with the state and mood of their subordinates. In addition to having regular contact with the subordinates and giving feedback through those interactions, the leaders had to be more observant about the subordinates' well-being, performance and workload. One leader described the need to be able to sense the needs of subordinates:

Caring for team members has been highlighted maybe more, and in a way, observing whether there is a need for help in other ways than just work-related matters. (Leader_13)

In addition to being available online, the leaders also experienced the requirement to be available face-to-face. Many leaders pondered the sufficiency of a virtual environment in delivering feedback. Although both leaders and subordinates described the frequency of the virtual interactions as systemized and frequent, many of the interviewed leaders described that giving feedback or going through personal matters had to be done face-to-face due to the sensitive nature of the issues. One leader reflected on the matter as follows:

Development discussions, for example, I'd like to handle such things face-to-face. And when you give feedback, be it good or bad, it should be done more face-to-face. Yeah, that's nicer if you can get to [the person] physically, and give a hug and thank you for a job well done. Or especially, if there's anything negative, then it's really nasty to handle via Skype. (Leader_26)

The perception of the face-to-face requirement was especially pronounced with leaders, and few subordinates came up with matters that required personal meetings at the office:

Well, I don't see anything that wouldn't work by a remote connection. It doesn't really matter to me whether we're in live contact or through Teams. I don't see that kind of need to meet [face-to-face]. (Subordinate_43)

I can't really say, because I think this [appointments with the leader online] has worked really well. [...] Of course, it's a fact that when you're sitting face-to-face with another person and talking, maybe it's a bit different, the contact of course, but... No, I can't say it makes a huge difference, because I think it works really well. (Subordinate_50)

To summarize, the interview data indicated that routinized communication frequency created a perception of a feedback environment in which the leader (as a source of feedback) was easily accessible. Nevertheless, the interviews also revealed a less positive effect of remote interaction, where despite the subordinates' positive experiences of their leader's availability in remote work, the leaders felt that the process of remote interaction and keeping up with their team increased the intensity of their work.

Tension 2: A close leader-member relationship does not eliminate quality challenges related to remote feedback

The second theme revealed a tension related to the interaction quality, affected by the dyadic relationship quality and duration. The interviews indicate that the feedback source credibility (i.e. the leader's trustworthiness: [Steelman et al., 2004](#)) in many leader-member dyads is high, as people feel emotionally close in remote work. However, the lack of spontaneity and timeliness influence the interaction quality. This hampers the informal, day-to-day feedback instances between the parties.

Many interviewees perceived that their relationship quality with their leader/team member had improved in remote work, contrary to expectations. Communication was perceived as more confidential, as there are no distractions in remote interactions as experienced in the office environment, and the parties do not need to look for a vacant meeting room to hold private conversations. Subordinates described dyadic conversations in remote work as unhurried, whereas in the office context, the interaction often occurred “on the fly”. As one subordinate explained:

It's easier to deal with each other. [...] Surprisingly, even if the distance has increased, so the intimacy has replaced it [physical proximity]. (Subordinate_3)

Indeed, the interviewees perceived their interactions in remote work as being more intimate due to scheduled one-to-one conversations and the private settings of online meetings. Interviewees described the interactions as having more depth than the office small talk. The following excerpt from a leader illustrates how people are encountered as a whole, having non-work factors in their life:

I've noticed through my own experience that people are somehow . . . In their own home, they are more relaxed, and maybe the home comes [through] somehow. . . You know, some kid comes in and sees who is on the video, and stuff like that. Somehow, that relationship becomes more personal. (Leader_8)

It seems, however, that the maturity of the LMX relationship influences the perception of closeness and the need for physical presence in remote work interactions. If the parties were already familiar, being in contact and further developing the relationship was less complicated remotely, which was different to the situation seen in newly established leader-member dyads. When, for example, the patterns for communication and giving feedback and instructions are known, the need for follow-up is reduced, and ensuring the correct reception of the message is easier. Correspondingly, the interviewees from teams with new leaders or team members hired during the remote work period described the need for face-to-face interaction as being greater. The following excerpts illustrate the contrast between relationships with longer temporal spans to those that are newly established:

I don't have such a strong need for it [face-to-face communication] because we've known each other for so long that we do so well with a Teams call or phone call or whatever. But if I had a newer leader, then I'm sure I'd like to take care of development discussions and things like that face-to-face. We had an interim development discussion, and we had it through Teams. I think it was okay. (Leader_9, talking as a subordinate about the relationship with their own leader)

Some of those who have remained in customer support due to this organizational reform are, of course, familiar to me as well, and I've been their leader for a long time. However, some are new team members, and with them, I'll have the process of getting to know them and find out how I can reach everyone, and how to make sure that information has reached them in a necessary way. I know that it hasn't gone very well for everyone in the last couple of weeks, and it still needs a bit of work. (Leader_11)

Despite the interviewees' positive perceptions of the quality of the interactions in remote work, some challenges were identified. The interviewees felt that informal and spontaneous interaction had decreased, and that interactions were often planned, and depending on the channel used, asynchronous. The chances for spontaneous synchronous feedback interactions were diminished, as informal day-to-day interactions and encounters do not materialize as easily online as in the office context. As a consequence, positive feedback that would have been meaningful for the recipient remained unexpressed. The following examples illustrate how informal, spontaneous moments during the day-to-day interactions in the office were assessed as crucial in feedback delivery:

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Well, yeah, I mean, in the office, you can give immediate feedback right away. When we were in an open office, you could stop by and say, “great job, well managed”, and things like that. [. . .] But then [in remote work], sparring, encouragement or feedback is not that common. (Subordinate_27)

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In the office you say thanks, and giving feedback for good performance should be remembered [. . .] It's very important when they [team members] are alone at home and don't hear that normal daily, 'hey, it's good, you took care of it nicely, thank you for doing this'. For us Finns it's maybe a bit more challenging to write 'well done'. You must sometimes really remind yourself of recognizing your team members, as they do an insanely great job. (Leader_14)

However, the interviewees described some equivalents for spontaneous day-to-day feedback interactions within remote work. For example, reactions distributed in chats and other instant messaging applications are perceived as ways of giving spontaneous feedback from a distance. Nevertheless, the quality of such feedback (e.g. the richness of information) was perceived as low. The reactions in the messaging applications are rather easy to convey, and the flow of such feedback can also be annoying to receive, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

So, of course, it has naturally reduced [spontaneous feedback]. If Teams and Skype beep all the time, it might become negative if thumbs-ups occur every fifteen minutes. After all, it doesn't work the same as in office work. (Subordinate_27)

I think, when I do my everyday work as well as I can, I don't need someone telling me weekly that I've done well. [. . .] When there is a reason to say something, it feels meaningful, compared to when it is daily. [. . .] It is not genuine. (Subordinate_29)

In addition to the challenges related to the spontaneity and information value of remote feedback mentioned above, interpreting feedback at a distance was described as challenging. Nonverbal communication is absent in written and oral feedback provided in a video call without a camera connection, increasing the risk of misinterpretation. Two interviewees described the challenges as follows:

The communication is so often written, and you're unable to see another person's gestures and facial expressions and so on. So, it [feedback] can more easily be interpreted as even more negative than the feedback provided was intended, or how the person who gave it wanted it to come out. (Subordinate_45)

If you're trying to present something, you can see from the expressions and reactions of the audience, whether they agree with you. Or is this a good thing. But in Teams, sometimes you feel like you're shouting into a well when you don't necessarily get any feedback from people. What are their vibes and what do they think about out there? (Leader_23)

Overall, the remote work context has created an opportunity to deepen long-term LMX relationships through regular, confidential one-to-one discussions. Nevertheless, the remote work context prevents leader-member dyads from taking advantage of the trustworthy relationship and delivering high-quality feedback. Especially, maintaining informal and spontaneous interaction which forms the foundation of daily feedback procedures and promotes feedback quality (see [Steelman et al., 2004](#); [Dahling et al., 2017](#)) is challenging.

Tension 3: feedback-seeking – promoted but still complicated in remote work

The final theme revealed a tension related to feedback-seeking, implying the extent to which employees are encouraged to seek feedback, and how comfortable they feel seeking it ([Steelman et al., 2004](#)). Although the interviews indicate that feedback-seeking is encouraged by leaders and facilitated by technology in the remote work context, it does not materialize easily. Earlier in this section, we reported how leaders voiced the low threshold for

communication, and how they encouraged subordinates to seek support when needed in remote work. A leader's actions can be interpreted as also promoting feedback-seeking through inquiry. However, at the same time, many leaders expressed concern about subordinates being left alone with challenges. They recognized the extra effort needed to keep communication lines open for feedback, and emphasized the active role of subordinates' in feedback-seeking, especially in remote work:

To find them [the subordinates] and encourage people to talk, so that they just don't stay there wondering and moaning about the situation, and sort of like not taking action and not bringing them [issues] up. (Leader_3)

Creating a safe working community, despite not seeing each other all the time, that's what I think is really important. [. . .] A person doesn't feel like being left alone, or that they dare not approach. Or they think they may interrupt. But I'm not saying it's completely uncomplicated, but it is something I constantly seek to pay attention to. (Leader_17)

The research data also showed how technology facilitated feedback-seeking in remote work. The subordinates thought they were not bothering the leader in the remote context in the same way they did on-site. The leader can choose when to answer, whereas walking up to the leader's desk interrupts their work. Moreover, the possibility to assess the availability of the other party through status messages made it easier to be in contact, and "traffic lights" on virtual platforms indicate whether a person is available, busy, or away. The following examples illustrate how technology promotes feedback-seeking:

I've agreed with everyone close to me with whom I have a lot of message exchange, you can send me a short message anytime, and I'll answer when it's right for me. I usually try to answer in an hour. (Leader_8)

In a way, I don't feel like I'm bothering anyone so much if I send a message, and they can answer right away or later if they are busy. On the other hand, if I go next to them in the office, I immediately feel that I'm disturbing them, even if they don't have anything going on, so maybe it [work in a virtual environment] has been more like positive. (Subordinate_1)

But despite the leaders' efforts and supporting technology, feedback-seeking actions did not always transfer easily to reality. As noted earlier, the contact was not always spontaneous, and the interaction was not instant, which was primarily due to the use of asynchronous communication tools. Also, the initiation to communicate was higher in remote work than in the office, leaving many things disregarded in daily interaction. Notably, this was evident when the subordinate encountered a challenge or a failure:

Well, yeah, I think the discussions in the corridors have been a good thing in that respect, too. You can ask people involved in a project what it looks like and how it feels. But if you want to do that now, you have to call and ask. And there's always a small threshold for calling. And I have to admit, often there will be no call. (Subordinate_11)

Well, maybe it's the fact that you may not broach a minor setback with anyone. Maybe there is, however, a little trouble with contacting. (Subordinate_6)

Moreover, it seems that the nature of remote work (as also raised in previous literature) supports autonomy, and in ideal situations, the development of trust. Many leaders described that remote work had led to higher job autonomy, which leaders did not perceive as a bad thing. The independent way of working was also verbalized to subordinates, and as one leader put it:

Basically, we must be reachable between 9 and 15. But I've told my people that I don't care, you may work in the middle of the night if you want to, as long as things get done. Certain team meetings and things like that are such, where you have to be present. (Leader_27)

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Similarly, several subordinates felt that their leader trusted them. Some leaders had been forced to reduce their supervisory actions due to the pandemic-induced remote work, while for other leaders, the trust towards subordinates was self-evident. The data indicated that there seems to be a fine line between whether a leader's interactive behaviour is regarded as monitoring or support in remote work. Many subordinates connected the leader's absence as a signal of trust and desired performance.

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That is, he [the leader] does not explicitly in any case spy or monitor, which is absolutely excellent; confidence is certainly a hundred per cent. (Subordinate_52)

In conclusion, leaders emphasize the extra effort needed for remote feedback interaction and strive to promote feedback-seeking by maintaining frequent communication. Further, communication technologies seem to promote feedback-seeking. However, soliciting support and feedback appears difficult in remote work, especially when subordinates have encountered challenges. Remaining without feedback might increase the risk of loneliness and reinforce the sense of failure at work.

Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to examine how remote work affects the feedback environment by exploring the daily feedback interactions as perceived by leaders and subordinates. Specifically, the emphasis was on understanding how reciprocity within remote LMX relationships manifests and how it influences the feedback dynamics. To this end, the research question "*how does remote work shape daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate?*" served as a basis for an in-depth qualitative analysis of how feedback interaction emerges when dyad parties work distantly from each other. Combining leaders' and subordinates' perceptions revealed contradictory aspects of dyadic feedback interactions, which we refer to as tensions. We explored three identified tensions using the feedback environment scale (Steelman *et al.*, 2004) as a framework for analysing the dyadic interactions. The contribution of our study to literature is twofold.

Theoretical implications

First, we bridge the gaps in the feedback literature regarding the lack of two-way perceptions of feedback interaction (SRQ1) and examining dyadic feedback in remote settings (SRQ3). The findings show that importantly, interactions between a leader and a subordinate that create the foundation for a feedback environment seemed not to diminish, despite this concern having been raised in earlier studies (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012). The interviewed subordinates appeared to be satisfied with the leader's accessibility online and the trustworthy relationship, which was improved on thanks to the communication routines maintained by the leader. Indeed, the burden of creating and maintaining communication routines falls on leaders, intensifying their work and increasing their cognitive workload, which is a concern brought to light in a prior study on frequent feedback (Tseng *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, remote working subordinates enjoying high levels of autonomy and trust did not actively seek support, even when it might have been needed. Meanwhile, leaders seemed to be searching for a turning point where subordinates might perceive the interaction as monitoring or intrusive, instead of support. Thus, in line with Anseel and Brutus (2019), our findings indicate that a feedback environment should be regarded as a dyadic construct, not solely concentrating on leaders' feedback-supportive behaviour and its perceptions by subordinates, but rather as an encompassing dynamic interplay between the parties involved.

The results also provoke a question of whether the remote work context emphasizes positive feedback interactions: Pleasant and positive issues are more easily brought up, while

matters related to more serious topics such as challenges or failures are postponed, as they are considered to need face-to-face contact (see Kirkman *et al.*, 2002; Krehl and Büttgen, 2022).

Second, this study provides missing empirical evidence regarding the reciprocal exchanges in LMX relationships (SRQ2) and widens the understanding of LMX relationships in remote work by examining remote, dyadic feedback interactions (SRQ3). Consistent with Jiang and Qu (2023), this study reinforces the importance of social exchange in LMX feedback interactions. However, our findings show that the remote work context influences LMX relationships, particularly from the perspective of reciprocity. The findings reveal that the balance of contribution in exchanges, which has been considered a fundamental aspect of LMX (Liden *et al.*, 1997; Lee *et al.*, 2019), might be misaligned in remote work relationships. It seems that leaders hold a greater responsibility within the context of remote work. Thus, subordinates could build their LMX relationship more actively through feedback interactions (see Lam *et al.*, 2007).

In line with Schreier *et al.* (2022), this study emphasizes the importance of a solid and high-quality LMX relationship between leaders and their team members in facilitating feedback exchange. In addition, our research extends the understanding of how context influences subordinates' engagement in feedback interaction in the LMX relationship, highlighting the misaligned reciprocity. Where prior studies report that high-quality LMX relationships promote subordinates' willingness to solicit feedback (Anseel *et al.*, 2015; Chun *et al.*, 2014), our findings from the context of remote work do not support these notions. Moreover, although the study of Huang (2012) shows that subordinates' sense of empowerment via trust in their leader increases the willingness to seek feedback, this does not seem to materialize in high-quality LMX relationships in remote work. The issue of technology can be speculated as creating a barrier to feedback.

To conclude, although both the feedback environment and LMX relationships are dyadic constructs, the results of this study highlight the imbalance between leaders and subordinates in their efforts to maintain exchange and interaction in the remote work context. Particularly, it seems that subordinates should be more proactive in these processes to make them effective and functional.

Practical implications

This study provides useful information for leaders, subordinates, and HR practitioners. First, our findings showed that systemized communication between leaders and subordinates created the perception of improved communication and deepened existing leader-member relations, despite the physical distance. Thus, leader-member dyads could create a communication plan together, including the frequency of communication and the channels to be used. When tracking communication frequency on an individual level, leaders avoid situations where some subordinates could receive fewer opportunities for feedback interaction, even if they might need support in remote work. Such a "communication gap" does not emerge as easily in the office environment where parties are physically present, so the difference is worth noting.

The need for systemized communication leads to further implications for HR practitioners, who could increase the organizational support for leadership and re-evaluate the number of subordinates per leader in remote working teams. This change implies an increase in the number of leaders in organizations. Indeed, keeping communication lines open for feedback individually for each subordinate requires resources. This study showed that leaders felt that informal daily communication (that forms the foundation for frequent feedback) in remote work was vital but burdening. Correspondingly, Tseng *et al.* (2019) are concerned about the cognitive overload of leaders in delivering frequent feedback. The findings of Mertens *et al.* (2021) lead us to the same concern, as they found that the average feedback frequency is 3.8 feedback

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interactions in three weeks, and that there is no upper limit for appropriate feedback frequency when the LMX relationship quality is perceived as high. With this said, it must be asked which feedback procedures (formal or informal) are more stressful and costly? This study challenges the ongoing trend where organizations are replacing formal appraisal processes with informal feedback procedures, as the formal processes are considered to be expensive and burdening (Levy *et al.*, 2017). We do not deny the positive aspects of frequent feedback shown in previous studies (e.g. Kuvaas *et al.*, 2017; Liu *et al.*, 2022). However, we feel that HR practitioners should abandon the yearly performance evaluations with caution, and strive for a balance between frequent and annual appraisal systems (see Gorbatov and Lane, 2018).

Second, the study demonstrates that leaders and subordinates should choose communication channels for feedback carefully, so as to avoid misinterpretation and quality impairment of feedback, even if they (contrary to expectations) experience closeness in their remote relationship. Therefore, face-to-face meetings should not be forgotten in remote work, especially when delivering constructive feedback (Krehl and Büttgen, 2022). While leader-member relationships are essential for creating a favourable feedback environment (Anseel and Brutus, 2019) and their relevance is emphasized in the context of remote work (Liu *et al.*, 2022), HR practitioners should provide training for leaders and subordinates in maintaining high-quality relationships. Additionally, leaders can be trained to give feedback (London, 2015) and promote a favourable feedback environment (Dahling *et al.*, 2017; Gallo and Steelman, 2019). All such training should be focused on virtual environments, improving remote communication skills, the use of ICT communication tools and building and maintaining trust and social networks at a distance, among other things (see Roman *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, the findings indicate that leaders' promotion and technological support in lowering the threshold for feedback-seeking does not activate subordinates to solicit feedback in remote work. Subordinates should therefore recognize their active role in building a favourable feedback environment and actively seek remote feedback (London, 2015). In the same vein, HR practitioners should clarify subordinates' responsibilities in feedback interactions, and provide training to help subordinates seek and receive feedback in remote settings.

Limitations and future research

Despite its strengths in utilizing extensive qualitative interview data that combines the perspectives of both leaders and subordinates in feedback interaction, this study has some limitations that offer fruitful avenues for future research. First, the feedback environment (Anseel and Lievens, 2007), LMX relationships (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012) and remote work (Peters *et al.*, 2016; Raghuram *et al.*, 2001) are known to appear differently in different cultures, due to the variation in cultural dimensions such as individualism and power distance. Therefore, our research results from a Finnish context should be generalized with caution, and further research is needed to expand the understanding of daily remote feedback procedures in leader-member relationships within different cultural contexts.

Second, the data used in this study was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic-induced remote work has been intensive, and the shift towards remote work was rapid and stressful. Additionally, the crisis period burdened many people with other non-work stressors related to health, childcare demands, and financial insecurity. These facts may have affected feedback interactions, as communication with a leader is a form of organizational support that may have helped subordinates cope with the exceptional circumstances (Mihalache and Mihalache, 2021). Thus, a longitudinal study is needed to examine remote feedback interactions beyond the crisis context in the post-COVID-19 environment.

Third, this study provided reciprocal insights from leaders and subordinates into four of seven facets of the feedback environment in the remote work context: source availability,

source credibility, feedback quality and the promotion of feedback-seeking (Steelman *et al.*, 2004). We therefore encourage scholars to broaden the understanding of the remaining feedback environment facets (feedback delivery and frequency of favourable and unfavourable feedback) in a remote context.

Fourth, the current research did not focus on how spontaneous feedback interactions affect the development of LMX relationships in remote work. Thus, future studies could address this aspect in more detail, as developing LMX relationships is vital for feedback interaction and vice versa. The remote work context should be emphasized in these studies, as the organizational context is related to developing the LMX relationship (see Gerstner and Day, 1997).

Finally, this study adopted a qualitative approach, enabling an in-depth interpretation of how feedback interaction in LMX relationships is constructed in remote work. The qualitative approach promotes a holistic understanding of the phenomenon but does not provide causality inference (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). Thus, we welcome longitudinal quantitative studies on the effects of the remote work context on dyadic feedback interaction and the feedback environment.

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Evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work: A psychological contract perspective

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Abstract

The value of human resource (HR) practices depends on how well they align with employees' needs and expectations, rather than on their mere existence. In this study, we explore this rarely studied perspective, focusing on evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work. The psychological contract (PC) theory, underutilized when considering employee HR perceptions, offers a valuable framework for studying HR practices in the evolving post-pandemic work environment. It explains employee behavior as a result of aligning their needs and expectations—expressed through PC elements—with HR practices, ultimately influencing organizational performance. We conducted a template analysis of open-ended responses (n=1278) from an online survey involving employees across 11 units of a multinational company operating in Finland. Our findings reveal nine HR practices reflecting four transactional (tangible, monetizable) and five relational (intangible, socio-emotionally based) PC elements. Employee perceptions of the fulfillment of these PC elements underscore an increasing demand for fully flexible remote work opportunities. Furthermore, the results indicate that effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction—commonly used evaluative measures—may overlap, with satisfaction potentially encompassing other evaluative dimensions. Moreover, the findings indicate that employees fail to recognize the role of training in hybrid work for strengthening the PC, while expecting office-standard benefits at home.

Keywords: employee perceptions, evaluative perceptions, HR practices, psychological contract, hybrid work, remote work

1 INTRODUCTION

Human resource (HR) practices are workforce management processes that significantly impact employee and organizational outcomes (Beijer et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2012; Wright & Boswell, 2002). The widespread adoption of remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the rise of hybrid work (Gifford, 2022; McPhail et al., 2024), is reshaping HR practices (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Haque, 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022). Remote work refers to a work arrangement where employees perform their duties from locations outside the office, typically from home using information communication technology (Allen et al., 2015). Hybrid work combines remote and in-office work, allowing employees some flexibility to split their time between both settings. It involves balancing individual tasks with collaborative interactions, alternating between remote and on-site work, as well as digital and face-to-face interactions (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024; Trevor & Holweg, 2022). With the rise of hybrid work, the field has called for a scholarly examination of emerging HR practices (Gifford, 2022; Lauring & Jonasson, 2024), particularly focusing on understanding and addressing employees' needs (Verma et al., 2023) to proactively address the challenges of hybrid work (Teng-Calleja et al., 2023).

Indeed, assessments of the impact of HR practices has increasingly focused on employees, as it has been recognized that employees' subjective perceptions influence organizational outcomes more effectively than managerial actions (Nishii et al., 2008; Van Beurden et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2024). When examining employee perceptions, it is crucial to understand that the mere existence of HR practices does not indicate their value to employees (Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019). Consequently, the literature distinguishes between different conceptualizations of employee HR perceptions (Wang et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2024). Descriptive perceptions focus on the existence of the HR practices implemented, while evaluative perceptions reflect employees' views on the effectiveness, quality and satisfaction with these practices (Beijer et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Meijerink et al., 2021). However, in current research, descriptive and evaluative perceptions are mainly blended, hampering the assessment of HR practices (for reviews, see Van Beurden et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2024). This ambiguity underscores the need to separate these two types of perceptions more clearly, so as to better understand the outcomes of HR practices (Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021; Van Beurden et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2024).

Moreover, research on employee HR perceptions often fails to justify the choice of theoretical framework, which is crucial for deepening the understanding of these perceptions (Edgar & Geare, 2014; Van Beurden et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2024). The psychological contract (PC) theory provides a valuable yet underutilized framework

for examining the alignment between employee preferences and HR practices (Lepak et al., 2012; Van Beurden et al., 2021). The psychological contract refers to employees' subjective, reciprocal expectations regarding their relationship with the organization (Rousseau, 1989). Employees' needs and beliefs shape these expectations, and the extent to which they are met influences their behavior within the employment relationship (Conway & Briner, 2009; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Rousseau, 1995). Therefore, understanding how HR practices align with employees' needs and expectations—key components determining the content of the psychological contract—is vital for driving employee and ultimately organizational outcomes (Kutaula et al., 2020; Rousseau & Greller, 1994).

Besides offering insights into the value of HR practices for employees, the PC theory serves to understand changes in employee-employer relationships that affect work experiences (Convey & Briner, 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic induced a macro-level change in working life (Howe et al., 2021), reshaping employee expectations and prompting alterations in the PC (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Karani Mehta et al., 2024). Such transformation in the work landscape presents an opportune moment to explore PCs (see Tietze & Nadin, 2011).

Research on psychological contracts is generally categorized into two streams: content, which examines the elements exchanged and the factors influencing these exchanges, and process, which focuses on the antecedents and consequences of contract fulfillment, breach, and violation (Conway & Briner, 2009; Kutaula et al., 2020). These research streams are also present in studies on PCs in remote settings. Most literature focuses on the digitalized remote work environment as a significant factor that shapes psychological contracts (Coetzee, 2021; Dhanpat, 2021; Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010; Raeder, 2021; Tietze & Nadin, 2011; Veldsman & Van Aarde, 2021), with fewer studies specifically addressing content (Adekoya et al., 2022; Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Karani Mehta et al., 2024). The process perspective (including PC fulfillment and breach) is explored in several studies (Gong & Sims, 2023; Gutworth et al., 2024; Hornung & Glaser, 2010; Karani et al., 2022; Yu, 2024), and one study has validated a PC scale for remote work, contributing to both content and process research (Karani Mehta et al., 2024).

Despite content being a primary research thread within PC studies, little is known about these contractual elements within remote work settings (Dhanpat, 2021; Karani Mehta et al., 2024). Furthermore, most empirical PC research relies on quantitative approaches, which have been criticized for inadequately capturing the subjective nature of these contracts (Ali, 2020, 2021; Conway & Briner, 2009). Thus, only two studies have utilized qualitative approaches to explore the content of the psychological contract in remote settings (Adekoya et al., 2022; Karani Mehta et al.,

2024), both with limited participants. Overall, the few qualitative studies on PCs in remote settings—addressing all perspectives, not just PC content—face various limitations, such as small sample sizes (Adekoya et al., 2022; Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010; Karani Mehta et al., 2024; Tietze & Nadin, 2011; Veldsman & Van Aarde, 2021), a focus on a single gender (Tietze & Nadin, 2011), a specific geographical context (Adekoya et al., 2022; Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010), or having been conducted before the pandemic (Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010; Tietze & Nadin, 2011). Therefore, additional qualitative research is needed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of psychological contracts (Ali, 2020, 2021; Conway & Briner, 2009; Nadin & Williams, 2011) and their content in the contemporary work landscape (Dhanpat, 2021; Karani Mehta et al., 2024).

This study aims to investigate evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work, focusing on the alignment between these practices and employees' needs and expectations, using the psychological contract theoretical framework. Adopting a qualitative approach allows for uncovering unexpected perceptions and providing insights into potential improvements in HR practices (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), which is essential for organizations in managing employee and organizational outcomes post-pandemic. The research addresses two key research questions: 1) What are the HR practices highlighted by employees in a hybrid work setting, reflecting elements of the psychological contract? and 2) How do employees evaluate these HR practices? By answering these questions, this study makes three contributions to the literature.

First, we enhance the understanding of psychological contract content in the post-pandemic era, identifying a PC in hybrid work with four transactional (tangible and/or monetizable) and five relational elements, rooted in trust and socio-emotional interaction (see Raeder, 2021; Rousseau, 1990). While all transactional elements remain unmet due to insufficient HR practices, trust and support from organizations and managers, consistent with prior research (Raeder, 2021; Rousseau, 1990; Varma et al., 2022), are crucial in fulfilling the relational elements. Notably, the pursuit of fulfilling relational PC elements appears to result in a contradiction between organizational expectations for office presence and an employee desire for flexibility. The findings also emphasize the need for organizations to help employees internalize key HR practices, such as training, which are vital for strengthening the PC. The study further supports the dynamic nature of the PC (Kutaula et al., 2020; Rousseau, 1995), illustrating how the rise of remote and hybrid work has reshaped employee expectations (Karani Mehta et al., 2024; Smite et al., 2023), expanded the boundaries of the PC (Adekoya et al., 2022), and created challenges to its fulfillment.

Second, we advance the understanding of HR practice assessment by exclusively employing an evaluative approach (Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021; Van Beurden et al., 2021) and justifying the rationale for the theoretical framework used to interpret employee perceptions (Edgar & Geare, 2014; Van Beurden et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2024). Our detailed exploration of the alignment between HR practices and employee needs and expectations uncovers potential overlaps among commonly applied evaluative measures, including effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction.

Third, we enhance the emerging empirical research on HR practices in hybrid work by highlighting both the similarities and differences in employee needs and expectations in relation to existing literature (e.g., Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Couto et al., 2024; Haque, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022; Straus et al., 2023; Suravi, 2024; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023). These findings are informed by the abrupt transition to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the evolving expectations associated with the hybrid work environment.

In practical terms, this study offers several implications for HR professionals, line managers, and employees, all of whom play important roles in shaping the employee experience and managing the PC in hybrid work.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Evolving HR practices

The changing work landscape, influenced by technological advancements and employee preferences, is driving the transformation of HR practices (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Haque, 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022). As Beer et al. (1984, p.34) stated, "HRM policies and practices are not and cannot be formed in a vacuum", underscoring the need for organizations to understand HR practices that are relevant in the current work environment. Thus, building on prior research, we examine HR practices through the lens of remote and hybrid work.

There is no exhaustive universally accepted list of HR practices that support organizational performance; and instead, practices are identified and categorized across various, partly overlapping frameworks (Guest, 2017; Posthuma et al., 2013; Su & Wright, 2012; Wright & Essman, 2021). Research on HR practices in remote and hybrid work is still evolving, and the need for organizational customization prevents the development of a universal framework for remote settings (see Couto et al., 2024). Much of the existing literature is non-empirical (Baumann & Marcum, 2023;

Fayard et al., 2021; Gratton, 2021; Haque, 2023; Author & Author, 2023; Luring & Jonasson, 2024; Suravi, 2024; Trevor & Holweg, 2022). Furthermore, the available empirical studies focus on insights collected during the pandemic lockdowns when remote work was mandated (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Couto et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023; Maddox-Daines, 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022; Straus et al., 2023). Additionally, some empirical research examines individual HR practices within remote and hybrid contexts (Jansson & Kangas, 2025; Skountridaki et al., 2024). Thus, broader samples from various contexts are needed to enhance the understanding of employee insights in developing HR practices in hybrid work (Teng-Calleja et al., 2023).

Recent literature suggests that organizations adopting remote and hybrid work models should prioritize employee well-being. This involves implementing HR practices that ensure ergonomic conditions in home offices (Couto et al., 2024; Maddox-Daines, 2023; Straus et al., 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023), support mental health by reducing social isolation through engagement in collaboration and social events (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Couto et al., 2024; Fayard et al., 2021; Haque, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022; Straus et al., 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023), and help maintain work-life balance as the boundaries between personal life and professional have become increasingly blurred (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Couto et al., 2024; Haque, 2023; Li et al., 2023). Additionally, office spaces should be designed to facilitate both collaboration and focused work (Fayard et al., 2021; Gratton, 2021; Skountridaki et al., 2024; Trevor & Holweg, 2022).

To promote work in remote environments, organizations should also prioritize transparent communication and knowledge-sharing practices (Haque, 2023; Luring & Jonasson, 2024; Shahriar et al., 2022; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023), and ensure integration of new hires into the organization, as onboarding process can be more challenging (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Couto et al., 2024). Empowering employees through job autonomy and flexibility in task performance is crucial (Baumann & Marcum, 2023; Haque, 2023), and involving them in the planning of hybrid work further increases the likelihood of success (Gratton, 2021; Skountridaki et al., 2024).

Remote settings also necessitate training in various areas, including self-leadership (Luring & Jonasson, 2024; Straus et al., 2023), interpersonal skills (Maddox-Daines, 2023; Suravi, 2024; Shahriar et al., 2022), and technology (Couto et al., 2024; Shahriar et al., 2022; Suravi, 2024; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023). Additionally, it is essential to ensure inclusion and fairness in HR practices (Baumann & Marcum, 2023; Gratton, 2021; Haque, 2023; Luring & Jonasson, 2024) and to adapt leadership skills to suit remote environments (Baumann & Marcum, 2023; Jansson & Kangas, 2025; Maddox-Daines, 2023; Suravi, 2024). Finally, organizations should implement result-based

performance evaluations to drive success in remote settings (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Haque, 2023; Author & Author, 2023), while avoiding strict control practices focused on physical presence, as these can stress employees and reduce efficiency (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Maddox-Daines, 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023).

Overall, organizations should align HR practices with employee preferences to enhance motivational outcomes, and consequently improve organizational performance. Understanding employee perspectives on HR practices is essential (Nishii et al., 2008; Van Beurden et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020), as they provide valuable insights into the individual-level processes driving the impact of HR practices on organizational performance (Lepak et al., 2012). The forthcoming subsections provide a comprehensive examination of this topic and discuss gaps in the literature.

2.2 Evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices

The extant research recognizes descriptive and evaluative conceptualizations of employee HR perceptions (Wang et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2024). Although interrelated, these concepts show distinct associations with outcomes, thereby influencing organizational performance differently (Beijer et al., 2021). Descriptive perceptions correlate more strongly with personal and job resources (e.g., competences, empowerment, and organizational support), whereas evaluative perceptions are more closely linked to job attitudes, and displaying motivational outcomes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Meijerink et al., 2021).

Descriptive employee perceptions focus on implemented HR practices (Kehoe & Wright, 2013), reflecting employees' observations regarding the availability of HR practices within the organization (Beijer et al., 2021; Van Beurden et al., 2021). In contrast, evaluative HR perceptions concentrate on capturing how employees emotionally assess HR practices, commonly through measures such as perceived effectiveness, quality, and the satisfaction with practices (Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021). First, effectiveness measures indicate the extent to which the employee perceives HR practices to support them in achieving goals (Edgar & Geare, 2014; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Van Beurden et al., 2021). Put another way, employees may perceive ineffective HR practices as preventing them from performing their tasks (Van Beurden et al., 2021) or as demands requiring excessive effort (Conway et al., 2016). Second, quality measures consider HR practices as services provided to employees (Meijerink et al., 2016; Meijerink et al., 2021) by the HR department and line managers (Gilbert et al., 2011). The focus is on evaluating how well these services are delivered, particularly in terms of accuracy and reliability (Gilbert et al., 2011; Meijerink et al., 2016). Third, overall satisfaction with HR

practices depends on how employees assess HR practices to fulfill their varying needs (Marescaux et al., 2012; Meijerink et al., 2021). As employee needs are unique, researchers typically measure general satisfaction with a selection of HR practices rather than focusing on individual employee needs (Meijerink et al., 2021; see, e.g., Kinnie et al., 2005; Marescaux et al., 2012).

All three evaluative measures reflect the emotional response to how well HR practices align with a chosen benchmark, such as an employee's personal goals, expectations, and needs (Meijerink et al., 2021). When employees feel that HR practices meet their standards, it enhances job satisfaction and organizational commitment, ultimately fostering positive performance-related outcomes (Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007).

This study examines evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work, using the psychological contract as a framework to assess the perceived value of HR practices at an individual level (Lepak et al., 2012; Van Beurden et al., 2021). Existing research often blends descriptive and evaluative approaches in measuring employee HR perceptions, highlighting the need for a separate examination of these perception types (Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019; Edgar & Geare, 2014; Meijerink et al., 2021; Van Beurden et al., 2021). Additionally, although evaluative measures are conceptually similar, they have not been empirically studied together in the HR field (Meijerink et al., 2021), making them a valuable focus of collective investigation.

To understand the factors influencing evaluative perceptions and which drive the outcomes of HR practices, organizations need to be aware of employee needs and expectations underlying the evaluations – i.e. the content of the psychological contract (Lepak et al., 2012). The following section provides a more detailed elaboration of this topic.

2.3 HR practices shaping the psychological contract

The psychological contract is a valuable tool for understanding employee behavior and the dynamics of the employment relationship (Dhanpat, 2021; Rousseau, 1995). It is an unwritten contract grounded in employees' personal beliefs about their mutual obligations with the organization, characterized by its one-sided nature and a lack of formal acknowledgement (Rousseau, 1989, 1995). Employee beliefs are influenced by explicit and implicit promises and responsibilities shaped by the organization (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Rousseau, 1989). Explicit terms refer to employee interpretations of verbal and written policies and agreements, whereas implicit terms infer from organizational culture and patterns in interaction (Conway & Briner, 2009; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Rousseau, 1995). In addition,

psychological contract reflects employees' individual needs (Conway & Briner, 2009; Rousseau, 1995). Grounded in the concept of social exchange and the norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964), the PC describes what employees perceive as their obligations towards the organization, and what they anticipate being promised in return (Rousseau, 1990).

HR practices significantly influence psychological contracts (Guest & Rodrigues, 2024; Kutaula et al., 2020; Raeder, 2021), conveying management's promises and their reciprocal expectations from employees (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Rousseau & Greller, 1994). Notably, line managers play a central role in both implementing these practices (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) and shaping psychological contracts (Conway & Briner, 2009). PC theory helps understand how employees respond to HR practices when their perceived value is high or when expectations remain unmet (Lepak et al., 2012; Nishii et al., 2008; Van Beurden et al., 2021). Essentially, positive perceptions of HR practices encourage employees to reciprocate in ways that benefit the organization, while negative perceptions may lead to detrimental attitudes and behaviors (Wang et al., 2020).

The PC content is commonly categorized by distinguishing between transactional and relational elements (Rousseau, 1990, 1989), which reflect the nature of employee needs and expectations (Conway & Briner, 2009; Rousseau, 1995). Transactional elements involve explicit agreements of exchange, which are clear, specific, and may include tangible resources like salary and benefits (Conway & Briner, 2009; Rousseau, 1990). In contrast, relational elements are more ambiguous and implicit, focusing on the intangible, socio-emotional aspects of employment relationships, such as support and mutual trust (Raeder, 2021; Rousseau, 1990). These two types of elements can coexist within a single contract (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), making them balanced PCs, in which explicit, monetary, and implicit social elements are combined (Rousseau, 1995). Additionally, the proportion of transactional and relational elements can vary within a PC and change over time (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994).

The psychological contract is indeed dynamic, constantly evolving in response to individual employee experiences, preferences, and changes in the organizational environment (Guest & Rodrigues, 2024; Kutaula et al., 2020; Rousseau, 1995). For example, a remote work environment has been found to enhance the fulfillment of relational elements by fostering trust and affective commitment (Hornung & Glaser, 2010). However, other studies suggest that remote employees tend to adopt a more transactional approach, prioritizing task completion over emotional engagement (Raeder, 2021; Tietze & Nadin, 2011), which can lead to reduced loyalty and commitment to their employer (Coetzee, 2021). Indeed, the remote context also

presents challenges such as reduced social interaction, which complicates the relational aspects of the psychological contract (Raeder, 2021). Additionally, prior research suggests that employees are willing to bear the costs of creating a safe and ergonomic home office when working remotely, reflecting a renegotiation of the terms of the PC (Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010).

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a re-evaluation of the psychological contract (Karani Mehta et al., 2024; Veldsman & Van Aarde, 2021), as the large-scale shift to remote work has redefined flexible work arrangements such as hybrid work, from a privilege for a select few into a fundamental right for all digital knowledge workers (Smite et al., 2023; Veldsman & Van Aarde, 2021). In this evolving work environment, employee expectations have increased regarding organizational support for job autonomy (Adekoya et al., 2022; Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020), well-being (Yu, 2024), and work-life balance (Adekoya et al., 2022; Gong & Sims, 2023). Furthermore, the significance of other relational aspects such as structured communication (Adekoya et al., 2022; Gong & Sims, 2023) and knowledge sharing (Gutworth et al., 2024; Karani et al., 2022) has been underscored.

Organizations should further strengthen relational PC aspects by supporting employees' personal and professional aspirations, including self-directedness, training and learning opportunities, and meaningful work – career values that are increasingly important to employees in current working life (Coetzee, 2021). In essence, organizations should demonstrate care for their employees and provide the necessary support to help them effectively perform their tasks and meet organizational expectations (Karani et al., 2022; Yu, 2024). Under such a revised PC, hybrid work represents a mutual agreement based on trust and fairness, which both the organization and employees honor, relying on shared leadership, self-discipline, and accountability (Adekoya et al., 2022). As Veldsman and Van Aarde (2021) suggest, in psychological contracting, engaging employee experiences should be the foundation for designing organizational practices in the current working environment.

In sum, psychological contract theory offers a valuable framework for exploring how fulfilling or failing to meet employee needs and expectations—manifested as transactional and relational PC elements—affects their attitudes and behavior. Organizations can facilitate the fulfillment of these PC elements by recognizing the HR practices related to them. Given that PCs are dynamic and responsive to changes, organizations need to remain attuned to evolving employee preferences and shifts in the work environment. Recent macro-level changes in the working landscape, such as the rise of hybrid work arrangements, have significantly impacted employee

expectations, making the exploration of HR practices in hybrid work through the lens of PC theory is particularly relevant.

The literature reviewed in subsections 2.1 and 2.3 highlights key aspects of HR practices and the role of PCs in remote settings. To assess whether employees recognize and value these aspects, further qualitative research is necessary. Indeed, for HR practices to influence employee outcomes, they must first be recognized by employees, as this recognition is essential for evaluation (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, this study explores which HR practices employees highlight and how they evaluate these practices. The practices employees raise can be interpreted as important for them and, consequently, relevant to their psychological contract, which is shaped by subjective needs and expectations. In doing so, the study aims to address the need for a more comprehensive understanding of PCs (Ali, 2020, 2021; Conway & Briner, 2009; Nadin & Williams, 2011) and its contemporary elements (Dhanpat, 2021; Karani Mehta et al., 2024), while also advancing the development of HR practices for hybrid work (Gifford, 2022; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023), with a focus on addressing employee needs (Verma et al., 2023).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data sample and collection

The research data is extracted from a large-scale questionnaire aimed to explore HR practices in hybrid work in a multinational company operating in technology manufacturing industry in Finland. The survey, conducted in December 2022, collected data from 11 autonomous units, each with full decision-making autonomy. In this organization, hybrid work follows the widely used 3/2 model, which in this case entails three days of office presence and two days of remote work each week (see Bloom, 2021; Trevor & Holweg, 2022).

Researchers commonly use standardized surveys to gauge employee perceptions of specific HR practices. However, limited response options on a 5-point Likert scale may hinder a deeper understanding of how employees perceive and engage with these practices (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994). In contrast, a qualitative approach enables a more nuanced exploration of psychological contract content and provides insights that standardized surveys might overlook (Ali, 2021; Conway & Briner, 2009).

In the survey, multiple-choice questions invited respondents to consider their subjective experiences of hybrid work (e.g. supervisor support and work loneliness),

while the open-ended question at the end, 'What are your thoughts on the current HR practices in hybrid work in your organization?', provided an opportunity to share their thoughts on the organization's HR practices. The responses to this open-ended question, which form the data for this study, reflected employees' needs and expectations, as well as their (un)fulfillment, which lie at the core of the psychological contract.

The survey was distributed to 3329 employees whose roles were suitable for remote work, with 1641 (49 %) responding. Of these respondents, 1278 answered the open-ended question. The respondents who answered this question included 75 % men and 25 % women, with a mean age of 44.9 years. Most respondents (53,6 %) worked remotely most of their time, specifically 51–99 % of their working hours. Nearly one-fifth (16,4 %) indicated that they worked remotely for half of their working time, while 24 % worked remotely for less than half (1–49%) of their working hours. Smaller percentages of respondents worked fully office-based (3.8 %) or fully remotely (2.1 %). The average remote working rate among respondents was 56.8 %, with a median of 60 %, suggesting a slight skew towards higher remote working rates.

3.2 Analysis

To address the research questions, we employed template analysis (King & Brooks, 2017), which offers a structured yet flexible form of thematic analysis that enables the identification and interpretation of patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This method is particularly effective for organizing large data sets and is well-suited for studies that combine theory-driven deductive and data-driven inductive approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2022; King & Brooks, 2017). Template analysis has been applied in qualitative organizational studies examining employee views and experiences (e.g., Jansson & Kangas, 2025; Kele & Cassell, 2023; Tomczak, 2022), as well as in research on the psychological contract (e.g., Ali, 2020, 2021; Nadin & Williams, 2011; Tietze & Nadin, 2011). NVivo software was used to support the analysis.

Initially, the lead author read through all the responses to become familiar with the data, making notes on its content. Following this, she developed a preliminary, deductive a priori coding template (King & Brooks, 2017), aligned with the research aim, and grounded in theory. The preliminary coding covered evaluative employee measures of effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction (Beijer et al., 2021; Boon et al., 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021), capturing both positive and negative perceptions within each measure.

In the second phase, the authors engaged in a reflective discussion on the preliminary coding template, focusing particularly on its relevance to the fulfillment of PC. The analysis highlighted the need to explore what employees explicitly discuss when evaluating HR practices in hybrid work within each measure. This led to an inductive approach in clustering the data from the preliminary coding template (King & Brooks, 2017), and prompted the development of research questions. The data-driven clustering revealed specific HR practices that represent the elements of PC in hybrid work.

In the third phase, the lead author developed a hierarchical initial coding template based on clustering from the prior stage (King & Brooks, 2017). The a priori template evolved into a model where the identified HR practices were categorized into transactional and relational elements of PC, illustrating the nature of employee needs and expectations (see Conway & Briner, 2009; Rousseau, 1990, 1995). As template construction is an iterative process, the template was revised as the analysis progressed (King & Brooks, 2017). In coding, open-ended responses were treated as reflections of employee needs and expectations, as respondents highlighted personally relevant issues when given the opportunity to express themselves freely. Through the lens of the psychological contract, these initially descriptive perceptions—offering insights into the availability or absence of HR practices within the organization (see Beijer et al., 2021; Van Beurden et al., 2021)—can be interpreted as evaluative perceptions in this context, as they inherently reveal whether employee needs and expectations are being met. Consequently, positive and negative evaluative perceptions of HR practices were identified.

The fourth phase involved further development of the coding template, which was shaped through multiple discussions between the authors, partial coding of the data by the second author, and a subsequent refinement of the identified HR practices. Once unanimous agreement on the final coding template was achieved, the lead author re-coded the entire dataset to ensure the coding comprehensively reflected the data (King & Brooks, 2017).

As King and Brooks (2017) emphasize, the final coding template is merely a tool for guiding the analysis, rather than an end in itself. Thus, in the final phase, the authors revisited the evaluative employee perceptions and sought to interpret how the identified HR practices and their related PC elements reflect employee views on effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction.

Overall, through the lens of the psychological contract, the analysis provided insight into which HR practices and the corresponding PC elements are salient to employees in the context of hybrid work, and how these are evaluated. Notably, although the data collection occurred at the unit level, the analysis was conducted at the employee

level, reflecting the PC's foundation in individual perceptions. Consequently, this study focuses on employee-level analysis across multiple HR practices (Lepak et al., 2012; see Wright & Boswell, 2002, p. 250, for the typology of micro and macro HRM research), and unit-level comparisons are discussed only when they influence employee-level perceptions.

The quality of this study is reflected in its conceptual coherence, achieved by aligning the research aims, methodology and data interpretation (see Braun & Clarke, 2021). A mixed deductive and inductive approach, facilitated by template analysis, was adopted to explore predefined measures such as effectiveness, quality and satisfaction, while also identifying the factors behind these assessments. Acknowledging the researchers' subjectivity in data interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022; King & Brooks, 2017), the study employed reflexivity throughout the analysis (King & Brooks, 2017) to minimize bias arising from the authors' assumptions about the functionality of hybrid work and relevant HR practices for remote settings. Lastly, to ensure empirical rigor, we provide detailed insights into the coding and analysis processes (Pratt et al., 2020). Next, we present our findings and a final coding template that illustrates the HR practices and related to elements of PC in hybrid work and their evaluation.

4 FINDINGS

The data reveal nine HR practices and the associated elements of the psychological contract in hybrid work, reflecting employee needs and expectations. Four of these elements are transactional in nature and include working time monitoring, office premises, fringe benefits, and employee voice. The remaining five elements are relational and pertain to job autonomy, fairness, interaction and collaboration, work-life balance, and well-being at work. A detailed discussion of these elements and their evaluation follows.

4.1 Transactional PC elements and related HR practices

Working time monitoring to ensure adherence to the 3/2 model can be considered an HR control practice (see Su & Wright, 2012; Wright & Essman, 2021). It can also be seen as an explicit condition presented to employees, making it a tangible dimension of the psychological contract. Responses revealed the lack of value of this HR practice to employees, indicating unmet expectations related to this PC element concerning the oversight of hybrid work. Adhering to the number of mandated office days posed both bureaucratic and practical challenges, for example, when employees opted to work from home due to health reasons. In addition, some respondents reported

limited working hours during remote workdays, with flextime credit accumulating only on office days. The most emotionally charged negative evaluations of hybrid work arrangements revolved around this practice, implying criticism towards the limited freedom to choose remote work. The following responses reflect the challenges and frustration stemming from the working time tracking in hybrid work:

I think the 3/2 model should be indicative, rather than a strictly monitored indicator. [---]. The measurement is also distorted when people have flu symptoms or COVID themselves or in their family and cannot go to the office but work remotely. More power should be given to line managers to ensure that people work in the office and remotely as long as tasks are performed, and targets are met.

It [hybrid work] worked fine for quite a while, then suddenly someone came up with the idea of going back to the previous millennium and starting to stalk attendance times. The company forges ahead to an all-time record year after year in challenging times, and then we have HR and a certain part of the management team start bitching that the work that led to this result was done too much remotely.

Organizational investments in *office facilities*, seen as a crucial HR practice for supporting employees in their daily operations (Guest, 2017), represent a tangible PC element measurable in monetary terms. Aligning with the principle of reciprocity of the PC (Blau, 1964; Rousseau, 1990), responses implied that employees expected the organization to ensure adequate workspace conditions if required to work in the office regularly. This HR practice emerged in multiple responses, with employees critiquing the office premises for not supporting hybrid work, thus highlighting its importance as an element of the psychological contract. Firstly, many expressed a preference for having assigned work desks instead of utilizing shared workstations:

I hate mobile seating – chairs, desks, screens require adjustments in both open and quiet spaces.

Also, the lack of assigned desks in a large office means that you never know who of your colleagues are at the workplace. It's possible to spend a day in the office without seeing a single familiar face, even though they may actually be present.

Additionally, many respondents desired more quiet rooms. They found the ambient noise of an open office disruptive, partly due to the pandemic period that had accustomed them to the quiet environment of a home office:

Tasks that require concentration suffer from working in an office due to the inefficiency of a multifunctional office. A quiet area is not quiet. Office sound zones are not working, and people are not following the office rules.

Respondents also emphasized that the office should not only provide a space for focused work, but also facilitate social interaction:

The office should also be an attractive place to come to: not noisy, good opportunities to meet colleagues without disturbing others.

Fringe benefits which are a component of compensation and benefit practices (Posthuma et al., 2013) emerged as another monetizable yet unfulfilled element of the PC. Some respondents highlighted the absence of meal benefits on home office days and desired lunch vouchers as a substitute for subsidized lunches at the workplace. Additionally, there was frequent dissatisfaction with the organization's insufficient support for acquiring home workspace essentials:

I think that it works quite well but I would appreciate getting wifi costs paid by the company and support for my home office equipment for ergonomics.

Finally, the data revealed the concept of *employee voice*, which encompasses HR practices that empower employees in their work-related decision-making processes (Guest, 2017; Posthuma et al., 2013; Skountridaki et al., 2024) and promote transparent communication (Haque, 2023). We classify this theme as transactional, because both the opportunity for employees to influence hybrid work arrangements and the formal communication of HR practices are clearly defined elements, reflecting their transactional nature. However, the data indicated that contrary to their expectations, employees were not consulted in the planning for hybrid work. Additionally, rumors of tightening conditions for hybrid work contributed to employee anxiety. The following extracts illustrate the criticism regarding the exclusion of employees and the lack of transparency in these matters:

First, we thought with the team about what is the right ratio of office/remote work for us, then the big boss decided how much time we should spend in the office. Employees could be consulted on how much of each job could be done remotely.

We're hanging by a thread. All the time we're kept on tenterhooks, that now the hybrid phase is only temporary [- -]. It's a bit like trying to work while holding your breath.

In sum, working time monitoring, office premises, fringe benefits, and employee voice were identified as HR practices related to explicit, tangible, and/or monetizable PC

elements in hybrid work. These four transactional elements received exclusively unfavorable views, as employees perceived them as lacking value in facilitating work, not fulfilling reciprocity, and/or failing to meet their expectations and needs. More variation in perceptions was observed within relational elements, as detailed below.

4.2 Relational PC elements and related HR practices

Job autonomy refers to job design practices and the level of discretion employees have in conducting their tasks (Guest, 2017; Posthuma et al., 2013). Regarding the psychological contract, expectations of autonomy in remote settings entail the idea of reciprocity, where employees seek autonomy in decision-making to enhance productivity and fulfill their obligations to the organization (Adekoya et al., 2022; Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). Positive perceptions of autonomy were evident among employees whose line manager had introduced a hybrid working model with flexibility, enabling employees to work from where it is most efficient. The respondents who enjoyed a high level of autonomy did not face strict restrictions on office days, and many expressed gratitude for the autonomy and responsibility that was granted. They highlighted how line managers applied common sense in leading hybrid work, and the practices in place within the team were described as more lenient than the organizational norms:

At the moment everything is working well and relaxed, although at one point some boss announced that we would have a 3/2 model. So 3 days in the office and max 2 remotely. However, I've actually implemented that quite freely in a 2/3 or 1/4 format, i.e. more remote than in the office, and it has worked well. The line manager has also not expressed any disagreement with this, and I think it's fine for me to be able to determine how much I do remotely and how often I'm in the office, according to my needs.

In contrast, there were also several respondents voicing discontent with restricted empowerment at work. This issue arose from the organization's adoption of the 3/2 model, which was perceived as constraining autonomy:

The current 3/2 model is too restrictive. However, much of the work can be done more efficiently remotely. It would be better if the remote/office work ratio could vary more freely depending on the situation. For example, there are weeks when it would be more efficient to work almost 100 % remotely, but the current model does not allow for this when you have to be in the office at least 60 % of the time.

The dissatisfaction was exacerbated by the organization's failure to justify the mandatory office days. Employees perceived the fixed attendance quota as inflexible and artificial. They felt they were subject to unjustified scrutiny, undermining the expectation of mutual trust underlying the PC (see Adekoya et al., 2022; Hornung & Glaser, 2010):

Rules that are too strict and restrictive, as if we are not trusted. We are experts and we carry out our work with professional pride. If there were deliberate omissions, it would be noticed.

Common (rigid) rules serve no one, they only make people feel bad. The old-fashioned view that only work done in the office is real work shines through clearly in the communication between HR and management.

Fairness in the workplace involves practices that ensure equitable opportunities and rights for all employees (Baumann & Marcum, 2023; Gratton, 2021). It is also a key component of the psychological contract (Adekoya et al., 2022; Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020), with varied fulfillment being observed in this study. Some respondents praised the organization's fairness efforts in adopting a unified 3/2 model for hybrid work. However, fairness was not realized for all respondents, primarily due to inconsistencies in how line managers implement hybrid work. These inconsistencies were noted both between different units and within teams of the same unit, highlighting the significant impact of managerial actions on employee perceptions of fairness.

Practices vary quite a lot. Even within my own unit. It seems to depend on the boss and one's face [i.e., whether the line manager likes the particular employee or not] as to what the applied practice is.

The idea [of hybrid work] is good, but in practice it seems that it is not being implemented. Many colleagues have not returned to the office at all, and managers do not necessarily insist on it. So, are staff members being treated equally?

The third relational PC element in hybrid work emerging from the data is linked to HR practices supporting *interaction and collaboration* (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Guest, 2017; Kinnie et al., 2005), which have been recognized as particularly important practices affecting PC in remote settings (Gutworth et al., 2024; Karani et al., 2022). The responses indicated that employees' needs and expectations for social interaction were met to varying degrees. Some respondents felt that the mandatory office days sufficiently facilitated social interaction with their colleagues:

I'm quite satisfied. I think it's very good that you can decide whether to work half your time at work or remotely. On the other hand, it's also good that you spend half of your working time on site, so that you can stay in touch with your work community and colleagues.

The current HR practices in hybrid work have worked well, and it is easy for the team to keep track of who is in the office if they want to plan their working week, so that they can see their colleagues face to face.

However, most responses related to this theme highlighted concerns about information flow, collaboration, community, and the onboarding of new hires in hybrid work, expressing a desire for more common office days. Respondents felt that tacit information was not adequately shared, and that collaboration suffered due to varying office hours. Additionally, many were concerned about weakened team spirit and the challenges of onboarding newcomers remotely, as illustrated by the following examples:

Hybrid work with other functions is difficult. A few examples: I don't know the attendance of other teams, some teams work a great deal remotely, you don't get to know new people, you don't know when some people leave the organization.

Functional for long-term employees, but challenging for newcomers to their careers. The overall decrease in contact is exacerbating the atmosphere in hybrid work, too.

Work-life balance refers to a person's ability to manage obligations in both their professional and personal life (Haar, 2013). Hybrid work, encompassing remote work and flexible working hours, is an HR practice that can support employees in achieving this balance (Adekoya et al., 2022; Haque, 2023). Importantly, addressing work-life conflicts reduces the risk of psychological contract breach (Gong & Sims, 2023). Several respondents expressed gratitude to the organization for enabling hybrid work and hoped for its continuation to uphold work-life balance. In contrast, other respondents desired greater flexibility to enhance their work-life balance. The following quotes demonstrate the variation in how this practice meets employee expectations and needs:

I have enough freedom to choose when I work remotely. It helps me balance family life with work, for example, when the kids are home sick and can't go to school or daycare, I can still work almost a full day from home.

I don't understand why I must come to the office when the same work could be done more efficiently at home and commuting time could be used for other aspects of life.

Well-being at work emerged as the fifth and final relational PC element from the data. When seen as a flexible work arrangement, hybrid work itself supports employee well-being (Adekoya et al. 2022; see Guest, 2017). Notably, well-being has become paramount in influencing the PC in post-pandemic work settings (Veldsman & Van Aarde, 2021; Yu, 2024). Like other relational elements that have been discussed earlier, this aspect prompted varied evaluations reflecting differences in meeting employee preferences. Respondents with positive perceptions described that hybrid work's flexibility improved their resilience at work and warmly welcomed its widespread adoption in working life:

It's good that hybrid working is possible. Helps an ageing worker to cope.

Hybrid working is the best thing the company has ever done to promote well-being at work.

In contrast, some respondents considered the negative consequences of hybrid work on well-being, such as reduced interaction as discussed earlier in this section. Other critical assessments arose from unmet needs and expectations related to transactional factors, such as insufficient organizational support for ergonomics as noted in the discussions on fringe benefits. Moreover, the rigidity of the organization's 3/2 model was reported to cause stress and hinder employee well-being, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

HR's way of tracking attendance rates is very old-fashioned and not conducive to anyone's well-being. I would recommend HR to familiarize themselves with modern management and the determinants of people's well-being. Furthermore, if anyone has the time for that kind of tracking then I would immediately recommend looking at our need for an HR department of the current size.

The findings highlight job autonomy, fairness, work-life balance, interaction and collaboration, and well-being at work as HR practices related to relational elements of the psychological contract in hybrid work. These elements elicited diverse perceptions. Respondents who felt their needs and expectations of support were fulfilled expressed positive views. Conversely, respondents whose preferences were not met had negative perceptions, highlighting perceived deficiencies in organizational or managerial support and/or trust. Specifically, job autonomy reflected expectations of reciprocity in terms of trust.

Overall, Figure 1 visually summarizes the HR practices highlighted by employees and the related transactional and relational elements of the psychological contract in hybrid work. These elements reflect employee needs and expectations, emphasizing their subjective importance. The following section examines how employees perceive the effectiveness, quality, and overall satisfaction of these HR practices.

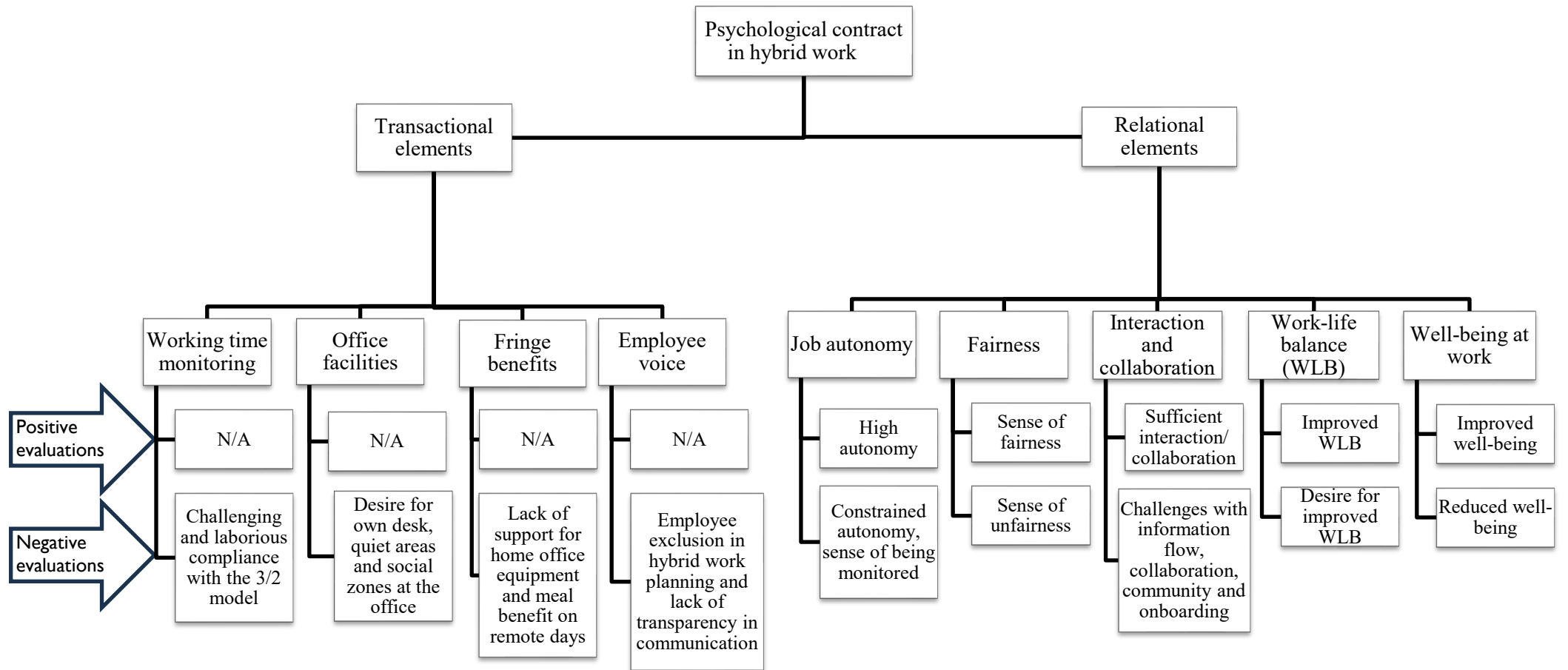


Figure 1. HR practices in hybrid work raised by employees, their connection to the psychological contract elements and their evaluation

4.3 Evaluative employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work

As summarized in Figure 1 above, employees hold mixed views on HR practices in hybrid work, here interpreted as elements of PC. They express favorable perceptions through appreciation and acknowledging their fulfilled needs, while unfavorable perceptions are conveyed through criticism and raised concerns. This variation is noticeable across all three measures of effectiveness, quality and satisfaction, which are further discussed below. Previous research suggests that a collection of HR practices has a greater impact on outcomes compared to individual practices, as these practices work together, synergistically reinforcing each other (Boon et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2024). Thus, we analyze HR practices in hybrid work as a bundle.

4.3.1 Perceived effectiveness

The way HR practices in hybrid work support goal achievement became evident through favorable evaluations regarding their effectiveness (see Edgar & Geare, 2014; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Van Beurden et al., 2021). First, the responses included many short comments, such as “functions well”, “functioning practices”, and “a functional solution”. These functionality-related responses cannot be attached to any specific HR practice, but they can be seen as reflecting a positive perception of the utility of HR practices in hybrid work in supporting work. Second, respondents who experienced high job autonomy due to their line managers, which enabled them to work from the most effective locations, generally held positive perceptions of effectiveness:

Very good practices. Both me and the employer get the best possible result with this arrangement!

Third, respondents who felt that mandatory office days provided enough interaction with colleagues tended to perceive that HR practices in hybrid work as supportive of their needs, as illustrated below. This team adapted the 2/3 model by requiring only two mandatory office days instead of three:

I think the current average of 2 days in the office and 3 days remotely is excellent [- -] Going on-site 2 times a week on average means I always get to see colleagues and catch up.

On the other hand, the responses also revealed inefficiencies in HR practices that impeded task execution (see Van Beurden et al., 2021). Many respondents felt that the fixed 3/2 model of mandatory office days did not adequately consider the nature of their work and constrained autonomy. For example, scheduling challenges arose

because office days often involved not only tasks requiring social interaction, but also remote meetings. The following excerpts illustrate the experienced ineffectiveness of the 3/2 model and indicate a preference for remote work over hybrid work:

It seems silly to hunt around the office for free booths for Teams meetings just because of mandatory office attendance. It's a hindrance to work. Waste of working time.

The amount of remote work could be increased, because during my time in the office, no tasks have arisen that would require me to be there, and my productivity in the office drops significantly.

Furthermore, respondents faced challenges arising from inadequate office facilities and weakened interaction and collaboration, as previously described in this section. Lastly, the responses indicate that complying with the requirements of working time monitoring was perceived as challenging and demanding excessive effort (see Conway et al., 2016). The following quotes reflect on this matter with sarcasm and frustration:

Dear HR / [organization's name], could you please create a time and attendance code in SAP called "I worked while sick" or "I was sick but not sick enough not to work". I would use these instead of the current code "Remote work" in the cases above. A written request from HR to come to the office while having a cold/cough to meet office hours quantification goals would work, too.

I don't understand, why we need to fill the excel file out every time we are supposed to go to the office. I can tell my colleagues directly when I am planning to go to the office. I think the excel files and all that bureaucracy is meant for the managers to track us, in particular, when we go to the office and how often.

4.3.2 Perceived quality

First, indications of quality are evident in employees' varying perceptions of the accuracy of organizational practices (see Gilbert et al., 2011; Meijerink et al., 2016). While some respondents consider HR practices in hybrid work as clear and well-designed, others perceive them as "somewhat" or "very" unclear, noting inconsistencies in the organization's policy on hybrid work. This ambiguity can undermine the accuracy, and consequently, the quality of HR practices in hybrid work, as can be interpreted from the following excerpts:

The practices are unclear, with different agreements and interpretations of what the hybrid model means across various units.

There is no clear indication of the amount of remote work allowed. In practice, the amount is now quite flexible, which is a very good thing. However, it would be good if this was clearly stated.

Second, the reliability in delivering HR practices (Gilbert et al., 2011; Meijerink et al., 2016) plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of HR practice quality, particularly through the implementation efforts of line managers (Gilbert et al., 2011; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). As discussed earlier, the way line managers implement the 3/2 model influences employee perceptions of HR practices concerning job autonomy and fairness. Therefore, consistent managerial implementation is essential for establishing reliability, and consequently, the overall quality of HR practices. The following quotes illustrate the importance of managerial actions in shaping employee perceptions:

I support hybrid and remote work, but attention should be paid to how work is managed. The line manager plays a significant role in the team's performance. It feels wrong that some people have "special privileges" regarding remote work.

The practices haven't been guided particularly well. If there are guidelines, they are not communicated or monitored for implementation.

4.3.3 Perceived overall satisfaction

When assessing employee satisfaction with HR practices, the focus lies in how well these practices collectively address the diverse needs and expectations of employees (Meijerink et al., 2021). The open-ended survey question which sought employees' thoughts and opinions on the current HR practices in hybrid work elicited numerous succinctly positive responses, such as "ok," "good," "very good," "great," and "excellent". These comments indicate overall satisfaction and the fulfillment of diverse needs. Additionally, expressions like "I'm satisfied", "I'm quite satisfied", and "I'm very satisfied" frequently emerged. However, from these short, positive answers, it is not possible to determine exactly what employees are satisfied with, such as whether they are satisfied with the quality or the efficiency of HR practices in hybrid work. Moreover, the favorable comments on the relational PC elements and related HR practices discussed earlier, further underscore employee satisfaction with various aspects. Respondents brought up their preferences and explained how they are being met through HR practices in hybrid work.

In contrast, the data did not include brief negative comments indicating general dissatisfaction. Instead, negative responses were consistently accompanied by explanations of the underlying reasons for dissatisfaction. Respondents who voiced

criticism and concerns highlighted issues they believed needed improvement within the hybrid working model. The overarching source of dissatisfaction was not related to hybrid work per se, but rather to the limitations imposed on remote work. Indeed, due to the pandemic-induced mandatory work-from-home period, many employees prefer remote work, which they have become accustomed to and feel entitled to (Smite et al., 2023), and which was also seen in this study. Positive comments highlighted satisfaction with remote work arrangements, which have become a deciding factor for employees considering new job opportunities:

Remote work has become a necessity. If it changed substantially, there would even be grounds for me to resign.

Very good. I would no longer work in a company where I couldn't work remotely.

On the other hand, some respondents expressed concerns about colleagues leaving the organization due to the restrictions of remote work. Moreover, others explicitly stated their intentions to seek employment elsewhere. These decisions were due to the organization's inflexibility to allow employees to freely opt for remote work, thus failing to accommodate employee preferences:

Really bad [respondent's view on hybrid work], the work can be done 100 % remotely. No point going to the office to talk shit!!! I can't get anything done in the office and then I have to push myself on remote days to get everything done that I don't get done on office days. I'm really annoyed with the way [organization's name] works and that's why I'm changing employer as soon as possible.

Overall, the evaluation of HR practices raised by employees reveals how these practices support or hinder their work in hybrid settings (see Lepak et al., 2012; Van Beurden et al., 2021). These insights are crucial for organizations, as they support the alignment of HR practices with employee needs and expectations, which is fundamental for fulfilling the psychological contract and thereby influencing employee attitudes and behavior.

5 DISCUSSION

This study examined employees' evaluative perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work, focusing on how these practices align with their needs and expectations, which are reflective of psychological contract elements. Psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989, 1995) served as a lens to analyze the perceived value of these practices in meeting employee preferences. Unlike quantitative surveys that typically

predefine HR practices and employee needs within specified questions (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), this qualitative study allowed employees to express their thoughts freely on HR practices in hybrid work. As a result, numerous respondents shared their views, revealing their needs and expectations, along with their fulfillment or any perceived lack thereof. Although the responses largely centered on the positive and negative aspects of the 3/2 model (hybrid work in general), they also allowed for an interpretation of the HR practices that influenced these aspects. This also uncovered the content of PC within the hybrid work context. Our findings have implications for both theory and practice.

5.1 Implications for theory

First, this study broadens the understanding of PC content in the post-pandemic era. The findings indicate that the PC in hybrid work encompasses four transactional and five relational elements, illustrating a balanced PC type (Rousseau, 1995). The results align with prior research emphasizing the significance of both transactional and relational elements in addressing the diverse needs and expectations of employees (Coetzee, 2021). However, there are variations in the fulfillment of different types of elements within the PC. Expectations of transactional elements all remain unmet due to either the absence of related HR practices or the present practices being perceived as challenging and burdensome. This is a noteworthy finding considering the predominance of transactional elements in contemporary working life (see Raeder, 2021; Tietze & Nadin, 2011).

The findings further reveal that employees did not highlight training when evaluating HR practices in hybrid work. However, existing literature identifies training as a critical HR practice that strengthens the PC and fosters positive employee attitudes and behaviors (Coetzee, 2021; Rousseau & Greller, 1994). Depending on the organizational context, training can encompass both transactional and relational dimensions (Conway & Briner, 2009). These insights underscore the importance of organizations in helping employees recognize and understand key HR practices that contribute to the psychological contract (see Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Rousseau & Greller, 1994).

Consistent with prior literature, organizational and managerial support and trust prove pivotal for fulfilling relational PC elements (Raeder, 2021; Rousseau, 1990). The role of the line manager becomes particularly evident in remote settings, where the organization depends heavily on interpersonal relationships. In these environments, managers are essential in fostering employee connection to the organization, promoting well-being, and supporting a healthy work-life balance (Varma et al., 2022). However, our findings indicate that managers must navigate the

tension between organizational expectations for on-site presence and the employees' preference for flexibility in remote working (see Pak et al., 2024). Interestingly, the findings further indicate that fulfilling relational PC elements could lead to an increase in remote work, which in turn poses challenges in maintaining these relational elements. This creates a paradox, given that relational PC elements build upon socio-emotional aspects, such as trust and support, that are more challenging to maintain at a distance due to challenges in interaction (see Coetzee, 2021; Raeder, 2021).

Moreover, our findings support the notion of the impact of a changing working landscape on the PC (Karani Mehta et al., 2024; Smite et al., 2023). Remote work opportunities seem to contribute to PC fulfillment, and thereby, affect employee outcomes differently than they did before the pandemic. Hornung and Glaser (2010) suggested in their pre-pandemic study that based on social exchange (Blau, 1964), employees feel morally obligated to reciprocate when remote work is seen as a special benefit, but not when it is a standard option. Indeed, our post-pandemic research data indicated heightened employee expectations towards remote work, now perceived as a fundamental right for knowledge workers (see Smite et al., 2023; Veldsman & Van Aarde, 2021). Consequently, criticism was directed towards the hybrid work model, among other things, due to its ineffectiveness and inflexibility. Therefore, it can be speculated whether, if adopted before the pandemic, the hybrid work model would have faced similar criticism regarding issues such as burdensome working time monitoring and limited autonomy. Adekoya et al. (2022) noted that the boundaries of the psychological contract were expanded during the pandemic crisis, necessitating greater mutual trust, fairness, and respect between employees and their organizations. These heightened expectations appear to persist in the post-pandemic work environment.

The study also identifies a shift in the obligations within the employer-employee relationship, reinforcing the suggestion that PC is dynamic and changes over time (Guest & Rodrigues, 2024; Kutaula et al., 2020; Rousseau & Greller, 1994). Research conducted by Jaakson and Kallaste (2011) prior to the pandemic indicated employees' willingness to bear the cost of equipping their home office in return for the remote work opportunity. Our findings from post-pandemic work environment, where hybrid work has become a standard (Gifford, 2022; McPhail et al., 2024), do not support this notion, and employees now anticipate similar facilities when working in the office and at home.

Second, we contribute to the employee HR perception literature by advancing the understanding of HR practice assessment. This study shows that different evaluative HR perception measures are key considerations for managing the psychological

contract through HR practices. Specifically, to better identify and address employee needs and expectations, organizations should consider not only overall satisfaction, but also specific metrics such as how HR practices facilitate task completion (effectiveness) and their accuracy and reliability in delivery (quality) (see Meijerink et al., 2021). However, the concurrent examination of all three evaluative perception types (effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction) revealed a potential issue regarding their equivalence, reinforcing the ambiguity in defining evaluative measures (Xie et al., 2024). The satisfaction measure pertains to how satisfied employees are in general with HR practices in meeting their diverse needs, goals and expectations (Meijerink et al., 2021). This implies that the satisfaction measure may inherently cover employees' needs concerning HR practices supporting their task completion (effectiveness) and their expectations regarding the accuracy and reliability of delivering HR practices (quality). Therefore, to refine the conceptualization of evaluative HR perceptions, we encourage reconsidering evaluative perception measures and suggest using satisfaction as an overarching measure instead of treating it as equivalent to other evaluative measures.

As a third contribution, the study expands the emerging literature on hybrid work. Our findings align broadly with previous research: by-employees-identified HR practices of hybrid work include result-oriented performance management instead of attendance monitoring (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Haque, 2023; Author & Author, 2023; Maddox-Daines, 2023), the suitability of office space for hybrid work (Fayard et al., 2021; Gratton, 2021; Skountridaki et al., 2024; Trevor & Holweg, 2022), the inclusion of employees in planning hybrid work (Gratton, 2021; Skountridaki et al., 2024) and transparent communication (Haque, 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022; Teng-Calleja, 2023). Additionally, respondents highlighted the support needed for autonomy (Baumann & Marcum, 2023; Haque, 2023), fairness (Baumann & Marcum, 2023; Gratton, 2021; Haque, 2023; Luring & Jonasson, 2024), interaction and collaboration (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Couto et al., 2024; Fayard et al., 2021; Haque, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022; Straus et al., 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023), work-life balance (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Couto et al., 2024; Haque, 2023; Li et al., 2023) and well-being (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Haque, 2023; Luring & Jonasson, 2024; Maddox-Daines, 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022; Teng-Calleja et al. 2023) in the hybrid working environment.

However, we also identified differences between previous literature and our data. First, while remote settings have been shown to elicit various training needs related to both soft and technical skills (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023; Couto et al., 2024; Haque, 2023; Luring & Jonasson, 2024; Li et al., 2023; Maddox-Daines, 2023; Shahriar et al., 2022; Straus et al., 2023; Suravi, 2024; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023), respondents in this study did not associate training with hybrid work, as discussed

above. This discrepancy may stem from the ways new working methods were adopted in response to a sudden, unforeseen event (see Galanti et al., 2021). Often, organizations support the introduction of remote work practices by providing training (Allen et al., 2015). However, remote work had to be quickly adopted virtually overnight, without prior planning, due to health and safety concerns triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gifford, 2022). Additionally, hybrid work has stealthily integrated into organizations post-pandemic, as a full return to the offices has not materialized (McPhail et al., 2024). Consequently, employees may not recognize the need for training amidst their focus on daily tasks, despite the potential benefits for smoother and more efficient work. Furthermore, whereas previous literature emphasizes the importance of ergonomic support in the home office (Maddox-Daines, 2023; Straus et al., 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023) which was a finding also evident in this study, we broaden the discussion of fringe benefits to include meal benefits on remote workdays.

5.2 Practical implications

Our results carry practical implications for HR professionals, line managers and employees. First, HR professionals should assess employee needs and expectations to identify potential discrepancies between current HR practices and employee preferences. Meeting employee expectations is crucial for improving satisfaction and performance (Karani et al., 2022; Lepak et al., 2012). Further, effective hybrid work arrangements should balance benefits and challenges while addressing necessary compromises (Gratton, 2021). Thus, HR professionals should collaborate with employees to establish a mutual understanding of needs and expectations (Adekoya et al., 2022; Rousseau & Greller, 1994), mitigating negative belief-based perceptions of HR practices and the adverse impact on PC (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994). For example, respondents in this study perceived the 3/2 model as a means of control, and if this is a misunderstanding, HR professionals should clarify the need for office days and the organization's expectations for hybrid work arrangements (see Karani et al., 2022; Nishii et al., 2008).

Additionally, HR professionals should align key performance indicators (KPIs) with hybrid practices, emphasizing the results tied to office presence instead of monitoring physical office attendance. Given the challenges of measuring abstract, knowledge-intensive work typical of remote setups while avoiding excessive bureaucracy, developing appropriate metrics is essential (Author & Author, 2023). Notably, the perceived fairness of remote work is not determined by whether the job requires office presence, but by whether this requirement is imposed by line managers (Lee & Kim, 2018). Therefore, HR professionals should shift organizational

focus away from the quantity of mandated office days to the nature of tasks, distinguishing between those suitable for remote settings and those that require physical presence (see Trevor & Holweg, 2022 for a proposed task categorization).

Furthermore, to underscore the significance of training for hybrid work, HR professionals should offer personnel training in areas like self-leadership, technology, and remote leadership skills. This approach not only promotes learning and enhances the meaningfulness of work, but also reinforces the relational aspects of the psychological contract, particularly those that can be challenged in remote settings (Coetzee, 2021; Raeder, 2021). Ultimately, it also contributes to improved employee well-being and organizational effectiveness (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024).

Second, line managers, who play a vital role in implementing HR practices (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Pak et al., 2024) should recognize their significant impact on employee experience and the management of psychological contracts (Conway & Briner, 2009). This study revealed that the degree to which line managers adhere to HR practices in hybrid work—whether they follow organizational guidelines strictly or loosely—affects not only their own teams, but also others. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that the actions of line managers extend beyond their own teams, potentially resulting in perceived unfairness among teams and units. Additionally, line managers should evaluate their leadership skills in the post-pandemic era, which may require shifting from a control-based mindset to a trust-based approach. This shift demands a genuine willingness to develop as leaders suitable for the contemporary setting of working life.

Finally, employees should reflect on their expectations of hybrid work and their readiness for mutual engagement. Organizations worry about potential losses in innovation capacity, the erosion of culture, and impaired knowledge transfer in remote settings (Smite et al., 2023; Trevor & Holweg, 2022). Thus, following the principle of social exchange (Blau, 1964), employees should consider how they can help address these concerns.

5.3 Limitations and future research

Despite the high number of respondents providing rich research data, the primary limitation of this study lies in its context within one multinational company operating in Finland. The psychological contract (Kutaula et al., 2020) and employee perceptions of HR practices (Wang et al., 2020) are influenced by subjective experiences shaped by cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs. Therefore, further research should explore different cultural contexts to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, while the open-ended question

provided valuable insights into HR practices in hybrid work without steering employees' thoughts, future studies could benefit from in-depth interviews with various parties involved in psychological contracting. For example, in addition to hybrid employees, the perspectives of HR professionals and line managers could significantly enhance our understanding.

Besides deepening the understanding of the psychological contract, incorporating perspectives from multiple stakeholders could also enhance the understanding of HR practices. Indeed, existing literature highlights discrepancies between how HR professionals intend HR practices, how line managers implement them, and how employees perceive them, which can result in variations in reports of HR practices (Beijer et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). This study concentrated on employee perceptions of HR practices following the recent trend of gauging employee experiences. However, it is worth considering whether, for example, the practice of working time monitoring in hybrid work, which was heavily criticized by employees in this study, was intended in the same way it was perceived. Examining intended, implemented, and perceived HR practices collectively could help organizations identify potential gaps between management intentions and employee experiences, ultimately enhancing organizational performance.

Finally, this study focused on qualitatively examining HR practices through the lens of the PC framework, with particular emphasis on the PC content. However, qualitative approaches have limitations in making causal inferences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016), particularly regarding the relationships between the fulfillment of individual needs, the PC, and employee outcomes, which lie beyond the scope of this research. Additionally, the mechanisms linking PC content to outcomes remain underexplored and necessitate further investigation (Conway & Briner, 2009). Therefore, we encourage quantitative studies to extend the process stream of PC literature and explore how evaluations of HR practices, identified as central in hybrid work, relate to employee outcomes.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The alignment of HR practices with employee needs and expectations is crucial for managing their impact on organizational performance. Examining employee perceptions of HR practices in hybrid work through the lens of psychological contract theory provides valuable insights into the individual-level value of these practices. The current shift towards hybrid work in the post-COVID era provides a timely context to explore these aspects. With the increasing attention on employee HR perceptions in recent years, we hope this article will enhance the understanding of

psychological contract elements, and advance the measurement of HR practices in the evolving work environment.

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